

Meteorite

Issue no. 4, Fall 2004

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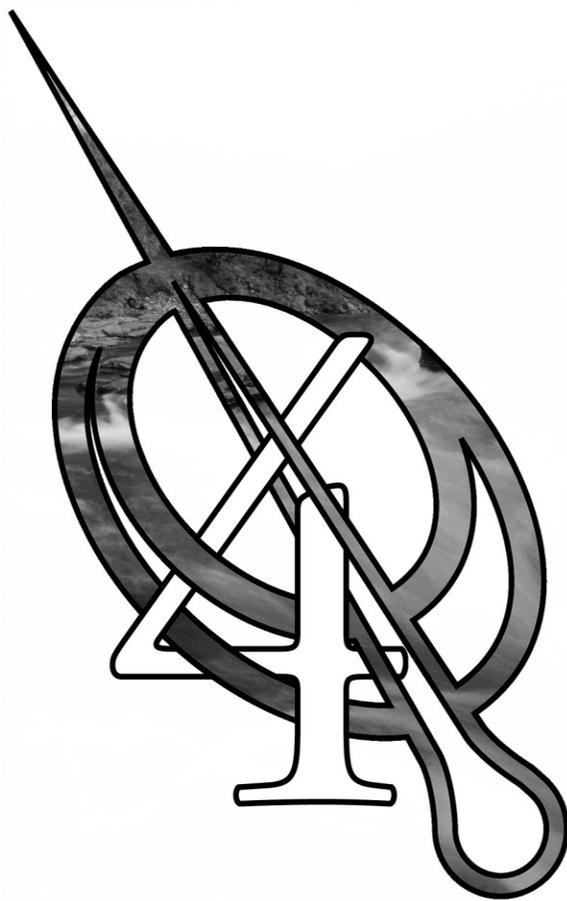
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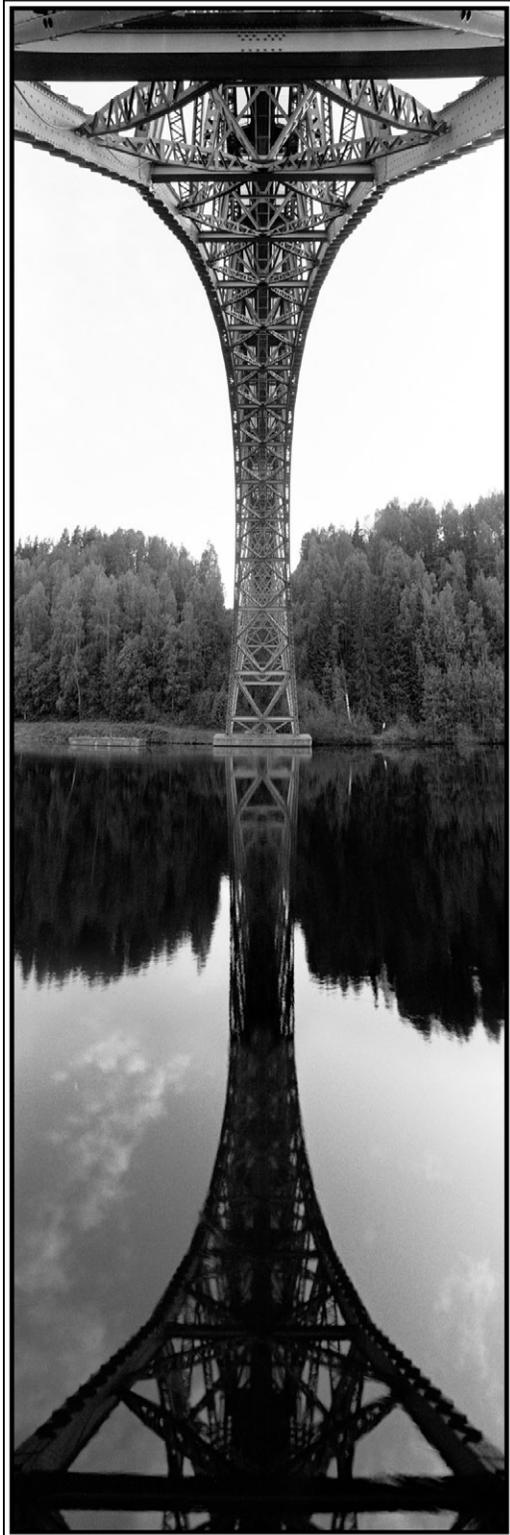


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A Letter From the Editor:

ANALYTIC AND CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

Joshua Michael Hill

How can one learn philosophy? One either derives philosophical cognitions from the first sources of their production, i.e., from the principles of reason; or one learns them from those who have philosophized. The easiest way is the latter. But that is not properly philosophy.

Immanuel Kant,
Lectures on Metaphysics, Ak 28:534.

The Meteorite staff's late-night meetings were typically succeeded (and sometimes interrupted) by philosophically broad and tangential conversations. We liberally mixed philosophical theories, arguments and ideas with social and political issues, literature, mathematics, film, physics and typography—rarely confusing imagination and irrationality—while we swallowed Great Lakes pressed through the grounds of Arabica coffee beans. We discussed hundreds of essays from students around the world, selecting the most enlightening and understandable for publication. All of this was done with intentional emphasis placed upon an absence of professional guidance. This made it easier to discuss what some of us see as a vaguely totalitarian, conspicuously anti-democratic, and dangerously nationalist atmosphere floating around our terror-stricken, war-willing nation, and more importantly, it forced us to select essays that similar-minded individuals might enjoy.

Looking back, a frequent topic of our academically divergent conversations stands out in my mind as directly relevant to the form of this journal: the distinction between analytic and Continental philosophy. A short discussion concerning this distinction therefore seems appropriate.

For anyone lacking experience with philosophy as it currently exists within the ivory towers of academia, the following quote from the Philosophical Gourmet—an online report that qualitatively ranks philosophy departments in the English-speaking world (as a “measure of faculty quality and reputation”¹)—serves wonderfully to illustrate the distinction between analytic and Continental philosophy in (appropriately) professional terms:

Although it appears to be a widespread view in the humanities that “analytic” philosophy is “dead” or “dying,” the professional situation of analytic philosophy simply does not bear this out. *All* the Ivy League universities, *all* the leading state research universities, *all* the University of California campuses, most of the top liberal arts colleges, most of the flagship campuses of the second-tier state research universities boast philosophy departments that *overwhelmingly* self-identify as “analytic”: it is hard to imagine a “movement” that is more academically and professionally entrenched than analytic philosophy.²

Clearly, it isn’t too difficult to guess the type of philosophy being taught in the philosophy departments of most of the outrageously expensive (oops, I mean prestigious) American institutions of higher education—public or private (as if this distinction is relevant in modern academia). The University of Michigan in Ann Arbor currently ranks fourth on the Philosophical Gourmet’s list (behind a less-than-exciting three-way tie for first). All of the departments at the top of the list *overwhelmingly* self-identify with analytic philosophy. Interestingly enough, the list is *overwhelmingly* maintained for and by analytic philosophers. Any

similarities between the Philosophical Gourmet and an *overwhelmingly* pretentious simulation of fantasy baseball are disregarded because valuable information, supposedly, is bestowed upon prospective graduate students. Such excuses, however, don't justify ranking systems of pedantic academic competition; there is no necessary correlation between name recognition and the ability to teach, and besides, diversity in philosophical thought is suffering in many institutions that hire for the sake of "academic" or "philosophical" professionalism and competition.

In contrast to the professional philosophers in prestigious, *overwhelmingly* analytic departments, academics in other departments and other disciplines that traditionally take humanity as an object of knowledge (e.g., sociology, English, comparative



literature, linguistics, anthropology, art history, women's studies, history, etcetera) have in general found analytic philosophy to lack the capacity for enlightenment or insight into the various topics of their studies. These other disciplines, most specifically (although by no means exclusively) the humanities other than philosophy, typically and frequently employ the works of non-analytic philosophers to theoretically augment an impressive variety of academic and intellectual subjects. The student of philosophy, therefore, usually has the opportunity to study non-analytic phi-

losophy in other disciplines. On the one hand this situation has a very positive consequence: students encountering philosophy in other disciplines (or at academic institutions where intellectual non-conformism is tolerated or expected) typically aren't expected to bask in the "scientific" glory of anti-interdisciplinary, formalized, conceptually hypostatized and *overwhelmingly* hypothetical human situations and relations that bear silent affinities to what can properly be called "nihilism" on individual, social and political levels. On the other hand, however, particular philosophical movements that are essential to modern intellectual thought—e.g., existentialism, phenomenology, critical theory (in a broad sense), or even Lacanian psychoanalysis—remain unnecessary for most philosophy degrees, frequently criticized without justification (e.g., as "literature," as "not containing any arguments," etcetera), and apparently even



unreasonably lumped together in the thoughts of many students (and professionals alike) as a singular and failed whole. Additionally, even the “best” departments of philosophy (that is, the *overwhelmingly* analytic departments) are given an excuse to not even offer so much as a minor that involves 19th Century Western philosophy.

Although neither tradition comes anywhere close to unanimous agreement upon philosophical issues (which alone makes each category questionable), analytic philosophers can be appropriately characterized as adopting a highly technical (“rigorous”), formalized (“logical”), and fairly homogenous style of philosophical investigation and exposition that unites them above and beyond their disparate views (quite literally through a mountainous network of footnotes). If this homogeneity of style is considered in combination with the hegemony of analytic philosophy in prestige-obsessed departments, the vocational (and therefore questionable) implication that it is better to have “training” in (the style of) analytic philosophy easily follows. This implication is questionable because it means that students of philosophy are more likely to succeed (as students and as professionals) if they adopt a particular style of doing philosophy, even though this style has no necessary relation to philosophical views beyond a convenient yet pre-critical limitation of topics and methods. *In contrast to the style of analytic philosophy*, “Continental” philosophers seem theoretically nomadic and literarily flamboyant (even though *neither* tradition comes anywhere close to unanimous agreement upon philosophical issues); the only thing homogenous about the style of investigation or exposition of Continental philosophers is that it is non-analytic. The impressive variety of incongruous traditions within “Continental” philosophy is simply too difficult to unite in any other way in opposition to analytic philosophy. As this implies, the academic category of Continental philosophy was not created by those who bear its name.

Simon Glendinning points out an analogous situation in his introduction to *The Edinburgh Encyclopedia of Continental Philosophy*. Revealingly, he says that “It would be ridiculous to think of anyone living in mainland Europe calling their morning meal a ‘Continental breakfast.’” Glendinning theoretically elaborates upon the analogy and argues that Continental philosophy is “the defining ‘non-part’ of analytical philosophy,” something that only “emerges as a fruitfully distinguishable philosophical category from *within* the movement that calls itself ‘analytical philosophy.’”³ In other words, Continental philosophy emerges as a “non-part” (a part with the primary function of defining what it is not) insofar as it consists of a different style than analytic philosophy. There is, then, an understandable difference in style between “traditions” that is taken by some to be a mark of differentiation.

H o w e v e r ,

this notion of defining a philosophical tradition in terms of its style (instead of its philosophical views) is only taken seriously within analytic philosophy—the overwhelmingly professional tradition that defines itself in terms of style instead of philosophical views.

In his introduction to the Blackwell *Companion to Continental Philosophy*, Simon Critchley proposes an explanation similar to that given by Glendinning. He says that the distinction between analytic and Continental philosophy “is essentially a professional self-description, that is, it is a way that departments of philosophy seek to organize their curricula and course offerings as well as signaling their broad intellectual allegiances.”⁴ To say that the distinction is essentially a professional self-description, by the way, still leaves room for

philosophical differences between traditions, even though these differences don't amount to unanimous agreement upon either side. The important point, once again, is that the meaning and significance of the distinction is based upon something other than philosophical views, namely, a philosophically unjustifiable professionalism that is (or at least *should* be) inadmissible in academia.

At the beginning of this letter I said that the distinction between analytic and Continental philosophy is relevant to the form of this journal. However, it should be clear by now that the distinction is only relevant to this journal insofar as a conscious decision was made by the editorial staff to ignore it for philosophical reasons when critically evaluating the philosophies of others. There are many things that degrade the quality of philosophical thought, discourse and education. Unquestioned preconceptions are at the top of the list. Recognizing this, a generation of philosophers might raise above the noise and clamor of the rest of academia by actualizing educational ideals that shouldn't be subordinated, ideals that unite philosophy with the sciences *and* the humanities (or rather, unite the sciences *and* the humanities *through philosophy*) instead of severing the ties for the sake of a very misguided façade. That won't happen until philosophy stops looking down upon the *humanities* as if the object and method of their inquiries is inherently irrational.

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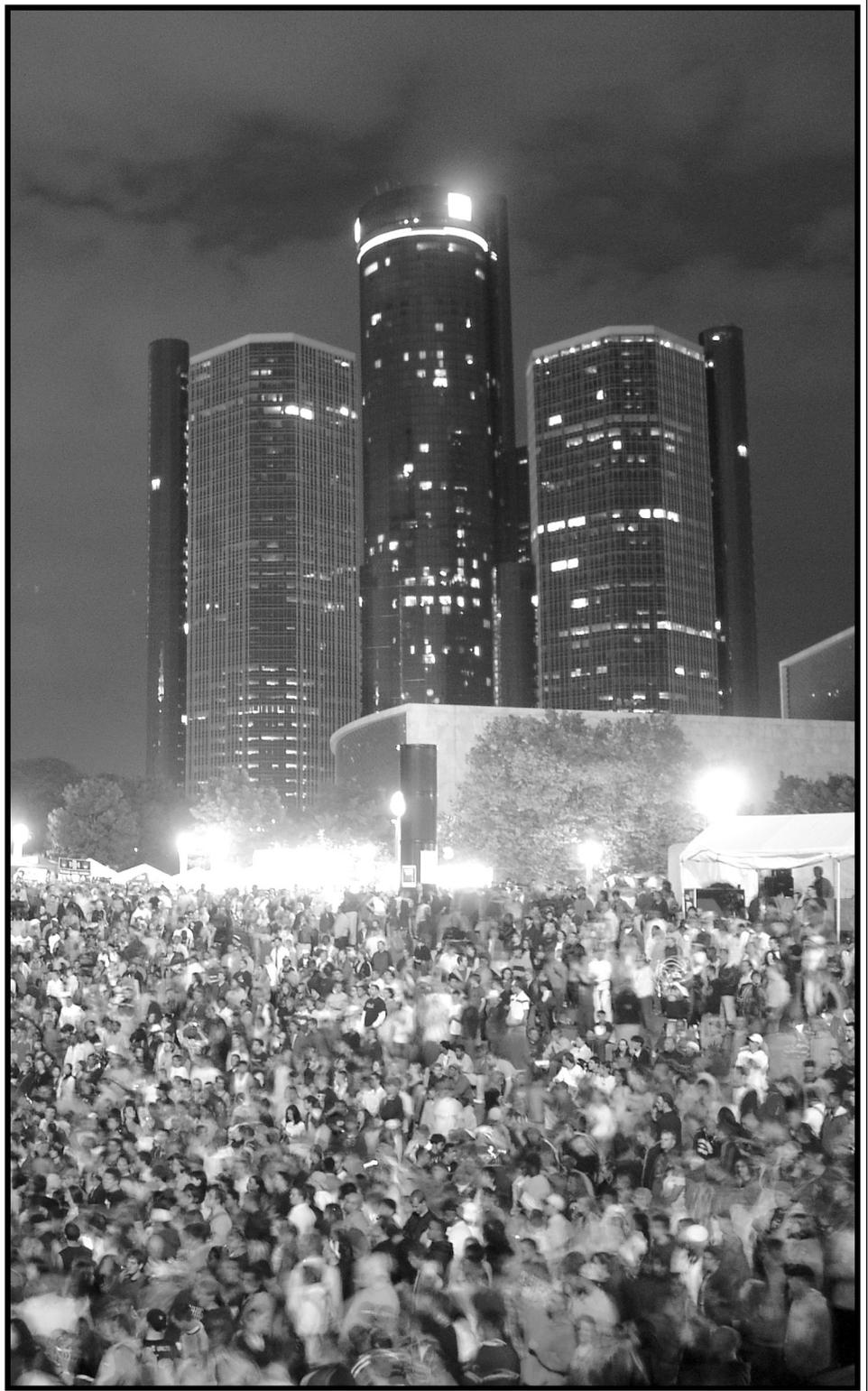
¹ Leiter, Brian. "What the Rankings Mean." *The Philosophical Gourmet*. 2002-2004. 15 Mar. 2004. <<http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com/meaningof.htm>>

² Leiter, Brian. "What the Rankings Mean." *The Philosophical Gourmet*. 2002-2004. 15 Mar. 2004. <<http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com/analytic.htm>>

³ Glendinning, Simon. "What is Continental Philosophy?" *The Edinburgh Encyclopedia of Continental Philosophy*. Ed. Simon Glendinning. Chicago, Illinois: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

⁴ Critchley, Simon. "Introduction: What is Continental Philosophy?" *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*. Ed. Simon Critchley. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. pp. 3-4.

Critchley's *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) is recommended for those who desire a broad, intelligible and concise overview of Continental philosophy.





Salvaging Descartes' *Géométrie*

Jason B Hill

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After investigating various mathematical, historical and philosophical sources concerning René Descartes' *La Géométrie*, I am convinced that this work is not understood in accordance with the original intent of its author. By using Descartes' philosophical works, I'll offer a different interpretation of this publication, and explain how poor interpretations have resulted in paradoxically beneficial impacts on mathematical knowledge. My aim is to connect early 17th Century Western intellectual discourse with the intent of Descartes in publishing this mathematical work, while looking beyond any mere categorical relation between Descartes and the church, or Descartes and the skeptics. Specifically, my goal is not to denounce these relations, but to broadly consider the interpersonal social and scientific discourse of Descartes' day, along with his personal experiences and philosophy, while attempting to construct a more accurate interpretation of *La Géométrie*. Such an interpretation is made possible by utilizing a method that both mathematicians and philosophers can easily follow, and this merely requires being familiar with certain key aspects of Descartes' *Discourse on the Method of Reasoning Well and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*.

René Descartes (1596-1650) is frequently considered the most influential mathematician and philosopher of the early 17th Century. To modern scholars he characterizes the impetus behind what is now seen as a dramatic shift from medieval traditions towards scientifically oriented thought. Nevertheless, Descartes was not alone in his academic and intellectual activities—mathematics and philosophy flourished in early 17th Century Europe. To get an idea of the extent of achievements during this period, consider a list of relatively well-known French mathematicians, many of whom were in regular contact with Descartes or had a special influence on his studies: François Viète, Pierre Hérigone, Claude Bachet, Jean-Baptiste Morin, Pierre Vernier, Etienne Pascal, Marin Mersenne, Girard Desargues, Pierre Gassendi, Jean Beaugrand, Albert Girard, Claude Hardy, Pierre de Carcavi, Pierre de Fermat, Florimond de Beaune, Jacques de Billy, Gilles Roberval, Ismael Boulliau,

F r e -

nicle de Bessy, Honoré

Fabri, Jacques Le Tenneur, Antoine Arnauld, Gabriel Mouton, Jean Picard, Claude Dechaies, Blaise Pascal, Jean Richer, Nicolas Malebranche, Philippe de la Hire, Bernard Lamy, and Jacques Ozanam. In addition, many great minds in Germany (Kepler), Italy (Galileo, Cavalieri), and Britain (Brigs, Harriot, Oughtred, Napier) were also making advancements in mathematics at this time. *All of these people had significant impacts on mathematics.*

Descartes published the *Discourse* in 1637. Originally it was published in French. This fact alone is curious, insofar as learned writings of the time were typically in Latin. Even more intriguing is the fact that Descartes' name as author was absent from the work and its appendages in the first edition, and he received nothing for the publication except 200 free copies to distribute amongst his colleagues.¹ Several interpretations of these facts have been made. Many scholars suggest that the *Discourse* was not intended to be the formal philosophical treatise that it has become. In it, Descartes autobiographically communicates the discovery of his method of systematic doubt—a method used to reach valid conclusions in scientific inquiry. A more thorough investigation into this matter, however, shows that the motivations behind the publication of the *Discourse* were slightly more complicated.

It is all too common today to equate the Renaissance with a battle between the Catholic Church and skepticism or reasoning. In fact, some modern texts even argue that several key figures in the history of scientific reasoning made names for themselves on the basis of their opposition to the Catholic Church, and sometimes nothing more.² This is unquestionably an oversimplification of the actual practices by both academic and religious institutions of the Renaissance.

We know from Descartes' correspondence that he considered several issues to be important (not just the relationship of the Catholic Church with science) when he wrote the *Discourse*. While it is known that Descartes was a self-proclaimed catholic (although he lived with a protestant mistress in protestant Holland when the *Discourse* was published), many modern scholars are lead by this in attempts to rectify the position of the Catholic Church with what they see as anti-Catholic views in Descartes' writings. This sometimes leads to the assertion that Descartes professed to be catholic so that his works would be accepted
and not

banned by the church. (Actually, his works were put on the index after his death.) However, it should be noted that Descartes had more problematic encounters with the Protestant theologians of Holland than he did with the Catholic Church. At one point, booksellers in Holland were forbidden from printing or selling any of Descartes' works until he appeared before the court in Utrecht to defend the charge that he was an atheist.³ Such facts lead us to question what should and what should not be considered during attempts to interpret works such as the *Discourse*. Do these facts about religion shape the social context in which the *Discourse* was written, and if so, do they help us gain a better understanding of what Descartes hoped to achieve by writing his treatise on method? Of course they do. But how?

Theodor W. Adorno and Michel Foucault offer a possible solution to this dilemma. One might ask: "What dilemma?" The answer: the dilemma lies in our assumptions regarding the nature of continuity in historical disciplines. According to Foucault, the notions of tradition, influence, development, and evolution "diversify the theme of continuity."⁴ These notions cannot be trusted—they have no privileged access to explaining their own foundations. For example, a broad claim about the nature of the Catholic Church's intellectual suppression tactics in Descartes' time assumes notions of tradition and influence, which might in turn be used as the basis for explaining why Galileo, or anyone for that matter, encountered intellectual roadblocks. In other words, rupture and continuity are not themes to be found in history through extensive research, as is commonly assumed by many historians of science and ideas. Rupture and continuity are typically assumed, and the research follows by attempting to justify these assumptions. That is, historians commonly assume that history is shaped by ruptures *or* continuity, and their investigative efforts frequently aim to justify such claims. Thus, in Descartes' case, we may use the historical traditions or notions of religious and scientific debates in an attempt to explain why these debates even occurred; but this, as Foucault points out, is circular reasoning. Another excellent example of this idea can be seen in the way Descartes is perceived as "emancipated from tradition" (we made this assumption earlier when

conside-
ring Descartes as somehow
individually definitive of the division between
pre-modern and modern philosophy). Adorno deals ex-
plicitly with this issue as it relates to Descartes: “It is questionable
whether the idea underlying this position—that tradition, what is not
known at first hand, should be spurned in face of the immediacy of lived
experience—whether this motif, which we take almost for granted, is really
so valid.”⁵ One of the perplexing aspects of Descartes’ works as they are inter-
preted today is that we can simultaneously identify him with revolutionary and
antiquated traditions. While we see Descartes’ method of reasoning as ground-
breaking, he considered the examples he used to promote his method (e.g., his
mathematics) to be rooted in the intellectual achievements of antiquity.⁶

The central theme here is that the entire realm of discourse in Descartes’ day provides us with a better perspective to understand his works than our knowledge of Enlightenment traditions, (anti-)religious influences, intellectual developments, or conceptual (r)evolutions. It is not my claim that these notions of continuity are obviously incorrect. However, in the spirit of the *Discourse* we must doubt their validity and applicability in order to hypothetically and scientifically consider them fallacious. In this simple manner the method presented in the *Discourse* should be used to study the *Discourse* itself. After all, the method of systematic doubt was not offered by Descartes solely as a means to ‘reason about reason’—it essentially was and is a practical guide to problem solving.

As Foucault points out, “We must renounce all those themes whose function is to ensure the infinite continuity of discourse and its secret presence to itself in the interplay of a constantly recurring absence.”⁷ In other words, while the notions of beginning and rupture are likely to distance us from the most historically enlightening portrayal of Descartes’ philosophy, so is the opposite notion of the ‘not-said.’ This makes the task of the historian much greater and, upon closer inspection, renders the possibility of a complete and ultimately correct interpretation incredibly improbable. Nevertheless, Foucault’s method of categorizing history based on

discourse alone (known as his “archaeology”) will often show why the commonly accepted interpretation of an event is erroneous.

This is demonstrated by Descartes' famous encounter with Chandoux in 1628. Chandoux, along with many others, claimed that science could only be based on mathematical probabilities. (It is interesting to note that there were incredible achievements made in probability theory during this time.) Anyone who has read Descartes' *Discourse* should immediately recognize that this view is not consistent with Descartes' position. But why? At this point, most texts will state that while meeting Chandoux in Paris, Descartes claimed certainty was the basis of scientific investigation. This historical claim presents no problems as it is clearly grounded in historical discourse, taking the form of a conversation between Descartes and Chandoux. The problem arises when the further claim is presented that Descartes “had a method for obtaining such certainty,” because then the distinction between Chandoux and Descartes becomes vague. Did they not both seek certainty, and, furthermore, wasn't this the basis of scientific investigation for both of them? While Descartes had such a method, we must emphasize that the method was primarily a function of certainty, and certainty was secondly a result of the method. Through this interpretation we must praise Descartes' method before we praise the results it obtains.

The *Discourse on Method* was originally 78 pages, comprising roughly one-sixth of the original publication. Attached to the *Discourse* were three appendages: *La Dioptrique*, *Les meteors*, and *La Géométrie*. These were included as practical examples of the method of scientific reasoning outlined in the *Discourse*. Although discovered earlier by Snell, *La Dioptrique* contained the first known publication of the law of refraction, in addition to information about the anatomy of the human eye and the shape of telescope lenses. *Les meteors* contained scientific explanations of rainbows, snow crystals, the size of raindrops, and the relation between thunder and lightning. *La Géométrie*, at least *prima facie*, seemed more old-fashioned insofar as it appeared to augment existing mathematical traditions.⁸ It is important to note that a large part of *La Géométrie* deals specifically with a problem that

worried
 mathematicians for a
 long time before Descartes—the
 Pappus problem.⁹ In *La Géométrie* Descar-
 tes presented a new method of solving the pro-
 blem. Nevertheless, readers had difficulty seeing how
 the three appendages were related to the *Discourse* and,
 consequently, they were removed in later printings. Ever
 since, *La Géométrie* has rarely been published and attempts to
 connect it to the *Discourse* have dwindled.

La Géométrie alone constituted 116 pages of the original pu-
 blication of the *Discourse*. It is composed of three separate sec-
 tions: “Problems the construction of which requires only straight
 lines and circles,” “On the nature of curved lines,” and “On the
 construction of solid and supersolid problems.” A description
 of each section (which I will now provide) is required for a
 summary view of the whole. For the sake of clarity I will
 refrain from using any mathematical terms which,
 although superficially impressive, could easily be
 confusing.

The first section, “Problems
 the construction of

w h i c h
 requires
 onlystraight
 lines and
 circles,” opens
 boldly: “Any pro-
 blem in geometry can
 easily be reduced to such
 terms that a knowledge of
 the lengths of certain lines is suf-
 ficient for its construction.” Descartes
 proceeds to show how the common arithmetic
 functions of addition, subtraction, multiplication, division,
 and extraction of root can be carried out purely geometrically with a straight edge
 and compass and composed completely in a plane diagram. The generality of this
 view introduced an idea that would have a central theme in Descartes’ geometry.
 Instead of interpreting the multiplication of two lines as an area, as had been done

since ancient times, Descartes' new geometrical method showed that the multiplication of two lines could instead be abstracted and simply create a new line. By multiplying in a third line, the ancients would have postulated a three-dimensional volume. To Descartes, it was again simply another line. At the point of multiplying in a fourth line, the ancient interpretation ceases to follow intuition, while Descartes' interpretation does not change.

This is of significant importance when Descartes gives his solution to the Pappus problem. Contrary to what many texts claim, the Pappus problem had been solved with a general solution before the time of Descartes. However, this solution was largely ignored as it, according to Pappus himself, "signified nothing comprehensible" in the sense that it allowed multiplication of lines beyond the known dimensional space of volumes. While there is evidence that ancient mathematicians such as Diophantus had used higher orders of multiplication, they were always limited in their capacity to grasp the theoretical result. In efforts to explain their results in comprehensible terms, they were referred to as "squared-squared" or "cubed-cubed" and so on. This is one reason why Descartes' solution was revolutionary. It allowed for a general solution to the problem that was based more in abstraction than intuition.

The second section, "On the nature of curved lines," is the least complete and most interpretively demanding portion in *La Géométrie*. At the same time, it is incredibly complex and yields many of Descartes' greatest known contributions to mathematics. This section is also concerned with the Pappus problem, but in a theoretical sense in which Descartes merely questions the conditions under which this and other problems are capable of being solved. In order to answer this, he considers and critiques the conditions under which Pappus judged the problem capable of a comprehensible solution. It is clear that Pappus' classification of the lines for which the problem was capable of solution is based principally on dimensionality, and secondly on line structure.

As Descartes has shown, he is now capable of avoiding the complicated issue of dimensionality altogether. Thus, all of Descartes' contemplation is placed on line structure. He continues and formulates a classification of acceptable lines and curves for not only the Pappus problem, but for geometry in general. This specific aspect of *La Géométrie* is not entirely remarkable, for such classifications had been attempted previously. In fact, Descartes' classification was later considered inconsistent and therefore unacceptable. However, the reasons why he actually grouped specific curves and lines as acceptable or not have largely been forgotten or ignored.

Descartes grouped curves and lines into two groups. First, the "geometrical" curves and lines are those which are known with absolute certainty. "Mechanical" curves are those which are not known with absolute certainty. According to Descartes, even extremely complex curves, if known with certainty, should be allowed in geometry. By "known with certainty," he is referring to the path of the curve or line, not its position relative to coordinates. In fact, Descartes never used coordinates to describe the path of curves or lines. Although he is generally given credit for the first practical use of coordinates and abscissa, these appear nowhere in his writings. They are arguably better attributed to Leibniz and Newton, although they could be viewed as the result of Descartes' geometrical methods applied by other mathematicians. (It is interesting to note that abscissa in the time just after Descartes were not required to be perpendicular.) In any case, Descartes never used them. He did, however, make extensive use of a line as a reference point, which greatly aided his geometrical constructions. We should keep in mind that, while this appears to be close to the formal idea of a coordinate system with abscissa, Descartes simply never made the latter notion explicit in his work. This also helps explain the problem that Descartes faced with negative and complex numbers. I will discuss this further when I discuss section three of the *La Géométrie*.

According to Descartes, geometrical curves all share a special resemblance to a straight line. By this, he claimed that all points on such geometrical curves could be expressed in definite relation by means of a single equation. On the other hand, curves which admit two simultaneous unrelated motions, according to Descartes, are by their very nature vague and therefore "mechanical," since no connection

between these motions can be determined.

It is important to understand that curves admitting two motions, which are capable of being reconciled into one motion, would be geometrical. Descartes' classification is therefore rather simple and precise, or, to use an appropriate phrase, "clear and distinct." I believe this notion plays a key role in *La Géométrie*, one which is not usually considered.

The other major contribution from Descartes in section two is a general method for finding the normal (i.e., the perpendicular) of a curve at a given point. After finding the normal, it is possible to calculate the slope of the tangent line to the curve at that point. This is the chief aim of derivative calculus.

Although Descartes' method used completely algebraic means, it is notable for its generality and uniqueness.

While this may seem like a minor contribution, it must be understood that some of the best mathematicians of all time had worked on this problem and were incapable of providing such a general solution. Descartes himself said, "I dare say that this is not only the most useful and the most general problem in geometry that I know, but even that I have ever desired to know."¹⁰

In the third section, "On the construction of solid and supersolid problems," Descartes focuses more on algebra than on geometrical problems. The center of attention of this section is primarily devoted to the methods of simplification. Descartes shows how his methods can be used in a generalized approach to solve problems that were commonly restricted by dimensionality. He emphasizes that using the simplest curve possible to solve a problem will yield the best result. He also is the first to explicitly state what has come to be known as "Descartes' rule of signs." This is simply an upper bound to the number of possible correct solutions to an equation, based on specific qualities of the equation itself. Descartes' rule of signs considers both positive and negative numbers (sometimes referred to by Descartes as "real" and "false" numbers) as possible solutions to the equation, but is incapable of stating what these solutions are. Several mathematicians, notably Cardan and Harriot, had made use of this rule before Descartes, but never stated it formally as it is presented in *La Géométrie*.

A f t e r
d e t e r m i n i n g
t h e t o t a l n u m b e r o f
s o l u t i o n s t o a n e q u a t i o n,
D e s c a r t e s s e e k s a r e f i n e m e n t o f
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p o s i t i v e s o l u t i o n s. I t i s a t t h i s p o i n t w h e r e
D e s c a r t e s m a k e s a m i s t a k e t h a t w o u l d l e a d t o
m u c h o f t h e c o n f u s i o n t h a t s u r r o u n d s *La Géométrie*,
f o r h i s r e f i n e m e n t t u r n s o u t t o b e i n c o r r e c t. A s J o h n
W a l l i s p o i n t e d o u t i n 1685, “T h i s r u l e i s e i t h e r a m i s t a k e,
o r a n i n a d v e r t e n c e, f o r i t m u s t b e t a k e n w i t h t h i s c a u t i o n,
t h a t i s, t h a t t h e r o o t s a r e r e a l, n o t [c o m p l e x].”¹¹ T h i s o v e r s i g h t
b y D e s c a r t e s h a s l e d s o m e h i s t o r y o f m a t h e m a t i c s t e x t s t o c l a i m
t h a t D e s c a r t e s c o u l d n o t w o r k w i t h n e g a t i v e o r c o m p l e x n u m b e r s.
T h i s a s s u m p t i o n t u r n s o u t t o b e f a l l a c i o u s. T h e t r u t h o f t h e m a t t e r
i s, w h i l e D e s c a r t e s s o u g h t t o w o r k o n l y w i t h “r e a l” n u m b e r s, p o s i t i v e
i n t e g e r s, h e a d m i t t e d n e g a t i v e a n d c o m p l e x n u m b e r s i n a l g e b r a i n t h e
s a m e s e n s e t h a t h e a d m i t t e d m e c h a n i c a l c u r v e s i n g e o m e t r y. N e g a t i v e
a n d c o m p l e x n u m b e r s a r e v a g u e, n o t c e r t a i n n o t i o n s. (T h e y a r e s t i l l v a g u e
n o t i o n s t o u s t o d a y.) J u s t a s D e s c a r t e s d o u b t e d t h e c e r t a i n t y o f m e c h a n i c a l
c u r v e s, h e d o u b t e d t h e c e r t a i n t y o f a l l b u t “r e a l” n u m b e r s, a n d
t h e r e f o r e w o u l d n o t u s e t h e m.

It is hard to determine what Descartes hoped to accomplish with the final section of *La Géométrie*. Although it shares some interesting results, its structure resembles a rough draft more than a finished product. Generally, this is the view that most mathematicians take in respect to *La Géométrie* in its entirety. It is horribly arranged, and it is hard to know at any point in the text what Descartes actually seeks to accomplish. This is only made worse by Descartes’ exclusion of proofs with the hope of making their discoveries more enjoyable for the reader. On this ground, it is completely understandable why the work was subsequently excluded from later publications of the *Discourse*. Nevertheless, I believe that it is precisely the separation of the *Discourse* and *La Géométrie* that makes the latter generally impossible to interpret authentically today.

I stated earlier that *La Géométrie* could be understood without the usage of confusing mathematical terms and notation. This is because Descartes’ original intention was to use it as an example of the method provided in the *Discourse*. While I agree that *La Géométrie* is horribly arranged, in

the sense that readers find no explicit relation to the *Discourse*, I find the evidence more than compelling that later additions to *La Géométrie*—mostly attempts by others to explain the mathematical results found by Descartes—did more injustice to the work simply because they ignored the reasons for which it was first published.

Sections two and three of *La Géométrie* give us the best understanding of how Descartes used his method of certainty in geometry. Recall that during his classification of geometrical and mechanical curves, Descartes claimed that curves composed of two motions incapable of being reconciled with each other must be mechanical in nature. Specifically, Descartes argued that curves composed of straight *and* curved segments must be mechanical, as straight and curved motions were impossible to unite in one certain motion. It has been suggested that Descartes' motivation for making this distinction was the inability to reconcile the most basic of all curves, the circle, with its own radius. The search to find a rational value for π , or prove there was none, had long been an important part in mathematics before Descartes. (In fact, to this day there are those who attempt to prove that π is rational.)

Descartes does mention the very well known problem of “circle squaring” explicitly in a letter to Mersenne just one year after the first publication of the *Discourse on Method*. According to Descartes, “one cannot admit [in geometry] lines which are like strings, that is, which are sometimes straight and sometimes curved, because the proportion between straight lines and curved lines is not known and I also believe it cannot be known by men, so we cannot conclude anything exact and certain from it.”¹² Unfortunately, he does not mention this explicitly anywhere in *La Géométrie*. Nevertheless, if one assumes that Descartes' classification of mechanical curves was based, at least in part, on the problem of squaring the circle, an interpretation of *La Géométrie* which gives priority to the method of certainty found in the *Discourse* (one that explains mathematical results as products of the method) is ultimately possible. This approach would also help to explain why *La Géométrie* is so unorganized, yet included originally in a work with glorified certainty and order.

A likely objection would be that squaring of the circle was not rigorously proved impossible until 1882 (by Lindemann), and Descartes was incapable of knowing in particular whether it was possible or not. This is true. However, under the interpretation of *La Géométrie* just stated, the only reason Descartes needs to exclude curves that he claims are mechanical is that he doubts their certainty. Thus, he does not need proof to exclude them. This also explains why Descartes' classification was ul-

timately incorrect. While he excluded curves that he considered to be doubtful, some were later determined to be exact. In spite of this, the fact that Descartes excluded these curves from his geometrical studies is ultimately irrelevant because he would have been specifically focused on curves that he himself knew were exact and therefore geometrical. In mathematics today, we use a modified version of Descartes' classification, for which we have Leibniz to thank. The current classification is one between algebraic and transcendental curves. As defined by Leibniz, algebraic curves are those represented by an equation of certain order (comprised of a certain number of parts) and transcendental curves are those represented by an equation of indefinite or infinite order.

We can also understand Descartes' attempt at creating an upper bound for the number of "real" solutions to an equation based on the rule of signs, if we first consider the method of the *Discourse* and then question how Descartes used this method as it relates to negative and complex numbers. As mentioned earlier, the only reason Descartes needed to reject negative and complex solutions to an equation is the fact that the notions of negative and complex numbers are vague and therefore, according to Descartes, not certain. As with his classification of geometric and mechanical curves, the false results obtained by Descartes have been elevated in importance to a position much higher than the problem of determining how he used his method of systematic doubt to obtain these results. We noted that Leibniz corrected and finished Descartes' work on curve classification. It was Newton who corrected Descartes' flaws in finding how many positive integer solutions exist for specific algebraic equations. Newton included the correction in his *Arithmetica universalis*. Today, Newton

is best known for his *Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica*, his magnum opus in which the differential calculus was formally outlined. However, in Newton's day, *The Arithmetica*, along with its correction of Descartes' rule of signs, was printed more than any other of Newton's works.¹³

One of the many oddities that many mathematicians today find in Descartes' writings is his rejection of mathematical proof by contradiction. (Some mathematicians, namely the constructivists, take a similar stance today.) Descartes stated that such a proof is "without intelligence and simply by chance." Again, it is in the *Discourse* where we find the reason why: he doubted the method of proof by contradiction (this notion, while modified, still plays an important role in mathematical logic, especially in relation to claims about infinity), and therefore refused to use it as the basis of certainty. While modern practices in mathematics rely on proof by contradiction quite heavily, we should emphasize the fact that Descartes rejection of this method had a very profound impact on advances in geometry and algebra. Not only was Descartes very systematic in his formulations of algebraic geometry, he concentrated specifically on gathering as much information as possible from the problem at hand before even attempting a solution, then used this information to either find a solution or determine that none was achievable. While many mathematicians failed to realize the subtleties of the method he was using, the attempts to rectify Descartes results lead down a path that was very similar. In other words, in failures to understand the theoretical aspects of Descartes' program, mathematics was pushed towards a method of systematic doubt, a method very similar to that of the *Discourse*, which would become the basis of analytic geometry.

The question can therefore be stated: "Is Descartes the father of modern analytic geometry?" While the answer to this question is more complex, we can assert a general reply in the form of, "Yes, but more by accident than by intent." My main argument here is that instead of studying the reasons why Descartes wrote *La Géométrie*, related it to the *Discourse*, and what originally motivated him to argue against the skeptics with a treatise

on geometry and algebra designed for the general educated public, the majority of efforts to interpret the work seem to be focused more on the mathematical, geometric, and algebraic results it contains. After all, we seem to have a tendency, at least in the discipline of mathematics, to view both progress and history in mathematics as a series of results and discoveries. As mentioned earlier, philosophers of history such as Adorno and Foucault warn us about such assumptions of continuity in history. It would appear that more concentration needs to be placed on the discursive practices of the time that actually lead, or at least influenced, mathematicians to formulate their theories. Mathematicians don't currently concentrate on this at all; they never really have.

La Géométrie was translated to Latin and published in four editions: 1649, 1659-61, 1683, and 1693. A commentary by Van Schooten was added to the second Latin edition in order to clarify as much as possible. (It was this version that Newton is said to have read.)¹⁴ The remarks themselves were over twice as long as the original edition of *La Géométrie* and were written as introductions to Descartes' horribly organized results and methods for mathematics students. In each of the later editions other comments were added. To this day, the work is rarely explained in any fundamental way as being part of the *Discourse* and attempts to understand the mathematical content have led to varying interpretations of what Descartes' goals in writing the work actually were.

In order to understand *La Géométrie*, it is important that mathematicians consider that it was originally intended as an example of methodology. Therefore, in order to appreciate this work, I argue that mathematicians should concentrate on an interpretation of the *Discourse* before venturing on to *La Géométrie*. Before appreciating the *Discourse*, the reasons for its publication (along with Descartes' relation to the skeptics and religious institutions) must be noted without falling into common assumptions (i.e., doubtable preconceptions). Similarly, those interested in Descartes' philosophy should consider the broad range of applicability which Descartes himself presented for his method with the three appendages to the *Discourse*. In fact, the *Discourse* itself can be seen as an introduction to three examples on how certainty can be found in scientific reasoning.

While *La Géométrie* has been incorrectly interpreted for the most part, the profound influence that Descartes has exercised upon the mathematical world can be seen as a direct consequence of these interpretations. This is perhaps the greatest of ironies surrounding modern Cartesian scholarship.

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NOTES

¹ Burton, 329.

² Anglin, 158.

³ Newman, 236.

⁴ Foucault, 21.

⁵ Adorno, 139.

⁶ Boyer, 335.

⁷ Foucault, 25.

⁸ Burton, 330.

⁹ This problem states: Given three or more straight lines, to find the geometrical locus (the set or configuration of all points whose coordinates satisfy a single equation or one or more algebraic conditions) such that, if one draws from the points rectilinear (straight) segments cutting the given straight lines at given angles, the product of two of these segments will be equal to the third or to the product of the third by the fourth, and so on. A version of this problem (in modern mathematical notation) is to find the roots of the equation $y = (x^3 - 2x^2 - x + 2) / x$.

¹⁰ Boyer, 344.

¹¹ Burton, 337.

¹² Mancosu, 77.

¹³ Boyer, 412.

¹⁴ Boyer, 391.



The Culture Industry, Ugly Art & The Poverty of Cruelty

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What is at stake for Adorno—or any other person living in the ideological prison of modernity? Might one—through Art—come to generate freedom in her cognitive relationship to the world, reconciling the individual with “nonidentity?” These questions will guide this exploration of select aspects of Adorno’s aesthetic philosophy. In this essay, I will examine the “culture industry,” which is one, if not *the*, chief protagonist in galvanizing enlightenment ideology. The culture industry systemically propagates false subjectivity, or ideological cognition. If Art is the means by which the liberation of subjectivity and freedom can be accomplished, then it must do so in response to an audience that exhibits a type of perception that cannot perceive the “real world.” This strain of perception is the result of the culture industry. Art that can compete with this type of cognitive deadening must engender qualities that allow it to reawaken subjectivity to the “real world.” For there to actually be an artistic audience is determined by Art’s ability to fight against the grain and ideology of modern society. It is supposed, then, that the modern world is bereft of an artistic audience. In order to break free of the impediments that the culture industry erects, Art must be hyperbolically cruel in its form in order to serve as the jarring catalyst for the reactivation of subjectivity. Adorno calls this the “method of cruelty.” I will examine the culture industry’s production and reproduction of the “non-audience” or the “dead audience”, and then look at the method of cruelty and Art’s ability to reconcile individuals with their subjectivity.

The triumph of enlightenment consists in its symbolic field of freedom: making “consumers feel compelled to buy and use its [i.e. the culture industry’s] products even though they see through them.”¹ This domain marks out a territory in which individuals’ dependency on the cultural machine trumps any misgivings that they might entertain about their own ability to choose or to be different. Free to choose any strain of ideology that the industry manufacture’s, these “pseudo-individuals” become industrialized produce, identical copies of each other, stamped with the UPC symbol of authenticity. In other words, the culture industry packages freedom in a certain capacity such that individuals—within a pregiven parameter organized and established by the industry—define themselves as free.

The moviegoer becomes the quintessence of modern ‘subjectivity’—life and the movies become indistinguishable.

Those who are so absorbed by the world of the movie—by its images, gestures, and words—that they are unable to apply what really makes it a world, do not have to dwell on particular points of mechanics during a screening. All the other films and products of the entertainment industry which they have seen taught them what to expect; they react automatically. The might of industrial society is lodged in men’s minds.²

People know that life is not the movie but yet they wish and act as if it actually were. Society serves up the data of experience that inform people and condition them towards predictable patterns in accordance with the program of the enlightenment. The culture industry is that zone of psychological enforcement that carries out the program with extreme diligence. This program, then, is an ideology that creates a uniform blanket of mass self-deception.

The moviegoer is the paragon of modern culture because she represents the logic of enlightenment: the false identity between the whole and the particular. In terms of critical reason this is the false identity between the reified self and the reified object; or, the “paranoid” rationality of identity thinking. This logic determines the culture industry’s drive to crush and insubordination that would strive to sever the whole from the part: to produce a veritable antithesis.

This can be understood concretely in the notion of the “oeuvre,” the social act, the (art)work. The oeuvre is immanently social, that is, it is a socially particular artifact thoroughly infected by ideology and history. As a particular, its internal composition—mediated through consciousness—has the ability to be delivered over to the whole or to a context that transcends



itself. When Adorno discusses particular works of art, he discusses two forms of consciousness in relation to the oeuvre.

One form is able to release the immanent constitution of the artifact so as to witness the disjunction of the whole from the particular. This is actually the second act of remembrance: the capacity to understand the nonidentical element of cognition—or, the ability to transcend the false identity between thought and reified object. Critical rationality opens up an understanding of the particular's determination within the whole, within the plurality of the world. To relate this to our discussion of remembrance, the particular delivered over to the whole is the ability to realize the contradiction between thought and truth.

A second form of consciousness is unable to understand the dynamic constitution of the oeuvre and tries to disassociate a particular object from its plurality. The particular is then reduced to its details. This, of course, is identity thinking, or the discharging of an object's plurality. The form of consciousness flattens out perception into the dead intake of nothings. The culture industry is the ideological front designed for this purpose—to reduce the particular to its details. Consequently, the movie industry's oeuvre exists solely in these details. The content and ideas never change insofar as the symbolic space of freedom is concerned because its concomitant cognition is petrified. Individuality of the artwork is only acceptable insofar as generality or conformity to the ideal of the mass is extolled—"mass" conceived as detail, as disjoined from the particular-whole dynamic, as flattened to such a point that the context truly becomes egalitarian in its aesthetic paucity.

If we relate this notion of the artwork to humanity, we see the same result is affected: subjectivity—the ability for an individual to understand the concrete grounding of her own particular self-hood within the immanent constitution of social reality (as a self which is constructed and deformed by the extant ideological conditions of history)—or particularity in relation to the whole, is truncated. Personal identity exists solely in the façade. Modern individuals only gain their 'subjectivity' by losing it, by conformity to mass-behavior, by the willingness to cede one's life away to the details. The category of the detail becomes the vanguard of the cultural machine. The individual is stripped down to the mass-person just as the particular is stripped down to its details—this is the problem with enlightenment. That which accepts this identity—between the whole and the particular—operates with the spectacles of mass deception. The question for art becomes what art utilizes or works within this logic.

¹ Adorno, Theodore & Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Continuum: New York, 1994. Hereafter: *Dialectic*, p. 167.

² *Dialectic*, p. 127.

If the moviegoer is truly modern, it is because the imagistic nature of film is divorced from any relationship to critical cognition. A grand display of free-floating forms inundates the audience as a river of continuous moments whose presence glows with a frenetic immediacy. The audience is united with the movie-stars through the fact that all their movements are blocked like theatrical actors. Marx once wrote of modernity: "All that is solid melts into air."³ Life becomes an image without cognitive relation, a free-floating sign without grounding in plurality. This is what is at stake for Adorno or any other person living the enlightened, modern world.

Enlightenment divorces the image from the cognition and the moviegoer from her social context. No connection can be established between the two. The amusement of the moviegoer is but one side of the coin. Without the sociological connection between social reality and play, it escapes the audience that the industrial machinery manufactures the content of their amusement. Thus, "Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work."⁴ One escapes the drudgery of the workday only to partake in events that are pre-packaged as entertainment and in experiences that are sanctioned by the cultural bosses.

We should entertain a fair amount of skepticism, though, to an approach that reduces all diversionary events as 'after-images' of the machine. How could modernist art, which is sanctioned by the cultural penthouses of the publishing juggernaut, retain its veracity as autonomous Art? Would not its banks too be eroded into the vortex of the free-floating image? What would it take for a cultural ritual or activity to escape the nullity of enlightenment? Such questions demand a reexamination of the effects of the culture industry.

If the cinema is dead (if it was ever alive), that is, unable to raise its mind above the onslaught of orgiastic images, then so is the musical audience. "The liquidation of the individual is the real signature of the new musical situation."⁵ These pseudo-individuals, again, only perceive the difference of detail among musical compositions. Trained as they are not to look at the "immanent composition of the oeuvre"—the dynamic totalizing force that strives toward a "heightened emancipation from the particularity" of its constitution⁶—music becomes background, no better than the cellophane wrapping of a package. Even the great works of art are unable to communicate because no one possesses ears.

If the immanent composition becomes background—refracted through the culture industry's logic—then the "details" are delighted in as the foreground of insubstantial image-experiences. Music

becomes an M&M candy shell. It is delighted in for the moment of its façade, permitting or excusing the listener from engaging with the work at any sort of cognitive level.

If the moments of sensual pleasure in the idea, the voice, the instrument are made into fetishes and torn away from any functions which could give them meaning, they meet a response equally isolated, equally far from the meaning of the whole, and equally determined by success in the blind and irrational which form the relationship to music. . . Where they react at all, it no longer makes any difference whether it is to Beethoven's Seventh Symphony or to a bikini."⁷

The reduction of music to the level of flat immediacy—the regression of listening—produces delight. The audience engages music at the “infantile stage” in which subjectivity is lost. Immersed in a mode of deconcentration, the audience becomes skeptical with respect to music that seeks to disrupt the mediation of the culture music industry: music that revolts against complacency.

Heavy art—art that revolts against complacency—attempts to sever the connection between the particular and the detail, wanting to make art into a realm of freedom. Heavy art, though, is not the same thing as autonomous Art. Heavy art fails where Art succeeds because of its tendency not to break away from lethargy, succumbing to “pseudo-activity.” Not fully active, these forms fall prey to their own ‘revolutionary’ intentions. Adorno locates stains of pseudo-activism in jazz, the jitterbug, and political art.

While the jitterbug or jazz may seem like viable options in lieu of the mass music of the culture industry, they actually share in the same regressive listening, making them no better than industrial music. The jazz musician is “nearest to the sportsman: if not to the football player. . . he shines by a capacity for rough improvisations, even if he must practice the piano for hours in secret in order to bring the refractory rhythms together.”⁸ The possible merits of free-form jazz—creativity, improvisation, cognitive engagement—all fall short of true. Art because the industrial parameters only allow it a pre-given field in which to negotiate its rhythms. The industry defines its symbolic space by being the actual cause of its ideological underpinnings.

This is accomplished through enlightenment in that it propagates the myth of the fully autonomous subject. We are not autonomous beings precisely because enlightenment has petrified our cognitions against the experience of freedom and subjectivity—nor are the jazz musicians’ ‘improvisations’ fully creative or free attests. Jazz operates

³ Marx, Karl. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Edited by Robert C. Tucker. W.W. Norton and Company: New York and London, 1978. p. 476.

⁴ *Dialectic*, p. 137.

⁵ Adorno, Theodore. “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening.” *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. Ed. Arato, Andrew & Eike Gebhardt. Continuum: New York, 1982. Hereafter: *Fetish*. p. 276.

⁶ Adorno, Theodore. *Aesthetic Theory*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1997. p. 53.

⁷ *Fetish*, p. 278.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

under the assumption that a monadic subject possessing freedom can create *ex nihilo*: as if the rifts and cadences are pulled out of the air at random. Free-form jazz attempts to create music within the parameters of this falsified space of freedom; in so doing, it falls into a pseudo-activity. Enlightenment created the reified, “autonomous” self and defined art within the parameters of this non-freedom.

Jazz, the jitterbug, and other emerging pseudo-active forces operate according to the same formula as the mass industries by catering its audiences to spontaneous, non-cognitive ‘beatness’. The incessant cadences of Kerouac’s literary antics are perhaps the most gratuitous example of what is art (i.e. not Art). Its romantic insistence on individuality—distinction from the herd mentality—only hypostatizes its failure that more clearly. Its rhetoric of subjectivity cannot save it, according to Adorno, precisely because it too is unconcerned with the false identity between the whole and the particular. It attempts to pass off its oeuvre as more than just detail, as concerned with its immanent constitution. Its failure is evident because it is unable to produce anything but a regressed audience.

Light art is contrasted with heavy art but not its antithesis. Mass music can be juxtaposed with the acid jazz cadences of the “Live Evil” session or the poetic diatribes of Dean Moriarty, but not in a genuine sense of establishing true antithesis—an antithesis that is fundamental to autonomous Art. Heavy art is “bourgeois art, which hypostatized itself as a world of freedom in contrast to what happening in the material world, [and] was from the beginning bought with exclusion of the lower classes.”⁹ Critical Theory can trace the historical emergence of modern heavy art from the ideology of *l’art pour l’art*. This movement is founded on the realignment of the social sphere of freedom. Only through the modern division of labor could such an ideology emerge, raising the banner of non-instrumental action: art as ritual activity without any practical purpose. Art as excess. Art as the expression of the liberalist theory of freedom and individual creativity. As an ‘autonomous’ realm, bourgeois art, is predicated upon the notion of individual creative output, or, under ideal circumstances, creation *ex nihilo*.

Adorno understands jazz as the recapitulation of false improvisations—as the attempt to posit pure immediacy of beatness: the work’s immanent composition arrests its audience in an ecstatic reification that is not the same as particularity transcending itself. Jazz is the idealistic counterpart to existentialism. Both cases smuggle in their own authentic jargon to justify the reification of the self. Both forget the second half of remembrance: the immanent social constitution of

consciousness. The jazz audience forgets itself and its subjectivity in the process of surrendering its auditory canals to regressive listening. The music becomes a fetish—the jazz audience is no better than the mass audience.

Adorno fails in this equivocation between jazz/jitterbug/political art because he conflates rhetoric with experience. He takes what is written about jazz (Kerouac, for example) and projects it onto all imagined jazz audiences. Is it true that jazz consists of regressive listening? I argue to the contrary. Jazz is not about pacifying the masses into a sort of beat ecstatic immediacy. The seemingly flat immediacy is not “habitual response,” or “numb thinking and deadened perception to a raw, wholly unfamiliar world” as it might be argued for the movie industry.¹⁰ The immediacy contains a deep structure that is cognitive and emotive, passionate and visionary. Jazz, as Coltrane once said, is an attempt to rejoin the world: an act of communication that opens up a field between the music and the audience. Its immediacy is instrumental in opening up the vista of the immanent constitution of the work: as dynamically active in wrestling the particular out of its particularity. The music transcends—not by obscuring the false identity between the whole and the particular, but by embracing it in its fragility. Jazz can in the best settings reactivate critical rationality.

The objection is perhaps best clarified once we gain an appreciation for how the work of Art asserts its autonomy. This is only possible with an understanding of the concept of beauty.

One of the traditional subjects of aesthetics—beauty—contains its own history with respect to the dialectic. The concept of beauty, though, conceived apart from its historical backdrop exists unaware of its own genesis. Tracing its genealogy is of vital importance to Adorno’s project in so far as reconciliation is possible as the concurrent experiencing of the beautiful and the ugly: the post-enlightenment beautiful. This context, or the aesthetic experience, demystifies reified consciousness and discloses subjectivity to individuals.

With the exile of mythic fear and the emergence of the modern self, “the traits of this [mythic] fear fell subject to taboo” and they became ugly.”¹¹ The enlightened self, through its historical act of negation, inverted its mythic aesthetic values so as to expel to the margins the fear, which would liquidate reified consciousness. Or, that which could inject a serum of terror into the modern heart, exposing the latent fear grounded in the roots of self-hood. “But the old images of terror persist in history, which has yet to redeem the promise of freedom, and in which the subject—as the agent of unfreedom—perpetuates the mythical spell, against which he rebels and to which he

⁹ *Dialectic*, p. 135.

¹⁰ Horkheimer, Max. *Critical Theory*. Herder and Herder: New York. 1972. p. 290.

¹¹ *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 47.

is subordinate.”¹² Our confrontation and reconciliation with the unconscious fear is what Adorno calls the “promise of freedom.”

This promise is contained within the dialectic as the ground of humanity’s redemption with itself. The reified self, whose historical construction has primarily been governed by the heavy-hand of domination, subverts the constitution of its present ‘autonomy’ qua details, thereby coming to terms with the latent fear of the natural world. Our confrontation with this fear and our victory over it is experienced as freedom or as reconciliation. This suggests that the experience of the ugly, as the modern enlightened response “to the cannibalistically threatening cult masks and grimaces [which are] the substantive imitation of fear”, needs to be approached from the standpoint of reconciliation.¹³ Only through our reconciliation with these forces of the dialectic can we hope to counteract the effects that leave us reified pseudo individuals.

If the ugly is that which is mythic, then the beautiful is that which is enlightened. Yet with almost all the concepts Adorno presents, there is a difference between what the concepts mean to the enlightened cognition and what they actually mean to the post-enlightenment consciousness of which Adorno takes himself to be an exponent. Beauty, like the ugly, has both a reified sense and an anti-ideological sense. The reified sense is part and parcel of the ideology of enlightenment. Art, that is, approached from an aesthetic perspective whose values promote the self *qua* domination.

Culture industry art occurs in a social domain that excludes subjective engagement. Music can no longer be approached with an ear toward experiencing the aesthetic precisely because the audience does not understand what the aesthetic is. People conflate the idea of beauty—as given by the enlightened cognition—with the experience of beauty. Mass art generated by the culture industry imagines the beautiful to be an objective concretion within the immediacy of an experience. Beauty is seen and recognized—it is not experienced as anything but the flattened perception that serves as the rule for the moviegoer or the regressive music listener. The mass individual would never imagine that the beautiful is actually ‘identical’ with the ugly.

Adorno denigrates jazz on the grounds of how inconducive it is towards the unfeathering of subjectivity. The jitterbug or political art divert the attentions of the audience from the aesthetic experience—that is, the immanent composition of the work—into a shallow aesthetic mode that is not co-extensive with beauty. Why, though, is this the case? Why is it true to imagine that physical exertion implicit

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 50.

to dance or to theatre inhibits the dynamic of beauty?

Adorno replies that the “isolated moments of enjoyment prove incompatible with the immanent constitution of the work of art, and whatever in the work goes beyond them to an essential perception is sacrificed to them. They are not bad in themselves but in their diversionary function. Is it fair, though, to reduce all works of art that happen to be ‘ecstatic’ or ‘joyous’ to the same level as mass art? Perhaps certain kinds of art that do allow for the experience of the aesthetic also happen to be enjoyable. Let us keep this in mind as we uncover the notion of the post-enlightenment beautiful and investigate the aesthetic experience of ugly art.

Of the ‘ugly’ art, Adorno writes:

Their radiance is dark; the beautiful permeates negativity, which appears to have mastered it. As if they feared that immortality would draw out their life blood, even the most seemingly neutral objects that art has sought to eternalize as beautiful radiate—entirely out of their materials—hardness, unassimilability, indeed ugliness.¹⁴

Ugly art not only is simultaneously beautiful, but is experienced as beautiful because of its impermeability to assimilation or convention. Consider Francisco de Goya’s *Witch’s Sabbath* for a moment. The lighting is somber, the mood is narcotic, and all the character images are grotesque: their visages cascading off each other in the revelry of bacchanalian evil. One confronts the image within the experience of transfixed horror. The internal logic of the piece denies any escape from the vortex of its negativity. Goya takes a sledgehammer to our minds—we are forced to engage it at the intellectual level it demands. This is the effect of *dark radiance* and it outstrips our enlightened self-hood of the barriers that have been erected in opposition to the primordial fear. The ugliness of the work as it is experienced through this type of engagement demonstrates the fact that enlightenment has not been completely victorious. We perceive that our modern cognitive status merely masks the regressive retardation of our minds to the primordial fear.

The beauty of ugly art consists in its ability to hammer down the idolatry of enlightened cognition: beauty is self-destruction. The double character of Art consists in this unique paradox that unites the beautiful and the ugly in one moment. This allows the two elements of remembrance to emerge: subjectivity and the historical genesis of consciousness.

This suggests that the way of recovering the audience within the

parameters of enlightened cognition is via a method of cruelty. Only through the creation of art that drives a wedge into the reified consciousness of modern self-hood can the artist hope to communicate the message of the aesthetic. That is, to allow its viewers access to the aesthetic experience to the immanent constitution of the oeuvre.

Goya's method of cruelty figures in the twisted images of the *Black Paintings*. On a more contemporary note, Radiohead and their recent exploration of modern life in relation to music is equally dark. *Kid A* is less an album and more a cohesive tryst within the world of a deadened musical audience whose auditory canals are stuffed shut with the candy-coated nothings of pop music. Thom Yorke's plasticized voice emerges out of the backdrop of the bass's synthetic rhythms. Its effect is less of the shocking pulse of Goya's eminence and more the awakening to a soothing nightmare that slowly suffocates. These voices of the culture industry double back upon their own genesis through the method of cruelty, undermining the *faux*-validity of contemporary pop rock. In other words, like Goya they do not attempt to posit themselves as outside 'the system', but rather show what is that the system produces.

Art becomes Art because it affects the disjunction of ideology from consciousness. Or perhaps more precisely, in the appearance to consciousness of its own historical genesis—that the self is the formation and reformation of the institutional configurations of social reality. Ideology, then, is the act of forgetting which the subject undergoes toward its own constitution. The objective configurations of society—e.g. the culture industry—make this act of forgetting easy.

Adorno writes: "Reconciliation as an act of violence, aesthetic formalism, and the unreconciled life forms a triad."¹⁵ This suggests a very crucial connection between cruel art, reconciliation, and beauty as it is defined an aesthetic formalism evocative of Clive Bell's "significant form." This triad in turn rests on a distinction between types of beauty: natural versus artistic.

As previously mentioned. Art explodes the rigid fusion between the image and cognition, thereby enacting remembrance. The experience of beauty mediated through Art differs from the experience of beauty in the natural world in that the artistic brand is ideological; that is, it concerns itself with ideology and its relation to consciousness. Let us begin with the idea of natural beauty.

Natural beauty is defined as "suspended history, a moment of becoming at a standstill."¹⁶ "Like the experience of art, the aesthetic experience of nature is that of images. Nature, as appearing beauty, is not perceived as an object of action. The sloughing off of the aims

¹⁵ *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 48.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

of self-preservation—which is emphatic in art—is carried out to the same degree in aesthetic experience of nature.”¹⁷ So, natural beauty is a relationship between humans and the natural world insofar as nature is not seen as an “object of action,” or something to be ground up in the instrumental machinery of the juggernaut. The preservation of the self (the dialectical history of fear) is ‘abandoned’ to such a degree that the reification of the self is sloughed off so that history is distilled into a “moment of becoming.”

Beauty makes apparent the two ‘halves of the human being: subjectivity and selfhood. History as a moment of becoming discloses itself as both incomplete subjectivity and incomplete self-hood. Subjectivity is the cognitive standpoint that recognizes the immanent containment of the self within the social—not as social institutional forms, but as the creative ground of all social forms or instantiations; we will call this *la société*. Subjectivity is experienced as *société*, as freedom—as dislocation from the ideological patterns of petrified perception. Selfhood by contrast is the cognitive standpoint of reification where one’s decisions and actions are immediate, unreflective, and pre-given by one’s social institutions—”society” in the second sense. History as moment of becoming is the cognitive standpoint by which both subjectivity and selfhood are tenuously contained within the same moment as *the* unresolved contradiction in humanity.

We can approach this same discussion from our previous investigation of rationality. The moment of becoming is akin to the positive experience of the nonidentical component of cognition. Rather than fleeing back into identity thinking, which reduces particularity to details, we connect with out subjectivities, allowing the immanent movement from the particular to the whole to occur. However, this is not simply a flight into ‘pure’ subjectivity but rather the formulation of critical rationality: reason aware of its freedom and the historical constitution of consciousness. Or, reason that consciously maintains the dichotomy between the self and the subject without reducing consciousness to either component.

Natural beauty is defined as “a moment of history at a standstill.” As opposed to history as a moment of becoming—which is the cognitive standpoint of artistic beauty—natural beauty is a moment of becoming flattened out into the sphere of pure subjectivity; that is, it is imagined wrong-headedly to be immediate, pure, and unadulterated freedom. Natural beauty’s success is too much. “The anamnesis of freedom in natural beauty deceives because it seeks freedom in the old unfreedom. Natural beauty is myth transposed into the imagination and thus, perhaps, required.”¹⁸ Beauty of this kind eradicates the

second half of the double character of art, the half of the contradiction that understands the historicity of consciousness. Freedom as natural beauty is experienced as an imagined pure subjectivity devoid of its immanent constitution within the social. Natural beauty is akin to the idealistic philosophies Adorno criticizes in the *Jargon of Authenticity*: “the mediation through the thinking subject disappears [so] completely” that the historicity of consciousness disappears into the “fullness” or “authenticity” of pure subjectivity.

Finally, we are in a position to understand what the post-enlightened beautiful is. The oeuvre is at the heart of the triad about which Adorno speaks: unreconciled life, aesthetic formalism, and violent reconciliation. The unreconciled life is human dignity reduced to the mass individual as manufactured by the culture industry. We call it false consciousness insofar as it is not consciousness at all—rather, it’s simply mechanical and pre-fabricated numbness. Critical rationality, or the ability to understand antithesis, is the way back to a life of reconciliation. We just need a push. The method of cruelty endemic to modernist art drives a wedge into our flattened perception—perception that sees art and beauty only in terms of pure essence, as aesthetic formalism does. The immanent movement of the oeuvre is remembered and self-hood can finally be understood in antithesis to freedom or subjectivity. Subjectivity, though, is not pure individuation but rather the ability to understand the self in relation to *société*: understanding the plurality of the natural world as the nonidentical component of cognition.

According to this reading, Adorno is justified in looking to Art or the oeuvre and its internal crystallizations in order to excavate the logic of its social instantiation in the dialectic. Moreover, Art provides us with an intimation of what anti-enlightenment cognition or ideology is like: critical rationality or the ability of come to terms with the ontological dichotomy between self-hood and subjectivity. Confronting the primordial fear of the natural world is equivalent to confronting the creation of the self and rejecting it. Not as the easy flight into pure subjectivity but rather as an attunement to the antithesis of critical rationality.

Jazz, like natural beauty, is not connected to critical reason as an instantiation of it. Its aspect of reification is formally equivalent to that of the culture industry, whose advertising media celebrate the meaningfulness of immediate and (supposedly) uncensored experience. This suggests how it is that experiences or actions become inflected with value for Adorno: only insofar as they are expressions of critical rationality. Freedom *qua* natural beauty contains just as

¹⁹ *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 66.

much paucity as endlessly-played sitcoms of FX syndication. Both are ideological and both falsely reconcile humans with the world.

This equivocation between natural beauty and the industrial apparatus of the cultural machine signals to me that there is something else at issue here, something we are missing. How could an experience which “recollects a world without domination” and “through this recollection dissolves [the self] back into that amorphousness out of which genius once arose and for the first time becomes conscious of the idea of freedom that could be realized in a free world from domination” be on par with the culture industry?¹⁹ Even if natural beauty collapses the antithesis of critical rationality, cannot we still say that hypostatized freedom is better than a reified consciousness? We still need to dig a little deeper.

The culture industry is successful most of the time in destroying the audiences of art, ideologically directing their minds to the details of the world, rather than its immanent constitutions. Art is Art because of its double character: or the ability to shatter the ideological fetters of the culture industry through its method of cruelty. Yet even Art can be denigrated to the status of a background context or referenced solely in regard to commodities. A Beethoven symphony, for example, being used to sell dog food to “people who love their pets!” aids in assimilating Art to the culture industry so that it can no longer bristle with dark radiance. The suggestion is that the more tied a world of Art is to the leveling mechanisms of the culture industry, the less likely it is to cultivate antithesis. Incessant advertising barrages serve up these real works as background context, pulling in even activated listening.

If it takes Art to awaken cognition, then it is curious indeed for a work of “non-Art” to produce this same awaking. By Adorno’s estimation, Nick Drake, the English folk singer, can hardly count as a true Artist. The songs he composed, while often reflecting a deep depression, dealt with themes of popular discourse: love, friendship, etc. One of his songs, “Pink Moon,” is a simple ballad echoing a somber lyricism. While the melody is haunting, it certainly cannot qualify for the method of cruelty. Yet many would argue that “Pink Moon” does exactly what Adorno would hold it incapable of doing: engendering artistic beauty. How is this possible? Is Adorno’s configuration of artistic beauty completely correct or is there a slippage between the method of cruelty and the production of artistic beauty? Are there other ‘methods’ that also counteract reified consciousness? Perhaps there are alternative arts, such as jazz, that can enact artistic beauty to the same extent as modernism.

The concept of Art as it has been worked out is very simply the experience of artistic beauty; that is, the experience of the contradiction between thought and truth, between subjectivity and its immanent constitution in society. This might also be understood as the awareness of the false identity between the individual and the mass—the central ideology of the culture industry and modernity. No matter how it is that artistic beauty is activated—whether by modernism, jazz, the jitterbug, lyrical poetry, dark satire, etc.—the experience is *analytically identical* with the unmasking of the ideology of enlightenment. In other words, how individuals become aware of their critical rationality and the antithesis of subjectivity is not necessarily grounded in any formal method. To do so, as Adorno tries, may actually impose undue restrictions on what art can be.

Once could read the earthy poetry of Pablo Neruda—

Because I am unfinished and spindle-shaped
I had an understanding with needles
and then they were threading me
and never have finished.

That's why the love I give you,
my woman, my needle woman,
coils in your ear moistened
by the sea winds of Chillán
and uncoils in your eyes,
letting sadness drift.²⁰

and experience Artistic beauty. There is no method of cruelty haunting the words of this Chilean laureate—his form parallels the ephemeral lyricism of *Sketches of Spain*, rooted in the richness of the terrestrial. If the effect of remembrance is what Adorno is truly after, it makes no difference what the form of the oeuvre is, so long as antithesis is produced.

Once it is admitted that alternative ‘methods,’ not necessarily cruel, may produce artistic beauty, then the previous examples suggest that there may be a slippage between the method of cruelty and the production of artistic beauty. The poetics of Neruda obviously cannot be reduced to a method similar to Goya’s works, nor am I ready to admit that either one isn’t in fact Art. As I mentioned before, there is something else at work here, something we have not yet grasped.

This missing element is the moral philosophy of Adorno. An account of this will explain why it is that Adorno needs to hold on to the method of cruelty. With an appreciation of its relationship to morality, we can come full circle in our understanding of politics,

morality, art, ideology, and their interpenetration. Moreover, successful criticisms of his moral philosophy shall spell trouble for the method of cruelty suggesting that critical rationality can be extended to art forms that engage the world positively (which the method rejects): like jazz, like political art, like theatre.

Adorno once wrote to Walter Benjamin: "Both [modernist art and mass culture] bear the scars of capitalism, both contain elements of change. Both are torn halves of freedom, to which however they do not add up."²¹ Mass culture seeks freedom through the act of purveying enlightenment: reconciliation with the primordial fear through the act of distancing the self further and further from the object. The self comes to consist solely in this type of deadened perception with respect to the world, where life takes on the aspect of a movie and objects become free-floating entities devoid of concrete qualities. In contrast to this, modernist Art takes a sledgehammer to this type of perception, attempting to reactivate critical cognition. Acting by means of a method of the method of cruelty, this type of Art militantly crushes the false sense of security that enlightenment creates, divesting the reified self of flattened perception. This opens up the real of freedom, which is an effect of artistic beauty. The method of cruelty, then, is necessary to open up the deadened cognition of the artistic audience.

Yet Adorno makes the claim that modernism (or mass culture) does not add up to full-fledged freedom. Complete freedom for humanity would depend on their ability to erase the domination implicit to the dialectic. Art is special in that it allows humans the experience of a freedom that is limited in scope—that is, experienced in respect to resisting mass culture. If we are to experience *complete liberation*, the impetus towards freedom that is driving mass culture needs to be erased in full.

Morality, then, is the cultivation of this resistance to mass culture—resistance that contains its own method of cruelty. Morality, however, is not identical with the "good life", or a world beyond domination, but is the tactical action that we must take toward promoting this future society. The good life is banned from the outset because complete freedom is impossible to imagine in this historical moment, for "there can be no good life within the bad one."²² Real freedom—*i.e.* not a torn in half of that freedom—is absolutized as that which is beyond domination, beyond reification, beyond alienation. Making do with what is possible in our time becomes the premise of Adorno's morality: we must resist the false identity of enlightenment at all costs. We must act with a method of cruelty *so as to become like*

²⁰ Neruda, Pablo.
The Yellow Heart.
Copper Canyon Press:
Port Townsend, 1990.
p. 35.

²¹ Walter Benjamin.
Gesammelte Schriften
I; 3 (Frankfurt am Main:
Suhrkamp, 1974). p.
1003.

²² Adorno, Theodore.
Problems of Moral
Philosophy.
Stanford University
Press, Stanford, 2000.
Hereafter: *Problems of*
Moral Philosophy, p. i.

works of Art in that we “radiate—entirely out [our] materials—hardness, unassimilability, indeed ugliness.”²³ Morality consists in the same sort of radical awareness of the juncture between the self and the subject that Art of the modernist strain exudes. This awareness must be thoroughly resistant insofar as resisting all positive conceptions of the world: politics, practical action, etc. It is only in works totally silent about politics that a “truthful” politics shines through.

Art excludes all affirmation of social reality. “The comfort that flows from great works of art lies less in what they express than in the fact that they have managed to struggle out of existence. Hope is soonest found among the comfortless.”²⁴ Morality follows suit. Our situation demands instead “that we resist the call of practicality with all our might in order ruthlessly to follow through with this idea and its logical implications.”²⁵ There is a shock value, it seems, found in a moral comportment based on a thoroughly cynical, anti-political mentality. Beyond the initial shock value, this type of person instills fear into people so as to crush their flattened perception, opening up a void in their cognition into which freedom may be smuggled.

Adorno’s diatribes against jazz, the jitterbug, and political art make complete sense in this context because they seemingly promote engagement with social reality that suggests that things aren’t quite so bad as they are. Moreover, as moral agents we must guard ourselves against reinsertion into the cultural machine. Our militancy must be overtly apolitical—*contra* false individuality and, most importantly, *contra* those types of activities reflecting pseudo-activity. The sign of true politicism—the only manner of morality we can entertain—is to reject all actions containing accommodation, which threatens to reduce the gains we made in our battle for true consciousness.

The heroic casting of morality is a symptom of the method of cruelty. Moreover, the method is the link between morality and aesthetics and casts critical rationality within the hues of nonpolitical cynicism. Through this refraction of what critical rationality is taken to be, Adorno fails to recognize other instantiations of that very rationality. Furthermore, this inability deludes him into believing that the best moral posture towards the world is equivalent to an overt rejection of it.

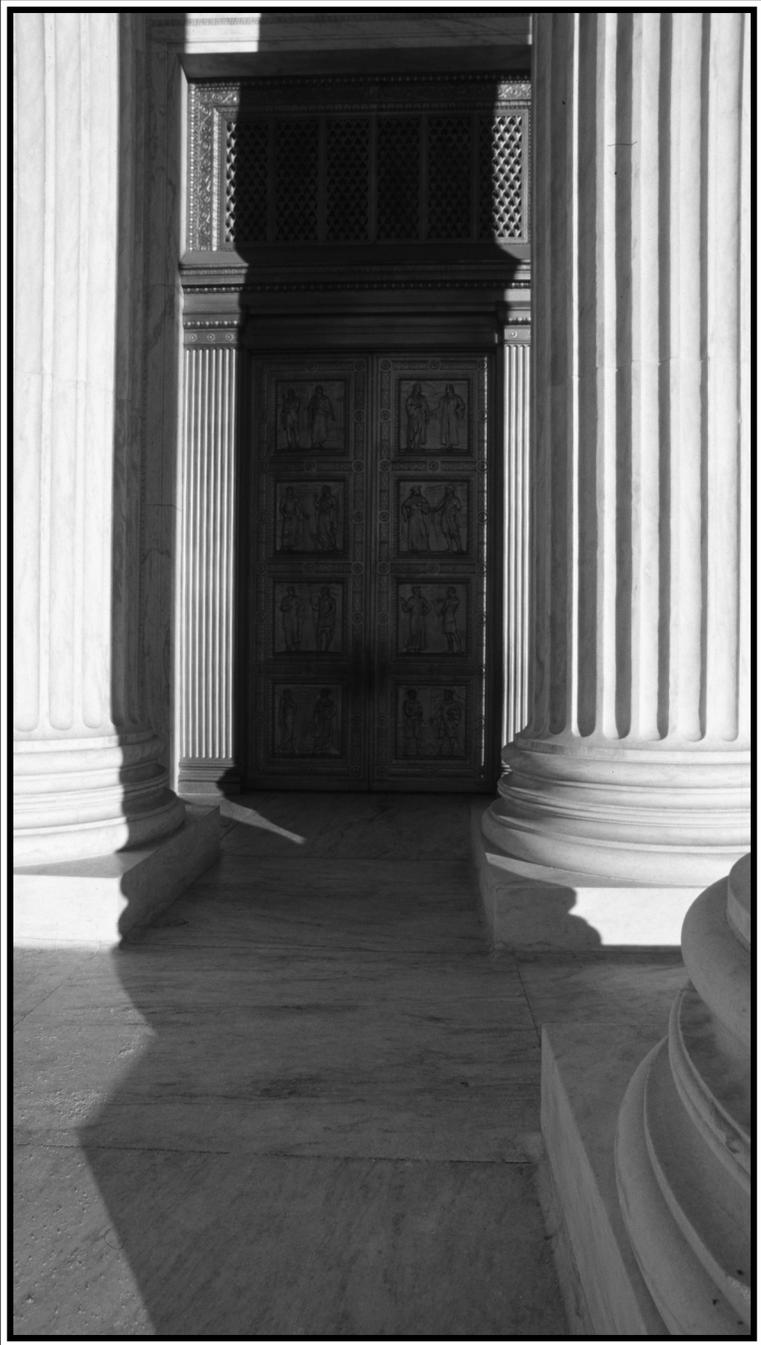
Through critical rationality we might come to immerse ourselves in the contradiction between truth and thought that the enlightenment blankets. However, extricating the aesthetic from the moral allow us to expand the category of Art well beyond the limits that Adorno would admit possible. More hopefully, Artistic beauty can be liberated from an overtly negative casting of it to include the range of positive dialectic freedom.

²³ *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 50.

²⁴ Cazeux, Clive, Ed. *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*. “Extracts from *Minima Moralia*: Reflections from Damaged Life.” Routledge: London and New York, 2000. p. 250.

²⁵ *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, p. 4.





A Compact Rational Moral Commentary

DISCUSSING *Kant's Ethical Thought* WITH ALLEN W WOOD

AN INTERVIEW BY
JOSHUA M HILL &
ANTHONY O'ROURKE

HILL & O'ROURKE: Let's begin with the relevance of Kant's thought to contemporary issues. In the preface to your book, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, you state that your interest in Kant stems from your experience of the present age. What do you feel to be the merit of examining Kant's ethics with respect to those social and ethical problems confronted by the contemporary philosopher—or, for that matter, cosmopolitan citizen—as an heir of the Enlightenment?

WOOD: This is a very open-ended question. I would not expect to derive from Kant's ethical theory any very precise prescriptions about particular social problems, and that was not my intention at all in the passage to which you refer. What I was trying to do there is to explain to my reader (and myself) why I find appealing certain themes in Kantian ethics that I emphasize in the book—especially the equal dignity of all rational beings and the Kantian theory of human nature, which makes human society fundamentally a scene of competitiveness and portrays people as very reluctant to acknowledge this equal dignity in practice, and very much disposed to lie to themselves by way of rationalizing their propensity to seek an imagined superiority over others. My point, to put it slightly differently from the way I did there, was that the age in which we have been living is one in which most people would acknowledge the equal dignity of all people, but also one in which human inequality is on the increase. It is also an age in which dominant ways of thinking, especially in this country, are transparent rationalizations for greed, ambition and the lust to dominate others. Social Darwinist ideologies play a role here, so does the fetishistic worship of the so-called “free market” (an oxymoronic term if ever there was one, since market forces keep most people in a condition of unfreedom).

Kant himself was of course living in a very different time, and I don't think he fully appreciated the practical implications of his own principle of the equal dignity of all rational beings (his views about political representation and the role of women in society, for instance, are bound to strike us today as very much at odds with his own principles.) But I think he the best articulation and defense that has been given of a system of ethical value based on human dignity and equality, and that it is important to us not only to have this set of ideas properly articulated and defended, but also to understand the historical tradition through which those ideas have come down to us. My focus in a book like this is on those points, and not on recipes for applying such principles to our current situation. My own view is that Kantian principles require much more egalitarian political and economic arrangements than now exist or than Kant would have advocated. But to argue that point was not one of the aims of my book.

If someone wonders why it is important to articulate our values clearly and why it is vital to understand the history of the theories in which this has been done, then that raises much larger questions about the value of philosophy itself and the value of historical self-understanding (and the close relationship that exists between these two values). I don't think there is space here to answer those questions.

You contrast the Kantian themes of the equal dignity of all rational beings and the individual's reluctance to acknowledge this equal dignity in practice. In so doing, you appeal to Kant's anthropology. Has the anthropology been an influence on your interpretation of Kant's ethical thought, or do you attribute your interpretation more toward your focus on orienting the *Groundwork* toward Kant's later ethical writings?

These questions get to some of the basic issues about the interpretation of Kant's moral philosophy. So I'll be a bit expansive in answering them, and I hope you will then focus in a bit more on what you want to ask about. To take the very last question right away, this is not a matter of either/or. In studying Kant's writings over the years I have become increasingly aware of the way readers of the *Groundwork*, especially in Anglophone philosophy, have both neglected the anthropological side of Kant's thought and have

tended to use the contents of the *Groundwork* to triangulate on all sorts of specific ethical issues while ignoring what Kant himself actually says in the *Metaphysics of Morals* and other later writings about how these issues are to be addressed. The *Groundwork* is what it says it is—it *lays the ground* for a metaphysics of morals by formulating and establishing the fundamental principle of morality. It specifically refers to a ‘metaphysics of morals’ which is to be a philosophical system of duties distinct from this groundwork, and it says that the *a priori* moral principle is to be applied only through an empirical ‘practical anthropology’ that is not supplied in the *Groundwork*. So the *Groundwork* itself contains enough for you to know that it should not be read or used in the way many people have read and used it. In particular, Kant’s four illustrations of the formula of universal law are *not* intended as a general model of how moral reasoning is supposed to proceed. They are merely attempts to give the reader of the *Groundwork* an intuitive feel for the way in which this first, most abstract formulation of the moral principle might relate to our ordinary conception of our moral duties, and thereby to lend some credibility to Kant’s claim that the principle he has derived is the one that common rational moral cognition always has (tacitly) before its eyes in making its judgments.

Kant never presented a system of ‘practical anthropology’, so we do not know what he thought one would look like. When he came to write the *Metaphysics of Morals* (after some 30 years of putting it off, since the first announcement that he intended to write a work of this title), he actually integrated an empirical theory of human nature into the system of duties contained in that work. So despite this reworking, he retained the basic idea that the principle of morality can be applied only through an empirical theory of human nature.

It might make sense to interpret Kant’s ethics in the traditional Anglophone way if it led to a better theory than Kant’s actual one. But there are notorious problems applying the formula of universal law as if it were supposed to be a general moral criterion—there are many ‘maxims’ for which the universalizability tests simply yield the wrong results. People who consider themselves Kantians still continue, out of a misguided sense of loyalty, to search for an interpretation of this principle that would make it defensible when it is understood as a universal criterion for what to do. But this quest of theirs for a Kantian philosopher’s stone in ethics is misguided, because it is motivated not by anything with a good philosophical basis, or even by

an exaggerated loyalty to Kant himself, but only by a foolish loyalty to one traditional *misreading* of the *Groundwork*.

The greatest appeal of this traditional reading, in my opinion, is that it feeds into a certain picture of what moral principles are for. A moral principle (such as the principle of utility or Kant's formula of universal law) is viewed as a sort of ethical pocket calculator, to be whipped out whenever you face a decision and used to figure out what to do. This isn't the way sensible people have ever made their moral decisions, though, and it isn't the way suggested by Kant's actual moral theory in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. It even seems to me wrongheaded to think that what we should want a moral theory to do is to tell us what to do. For a mature rational being, what we are to do is up to us. In difficult moral situations, it is not even clear that there always is any one thing that the agent ought to do. Rather, a conscientious moral agent should always weigh different considerations and decide for herself what to do. Sometimes it is true that there is only one morally acceptable course, but this is by no means always true, and in those cases where we are most in need of philosophical reflection, it is very seldom true. What a moral theory should do is systematize to some extent the way we should think about what to do in making decisions for ourselves. In my opinion, Kant's way of doing this in the *Metaphysics of Morals* has a lot to recommend it. The other thing we should want from a moral theory is a grounding for our thinking about what to do in the basic value or values on which moral thinking should be based. The function of these basic values (or of a 'supreme principle' that lies close to them) is very different from the moral rules or patterns of reasoning about what to do that we should apply when making decisions.

It fundamentally mistakes the proper role of a 'supreme principle' in moral thinking, treating it as if it were like an everyday moral rule or rule of thumb (such as "Don't break your promises")—only a rule that's supposed to be without exceptions and to direct action in every situation. The actual role of a moral principle is not directly to tell you what to do here and now but only to provide the fundamental context in which to ground a general conception of what our aims in life should be and what sorts of moral constraints there should be on our pursuit of them.

In applying a principle in that way, you also need a theoretically rich conception of the empirical situation in which you are applying it. This

means, at the fundamental level of moral theory, a conception of the human condition—what human needs are, what human beings are like, how they tend to relate to each other. Then you can see what your fundamental moral values dictate about which needs to satisfy and how to satisfy them, and how people should relate to each other—consequently, how their behavior toward one another needs to be regulated. Kant has often been read as a philosopher whose theory is based on a denial of these obvious facts about the task of moral philosophy and its relation to life. But that too is due to a fundamental misreading of his theory—even of the Preface to the *Groundwork*, where he says that practical anthropology is an essential part of moral philosophy. His only negative point there about the study of human nature is that it is not the source of the fundamental principle of morality. But of course it is required for any application of such a principle.

You stress the importance of “common rational moral cognition” as a starting point in Kant’s *Groundwork*. However, in doing so you claim that common rational moral cognition “will support the claims of his ethical theory only if it is supplemented or even corrected by philosophical arguments.”² If we know that our common starting point will require argumentative correction, then why not just begin our moral considerations with rigorous philosophical argumentation?

If you are asking me why Kant began with common rational moral cognition, I think it is because he wanted to begin with an appeal to the moral common sense of his readers, since he was confident that it would endorse the main ideas of his theory, if they were presented correctly. He thought his theory captures the healthy human reason of all moral agents, and so he chose to begin by presenting his theory in that light. My own view is that Kant *grossly* underestimated the extent to which his theory represents a revision of moral common sense (or the accepted moral thinking of people in his day), even if his theory can be grounded (as he thought) on healthy human reason. Consequently, I think the First Section of the *Groundwork*, and especially the discussion of acting from duty, is more controversial than he thought. The First Section is not, in my opinion, as rhetorically effective a presentation of Kant’s theory as he hoped, and what he was saying there has been subject to pervasive misunderstandings, not only by his critics

² *Kant’s Ethical Thought*, 26.

but even by his sympathizers. Your question may imply that I think Kant would have done better to skip the arguments of the First Section and proceed directly to the more philosophical arguments of the Second Section. In a way, I do think that, but I also understand his need to begin by representing his principle as an expression of people's healthy rational convictions—which I also think it is. So I can't endorse the view that he should have simply skipped the First Section. But I do wish that he had done more to prevent his central claims there from being misunderstood.

The social, political and intellectual climate of our time is much different than Kant's. His ethical theory, supposedly, is formulated such that the law is applicable and binding regardless of this change. If there is such a strong connection between common rational moral cognition and rigorous moral thought, does this mean that the social, political, and intellectual spheres have little (if any) influence on pre-philosophical moral thought?

As I would interpret Kant's theory, it formulates the fundamental principle of morality in three basic ways that form an interdependent system. I interpret this as a fallible attempt to articulate the ultimate rational grounds on which we ought to act. Because it is fallible, we certainly can imagine revising it, and even without revising Kant's formulations, we certainly can imagine reinterpreting them, or at least interpreting them differently from the way Kant did (or from the way his contemporaries could have), based on changed circumstances and our changed knowledge. For example, we might reinterpret what it is to treat rational nature as an end in itself based on growth in our knowledge about what 'rational nature' consists in. Such knowledge might include, for instance, greater awareness of the ways of life of different human cultures (which constitute the only instances of rational nature with which we are acquainted) and greater awareness of the biological, psychological or neural bases of our rational faculties. We certainly should reinterpret the demands made on social institutions by the dignity of rational nature, in such matters as the rights of women and the rights of all citizens to active political participation.

Kant tended to stress the continuity between his own moral theory and (what he called) "common rational moral cognition" (which he apparently

thought every rational agent possessed simply as part of their rational faculty). But clearly Kant's principles entail a revision of some common sense moral beliefs in his time—for instance, they require us to consider all rational beings as moral equals, contrary to the aristocratic assumptions that still dominated a lot of moral common sense in his day. And as I have just suggested, it is quite defensible to argue that Kant's principles require a more radical critique of moral common sense than Kant himself was willing to entertain. But I do not understand why you think this might imply that “the social, political, and intellectual spheres have little (if any) influence on pre-philosophical moral thought.” On the contrary, it is all too obvious that pre-philosophical moral thought is much influenced by these matters (for better or worse). Even philosophical moral thought, both as regards the (always fallible) formulation of the fundamental principle of morality and as regards the continuing reinterpretation of our best formulations of that principle, is and ought to be influenced by social, political and intellectual changes, insofar as these increase our knowledge and lead us to formulate and interpret moral principles in new and superior ways.

Even though you hold Kant's formulation to be fallible, you seem to agree with his claim that the fundamental principle of morality, whatever it is, is an *a priori* principle. A different approach seems more popular these days: there are no such principles, and the failure of a monumental moral philosopher to produce such a principle is simply indirect evidence.

The epistemic status of any proposition has to be distinguished from our degree of certainty about it, or the degree of fallibility we ascribe to ourselves regarding our judgments about it. To say that a proposition is such that if it is known, it must be known *a priori* is not to decide one way or another about its truth, or how certain we may be about it, or even whether it is knowable by us at all.

In Hume's *Dialogues*, Demea seems interested in *a priori* arguments for God's existence, and uninterested in empirical arguments for it, because he thinks the *a priori* arguments promise absolute certainty, whereas the empirical ones offer only probability. Maybe this is because propositions in mathematics, which most people take to be the paradigm case of *a priori*

knowledge, are typically also paradigm cases of certainty. But Demea is utterly wrongheaded here. I myself think that if there is any good argument for God's existence, it is probably the ontological argument (the most *a priori* argument there could be for anything). But if you ask me whether I think the ontological argument is sound, I must confess I have no firm position on that. (Even if it is, I should perhaps emphasize, what it proves still leaves us some light years away from endorsing anything like any of the theistic religions through which people have tyrannized over their own minds and which still mislead them in all sorts of ways.) I don't think the ontological argument has been clearly refuted by the standard objections to it (for instance, Kant's). On the other hand, there are too many reasons for doubting the ontological argument's whole way of looking at such things as existence, reality, the meaning of predication, and so on, and for doubting that we have cognitive access to such properties as supreme perfection and the like, for us to be at all sure that the argument is anything that should convince us of anything. And of course having proven metaphysically the existence of a supremely perfect entity or a being than which no greater can be thought would do exactly nothing to render rational the things that most religious people believe, feel and do.

Of course as Hume beautifully demonstrates in the *Dialogues*, Demea's basic motivations—in particular, his craving for 'absolute certainty' in religious matters—are both ugly and pernicious. (They are part of one kind of pernicious religious way of thinking, that is obviously still with us). Demea isn't really a 'rationalist'—he's an anti-rationalist, as we see clearly throughout the *Dialogues*, especially in his comically life-hating speeches in Section X, after he has apparently lightheartedly (and lightheadedly) abandoned the *a priori* argument for God's existence in the face of Cleanthes' objections (which are pretty shallow and dogmatic, if you ask me). About the deepest matters in life, people have to accustom themselves to uncertainty and modesty regarding their own opinions and faculties. A person who cannot do this, who has an irresistible emotional need to cling to some "faith", is always a dangerous person.

Thinking in the area of ethics that is similar to Demea's would be equally wrongheaded and pernicious. Someone who wanted to bolster a closed-minded moral dogmatism by declaring the moral principle to be *a priori* would be just as nasty a character as Demea is portrayed to be. To think of Kantian ethics as doing anything of this sort would be to refuse to take it seriously and to

misunderstand what it is all about in the most basic way imaginable.

Any honest person must admit that what is fundamentally true in ethics is bound to be a matter of controversy for the foreseeable future, and that no one can claim anything resembling infallibility in such matters. One explanation of this might be that ethics fundamentally involves empirical matters where the evidence is mixed. This is no doubt true regarding particular ethical issues, and may explain why some of them are endlessly controversial and uncertain, and no one can claim infallibility about them. But I don't think that is the correct explanation when it comes to fundamental principles of ethics. I think the problem there is not at all that the empirical facts are unclear, but that the fundamental concepts are up for grabs, and the way we should interpret even the most evident empirical facts is murky and unclear.

I tend to be convinced by some of Kant's reasons for thinking that the fundamental principle of morality must be *a priori*. The most convincing consideration to me is that morality is fundamentally a matter of our self-government by our rational faculties, and whatever proceeds from our faculties (as distinguished from what proceeds from the evidence given to them from outside) counts as *a priori*. In this way, empiricists interpret claims of *a priori* exactly wrongly when they think of them as excluding critical thinking and inquiry. On the contrary, to say that something is *a priori* is to say that its source is only in our thinking about things. In effect (to put it in Kantian language) to say that the moral principle is *a priori* is to say no more and no less than that it is the principle of rational autonomy.

In this way, it by no means follows from the fact that the principle comes from our rational faculties that we can be sure what the principle is, or how to formulate it. This may in fact make whatever we think about the foundations of morality even more murky and fallible than if the issues were empirical ones, about which we had some idea how to investigate them. It seems to me one of the serious blind spots in the utilitarian tradition that some have been attracted to this position through the illusory belief that ethical issues could be settled with certainty through empirical investigations (into the felicific tendencies of actions or rules or whatever). It is an advantage of a position that takes ethics to be fundamentally a matter of *a priori* principles that it can give a more correct account of why ethical matters seem so problematic.

But even the utilitarians (the best of them, anyway) were aware of the difficulty and uncertainty of what they were undertaking. One of the best statements ever made of the difficulties of thinking about ethical theory is the final page or so of the Preface of Bentham's *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, where he professes not to know whether his aims are achievable and concludes that there is no 'King's Road' to legislative science. Although Kant conceives the project of a metaphysics of morals very differently from the way Bentham conceives his project, I think a Kantian should say the same things that Bentham did about the difficulty and uncertainty of the task.

The first principle (or principles) of ethics are problematic because our basic thinking about ourselves, our place in the world, and what we should do, is still extremely confused, and there are such a variety of thoughts about it that have some plausibility but not much self-evidence. The fault, that is to say, is not in the state of the empirical evidence, but in ourselves as seekers and interpreters of the evidence. In other words, I think it is a confirmation of the view that the principle of morality is *a priori* that this view gives the correct account of why we are so fallible regarding moral questions.



KINGDOMS OF VIRTUOUS PIXIES

An Interpretive Debate Between Aristotle and Kant

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Imagine, if you will, a university auditorium, a mediator (no pun intended), and two renowned speakers in the field of ethics. The structure of the discussion is based on these two scholars' interpretations of the lyrics of a contemporary song in the attempt to compare and differentiate their groundbreaking epistemologies and ethical theories. The following is a possible transcript of this academic discussion, for which we could gather to gain a more applicable version of their respective theories. This would be an excellent forum in which students could explore introductions to a wide range of each of the speakers' theories. The speakers: Aristotle and Kant. The song: Pixie, written and performed by Ani DiFranco.

M E D I A T O R :

Today we are joined by two great philosophers, Aristotle and Immanuel Kant. Welcome to our forum, gentlemen. You have graciously agreed to participate in an open discussion and interpretation of a contemporary song, Pixie, by singer / songwriter Ani DiFranco. We will list the lyrics by section and you can each voice your opinions and theories. If you so desire, you can also respond to each other's interpretations. We hope to facilitate a discussion distinguishing your epistemological differences and applying your ethical theories to the thoughts, experiences, and actions expressed in the song. This is an open discussion, but please allow each other to speak without interruptions. Well, shall we begin?

*i'm a pixie
 i'm a paper doll
 i'm a cartoon
 i'm a chipper cheerful free for all
 and i light up a room
 i'm the color me happy girl
 miss live and let live
 and when they're out for blood
 i always give*

A R I S T O T L E :

I have a teleological view of a flourishing life that rests within a biological framework, which is a theory based on a natural end of happiness. The mind and the object or agent being observed must be consistent in order to accurately bring sensory and intellectual perceptions into one's consciousness. One can observe an agent's capacities, or notable traits, which contribute to the natural end of that particular agent. In this opening, DiFranco identifies her personal activities, or traits, that contribute to her final cause, or end. She seems to focus on elating others, which would suggest that her final cause is to promote happiness. I would also like to note that the last two lines show how DiFranco is willing to compromise in certain situations so that she can maintain order in her life to reach the desired end of happiness. By acting toward this final cause, DiFranco can truly flourish by achieving the ultimate end of humans, which is happiness.

K A N T :

Such a biological framework does not seem to do justice when discussing the importance of an agent's self-consciousness. According to my theories, self-consciousness, expressed by the agent as "I," is embedded in organizing one's actions or experiences in a process that I termed "synthesis." The unity of an agent while processing data in a rule-governed manner to organize sensory data into concepts exhibits a "synthetic unity of perceptions." An agent, therefore has an objective a priori validity resting on "the relation in which our entire sensibility, and with it all possible appearances, stand to original apperception," or as long as the agent is constantly aware of self-consciousness.¹ Basically, the agent imposes awareness of self-identity on perceived data as it is configured, so how something looks to an agent is merely a reflection of the subject ("I") that organized it.

A R I S T O T L E :

I, too, have postulated that imagination "involves a synthesis of concepts"² and that the thinking soul discriminates with a type of unity that acts as a connector of faculties, linking the mind's images to the perceived objects.³ Thus, "the mind which is actively thinking is the objects which it thinks."⁴ This is why it is so important to have consistency between the mind and the object or agent being observed.

*the man behind the counter
 looks like he's got
 a half a dozen places he'd rather be
 and furthermore*

*it looks like he's prepared
to take it all out
on me*

K A N T :

Here, DiFranco phrases her experience with the man behind the counter beautifully. She twice says “looks like,” which is actually how one should view the world. I realize that your theoretical framework is based on how things *are*, with the mind acting as a camera as it sketches out what it sees, but actually how things *look* to the viewer is what I have concluded to be the source of necessity. She accepts the temporal input of the scene in that he first looks like he doesn't want to be there, and then that he is going to somehow affect her life because of his troubles. This contradicts your previous statement that DiFranco is willing to compromise herself “when they're out for blood.” However, her awareness through the time span of the event supports my theory of knowledge that self-consciousness orders data and, thus, how things look to an agent is the source of necessity.⁵

A R I S T O T L E :

I realize that you think that something inside the agent's mind is the source for necessity, but I have stated that the source of necessity is the observed object's or agent's essence. Humans are different from other animals because we have knowledge and understanding, and we also have the ability to develop insight. Our intellectual consciousness is connected to essence through a quantum leap of control from image to concept, or “induction.”⁶

K A N T :

The non-sequitur style of your theory of induction is atrocious. It does not logically flow because nothing outside the mind can correspond to a mental state. The natural act of the mind is to think that there *is* something outside the mind that corresponds to the “useful fiction” that the mind creates in order to perform functions. Your suggestion of induction is itself a quantum leap that is invalid. Basically, you are theorizing that the mind takes an active role in controlling the human and, therefore, makes the man himself passive to the event. Furthermore, you constantly speculate that ends are achievable to those who are merely active participants in deliberation and other “virtuous” qualities. At no point do you actually detail how one should deliberate or even what occurs during this deliberation. I have dedicated a great deal of work to just this task.

A R I S T O T L E :

Actually, you are misinterpreting me if you think that I differentiate the mind and the man, for the mind is actually the identity of the man. Had you really studied my works you would realize that man is the only agent who has the ability to actively use insight, which allows induction to be of use to him, and induction is merely a piece of the reasoning process with which he is equipped. This voice of self-consciousness is man's faculty of reason, and, if it is used as one's natural ruler and guide in contemplation, it leads to a morality based in one's loyalty to one's self.⁷ Induction is, therefore, man taking an active role in favoring reason and rationality in controlling himself.

K A N T :

But I must reiterate, induction is invalid because one cannot use mere sensory perceptions to recognize an agent's natural end. Your teleological epistemology focuses on supposed natural ends . . .

A R I S T O T L E :

First of all, according to my theory of knowledge, every agent has (1) matter, or description, detailed to that one specific thing and (2) essence, or definition, which is how the matter is organized. Every agent also has observable capacities which lead toward a final cause. This teleological end allows us to judge an agent's activities as right or wrong based on whether the actions are appropriate compared to this natural purpose. In my attempt to ascertain the function of man, I concluded that man alone has "an active life of the element that has a rational principle."⁸ Secondly, I would like to point out that your theoretical framework is also teleological.

K A N T :

Yes, some of my theories can be viewed as teleological in that they are based on ends, but my arguments have a stronger foundation because, unlike your study of the good that can be produced by focusing on how agents function in a "virtuous" pursuit of the seemingly unattainable "good life," my studies are based on the ends that are achievable since they are set forth by reason,⁹ not on the stance that man can intuit an agent's nature. My theories focus more on how to achieve an end that could become a universal imperative by presenting a structure to follow in deliberations. You just assume that man desires good, while I

actually separate the imperatives that drive desire into those which are conditional and those which are categorical. I present an internal view while your theories are based "outside" the mind. Your perception-based intuition prejudices the reason being used. "Outside" forces and events cannot be used to objectively deliberate and gauge universal reasonableness, especially regarding how you postulate your induction theory. How can you build a theoretical foundation on such variable observations? You have even written, "Scientific knowledge is not possible through the act of perception."¹⁰

A R I S T O T L E :

I did write that, but you are misusing the statement to imply a lack of foundation for intuition. The idea which I referenced in that particular quote is that sentient perception is a quality that we share with many other animals. However, only man has the ability to ask why something happens. Humans are rational and intelligent and, therefore, have the capacity of induction. One can conclude that induction is a categorical truth that can be established about human beings. Of the ways humans perceive truth, "scientific knowing and intuition are always true: further, no other kind of thought except intuition is more accurate than scientific knowledge [because intuition is] the originative source of scientific knowledge."¹¹ This is a key factor in my epistemology based on a hierarchical stratification of agents with consciousness.¹² Furthermore, in defense of my theoretical foundation, I have stated that "variable facts are the starting-points for the apprehension of the end, since the universals are reached from the particulars; of these therefore we must have perception, and this perception is intuitive reason."¹³

K A N T :

But it's wrong! You *cannot* categorically establish breakthroughs as major functions in acquiring knowledge! Yes, there may be some things people can understand after deliberation and reach a point of understanding, then even have a quantum leap in the apparent form of induction. However, it is insane to think that people's general observations on a daily basis are all founded in perception-based interpretations that claim the form of insight!

A R I S T O T L E :

It "looks like" you're getting a little hot under the collar. Why don't you just separate yourself from your emotions by respecting reasonableness or something? It's not so easy in the real world when it's more than just words on paper, is it, universality boy?!

M E D I A T O R :

Okay, gentlemen, let's take a little time out. It is obvious that there is a rift between your respective views, especially based on your distinctive epistemologies and the extreme differences in how exactly knowledge is acquired. However, you have been mentioning a number of issues on which you could attempt to elaborate throughout your discussion here in a more objective manner. Let's move on to the next section, please.

buddy,

I don't really care what your problem is just don't make it

mine

A R I S T O T L E :

Here, DiFranco demonstrates great insight in her phrasing of an important idea. With regard to the correct time to end interpersonal relationships, I include the moral deterioration of one of the parties involved, for only good can be loved.¹⁴ In the true nature of friendship, such a relationship is based on a certain resemblance,¹⁵ but unequals will equalize.¹⁶ In this section, DiFranco foresees the potential equalization of his attitude on her, so she seems to attempt to prevent such an occurrence by choosing to distance herself from becoming involved in his situation.

K A N T :

I think that you are basically saying that one person's emotions can influence another's, and if that is the case, DiFranco realizes the need to preserve her balanced self-regard. Perhaps she knows that she doesn't want any emotional influences that this man may unload on her, so she wants to avoid an interpersonal exchange with him. I have stated that, while deliberating, one experiences a battle between (1) the feeling caused by insight, or respect for the primacy of reason, and (2) the pathological threats to freedom, which take the form of feelings or interests.¹⁷

*come on kids,
let's all hold hands
and pretend we're having a good time*

A R I S T O T L E :

Well, DiFranco suggests here, perhaps metaphorically, that we should maintain a level of civility in the face of disagreement by stating that we should “all hold hands.” In *The Politics*, I address the power of speech for man. Our natural tendency toward forming political communities is connected to our use of public discourse.

K A N T :

No civil obligation can require someone to act or behave in a certain way with a certain motive. Ethical theory is concerned with internal motivations, but political theory is concerned with maintaining public freedom. Civil society itself is an ordered pattern of force in the interest of preserving freedom,¹⁸ where rule-enforced order constrains the freedom of citizens to such a universal and agreed upon degree that it ultimately becomes a preservation of freedom.

A R I S T O T L E :

Perhaps, but being civil is a deliberate effort to maintain a level of discourse to preserve peace and public order while living with people who don't necessarily agree.¹⁹

K A N T :

Okay, that is more of a political argument, but in response to your opening ethical standpoint on this excerpt, I argue that one must use social interactions to “cultivate a disposition of reciprocity – agreeableness, tolerance, mutual love and respect – and so associate the [social] graces with virtue. To bring this about is itself a duty of virtue.”²⁰ So, as you have said, by DiFranco's deliber-

ate effort to preserve peace, she is also promoting a “virtuous disposition by at least making virtue fashionable.”²¹

*maybe you don't like your job
maybe you didn't get enough sleep
well, nobody likes their job
nobody got enough sleep
maybe you just had
the worst day of your life
but, you know, there's no escape
and there's no excuse*

A R I S T O T L E :

DiFranco seems quite understanding in this potential inference. Although I define understanding as “applicable to the exercise of the faculty of opinion for the purpose of judging of what some one else says about matters with which practical wisdom is concerned – and judging soundly,”²² I think that this statement is applicable to the situation because she is judging someone's possible situations leading to a change in behavior. It actually sounds as if she is acting as a sympathetic judge. I have written that “sympathetic judgment is judgment which discriminates what is equitable and does so correctly.”²³ Thus, this attitude is necessary for interpersonal relationships because one must objectively position one's self to sympathize before making a judgment.

K A N T :

I see what you are saying. In different terminology, I have a somewhat similar view that humanity is a conditional duty in that humans are naturally receptive to

sharing others' feelings. However, I have broken humanity down into two distinct branches: sympathy and compassion.²⁴ One has an obligation to sympathy because it is free and freedom is found in making moral decisions based on insight and rationality. In a moral duty such as this, it is a necessity to be reasonable out of pure respect for the awe and importance of reasonableness. Meeting this requirement, therefore, provides moral worth.²⁵ However, the last two lines of this section support my theories that one cannot make a moral decision on a pathological basis. The extent to which behavior is caused by influences, such as those with which DiFranco has sympathized, acts against and diminishes freedom.²⁶

M E D I A T O R :

With that thought, I think that you can easily transition to the next line.

K A N T :

As always, I remain your most humble and obedient servant.

*so just suck up
and be nice*

K A N T :

Here, DiFranco is exercising a decision-making process toward the categorical imperative.²⁷ Essentially, she is actively making a decision to not react emotionally to the situation and, in fact, deciding to act in a manner that allows her to be justified in a universal moral law. This statement

expresses a moral consciousness that I set forth as, "I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law."²⁸ She is basically stating that no matter what you may be feeling at a given moment, realize that you can actively make the decision to autonomously be nice.

A R I S T O T L E :

I would like to emphasize your phrasing when you described her decision-making as taking an active role. As you know, I strongly believe in the achievability of goals through action. In this particular case, I think that DiFranco is applying practical wisdom and moral virtue²⁹ to declare her conclusion that people should be nice.

*all the privileged white kids on tv
playing at death
brandishing their cold cuts
with their ghostly makeup
and their heroine breath
and all the fishes are flapping wildly
on their hooks
while all the top critics find great meaning
in the telephone book*

A R I S T O T L E :

These descriptions really seem to demonstrate DiFranco's disapproving feelings toward self-indulgence, for they are linked to the senses and, in the custom to become affiliated with self-indulgence, these actions approach us "not as men but as animals."³⁰

DiFranco even alludes to this fact by referring to some of these people as “fishes.” Self-indulgence is characterized by an excessive craving of pleasures and one who is “led by his appetite to choose at the cost of everything else.”³¹ After all, the voluntary practice of activities gradually, but unavoidably, produces certain character traits,³² of which I have written, “we are masters of our actions . . . but though we control the beginning of our states of character the gradual progress is not obvious . . . [but] the states are voluntary.”³³ Once a man becomes self-indulgent through voluntary actions, it is not possible to simply change because his character has been altered.³⁴ To provide a contrasting view, a temperate man “occupies a middle position” regarding such pleasures, while a self-indulgent man “loves such pleasures more than they are worth.”³⁵

K A N T :

I agree that one cannot decide to change such behavior once one’s character has been altered because one has established a habitual inclination.³⁶ I attempt to demonstrate, through a catechism, the instruction on the proper basis for the command of duty. To show how to observe an obligation, I have written that it is “the shamefulfulness of vice, not its harmfulness (to the agent himself) that must be emphasized above all.”³⁷

*the little emperor he has no clothes
so he can't come out to play
and besides which
life is suffering
and he likes it that way*

A R I S T O T L E :

DiFranco’s phrasing of his inability to “come out and play” is very interesting. This is almost exactly from my text differentiating the good man and the evil man, which states that “those who have done many terrible deeds and are hated for their wickedness even shrink from life and destroy themselves.”³⁸ The evil man experiences an annihilation of reason, which is inherently self-destructive, for there is no peace of mind for him as he is torn by being pulled in many directions.³⁹

K A N T :

Even though I do not go so far as to state that an agent becomes inherently self-destructive, I also believe that there must be, in the relationship between happiness and morality, a proportionate connection between the two,⁴⁰ for the mind balks if there is an incongruity between them.

A R I S T O T L E :

If we are going to get into morality here, I must state that the ultimate motive for being good is the possibility of friendship.⁴¹

K A N T :

But pure friendship is only an ideal.

M E D I A T O R :

You can both specifically address friendship in the upcoming section.

*and the little guy is not so friendly
but you know life has been*

cruel

A R I S T O T L E :

Like I was just saying, the ultimate motive for being good is the possibility of friendship, including with one's self, which is essential to man and achievable by action. In this case, "the little guy is not so friendly," perhaps as a reflection of what his life has become through his aforementioned annihilation of reason.

K A N T :

Regardless of the state of his life, friendship is an ideal that should be kept as an ideal. It is simply not realistic. We do have a "duty of friendship" which involves respect for the necessary ideal, while realizing that perfect friendship is not achievable in practice.⁴²

A R I S T O T L E :

How can you say that? Friendship is necessary for men! I discuss three issues that contribute to why man needs friends,⁴³ most importantly to provide reflective selves by which one can view one's self through those close to him. We are generally too close to ourselves to make objective judgments.

K A N T :

No, it is impossible to achieve perfect friendship for two distinct reasons. First, we can never know what is truly in someone else's head, so there is an epistemological

block on achieving friendship. Second, every human friendship is a state of tension between two undeniable forces, those of attraction to others and repulsion from the prospect of the resulting compromised self-respect and self-possession, or autonomy, so we must keep others at a distance.

A R I S T O T L E :

These claims create a good cautionary note, but the theory behind them is wrong. First of all, since friendship is based on a unity of common insight, we can have personal knowledge of others. I have postulated that a friend is a reflection of one's self, which creates a mirrored identity. Secondly, in the process of creating "our" friendship, "we" forms as a counterpart to one's "I." Each party of "we" has a clearer consciousness than "I" because the agents have reflective alter-egos.

K A N T :

But familiarity breeds contempt! If people get too close, respect can be forever lost!⁴⁴

M E D I A T O R :

I think that we are at a theoretical impasse here, gentlemen. Would you like to continue on to the next two lines?

so wipe that smile off your face baby

*and try to
be cool*

K A N T :

The categorical imperative, represented by DiFranco's suggestion to "try to be cool," answers problems brought about by my theory that decisions cannot be made with emotional influences. Essentially, one can off-set emotions by introducing another in opposition, specifically that of respect. The only possible object with a feeling of respect is rationality. Humans are agents of respect because they are autonomous and act on intelligence. Reason itself sets certain goals that have a decisive role in the decision-making process without posing any threat to freedom or autonomy. A respect to be reasonable presents self-control of the mind over emotions, and lays the foundation for my notion of true autonomy, consciously allowing the mind to control or restrain personal freedom. There is a fundamental role for feelings, but they are kept in their proper place by respect so reason is not defenseless against those forces.⁴⁵ Moral law has the power to generate respect in order to support insight and integrity.⁴⁶

A R I S T O T L E :

Moral virtue is not the power to suppress one's feelings as your description of alienating or counteracting emotions seems to suggest. It is, in fact, humanizing them in order to make them contextually appropriate and balanced so that they gain significance.

*maybe you don't like your job
maybe you didn't get enough sleep
well, nobody likes their job
nobody got enough sleep
maybe you just had*

*the worst day of your life
but, you know, there's no escape
and there's no excuse
so just suck up
and be nice*

A R I S T O T L E :

All these potential pathological states that DiFranco presents are reasons, which are pieces of objectivity that show mind in touch with reality, thus DiFranco is trying to be objective and maintain the characteristic of "clarity." By being loyal to one's self and arranging everything in one's life so that it is focused in the mind, one has integrity and can achieve the "good life," or happiness. Nature gives everyone a clear mind, but we can get clouded by decisions we make that cause a change in mentality resulting from walking away from the voice of reason. As a result of blinding one's insight, one has no internal resource for restoring that clarity of mind, which is reflected by DiFranco's statement that "there's no escape." For these reasons, maintaining control and practical wisdom is an absolute necessity. Intense emotions can fixate the mind and put a piece out of place, in which case, one loses control.⁴⁷

K A N T :

Such a loss of control would be destructive, but not for your reason of losing happiness. The most important driving concept that would be lost is freedom. If something influences or disrupts the decision-making process, the resulting rift in unity and alien-

ation within one's self will lead to a loss of freedom, for moral law and freedom reciprocally imply one another.⁴⁸ This particular situation noted by DiFranco is an example of heteronomy, a condition in which the decision-making process is under the influence of something. Such a breakdown of the decision-making process due to a seemingly absolute fixation of emotions contains diminished responsibility⁴⁹ because the mind always has the ideal of the absolute and, in the absence of the awe of self-respect, an influential feeling can take on the guise of an absolute and fixate the mind.

*yeah, i would like to perfect the art
of being studiously aloof
like life is just a boring chore
and i am living proof
i could join forces with an army
of ornery hipsters
but then i guess i'd be out of a job
so i guess it's out of the picture*

A R I S T O T L E :

DiFranco is obviously aware that she has limitations, not necessarily imposed on her, but from her need to not give into desires that are more than moderate, because beyond self-sufficiency is a distraction. DiFranco is aware that she should not engage herself in the pursuit of things that she does not need, "for self-sufficiency and action do not involve excess . . . for the life of the man who is active in accordance with virtue will be happy."⁵⁰ One can reach the "good life" by orchestrating all human needs in an orderly way. DiFranco objectively realizes that "it's out of the picture," and is, therefore, exercising and cultivating

reason, which contributes to the best state of mind.⁵¹

K A N T :

Finally! You admit the importance of taking note of reason! One must maintain a respect for reason when making decisions, especially as important and life-changing as the one DiFranco is describing.

A R I S T O T L E :

Well, when I discuss practical reason, I postulate that character, not a concept, is the root of judgments, and that self-control in the form of temperance provides discipline which then protects good judgment.⁵² Acting on reason is a form of control, so DiFranco is free in the sense that she is acting on a deliberate insight and being true to herself.⁵³ Can we move on to the last section to continue my thought?

K A N T :

I have no objection to that.

M E D I A T O R :

Okay, then. Let's move to the end of the song. Since this is the last section, perhaps you can each give us a "big picture" idea of your understanding of the basis of morality in ethics.

*i'm a pixie
i'm a paper doll
i'm a cartoon*

*i'm a chipper cheerful free for all
and i light up a room
i'm the color me happy girl
miss live and let live
and when they're out for blood
i always give*

A R I S T O T L E :

Well, I just wanted to continue my thoughts with this final section that revisits DiFranco's self-identification. The only difference here is the word "cuz" in the beginning. I think that this represents her attitude that she knows who she is and that she is not going to change for anyone else. This is very important because being loyal to one's self, which is integrity, leads to happiness.⁵⁴ I, therefore, postulate that the basis of morality in ethics is ourselves and that the mind delights in itself when it acts. Thus, morality and happiness are related to one's relationship with one's self and the activity of contemplation to be loyal to one's self.⁵⁵

K A N T :

Humans are obviously the basis of morality, and happiness is involved in one's integrity, but it is not the reason why. Humans are ends within themselves and have dignity, and they maintain a self-legislative and autonomous rule of restraint. Moral consciousness, which drives reason, is identical to absolute freedom. However, we must remember that morality is not a cause in the physical world, but we do have a duty to maintain our autonomy and seek happiness. I think that the ideal, as you might say, Aristotle, is to try to have a "good life."

M E D I A T O R :

While this was supposed to be an objective discussion between two well-respected ethical theorists through the interpretation of a contemporary song, the distinguished and renowned philosophers were, at times, hostile. This should have been predictable, since they do have opposing views at the foundations of their epistemologies, as we saw in the beginning. These differences are then found in every aspect of the ensuing ethics. Thus, we should have assumed that they would take the debate personally, since the discussions were based on their life works and beliefs. In all, I think we at least touched on many issues on which Aristotle and Kant agree and differ. Perhaps this could be the first in a series of more in-depth discussions if more time could be devoted to such magnanimous facets of two outspoken philosophers. Thank you for your attendance and we hope that you enjoyed the discussion.

NOTES

¹ *Critique of Pure Reason*, 138-139.

² *De Anima*, Bk. III, Ch. 8.

³ *Id.*, Ch. 7.

⁴ *Id.* Emphasis added.

⁵ According to Kant, two important factors are involved in how things look to an agent: (1) the temporally recognizable discreteness of the data input, which creates order by means of one's prevalence in relationship to the object of observation, and (2) that the center of awareness is self-consciousness. The sequence of sensory data input is a rigorously fixed and necessary causal flow to form an objective experience for the agent. This causal sequence does not affect the viewing agent, so something in the agent's consciousness is not in time and is able to make comparisons. Unity is constituted at each moment, represented by the ordered relationship

of many things (perceived data) to one central agent who is aware of the essential self-consciousness. *Critique of Pure Reason*, 138–139.

⁶ Aristotle attempts to thwart potential objectors to his theory of knowledge by explaining how the mind's intellectual consciousness forms a connection to an object's essence. Humans have knowledge when sensory consciousness and matter have the same form. Humans have understanding when intellectual consciousness is doing the same thing as the observed object's essence, which also creates insight. Since humans can think and understand, they are intellectually organized matter and can, therefore, perceive with intelligence. Induction is the point at which the principle of control shifts from imaging to meaning, wherein concepts become mental duplicates of essences.

⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, Ch. 7.

⁸ Aristotle, in searching for that which is peculiar to man, excludes (1) a life of nutrition and growth, since it is common to even plants, and (2) a life of perception, since it is common to even sentient animals. Humans are intelligent and have the capacity to understand. He thus concludes that man has an active life of rationality. Aristotle explains, "if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle . . . human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue . . . in a complete life." *Id.*, Book I, Ch. 7.

⁹ Kant sets forth two goals, or ethical obligations, required by reason: *one's own perfection and the happiness of others*. First, that humans, out of respect for the ability to set up goals, develop the versatility to achieve these goals. Second, one's regard for humanity and one's self absolutely requires that one consider, at least tacitly, other people when deliberating. *Critique of Practical Reason*, 154–155.

¹⁰ *Posterior Analytics*, Bk. I, Ch. 31.

¹¹ *Id.*, Bk. II, Ch. 19.

¹² Aristotle's biological explanation of induction follows a hierarchical pattern: (1) agent is *aware* while contact acts upon it; (2) agent can retain a *trace* of contact after it is over; (3) agent can *systemize* traces, the beginning of memory; (4) agent has capacity to *selectively recall* traces, or memories; (5) agent can set up *comparisons*, thus producing larger classifications and similarities and more general images; and (6) only at the human level, *induction*, a quantum leap of control from image to concept. *Id.* See also, *Metaphysics*, Bk. I, Ch. 1.

¹³ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VI, Ch. 11.

¹⁴ *Id.*, Bk. IX, Ch. 3.

¹⁵ *Id.*, Bk. VIII, Ch. 3.

¹⁶ *Id.*, Ch. 8.

¹⁷ *Critique of Practical Reason*, 76–79.

¹⁸ *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 24–25.

¹⁹ *Politics*, Bk. I, Ch. 2.

²⁰ *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 218.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VI, Ch. 10. Emphasis added.

²³ *Id.*, Ch. 11.

²⁴ Sympathy is *free* and based on practical reason.

Compassion is *unfree* and spreads among humans in proximity to one another. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 204–205.

²⁵ *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 30.

²⁶ *Critique of Practical Reason*, 28–29.

²⁷ The categorical imperative is how a moral quality enters the decision-making process. According to Kant's practical principle, there are two subsets, maxims and imperatives. Maxims are psychological, subjective bases underlying a decision, which can be pathological or insightful. *Pathological maxims* are feeling-based and can be expressed by "I want." The morality is nullified in such decisions because they always involve the causal influence of something on the agent. *Insightful maxims* are reason-based and can be expressed by "I ought." These are based in morality because reasons are not causal. Thus, when someone makes a decision, it is at the intersection of two fields of force: a *posteriori* incentives (causal, or "I want," factors) and a *priori* principles (insight into what makes sense). The second subset, imperatives, involves an element of "ought" and is contained within some reason. Imperatives can be conditional or categorical. *Conditional imperatives* apply to hypothetical situations for a matter of interest followed by a matter of logic, as can be expressed by an "if . . . then" statement, thus it is insight coupled with an interest. *Categorical imperatives* express an "ought" without a reason, or an "if," and are absolute. Kant's categorical imperative to be reasonable involves three components in making a moral decision: (a) *intelligence* (sense/nonsense): being able to see the difference between making sense and not making sense, or thinking before making a decision in order to weigh one's options; (b) *consciousness of necessity*: the mind cannot be aware of the difference between making sense and not making sense without also being conscious that the final decision ought to make sense, thus the thinking process is driven by the knowledge that decisions ought to make sense; and (c) *moral motive* (respecting the importance of being reasonable and containing a universalizing thought): constructing reasonable justification for certain decisions where reason shows how it is objective and makes sense, which

is crucial in making a moral decision because it holds objectivity and reasonableness.

- ²⁸ The absolute reasonableness of a decision is that it is totally free of any distorting personal interests and is, consequently, completely objective. The formula that captures the justification of a decision to make it universally valid, justifying that freedom should be used in a certain way, is that everyone ought to make the same decision in the same situation. The absence of interest is a negative but reliable measure of objectivity for Kant. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 14.
- ²⁹ Aristotle writes, “the work of man is achieved only in accordance with practical wisdom as well as with moral virtue; for virtue makes us aim at the right mark, and practical wisdom makes us take the right means.” *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VI, Ch. 12.
- ³⁰ *Id.*, Bk. III, Ch. 10.
- ³¹ *Id.*, Ch. 11.
- ³² Humans desire a particular end and voluntarily deliberate about and choose actions concerning means, thus the exercise of virtue and vice is in one’s power. Aristotle continues, “Men make themselves responsible for being unjust or self-indulgent.” *Id.*, Ch. 5. But Aristotle does not claim that self-indulgence *itself* is a voluntary state. He writes, “For the self-indulgent man . . . the particular acts are voluntary (for he does them with craving and desire), but the whole state is less so; for no one craves to be self-indulgent.” *Id.*, Ch. 12.
- ³³ *Id.*, Ch. 5.
- ³⁴ *Id.*
- ³⁵ *Id.*, Ch. 11.
- ³⁶ In a section regarding the manner in which one should attempt to cultivate virtue, Kant explains, “To form a habit is to establish a lasting inclination apart from any maxim, through frequently repeated gratifications of that inclination; it is a mechanism of sense rather than a principle of thought (and one that is easier to acquire than to get rid of afterwards.” *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 223.
- ³⁷ *Id.*, 225.
- ³⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. IX, Ch. 4. Emphasis added.
- ³⁹ *Id.*
- ⁴⁰ *Critique of Practical Reason*, 131–132.
- ⁴¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. IX, Ch. 4.
- ⁴² *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 215.
- ⁴³ Aristotle writes, “If (1) happiness lies in living and being active, and the good man’s activity is the virtuous and the pleasant, . . . and (2) a thing’s being one’s own is one of the attributes that make it pleasant, and (3) we can contemplate our neighbors better than ourselves and their actions better than our own, and if the actions of

virtuous men who are their friends and pleasant to good men . . . the supremely happy man will need friends of this sort, since his purpose is to contemplate worthy actions and actions that are his own, and the actions of a good man who is his friend have both these qualities.” *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. IX, Ch. 9.

⁴⁴ *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 215.

⁴⁵ *Critique of Practical Reason*, 78.

⁴⁶ *Id.*, 79.

⁴⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. III, Ch. 5.

⁴⁸ *Critique of Practical Reason*, 29.

⁴⁹ *Id.*, 33.

⁵⁰ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. X, Ch. 8.

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² *Id.*, Bk. VI, Ch. 5.

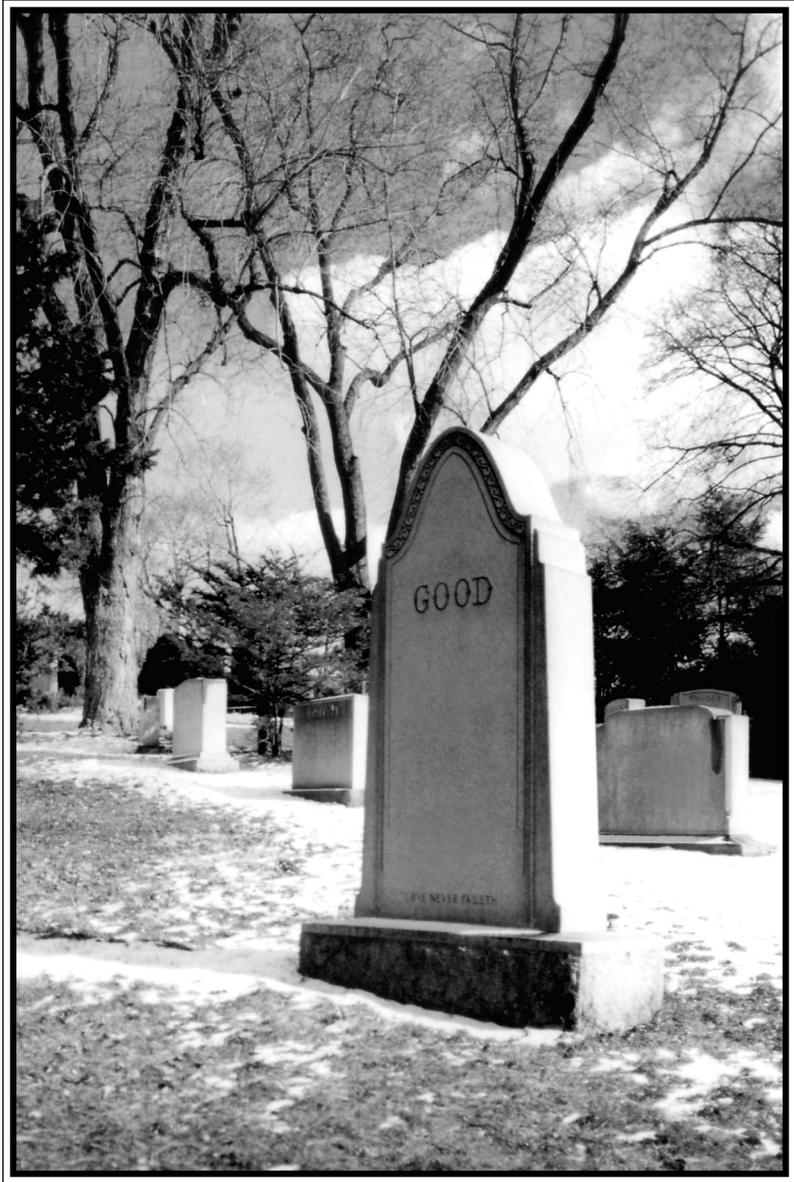
⁵³ In describing the good man’s relation to himself, Aristotle writes, “his opinions are harmonious, and he desires the same things with all his soul; and therefore he wishes for himself what is good and what seems so, and does it (for it is characteristic of the good man to work out the good), and does so for his own sake (for he does it for the sake of the intellectual element in him, which is thought to be the man himself); and he wishes himself to live and be preserved, and especially the element by virtue of which he thinks. For existence is good to the virtuous man, and each man wishes himself what is good, while no one chooses to possess the whole world if he has first to become someone else . . . he wishes for this only on condition of being whatever he is.” *Id.*, Bk. IX, Ch. 4.

⁵⁴ *Id.*, Bk. X, Ch. 7.

⁵⁵ *Id.*

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a philosophical argument for
Meme(tic)s

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THE GREATEST IMPACT OF Darwinism was arguably its offer of a plausible account of the natural emergence of life. For the first time it became possible to fully describe how complex, efficient organisms could arise from their simpler ancestors without requiring the postulation of an intelligent creator. This dramatic shift in perspective caused a reevaluation of the assumptions of many fields of inquiry, including psychology, sociology, and philosophy. Currently, the majority of academics and intellectuals accept that man is not a perfect organism produced by a divine intelligence, but rather, the product of a natural process of slow, systematic change.

There is, however, one area in which such a shift in perspective did not occur: our relationship to our own thoughts. Just as we once observed the complexity and efficiency of life and concluded that it could only be the work of a sentient creator, we presently assume that human thought is the product of an intelligent design: our own. Despite the wide currency of the Darwinian perspective, the notion of ourselves as the intelligent designers of our thoughts still lies at the root of our self-definition. Considering the enormous advances in scientific knowledge that followed the rise of Darwinism, it would be worthwhile to question the role of man as intelligent designer as best we can.

In the clearest possible terms, immediate experience reveals to us that we are the authors of our thoughts, or at the very least the arbiters of them — we experience such authorship when we think creatively, and arbitration when we choose to ponder one idea instead of another. I am writing this essay, and thus I am the creator of the ideas within it. You are reading this essay, and, presumably, intelligently deciding whether or not you will accept the ideas presented. In the face of such overwhelming evidence, we are left with little choice but to conclude that our thoughts are the spontaneous, deliberate products of our free-willing minds.

We consider ourselves unique and anomalous in this respect. Our newfound evolutionary perspective has allowed us to ascribe a sort of mindlessness onto the whole of nature apart from ourselves, describing it as the product of a blind mechanical process, devoid of the intelligence, creative power, and deliberative faculty that we alone possess. When confronted with the embarrassment of a computer with calculative capabilities exceeding our own (at chess, say), our immediate defense is that machines cannot think creatively, critically, intentionally, or reflexively. We believe ourselves to have entirely unique and incredibly anomalous powers, the possession and use of which frees us — somehow, in some way — from the laws that govern the rest of the universe. Just as Creationism was unshakable before Darwinism, we have never been able to escape this conclusion, for no other has been consistent with the evidence available, and no new tool analogous to the theory of evolution has been offered.

The meme, a recent invention of evolutionary theory, seems a likely candidate. Though its scientific validity has been in question since its proposal, there is a substantial philosophical case for memetics which has yet to be made, and its potential philosophical ramifications are significant.

The first section of this essay briefly describes the theory of memetics, and rebuts a few of the immediate arguments against it. The second contains a philosophical argument for the theory. The third is an examination of the philosophical implications of memetics, particularly focusing on the similarity between the pragmatic and memetic perspectives. The lesser goal is to provide a philosophical account of memetics, and the greater is to make a convincing case for memetics as an object worthy of further philosophical consideration and investigation.

I: THE THEORY OF MEMETICS

Broadly defined, a meme is a “unit of culture”—a phrase, a way of dressing, an idea, and so forth—which behaves like a gene. Proposed by the evolutionary theorist Richard Dawkins in a speculative afterthought to *The Selfish Gene*,¹ the idea was initially slow to catch on. Recently, however, its adoption by a number of prominent authors — most notably Daniel Dennett² and Susan Blackmore³ — has rekindled interest in the meme, and a small community of scholars has sprung up around the idea, publishing articles, a dedicated online journal⁴ and a flurry of books, both popular and academic.⁵ Work on the subject has been rather insular, however, and as this paper has the general philosophical public as its intended audience, I will quickly paraphrase the foundations of the idea before making my argument for it.

A gene can be usefully defined as a high-fidelity biological replicator, i.e., any portion of a chromosome that can pass an intact copy of itself on to the next generation.⁶ By determining the phenotype of an organism, a gene can influence that organism’s chances of reproducing, and therefore its own. A gene becomes prevalent in a population only by producing more copies of itself than its competitors.

Like a gene, a meme is a replicator; it is a “unit of culture” which is able to reproduce itself with a high degree of fidelity. Where the gene proliferates through the population of organisms it inhabits, the meme’s environment is the human mind, and it reproduces by transmitting itself from one mind to another. The degree to which a meme will become widespread in a population of minds is therefore dependent on its reproductive fitness, which in turn is determined by its influence on the minds that it inhabits.

¹ Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford University Press, 1976. Hereafter: *Selfish Gene*.

² Dennett, Daniel. “Memes and the Exploitation of Imagination.” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 48(2):127135, 1990.

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³ Blackmore, Susan. *The Meme Machine*. Oxford University Press, 1999. Hereafter: *Meme Machine*.

⁴ The Journal of Memetics – Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission; <http://jom-emit.cfpm.org/>

⁵ In his essay “Taking Memetics Seriously” (Hull, David. “Taking Memetics Seriously.” *Aunger 2001*: 43-57, 2001.), David Hull attempts to date the beginning of serious study of memetics: “My intuitive guess is that memetics as an active research program is quite new, no older than a dozen years. During this period numerous workers from a variety of backgrounds have devoted themselves to expanding on the notion of memetic evolution – and no higher standard than voting with one’s career exists in science.”

⁶ *Selfish Gene*, p. 28.

Since resources are limited, genes which are good at replicating themselves will survive, and those which are not will become extinct. The maximization of reproductive potential over its lifespan is therefore the only measure of success for a gene, and we should assume that a gene continues to exist solely because it is a good replicator. To use Dawkins' famous anthropomorphization, genes must be "selfish" — if they are to survive, their only "goal" must be to maximize their own reproductive potential.

Chain letters are an excellent example of memes at work:⁷ they are highly prolific because they have hit on a way of hijacking human minds with an instruction set which ensures their own reproduction. Furthermore, since each "child" carries the same set of instructions, it is just as capable of reproduction as its parent.⁸ The chain letter is widespread simply because of its reproductive potential — in fact, it is so perfectly designed for reproduction that it is difficult to imagine it failing. Despite this, however, a chain letter has no other redeeming qualities. It contains no truth, and does no good to anyone, including its originator; it is reproduced because it can be, and nothing more. Like a gene, a meme such as a chain letter must be "selfish," concerned only with its own reproductive potential, and completely blind to qualities such as truth or value.

This example is typical of the "weak" claim of memetics, in which the meme is described as a virus, parasitizing our otherwise reasonable minds for its own ends.⁹ This makes for riveting reading, but as long as we are only talking about one meme at a time, as long as we have no broader context, it can be little more than an interesting narrative — a description, not an explanation. The weak claim is not very hard to swallow, but neither is it very interesting, at least as philosophers use that word.

By contrast, the strong claim¹⁰ of memetics is both dubious and fascinating. The weak claim states, “Some ideas are memes, and act similarly to biological replicators.” The strong claim concurs, and expands the assertion to, “*All* ideas are memes, and they *are* replicators.” Dan Sperber, a cultural evolutionist and prominent critic of memetics, describes the potential impact of the strong claim as follows:

Once the general idea of a meme is understood — and especially if it is understood fairly loosely — it is all too easy to see human social life as teeming with memes. More generally, aren't words, songs, fashions, political ideas... and just about everything cultural, items that get copied again and again, with the more successful items managing to invade more minds over longer periods of historical time, and to recruit those minds to further their own propagation? If this were so, if culture were made of memes in Dawkins' strong sense, then the study of culture could — and arguably should — be recast as a science of memes or 'memetics.' The Darwinian model of selection could be used, with proper adjustments, to explain the properties, the variety and the evolution of culture, just as it explains the properties, the variety, and the evolution of life.¹¹

In the strong claim (which I will refer to simply as “memetics” from here on), the sum total of all memes (that is, all of human culture) make up an evolutionary system, and undergo natural selection just as genes do. This is at the very least initially plausible because evolution as proposed by Darwin is *substrate neutral*: evolution will take place in any system in which the proper conditions are present, regardless of its composition. These conditions are variation, heredity, and differential fitness;¹² in other words, if the elements of a system have varying characteristics which are passed on through reproduction and which influence the success of reproduction, natural selection will take place. According to memetics, human culture is made up of such elements, and should therefore be considered an evolutionary system.

⁷ The chain letter is probably the least controversial canonical example of a meme; Dan Sperber has supported it (Sperber, Dan. “An Objection to the Memetics Approach to Culture.” Auger 2001: 163-173, 2001. pp. 163-164. Hereafter: Sperber.) and it is one of the few memes that it is open to mathematical analysis. The interested (and the skeptical) will find an excellent statistical analysis of chain letter mutations at <http://www.silcom.com/~barnowl/chain-letter/evolution.html>, as well as an extensive bibliography.

⁸ There can, of course, be errors such as word substitution in the reproduction process, but as long as the letter still instructs its recipient to «copy me!» with sufficient strength, the letter will continue to reproduce, albeit with a new mutation that distinguishes it from other lines of descent. See the Internet address referred to in note 3 for more information.

⁹ Dawkins, Richard. “Viruses of the Mind.” *Dennett and His Critics: Demystifying Mind*. Ed. Bo Dahlbom. Blackwell Publishers, 1995.

¹⁰ The distinction between the weak and strong claims is adapted from Sperber, p. 164.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Dangerous*, p. 343.

Despite its initial plausibility, the validity of the theory has been vigorously debated in recent years, and has not gained even remotely wide acceptance in the academic community. Even a cursory survey of the published literature diagnoses the problem: those who aren't immediately fascinated by the theory haven't been giving a compelling reason to accept it. Most such objections come from scientists, and not without reason: even among those working in the field there seems to be little consensus on its finer qualities, or the boundaries of its application. An evolutionary biologist considering memetics might naturally wish to conduct a statistical analysis of the propagation of a meme within a population, but will likely become discouraged upon discovering that there are no standard units of measurement, no means of data collection, and most damningly, no real agreement on which elements of culture or behavior should and should not be considered memes. Susan Blackmore, arguably the most prominent memeticist, has argued that memes are only those behaviors which are acquired through imitation,¹³ and the inclusion of her definition in the *Encyclopedia of Evolution*¹⁴ would give her the strength of authority, if it weren't for the fact that within the same reference volume Daniel Dennett defines memes as "packets of information" which are replicated, regardless of the behavioral means employed.¹⁵

Until these issues are resolved, the possibility of a science of memetics seems questionable. Dennett himself is pessimistic:

[Biological] species are invisible without a modicum of stasis, but remember, too, that this is an epistemological, not a metaphysical, point: if species weren't rather static, we couldn't *find out* and organize the facts needed to do certain kinds of science; that wouldn't show, however, that the phenomena weren't governed by natural selection. Similarly, the conclusion here would be a pessimistic *epistemological* conclusion: even if memes *do* originate by a process of "descent with modification," our chances of cranking out a science that charts that descent are slim.¹⁶

However, the implication of Dennett's pessimism is significant: despite the inherent difficulties to any phenomenal investigation of memes, we don't need to throw out the metaphysical possibility of a science along with the epistemological. Scientists are unlikely to investigate memetics without the latter, but philosophers are subject to no such constraints, and the lack of empirical evidence in favor of memetics will not invalidate a philosophical argument for it.

There is one more argument of this type that must be laid to rest. We have noted above that memetics is possible because Darwinian evolution is substrate neutral — but we still must offer some account of what this substrate might be. The simple answer is that memes are electro-chemically encoded in the neural network of the brain, and it typically elicits a simple counterargument: in that case, mustn't every instance of a meme be accompanied by an identical brain structure? It must be conceded that this is unlikely, but this admission does not mean that the meme cannot truly exist. Dennett responds to this argument by noting that a meme no more needs to be reduced to its substrate than a gene does — the latter, like the former, is made up of transcribable information physically encoded.¹⁷ He concludes,

Those who question whether memes exist because they cannot see what material thing a meme could be should ask themselves if they are equally dubious about whether words exist. The word *cat* isn't made out of some of the ink on this page, and a recipe for chocolate cake isn't made out of flour and chocolate.¹⁸

If the lack of an identifiable and universal substrate were a legitimate criteria for the falsification of a theory, we would have to reject far more fields than memetics (cognitive psychology, for one, since it is the study of the functional properties of the mind and brain, abstracted from physical particulars). Work in philosophy of language would suffer equally, insofar as it would be necessary to locate a universal brain structure corresponding to “words” before discussion could even begin. Likewise, we should not deny ourselves the opportunity to examine memetics philosophically simply because we cannot precisely identify a universal brain structure which encompasses every meme.

¹³ *Meme Machine*.

Blackmore, Susan. (1998.) «Imitation and the Definition of a Meme,» *Journal of Memetics – Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission*: 2 (1998). http://jom-emit.cfpm.org/1998/vol2/blackmore_s.html.

¹⁴ Blackmore, Susan. (2002.) Entry for «meme.» *Encyclopedia of Evolution*, 2002.

¹⁵ Dennett, Daniel. (2002.) «The New Replicators.» *The Encyclopedia of Evolution*, 2002.

¹⁶ *Dangerous*, pp. 355-6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

II: THE ARGUMENT FOR MEMETICS

First, a note about terminology: I have chosen terms which are easily understood, but must qualify my usage of them. The word “idea” in the following argument can be read in the common sense of the word; examples might be democracy, racism, the wheel, solipsism or the belief that aliens abducted Elvis. This interpretation will provide the reader with a more or less accurate model of the processes I describe. However, taken broadly my definition should encompass anything that is included in “culture” — a category which is not limited to those mental objects we commonly call “ideas.” For example, the tendency to pronounce the word ‘nuclear’ as ‘NOOK-yuh-ler’ is certainly cultural, and therefore falls under what I will be calling “ideas.” By ‘acceptance,’ I mean the process by which an idea in the broader sense becomes internalized by the mind it has been presented to, and therefore capable of further reproduction, whether or not a conscious decision making process took place. If a mind has accepted an idea in this fashion, I will describe it as “holding” that idea.

To begin with, what problem are we trying to solve? If we look back on history, it is obvious that cultures change, or ‘evolve’ in the loose sense of the word — certain ideas become popular, while others fall out of favor. The question we must set for ourselves is, “*Why and by what means* does this change take place?” We are therefore looking for

place within cultures over the course of decades or centuries, but also the minuscule cultural changes that occur every time an individual accepts or rejects an idea. There are a multitude of possible explanations for these phenomena, including those offered by cultural evolutionists, anthropologists, and historians, but the feature that distinguishes memetics from these alternatives is that *ideas are considered selfish replicators, which exist only because they are able to propagate themselves*, and we should rightfully call any theory of culture which makes such a claim to be memetic. Finally, we are making a philosophical investigation, so we should start from a few stable premises and explore their implications. A likely way to begin, therefore, should be a constraint on the types of theories of cultural change we may propose:

P1: *Any plausible theory of cultural change must be consistent with the findings of science generally, and the theory of evolution by natural selection specifically.*¹⁹

For many readers, this point will not require debate. As noted above, the theory of evolution is so well established, having been confirmed countless times over, that anyone who accepts the epistemological validity of science and its methods as a whole is almost immediately bound to agree with it. It therefore serves excellently as the logical foundation for our argument.

Of course, there are numerous philosophical stances which would negate the truth value of science, and thus of evolution, and these must be dealt with if the argument is to have any power. The conceptual space of philosophy is so fragmented and so various, however, that it would be impossible to refute each of these positions, among them skepticism, solipsism, theism, et al, individually. In general, however, we should note that all of these are extreme epistemological positions: the skeptic must maintain that effect and cause are not contingent upon one another, though science has made great advances based on that very assumption; the theist must first provide an argument for his faith, a historically doomed venture. The evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of the scientific method's efficacy — or, more specifically, the efficacy of taking the scientific method to be true — and if there is a reasonable argument that shows we would be better off if we did *not* take it to be true, the burden of proof is on the dissenter.

For now, we must take the findings of science, and specifically the theory of evolution, to be true, for otherwise we must reject them all together, which seems to me a far worse result than anything memetics could produce.

P₂: *As constrained in P₁, a theory of cultural change must consider human behavior to be the product of evolution, and accordingly a physical brain process. Since the decision to accept or reject an idea is a type of behavior, we should consider acceptance and rejection to be physical events, and thus subject to the same causal laws as all physical events.*

P₃: *Since they interact causally with human behavior, ideas should be considered physical objects—that is, either identical with or supervenient to a physical substrate in the brain—and therefore subject to causal laws.*

¹⁹ In the forward to *Aunger*, Daniel Dennett suggests the same constraint: “It is obvious that there are patterns of cultural change—evolution in the neutral sense—and any theory of cultural change worth more than a moment’s consideration will have to be Darwinian in the minimal sense of being *consistent with* the theory of evolution by natural selection of *Homo sapiens*. The demands of this minimal Darwinism are far from trivial, and the ferocity with which Darwinian accounts of the evolution of language and sociality are attacked by some critics form the humanities and social sciences show that in some influential quarters, mere consistency with evolutionary theory is not yet the accepted constraint it ought to be.” (Dennett, Daniel; Introduction to *Darwinizing Culture*.)

These two points will be the most difficult in the argument, because their plausibility is dependent on the specific position one takes within the philosophy of mind. Many readers may find the above statements dubious, because they seem to presuppose the existence of psychophysical laws; for philosophers, the demand for consistency with evolution is not enough to assuage doubt. The conflict is an old one. Donald Davidson suggests that it stems from an apparent contradiction between the following three principles:

The first principle asserts that at least some mental events interact casually with physical events. [...] if a man perceives that a ship is approaching, then a ship approaching must have caused him to come believe that a ship is approaching. [...]

The second principle is that where there is causality, there must be a law: events related as cause and effect fall under strict deterministic laws. [...]

The third principle is that there are no strict deterministic laws on the basis of which mental events can be predicted and explained.²⁰

The third principle, which is widely accepted, seems to contradict P2 and P3, which depend on human behavior obeying nomological causality. However, if the possible dissenting positions are divided according to Davidson's model (materialism, epiphenomenalism, Cartesian dualism, and anomalous monism), it becomes clear that the difficulty is far less than it first seemed. The materialist is unlikely to disagree with either statement, since he believes all mental events to be physical events, and thus nomological (rejecting Davidson's third principle); while the epiphenomenalist won't be troubled by them, for though he considers mental events anomalous, for him they have no causal efficacy on the physical events which produce them — the physical events are therefore doing all the work of behavior-production, and are free to behave as nomologically as they like. Out of the two positions which would take exception,

the first is Cartesian dualism, which maintains that the mental is separate from the physical and yet has causal efficacy over it. This is the less difficult of the two: dualism is so inconsistent with the theory of evolution that the two are mutually incompatible, and the position has been so thoroughly discredited by now that it is difficult to imagine a proper rebuttal being made from it. As before, the burden of proof lies with the dualist — for now, we will move on.

The final position is anomalous monism, Davidson's own stance, which, as the name suggests, claims that all mental events are physical events, while denying that mental events follow strict causal laws.²¹ The relationship between the mental and the physical is therefore one of supervenience, or dependence without reducibility:

Such supervenience might be taken to mean that there cannot be two events alike in all physical respects but differing in some mental respect, or that an object cannot alter in some mental respect without altering in some physical respect.²²

To say that mental events are supervenient on physical events thus allows us to identify a decision or an idea with a brain process or state without requiring us to “explain them away” by reducing them completely to physical events, just as we would like to say that a particularly moving painting is identical with the pigments spread on the canvas, but reject the idea that the emotional power of the image is “nothing but” the properties of the paint. This is an identity theory which allows for emergent properties: in short, it describes how the mental may be “something more” than the physical and yet ultimately stem from it. Under anomalous monism we can therefore talk about how mental events and states must be dependent on the causal relations between physical objects and states, *despite* the fact that

²⁰ Davidson, Donald. “Mental Events.” *Experience and Theory*, ed. I. Foster and W. Swanson. University of Massachusetts Press. 1970.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

... even if someone knew the entire physical history of the world, and every mental event were identical with a physical, it would not follow that he could predict or explain a single mental event.²³

For those who cannot agree with materialism, therefore, anomalous monism will provide the necessary support for the claim made in P2, albeit in slightly modified form: insofar as we consider acceptance and rejection of ideas to *supervene on* physical events, we can consider them to act causally, for though they do not obey strict causal laws, their existence is dependent upon the physical events with which they are identical, and since the latter must obey causal laws, for our purposes we may treat the former as though they do as well. The simplest way to do this is to eliminate the mental from the discussion altogether — if we can say confidently that any event affecting behavior must be physical insofar as it does so, and thus must be subject to nomological causality. The impossibility of predicting or describing the character of the accompanying *mental* event therefore becomes moot, because it does not alter the description of the behaviors of acceptance and rejection, which are all that we are concerning ourselves with.

P4: *Following P2 and P3, for any individual S and any idea T, whether S will accept or not accept T is dependent on the properties of and interactions between S and T including: the other ideas that S holds (U, and the predispositions of S to accepted one type of idea over another (V); the properties of T (such as its ease of communication); the interactions between U, V and T; the manner in which T is introduced to S, etc. This holds true of the other activities of ideas, including transmission; S will transmit T to other individuals according to all these properties.*

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*i**b**i**d*

What this means, in essence, is that we will believe or not believe the ideas presented to us according to the properties of the entire system which includes S, T, U and V, and that *if the properties of the system remain constant the same result will occur every time*. This claim is consistent with both materialism and anomalous monism as presented by Davidson.

To sketch a highly simplified example: the idea of Creationism is presented to Jones. Among the ideas Jones currently holds are those of Darwinism and the scientific method, and he is predisposed to think empirically. Jones is therefore highly unlikely to accept Creationism, because (a) he already holds the idea of Darwinism — the two ideas conflict, and (b) as a result of his predisposition towards empiricism and the already held idea of scientific method, Jones' criteria for acceptable ideas demand that they be empirically verifiable. Were these preconditions not present, Jones might indeed find Creationism acceptable. Indeed, Creationism has been hugely prolific throughout history as a result of properties which make it plausible and speed its proliferation in the right contexts.

phenomenal experience, and that he finds it unpleasant to have an experience which is unaccounted for by any idea, it is easy to see how the idea of himself as “prime mover” might be acceptable to Jones despite its conflict with the idea of evolution. This idea has indeed become relatively widespread, and it has done so by exploiting the predispositions of human minds to accept one idea over another. Here we have an example of an idea being transmitted and held, regardless of its seeming conflict with widely-held ideas, as a result of the interaction of its own properties with the properties of its targets. This brings us to our last point:

There is another subtlety of this conclusion to point out, one to which the example can be extended. Is it possible that Jones could accept an idea which comes into conflict with those he currently holds? The answer is ‘yes,’ if the conditions allow it. Take for example the idea of the human mind as a “prime mover,” which is certainly in conflict with evolution. If we add to the conditions outlined above that Jones is highly predisposed to accept any idea which accounts for and is supported by his immediate

P5: *Following P4, all other things being equal, an idea will be transmitted often and held widely as a result of its own inherent properties. An idea which is “good” at being transmitted and accepted will be transmitted and accepted more often, and thus will be more prevalent within a population.*

As should be clear by now, this conclusion is the primary tenant of memetics, the feature that distinguishes it from competing models of cultural change. Ideas do not proliferate and persist because they are true, or even because we deem them true; rather, they do so because they are *good at traveling* and *good at being accepted*. This is precisely the third property required of an evolutionary system, as well as the feature that distinguishes memetics from competing theories of culture. As for the first two properties, ideas certainly exhibit variation; and what is communication, if not the replication of ideas? Taken as a whole, therefore, human thought — the sum total of every idea in every human mind — should therefore be considered an evolutionary system, in which ideas compete with one another for dominance. The eventual products of such a system are equivalent to those of genetic evolution: due to the influence of natural selection, only those ideas which are best at replicating will survive. We should therefore assume that any idea which continues to exist does so solely because it has done a good job of exploiting its environment — our minds — for its own replication. Every idea is, therefore, a meme.

²⁴ James, William. "What Pragmatism Means." Lecture 2 in *Pragmatism*. Longman Green and Co. 1907: 17-32.

Hereafter: *What Pragmatism Means*

— "Pragmatism and Common Sense". Lecture 5 in *Pragmatism*. Longman Green and Co. 1907: 63-75.

— "Pragmatism and Humanism". Lecture 7 in *Pragmatism*. Longman Green and Co. 1907: 92- 104.

— "The Will to Believe." *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. New York: Dover Publications, 1956.

²⁵ *What Pragmatism Means*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

III: MEMETICS AND PHILOSOPHY.

The broad strokes of the philosophical impact of memetics should now be clear: as a conceptual framework, it is a way of looking at ideas which is at odds with most of Western philosophy. But there is more work to do: to firmly root memetics as a valid philosophical stance, its relevance to traditional philosophical subjects needs to be demonstrated, and some of the specific positions that such a stance might entail require a preliminary examination. In the interest of space I will limit myself to the strongest example I have found: the striking similarity between the theories of truth provided by memetics and the pragmatic philosophy of William James.

One of James' most notable characteristics as a philosopher is his remarkable ability to account for the way people actually behave when working with ideas. Even more striking is the degree to which such these accounts often sound like the work of a memeticist; in fact, examples of this similarity are so numerous²⁴ that I feel our purpose would be better served by quoting one long passage rather than many short ones:

Schiller and Dewey particularly singled out for generalization is the familiar one by which any individual settles into *new opinions*. The process here is always the same. The individual has a stock of old opinion already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much of it as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives. So he tries to change first this opinion, and then that (for they resist change very variously), until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter, some idea that mediates between the stock and the new experience and runs them into one another most felicitously and expeditiously.²⁵

Here James' work clearly supports the memetic narrative concerning the way in which one idea is accepted over another — the idea which succeeds is that which makes the best fit within the available environment. It also accurately describes a phenomenon that hasn't yet entered our discussion: in an evolutionary system it is likely that any available environmental niche will be filled, assuming that the variation and quantity of its elements is sufficient. Likewise,

if conditions in a mind are such that a certain idea will be much more acceptable there than any other, that idea will inevitably arise there, by virtue of natural selection. This phenomenon becomes especially important when applied to James' following comments on the nature of truth:

This new idea is then adopted as the true one. It preserves the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification, stretching them just enough to make them admit the novelty, but conceiving that in ways as familiar as the case leaves possible. An *outré* explanation, violating all our preconceptions, would never pass for a true account of a novelty... The most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs leave most of his old order standing. New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as to ever show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity. We hold a theory true just in proportion to its success in solving this 'problem of maxima and minima.'

... Purely objective truth, truth in whose establishment the function of giving human satisfaction in marrying previous parts of experience with newer parts played no role whatever, is nowhere to be found. The reasons why we call things true is the reason why they *are* true, for 'to be true' *means* only to perform this marriage-function.²⁶

James considers true beliefs to be nothing more than those which are *useful* to us — here he is simply describing a special case of that theory, in which an idea is considered true because it effectively resolves our “inward trouble,” proving itself useful. The last sentence makes his meaning quite clear: such an idea is not simply *called* true, but *is* true, because this is the only sense in which truth has any meaning.

It should be clear that this is the only “truth” which a meme could be said to possess. After all, epistemological truth has no survival value whatsoever for a meme, and memetics is therefore entirely neutral on the subject of truth-value. Of course, an idea which could be verified by the correspondence theory of truth (for example) might be more successful among those who held that theory than another meme, but this proves nothing about either the idea or the theory — after all, an idea which is a lie is likely to be successful among those who accept all lies. From “the meme’s-eye view,” truth and falsity are simply two more selectable characteristics among a vast multitude of alternatives.

The closest the meme has to a measure of worth is its fitness — in other words, how good it is at getting itself accepted into an environment. And insofar as that environment is composed of other ideas, James gives a perfect description of what a meme must do in order to be successful: the other memes residing in environment are probably already quite well entrenched, and would be well-defended against any outsider which tried to usurp them; the successful candidate meme will as a general rule be the one which is able to take up residence while causing the least disturbance. As both James and memetics predict, the idea which best “solves the problem of maxima and minima” is the only one that we will accept. In memetics, as in pragmatism, acceptability might as well be our criterion for truth, as we have no other means by which to judge ideas.

What's more, though we can identify traits which will benefit every meme which possesses them, such as the ability to enter a mind with a minimum of disturbance, it is unlikely that a single meme would possess these traits in relation to *every* mind. As noted above, the idea of Creationism is unlikely to have a high level of fitness within the mind of an evolutionary biologist, regardless of the inherent properties which may make it a good meme. (This mirrors James' own work in *The Will to Believe*, in which he writes of the distinction between "live and dead hypotheses.") This means that memetic truth must be ultimately contextual, for each meme will have a different fitness level, and thus a different truth value, depending on the environment it is found in. This is, of course, consistent with the contextuality present in James' own pragmatic theory of truth.

From this rough sketch we can begin to see how a memeticist-philosopher might begin to think about the traditional problems of philosophy. Specifically, he will probably be inclined to take the pragmatic view of truth as being dependent on efficacy and causality. This, of course, can only be a start, but hopefully it will serve as an indicator to other philosophers that the memetic approach is worth investigating and pursuing. As I have shown, memetics is that strange animal, a scientific theory with both a philosophical justification and philosophical implications. We know we shouldn't ignore it, but how do we deal with it? Philosophers will require much more in order to believe memetics valid, but now memetics may have its foot in the door – and with enough exposure, it should get the fair chance to prove itself, fit or unfit, that every meme deserves.



Hegel and the Pathway of Despair

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Through a mesh of abstruse terminology, frenzied prose and a text constructed with apparent disorder, Hegel's overarching scheme in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* seems *prima facie* to neglect the singular existing individual and subsume it in the "world-spirit." Hyppolite even asks whether "it is possible...Hegel had not forgotten his own existential nature, for it disappears with his system."¹ However, in chapter 4 of this work Hegel illuminates within the context of his progressive system the disparity between self and other, Being and Non-being, and Universal and Particular.

It is from this chapter, which culminates in the so-called "Unhappy Consciousness," that we can

extract a picture of Hegel's stance on individual existence itself. Our task is to follow Hegel's path of consciousness from the emergence of self-consciousness to its eventual dialectical limit before progressing to Reason in the Unhappy Consciousness.

This path is of one of despair and negation. Indeed, Hegel sees a spiral of anxiety as a necessary function of consciousness' realization. In becoming something other than it believes itself to be, i.e. in showing itself to be an untruth, consciousness loses its sense of self and thus its security. Hegel remarks: "The road can therefore be regarded as the pathway of *doubt*, or more precisely as the way of despair."² Hegel tells us that this progression to 'the standpoint of Science' is one of necessity and that its goal, the correspondence of subject and object, is a fixed one of knowledge no longer needing to go beyond itself.

In our present task we will not see this realization of consciousness, as that lies far beyond the discussion of the Unhappy Consciousness. We will instead witness the necessary negation that consciousness must impose upon itself to elevate itself. This negation is a violent one; it must be if consciousness is to recognize its incompleteness. Furthermore, "consciousness suffers this violence at its own hands: it spoils its own limited satisfaction."³ Hegel warns against the possibility of retreat and denial when consciousness acknowledges its own untruth:

When consciousness feels this violence, its anxiety may well make it retreat from the truth, and strive to hold on to what it is in danger of losing. But it can find no peace. If it wishes to remain in a state of unthinking inertia, then the thought troubles its thoughtlessness, and its own unrest disturbs its inertia.⁴

Thus, we are faced with a consciousness that acknowledges its incomplete nature and hence

¹ Hyppolite, J. *Studies on Marx and Hegel*
Ed & Trans: O'Neill, J. (Basic Books,
1969), p. 22.

² Hegel, G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*,
Trans: Miller, A.V.

(Oxford University
Press, 1979), p. 78.
Hereafter: *PS*.

³ *PS*, 80.

⁴ *Ibid*.

the distance between it-self and the ideal (Notion) it strives to claim. This split between the I and the Non- I (The Nothing) will underlie our exposition of Hegel's pathway of despair.

Before the arrival of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1807, Western philosophy's concept of the self had to a large extent been viewed as either an illusive postulate (i.e. Hume), or contrariwise, an entity capable of existing in-itself (i.e. Descartes' *Cogito* and Leibniz's self-sufficient Monads). With Hegel the conviction in the self-sufficient autonomy of the self is radically shaken.

In the first section of Chapter 4 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, titled 'The Truth of Self-certainty,' Hegel argues that only in the experience of desire does consciousness come to know it-self as self-consciousness, as an I. Hegel, in contrast to the passive 'disinterestedness' prevalent in 19th century German aesthetics, arrives at this conclusion by purporting that in desiring something other than the self, consciousness becomes aware of the disparity between the I and the non-I. For instance, Schopenhauer's philosophy of the sublime is a state of union between subject and object; the subject is lost in the object when its volition is denied—its desires are annulled for there is no self to satisfy. Returning to Hegel, in everyday consciousness the self acknowledges the world at the moment it desires an object (i.e., something other than itself). The self sees it-self in a duality, on the one hand as subject and on the other hand as object, each simultaneously and interdependently. Kojève writes,

The man who contemplates is "absorbed" by what he contemplates; the "knowing subject" "loses" himself in the object that is known. Contemplation reveals the object, not the subject...the man who is "absorbed" can only be "brought back to himself" only by a Desire.⁵

⁵ Kojève, A. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* Trans: Nichols, J & Ed: Bloom, A & Assembled: Queneau, R. (Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 3. Hereafter: *LPS*.

However, the realization of self-consciousness does not emerge through the desire of an inanimate object alone; it must desire and in turn *negate* something of an equal status or otherwise its negation of the object would equate the self with that object.

⁶ *Phenomenology*, p. 178.

Self-certainty is recognition of the self in isolation. Consciousness senses objects, and even uses them, but it does not yet acknowledge itself as a self among many until other selves are recognized as such; otherwise it conceives a solipsism with only itself existing.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹¹ Sartre, J-P. *Being and Nothingness* Trans: Barnes, H. (Routledge, 1998). p. 236.

For self-consciousness to realize itself its desire must be directed towards an object that equates it with its own status. Accordingly, we move to the kernel of Hegel's concept of self:

Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged.⁶

Consciousness, then, is only rendered self-consciousness when it acknowledges or recognizes the other as its counterpart, and vice-versa: “*Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.*”⁷ The other is therefore never simply the isolated other; it entails the identity of the self. Hegel’s dialectic allows the opposites of self and other to co-exist and even presuppose one another, meaning that difference from self is imperative to selfhood. Solipsism, therefore, is annulled in the disclosure between self and other—in saying “I am I,” I exclude that which I am not, and that which I am not is, among other things, the other. Such an exclusion presupposes the very possibility of the other.

The realization of self-consciousness is therefore an intersubjective matter that necessarily involves the participation of the other. But this necessary participation of the other involves a tension: in being dependent upon something other than itself for its own certainty, consciousness strives to *negate* the other thus enforcing its sense of autonomous certainty.

Consciousness, in other words, “must proceed to supersede the other independent being in order thereby to become certain of itself as the essential being.”⁸

There is further cause for tension when we realize that the role of self-consciousness for self and other is the same—they both demand a negation of the other. According to Hegel, “Each sees the *other* do the same as it does; each does itself what it demands of the other, and therefore also does what it does only in so far as the other does the same.”⁹

“*The self sees it-self in a duality, on the one hand as subject and on the other hand as object, each simultaneously and interdependently.*”

Initially, then, an apparently asymmetrical dichotomy emerges between the *recognized* and the *recognizer*. Being-for-itself, that is, the immediate I, neglects to consider in this immediacy or naivety the otherness that is the non-I: “what is ‘other’ for it is an unessential, negatively characterized object.

But the ‘other’ is also a self-consciousness; one individual is confronted by another individual.”¹⁰

In his account of Hegel’s intersubjective philosophy, Sartre writes:

No external nothingness in-itself separates my consciousness for the Other’s consciousness; it is by the very fact of being me that I exclude the other.¹¹

Sartre is alluding to Husserl’s phenomenological theory of *intentionality*; i.e. that consciousness is always consciousness of *some*-thing as opposed to *no*-thing, but the emphasis is on the necessary elimination of otherness in being-for-itself.

But for the self to be certain it must *co-exist* with the other and this involves being recognized by the other; the idea must be transformed into truth by emerging as an objective reality, i.e. a reality that exists not only for the self but also for the other. Consciousness must recognize in itself its objective otherness in order to be realized as self-consciousness—it must see itself mirrored in the other to acquire objectivity:

[Consciousness] would have truth only if its own being-for-itself had confronted it as an independent object, or, what is the same thing, if the object had presented itself as this pure self-certainty.¹²

As Hegel states, a duality between two selves seeking certainty in the other seems to necessitate one dominating the other in order to realize itself:

In so far as it is the action of the *other*, each seeks the death of the other. But in doing so, the second kind of action, action on its own part, is also involved; for the former involves the staking of its own life.¹³

Thus, a ‘life-and-death’ struggle for exclusive recognition ensues.¹⁴ The risk the self takes to destroy the other is the pre-requisite that gives certainty to the self as an autonomous being-for-itself. Kojève remarks,

Without this fight to the death for pure prestige, there would never have been humans on earth. Indeed, the human being is former only in terms of a Desire directed towards another Desire, that is—finally—in terms of a desire for recognition.¹⁵

However, this co-dependent strife between self and other must avoid the death of one combatant. Otherwise the potential for both selves to be recognized is dissolved and the remaining survivor is isolated in the nothingness of not being recognized. In such a case consciousness would exist with a taste of its ideal, but it would be left in a melancholy reverie of longing for the potential its otherness provided. From this Hegel concludes that recognition exists when both parties survive but when one is left subordinate to the other. In other words, recognition exists within the dynamics of a master and slave relationship.

In his work *The Divided Self* the psychiatrist R.D. Laing, who was heavily indebted to Hegel and Sartre, observes the following situation:

“What the subject is, is the series of its actions. If these are a series of worthless productions, then the subjectivity of volition is likewise worthless; and conversely, if the series of the individual’s deeds are of a substantial nature, then so also is his inner will.”

Hegel, G. W. F. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Trans. Nisbet, H.B.; Ed. Allen W. Wood. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991. §124.

An argument occurred between two patients in the course of a session in an analytic group. Suddenly, one of the protagonists broke off the argument to say, 'I can't go on. You are arguing in order to have the pleasure of triumphing over me. At best you win an argument. At worst you lose an argument. *I am arguing to preserve my existence.*'¹⁶

¹² *PS*, 186.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁴ Whether Hegel's remarks about a "life-and-death" struggle are interpreted literally or viewed symbolically as the permanent structure of an implicit tension present in interpersonal relationships is a matter of contention. However, I believe Sartre has advanced a convincing argument for the latter in the third section of his *Being and Nothingness*.

¹⁵ *LPS*, 7.

¹⁶ Laing, R.D. *The Divided Self* (Penguin, 1965), p. 43.

¹⁷ *PS*, 192.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

One might easily interpret such an interaction as an embodiment of the Hegelian Notion of recognition: the criterion of being-for-itself requires that a sense of autonomy be gained from the other, and the proof of its fulfillment is that the argument is won.

As the Master-Slave dialectic unfolds we see it reach its limitations. It would seem that the master has gained the desired position of being recognized, while the slave resides himself to the subservient role of the other. However, since the masters sense of independent being is dependent on the recognition of the slave, who is accordingly no longer independent himself, the objective recognition of the masters self-consciousness is now in peril:

...it is clear that this object does not correspond to its Notion, but rather that the object in which the lord has achieved his lordship has in reality turned out to be something quite different from an independent consciousness. What now confronts him is not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one.¹⁷

The master exists, therefore, *in* the slave and not in-himself.

Meanwhile, the slave's status is reversed. Through the process of objectifying himself in work, he becomes the true being-for-itself. In work the slave expresses himself *onto* the world, moulds and forms it according to his ideas, while simultaneously forging himself as a being-for-itself that is dependent on itself and not desire: "Work...is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off; in other words work forms and shapes things."¹⁸ Thus, work provides consciousness with a means to *impose* itself on the world, thereby making it its own: "Through his service he rids himself of his attachment to natural existence in every single detail; and gets rid of it by working on it."¹⁹

The desire consumed by the master is a capricious affair that is always dependent on something other than itself for its fulfilment: "Desire has reserved to itself the pure negating of the object and thereby its unalloyed feeling of self. But that is the reason why satisfaction is itself only a fleeting one, for it lacks the side of objectivity and permanence."²⁰ Moreover,

the slave experiences *fear* under the master's supremacy, a fear that involves the risking of his life through service to the master, and a fear that then seizes his whole being.²¹ Through this fear the slave acquires a fuller sense of self-consciousness than is possible for the master. In his indolent compliancy the master has yet to risk his life, and, thereby, has yet to disclose the entirety of existence to himself. This is a paradox; consciousness is *freedom* and yet devoid of consciousness the world nevertheless endures. The master is perched on a baseless stool, risking nothing, and thus remains in a state of ignorant contentment. The risk to throw oneself into the groundlessness of existence is the supreme declaration of freedom, for consciousness has thus discarded the dross of the corporeal and base matter beneath it. It is at last an affirmation of the *ideal* to which only suffering and despair can give rise.

One must perhaps be heedful not to read the dialectical unfolding of the slave-master parable as a Freudian process of growth from infancy to adulthood, but rather as an unfolding of a subject that by its very nature contains in-itself every possible movement. Self-consciousness is already implicit in natural consciousness, yet it requires a dialectical 'push' to unfold it. This push is the necessary negation that consciousness encounters when it is inhibited by its own limitations.

In his now forgotten work *The Ego and His Own* (1845), the German anarchist Max Stirner presents a twist on the Hegelian master-slave parable. For Stirner, the submissive role the slave plays is ethically wrong, and the eventual transfiguration through which the slave redeems himself is an illusion. We must, he protests, exist for the-self, for the demands of our ego—as exemplified by the master:

Not till one has fallen in love with his *corporeal* self, and takes pleasure in himself as a living flesh-and-blood person...not till then has one a person or *egoistic* interest, an interest not only in our spirit, for instance, but in total satisfaction, satisfaction of the whole chap, a *selfish* interest.²²

²¹ Ibid., 194.

²² Stirner, M. *The Ego and His Own* Trans: Byington. S (Harper & Row, 1971), p. 48.

²³ *PS*, 197.

²⁴ Ibid., 198.

²⁵ Ibid., 199.

²⁶ Ibid., 200.

²⁷ Ibid., 201.

The implications of the Master-Slave parable are numerous, but as the focus of our task is to follow Hegel's pathway of despair, we now turn to the third division of chapter 4, 'Freedom of Self-Consciousness.'

Hegel's dialectical passage throughout the Master-Slave parable concludes by showing that the paradoxical outcome for both master and slave is an internalization and rationalization of their displaced roles: the "real world," now disclosed to self-consciousness as an interdependent affair, causes self-consciousness to retreat to the inner world of pure thought, to a purported autonomy of being.

The first stage of Hegel's progressive passage from the fallibility of the previous section is in the mode of Stoicism. If consciousness is free only when it is independent from others, and if freedom is something to be sought, then this freedom can, according to the present mode, exist only in thinking: "In thinking, I *am free*, because I am not in an *other*, but remain simply and solely in communion with myself."²³ With this, Hegel accords a mode of being to Stoicism, a mode whose principles are "that consciousness is a being that *thinks*, and that consciousness holds something to be essentially important, or true and good only in so far as it *thinks* it to be such."²⁴

Thus, under the guise of Stoicism, the dynamics of the Master-Slave dialectic are seen as something outside of the self, and, therefore, as something to be treated with indifference (*apatheia*). This, of course, was a major tenet of the Stoic philosophy: that divine providence is sovereign in the world, and that the only freedom people have is how they react to this providence. Thus, Epictetus' famous maxim, which declares that a man can find solace even on a rack, is echoed in Hegel when he remarks,

Whether on the throne or in chains, in the utter dependence of its individual existence, its aim is to be free, and to maintain that lifeless indifference which steadfastly withdraws from the bustle of existence, alike from being active as passive, into the simple essentially of thought.²⁵

Stoicism emerges as an inadequate mode of being because it is essentially abstracted from the whole. It denies the realism of the objective (natural) world and replaces it with the subjective interior of pure thought. According to Hegel, there is admittedly a "freedom in thought," but this freedom has only "pure thought as its truth" and it is therefore "a truth lacking the fullness of life."²⁶ Here, then, in the embodiment of the Stoic is a person who lives with recourse to constant abstraction. Having perched him or herself upon a plateau of indifference, this morose person exists, but only as a shadow does—with form and no content. Having now realized that only in the opposition of the other can he or she disclose oneself, the Stoic person has withdrawn into oneself. The Stoic has sought autonomy and found it in pure thought, but in the process he or she has sacrificed the essence of life.

Stoicism, having now emerged as a hollow and inadequate form of self-consciousness, and one that has not achieved its aim of complete negation,²⁷ forces consciousness to go a step further and negate the *external* world—thus



“The Stoic is a person who lives with recourse to constant abstraction.”

we arrive at Scepticism. The introversion of Stoicism progresses to external negation. By declaring that the natural world is an illusion on account of the unreliability of the senses, and by declaring that morality, knowledge and truth are unattainable, the Sceptic severs the dependence between himself and the world. He or she denies the reality of the outside world so that the objective world is absorbed into the self; “abstract thought becomes the concrete thinking which annihilates the being of the world in all its manifold determinateness.”²⁸

²⁸ Ibid., 202.

²⁹ Ibid., 204.

³⁰ Ibid., 205.

³¹ Norman, R. *Hegel's Phenomenology: a Philosophical Introduction* (Sussex University Press, 1976). p. 59.

However, Hegel claims, the Sceptic not only denies the external world by adhering to a consistent Scepticism, but also his or her own relationship to it, a relationship “in which the ‘other’ is held to be objective and is established as such, and hence, too, its *perceiving*, along with firmly securing what it is in danger of losing, viz. *sophistry*, and the truth it has itself determined and established.”²⁹ In other words, in the act of perceiving and thus negating the external world, the Sceptic erroneously believes his or herself to be confirmed in the presence of The Nothing.

There is, Hegel tells us, further contradiction when we see the Sceptic purporting to be poised in a secure position while around him or her exist the flux and ephemeral nature of the natural world. If the Sceptic’s Scepticism were consistent then he or she too would be annihilated in the absolute negation of Being. The consistent Sceptic must turn upon him or herself as an object of Scepticism: the Sceptic must admit to “being a wholly contingent, single, and separate consciousness—a consciousness which is empirical, which takes its guidance from what has no reality for it, which obeys what is for it not an *essential* being...”³⁰ The Sceptic is, therefore, now lost in a labyrinth of self-contraction and inconsistency, and, as Richard Norman writes,

[Hegel’s] remarks apply equally to a modern sceptic like Hume, who, when he is engaged in philosophy, is ‘ready to reject all belief and reasoning’, but when he leaves such speculations in order to dine, play a game of back-gammon...finds himself ‘absolutely and necessarily determined to live, and talk, and act like other people in common affairs of life.’³¹

Indeed, it is this unavoidable self-undermining hypocrisy that annuls the Sceptic’s position.

The Sceptic is forced to concede to the existence of the external world—otherwise his or her argument refutes itself. Simultaneously, then, self-consciousness is severed in an explicit awareness of the self as divided between being, on the one hand, a contingent, empirical self that

fluctuates in the phenomenal realm, and also, on the other hand, as a self that “recognizes that its freedom lies in rising above all the confusion and contingency of existence.”³² This division, of which the self is conscious, is a division with unity, viz. the self. Thus, self-consciousness observes itself as both being-in-itself and being-in-another, i.e. as itself yet alien to itself. Previously, the dynamics master-slave dialectic occurred between two individuals, whereas now they have been compounded into one: “The duplication of self-consciousness within itself, which is essential in the Notion of Spirit, is thus here before us, but not yet its unity.”³³ This internal contradiction gives rise to a new shape of consciousness: the Unhappy Consciousness.

Without tracing the development of Hegel’s dialectic to arrive at this point, the Unhappy Consciousness—the core of despair in the *Phenomenology*—would emerge as an arbitrary and groundless shape of consciousness. Now that we have followed the path to this point, our task is to explore Hegel’s transition from the denial of the Sceptic to the concession of the Unhappy Consciousness.

Throughout the section on the Unhappy Consciousness Hegel alludes to the bifurcation that the Christian/Judaeo tradition leaves between individuals and God, individuals and society, individuals and nature and, as we see with the Sceptic, between the individual and him or herself. Hegel seeks a union similar to that of the Greek *polis*: a synthesis of morality, art, religion and politics without recourse to empty abstraction, i.e. one that is experiential as well as theoretical. In the Greek *polis* the world was the world for man, while in the Christian/Judaeo tradition, man’s true world lies elsewhere—humanity is a naysayer to the present world, they renounce it in favour of another world. The ethos of Christianity is essentially insular—its concern for society is annulled in the pre-occupation with self-redemption and piety. In the figure of Abraham this distinction between the harmony of the Greeks and the otherworldly anxiety of the Christian/Judaeo tradition is made explicit. For example, as Hyppolite writes, “[Abraham] was incapable of an attachment to a finite and limited object. Life was reflected in him but as a totality, the negation of all its determinate forms.”³⁴

Hence, in becoming conscious of the Universal, the pious individual, Abraham in this case, severs his connection from the Universal by seeing himself as something inferior to it. Hegel elaborates,

“If the Sceptic’s Scepticism were consistent then he or she too would be annihilated in the absolute negation of Being.”

³² *PS*, 205.

³³ *Ibid.*, 206.

³⁴ Hyppolite, J. *Studies on Marx and Hegel* Ed & Trans:

With his herds Abraham wandered hither and thither over a boundless territory without bringing parts of it nearer to him by cultivating and improving them...he was a stranger to soil and men alike...The whole world Abraham regarded his opposite; if he did not take it to be nullity he looked upon it as sustained by a God who was alien to it. Nothing in nature was supposed to have any part in God; everything was simply under God's mastery.³⁵

Thus, unable to project himself on the world as the slave does by 'cultivating and improving' it through labor, Abraham remains estranged from a world that he sees as distinct from God.

As we have seen, the Sceptic emerged as being conscious of oneself, but it is a self that is dislocated; the duality between the I and non-I is fused without reconciliation, thus forming the Unhappy Consciousness. Self-consciousness acknowledges itself as incomplete and fragmented, and yet, because it is unable to unite this division, the Spirit towards which it implicitly moves is currently unattainable. Consciousness is now conscious of the Whole, and thus, conscious of its finitude. This development of consciousness rouses a despair that is the consciousness of being conscious of what consciousness lacks—a Truth (an Absolute where it *should* be).

Søren Kierkegaard's analysis of the Unhappy Consciousness in *Either/Or* contains a parallel to the division that underlies Hegel's Unhappy Consciousness. Kierkegaard writes,

The unhappy person is one who has his ideal, the content of his life, the fullness of his consciousness, the essences of his being, in some other manner outside of himself. He is always absent, never present to himself.³⁷

Indeed, such an estrangement from oneself, seen in Hegel as the division between the I and non-I and centred in the religious/existential void, is echoed in Kierkegaard as the *angst* that discloses itself in pure-freedom, and thus, the choice between reason and faith. The ideal that lies outside oneself is the Absolute, and consciousness undergoes despair when it acknowledges what it lacks, and thus, the incomplete status it has.

We now arrive at a position of existence that is distinctly a human mode of existence. Self-consciousness exists in the shadow of the Whole, in the shadow of its totality and everything that is opposed to it—it sees itself as a being but as being that exists only in contrast to what its not: "Consciousness of life, of its existence and activity, is only an agonizing

*“the unification of
concrete subjective
existence,
finitude and
existence, on the
one side,*

over this existence and activity, for therein it is conscious that its essence is only its opposite, is conscious only of its own nothingness.”³⁸ Despair is the thirst of consciousness to become something other than itself, something other than a particular; it is the endeavor of consciousness to fuse itself with its opposite—the Universal and the Unchangeable. This desired or expected unification with the Universal and Unchangeable is groundless; it is a fruitless dream insofar as it already involves the presence of the particular changeable self. Above all, consciousness recognizes its own finitude, and furthermore, that this finitude frames its being.

The dilemma Hegel presents is one that is perennial in philosophy: it concerns the unification of concrete subjective existence, finitude and existence, on the one side, and Being *qua* Being on the other; the boundless realm of the Absolute, where in subsuming everything that is, it too becomes the Nothing that isn’t. Severed from the unity of which it presupposes, consciousness therefore sees itself as inferior and extraneous to totality of Being – it has no part in the particular as it has yet to find its place in the Universal. We see an example of this in the artisan’s of Plato’s Republic who in being conscious of a world of Forms, but as yet unable to grasp them, are rendered less ontologically ‘real’ than their counterpart, the Guardian.

The Unhappy Consciousness seeks to destroy itself so as to re-emerge in union with the Unchangeable; but in seeking complete annihilation the very access to unity—the self—is also destroyed. It is only through the self, not the purported other-world, that a union can be acquired between Being and the Nothing without recourse to self-dissolution.

Hegel suggests three ways in which consciousness seeks to unite itself with the Unchangeable, that is, three ways in which consciousness seeks to stand itself in relation to the Unchangeable. First, it distinguishes itself from the Unchangeable by projecting its Universality, i.e. the Notion into the beyond. This, however, merely re-affirms the original alienated struggle insofar as it embraces the disparity between the mutable and the immutable. Second, it believes that its very contingency is part of the Unchangeable, i.e. as a mode of God thus equating man *with* God. Similarly, this mode proves unsatisfactory as consciousness is again divided between itself as a being identifiable with God and itself simultaneously as base matter, replete with the sin, guilt and suffering that is interdependent with humanity. Third, it reconciles these two poles, the mutable and immutable, by identifying itself *in* the Unchangeable—as Spirit.

³⁵ Hegel, G.W.F. *Early Theological Writings* Trans: Knox, T.M. (University of Chicago Press, 1990).

³⁶ Although the allusions to religion are frequent, if not explicit in the present section, the reconciliation Hegel seeks is as much existential as it is religious.

³⁷ Kierkegaard, S. *Either/Or* Vol.1 Trans: Swenson, D. & Swenson L. (Princeton, 1971). p. 220.

³⁸ *PS*, 209.

*and Being qua Being
on the other.”*

It is this final option, Hegel argues, that proves to be the successful one:

In the first relationship it was merely the notion of an actual consciousness...which is not yet actual in action and enjoyment; the second is this actualization as an external action and enjoyment...but here, now is where the enemy is met with in his most characteristic form.³⁹

Consciousness, however, having now returned to itself from outward despair into the acquiescence of nothingness is still unhappy. “This third relationship in which this true actuality is one of the terms is the *relation* of that actuality, as a nothingness to the universal Being.”⁴⁰

It is only through the process of “mediation” that consciousness comes to redeem itself, for it is this that fills the middle term of a syllogism left by the polarities of Particular and Universal. In being conscious of its unity with the Absolute, albeit manifest as nothingness, consciousness comes to realize that a mediator must exist in order for there be such a relation, viz. between Particular and Universal. It is this mediator that acts as the mercurial transforming-agent, as it were, that alters both the Universal and the Particular.

Religiously, this mediator would seem to be symbolic of Christ—the divine-human, insofar as within the figure of Christ both finite and infinite conjoin while the bind between consciousness and concrete existence is persevered. Indeed, as Hegel suggests, the very possibility of there being a mediator presupposes that there is a consciousness to do the mediating: “This middle term is itself a consciousness Being, for it is an action which mediates consciousness as such; the content of this action is the extinction of the particular individuality which consciousness is undertaking.”⁴¹ From this mediator, seemingly embodied as the minister or indeed as the medium through which Being articulates itself (i.e. the mystic), consciousness finds consolation and accordingly rejects its own will in favour of following the mediators. In this process of self-denial, consciousness is no longer responsible for itself and so to ascribe joy or woe to consciousness would be absurd – one can only be happy or morose if one has played part in obtaining that mood. But in this mode of consciousness the ‘I’ is all but shielded in the mediator.

Hegel’s argument is that through the negativity of self-denial a positive (i.e. an affirmative) consciousness opens up that is receptive to the Unchangeable; as the Changeable is

*“The Unhappy
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destroyed.”*

increasingly mortified, the Unchangeable fills its void. Furthermore, through the renunciation of possessions and the actuality of itself manifest in work, consciousness loses its sense of autonomy, thereby rendering it a 'thing.' Thus, according to Hegel, consciousness "has the certainty of having truly divested itself of its 'I', and of having turned its immediate self-consciousness into a *Thing*, into having an objective existence."⁴²

The particular will has been sacrificed for the Universal self through the action of a mediator, thus reconciling the two polarities. It therefore transpires that the certainty consciousness derives emanates from the mediator, and consequently, Hegel announces the arrival of Reason—that which allows for the possibility of such a shift, i.e., the Particular consciousness identifying itself in the Universal through the middle term—the mediator.

Hegel's announcement of Reason at the end of the section on the Unhappy Consciousness seems somewhat thin after the grand dual between Master and Slave. Even more problematic than a desire for a dramatic finale is the somewhat abrupt emergence of Reason.

Certainly, the announcement of Reason does not seem to be a logically necessary development in the *Phenomenology*. Rather, it seems to have been posited as a pre-requisite for Hegel's Idealism.

Nevertheless, by equating reason with reality, Hegel has offered a remedy for the Unhappy Consciousness. By way of Reason, consciousness has discovered that the world is not in fact alien to it, but rather, it is consciousness' own Universal nature:

Now that self-consciousness is Reason, its hitherto negative relation to otherness turns round into a positive relation. Up till now it has been concerned only with its independence and freedom...at the expense of the world...but as Reason, assured of itself, it is at peace with them, and can endure them; for it is certain that it is itself reality, or that everything actual is none other than itself; its thinking is directly actuality, and thus its relationship to the latter is of idealism.⁴³

In correlating reason with reality consciousness has arrived at Objective Idealism, which the remainder of the *Phenomenology* explores, but because that is beyond the limits of our present task, and because we have followed Hegel's path until its Reasonable redemption, our journey is complete.

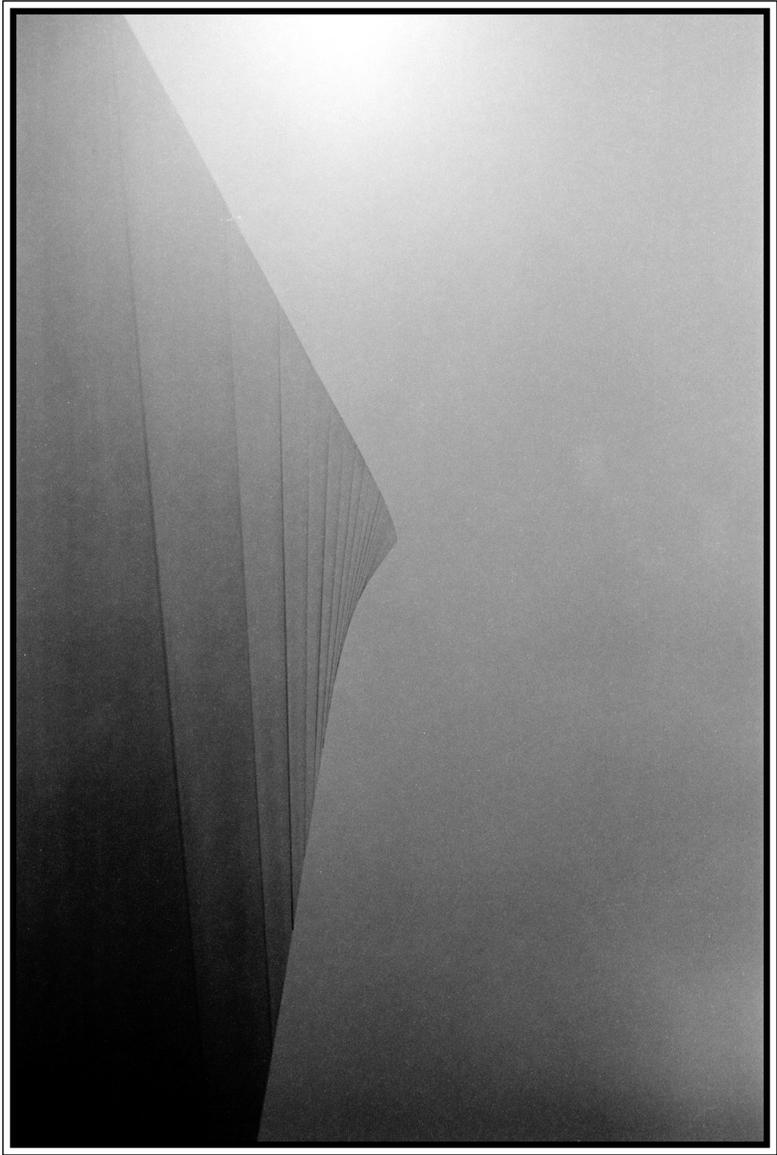
³⁹ Ibid., 223.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 224.

⁴¹ Ibid., 227.

⁴² Ibid., 229.

⁴³ Ibid., 232.



Vagueness: Language vs. Logic

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- § 1 Timothy Williamson notes that vagueness has been perceived as a problem by the two philosophical traditions highly concerned with formal logic, the Stoics and modern analytic philosophy.¹ This is not surprising, for the problem of vagueness that language presents can be seen most readily in the sorites paradox. This paradox presents a series of predications that seemingly command assent, e.g. A man with one hair on his head is bald; If so, then a man with two hairs on his head is bald; If so, then a man with three hairs on his head is bald; etc. Since the starting point is true, and since we can never confidently say which hair added makes him no longer bald, we are left falsely concluding that a man with thousands of hairs is bald. While any language user off the street could be confronted with this seeming incoherency generated by vague predicates, the significance of most everyday discourse is preserved unblemished. Though I couldn't identify the exact point on a color spectrum at which red ends and yellow begins, this worries me not when I see a fire truck drive by. Only those, that is, who are concerned to correlate formal logic and natural language, would find the sorites paradox's implications disquieting and globally important. The exact nature of vagueness and the problems to which it gives rise are the subject of section II.

There are two main ways to avoid the logical contradiction created by vagueness: revise either classical logic or the functioning of our vague predicates. There have been three attempts at the first approach: supervaluationism, three-valued logic, and fuzzy or degree logics. The second approach, called the epistemic view, is taken up by Williamson, who proposes instead that we do not think of our concepts as vague but rather our epistemic state as ignorant. There is, however, a final approach, that taken by Bertrand Russell, who rejects the applicability of an exact logic to our inherently vague language. In a sense, Russell is siding with the vast majority of humanity not obsessed with relating formal logic and natural language; he creates a rift between the two. Two criteria guide the search for an answer among these five options: (1) is the makeup of our conceptual structure, and (2) is the functioning of that structure in relation to the world, i.e. the cognitive status of propositions, or the truth of vague statements. In section III I use criterion (1) destructively, rejecting solutions one through four and agreeing with Russell that vagueness, inherent in all our language, prevents it from ever squaring with formal logic. But in section IV I perform a constructive task with criterion (2) by incorporating a fundamentally important insight of Williamson (stemming from Tarski's theorem) that qualifies how we relate truth to vague statements; inasmuch as all statements of our natural language are vague, this means drawing out general implications for a theory of truth.

§ 2 There are two conditions for vagueness: a term is vague if and only if (i) it has borderline cases, and (ii) it has higher-order borderline cases.² "Borderline" means that, in one or more instances, one is unable to decide whether or not a predicate applies to a particular object. For example, the predicate "house" is vague because there are certain structures, e.g. four walls without a roof or a roof with three walls, concerning which I wouldn't be able to say whether or not they are houses. Condition (ii), higher-order vagueness, means that it is also unclear as to where the unclarity over the applicability of a predicate starts. One could call it the existence of borderline borderline cases. For example, on a color spectrum between red and yellow there is an interim zone, call it "orange", for which one cannot decide whether a particular shade is red or yellow. But one can further not tell where the zone of in-between itself starts, e.g. a case between red and orange. These two conditions are necessary and sufficient for the sorites paradox, because they entail the indistinguishability of the extension of a predicate along a continuous spectrum.

In elucidating “borderline”, we must be careful not to exclude definitionally the epistemic view, which question-begging would occur if we said that vagueness occurs iff our ignorance does not prevent us from knowing whether or not the predicate applies.³ The nuance between these two types of definition is highlighted by properly distinguishing between vagueness and underspecificity. Underspecificity occurs when, by simply knowing more about the exact state of the physical world, we would then be able to unambiguously apply a predicate. Assume, for example, that 500 or more people constitute a mob. Glancing at a crowd of 501, we might not be able to decide whether or not to call it a mob. This undecidability is underspecificity and not vagueness, however, because by counting, i.e. refining the exactness of our knowledge about the world, we could then decide whether or not to call the group a mob. Hence this predication is true, even though at a glance we might not be able to say so.

Vagueness results, in contrast, when our margin of error in specification is greater than the level knowledge possible. Continuing the example, to gauge the underspecificity of “mob”, we assumed each person to be an atomic unit. If borderline people are allowed, however, we could not conclude, as above, that we would be able to decide the applicability of the predication simply by knowing which atoms of the universe are where. Vagueness, then, is a conceptual or representational matter when no more exact knowledge of the world would resolve our inability to decide upon the predicate’s applicability. It is an additional and important question as to whether there is still a real borderline to our vague concepts that we cannot know because of this margin of error (as Williamson contends). We could summarize that vagueness is the inability to apply a predicate (to borderline cases) not based on underspecificity. Notice how “underspecificity” has been substituted for “ignorance” to rectify the question-begging definition.

One question worth pursuing is, Where does the root of vagueness lie? The first option is tracing it to the world itself. Differentiating underspecificity from vagueness, however, already signals the dead-end of this path. At first sight we might think that vagueness possibly occurs in the world on two levels, the macro or the micro. In truth, however, both are forms of underspecificity. On the macro level, many phenomena appear to lack definite boundaries, e.g. a cloud. If we use a deeper level of exactitude, however, such as the atom or molecule, we see that this phenomenon is merely underspecificity. With every air molecule differentiated, it is then a mere conceptual matter as to where one draws the boundary of the cloud. Similarly, it is a misun-

derstanding to call the phenomenon of a mountain vague: the matter constituting each ridgeline and gully is itself clearly identifiable; it is only a conceptual vagueness that wavers as to where to demarcate the mountain's boundary.⁴

The micro level may appear more complex, but the quantitative situation is no different. Firstly, the apparent infinite divisibility of matter points to the issue of underspecificity, but not necessarily to vagueness. For example, light forms a continuous spectrum that lacks any internal quantitative boundaries, but that in no way affects the fact that a certain wave has a certain measurable wavelength. Secondly, on the micro level some phenomena cannot possibly be exactly measured, as demonstrated by Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, but that very principle entails positing a position and velocity for a particle that we cannot observe without altering. If vagueness does not reside in the world, it must then somehow be connected to our representation of the world.⁵

The sorites paradox uses this conceptual fuzziness as its launch pad. In antiquity the paradox was formed as a series of questions. The archetypal case is the heap, from which the name "sorites" comes ("soros" being Greek for "heap").⁶ The accosting philosopher would begin by asking whether one grain of wheat makes a heap. The answer: Certainly not. But then, he continues, do two grains make a heap? Do three? Four? Five? The questions can be extended ad infinitum and, if we are never willing to admit that the marginal addition of one grain makes the difference, we are left concluding that, no matter how large, no pile of wheat is a heap.

A structure similar to the Q&A can be generated in the form of a logical argument:

- (1) 1 grain isn't a heap.
- (2) If 1 grain isn't a heap, then 2 grains aren't a heap.
- (3) If 2 grains aren't a heap, then 3 grains aren't a heap.
- ...
- (10⁶) If 999,999 grains aren't a heap, then one million grains aren't a heap.

Therefore, one millions grains aren't a heap.⁷

The importance of this form of the argument is its simplicity. With just modus ponens we apparently derive an absurd falsity from true premises. While simplicity makes the argument's validity difficult to challenge, the truth of the premises is equally defensible. Premise one looks uncontested. Premises two through one million are at least prima facie

open to question, because we can recognize the quantitative addition of another grain. But the difficulty of making a judgment of predication based on a marginal distinction can easily be magnified. Take a sorites series of height, for example: from a one-meter-tall person who is clearly short, we could prove that someone ten meters tall, or even one million meters tall, is also short. Here, however, we can decrease the marginal change between steps while simultaneously increasing the number of premises. Instead of the liberal difference, “If someone 1 meter tall is short, then someone 1.1 meters tall is short”, we could state “... then someone 1.01 meters tall is short”, or “... then someone 1.000001 meters tall is short.” It’s no longer clear that one can contest such premises, because at the limit one could make the marginal difference immeasurable: with infinite premises we could reduce the marginal change to infinitely small. If one allows the coherency of arguments with infinitely many premises, this would make it nearly absurd to contest any of them based on an infinitely small change.

Besides this first formalized argument, there are two additional important logical forms of the paradox. The second condenses the conditional statements into a quantified premise. For the predicate F (short, for example) and the sequence of objects x_i , the paradox asserts:

- (1) Fx_1
- (2) For all i , if Fx_i then Fx_{i+1}
- and therefore, (3) Fx_n ⁸

Premise (1) is an empirical observation, as is conclusion (3), which contradicts the fact that x_n is actually ten-meters tall, for example.

The third form simplifies the premises and generates a quantified conclusion:

- (1) Fx_1
- (2) $\sim Fx_{1,000,000}$ therefore
- (3) There is some x such that Fx and $\sim Fx_{i+1}$ ⁹

Given bivalence, this argument is valid. The falsity of this conclusion is, according to many commentators, entailed by the nature of vagueness: because predicates like “bald” are vague, there is no single hair (x_{i+1}) that makes someone no longer bald. (Note that the conclusion’s truth is precisely what the epistemic view argues, so this form of the argument is a paradox for everyone else but is a “sound” proof for the epistemic view’s proponents such as Williamson.)

We might wonder, however, whether the sorites paradox is actually a serious problem. Pragmatically, it does not hinder language usage, nor

does it reduce or erase the putative meaning of vague terms. There are at least three reasons to worry. One reason is that we cannot accept the conclusion, that it's just "strange but true" that one million grains don't make a heap.¹⁰ This complaisance will not do. Because the paradoxes are reversible, we could start with the observation that one million grains make a heap and with equal soundness prove that one grain of wheat also makes a heap. We could show that red is yellow or that yellow is red. Without direction or a way out of the vicious derivations, complete logical meaninglessness would result.

A second cause for concern is the pervasiveness of vagueness in our language. Nearly all parties agree that when natural languages are scrutinized, vagueness is endemic and perhaps universal. There are many specific concepts, however, for which we desire a more accurate account and exact borders, e.g. moral and legal concepts such as personhood and responsibility. In order to perform tasks with these words, we need some way of creating borders and resolving vagueness (i.e. a way that is helpful and/or true).

The final reason, persuasively argued by Williamson, is the importance of classical logic to analytic philosophy and its understanding of truth, namely Tarski's theory (discussed below). Retaining bivalence (or some essential semblance *apropos* of Tarski) and avoiding the sorites paradox could be a litmus test, then, for an explanation of vagueness, what I called above criterion (2). Next we turn to the responses to our problem.

§ 3

Of the five primary answers to vagueness, the first is supervaluationism, which identifies vagueness as a deficiency in a predicate's meaning. In response, this approach uses a bivalent, non-vague meta-language to give a more precise account of the meaning of vague predications. Supervaluationism, explored extensively by Kit Fine, works by examining all the possible "precisifications", or specifications, of a predicate, which are the ways of drawing a sharp boundary for it. For example, the predicate "bald" could hypothetically be made precise if we decided that a person with 100 or less hairs is bald, but 101 hairs or more makes him or her non-bald. All predications would now have an unambiguous truth-value. The choice of 100, however, is arbitrary, since the conditions of vagueness entail not knowing such a cutoff point. Supervaluationism demands that we take into account all such possible ways of precisification, and forms a new super-truth-value (which I will here call the truth-value*) based on the results. A sentence is defined as true* if and only if it is true on all such precisifications, false* if false on all, and otherwise neither* (true nor false).¹¹

This solution provides a simple and intuitive explanation for the first two forms of the sorites paradox. In the first form, for any precisification, the conditional at that point will fail. In our example, “If a man with 100 hairs is bald, then a man with 101 hairs is bald” comes out false, because the antecedent is true but the consequent false. Since this conditional will be true on other precisifications, e.g. where 102 hairs starts the point of non-baldness, it gets a super-value of neither*. For the same reason of conditional failure the second premise of the second formal argument is also rejected, occluding the reductio. These results accord well with our understanding of vagueness as entailing borderline cases for which we’re not sure that predications should have a definitive value of true or false. An additional benefit is that super-valuationism preserves much of classical logic, including the principle of the excluded middle, since “ p or $\sim p$ ” will come out true on all precisifications.¹²

Supervaluationism has three critical problems, however, that prevent it from adequately explaining vagueness. Firstly, this theory does not preserve bivalence in the object language, since a borderline case of tall will come out true on some and false on other precisifications. The importance of this failure for a theory of truth will be discussed below in section IV. Secondly, higher-order vagueness is left unaccounted for. Any sentence of the object language will be given a definite super-value, so there will be a sharp cutoff between the true* cases and the borderline cases of neither*. Concerning the reality of vagueness: unfortunately it ain’t so. Lastly, supervaluationism’s non-classical semantics fails to reflect our conceptual structure. This can be seen in its failure to explain the falsity of the conclusion in the third form of the paradox. It holds, for example, to the truth of the statement “There’s a hair that makes all the difference to baldness”, but the falsity of such a sentence seems precisely what an adequate account of vagueness is supposed to explain.¹³

The second answer to the paradoxes is three-valued logic (or any finite-valued logic greater than two), which posits a value of indefiniteness in addition to truth and falsity. The logical connectives are then redefined for this non-bivalent metalanguage. Negation, for example, is true if and only if the component is false, but, if the component is indefinite, its negation is indefinite as well.¹⁴ Three-valued logics answer vagueness by making logical predication likewise sensitive to the indefiniteness of some semantic facts: since we are committed to vagueness in our object language, wouldn’t a metalanguage that incorporated indefiniteness provide the best model? This approach does

escape the sorites paradoxes, for the conditional premises come out indefinite rather than true; thus validity goes by the wayside.

The answer to the above question, however, is that a three-valued logic does not provide the best model for our vague language. First, and just as in supervaluationism, the failure of bivalence on account of three semantic values counts strongly against this view, as discussed below. Second, this approach commits a fundamental error in its modeling strategy: although the metalanguage is non-bivalent, it is not vague. The theory, that is, gives definite semantic values to all predications of the object language, even if it admits that one of these values is itself indefinite. We can see, then, why this approach has a difficulty with higher-ordered vagueness. There will be sharp lines between true statements and the statements valued indefinite as long as the semantic theory rigidly attaches values to the predications. It therefore cannot explain vagueness.

Fuzzy logic or degree theories are the third answer. Degree theories take a very different approach to explaining vagueness than multivalent theories: the former don't try to mirror the object language's seeming non-bivalence, but instead play off the comparative nature of the object language. Two women might both be borderline bald, but we could nonetheless say that one is balder than the other. Simple semantic indeterminacy, these theorists say, isn't the point at issue. To the question, "Are these two women bald?", we can imagine saying, "Sort of, but one is balder than the other." The degree theorist claims that this means we could say then that "The one is bald" is more true than "The other is bald." This is a controversial step, and one for which I don't have much sympathy (though degree logics may be extremely worthwhile for other purposes). The specifics of this approach are as follows. Degrees of truth can be quantified by probabilities between 0 and 1, where these boundaries mark falsity and truth, respectively. The logical connectives are then redefined, e.g. the truth of a negation becomes one minus the probability of its component: $\sim p = 1 - p$.¹⁵ A falsity (0) negated becomes a truth (1), and the middle of the road 0.5 negated is also 0.5. There are two different ways to define validity for such a system. By truth-preservation models, for a valid inference the conclusion must have a truth degree no lower than the lowest premise. Alternately, validity could be conceived of as allowing no more falsity in the conclusion than the sum of the premises' degrees of falsity. Either of these conceptions provides explanations of the paradoxes: for the first two forms of the sorites, the conditional premises will have consequents that are progressively less true (or more false) than the anteced-

ents, so soundness is lost; the third formalization is also clearly invalid, for the two premises have a truth degree of 1, while the quantified conclusion's value is only about 0.5.¹⁶

These results are encouraging, but problems are rife for degree theories. Firstly, higher-order vagueness is just as inadequately explained here as by the previous two theories, because of the absolute break between the truth of probability 1 and the near truth of 0.999. Second-order vagueness entails the impossibility of this distinction, for we cannot identify a sharp boundary between clear and borderline cases. Secondly, degree theories yield some extremely unintuitive results, raising doubts about their explanatory adequacy. For example, when the probability of "p" is 0.5, the statement "p or ~p" is as true as "p & ~p". Lastly, it's not entirely clear that degree theories fully explain the third logical form of the paradox, for the falsity of its conclusion (that predicates have sharp boundaries) is seemingly entailed by vagueness, but these theories give it a value of 0.5.¹⁷

The fourth answer is Williamson's epistemic view, which holds vagueness to be a form of ignorance about our concepts, for, it contends, those concepts themselves actually have sharp boundaries and well-defined extensions.¹⁸ This answer preserves classical logic, and escapes the first two forms of the paradox: in form one by denying the truth of one of the conditionals, and by denying premise two in the second form, since there is a sharp boundary that prevents the reductio even though we do not and perhaps cannot know where it is. The third form, additionally, the epistemic view takes as a sound proof, since the concluded existence of a sharp boundary is precisely what it argues for. Williamson can similarly use the first two logical forms to his advantage: because they are valid, and because the first premise and conclusion are both true, we have a reductio ad absurdum for the failure of one of the conditional premises.

The epistemic view was also the Stoic's reaction to the paradox. Because they accepted both logic's applicability to language and the principle of bivalence, the Stoics reasoned from the reductio to the falsity of one of the conditionals, and concluded that predicates have sharp boundaries that we are ignorant of. According to the Stoic ideal of wisdom, one would only speak truth: confronted with the paradox, then, the Stoic Chrysippus recommended falling silent, in the face of one's ignorance, well before one is in danger of crossing the sharp boundary and asserting a falsehood.¹⁹

The epistemic view retains both classical logic and semantics, and is therefore not subject to any of the criticism of the previous solutions.

It has, however, several hurdles of its own. For one, it must explain the counterintuitive notion of ignorance that is essential to its success. Williamson tackles this challenge in two ways. He contends, firstly, that ignorance should actually be seen as our default state, defending our lack of knowledge from the need of explanation.²⁰ Secondly, he explains our ignorance with the notion of a margin of error mentioned in section II. Human cognitive faculties are not reliable enough to make distinctions commensurate with the infinite underspecificity of the natural world. We simply cannot distinguish, for example, between extremely fine shades of red.

This explanation of our ignorance both helps and hurts Williamson's cause. It is certainly true that our finite, perspectival cognition is not up for complete or precise comprehension of the natural world: absolute or objective knowledge is a chimera, and therefore ignorance is very much a constitutive factor of human life. This ignorance, however, also limits our discourse, and here Williamson runs into difficulty. Here I follow the general philosophical tradition of Wittgenstein, who argued that there cannot be a difference in meaning without a difference in use, and who similarly rejected "the notion of imperceptible rails upon which the correct usage of language is supposed to run."²¹

Here is the problem. Williamson fully agrees that meaning supervenes upon use, so that "there is no difference in meaning without a difference in use."²² Our actual use of predicates, however, treats them as if they lack sharp boundaries. This is precisely why the paradoxes arise. If a predicate has only as precise a meaning as usage has conferred upon it, or, to put it another way, if it only has a content garnered from its instances of usage, then it seems flatly wrong to insist that it has an exact extension.

An example will make this clear. Say I create the new word "strumpity", and use it once while looking at a dog walk across the lawn, in the sentence "That dog is strumpity." Williamson must maintain that by fiat this word has sharp boundaries.²³ Even if we add bits of intensional discourse, such as that I intend by "strumpity" some sense similar to but not exactly the same as "short", my neologism would still have no sharply extended meaning content, which according to Williamson it must have. Where would the predicate's boundaries come from? Williamson does not answer this question, but asserts that it is still possible that such boundaries exist. In one place he remarks that nature could contain such boundaries: e.g. since a heap cannot be made from a flat layer of grains, at least four grains are required to make a heap, "three grains close together supporting a fourth on top."²⁴

His argument here, however, is misguided. The point is not whether the world contains any boundaries reflected in our concepts. There certainly are boundary-marking features of concepts on account of the world, for example the boundary between molecules of O_2 that do or do not have a hydrogen atom attached. But asserting this feature of language does not discount the simultaneous existence of conceptual vagueness in language. We can concede to Williamson that usage might reflect some sharp boundaries in the world, but the point remains that our concepts' boundaries are not completely sharp. Vagueness resides in our representation of the world, which means we have to look to how that representation itself operates. And this returns us to the supervenience of meaning upon use. If the extension has not been gotten by stipulation or use, a full account of meaning (to Williamson's purposes) with the supervenience principle is occluded: Williamson can only manufacture boundaries out of thin air, and this is unacceptable.

Besides the logical arguments for the epistemic view, much of Williamson's clout comes from the untenability of an adequate alternative explanation of vagueness (which would be overcome if the analysis given below is tenable), but we should not confuse this with an adequate description of the functioning of our predicates. On account of the trouble with meaning and use, I consider the epistemic view as unsuccessful as the previous three solutions. Now to the alternative.

§ 4

To reject all of these explanations and conclude that natural language simply does not conform to formal logic is to side with Russell, answer number five. If one takes this view, one can still retain logic for its usefulness in specific cases, mining various systems pragmatically as one uses mathematics in physics. One such appropriation is classical logic and bivalence in connection with truth: by establishing some connection between the cognitive functioning of language and logically formalized predication, we can salvage cognitive meaning and avoid what Williamson calls nihilism, the condition resigned to the meaninglessness of vague statements.²⁵

The question is whether we can afford to agree with Russell and create a rift between language and logic. Williamson's primary concern is to prevent this separation, and he makes much of the point that for pragmatic reasons alone we could justifiably side with his view as the best explanation of vagueness. Why? Because, he correctly observes, analytic philosophy is committed to an understanding of truth that incorporates or at least resembles Tarski's theory, and, as Williamson (and Tarski) has shown, this entails bivalence or something like it.²⁶ A

complete rift between logic and language, then, would derail the truth-functioning of language.

The importance of Tarski's theorem here is its connection to bivalence, viz. Tarski's theorem coupled with a rejection of bivalence creates a logical contradiction. Tarski's theorem defines truth predication by disquotation, e.g. "The sentence 'it is raining' is true iff it is raining." Formally expressed, where T is the truth predicate and p = it is raining, this sentence becomes:

$$(1) T"p" \text{ iff } p.$$

A second example is:

$$(2) T"\sim p" \text{ iff } \sim p.$$

The denial of bivalence can be expressed with the left-hand quantities of these biconditionals, asserting, e.g., that "It is not the case that ('It is raining' is true or 'It is not raining' is true)":

$$(3) \sim(T"p" \text{ or } T"\sim p").$$

By substitution of each of the quantities in this disjunction (3) with their right-hand partners from the biconditionals (1) and (2) above, we then get:

$$(4) \sim(p \text{ or } \sim p).$$

By De Morgan's law's, (4) can be transformed into:

$$(5) \sim p \ \& \ \sim \sim p.$$

Here we have the contradiction, whether or not double negation can be eliminated.²⁷ I consider this proof as important as Williamson does: whether or not truth simply is the disquotational process of Tarski's theorem, I think it would be difficult to say what truth is without at least admitting that "It is raining" is true if and only if it actually is raining. As Williamson observes, this logical contradiction is unacceptable. It counts against Williamson's opposition by catching the Russellian view in a sort of liar's paradox, in which Russell would be saying something true, viz. that language does not align with logic, that would thereby render truth-saying impossible.

Assuming the analysis of criterion (1) above is correct (section III), that the epistemic view does not really do justice to the vague status of our conceptual structure, should we nonetheless concede with Williamson that we must posit some unknown and perhaps unknowable epistemic status to vague concepts? No, so long as we can bridge the gap between logic and language by explaining the cognitive functioning of language, criterion (2).

A brief sketch of such an explanation follows, based on the distinction noted in section I, namely that between (1) the psychological structure and interworkings of our concepts, and (2) those concepts' external functioning vis-à-vis the world, i.e. their cognitive functioning or truth. Williamson's fundamental insight for (2), which he mistakenly assimilates with (1), is that any predicate used cognitively, i.e. used to say something about how the world is, can only be applied bivalently to an object.²⁸ For example, take the predicate Fx , where F means "x is a mug". Where $a = \text{me}$, Fa is false. Now for $b = \text{this coffee mug on my desk}$, Fb is true. So far so good. Next imagine a third case where $c = \text{my Chinese teacup that lacks a handle}$, i.e. a borderline case that may or may not be a mug. My contention—contra Williamson—is this: to maintain Russell's position, we must only hold that by saying Fc is neither true nor false one is no longer saying anything about the world. This maintains the necessary condition that vague predicates, used cognitively, must admit of analysis that conforms to Tarski's theory and therefore bivalency.²⁹

Is this copout acceptable? Yes, because Williamson grants, correctly, that intuitionism in mathematics is perfectly reasonable. He states: "the argument [reducing denials of bivalence to absurdity] applies not whenever bivalence is denied, but only when it is denied of a particular sentence."³⁰ But I am perfectly happy to grant that some sentences are used non-cognitively and have nothing to do with bivalency: the undecidability of applying a predicate seems to be exactly this. Completing this analysis with regard to a complete theory of truth would require further investigation than this paper allows, but we can note: one, saying "definitely short" seems to only differ with "short" through noting the subject's commitment (e.g. epistemic) to the application of the predicate, not a cognitive difference in the world or degree of truth within the predicate itself; and, two, saying "somewhat short" or "vaguely short", where one intends a predication, must only be seen as a slightly different predicate (or function) within the amalgam of our conceptual system—one can use it cognitively, but thereby one uses it differently or uses only a related predicate.³¹

The explanatory power of this nuance, in addition, makes the amended Russellian view superior to any other theory of vagueness. Take, for example, the case of three people in a row, #1 who is clearly short, #2 who is a borderline case, and #3 who is clearly not short. Contra the non-classical logical replies that assign a third status to the borderline case (whether it be absolute or of a degree), by withholding judgment for person #2 we are precisely declining to make a cognitive assertion about him. Just what tertium quid status we would be assigning is difficult to imagine with the importance and basicity of Tarski's theory in view.

With this explanatory device for the Russellian answer to vagueness, can we give a more detailed account of the sorites paradox? Yes. In the second scheme, for the predicate F and the sequence of objects x_i , the paradox asserts:

- (1) Fx_1
- (2) For all i , if Fx_i then Fx_{i+1}
and concludes
- (3) $Fx_{1,000,000}$

Premise (1) and conclusion (3) are cognitive assertions, true and false respectively, to which bivalency applies. Premise (2), however, is an assumption about the psychological structure and status of our concepts which we can join Russell in rejecting. Since all of our language and concepts are actually vague, this logical predication of their relation is false and commits a category mistake. And we now have a similar explanation for the falsity of the conclusion in the third scheme: that there is a hair that makes all the difference to baldness is flatly contradicted by our nebular concepts.

§ 5 Does vagueness in natural language give rise to a philosophical problem? Yes. Is it soluble? Yes. The sorites paradox gives us good reason to doubt that any formal logic can precisely model natural language. We can view various logical systems as attempts to capture a particular aspect of language as adequately as possible. Although none is perfect, we can appropriate them based on their usefulness and success. In the case of vagueness, none properly explains the issues at hand, because logical predication requires sharp boundaries, precisely what concepts of natural language lack. We can nonetheless, pace Williamson, use classical logic to the extent that it helps us understand the truth-functioning of our cognitive utterances. This relation between language and classical logic's bivalence principle is further brought to light by an examination of the vagueness of predicates and our conceptual structure, particularly in contrast to the underspecificity of the natural world.

Concerning this last point: our world often has exact boundaries given the precision of our unaided senses, e.g. I can clearly see the extension of this coffee mug, where it ends and my desktop begins. If we thought that the objects of the world correspond via words to ideas in our conceptual apparatus à la empiricists Locke and Hume, then it would be natural to posit an at-least theoretical analogue to under-specificity in our minds. Williamson, in his approach to the problem of vagueness, makes a similar shift from the outer world to the inner mind (not to attribute a philosophy of Ideas to him, though). However, if the reification of concepts is broken down to use, e.g. following something like Wittgenstein's concept of family-resemblance, we would no more expect all predications to be logically precise than we would expect all arguments to be valid or all truths derived from clear and distinct ideas.³²

Notes

- ¹ Williamson (2001) 36.
- ² Keefe and Smith, 2; Additionally, One might think that there is a more moderate form of non-sorites vagueness constituted only by condition (i); as such it would simply yield a non-binary system, and would not be the type of vagueness inherent in natural language, as explained below.
- ³ Williamson (1999) 270.
- ⁴ Cf. this error in Tye and Sainsbury (Keefe and Smith 17).
- ⁵ I am in complete agreement on this point with Russell. See Russell 62-3 and 68, and Williamson (2001) 52-3.
- ⁶ Sainsbury and Williamson, 458.
- ⁷ Sainsbury and Williamson, 462.
- ⁸ Keefe and Smith, 9-10.
- ⁹ Sainsbury and Williamson, 468.
- ¹⁰ Sainsbury and Williamson, 465.
- ¹¹ Keefe and Smith, 23.
- ¹² Sainsbury and Williamson, 472.
- ¹³ Keefe and Smith, 32; One way to extend the case for supervaluationism is to incorporate a definitely operator, "Def", as Fine himself does (Fine 140; Sainsbury and Williamson 473-4). Since the resultant complications are outside the scope of this essay, I will only note that such a move cannot account for higher-order vagueness and therefore need not worry us for the present purposes.
- ¹⁴ Sainsbury and Williamson, 478.
- ¹⁵ Sainsbury and Williamson, 476.
- ¹⁶ Sainsbury and Williamson, 476-7.
- ¹⁷ Sainsbury and Williamson, 476-7; One could amend this problem with a definitely operator, but in light of the other difficulties that void the solution-check written by degree theories, it's not necessary to pursue the vicissitudes of this objection.
- ¹⁸ Keefe and Smith, 17.
- ¹⁹ Sainsbury and Williamson, 459-61.
- ²⁰ Keefe and Smith 19.
- ²¹ Sainsbury and Williamson 479; Wittgenstein sections 65-6, et al.
- ²² Keefe and Smith, 19.
- ²³ Keefe and Smith, 21.
- ²⁴ Sainsbury and Williamson, 480.
- ²⁵ Williamson (2001) 165ff.
- ²⁶ Williamson (1999) 268.
- ²⁷ Proof reproduced from Williamson (1999) 265-6.
- ²⁸ Williamson (1999) 265-6.
- ²⁹ An interesting connection would be between the seemingly mild semantic indeterminacy entailed by my view here and the work of Quine. Perhaps there is a worm of indeterminacy at the core of the semantic apple. But that will have to await another essay.
- ³⁰ Williamson (1999) 266.
- ³¹ E.g. Maybe "somewhat short" should be treated as essentially comparative (to some norm, for example), and closer in form to a two-place predicate (such as Sxy meaning "x is shorter than y") rather than as an indexed truth-degree of the one-place predicate "short".
- ³² I would like to acknowledge the help of Elizabeth Fricker, the tutor for whom I originally handed this essay in, and the help of the other professors and students who gave me the benefit of their comments: Bill Mander, Anamitra Deb and Benjamin Rusch.

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