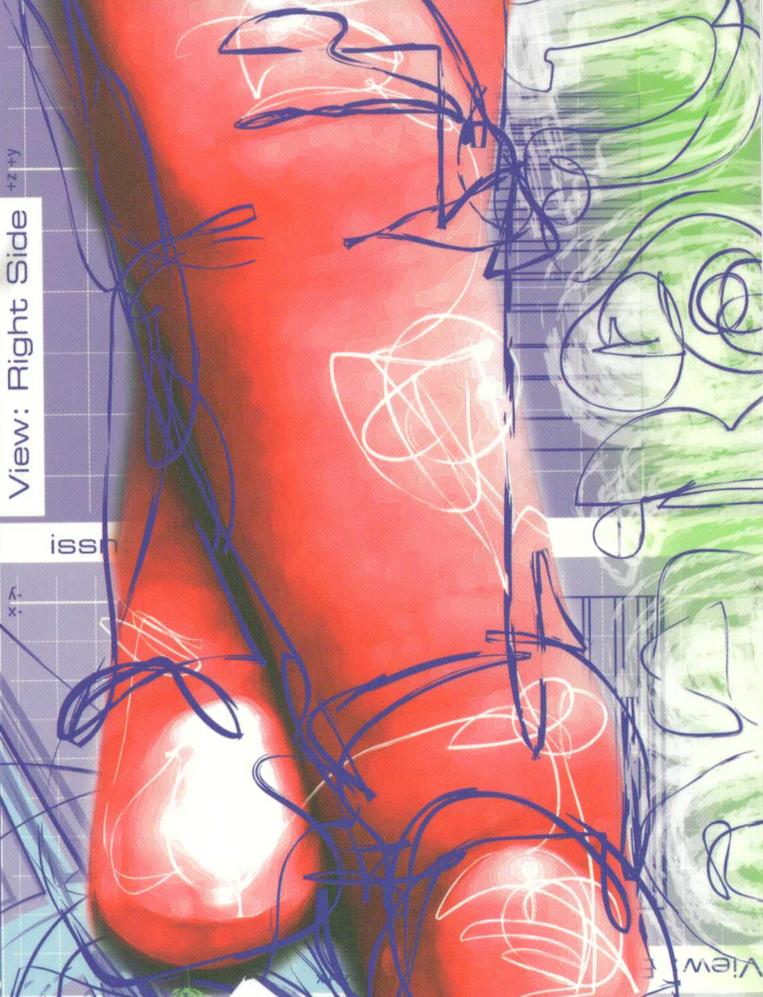


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# meteorite

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ISSUE NO.

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# meteorite

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AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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ONLY AFTER  
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WHEN PHILLO

text: "The Self-Assertion of the German University"

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Meteorite

# Letter to the Editor

Jason Boag

'What is philosophy?' The question is to be answered with a statement, 'Philosophy is X... Nothing more and nothing less.' But this response is already structured by an economy of signification. The structural metaphor through which the question is to be answered, through which 'philosophy' is to be thought, is implicit, is what is asked for in the phrasing of the question — Philosophy is to survey its own demarcation.<sup>1</sup>

Jon Yeasting, "A Letter from the Editor", *Meteorite* no. 1

But as for the letter — be it taken as typographical character, epistle, or what makes a man of letters... [we will never say] that there is letter anywhere, whatever the context, even to designate overdue mail. For the signifier is a unit its very uniqueness, being by nature symbol only of an absence. Which is why we cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other objects, it must be or not be in a particular place but that unlike them it will be and not be where it is, wherever it goes.<sup>2</sup>

Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'"

My letter has no place in a philosophy journal.

Let's imagine my letter: I seem to be addressing the editor, Jon, and his "Letter from the Editor" published in the first issue of *Meteorite*. So I could begin my letter with "Dear John." I'd throw off the proper diction and cold objective distance they teach undergraduates for philosophy

"If men learn [writing], it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks."

Plato - Phaedrus

papers. Jon might be reading that letter right now, staring out his bedroom window with weepy eyes — while I escape our hypothetical relationship, driving away into the sunset. Do you see the problem of my soap opera story? Jon lacks the letter 'h' in his name, that silent, ghostly 'h' that would be required to situate my letter in the genre of "Dear John" letters. Maybe I could just tell Jon my feelings before I leave him, our bodies like shadows against the burning sunset. "Dear Jon," I would cry, and no one would ever know the difference. And that's exactly the point of a "Dear John" letter — I don't want to be there when lonely Jon reads my "Dear John" letter. The letter creates my problem.

What about Lacan? He is dead and has no address. His quote, like my "Dear Jon" problem, reminds us of the weaknesses of the letter. The letter always stands in for a person's speeches, leaving behind these ink scribbles of writing that are thought to represent our already past thoughts. More importantly, Lacan notices the variable meanings of the word letter that are already complicating these paragraphs. By the end of his lecture, Lacan concludes: "a letter always arrives at its destination." Lacan saw the signifier (a "letter" replacing our original thoughts) as a viable substitute for the signified (our original thoughts) — while we must wait for the mail to be delivered, Lacan was sure the letter was eventually delivered. Barbara Johnson explains that Lacan's psychoanalytic theory implies

a reappropriating return to the place of true ownership, an indivisible identity functioning beyond the possibility of disintegration or unrecoverable loss, and a totally self-present, unequivocal meaning or truth.<sup>3</sup>

Lacan's accounting for the system of signification reminds us never to take our letters for granted — we should always note their context, their uniqueness, and their many possible receivers. He taught me how to play with the confusing signifier and spend two pages of aimless text abusing the flexible meanings of words like "letter" or "Jon." A single reading of such words is impossible. Now you are reading a letter addressing another letter. This singular collision of

"the author function is linked to the juridical and institutional SYSTEM that encompasses,

DETERMINES, and articulates the universe of DISCOURSES -Michel FOUCAULT

signifiers is an important event, or was, since letters always recount past actions that are received only as fast as the postman can carry the letter to us.

Now think about the discipline of philosophy, that formidable institution enforcing the "demarcation" of philosophy that Jon's letter addresses. Jon's letter was disciplined, written by a philosophy major for a philosophy journal. His sometimes heavy-handed phrasing and healthy vocabulary reflect the rules of subject matter, copyright, and seriousness he's learned — the seriousness that keeps the discipline of philosophy separate from so many other forms of discourse. Philosophy as Jon learned it does not include the prose of my genre of "Dear John" letters. In contrast to philosophy papers, letters have few rules and too many liberties. For example, I've been hiding what kind of student I am. I am disciplined as a Literature student. I am what Lacan calls a "man of letters." For rhetorical effect, I will highlight my important point. I repeat myself: My letter has no place in a philosophy journal. Such rhetorical flourish, the traditional mark of a literary text, is far from the style of philosophy.

But before all that philosophy, what are these extra terms — a setting, a plot, two characters, and a subtext of forbidden love between an old man and a charming boy? Where is the philosophy here? Phaedrus seems no better than my "Dear John" letter, with all the melodrama of that blessed genre. At what point did my gimmick move inside the discipline of philosophy and escape the discipline of literature that I study each day? Plato himself provides one of philosophy's oldest answers to that question, criticizing the speech that Phaedrus read:

Written discourse on any subject is bound to contain much that is fanciful... nothing that has ever been written whether in verse or prose merits much serious attention... in reality such compositions are, at the best, a means of reminding those who know the truth, that lucidity and completeness and serious importance belong only to these lessons on justice and honor and goodness that are expounded and set forth for the sake of instruction and are written in the soul of the listener.<sup>6</sup>

Plato's dialogue draws a sweeping line between me (Literature student, fanciful reader of written word) and you (philosophy student, listener to serious soul texts). By this classical definition, my letter threatens the

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Thus, through repetition, I touch on the three meanings of "letter" that Lacan elaborates. The problem of such a signifier with an absent signified drives Lacan's argument, preventing us from demarcating the essence of the word letter. Soon we will see Jacques Derrida's critique of Lacan's modified idea of truth, a critique that also looks at the signification system that demarcates philosophy.

But first we must go through Plato. I should quote Plato himself, in the *Phaedrus*, to avoid spoiling my point with any more rhetoric. Any introductory philosophy course will teach that Plato is within the demarcation of philosophy. Through this foundational philosopher's quote, I will sneak past the high walls of a philosophy journal.

Here is the scene Plato describes: A young man, Phaedrus, meets old Socrates while "off for a walk outside the city wall."<sup>5</sup> The love-sick youth hides a speech about love under his cloak which he will read to Socrates. Their escape from the cold city walls of the *polis*, the perfect blue sky, or even the boy's innocent voice — all these stir the old philosopher's heart. He declares, "I was thrilled by [your speech]. And it was you, Phaedrus, that made me feel as I did" (482). That touching scene begins one of Plato's most famous dialogues.

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philosophical-ness of this very journal. My fanciful writing and the other not-philosophy traits that Plato lists must remain on the other-side of the philosophy line, as not to corrupt the seriousness of this journal or a conversation between a philosopher and an attractive young man. One answer to the question, "What is philosophy?" is "not-literature," according to Plato's foundational essay. Therefore, why am I writing? My letter is still here because Plato needs writing.

Socrates tells Phaedrus a story about the Egyptian Ibis-headed god, Theuth. It is said, according to Socrates, that Theuth presented an early Egyptian king the gift of letters, the first letters, to be used for the new skill of writing. The king rejected the gift with a fascinating speech. I will quote some of the speech, but I attribute the words to Plato, and not Egyptian stories. This myth *must* be instructional (a parable at most), these thin narrative lines to dress up Plato's philosophic truth — otherwise, the story would be writing, according to Plato's own stipulations. Plato writes:

If men learn [writing], it will implant forgetfulness in their souls, they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks.<sup>8</sup>

The æsthetic image in the dramatic form is life purified in and REPROJECTED FROM THE HUMAN imagination. The mystery of esthetic like that of the material creation is accomplished. The ARTIST, LIKE THE GOD OF the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.

"For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their out-reaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of

Plato calls this sort of written learning the "conceit of wisdom," erecting the first walls to contain "philosophy," demarcating only knowledge that is spoken by the philosopher who is present. Philosophic knowledge is originary, and the written effects of rhetoric or poetic flourish merely copy or signify that original presence. Such knowledge always stands a step lower on the hierarchy that Plato built.

Jacques Derrida rereads Plato, questioning this foundational presence that speaks of *logos*:

One could say anachronously that the 'speaking subject' is the *father* of his speech... *Logos* is a son, then, a son that would be destroyed in his very *presence* without the present *attendance* of his father. His father who answers. His father who speaks for him and answers for him. Without his father, he would be nothing but, in fact, writing.<sup>9</sup>

To understand Derrida's point we must break with Lacan's "indivisible identity" of the signifier, his faith that the letter always reaches its destination. For Derrida, the signifier of truth is so weak that it cannot stand alone, it needs the illusion of self-presence, a Socrates-figure always present behind the speech of philosophy. Plato's bold division line depends on this father-subject. Very little indeed separates writing

and speaking in Derrida's mind. Let us abandon our unquestioning faith in the father of philosophical truth for the rest of this column, if only to test the bricks that built up Plato's original demarcation of philosophy.

Phaedrus' recitation of a written love speech beside a river will never be philosophy (however pleased Socrates felt). Plato christens the presence of the philosopher as the absolute necessity for meaning. And if philosophic truth depends on self-presence, then philosophy is not writing — and my letter has no place in the philosophy journal. Derrida calls writing (along with Plato) the *pharmakon* — a poison that can help you in small doses or kill you if abused. Writing at once adds to philosophy and threatens to destroy the presence of *logos*. This fascinating interaction is the ultimate demarcating force, answering the question "what is..." for both our disciplines. Derrida writes:

The purity of the inside can only be restored if the charges are brought home against exteriority as a supplement, inessential yet harmful to the essence, a surplus that *ought* never to have come to be added to the untouched plenitude of the inside. The restoration of internal purity must thus reconstitute, *recite* — and this is a myth as such, the mythology for example of a *logos* recounting its origin, going back to the eve of the pharmakographic aggression.<sup>10</sup>

"[L]iterature (it would be better from now on to say writing), by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text ... liberates what may be called an anti-theological

whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the evolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs. Such, and so magnifying, is the virtue of a large

and liberal theme! We expand to its bulk. To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be who have tried it."

Writing then, helps philosophy to think about itself. Writing and its difficulty are quarantined outside the city walls, only to sneak back across to help "reconstitute" Plato's originary demarcation of philosophy. Philosophy originates in writing, in the moment the line is breached and we can say, "X is not philosophy." That outside breach confirms the uniqueness of *logos* contained on the inside, strengthening the domain of philosophy.

Now is the time for qualification. Who is qualified to cite Derrida or Plato? I doubt that I am. I am a student, above all, like you or the editor, and we are becoming-qualified to write for philosophy journals. *Qualification* — discovering what side of Plato's line you inhabit. The metonym of student-hood depends on signification and the mechanisms we use to demarcate our disciplines. Writing, the outside of philosophy, is by no means the sole property of or equivalent to the discipline of literature. The *pharmakon* is so powerful because it extends into every aspect of our lives, its vastness ultimately leading Derrida and others to question the nature of signification (as we will soon see).

While Plato helped shape philosophy into the oldest discipline, the question "what is literature" did not demarcate a discipline until centuries later. Foucault traces this disciplinary moment to post-

Enlightenment times where the ideological mechanism of the "author function" developed. He writes:

Since the eighteenth century, the author has played the role of the regulator of the fictive, a role quite characteristic of our era of industrial and bourgeois society, of individualism and private property.<sup>11</sup>

These are terms of discipline. The author function is essential to such an endeavor, symbolizing a presence behind the body of texts named, for instance, "Shakespeare." The author function suspends meaning in the body of texts named "Shakespeare," limits all possible signification, initiating a desire to find the "transcendental signified" in his texts. The author-functioned text attaches a new power to Shakespeare's name, makes us read for his authenticity and his access to stable meaning.

The awesome task of circulating this new meaning, is work for the discipline of literature. The single reading, the text's closed circle of signification demarcating the genius of Shakespeare. This new idea of literature has everything to do with writing, and in turn, the disciplinary moment of philosophy. Foucault explains:

Herman Melville - Moby Dick

an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning, is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases reason, science, law"

Roland Barthes - "The Death of the Author"

The author allows a limitation of the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations within a world where one is thrifty not only with one's resources and riches, but also with one's discourses and their significations.<sup>12</sup>

Literature depends on the same difficulty as philosophy, the consolidation of meaning and the construction of a plenitude of truth. Shakespeare's originary presence is never questioned. His authenticity escapes the *pharmakon's* corruption. Because while the *pharmakon* is dangerous, it also supplements the signifier.

Derrida writes:

The true and the untrue are both species of repetition. And there is no repetition possible without the graphics of supplementarity, which supplies, for the lack of a full unity, another unit that comes to relieve it, being enough the same and enough other so that it can replace by addition.<sup>13</sup>

Writing violently feeds our desire for the pure presence of *logos*. Plato solidified the foundational distinction between present speech and writing, initiating an old Western obsession. For Derrida, the desiring philosophy student conjures not the "indivisible truths" that Lacan saw in the signifier, but instead, the phantom supplements of writing. We

have no place for the letter that reminds us of the instability of all language. Speech itself would not need writing's help if it were fully present. We desire sturdy city walls for philosophy, and displace the instability of the signifier onto writing.

Phaedrus and I stand outside of philosophy, with our written speeches and pale imitation. Plato lives on the inside, the *polis* named philosophy. Philosophy's idea of itself depends on putting writing and unstable signification outside.

Thus, my letter has a place in the philosophy journal, but only because it is written. Plato pushed me to the outside, defining his discipline through the action. If we reconsider our relationship, we will see the abyss between us — the

instability of *all* language that initiated our chain of supplementary meaning. We are students with a crucial chance to study the figures that shape our subjectivity as philosophy or literature students. We are unqualified, and should watch very carefully as we are disciplined.

For conclusion, or to avoid conclusion, I will cite Habermas' warning against "the false assimilation" of our disciplines into each other. He offers instead,

They can only resolve this paradox by rhetorically expanding and enriching their special languages to the extent that is require to link up indirect communications with the manifest contents of statements, and to do so in a deliberate way.<sup>14</sup>

So our task is awareness of the originary, linguistic distinctions that shaped our forms of knowledge. We do not share functional vocabularies or positions in discourse. We share the logic of discipline.

But I cannot help but remember Freud's notion of "manifest content" in dream interpretation, a very

un-"deliberate" way of finishing my column. Freud labels the parts of dreams we remember and can describe "manifest content." "Latent content," on the other hand, designates our unconscious desires displaced by the confusing manifest content of our dreams. Freud discovered the latent content of a dream by tracing what the manifest content signified.

Who is dreaming our disciplines, and what does our shared, "manifest" content mean? The question returns to Lacan's idea of "indivisible" truth that Derrida attacks. If philosophy is a centuries-old obsession for *logos*, maybe Habermas' "manifest content" is only a substitute for the truth of our desire for the unity of *logos*. The letter, a tangled mess of signifiers, touches both our disciplines in playful, confusing ways — a sort of latent content repressed by our formal disciplines and philosophy journals. We can communicate through undelivered letters like this one, acting like a person who awkwardly describes their dream to someone else. These letters can describe dream places where the city walls of discipline don't seem so hard and fast.

1. Jonathan Yeasting, "A Letter From the Editor," *Meteorite* Vol. 1, no.1 (Ann Arbor: Fall 1998) 6.  
2. Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'", 37  
3. Barbara Johnson, "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida," *Yale French Studies* 55/56, Literature &

Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading (Otherwise, 1977), 425  
4. Ibid.  
5. Plato, Phaedrus, l.  
6. Phaedrus, l.

7. Phaedrus, l.  
8. Phaedrus, l.  
9. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (Chicago: Chicago U.P., 1981) 128.  
10. Ibid., p.128.

11. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p 119

Matthew Arnold



# Wittgensteinian Fideism and Religious Skepticism

John Searle once mentioned in an interview “Wittgenstein’s aversion to theory.”<sup>1</sup> This phrase is suggestive of Wittgenstein’s thinking on how to approach the issues surrounding religious practices and language; the same phrase also illustrates the thought of those philosophers of religion indebted to Wittgenstein. Keeping Searle’s comment in view, I have two aims in this paper: first, to describe Wittgenstein’s thinking on religion as a reaction against the urge toward “theory” on the part of philosophers *vis-à-vis* religious belief; and, second, to debate the skeptical attack upon the Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion that arises when philosophers give in to this urge.

In contemporary philosophy of religion, Wittgenstein’s presence is felt as one of the forces behind theological non-realism.<sup>2</sup> Non-realism, according to John Hick, is the position that “interprets religious language, not as referring to a transcendent reality... but as expressing our emotions, or our basic moral insights and intentions... or as referring to our moral and spiritual ideals.”<sup>3</sup> Non-realists are not “anti-religious” - indeed,

they wish, by and large, to retain religious language and practice as a venerable “form of life” - but they do regard talk of God or salvation “understood realistically,” as “meaningless or utterly implausible.”<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, realists, as Don Cupitt puts it, “think our religious language tells of beings, events and forces that belong to a higher world.... But I [Cupitt is speaking here as a representative of non-realism] believe that there is only one world... the world of language.”<sup>5</sup> Thus we cannot think of religious language as “replicating the structure of some extra-linguistic reality.”<sup>6</sup> Realists, as might be expected, react with dismay toward this characterization of religion. They find the type of religious belief that could be offered in this context a pale ghost of *genuine* belief.

But the debate on this issue among philosophers of religion is, we might say, trilateral — it is not just between the Wittgensteinians, such as D. Z. Phillips, and realists, like Hick. Other philosophers, Kai Nielsen and Antony Flew for instance, start by doubting the value of religion and religious language altogether, whether that language is seen by its users as an enclosed “form of life” or as a description of ultimate reality. Whereas for the realist the Wittgensteinian program has made too little of religious claims, skeptics like Nielsen accuse the language-game maneuver of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy as privileging religious language to an absurd degree because it exempts religious language from the constraints of rational discourse.

Bernard Williams illustrates the above tension well: for the skeptic, Wittgenstein’s attitude toward religion seems too “permissive,” but from the realist’s point of view, the Wittgensteinians are “giving a radically humanist interpretation to religion” that denies the objective reality of its subject matter.<sup>7</sup> Wittgensteinians find both of these criticisms trade in the same “foundationalist” conception of what should be allowable religious discourse; the criticisms only pull in opposing directions because they stem from opposite philosophical prejudices. The foundationalism shared between the skeptic and the realist is manifest in the notion that religious propositions must, to be meaningful, be grounded on rational foundations that are themselves in need of no further grounding. The difference between the two parties is that the skeptic believes that religious claims do not have this grounding while the realist claims that such grounds exist.

After a discussion of what Wittgenstein has to say about religious belief and language in his own writings, I shall return to the charges leveled by Nielsen at the neo-Wittgensteinians. These challenges are resolved by the Wittgensteinians in much the same way that the opposition of the realists is dealt with. To both the skeptic and the realist, the Wittgensteinians maintain that what it is to “explain” and to “believe in” religious propositions has been misunderstood.

In many respects Wittgenstein had a high regard for the religious way of life. Norman Malcolm, Wittgenstein's friend and student, writes, "I believe that he looked on religion as a 'form of life' . . . in which he did not participate, but with which he was sympathetic and which greatly interested him."<sup>9</sup> Malcolm is even prepared to say that Wittgenstein was, in a certain way, "more deeply religious than are many... religious believers."<sup>10</sup>

after  
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has clarified  
the grammar of  
religious beliefs,  
its work  
is over.

But we must understand that religion was valuable for Wittgenstein only insofar as it was a lived practice. Religious propositions, abstracted from a religious context, held no meaning for Wittgenstein. Catholicism, he said, might, in some ways, be "wonderful beyond words," but "any attempt to make it into a philosophical system is offensive."<sup>11</sup> Here we see precisely the opposition to theory that Searle mentions. This orientation towards religion does not seek to make ontological claims; there is, for instance, no need to dig under the word "God" to see if it attaches to some "object of faith." The Wittgensteinians, at least,

would claim that this rejection of the urge to posit such objects of faith can have, as Peter Winch says, "a liberating effect on some people and enable them to take certain religious attitudes seriously in a way they would not have been able to before."<sup>16</sup>

Even in his earliest thought, Wittgenstein displays a sensitivity toward religious life and language, but we are told in the *Tractatus* that "God does not reveal himself in the world."<sup>17</sup> Since God is not in the world as a fact, he cannot be the object of sensible discourse and, therefore, cannot be known to us. So, according to Wittgenstein, the structure of language is not appropriate to discuss that which lies outside the world; we must, therefore, pass over in silence that which cannot be sensibly formulated in language.

In his "Lecture on Ethics," Wittgenstein again warns us against trying to move past the limits of language. In this essay, Wittgenstein holds that our language can pick out neither transcendent meaning nor absolute value from the conglomeration of facts that make up the world for us. So, again, what we tend to think of as the objects of ethical and religious speech are placed off limits because all the facts in the world "stand on the same level" — there is no vertical dimension of value *in* the world, no room for transcendence *in* our language.<sup>18</sup> As it is phrased in the *Tractatus*, the "sense" of the world "must lie outside the world," (6.41) but since our propositions "can express nothing of what is higher," (6.42) any talk of absolute value must come to nothing and any proposed description of absolute value should be rejected "*ab initio*" just because it is a description.<sup>19</sup>

One of the themes of the *Tractatus* is that the "world is the totality of facts" (1.1) that we "picture... to ourselves." (2.1) It follows from these propositions that we can — at the risk of some over-simplification — judge the truth of a picture by "checking" it against the world, by checking the "agreement... of its sense with reality." (2.223) Thus, "to tell whether a picture is true or false we must compare it with reality." (2.223)

In his post-Tractarian work, however, Wittgenstein abandons the conception of language as mirroring reality in a determinant and objective fashion. In Wittgenstein's later thought a proposition acquires its sense not so much by being founded on an underlying reality, as by being held in place by other propositions. And, after the fashion of the realists, to assert a foundation beneath our use of a proposition in order to certify our language a needless — and impossible — exercise in reification.

So in Wittgenstein's later thought, the sense of a proposition is not established by its correspondence to a reality that exists outside of the context of that proposition. Rather, "it is only in use that... [a] proposition has its sense."<sup>20</sup> We always find a proposition in a "system in which consequences and premises give one another *mutual* support."<sup>21</sup> And those of our convictions which stand fast "do so, not because... [they are] intrinsically obvious or convincing," but because they are held fast by what lies around them.<sup>22</sup>

Given Wittgenstein's later conception of language, it follows that all testing, "all confirmation and dis-confirmation of a hypothesis takes place within a system" and a given system will determine what the concepts internal to it can mean.<sup>23</sup> We cannot extricate ourselves from our linguistic practices so as to verify the validity of these practices. Thus, I can never say that I have gotten "my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness.... it is [instead] the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false."<sup>24</sup> We can never judge a way of picturing the world in a purely objective fashion, for we must always "use judgments as principles of judgment."<sup>25</sup> We can only see that our use holds together for ourselves and our interlocutors.

The point of all this, at least as it relates to religious concepts, as it has been interpreted by Wittgensteinian

philosophers of religion, is that, since a given language-game must provide its own standards of meaningfulness, it makes no sense to speak of the language-game of religion as being, in its totality, either reasonable or unreasonable.<sup>26</sup> Further, the relation of religious claims to a “reality” outside of religious “forms of life” cannot and need not be determined. For the Wittgensteinian then, the conflict between realist and skeptical philosophers of religion is a chimera because, as D. Z. Phillips writes, the “distinction between the real and unreal is not prior to the use of various language-games.”<sup>27</sup> Further, if the “meaning” of religious terms can be found only within that same mode of discourse and if philosophy wishes to pronounce on religious topics, then it must be “prepared to examine religious concepts in the contexts from which they derive their meaning.”<sup>28</sup> Here we are left with a philosophy that “simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.”<sup>29</sup>



As John Searle puts it, the fundamental insight of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy is that there cannot be “any non-linguistic Archimedean point from which we can appraise the success or failure of language in representing, coping with, or dealing with the real world.”<sup>30</sup> As Wittgenstein maintains in the *Philosophical Investigations*, “What has to be accepted, the given, is — so one could say — *forms of life*.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, when philosophy looks at religion all it can say is: “This language-game is played.”<sup>32</sup> As Norman Malcolm puts it, what this amounts to is that the “existence of religious practices can no more be explained than can the existence of sports, or of musical composition.”<sup>34</sup> All the believer can do is point to her religious life, which displays her belief. And philosophy must leave “everything just as it is.”<sup>33</sup>

For many, this Wittgensteinian claim appears too strong. When Wittgenstein speaks of our desire to critique an entire language-game as a type of philosophical arrogance, skeptics like Kai Nielsen feel hemmed in. Nielsen asks: “Why can’t a given language-game be incoherent or absurd?”<sup>35</sup> and he caricatures the view that philosophy “cannot relevantly criticize religion” as “Wittgensteinian Fideism.”<sup>36</sup> This appellation suggests that the Wittgensteinians are willing to privilege certain religious propositions without giving them any rational support — even in the face of all evidence and argument to the contrary.

From a Wittgensteinian perspective, however, the problem is that Nielsen thinks that he can “explain” religious belief by determining whether religious propositions agree with reality or not. But the Wittgensteinians reply that “the idea of ‘agreement with reality’ does not have any clear application” because such agreement can only be read in terms of some specific context or language. Phillips writes that, for Wittgenstein, this hunger for explanation among philosophers

seemed to result “from a deep philosophical prejudice.... the craving for generality, the insistence that what constitutes an intelligible move in one context must constitute an intelligible move in all contexts.”<sup>39</sup> This craving for generality leads to the mistake of looking “for an explanation where we should see the facts as ‘primary phenomena.’ That is, where we should say: *this language-game is played*.”<sup>40</sup>

The skeptics, in this craving, assume that the position from which they would deploy their attacks on the dubious propositions of religion is itself grounded on a rock-solid foundation — a foundation which requires no further support. But it is just the possibility of taking such a position that Wittgenstein denies. There is no way to verify a foundationalism of this nature because we cannot turn around to judge our perspective without employing it as a background. Thus, Wittgenstein says, we will always find that at “the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded.”<sup>41</sup>

It may seem that Wittgenstein has introduced an odd sort of relativism here. Nielsen, for instance, is scandalized by Peter Winch’s claim that anthropologists are wrong in assuming that the Western scientific outlook, as opposed to the outlook of more “primitive” peoples, corresponds to objective reality. Nielsen says: “We know that we, with our scientific culture, are right about these matters and the Azande [Indians] are wrong.”<sup>42</sup> It seems, though, that we can only know this from the perspective of our “scientific culture.” We are, on Wittgenstein’s formulation, using “our language-game as a base to *combat* theirs,” in which case we cannot help misreading a form of life because we have tried to understand it in terms foreign to it.<sup>43</sup> To be fair to the Azande, ought we not take up some neutral position, so as to remove ourselves from our received way of looking at things before judging the perspectives of others? Of course we can no more do this than we can step outside of our own skins. We cannot doubt the very perspective from which we doubt Azande magic. As Wittgenstein says: “The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty.”<sup>44</sup>

So this is one Wittgensteinian criticism of Nielsen’s position: There just doesn’t seem to be any way that we can meaningfully judge mutually opposing world views. We cannot extricate ourselves from our own position in order to survey every possible way of looking at the world and confirm that ours corresponds most directly to an exterior reality. And if the above is true, then we can only talk about aspects of a world view as they refer to that view’s axioms and goals. Further, as Wittgenstein has pointed out, “whether a proposition can turn out false... depends on what I make count as determinants for that proposition.”<sup>46</sup> And at some point, we simply assume the propositions that we start with.

Besides charging the skeptic with this methodological confusion, the Wittgensteinians also claim that the skeptic tends to misread what believers are really doing; that is, the skeptic tends to read religious claims in terms of a realism that believers may in fact not adhere to. As a result, the skeptics are tempted to import the methods and goals of, say, contemporary Western science when assessing the value of

religious language. Are we not, for instance, inclined to judge the magic of a primitive tribe as if it aimed at the same thing as our science?

Wittgenstein reveals this tendency in his "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*." In *The Golden Bough*, Sir James Frazer, no doubt referring to people he considers the "scientists" of earlier ages, writes, we "shall do well to look with leniency upon their errors as inevitable slips made in the search for truth."<sup>47</sup> For Wittgenstein, Frazer's reading of "savage" myth and ritual is unsatisfactory because "it makes these views look like errors." But, claims Wittgenstein, no proponent of a given religion is in error, "except when he sets forth a theory."<sup>48</sup>

It is the very idea "of wanting to explain a practice" that strikes Wittgenstein as being wrong.<sup>49</sup> What would be right, perhaps, is a *description*, but an *explanation* assumes too much — an objective ground from which this can be given. Frazer doubles his mistake because he cannot but consider the rituals he studies as a groping toward modern science — as if they were a pathetic proto-science. This is a measure by which they clearly fall short. Our science, we claim at least, can affect the visible world in a much more predictable, repeatable, and verifiable fashion than can any shaman's magic. But in what sense are we right, and he wrong, if we have only read his intent in terms of our own?

In "religious practices," Wittgenstein states, "there is no question of an error."<sup>50</sup> Genuine religious practices do not make the effort to do anything but perform their *religious* function and in this they *cannot* err, the attempt to "explain" a religious act by suggesting what it aims at "is already therefore wrong."<sup>51</sup> If the savage says, "My magic works," how can we deny this? In such a case, the Wittgensteinian might ask who should say what it means to "work"? The primitive's magic may not affect the world in the way an anthropologist would suppose the primitive to desire, but his magic still "works," it does just what it should. That is, it holds just the place in the conduct of affairs that it does hold; the word "should" can have no other meaning here. As Wittgenstein notes, "the same savage, who stabs the picture of his enemy apparently in order to kill him, really builds his hut out of wood."<sup>54</sup> If the savage's belief in magic were what Frazer suggests it to be, he would build his hut with magic too.

Take an example that Phillips uses: a boxer who prays before every bout. Does he really believe that this activity insures victory or keeps him from harm?<sup>57</sup> If we ask him and he answers yes, then we have a testable hypothesis, an hypothesis which, it is supposed, can be denied by an appeal to evidence. What if we prove to the boxer that his prayers do not have this effect? The boxer may still claim that this is "why" he prays, even though he is aware that he frequently loses or is injured. His may be the only answer that can be given to a question that should not have been asked. In fact, the prayer of the boxer does *not*, according to the Wittgensteinians, manifest a belief in some testable theory, it is rather an expression of what is appropriate from the point of view of a certain piety. One of the skeptic's mistakes is to assume that each person who prays expects the prayer to act as a sort of magical formula, and it may even be wrong to take the word of a believer if he expresses himself or herself in this way.<sup>58</sup> The person who prays perhaps cannot

express what they are doing except in terms which the skeptic or anthropologist, in search of an explanation, must misread as belief in some type of super-natural causation. In opposition to Frazer, Wittgenstein is certainly right that it is not a prior, mistaken theory that produces primitive rituals and religious practices, but practices exist as an aspect of culture — as a part of life. These practices help to form the context that determines what a "mistake" can be. So we should not expect a given religious proposition to be explained by some prior non-religious commitment. Nor should we see these propositions themselves as explanations of an external reality.

But we should return to Nielsen's complaints concerning the foregoing analysis of religious practice. From what has been said above it may indeed appear that religious language *has* been given too free a reign by the Wittgensteinians. As Nielsen's consternation with Winch suggests, have we not sanctioned a strange relativism that is unable to distinguish between the truths of science and the fancies of superstition? But this suggests, I think, a real misunderstanding of the Wittgensteinian project. Clearly, Wittgenstein has not asserted that the scientist might as well resort to the methods of Shamanism, and it is equally certain that he has made no move in the direction of affirming the objects of religious belief as somehow "real."

Nielsen's objection, though, seems based on the assumption that Wittgenstein has done just this. When Wittgenstein says that philosophy must take a language-game as a given, Nielsen seems to take this as corroborating the contents of the language-game in question. On this reading, if we accept the Wittgensteinians' claims, we might as well substitute Azande magic for the experiments of scientists. It is just here, however, that Nielsen's charge of "fideism" misses its mark. When Wittgenstein offers us other ways of looking at things he is not offering them as descriptions of the way things *really* are, rather he confronts us with positions opposed to our own to expose the erroneous "notions of necessity where our ways of thinking are concerned."<sup>60</sup> Wittgenstein exposes what he calls the final "groundlessness of our believing."<sup>61</sup>

The reaction of skeptics like Nielsen to the Wittgensteinian thesis is understandable only if they think that Wittgenstein is affirming the truth of those propositions about which they are skeptical. But this is precisely *not* what Wittgenstein is attempting. Wittgenstein is not trying to provide foundations for the beliefs to which Nielsen is opposed, rather his

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If a savage says, "My magic works," then we would have grounds to say that they are wrong. (Though one might counter that now it is the Wittgensteinians who are giving "explanations.")

how can we deny this?

point is, as Phillips says, 'that the whole conception of such underpinning is confused.'<sup>62</sup>

Neither Wittgenstein nor the contemporary Wittgensteinians hold that all beliefs are necessarily inviolate and immune from criticism. Beliefs can certainly become senseless, especially if the believer attempts to push propositions outside their proper bounds. If a believer attempts to leave the realm of religious discourse he opens himself to correction, as was shown in Wittgenstein's essay on *The Golden Bough*. The implication of that essay was that if Frazer's savages *did* think in the way that he suggests, then we would have grounds to say that they are wrong. (Though one might counter that now it is the Wittgensteinians who are giving "explanations.")

Take the boxer mentioned earlier, if he *really* believes that his prayers work in some mechanical way then he is guilty of what Wittgenstein calls "superstition", the notion that religious rituals can achieve the same ends as science. For Wittgenstein, where religion springs from trust, superstition springs from fear, and "is a kind of false science" motivated by that fear.<sup>63</sup> If "believing in God" is an aspect of religion, then it is based on trust and cannot be in the same category as believing in the empirical sciences. If someone goes beyond this, i.e. makes an appeal to a reality external to the religious life and adduces this as evidence for the existence of God, then the Wittgensteinian might say that this person's beliefs have become objectionable; we might say that such a person has let his religion bleed over into science.

Wittgenstein would have both the skeptic and the believer on guard against taking 'religious utterances as if they were some sort of second-rate scientific utterances, as if they were theories for which we have inadequate evidence.'<sup>64</sup> On Wittgenstein's account, perhaps all a skeptical philosopher of religion can do is show when the users of religious language have overstepped their bounds into realms where that language does not belong. But why would a skeptic be concerned to do more than this if he can satisfy himself that believers are non-realists on the Wittgensteinian model? Against the religious realists it would seem that Nielsen and Wittgenstein are allies.



It is of course this very non-realism that gets the Wittgensteinians into trouble with the realists who contend that this analysis of religious language and belief does not live up to what believers say *they* believe in. Searle points out what so many realists find odd about the Wittgensteinian critique of religious belief. He claims, clearly part of the reason people pray is that they believe there is, in some *real* way, "a God up there listening."<sup>65</sup> Thus, in playing the language-game of religion, the participants must assume something independent of that game. Searle writes, "You have to be a very *recherché* sort of religious intellectual to keep praying if you don't think there is any real God outside who is listening to your prayers."<sup>66</sup>

The realist holds that a religious belief "is distinct from the commitment which may follow from it, and is the justification for it." But this is incoherent for the Wittgensteinians precisely because beliefs are not prior to commitments, or patterns of life. Indeed, once the patterns of life have been accounted for, there is nothing left over to be called belief.<sup>67</sup> The notion is this: when we understand that we can drop the idea of a relation between a belief and an object without affecting the content of the belief — or without affecting religious practice — we see (at least so the Wittgensteinian holds) that realism is not so much a philosophical position as a "battle cry."<sup>68</sup> And if we realize the emptiness of realism we are left with beliefs that are, as Phillips says, "expressions of faith and trust."<sup>69</sup> Now the realist believer will acknowledge this last part but will hold out for something more as well, that in which — or in whom — one has faith and trust.

If the believer does *believe*, in the realist's sense, in prayer or miracles it seems that they are written off. For the Wittgensteinians, it appears that religious belief is fine, so long as religious propositions are kept enclosed in the purely self-referential language-game of a vague faith and trust. As soon as a belief is taken to *really* refer outside of this game into the world — the domain of the empirical sciences — it is bludgeoned into submission. Such beliefs are, in Phillips' words, "blunders, mistakes, regarding causal connections of a kind. We can say that the people involved are reasoning wrongly, meaning by this that they contradict what we already know."<sup>70</sup>

On the Wittgensteinian account both the realist and the skeptic are "invoking an external relation between the language-game and reality... trading in a non-linguistic, transcendental point of view."<sup>73</sup> According to Phillips, both the realist and the skeptic talk "as though it *makes sense* to speak of language referring to reality." They talk as if a belief must pick out some object in the real world to be meaningful. However, this relation between belief and object is just asserted; its nature is never elucidated because there is no standpoint from which such a description can be given. As Phillips puts it, "*language as such does not refer to anything, either successfully or unsuccessfully.*"<sup>74</sup>

It is ironic that Wittgenstein's thought on religion makes so few people happy. For the skeptic, he is apparently too willing to condone naïve belief; for the realist

believer, he has given the game over to the skeptic by refusing to allow the postulates of religion an objective standing. The objections of the realists and the skeptics stem from the same urge, the urge for explanation, and Wittgenstein is determined to leave this urge unsatisfied because there is no "high-ground" from which one can launch sorties against an opposing language-game. Thus, after philosophy has clarified the grammar of religious beliefs, its work is over. But, Phillips writes, "as a result of such clarification, someone may see dimly that religious beliefs are not what he had taken them to be..."<sup>75</sup>

## Conclusion

I have spent most of my time in this paper giving a charitable reading to the neo-Wittgensteinian response to the skeptic's charge of "fideism." I think that this charge fails because, for the Wittgensteinians, belief in a proposition of religion does not occur prior to the religious form of life. That is, a religious belief is not an affirmation that refers to a reality exterior to religious language and practice.

This raises two difficult and related epistemological issues which I have not attempted to deal with in this paper but to which I would like to briefly draw the reader's attention. First, there is the question, "How reliably does our language map or mirror the non-linguistic reality to which it presumably refers?" Second, and more radically, there is the question, "Is there, in fact, any objective, non-linguistic reality for language to map or mirror?"

To illustrate this problem, let me offer a partial definition of the realist's conception of truth. I take the essential feature of this definition to be the position that the truth of a belief or statement depends on whether or not the world is as the belief or statement says it is. A person who is a realist (concerning religious language) would say further that religious believers really believe that the propositions of their religion are true in this sense.

I am not sure what D. Z. Phillips would say about this definition. In several places, however, he suggests that the question of an extra-linguistic reality is useless and therefore meaningless. He claims, as we have seen, that the "distinction between the real and unreal is not prior to the uses of various language-games," and that "language does not refer to anything, either successfully or unsuccessfully." I do not think that Phillips is entirely consistent here — he has, for example, made naturalistic assumptions about the status of prayer and miracles — but it seems to me that the passages above implicitly answer the question about the status of an extra-linguistic reality in the negative. There seems to be no relation between beliefs and the objects of beliefs because there just is not anything "under" or "behind" our linguistically situated beliefs.

If Phillips is simply saying that belief in God does not attach to any object, then I can at least understand what he means (though I still would not understand his reluctance to simply assert that God does not exist). But if Phillips wants to say that no use of language is underwritten by a reality to which it refers, then I confess that I find it hard to make much of his claim. I can't think of any positive argument in its favor. Indeed, if Phillips did hold this latter position

I would be inclined to accuse him of some sort of self-referential incoherence: if we can never extract ourselves from

the various language-games that we participate in, if there is no reality external to these games, how can we make even this claim itself — without having stepped outside the bounds of language-games, thereby to view reality as it is and deliver the proclamation that no one can extract themselves from language-games because there is no extra-linguistic reality?

## Notes

1. D. Z. Phillips, "Searle on Language-Games and Religion," in D. Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. 22. In this article Phillips quotes extensively from an interview with John Searle which appeared in "Wittgenstein: Dialogue with John Searle," in *The Great Philosophers*, edited by Bryan Magee (BBC Books, 1987). This quotation appears on page 344 of that text, in future citations to Phillips's article I shall give the corresponding pages in *The Great Philosophers*.
2. The words "non-realism" and "realism" should, in the context of this paper, be taken to refer exclusively to the current debate in the philosophy of religion which will be described presently; associations with other "realisms" are not explored in this paper.
3. John Hick, "Religious Realism and Non-Realism," in John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993) p. 7.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
5. Don Cupitt, "Anti-Realist Faith," in Joseph Runzo (ed.), *Is God Real?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993) p.50.
6. *Ibid.* p. 67
7. Bernard Williams, "The Spell of Linguistic Philosophy," in Bryan Magee, *Men of Ideas* (London: BBC Books, 1978) pp. 137-138. The article cited here is actually a conversation between Williams and Magee.
8. Quoted in Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994) p. 11.
9. Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein, A Memoir* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 72.
10. Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: From A Religious Point of View?*, p. 21.
11. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 11.
12. See, for instance, *Ibid.*, p. 19 and Malcolm's Memoir, p. 71.
13. Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: From A Religious Point of View?*, p. 19.
14. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 18.
15. Quoted in Winch's "Discussion of Malcolm's Essay" in Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: From A Religious Point of View?*, p. 96.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
17. All internal citations refer to B. F. McGuinness's translation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge Publishing, 1995).

18. Ludwig Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics," in James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (eds.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Occasions: 1912-1951* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), p. 39.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

20. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. Wright (eds.), trans. Dennis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), para. 10.

21. *Ibid.*, para. 142.

22. *Ibid.*, para. 144.

23. *Ibid.*, para. 105.

24. *Ibid.*, para. 94.

25. *Ibid.*, para. 124.

26. Cf. Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: From*, p. 78 and Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, p. xiii.

27. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, p. xi.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

29. Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Philosophy," in Klagge and Nordmann (eds.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Occasions: 1912-1951* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), p. 177.

30. Phillips, "Searle," p. 24. P. 331 in *The Great Philosophers*.

31. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), p. 226e.

32. Kai Nielsen, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), p. 120.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: From*, p. 85.

35. Nielsen, p. 57.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 67. References to "Wittgensteinian Fideism" occur throughout the text cited here and in Nielsen's article by that name in *Philosophy* (July, 1967). Nielsen describes Phillips as "the arch-Wittgensteinian Fideist" (Nielsen, p. 56).

37. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, para. 215.

38. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism*, p. 55.

39. D. Z. Phillips, "Religious Beliefs and Language-Games," in *Wittgenstein and Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. 63.

40. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (para. 654) p. 167.

41. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, para. 253.

42. Nielsen, p. 79. Nielsen is referring to Winch's famous article "Understanding a Primitive Society" (*American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. I no. 4, Oct. 1964, pp. 307-324) wherein Winch critiques the work of the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard on the African Azande tribe.

43. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, para. 609.

44. *Ibid.*, para. 115.

45. Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: From*, p. 77.

46. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, para. 5.

47. Quoted in Klagge and Nordmann, p. 120.

48. Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," in Klagge and Nordmann (eds.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Occasions: 1912-1951* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), p. 119. The phrase "savages" is, of course, absurd and offensive. I retain it only because it is Wittgenstein's usage.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

57. Phillips uses several examples similar to this one

on pp. 72-74 of *Wittgenstein and Religion*, ("Religious Beliefs and Language-Games").

58. I think that Wittgenstein points in the direction of this difficulty on p. 60 of *Lectures and Conversations*. The fact that someone claims to put forth evidence for his belief is not enough to determine if this is how his belief is operating.

59. Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: From*, p. 86.

60. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism*, p. 116.

61. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, para. 166.

62. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism*, p. 63.

63. Quoted in Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: From*, p. 18.

64. Phillips, "Searle," p. 27. (Page 334 in *The Great Philosophers*).

65. *Ibid.*, p. 23. (Page 335 in *The Great Philosophers*).

66. *Ibid.*

67. D. Z. Phillips, "On Really Believing," in Runzo (ed.), *Is God Real?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. 85. Here Phillips is quoting Roger Trigg.

68. Quoted in Phillips, "On Really Believing," p. 87.

69. Phillips, "Religious Belief and Language-Games," p. 73.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

71. Cf., for instance, "On Really Believing," p. 107.

72. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism*, xiii.

73. Phillips, "Searle," p. 24. But as long as Phillips is brandishing this weapon couldn't we accuse Wittgenstein and Phillips of the same sort of thing? How does one come to know that there is no "non-linguistic, transcendental point of view"; how does one come to see the divisions between language-games and accuse others of taking a transcendental point of view and of breaking through linguistic barriers without warrant if one has not himself done just this?

74. Phillips, "Great Expectations," in Runzo (ed.), *Is God Real?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. 206.

75. Phillips, "Religious Beliefs and Language-Games," p. 77.

It is important for Islamic thought to reassert itself clearly and define the parameters upon which a modern Islamic epistemology can be built. The work of the philosophers of the West cannot be ignored, and their criticism should be used to recreate not disparage, the vigor of Islamic philosophy that has been lost over the past few centuries.

Macksood A. Aftab

Groundwork

# On Islamic Philosophy

An examination of issues in epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of religion in the context of modern Western philosophy

Note About the Research:

This project represents a culmination of one year of research during the period of 1998-1999. The work was done both at the International Islamic University, Malaysia and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

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RELATIVE TO ITS WESTERN COUNTERPART, ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY HAS remained largely dormant for the past few hundred years. The intellectual rigor of Islamic thought has waned and contemporary Muslim thinkers are faced with the enormous challenge of re-interpreting and integrating the tremendous intellectual achievements of the West with those of earlier Islamic thinkers and the Qur'an.

This endeavor is of crucial importance to any hope for a new Islamic intellectual renaissance. The rise of Western science and philosophy has posed serious challenges to the fundamental principles of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics espoused by the classical thinkers of Islam. These issues need to be addressed. As Muhammad Iqbal, perhaps the first modern Muslim philosopher to focus on these problems in any comprehensive manner, writes:

**With the reawakening of Islam, therefore, it is necessary to examine, in an independent spirit, what Europe has thought and how far the conclusions reached by her can help us in the revision and if necessary, reconstruction, of theological thought in Islam.<sup>1</sup>**

The current undertaking will by no means meet the challenge put forth by Iqbal. It will, however, attempt to at least lay out some of the issues in Islamic epistemology, metaphysics and philosophy of religion. The difficulty of studies in this field is compounded by the fact that there is very little academic material available on Islamic philosophy, and much of what there is remains to be translated from their original languages. Even when translations are available, many of the issues in philosophy have changed over time and it is unclear how to relate the medieval debates with the modern ones. In short, there is a significant period of intellectual lapse on the Islamic side, between the Middle Ages and today. Despite these problems, there is a need to present intellectual thought in Islam in an easy to understand yet rigorous manner that

may be able to contribute toward the development of cross-cultural studies between Western and Islamic philosophy. Both traditions have much to gain from each other.

It is important to understand the basic framework and essential tools used by Islamic philosophers in order to critique and build upon their works. Modern Western philosophy has already dismissed many of the claims of medieval thinkers. It is now worth evaluating if the earlier claims merit re-examination.

It is peculiar that many of the modern Western arguments have close analogues in the earlier Islamic thinkers. Some have suggested that perhaps this shows the influence of Islamic thought on European philosophy. Many of the classic works of Islamic philosophy were translated into Latin from Arabic at the beginning of the European Renaissance. These, along with translated Greek manuscripts, greatly influenced the development of early Western thought. This influence is best seen in the works of Descartes and Aquinas. In any case, I think, the material is best viewed as a progression of thought from the Greeks onto the Muslims and then to Europe, and not as two isolated or opposed points of view.

There are three major rational arguments for the existence of God that have had a significant influence on the history of philosophy of religion. These are namely, the Cosmological, Teleological and Ontological arguments. This paper will examine these three major arguments as they are presented in Western philosophy and compare them with arguments for the existence of God presented by ancient and modern Islamic philosophers. It will also attempt to clarify the role of philosophy in Islamic thought and the ways in which Muslim philosophers have attempted to reconcile faith and reason. Another strategy of argumentation for God's existence, only recently proposed in contemporary Western philosophy, is proof from religious experience. This approach has deep roots in Islamic philosophy and will be examined in the final part of this paper.

## PHILOSOPHY & ISLAM

Al-Kindi (Alkindus, 800-873 CE), widely recognized as the first Muslim philosopher, called philosophy the most exalted science — of all the disciplines, philosophy alone was thought to ask fundamental questions about universal concerns. Al-Kindi adopted a somewhat Platonic understanding of philosophy as *philo-sophia* — the love of wisdom.<sup>2</sup> Al-Kindi and most Muslim philosophers agree philosophy cannot reach as far as revelation. Hence, our actions should be in primary accord with the teachings of Islam, and philosophy ought to be considered as an independent discipline.

Al-Ghazzali (Algazel, 1058-1111) was a highly influential orthodox Muslim thinker who rebuffed many of those who claimed

Modern Western philosophy has already DISMISSED many of the claims of medieval thinkers. It is now worth evaluating if the earlier claims merit re-examination.

that they could prove God by reason alone. He thinks that the kind of reasoning used by philosophers would never result in the proof of the existence of God. Al-Ghazzali found serious failings in the philosophers of his era. He writes, "they have abandoned all the religious duties... [that] Islam imposes on its followers."

The Aristotelian thinker Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1128 — 1198) held philosophy to be nothing more than the study of beings and reflection upon them. Faith in Islam and the practice of philosophy are intimately connected for Ibn Rushd. He found that the Qu'ran makes the study of philosophy obligatory for all believers. It asks of men, "have they not studied the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and whatever things God has created?" In another passage, the Qu'ran encourages mankind to "Reflect, you have vision." Here God urges the reader to study the world — to discover how and why objects and beings exist. Ibn Rushd concludes that God compels man to try to obtain demonstrative knowledge of His existence. However, prior to having such demonstrative knowledge, man must first learn and master dialectical, theoretical and logical knowledge. That is, for man to learn about the world, he must know the foundations of reasoning. Hence, not only is philosophy necessary, but philosophy is commanded by the divine.<sup>3</sup>

Ibn Rushd admits that, like any scholarly discipline, philosophy may have the potential for harm. The danger of philosophy, however, is no greater than that which results from the study of medicine or law. Moreover, although it may be possible to misuse philosophy for other purposes; since the study of philosophy is commanded by God Himself, it is obligatory.<sup>4</sup>

The modern philosopher Muhammad Iqbal sees no contradiction between faith and reason. Iqbal (1877-1938) is considered the poet-philosopher of twentieth century Islam and his work has been a key impetus in the revival of Islamic thought. He was born in (what is now) Pakistan and studied in Britain and Germany. This expatriation offered Iqbal unique cultural and theoretical insights into both Islamic and Western philosophical traditions. He thinks that thought and intuition both arise from the same source; thought and intuition are not in opposition to each other, but rather are complimentary. Reason aims at achieving knowledge of the physical world and existence; the intuition of religious experience aims at transcending this world and achieving knowledge of the ultimate. Iqbal then thinks that it is necessary for Muslims to engage themselves in the study and science of philosophy in order to redefine an Islamic culture now confronted with a more "advanced" Western civilization. If Muslim thinkers fail in this challenge, then Muslim thought risks assimilation into Western philosophy.

This debate is not unique to Islam; similar concerns have emerged in the history of Christian thought as well. While religious tensions were building barriers to analytical thought in Europe, reason was flourishing in Muslim lands. As the Churches influenced waned, the pendulum of history swung toward Enlightenment and the West. Today it is common for Christian theologians to use philosophy to justify their positions, as has historically been the case among certain Muslim groups. The difficult task, however, is to uphold theist conclusions on purely philosophical grounds in the face of a challenge from radical skepticism.

## Cosmological Arguments

The cosmological argument was first introduced by Aristotle and later refined by the celebrated Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas. In the Islamic tradition, the argument was adopted by Al-Kindi, as well as Ibn Rushd. The argument has several forms - the basic first-cause argument runs as follows: Every event must have a cause, and each cause must in turn have its own cause, and so forth. Hence, there must either be an infinite regress of causes or there must be a starting point or first cause. Aquinas and Al-Kindi reject the notion of an infinite regress and insist that there must be a first cause, and the first cause must be God, the only uncaused being.

Another form of this argument is based on the concept of a *prime-mover*. Ibn Rushd advocates the Aristotelian argument that every motion must be caused by another motion. However, it is necessarily the case that there must be a first motion. The conclusion thus follows that there must be an initial prime-mover, a mover that caused motion without itself being caused.

Islamic thought is split with regard to the cosmological argument. There is an affirmative Aristotelian response strongly supporting the argument and a negative response that is quite critical of it. Among the Aristotelian thinkers are Al-Kindi and Averroes; Al-Ghazzali and Iqbal may be seen as being in opposition to the argument.

Al-Kindi is one of the first Islamic philosophers to attempt to introduce a purely empirical argument for the existence of God. In fact, his chief contribution, in his *On First Philosophy* is the *dalil al-huduth*, the cosmological argument for the existence of God.<sup>5</sup> One of the variations revolves around the principle of *tarjih*. *Tarjih* holds that prior to the existence of the universe it was equally likely for it to exist or not to exist; the fact that the universe does exist implies that it required a determining principle which would cause its existence to prevail over non-existence. This principle of determination is God.<sup>6</sup> One can easily draw an analogy to Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason.<sup>7</sup>

There are difficulties with this kind of an account of the universe. It seems to lead to the conclusion that all truths are necessary. That is, if everything exists because the reasons for its existence supercede the reasons for its non-existence, then everything *necessarily* exists. Since the superiority of its potential existence over its non-existence provides the required determining principle (as for Kindi) or sufficient reason (as for Leibniz), for it to exist, it then appears that the creation of the universe was not contingent upon the will of God, but is as necessary as the existence of God Himself. This seems implausible.

Al-Kindi's second argument draws its inspiration from Islamic and Aristotelian sciences. He argues that only God is indivisible, and everything other than God is in some way composite.

Kindi describes his concept of God:

**He has no matter, no form, no quantity, no quality, no relation; nor is He qualified by any of the remaining categories (*al-ma'qulat*). He has no genus, no differentia, no species, no proprium, no accident. He is immutable... He is, therefore, absolute oneness, nothing but oneness (*wahdah*). Everything else must be multiple.<sup>8</sup>**

Al-Kindi depended on this distinction for many of his arguments for the existence of God. In Al-Kindi's theory, only God's unity is necessary; that of all others is contingent upon God. Hence, all other beings single or multiple must emanate from the ultimate essential being. Kindi accepts that the material world cannot exist *ad infinitum* because of the impossibility of an actual infinite. The material world is not *eo ipso* eternal, because of the impossibility of an infinite duration of time; since our conception of time is contingent upon the existence of finite bodies and motion. As such, the world requires a creator - or rather a generator (*mudhith*) in Kindi's scheme - who could generate the world *ex nihilo*. (Fakhry 74-79)

Islamic scholarship, like its western counterpart, offers numerous criticisms of cosmological arguments. Ghazzali was unconvinced by the first-cause arguments of Al-Kindi. In response to them he wrote:

**According to the hypothesis under consideration, it has been established that all the beings in the world have a cause. Now, let the cause itself have a cause, and the cause of the cause have yet another cause, and so on *ad infinitum*. It does not behoove you to say that an infinite regress of causes is impossible.<sup>9</sup>**

More recently, Muhammad Iqbal also rejects the argument stating, "Logically speaking, then, the movement from the finite to the infinite as embodied in the cosmological argument is quite illegitimate; and the argument fails in total." For Iqbal, the concept of the first "un-caused cause" is absurd. He continues:

**It is, however, obvious that a finite effect can give only a finite cause, or at most an infinite series of such causes. To finish the series at a certain point, and to elevate one member of the series to the dignity of an un-caused first cause, is to set at naught the very law of causation on which the whole argument proceeds.**

It is for these reasons that modern philosophers almost unanimously reject the cosmological argument as a legitimate proof for the existence of God. Kant, for example, also repudiates any cosmological proof on the grounds that it is nothing more than an ontological proof in disguise.

He argues that any necessary object's essence must involve existence; hence, reason alone can define such a being. The cosmological argument, devoid of any empirical premises, begins to resemble its ontological counterpart.

Al-Kindi's argument has been taken up by some contemporary Western philosophers and named the Kalam Cosmological Argument. Among its chief proponents is Dr. William Craig.<sup>10</sup> This argument proposes to show that the universe necessarily must have had a beginning. A contrast is drawn between two concepts, the *potential* infinite and the *actual* infinite. A potential infinite is a concept of an infinite series, to which more things can be added. For example, there may be an infinite number of integers, however in any single closed set, the number of integers is finite. An actual infinite would be a closed set containing all possible integers. Such a set is impossible, since there are an infinite number of integers. Once a set is defined, another integer can always be added to it. Ramey quotes the famous mathematician David Hilbert:

**...The actual infinite is nowhere to be found in reality. It neither exists in nature nor provides a legitimate basis for rational thought—a remarkable harmony between being and thought...**

This forms an essential part of the argument. It demonstrates that an infinite regress could not exist; thus, the universe cannot possibly be actually infinite. The argument goes on to show that if the universe could not be actually infinite or eternal, it must have a first-cause or creator, a God.

How can God, an “uncaused and infinite being” exist? Al-Kindi's answer is quite interesting. He states that it is not fair to ask this question of God, since God is not an actual infinite. God is not a set or collection of things, He is one. God is an absolute unity, and hence on Al-Kindi's scheme God should not be thought of as “infinite.”<sup>11</sup> It is not clear, however, if the Kalam argument successfully shows the impossibility of an infinite. A common response points out that there is no difficulty in imagining an infinity that begins at the present and continues into the future. It then follows that it is entirely conceivable for the same infinity to extend in to the past as well.<sup>12</sup>

## Teleological Arguments

The version of the argument from design is best known in contemporary philosophy as it is presented by William Paley (1805) in his *Natural Theology*. He offers us the analogy of the watch. Suppose that while walking in a deserted remote location you come across a watch. Upon examining this device you may ask yourself, “How did this object come into existence?” Surely it could not be by pure chance; its design is intricate and complex. You would be more likely to think that the watch was a product of an intelligent designer - that is, there must be a watchmaker. Paley argues that the universe is even more complex and manifestly designed than the watch. Such extraordinary design is evident in many phenomena, from planets and galaxies to human cells and atoms. Therefore the universe must have an intelligent creator. This form of the argument can be seen as an inference to the best explanation. That is,

given the remarkable phenomena of the universe, the best possible explanation for this must be the existence of God.

Al-Kindi makes reference to such teleological proof (*dalil al-'indyah*) for the existence of God. He argues that “the orderly and wonderful phenomena of nature could not be purposeless and accidental.”<sup>13</sup> This is consistent with the Qur'anic verse “Not for (idle) sport did We create the heavens and the earth and all that is between!”<sup>14</sup> The teleological argument analyses the material world and infers from it an artificer, a self-conscious being that created this extremely complex world for a purpose. That creator is God. Muhammad Iqbal criticizes this argument in the following terms:

**At best, it [the teleological proof] gives us a skillful external contriver working on a pre-existing dead and intractable material the elements of which are, by their own nature, incapable of orderly structures and combinations. The argument gives us a contriver only and not a creator; and even if we suppose him to be also the creator of his material, it does no credit to his wisdom to create his own difficulties by first creating intractable material, and then overcoming its resistance by the application of methods alien to its original nature. The designer regarded as external to his material must always remain limited by his material and hence a finite designer...**<sup>15</sup>

Iqbal is demonstrating that any argument from design rests on understanding the universe as of extraordinary complexity and meticulous arrangement. It is this notion that compels the observer to infer that there must be an intelligent designer. This view is consistent with the watchmaker example presented by Paley. However, the case of the watch and the case of the universe differ. Unlike the case of the watch, where its builder assembled the complex machine given pre-existing material, the material of the universe itself was created by God. Thus, there is no point in finding it extraordinary that God would be able to organize pre-existing intractable material in such an elegant fashion. The only reason we would have to think such would be if it were a profoundly difficult task to arrange the universe. But then why would God first create a difficult task for Himself and then go on to resolve the difficulty by arranging into a sophisticated pattern? In addition, if He is only an arranger, God would be limited in what He could create. This, to Iqbal, does not seem consistent with the Islamic concept of an omnipotent God. Iqbal writes, perhaps in response to Paley, “There is really no analogy between the work of the human artificer and the phenomena of Nature.”<sup>16</sup>

Most Muslim philosophers have attempted to get around this vexatious problem by simply recognizing the Qur'anic emphasis on the uniformity of nature, accepting it as such and thus avoiding this problem. The above problem of induction gave rise to modern skepticism and remains a fascinating unsolved puzzle.

## Ontological Arguments

The modern Western form of the ontological argument was made famous by Anselm and Descartes. The argument rests on the premise that existence is a predicate that a being could have or lack. A summary of Anselm's argument is as follows:

1. God is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.
2. A being than which nothing greater can be conceived of exists in our thought.
3. Either a being than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in thought alone and not in reality, or a being than which nothing greater can be conceived exists both in thought and in reality.
4. If the greatest conceivable being existed in thought alone we could think of another being existing in both thought and reality.
5. Existing in thought and reality is greater than existing in thought alone. (A being than which nothing greater can be conceived — God — exists in thought and in reality.)

Without any reference to the world, Anselm argues for the existence of God. A key feature of these kind of arguments is that they try to show not only that God exists, but that he necessarily exists. It would be impossible to think of God without it existing. Descartes famously writes,

**From the fact that I cannot think of a mountain without a valley, it does not follow that a mountain and a valley exist anywhere, but simply that a mountain and a valley, whether they exist or not are mutually inseparable. But from the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God.**

Hence, to even make the concept of God intelligible, God must exist. This argument has been widely criticized.

The closest Islamic parallel to this Cartesian ontology can be found in the thought of the ninth century philosopher Avicenna. He shared Descartes methodology of doubt and proposed a somewhat similar ontological argument for the existence of God.<sup>17</sup> Avicenna also held God to be a necessary being. However, his argument — unlike Descartes' — does not make a claim to pure rationalism. Avicenna believed that we possess a direct intuitive apprehension of the reality and existence of this necessary being. He believed that it would be impossible to think concretely without the existence of such a being. Averroes, however, insisted that there can be no rational proof for God's existence and it can only be grasped via the medium of intuition.

The God that Avicenna argues for is a Necessary Being - a being that necessarily exists, and everything else besides is contingent and depends upon this being for its existence. God has no

essence besides his existence. His essence (Ar. *mahiyyah*; L. *quidditas*) is just His existence. Since God is the only being in which essence and existence are to be found together, the essence of all other beings precedes their existence. Thus God is absolutely simplicity; He has no further attributes.<sup>18</sup>

In his book *al-Shifa*, Avicenna explains that since the Necessary Being has no genus, no *differentia*, it is both indefinable and indemonstrable. As such "neither its being or its actions can be an object of discursive thought, since it is without cause, quality, position or time."<sup>19</sup> All other entities do not exist necessarily or essentially, rather they are merely contingent beings (beings *per accidens*). The characteristics of God offered by Avicenna drew major criticisms from the contemporary Muslim orthodoxy, who found his definition incompatible with Islamic doctrine. The Qu'ran says that "not a particle remains hidden from God in the heavens or on the earth." Then how could God be omniscient if He has no attributes?

Avicenna does try to explain how his description would be compatible with God having knowledge of the world. Avicenna's reply is that in knowing Himself, God is capable of knowing everything that emanated from Him. Since God does not have sense-perceptual knowledge, He cannot know the particulars, but rather knows only the essences or universal principles. According to Avicenna this does not exclude Him knowing the specifics of any given event. Knowing all the antecedents and consequences in the causal chain, God is able to place a particular event in time and differentiate that event from all other events. Hence, Avicenna's theory does not preclude God's knowledge of the specifics.<sup>20</sup>

Another key characteristic of Avicenna's ontology is his belief that the universe is eternal. This belief was also unacceptable to the Islamic orthodoxy. Avicenna thought that God's creative ability was linked to His intellectual nature and thus flowed eternally from God out of a rational necessity. Although the universe exists as independent from God, its existence is still contingent upon God. This can be seen as refinement, or rather an "Islamization" of the Aristotelian view that God and the universe were two distinct beings which did not interact with each other.

## Arguments from Religious Experience

There have been philosophical arguments presented for the existence of God which are non-analytical and do not rely on purely logical or empirical premises. Beginning with Al-Ghazzali, there is a strong push in classical Islamic philosophy to resolutely advance this view - and at the same time to deny the legitimacy of purely rationalist arguments for God's existence. Later, Muhammad Iqbal is party to this strategy. However, Iqbal, in concert with his organic world-view, also explores possibilities of reconciliation between reason and religious experience.

The principles for an Islamic epistemology are laid out in the Qu'ran. Three avenues for knowledge are defined:<sup>21</sup>

1. **Certainty by Sense-Perception** (*ain al-yaqin*) or empirically derived knowledge
2. **Cognitive Certainty** (*ilm al-yaqin*) or knowledge by pure reason
3. **Absolute Experienced Certainty** (*haqq al-yaqin*), or knowledge by intuition.

These are sometimes called “modes of knowledge.” A Sufi philosopher explains:

**The sensory mode is experienced through we eat and smell, the cognitive is through knowledge, whether self-evident or acquired, while the intuitive is similarly divided: It can either be self-evident or acquired. However, he who has access to intuitive, which is to say divine knowledge, knows instinctively what other must acquire through the exercise of their cognitive faculties.**<sup>22</sup>

It is this last form of knowledge - the intuitive - at which the arguments from religious experience aim. There is some disagreement on the significance of intuitive knowledge; one should ask the question, even if intuitive knowledge is necessary, is it sufficient for an Islamic epistemology of metaphysics? Ghazzali argues in the affirmative. However, modern philosophers like Iqbal and Al-Attas assert that intuitive knowledge must work in concert with other epistemologies as well.

## Al - Ghazzali

The first major critic of philosophy in the Islamic tradition was Abu Hamid ibn Muhammad al-Ghazzali. Ghazzali felt that no formulation of an epistemology based on human reason could possibly offer a sufficient account of metaphysical theology.

He was an influential Islamic scholar that became interested in philosophy after studying a variety of quarreling Muslim intellectual movements. He then decided

**even if** to embark on a project to determine the answers to two questions: What is **INTUITIVE** certain knowledge? And is such knowledge possible by humans?<sup>23</sup>

**KNOWLEDGE** To accomplish his goal, Ghazzali, much like Descartes, engages in methodological doubt. Unlike Descartes, however, Ghazzali reaches a much more radical conclusion about our ability to have “certain knowledge.” He begins by defining what he means by “certain knowledge.” Ghazzali writes:

**NECESSARY,** **is it** **SUFFICIENT** **for an** **ISLAMIC METAPHYSICS?** **The search after truth being the aim which I propose to myself, I ought in the first place to ascertain what are the bases of certitude. In the second place I ought to recognize that certitude is the clear and complete knowledge of things, such knowledge as leave no room for doubt, nor any possibility of error.**<sup>24</sup>

The kind of knowledge Ghazzali is then seeking is such that the object of knowledge is known in a manner which precludes all possibilities of doubt.

According to Ghazzali, there are only two sources of knowledge that are available to us: sense-perception, and pure reason. He writes:

**We cannot hope to find truth except in matters which carry their evidence in themselves, i.e. in sense-perception and necessary principles of thought; we must, therefore first of all establish these two on a firm basis.**<sup>25</sup>

As a first step, Ghazzali concludes that the only knowledge that could qualify as “certain” would be of the kind that would fit the above description - knowledge of sense-perception or self-evident or necessary truths.<sup>26</sup> Next, Ghazzali examines the extent of knowledge that these avenues allow. He quickly realizes that sense-perception cannot be a source of certain knowledge as it is often untrustworthy. Ghazzali offers examples: shadows appear to be stationary, though in reality they move over time; planets appear coin-sized though astronomical evidence points to the contrary.

Having discarded knowledge of the senses as a path to certainty, Ghazzali considers knowledge of necessary truths. Ghazzali and Descartes both agree that knowledge by sense-perception is unreliable, but Ghazzali makes the further claim that knowledge by pure theoretical reason alone is also unreliable. Descartes, on the other hand, had built his entire epistemology on the basis of the viability of knowledge by pure reason. Ghazzali, though, thinks that this is also not a credible source of knowledge. If he could not trust one kind of knowledge, why trust the other? Ghazzali thought there was no reason to prefer one over the other.<sup>27</sup> There were questions that made him doubt the utility of necessary principles: Is ten really more than three? Can something be and not be at the same time? Can something be both necessary and impossible? He thought reason alone could not provide satisfactory answers to these questions.<sup>28</sup> Hence, making an analogy between the two modes of knowledge, Ghazzali denies knowledge of necessary proposition as well.<sup>29</sup> For obvious reasons, his argument here is quite controversial and Iqbal strongly criticizes Ghazzali on this count.

Ghazzali is now in a position where he has convinced himself that neither of the two avenues of knowledge open to him are reliable. He is confused and considers the possibility that life could be a dream. He was in a state of continuous doubt, unable to ground anything in truth and existence. Ghazzali suffered from this *aporia* as if it were a physical malady. Until he realized a “light which God infused into his heart, which is the key to most species of knowledge.”<sup>30</sup> This Ghazzali found similar to how the Prophet Muhammad describes revelation, “the dilation of the heart, whereby it becomes prone to the reception of Islam.” Ghazzali was then able to transcend everyday experience and realize the ultimate reality through spiritual experience. What Ghazzali is suggesting is the “possibility of a form of apprehension higher than rational apprehension, that is, apprehension as the mystic’s inspiration or the prophet’s revelation.”<sup>31</sup> This new form of knowledge is what he calls intuition. It is distinct from knowledge by the senses or by intellect; intuitive knowledge is only possible through divine facilitation.

## Iqbal’s Critique of Ghazzali

Muhammad Iqbal is quite critical of Ghazzali’s characterization of knowledge. He finds Ghazzali to be mistaken in abandoning reason and embracing mysticism as the exclusive path to experience of the infinite. Iqbal writes of Ghazzali:

He failed to see that thought and intuition are organically related and that thought must necessarily simulate finitude and inconclusiveness because of its alliance with serial time. The idea that thought is essentially finite, and for this reason unable to capture the Infinite, is based on a mistaken notion of the movement of thought in knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

For Iqbal, there is no inherent reason a finite being cannot grasp the reality of an infinite being. Thought is dynamic and is revealed over time. Iqbal further explains how the infinite can come into the comprehension of a finite being. Using a Qur'anic metaphor, the infinite according to Iqbal is

RELIGION  
IS NOT...  
ISOLATED  
FROM  
PHILOSOPHY

A kind of 'Preserved Tablet', which holds up the entire undermined possibilities of knowledge as a present reality, revealing itself in serial time as a succession of finite concepts appearing to reach a unity which is already present in them. It is in fact the presence of the total Infinite in the movement of knowledge that makes finite thinking possible.

Thus, the continuous revealing of the infinite over a finite temporal period allows the finite intellect to grasp the essence of the infinite God. It is not that at any point the finite intellect will be able to fully comprehend the limitless and infinite, but rather that it is the potential of thought to be itself without limit that allows it to have an understanding of the limitless, at least in principle. Dr. Naqib Al-Attas, a contemporary Muslim philosopher and disciple of Al-Ghazzali's school, explains the concept of intuition as understood by him:

**We maintain that all knowledge of reality and of truth, and the projection of a true vision of the ultimate nature of things is originally derived through the medium of intuition. The intuition that we mean cannot simply be reduced to that which operates solely at the physical level of discursive reason based upon sense-experience, for since we affirm in man the possession of physical as well as intelligential or spiritual powers and faculties which refer back to the spiritual entity, sometimes called intellect, or heart, or soul, or self, it follows that man's rational, imaginal and empirical existence must involve both the physical and spiritual levels.**

Here he reaffirms both physical (material) and spiritual (metaphysical) levels as necessary for intuition. However, special emphasis is placed upon the spiritual. This concept of intuition is a major theme both within higher Islamic philosophy and mysticism. It holds that the ultimate reality can be directly and spontaneously experienced and truth can become self-evident with complete clarity.

**when seeking the divine, we CANNOT and DO NOT rely upon "OTHERS." The clue to the ULTIMATE reality must be contained within the EGO. The individual SELF must be the ONLY WAY to certain knowledge.**

## Muhammad Iqbal

Iqbal offers his account of the possibility of religion in the last lecture of the reconstruction titled *Is Religion Possible?* For Iqbal, religion is not something isolated from philosophy. He advocates an integration of the two, at times suggesting that the psychology has not reached an advanced enough level to be able to incorporate spiritual experience as part of a scientific theory of knowledge. Iqbal thinks that, given adequate methods, the ultimate reality is within human grasp. He writes that:

**The truth is that the religious and the scientific processes, though involving different methods, are identical in their final aim. Both aim at reaching the most real. In fact, religion... is far more anxious to reach the ultimately real than science.**<sup>33</sup>

One of the major objections to proofs from religious experience has been that religious experience is incommunicable - not transferable from one person to another - and as such has no value as evidence. That is, person A may see the truth of a proposition whereas person B may not, and there is no way for person A to demonstrate to person B how he came to believe a certain thing. Iqbal does not think that this is a problem. Rather, precisely this "problem" is the foundation of his worldview. He had an organic view about the universe as a whole and people as we encounter them. In our everyday life we see other individuals as mere functions, and only deal with them in so far as their conceptual relation to us is concerned. We do not pursue them any further for any sense of an ultimate reality. Thus, when seeking the divine, we cannot and do not rely upon "others." The clue to the ultimate reality must be contained within the ego. The individual self must be the only way to certain knowledge.

It may be that what we call the external world is only an intellectual construction, and that there are other levels of human experience capable of being systematized by other orders of space and time - levels in which concept and analysis do not play the same role as they do in the case of our normal experience.<sup>34</sup>

The incommunicability of religious experience is an essential part of what makes it different from “normal experience”:

**Strictly speaking, the experience which leads to this discovery is not a conceptually manageable intellectual fact; it is a vital fact, an attitude consequent on an inner biological transformation which cannot be captured in the net of logical categories.**<sup>35</sup>

Intuition is then a valid form of knowledge-yielding experience. This does not, however, mean that intuition is divorced from reason. Iqbal explains that, although real, we do not have the tools at our disposal to evaluate this process of “inner biological transformation.” The scientific method we have today is insufficient to apply to these kinds of experiences, since scientific “concept and analysis” may not be applicable to this sort of experience as they are to physics. Dr. Al-Attas, advocating a similar view states:

**Belief has cognitive content; and one of the main points of divergence between true religion and secular philosophy and science is the way in which the sources and methods of knowledge are understood.**<sup>36</sup>

At this level of experience, “the act of knowledge is a constitutive element in the objective reality.”<sup>37</sup> Iqbal thought God could not be removed from his creation. Not in the pantheistic sense, but in that the ultimate reality cannot stand as an other to the universe or person (as Avicenna thought). Rather, they are intertwined, and in looking within ourselves for this higher level of experience, the ultimate reality would be revealed unto the individual. As Iqbal explains, this higher level of experience is not at the sensory or representational level. It is better described as a feeling rather than as concepts. He writes: “It is rather a mode of dealing with Reality in which sensation, in the physiological sense of the word, does not play any part.”<sup>38</sup>

This, for Iqbal, is the mystic experience that ultimately leads to certain knowledge. This knowledge is

**Irresistible and like bright sunshine forces itself immediately to be perceived as soon as the mind turns its attention to it, and leaves no room for hesitation, doubt or examination, but the mind is perfectly filled with the clear light of it.**<sup>39</sup>

It should be mentioned that although Iqbal offers the above explanation of the way in which an individual may access the ultimate, he draws his inspiration from Einstein and Nietzsche. Einstein’s theory of relativity gave Iqbal hope that his theory about the relation between the finite and the infinite was viable. Relativity blurred the line between traditional conceptions of what was physical and what was metaphysical, exposing their underlying connections. Nietzsche’s emphasis on individuality

deeply impressed Iqbal; he thought that Nietzsche was on the right track, but had been distracted by the way that the naturalisms of Schopenhauer, Darwin and Lange explained away the existence of God. Hence, Nietzsche was a failure. But he had realized an essential truth. That is, what ultimately matters is the ego, the *self*, and nothing else. Thus it is not important if reality is not transferable from one person to another. What matters is the “I” and not the “other.”

It is also significant that Iqbal thought that if a sufficient understanding of the “mental” was achieved, it would be (at least theoretically) possible to use the science of psychology to garner a better sense of this “deeper experience.” This may be relevant to the concept in philosophy of mind known as the “anomalousness of the mental.” This principle states that there are no causal laws that relate to mental events. This explains science and psychology’s difficulty in grasping such concepts. Iqbal, however, thinks that it is at least theoretically possible to be able to achieve a working understanding of mental events. The theories of knowledge advocated by the proofs from religious experience may be considered externalist accounts. Externalism is the view that some of the justifying factors of belief need not be cognitively accessible and may be external to the mind of the individual. That is, a person can be justified in holding a belief even if they are not aware that they are in possession of all the reasons that make the position justified. Iqbal advocates a similar view, in that the reasons, although they may objectively exist, are difficult to determine by the individual.

Externalism often rests on the premise of reliabilism. That is, one way to know that something is true without knowing all the reasons for it being true is to consider if the information is received from a reliable source. For example, we may consider our vision and senses to be a reliable source to affirm the existence of the external world. In the same way, Iqbal and Ghazzali describe the experience of the divine in terms of the sense. If this experience is reliable and originating from God, then we could affirm the knowledge without knowing all the reasons that justify God’s existence. It appears, however, that what Iqbal wants to say is that the reasons for the justification of God are, in theory, accessible to humans, but in practice are much more difficult to determine compared to the direct mystic experience of the divine entity. This is consistent with the views of Al-Ghazzali on this issue.<sup>40</sup>

## The Potential of Islam

There is a strong tradition of rigorous Islamic thought on philosophical issues. Issues in Islamic metaphysics and epistemology are varied and complex. There are strong and useful similarities of thinking between Muslim and Western philosophy. Western philosophers have expanded upon many of the debates originating within the Islamic world, as the Muslims had earlier done with the work of Greek scholars. It would be a mistake to consider Islamic thought a relic of the past. Islamic philosophy is showing signs of significant recovery and with the emergence of an integrated worldview, it will be a practicable academic discipline.

The consensus among modern Muslim philosophers seems to have shifted away from the purely empirical arguments for God’s existence. The consensus of Islamic thinkers like Ghazzali, Al-Attas and Iqbal seem to prefer arguments from religious experience over the rational arguments.

Apart from the basic question of how faith and reason interact in epistemology, there are other issues of significance that need philosophical study. For instance, is there an Islamic response to the mind-body problem? Are we to reject the concept of the soul as Kant did since it is an obscure concept? Or can it be reinterpreted as the mind? If so, what constitutes the mind? Does Islam provide its own ethical framework? If so, what are its principles and does it resolve some of the difficulties of common Western ethical theories? These are just some of the questions, besides those of epistemology and metaphysics, that will face future Muslim philosophers.

Resolving these problems will have profound implications on the Islamic worldview and are prerequisite to any tangible and independent Islamic academic philosophy.

At the very least, it is important for Islamic thought to reassert itself clearly and define the parameters upon which a modern Islamic epistemology can be built. The work of the philosophers of the West cannot be ignored, and their criticism should be used to recreate, not disparage, the vigor of Islamic philosophy that has been lost over the past few centuries.

## 42 Notes

- 1 Iqbal, 6
- 2 Kindi, 18-19
- 3 Ibn Rushd, 44-46. It should also be noted that the thrust of Ghazzali's argument is not against philosophy, but rather its us. His main concern is that the philosophers are drawing invalid conclusions from their arguments.
- 4 Ibn Rushd, 47
- 5 Nasr, 168
- 6 Kindi, 58
- 7 Russell, 568; Cassirer, 73
- 8 Sharif, 429
- 9 Tahafut, 90-91
- 10 Ramey
- 11 Fakhry, 77
- 12 Sharif, 503
- 13 Kindi, 61
- 14 Yusuf Ali, Qur'an 21:16
- 15 Iqbal, 24
- 16 (Iqbal 24)
- 17 Shiekh, 77
- 18 Sharif, 501
- 19 Fakhry, 153-154
- 20 Al-Ghazzali was not satisfied with this account and criticized Avvicena stating that the theory would not allow for change in

- divine knowledge with the introduction of temporality. (Sharif, 502)
- 21 Wan Daud, 65
  - 22 Awliya, 160-161
  - 23 Fakhry, 218; Sheikh, 85; Sharif, 583
  - 24 Sharif, 588
  - 25 Sharif, 589
  - 26 Ghazzali
  - 27 Fakhry, 219
  - 28 Sharif, 589
  - 29 Fakhry, 219
  - 30 Fakhry, 219
  - 31 Sharif, 590
  - 32 Iqbal, 155
  - 33 Iqbal, 155
  - 34 Iqbal, 144
  - 35 Iqbal, 145
  - 36 Anees.
  - 37 Iqbal, 145
  - 38 Maruf
  - 39 Hasan
  - 40 Iqbal also advocates another proof for the existence of God based upon the Qur'anic emphasis upon history. This can also be considered a reliabilist account, however, it has not been considered in this paper.

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# MORE THAN ANY OTHER...

## *a special section of meteorite on Foucault and philosophy*

To the extent that Foucault fits into the philosophical tradition, it is the critical tradition of Kant, and project could be called a critical history of thought....

Maurice Florence, entry for "Foucault", Dictionnaire des Philosophes, 1982.

"Maurice Florence" is a pseudonym devised for the sake of the Dictionnaire; Michel Foucault was the author of his own entry.

Perhaps this minor fact of scholarship echoes the voice of a generation of young thinkers who not only attend to what Foucault has written, but have begun to identify themselves with his project. The French language has an untranslatable distinction which describes this well: *On pense de Kant ou Descartes, Sartre ou Heidegger, mais on pense à Foucault.* Though, like the others, we challenge Foucault with every critical strategy in our arsenal, we are also drawn to think of the man who was lost to us before we ever could have known to discover him. Indeed, for many of us, it was Foucault who first opened all the possibilities of a "critical arsenal." We understand Foucault's project not only a scholasticism. For us, the "critical history of thought" is a far more intimate work - a permanent questioning of what it is that has become our "personal." And perhaps at times we are even jealous of Foucault for completing a task that many of us don not think to begin - the writing of one's own entry in the registry of the world.

The following two papers each confront what it would mean to "write the entry for one's self." John Hartmann's "Thinking Otherly: Foucault and the self" not only finds in the later Foucault a well-developed "ethics of self-creation," but convincingly illustrates how this "ethics" emerges from themes in Foucault's earlier works. Hartmann holds that Foucault's thought opens upon a conceptual space too often foreclosed by modern philosophy - the body. By nurturing the theoretical rapport between subjectivity and the body, we arrive at a particularly Foucauldian ethos that is resilient to many of the charges commonly raised against Foucault's work.

Paul Lekas' "Beyond the Phallic Signifier: Foucault and psychology" reevaluates what is at stake in Foucault's work by reading Foucault not simply as a critic of psychoanalysis, but as a thinker of psychology in his own right - one who belongs as much to the tradition of Freud and Lacan as to that of Marx and Nietzsche. Lekas carefully draws analogies across the front-lines of what would otherwise seem intractable debates, demonstrating that Foucault's concept of subjectification offers a compelling revision of the thought of his more "properly psychoanalytic" contemporaries.

Both Hartmann and Lekas' texts as they appear here are abridged editions of lengthier works. The original version of each is available at [www.umich.edu/meteorit](http://www.umich.edu/meteorit)

## *Thinking Otherly: Foucault and the Self* — John Hartmann

*the body, as the site of production and normalization, must also be the basis for a novel understanding of subjectivity and self. The process of subjectification occurs on the surface of the body.*

When discussing his early philosophical education, Michel Foucault often spoke of his turn towards writers like Nietzsche, Blanchot and Bataille as a means of distancing himself from the then in-vogue phenomenological-Marxist school of French thought (represented by his own teachers Merleau-Ponty and Hyppolite, as well as by Sartre):

What did they represent for me? First of all, an invitation to call into question the category of the 'subject,' its primacy and its originating function. And then, the conviction that an operation of that kind would not have made any sense if it had been confined to speculation: to call the subject into question had to mean to live it in an experience that might be its real destruction or dissociation, its explosion or upheaval into something radically 'other.'<sup>1</sup>

This "turn," as it were, is emblematic of the manner in which thinkers like Foucault have begun to reconsider many of the traditional issues of philosophy.

My question in this paper regards the place of the "self" within such discourse, and more precisely, how one is to become what one is from within the modern condition. I take the common understanding of postmodern discourse to be that we have become convinced of the relativism (cultural, epistemic, etc.) of the age. Alan Bloom, for example, argues in *The Closing of the American Mind* that it is Nietzsche behind the apparent nihilism of the youth and perhaps even the JFK assassination. I take this cultural phenomenon as a starting point, and ask this philosophical question: How does one create meaning out of this "nihilistic soup"? If we remove the hegemony of the subject, what is left to the self? And what means can be

found within the postmodern topography for any sort of movement — for any sort of “ethic of self”?

My point is this — once we begin to think of philosophy and truth as language games and nothing more, we need to provide a way for philosophy to operate, to surge outside of the problem it has created for itself. Once we see the difficulties with various notions of subjectivity and their effects on philosophic discourse, we need to create a different means of existing in the world — a space for the self.

In the course of Foucault’s career, he appears to offer two very different possible means of creating a self. Early on (circa *The Archaeology of Knowledge*) he seems fixated on the possibility of the transgression state, of using culture against itself, resisting through the very power structures which oppress and codify. In his last works, however, Foucault turns to the Greeks and Romans for examples of ethical strategies that focus inward instead of extending outward — cases of true “ethics of the self.” Many commentators have seen this as something of a theoretical turn in Foucault’s work, but I see it as a completion of a project cut short by an untimely death. The later emphasis on the self completes the triad power/knowledge/self which Foucault analyzed throughout his career. There is little incongruity evident in a synthesis of these two ethical positions. Transgression states need not be bizarre or overly dramatic. Why can’t a turning inward of morality effect the same changes as a sado-masochistic experience? The key to both, I believe, is the possibility for “thinking otherly” — for recreating the self in a new relation to the social structures within which it is enmeshed. My goal is an elucidation of a means of movement, a theory of how a self might gain the possibility of thinking and living otherly.

### a historical introduction & an introduction to genealogy

The hegemony of the static, valorized, subject, beginning with Plato’s likening of the body to a prison of the soul and continuing through Descartes’ work to the present, has been one of the most central, yet often under-analyzed, notions within Western philosophy. Descartes’ procedure, for example, might best be described as an epistemology based upon an ontological duality of self. In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he stops up his ears, eyes, etc., and searches inward for some infallible bit of information. He notes that because he finds his senses to be misleading in a number of instances, it is imperative that he cast off, as it were, the mistakes that the body might cause him, and thus creates a dualism to account for this situation. Descartes finds his modicum of certainty in the statement “*cogito, ergo sum*.” This “self-evident” knowledge is what Descartes is able to build his epistemology on: a valorization of the intellect or mind at the expense of the passions, senses, or best termed, the body. The implication is that the body is unworthy for service as a site of knowledge; all important or truly useful information comes from reason and logical dissection. In this manner, Cartesian metaphysics, running through Kant (differentiating between the phenomenal and noumenal Ego, and valorizing the noumenal) and, in some ways, through Hegel, dominated Western thought, and to a degree continues to do so today.

“Neo-Cartesian,” including the phenomenol-

ogists (with the possible exception of the very late Merleau-Ponty) as well as Sartre, made their attempt to move beyond Cartesianism by examining the “subject” as the site of experience. And yet, by continuing with a rather static notion of subject — for example, the *epoché* as a means of accessing the transcendental Ego for inquiry within Husserlian thought — they managed only to displace the issue. Positing a subject as lived experience, a substance to be interrogated in relation to perception of the exterior world, does not overcome Cartesian metaphysics, as the problem is not necessarily the valorization of the mind, but the continuance of the binary dualism; there is a subject which interprets the world, which is separate from that world, indissoluble, sometimes transcendental and perhaps even immortal. By not questioning this prioritization, the preference for an authentic sort of self as opposed to a vulgar or non-transcendent variety, Cartesian metaphysics is not yet overcome.

This is the framework within which Michel Foucault writes. Throughout his career, Foucault strove to understand both the manner in which the notion of the subject was relatively unchallenged — why the subject? what good is it? why do we need it at all? — as well as the means by which we might move beyond the hegemony of the subject, towards a deeper understanding of our own time and situation.

What, then, is the modern subject? How is it created? What is subjectification? To understand the background to this discussion, we must look to Foucault’s own philosophical mentor — Nietzsche — and the tradition that Nietzschean thought inspired.

With his utterance “God is dead,” Nietzsche pushes us beyond dualism. By dualism, in this case, I mean not only the mind-body split evident in Plato and Descartes, but also the differentiation between materiality and the social. The trend in both cases is to posit a subject, rational or transcendental (or both), which exists beyond the reach of the body or the social. This is the sort of dualism which Nietzsche was reacting against. In this light, the true import of his statement “God is dead” is not the death of God *per se*, but instead all that which a God would guarantee — objective reality, objective truth, a true morality. In place of an epistemology, Nietzsche presents us with an economy of forces. Instead of objective reality, there is perspectivism. Perspectivism, in the Nietzschean tradition, does not promote a naïve relativism, where truth is relativized to personal belief or belief structures. All that exists, then, might best be described as *interpretation*. As Foucault writes,

**Words themselves are nothing but interpretations, throughout their history they interpret before being signs, and ultimately they signify only because they are essentially nothing but interpretations... [this is also what Nietzsche means when he says that words have always been invented by the ruling classes; they do not denote a signified, they impose an interpretation.]**<sup>2</sup>

In this light, we can see that Nietzsche not only dealt God a death-blow, but *he simultaneously sublated the notion of the Real, as well as the notion of the ahistorical, atemporal subject*. This, of course, is not to say that the Real ever ‘truly’ existed, because it didn’t — but neither did God. We are left with an ontology based upon the interpellation of materiality and the social, of the body and the forces that act upon it. Materiality and the social are one and the same. Together, *they* are the Real.

What is at stake in Nietzsche’s vision of the conscious subject is

why the subject?  
what good is it?  
why do we need to know?

not the mere reduction or simplification of the subject to the symbolic order within which he or she is enmeshed. Nor is it the understanding of the subject as simply that materiality which is encoded with the structures of the social. Rather, it is a cross-pollination, an *interpellation*, a continual recasting of the material by the social, and the social by materiality — there is no Outside to this system.

In his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Foucault explicitly locates his own notion of genealogy within the Nietzschean framework. Withdrawing any claims to the *Ursprung* (origin) of concepts, as the pursuit of the origin “attempt[s] to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities,”<sup>3</sup> genealogy instead turns towards questions of *Entstehung* (emergence) and *Herkunft* (descent). This turn is characteristic of the attempt to consider the Real as being historically constituted; that is to say, ordered according to the contingent structures created and maintained by power/knowledge. Genealogy, then, operates as a means of tracing the histories of concepts, of understanding the historical twists and turns that not only create signs but remain hidden within those signs. As Foucault writes in a very famous passage, “genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times.”<sup>4</sup>

Foucault characterizes the study of descent, and the practice of genealogical analysis, as permitting

**The discovery, under the unique aspect of a trait or a concept, of the myriad events through which — thanks to which, against which — they were formed... it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations — or, conversely, the complete reversals — the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us...**<sup>5</sup>

*Herkunft* then is a tracing of *Entstehung*, of the points in history in which different force-relations created new signs or overcoded the meanings of existing one:

**An event, consequently, is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it...**<sup>6</sup>

And yet, Foucault locates the site of *Herkunft*, of descent, as being the body. What is implied in this statement?

Foucault is a materialist, and as such, the body becomes the site of interplay between materiality and the social. The body is inscribed by interaction of forces, but even more so, the body is a product of these power relations. In other words, the subject of genealogy, *Herkunft*, is recorded in the body. Foucault explains this in the following:

**The body — and everything that touches it: diet, climate, and soil — is the domain of the *Herkunft*. The body manifests the stigmata of past experience and also gives rise to desires, failings, and errors... [t]he body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume of perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body.**<sup>7</sup>

This is a crucial movement for the argument I wish to undertake — that the body, as the site of production and normalization, must also be the basis for a

novel understanding of subjectivity and self. The process of subjectification occurs on the surfaces of the body. The body is trained, coerced, and rewarded via the dictates of the modern ‘soul’ — not a Christian soul, to be sure, but the means by which the body is created in the image of power. As Foucault writes very early on in *Discipline and Punish*, describing modern man, “a ‘soul’ inhabits him and brings him to existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body. The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body.”<sup>8</sup> The soul which inhabits the modern body is created by power, works in the service of power, and induces the production of a body that is always inscripted and overcoded by discursive elements — “you need to lose weight,” or “you should never have desire for those of your own sex or family.” This constitution of the subject is deciphered only through the intermediary of language.

Through genealogical analysis, we can thus understand the means by which one becomes a subject. Additionally, if we can understand the process of subjectification, we can realize the contingency of it, and thus perhaps find a means of moving beyond the hegemony of the subject. Foucault, throughout his career, understood one of the conditions of human fulfillment as being the possibility of opening up new possibilities of life beyond those limits imposed by prevailing norms. As Foucault believed (so strongly in fact that this passage was read at his funeral by Gilles Deleuze):

**There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks and perceive differently than one sees is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.**<sup>9</sup>

## foucault and critique

An examination of the contemporary debates surrounding Foucault's work may help develop the concept of the body as the means towards a novel understanding of subjectivity.

Despite the frequency with which Foucault's texts are cited by feminist thinkers, many feminists have also criticized Foucault's apparent distillation of agency from the body. This sort of criticism frequently runs along these lines, according to Lois McNay:

**For the emphasis that Foucault places on the effects of power upon the body results in a reduction of social agents to passive bodies and does not explain how individuals may act in an autonomous fashion. This lack of a rounded theory of subjectivity or agency conflicts with a fundamental aim of the feminist project: to rediscover and re-evaluate the experiences of women.**<sup>10</sup>

But is this a fair criticism of Foucault? Or, to put another way, do these thinkers gloss over certain concepts within Foucault's texts which might defuse this critique? I believe that McNay's points indicate a certain misreading of Foucault's work, which I will do my best to correct. I will first (quite briefly) work with Foucault's notions of power and subjectivity, concentrating on the account found in *The Will to Knowledge*. Also, I will entertain two criticisms common to a number of thinkers, and will attempt to reply to them.

Foucault's notion of power, central to his discussion of subjectification, has proven to be rather enigmatic in some regards. A number of feminist thinkers seem to understand power to be a homogenous field extending over and creating the social realm. For these thinkers, power is problematic in a number of ways, especially regarding the ideas that 1) Foucault's notion of power relations implies a docile body, and 2) that power in itself — as a universal, overarching field of relations — does not allow for any real means of resistance. Power, as described by Fou-

cault, is not

**A group of institutions and mechanism that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state... power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization...**<sup>11</sup>

Power does not exist in some unitary form, reducible to one specific point or essence. Rather, there is an

**Omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to the next.**

**Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.**<sup>12</sup>

Genealogy is the study of these power relations, as signs and norms change over time due to the interplay of numerous forces and the overcoding of previous power relations. Power and knowledge have a symbiotic relationship — power relations presuppose, and are catalyzed by fields of knowledge; knowledge produces the power relations that maintain it. Power and knowledge are as two sides of a coin. Indeed, as Foucault writes, “it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together.”<sup>13</sup> Discursive

practices (words or statements enmeshed within the matrix of power which have effects due to this position within power) belie the power relations that spawn them, as well as maintain those power mechanisms. The dualism between materiality (power) and the social (knowledge) is overcome; discourse becomes the Real.

The body is the site of the inscription of discursive practices. The body is inscribed by the interplay of power relations, but even more so, the body is a product of these power relations. In other words, the subject of genealogy, the descent (*Herkunft*) and emergence (*Entstehung*) of power relations, is recorded in the body.

This leads directly into the second objection to Foucault mentioned above:

**However, despite Foucault's theoretical assertion that power is a diffuse, heterogeneous and productive phenomenon, his historical analyses tend to depict power as a centralized, monolithic force with an inexorable and repressive grip on its subjects.**<sup>14</sup>

This claim, found in the works of a number of thinkers (including Jürgen Habermas), represents the second wave of criticism against Foucault's theories of power and subjectification, and is in a number of important areas directly linked to the first. If we remove the essentializing claim to a feminine body, we are left with gender, and in particular, the manner in which gender is produced and enforced is through power/knowledge. But does this leave room for effective agency? If

there is no outside to power/knowledge, does space remain for ethical movement?

The obvious retort to be made on behalf of Foucault is this: that the notion of power, in itself, entails a certain means of resistance. As he writes,

**Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.... [Power] depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations.**<sup>15</sup>

Foucault makes the point that resistance to subjectification is inherent within the system of subjectification. It is a matter of taking the means of subjectification and turning them against themselves:

**Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are... discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance, and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.**<sup>16</sup>

What is at stake in this move is best illustrated by the work of Judith Butler, whose ideas I will briefly explain here. Butler works through the notion of resistance by *understanding gender as performative*, that is to say, that the process of subjectification takes place through the continual iteration and re-iteration of discursive practices and normative frameworks which implant themselves within the gendered body. This is not to say that one performs one's gender in any conscious sense; rather, performative identity “must be understood not as a singular or deliberative ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.”<sup>17</sup> For example, masculinity is defined in no small part by social convention, by certain normative standards that create a homogenized ideal of what a man should be: tall, rugged, powerful. The iteration of such norms creates a masculine identity that is inscribed into bodies, so that discourse creates and maintains what we understand to be masculine.

Butler owes much theoretically to the work of Jacques Derrida, from whom she borrows notions of performativity and speech. “Every sign,” Derrida writes,

**... can be cited, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new concepts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion. This does not suppose that the mark is valid outside its context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring.**<sup>18</sup>

Here, Derrida is after the idea that any discursive practice or sign has meaning only in

*The body is the site of the inscription*

terms of context — there, then, is no pure presence, but always the falling away of context. The iteration of the mark or sign brings possibilities for re-inscription, for resistance to power. The iteration of normativity is never total or final, but always contingent, subject to failure. This presents the possibility for a reappropriation of the sign or statement. ‘Eventually, one may recognize other such possibilities in it [the mark or sign] by inscribing or *grafting* it into other chains. No context can enclose it. Nor can any code, the code being here both the possibility and impossibility of writing, of its essential iterability (repetition/alterity).’<sup>19</sup>

Butler utilizes the Lacanian/Freudian concept of “foreclosure” to underscore the manner in which performative identity is constructed. “Foreclosure” is here taken to mean (in Lacanian terms) ‘that what is foreclosed in a signifier, namely, that which has been symbolized, and that the mechanism of that repudiation takes place within the “symbolic”<sup>20</sup> order as a policing of the borders of intelligibility.’<sup>21</sup> Maintaining the boundaries between the binary oppositions, between that which is intelligible and the realm of the psychotic, the process of foreclosure also exposes the limitations to means of subjectification. And yet, that which maintains that which is foreclosed (the Law of the Father, for Lacan) is *internal to the symbolic realm*. This is akin to Derrida’s realization that the relation between the terms of a binary dualism is always parasitic: take normal, paradigmatic heterosexuality against the marginalized homosexual, for instance. The realm of normal heterosexual behaviour is maintained by that which is marginalized — homosexuality. Without the marginal, the normal could not exist; the existence of the marginal is assumed in the construction of the normal. In other words, the “frozen dualism” deconstructs to a situation where both the normal and the marginal depend upon one another, and a certain thawing of the dualism commences.

This is important in the rejection of essentialism. In the attempt to essentialize the feminine, one runs the risk of essentializing that which feminism attempts to overcome: the abject, marginalized feminine materiality. The dependence on the normative heterosexual position remains in place. Furthermore, the essential question is never posed: what normalizing practices remain in place with the movement towards a stable, essential femininity? Foucault writes:

**The task is not, as a consequence, to multiply numerically subject-positions *within* the existing symbolic... insistence on coherent identity as a point of departure presumes that what a ‘subject is is already known, already fixed... if that very subject produces its own coherence at the cost of its own complexity, the crossings of identifications of which it is itself composed, then that subject forecloses the kinds of contestatory connections that might democratize the field of its own operation.’<sup>22</sup>**

In opposition to this approach, Foucault offers another idea, summed up in this way:

**It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim — through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality — to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. *The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures.***<sup>23</sup>

Here we see Foucault’s notion that the explosion and proliferation of difference can provide a means of an emancipatory politic without running the risk of essentializing a static substance. How is this possible?

What if it were possible to loosen the knots that hold together the discursive frameworks which create the modern subject? What if it were possible to undermine the division between normal and marginal, without assuming a position on either side? Foucault’s point, as well as Butler’s, is that this sort of strategic movement is indeed possible, as well as efficacious:

**And if there is *agency*, it is to be found, paradoxically, in the possibilities opened up in and by that constrained appropriation of the regulatory law, by the materialization of that law, the compulsory appropriations and identification with those normative demands...<sup>24</sup>**

If, as Butler asserts, the means for resistance are implicit within every power structure, we must first ask where such sites of resistance might be encountered, and then, how we might make use of them.

Just as a child desires what is not available to her simply because she can’t have it, marginalized practices become eroticized precisely because of the fact that they are taboo.<sup>25</sup> Or, viewed another way, subjectification is a result of numerous social forces that intersect and form a locus: sex, gender, race, ethnicity, education, economic status, and so forth. If identity is enforced through iteration, meaning that subjectification is a continually on-going process, enforced through constant inscription and re-inscription of regulatory law, there always exists the possibility that the iteration will fail. One might argue that the materiality of the body is itself resistant to inscription; some sorts of iterated normalization are more conducive to the process of inscription than others. The inherent possibility of a failure to iterate the position of power, to fail to create a normalized subject, can thus be understood to allow for possibilities for thinking otherly, for constructing the self in a different manner than that demanded by power. In either case, the idea is to inhabit strategic points within the power/knowledge nexus, not to occupy them, *but to subvert them*.

This, then, is the force of Foucault’s idea about “bodies and pleasures.” What is essential is the re-appropriation of the mark, the implosion of the dualism through citation. Butler describes one such practical means of resistance as drag, where the identity of one’s sexual position within the social field is grafted into new situations, thus exposing the contingency of said identity:

**...A crisis in the symbolic will entail a crisis in this identity-conferring function of the name, and in the stabilizing of bodily contours according to sex allegedly performed by the symbolic. *The crisis in the symbolic, understood as a crisis over what constitutes the limits of intelligibility, will register as a crisis in the name and in the morphological stability that the name is said to confer.***<sup>26</sup>

The muscular, exquisitely masculine Navy fag is an example of the manner in which the symbolic can become destabilized — the Lieutenant, through his non-fulfillment of the standard position attributed to gay men (feminized, a lisp), undermines the iteration of the normative rule. He assumes a position within the symbolic order which is not new, but one which can be utilized in subverting conventional notions of what it means to be a homosexual subject, whether he is conscious of such possibilities or not.

One also might take the example of Tupac Shakur as a man whose life and works expose the possibilities for self-transformation through creating something of a crisis in the identity-fixing function of the performative. Born in Brooklyn to a mother who

*of discursive practices.*

was a Black Panther, Shakur attended the Baltimore School for the Arts, where he was recognized as having incredible talent. His career as a “gangsta rapper” was coupled with his poetry writing, for example, and his outstanding performances in various movies. Shakur’s position within the symbolic does not reduce to that of some “angry black man,” which, as one who grew up in poverty and various ghettos, current power structures seem to demand. Rather, Shakur made his position within the symbolic order tremble; he was arrested for assault and sexual misconduct while at the same time heavily involved in large works of charity, and continuing to practice his art. Through resistance of power via his questioning of his own social identity, Shakur’s life points the way towards a means of actively recreating the self through one’s own practices.

Performativity of identity also explains, to some degree, Foucault’s willingness to discuss his own interest in sado-masochistic sexual practices and the phenomenon of gay men “inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body — through eroticization of the body... it’s a kind of creating, a creative enterprise, which has as one of its main features... the desexualization of pleasure.”<sup>27</sup> For Foucault, sexuality became a discursive object, and subjects were made participants in bio-political control over their own sexuality, with the effect being a new sort of subject in regards to sexuality. Of course, as Foucault would argue, with the proliferation of discourse around sex came a similar proliferation of taboos and erotica — this is why Foucault describes power as *dangerous*, and not as simply “bad” — but nevertheless, pleasure became linked to specific sorts of activities. With sado-masochism, for example, these activities are re-appropriated and cited in new ways, “desexualizing” pleasure and subverting normalized notions regarding sexual practice. There is a resistance of bio-politics, which demands normalized heterosexual behaviors as a means of reproducing a population. With sado-masochistic practice, gender and sexuality become performative. Bodies become grounds for experimentation, sites of creation and citation, where the goal is not the creation of new bodies, but new relations to the self. It becomes a matter of turning attention from the body towards the self. This is the ‘turn’ Foucault completes in his last works.

## fashioning a self

In one of the most remarkable essays of his career, “What is Enlightenment?”, Foucault analyzes an essay by Immanuel Kant, “*Was ist Aufklärung?*”, and situates himself as participating in the critical project of Kant and the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*). “In the text on *Aufklärung*, he [Kant] deals with the question of contemporary reality alone. He is not seeking to understand the present on the basis of a totality or of a future achievement. He is looking for a difference: What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?”<sup>28</sup> Given Foucault’s rather caustic dismissal of Kantian thought in *The Order of Things*, this alliance seems unlikely.<sup>29</sup> And yet, Foucault does, in various interviews and essays towards the end of his life, speak favorably of Kant’s movement towards “an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical

analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.”<sup>30</sup>

This late “turn,” as it were, is emblematic of the manner in which Foucault saw his own project towards the end of his life, of a unique method of critique — “...the permanent reactivation of an attitude — that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our own historical era.”<sup>31</sup> As discussed before, the means of resistance inherent within Foucault’s analytic of power structures have been severely criticized in a number of circles. This ‘turn’ might be construed as something of an attempt to clarify the manner in which one might attempt critique from within power. Or, as Foucault’s biographer James Miller suggests, it might have stemmed from a personal “transgressive” experience.<sup>32</sup> In either case, the turn towards technologies of the self in Foucault’s last works represents a major refinement of his understanding of subjectivity, as well as the means by which a subject might rework herself, might resist power and create a new, different self.

In the essay on Kant, Foucault mentions Charles Baudelaire as the epitome of “the man who tries to invent himself.”<sup>33</sup> He appropriates Baudelaire’s term *dandyisme* to describe a sort of relationship one has with oneself, in which one takes oneself as an object to be elaborated and produced according to one’s own desires and beliefs. It becomes evident as the essay progresses that Foucault’s interest in Baudelaire is due to the manner in which he reads Baudelaire’s life and work as exemplifying a different sort of relation to the self than is usually seen in modern subjects. He calls this relationship an ‘ethical’ relation, which he describes as “the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, *rappor à soi*... which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions.”<sup>34</sup>

In *The Use of Pleasure* and elsewhere, Foucault outlines four major aspects of this ‘ethical’ relationship to the self. There is the manner in which one cares for one’s ethical substance, one’s *bios*, or “a material for an aesthetic piece of art”<sup>35</sup>; “that is, the way in which the individual has to constitute this or that part of himself as the prime material of his moral conduct.”<sup>36</sup> There is the mode of subjection (*mode d’assujettissement*); “the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obliged to put it into practice.”<sup>37</sup> There is also the form of elaboration, or of ethical work (*travail éthique*); “[work] that one performs on oneself, not only in order to bring one’s conduct into compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one’s behavior.”<sup>38</sup> Finally, there is the *telos* of the ethical subject, as “an action is not only moral in itself, in its singularity, but it is also moral in its circumstantial integration and by virtue of the place it occupies in a pattern of conduct.”<sup>39</sup>

Differences in ethical behavior can be understood, in this view, as being linked to differences in these aspects of the relation to the self. For example, if we look at abstention from sex with partners other than your ‘steady,’ we might understand the moral status of the practice differently from each of these perspectives. There is a different relation to the self if you abstain for religious reasons as opposed to respect for the other person in your relationship, or if you base such abstention upon the battle to control the passions. Foucault’s analysis of such a situation illustrates the differences in

ethical status we ascribe, following the differences in rules encountered and modes of relation to the self one utilizes.

But why the turn to the *Greco-Roman* world for inspiration? In Foucault's analysis, the difference between the relation to the self of the Greek world, for example, and our modern society does not boil down to a difference in prohibition against homosexuality, nor a difference in ideas about fidelity. Furthermore, there is no clean break between the two realms. Foucault writes that,

**...given a longer historical frame to consider, one could trace the persistence of themes, anxieties, and exigencies that no doubt marked the Christian ethic and the morality of modern European societies; but not only, since they were already present at the core of Greek and Greco-Roman thought.**<sup>40</sup>

The difference, according to Foucault, is in the manner in which the relation to the self is maintained. In modern society, the ethical self is constructed in relation to regulatory law — normativity. For example, modern sexuality is constructed in no small part against and through bio-power, through the heterosexual ideal, etc. For the Greeks, however, the ethical self is understood to be akin to the care of the self.

What we have here is an entire ethics revolving around the care of the self; this is what gives ancient ethics its particular form... in antiquity, ethics as the conscious practice of freedom has revolved around this fundamental imperative: 'Take care of yourself.' [*soucie-toi de toi-même*]<sup>41</sup>

Put somewhat differently, the difference between us and the Greeks can be summed up in the manner in which we know ourselves, or gain knowledge of ourselves.<sup>42</sup>

What is important in this difference? For modern man, knowledge of the self comes from outside — from power, from normalization, from regulatory law. The relation to oneself in the Greco-Roman situation comes from the inside, from practice, from sorts of asceticism (for example, the emphasis on moderation, the Stoic point of denial).<sup>43</sup> These sorts of practices gave shape to the self through

hard work and repetition, culminating in the achievement of a novel relation to self. This crafting of one's *bios*, this fashioning of the self in an aesthetic of existence — all of this seems to be Foucault's interest in studying the ethics of the Greco-Roman world.

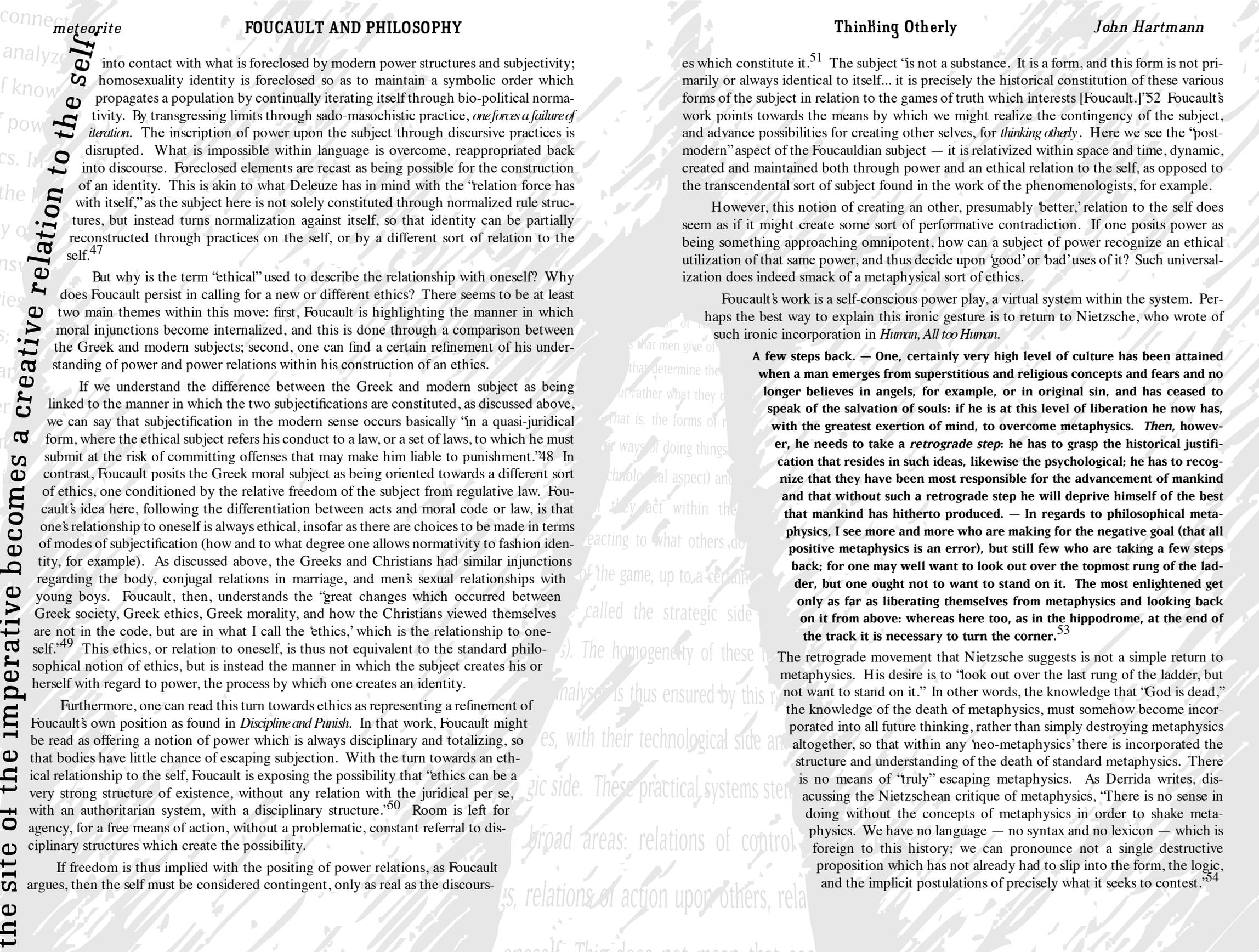
Gilles Deleuze, commenting upon this idea, describes what he calls 'the fold,' or the inside of the outside, the internalization of external (power) structures. This fold is what constitutes subjectivity. According to Foucault, Deleuze says, the modern self is a "derivative of the outside, conditioned by the fold."<sup>44</sup> The Greeks, on the other hand, redoubled force within the fold, making it relate back to itself. This is the difference Foucault writes of, "a relation which force has with itself, a power to affect itself, an affect of self on self... they [the Greeks] invented the subject, but only as a derivative or the product of a 'subjectification.'"<sup>45</sup>

Of course, Foucault is not advocating a simple return to Greek ethics. "...You can't find the solution of a problem in the solution of a problem raised at another moment by other people."<sup>46</sup> The point behind his genealogical analysis is rather to offer something of an "alternative," although Foucault himself would not like that word. By "alternative," I do not mean another ethic to be embraced in entirety, but more along the lines of a different perspective, a different slant on the manner in which a self is created.

This, then, leads to the crux of this paper, and this issue. How do we utilize other methods of relating to ourselves? How do we allow for other, 'ethical' possibilities of subjectification other than those offered by bio-power and normalization? There are multiple means. In the previous section, we explored in depth one such method, that of loosening the bonds of normalization by undermining the performative hold of normative or regulatory law. This leads towards another sort of ideal, one which Foucault himself endorsed in the early and mid-1960s — the transgressive state.

According to Foucault, transgression is that state of affairs where the prevailing limits (normative, bio-political, etc.) are approached, and violated for the smallest instant of time. In going beyond the prevailing norms set by regulative law, one gains something akin to freedom from discipline and normalization, creating new intensities upon the body, different knowledge, interesting ideas for resistance.

Perhaps transgression, in this regard, might be considered as a technology of the self. It might even be said that there exist as many possible means of refashioning the self as there are norms to be transgressed. If we take the example of Foucault's interest in sado-masochistic practice, we might understand the manner in which transgression could be thought of as a technology of the self. When one transgresses a limit, one comes



the site of the imperative becomes a creative relation to the self

into contact with what is foreclosed by modern power structures and subjectivity; homosexuality identity is foreclosed so as to maintain a symbolic order which propagates a population by continually iterating itself through bio-political normativity. By transgressing limits through sado-masochistic practice, *one forces a failure of iteration*. The inscription of power upon the subject through discursive practices is disrupted. What is impossible within language is overcome, reappropriated back into discourse. Foreclosed elements are recast as being possible for the construction of an identity. This is akin to what Deleuze has in mind with the ‘relation force has with itself,’ as the subject here is not solely constituted through normalized rule structures, but instead turns normalization against itself, so that identity can be partially reconstructed through practices on the self, or by a different sort of relation to the self.<sup>47</sup>

But why is the term ‘ethical’ used to describe the relationship with oneself? Why does Foucault persist in calling for a new or different ethics? There seems to be at least two main themes within this move: first, Foucault is highlighting the manner in which moral injunctions become internalized, and this is done through a comparison between the Greek and modern subjects; second, one can find a certain refinement of his understanding of power and power relations within his construction of an ethics.

If we understand the difference between the Greek and modern subject as being linked to the manner in which the two subjectifications are constituted, as discussed above, we can say that subjectification in the modern sense occurs basically ‘in a quasi-judicial form, where the ethical subject refers his conduct to a law, or a set of laws, to which he must submit at the risk of committing offenses that may make him liable to punishment.’<sup>48</sup> In contrast, Foucault posits the Greek moral subject as being oriented towards a different sort of ethics, one conditioned by the relative freedom of the subject from regulative law. Foucault’s idea here, following the differentiation between acts and moral code or law, is that one’s relationship to oneself is always ethical, insofar as there are choices to be made in terms of modes of subjectification (how and to what degree one allows normativity to fashion identity, for example). As discussed above, the Greeks and Christians had similar injunctions regarding the body, conjugal relations in marriage, and men’s sexual relationships with young boys. Foucault, then, understands the ‘great changes which occurred between Greek society, Greek ethics, Greek morality, and how the Christians viewed themselves are not in the code, but are in what I call the ‘ethics,’ which is the relationship to oneself.’<sup>49</sup> This ethics, or relation to oneself, is thus not equivalent to the standard philosophical notion of ethics, but is instead the manner in which the subject creates his or herself with regard to power, the process by which one creates an identity.

Furthermore, one can read this turn towards ethics as representing a refinement of Foucault’s own position as found in *Discipline and Punish*. In that work, Foucault might be read as offering a notion of power which is always disciplinary and totalizing, so that bodies have little chance of escaping subjection. With the turn towards an ethical relationship to the self, Foucault is exposing the possibility that ‘ethics can be a very strong structure of existence, without any relation with the juridical per se, with an authoritarian system, with a disciplinary structure.’<sup>50</sup> Room is left for agency, for a free means of action, without a problematic, constant referral to disciplinary structures which create the possibility.

If freedom is thus implied with the positing of power relations, as Foucault argues, then the self must be considered contingent, only as real as the discours-

es which constitute it.<sup>51</sup> The subject ‘is not a substance. It is a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself... it is precisely the historical constitution of these various forms of the subject in relation to the games of truth which interests [Foucault.]’<sup>52</sup> Foucault’s work points towards the means by which we might realize the contingency of the subject, and advance possibilities for creating other selves, for *thinking otherly*. Here we see the ‘post-modern’ aspect of the Foucauldian subject — it is relativized within space and time, dynamic, created and maintained both through power and an ethical relation to the self, as opposed to the transcendental sort of subject found in the work of the phenomenologists, for example.

However, this notion of creating an other, presumably ‘better,’ relation to the self does seem as if it might create some sort of performative contradiction. If one posits power as being something approaching omnipotent, how can a subject of power recognize an ethical utilization of that same power, and thus decide upon ‘good’ or ‘bad’ uses of it? Such universalization does indeed smack of a metaphysical sort of ethics.

Foucault’s work is a self-conscious power play, a virtual system within the system. Perhaps the best way to explain this ironic gesture is to return to Nietzsche, who wrote of such ironic incorporation in *Human, All too Human*.

**A few steps back. — One, certainly very high level of culture has been attained when a man emerges from superstitious and religious concepts and fears and no longer believes in angels, for example, or in original sin, and has ceased to speak of the salvation of souls: if he is at this level of liberation he now has, with the greatest exertion of mind, to overcome metaphysics. Then, however, he needs to take a retrograde step: he has to grasp the historical justification that resides in such ideas, likewise the psychological; he has to recognize that they have been most responsible for the advancement of mankind and that without such a retrograde step he will deprive himself of the best that mankind has hitherto produced. — In regards to philosophical metaphysics, I see more and more who are making for the negative goal (that all positive metaphysics is an error), but still few who are taking a few steps back; for one may well want to look out over the topmost rung of the ladder, but one ought not to want to stand on it. The most enlightened get only as far as liberating themselves from metaphysics and looking back on it from above: whereas here too, as in the hippodrome, at the end of the track it is necessary to turn the corner.**<sup>53</sup>

The retrograde movement that Nietzsche suggests is not a simple return to metaphysics. His desire is to ‘look out over the last rung of the ladder, but not want to stand on it.’ In other words, the knowledge that ‘God is dead,’ the knowledge of the death of metaphysics, must somehow become incorporated into all future thinking, rather than simply destroying metaphysics altogether, so that within any ‘neo-metaphysics’ there is incorporated the structure and understanding of the death of standard metaphysics. There is no means of ‘truly’ escaping metaphysics. As Derrida writes, discussing the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics, ‘There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language — no syntax and no lexicon — which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest.’<sup>54</sup>

This is the sort of ironic gesture that I understand Foucault to be making with his desire for movement towards a better relation to the self. There is no claim to a “universal” manner in which one should proceed, but instead a personal exertion of power, an undertaking of genealogical research to reconstruct the past *in an inherently interested manner*, suiting his needs in the present so as to alter techniques of the self in the future.<sup>55</sup>

If we are to take aim at the heart of the issue, it can perhaps best be summed up in this way. In his essay, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Foucault describes the point of genealogical analysis as follows. “Where religions once demanded the sacrifice of bodies, knowledge now calls for experimentation on ourselves, calls us to the sacrifice of the subject of knowledge.”<sup>56</sup>

If we accept the idea that the subject is constructed through historical practice and power relations, we must also understand the contingency of that construction. Given this knowledge, the site of the imperative becomes a creative relation to the self. This is why Foucault valorizes the example of Baudelaire in his essay on Kant’s “*Was ist Aufklärung?*” Baudelaire, for Foucault, represents this sort of relation. “Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself... to face the task of producing himself.”<sup>57</sup>

We have seen that, at a certain historical, the ethical relation to the self was taken to be a training of sorts of the self by oneself, and that this shifted towards a relation between the self and the law, norms, etc. Perhaps it is time to move again, to jump to another position in the field of power, turning power against itself in the hopes of finding a different, aesthetic means of relating to the self, of living our lives.

As Foucault writes in a most poignant passage,

**What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life... couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?**<sup>58</sup>

## notes

- 1 Foucault, Michel. *Remarks on Marx (Conversations with Duccio Trombadori)*. trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito. Semotext(e): New York, 1991. 46.
- 2 Foucault, Michel. “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx.” *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*. volume 2 of *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*. ed. James D. Faubion. New York: New Press, 1998. 276.
- 3 Foucault, Michel. “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, ed. Donald F. Bouchard. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977. 142. Hereafter NGH.
- 4 NGH, 139.
- 5 *ibid.*, 146.
- 6 *ibid.*, 154.
- 7 *ibid.*, 148.
- 8 Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon, 1977. 30. Hereafter DP.
- 9 Foucault, Michel. *The Use of Pleasure*. trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon, 1985. 8. Hereafter UP.

- 10 McNay, Lois. *Foucault and Feminism*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992. 3.
- 11 HS, 92.
- 12 *ibid.*, 93.
- 13 *ibid.*, 100.
- 14 McNay, 38.
- 15 HS, 95-6.
- 16 *ibid.*, 100-1.
- 17 Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex.’* New York: Routledge, 1993. 2.
- 18 Derrida, Jacques. “Signature Event Context” *Margins of Philosophy*. trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. 320.
- 19 *ibid.*, 317.
- 20 “The symbolic is understood as the normative dimension of the constitution of the sexed subject within language. It consists in a series of demands, taboos, sanctions, injunctions, prohibitions, impossible idealizations, and threats — performative speech acts, as it were, that wield the power to produce the field of culturally viable subjects: performative acts, in other words, with the power to produce or materialize subjectivating effects.” Butler, 106.
- 21 *ibid.*, 204.
- 22 *ibid.*, 114-5.
- 23 HS, 157. *my italics*.
- 24 Butler, 12.
- 25 If the taboo becomes eroticized precisely for the transgressive states that it produces, what happens to oedipus, to sexed positionality, to the fast distinction between an imaginary or fantasized identification and those social and linguistic positions of intelligible ‘sex’ mandated by the symbolic law? (*ibid.*, 97.)
- 26 *ibid.*, 138.
- 27 Foucault, Michel. “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity.” interview with B. Gallagher and A. Wilson (Toronto, 1982). *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol. I*. New York: New Press, 1997. 165.
- 28 Foucault, Michel. “What is Enlightenment?” *The Foucault Reader*. ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon, 1984. 34. Hereafter WE.
- 29 see pp. 340-3 of *The Order of Things* for this text and criticism.
- 30 WE, 50.
- 31 *ibid.*, 42.
- 32 “He [Foucault] wrote to Simeon Wade in similar terms, reporting that his Death Valley trip had led him to shelve almost everything that he had previously written about sexuality.” (Miller, James. *The Passion of Michel Foucault*. New York: Anchor, 1993. 252.) The story, as relayed by Miller, is that Foucault achieved some sort of ‘limit-experience’ while under the influence of LSD at Death Valley in 1975.
- 33 WE, 42.
- 34 GE, 352.
- 35 *ibid.*, 348.
- 36 UP, 26.
- 37 *ibid.*, 27.
- 38 *ibid.*
- 39 *ibid.*, 27-8.
- 40 *ibid.*, 15.
- 41 Foucault, Michel. “The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom.” *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Foucault, Vol. 1*. ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: New Press, 1997. 285. Hereafter TECS.
- 42 As Foucault puts it, “In Greco-Roman culture, knowledge of oneself appeared as the consequence of the care of the self. In the modern world, knowledge of oneself constitutes the fundamental principal.” (TS, 228.)
- 43 One should not mistake the ascetic idea with a certain brand of asceticism necessary for giving shape to oneself. Indeed, Foucault advocates a sort of asceticism: “It is what one could call an ascetic practice, taking asceticism in a very general sense — in other words, not in the sense of a morality of renunciation but as an exercise of the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being.” (TECS, 282)
- 44 Deleuze, Gilles. “Foldings, or the Inside of Thought.” *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*. ed. Michael Kelly. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995. 325.
- 45 Deleuze, 321.
- 46 GE, 343.
- 47 This is one point of critique that should be raised. Although Foucault himself disavows the transgressive state as being a means of achieving an ethical relation to the self in the context of his late writings (unfortunately, I cannot remember the exact location of the comment), I rather see the possibility of transgression as being one of numerous means of creating such a relation to the self. Transgression is quite feasible in terms of creating a different relation to power, to regulatory law.
- 48 UP, 29-30.
- 49 GE, 355.
- 50 *ibid.*, 348.
- 51 “It should be also be noted that power

relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free. If one of them were completely at the other's disposal and became his thing, an object on which he could wreak boundless and limitless violence, there wouldn't be any relations of power. Thus, in order for power relations to come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides." (TECS, 292.) Also, one should think of Derrida's contribution, where power as a performative structure is not perfectly iterable, failing to inscript itself often, thus creating situations where one is free from coercion by the very structure of power.

52 TECS, 291.

53 Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Human, all too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*. trans. by R.J. Hollingdale, intro. by Erich Heller. USA: Cambridge University Press, 1993 (1986). \$20.

54 Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass. Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1978. 280-81.

55 This is also where Foucault eludes Habermas' charge of 'crypto-normativity.' Foucault is not working with the same normative framework as is Habermas; rather, he is striving to undermine it, working as a localized theoretician, exposing the manner in which localized practice and resistance can and do alter what is normative.

56 Foucault, Michel. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, ed. Donald F. Bouchard. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977. 163.

57 WE, 42.

58 GE, 350.

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