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Aesthetics, Attention, & Agency:
On the Novel Therapeutic Value of Psychedelic Experience

Trystan S. Richard
University of Utah

Abstract

In this paper, I advocate for the therapeutic efficacy of psychedelic experience by examining features of aesthetic experience. Section 1 deals with defamiliarization and self-unbinding; Section 2 concerns longevity and loss of control; and in Section 3, I explore anti-practicality and agency. I conclude by pointing toward novel research opportunities. My aim in each case is to identify the potential for psychedelic experience to aesthetically enhance 'ordinary' experience. I will argue that psychedelic experience yields therapeutic efficacy by providing perceptual and reflective tools for cultivating one's relationship with the everyday.

1 - Introduction

In Chapter 2 of Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception, Bence Nanay articulates his notion of aesthetic experience in terms of an orthogonal distinction between four types of visual attention: attention is (broadly) either distributed or focused regarding objects and simultaneously either distributed or focused regarding properties.1 Nanay points to paradigmatic instances of aesthetic experience, characterized by object-focused and property-distributed attention. He calls this combinatory cognitive mode aesthetic attention. He demonstrates that aesthetic attention underlies aesthetic experience by showing how the former neatly explains archetypal features of the latter.

1 - Defamiliarization & Self-unbinding

The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception.2

Nanay's survey of paradigmatic descriptions of aesthetic experience reads like a series of trip reports. Objects appear “scattered and blurred”;3 familiar forms are emptied of their normal significance;4 and mental detachment affords unusually vivid perception.5 While under the influence of the aesthetic, one sees the world with fresh eyes. As Nanay

1Bence Nanay, Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception, (Oxford University Press, 2016).
2Victor Shklovsky, Art as Technique, (1917). Quoted in Nanay, Aesthetics.
makes clear, this freshness involves the distribution of one’s attention across myriad properties of a given object or scene. Instead of the well-worn cover of my old math textbook, I see a cascade of playing cards arranged in strange symmetry. Instead of my well-worn white-walled bedroom, I see an undulating surface of shades and curves...

Indeed, such defamiliarizing experiences are common on psychedelic trips. For instance, Nanay presents a narrative self-report recorded by the well-known psychonaut, Aldous Huxley as archetypally aesthetic:

A small typing table stood in the center of the room; beyond it, from my point of view, was a wicker chair and beyond that a desk. The three pieces formed an intricate pattern of horizontals, uprights and diagonals – a pattern all the more interesting for not being interpreted in terms of spatial relationships. Table, chair, and desk came together in a composition.

Similar reports – which feature disruptions of ordinary spatial perception, yielding unusually vivid pattern-recognition – appear regularly in the recent clinical data on 'mystical' experiences occasioned by psychedelic therapy. Chris Letheby examines this literature, aiming to uncover the underlying natural mechanisms. His REBUS (Relaxed Beliefs Under Psychedelics) model of their therapeutic efficacy draws on neurocomputational theories of active perception, wherein the brain plays an active role in 'hallucinating' or phenomenally representing reality (eg. Seth 2021). In short, psychedelics disrupt phenomenology by relaxing the perceptual priors with which one's mind constructs the sensorial world. In Huxley’s case, mescaline-induced perceptual relaxation distributes his attention aesthetically – across more of his familiar furniture’s features than those to which he soberly attends in everyday life. Likewise, tripping provides therapeutic breakthroughs by relaxing the prior beliefs with which we construct ourselves; it catalyzes self-unbinding. Psychedelic therapy might revivify the mundane by prying open one’s attention to channels of unfamiliar beauty.

2 - Lingering Affect & Lack of Full Control

"The Difference Between Medicine and Poison is in the Dose"

Of course, psychedelics are not the only class of drugs which aesthetify experience by distributing attention and defamiliarizing perception. Alcohol, for example, famously beautifies the everyday by relaxing cognitive inhibition. What makes tripping stand out as an option for therapy is that its positive perceptual effects tend to last much longer than those of drinking. This longevity is evident in the emerging clinical literature. Patients treated with medicines like psilocybin report improved well-being months afterward; they are able to recall insights from their trips and apply them to ordinary circumstances—and thereby deepen adaptation to daily life. If the drunk goggles get thrown away once sober, it seems the psychedelic shades just get taken off.

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9Letheby, *Philosophy of Psychedelics*.
11—and require far less compulsive redosing!
12Letheby, *Philosophy of Psychedelics*. 
The influence of aesthetic experience is like that of LSD and similar substances in that it likewise lingers. For instance, consider how different the world looks after walking out of an engaging movie.\textsuperscript{13} However, psychedelic experience is also unlike aesthetic engagement in that the former is easier to manifest intentionally. Nanay observes as well that we lack full control over whether we will have an aesthetic experience. He quotes Roger Fry, who laments “days of lowered vitality when one may wander […] in despair at one’s incapacity to respond to the appeal of the great [artists].”\textsuperscript{14} Aesthetic experience is like belief in this way. We might call this aesthetic involuntarism. Our aesthetic sensibilities can be overwhelmed by emotional, ethical, and even epistemic factors. Consider how plot holes can ruin a story, or how life circumstances can recolor a song. Beauty is not fully under our control.

The ability to take a drug which reliably defamiliarizes perception enhances agency by increasing control over one’s openness to aesthetic experience. Moreover, the enduring nature of psychedelic insights makes unfamiliar beauty easier to experience in everyday life – even to experience while no longer on the drug! For this reason, technologies like ayahuasca may be uniquely well suited to use as tools rather than crutches. Compounds which encourage vivid self-reflection have therapeutic longevity because they do more than prescribe a numbing gloss over daily life.

3 - Anti-practicality & Aesthetic Agency

\textit{Freedom comes from a balance of flexibility and control.}\textsuperscript{15}

Psychedelic patients’ long-lasting ability to recall and recreate therapeutic insight hints at our capacity to experience multifaceted beauty through perceptual cultivation. Profoundly novel experiences encourage profoundly novel understanding. Contemporary philosopher of aesthetics and technology C. Thi Nguyen makes a similar point when he compares playing games to practicing yoga.\textsuperscript{16} Yoga trains the body by directing attention and movement. Games train the mind by directing attention and will. Nguyen shows that games invert motivation and provide space for aesthetic appreciation of one’s own agency. Games encourage us to pursue particular goals for the sake of the experiences enabled by their pursuit – not just for the sake of victory.

Such anti-practicality also characterizes Nanay’s notion of the aesthetic. Nanay identifies his analysis as broadly Kantian.\textsuperscript{17} Aesthetic experience presents its objects as more than mere means to an end; it focuses holistically on the complex variety inalienably embedded in the visual scene, or on the strange wonder hidden away in everyday objects. By training the mind to relax its evaluative priors, psychedelic therapy might enhance one’s capacity to engage meaningfully with the mundane on mutually agreeable terms. Psychedelically-informed attention empowers everyday experiences of aesthetic agency. Presence with the unified moment and openness to its marvelous multiplicity allows one to act authentically for the serene sake of beautiful action alone.

4 - Conclusion & Future Work

\textsuperscript{13}Nanay, \textit{Aesthetics}.

\textsuperscript{14}Roger Fry (1927). Quoted in Nanay, \textit{Aesthetics}.

\textsuperscript{15}C. Thi Nguyen, \textit{Games: Agency as Art}, (Oxford University Press, 2020).

\textsuperscript{16}Nguyen, \textit{Games}.

\textsuperscript{17}Nanay, \textit{Aesthetics}. 

Whatever occupation or activity you can think of, it is in reality a game. [...] Appalled as I am by the results of my teaching, I cannot stop, but quickly move on to the next creature with my news, until I have preached the truth throughout the universe and have converted everyone to oblivion.¹⁸

If games and artworks are like yoga for the mind, then psychedelic trips are something like yoga for the soul. Traditional yoga engages with novel modalities of one’s own embodiment; games and art engage with novel modes of agency and perception; and psychic therapies engage with novel modes of consciousness. The interrelatedness of psychedelics and aesthetics is expressed through their common communion with defamiliarization and aesthetic appreciation. Drugs and artworks can both be used as tools for self-reflection yielding long-lasting results. This commonality suggests that there is untapped therapeutic value in the appreciation of beauty. Perhaps there is important research to be done in this respect. It may be that the clinical efficacy of psychedelics owes not only to their perception-altering and self-unbinding properties, but just as well to their sheer, spectacular awe. The everyday self may at times seem inescapable, yet the silver-screen sun sets upon us all and still, this strange show whirls on...

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White Consumer Consciousness and the Commodification of Racial Identity

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Abstract

Black Marxist theory holds that one of capitalism's core features is the commodification of racial identity which has shaped the violent history of racism as we know it. This paper discusses the metaphysical underpinnings of "racial capitalism" and explains how the commodification of racial identity remains pervasive in neoliberal society. Drawing on Hegel's idealist aesthetics and their inversion in Marx's materialist critique, I argue that capitalism fosters a form of aesthetic consciousness that allows for the abstraction and consumption of racial 'Otherness.' Then, with the support of Black radical thinkers such as bell hooks, Frantz Fanon, and Patricia Hill Collins, I address how the commodifying effects of racial capitalism mold the white consumer psyche, as well as the behavior of predominantly white institutions, such that Black and brown people are often treated as marketable or consumable images rather than respected individuals who embody their racial identity. Finally, I engage with the question, often debated by Marxists, of whether identity politics and anti-racism can be at all effective under capitalism. I attempt to break from Adolph Reed's position that identity politics remains superficial and counterrevolutionary by arguing that anti-racism, if properly directed against the aesthetics of identity commodification, can help resist the material and spiritual alienations imposed on us all.

Introduction

You’ve taken my blues and gone —
You sing ’em on Broadway
And you sing ’em in Hollywood Bowl,
And you mixed ’em up with symphonies
And you fixed ’em
So they don’t sound like me.
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

- Langston Hughes

From the perspective of Black Marxist thought, racism and capitalism form a symbiosis that rests on the commodification of the bodies and culture of Black and brown people. This phenomenon can be observed everywhere in neoliberal society, often in

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19I should provide a brief note on the difference between “liberalism” and “neoliberalism,” especially because the surest way to tell if someone thinks like a neoliberal is that he will claim
seemingly innocuous ways, but it was born from a history of violence. In today’s America, where the legacy of slavery persists through various forms of institutional racism—and, in the case of prison labor, where it remains appallingly close to its original structure—the problem of racial commodification survives and continues to evolve. Scholars have written sweeping studies of the historical commodification of Black and brown people’s bodies (i.e., the exploitation of their labor). But this paper seeks to address the frontier of racial commodification in a world of advanced capitalism and mass media—the reproduction and consumption of “identity” itself. There is no doubt that racial politics in America have changed drastically since the time of slavery. But as long as the essential structures of racial capitalism remain, as long as the meaning of racial identity is shaped by the market, a central neurosis of the consumer psyche will remain—namely, that Black and brown people will appear as images and objects of consumption. This makes it so that, even for progressive-minded white people, the line between encountering racial identity as something embodied by a person versus something represented as an abstract Other is often blurred. Drawing on the foundational theories of Hegel and Marx, as well as more precise critiques from Frantz Fanon, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins and others, I will attempt to bring that line into focus and help us to see the transformative power of being on the right side of it. I will also argue that, despite the powerful skepticism of Black Marxists like Adolph Reed, anti-racism, when conceived in terms of a struggle against the aesthetics of commodification, can help resist the material and spiritual alienations that capitalism imposes on us all.

The term “racial capitalism,” first coined by Cedric Robinson in his 1983 work Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition, attempts to make up for traditional Marxism’s failure to account for the inherently racial character of capitalism. For Robinson, capitalism and racism did not break from the old European feudal order but rather evolved from within it to produce a modern system of “racial capitalism”—one that was dependent on slavery and imperialism. The term racial capitalism is meant to express that capitalism and racism have a reciprocal, coevolutionary relationship. More concretely, it is meant to call attention to the fact that the capitalist division of labor and class hierarchy have always been created and sustained by racial inequality. Once one accepts this, it becomes less of a stretch to propose that capitalism is the necessary partner of racism, and perhaps even the direct cause of it. Nonetheless, in order to understand how the commodification of racial identity is endemic to capitalism, it is helpful to return to the foundational theories of Hegel and Marx. Once we see how Marx stands Hegel’s idealist dialectic on its head, it becomes clear how the material relations of capitalism produce a deficient aesthetic consciousness that dissolves racial identity into the same commodified soup as coal or steel.

The Metaphysical Foundations of Racial Capitalism

the latter is synonymous with the former. In broad terms, liberalism primarily values the freedom of people while neoliberalism primarily values the “freedom” of capital—that is, the unregulated flow of money and resources across the world. For a more in depth analysis of neoliberalism in the context of critical economic theory see: David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)


Hegel, in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, posits that it is human nature to try to externalize our inner selves onto the world around us. There is an innate human need to “impress the seal of our innermost being” on our surroundings. But there are different ways of doing this, and some are truer to freedom and more worthy of humanity than others. Specifically, Hegel cautions against the extremes of practical “desire” and theoretical “intelligence.” Both desire and intelligence transform objects into the alienated servants of the subject—the former by reducing things to objects of consumption, the latter by abstracting things into universal categories of the mind. Both of these deficient modes prevent the subject from acting self-consistently and therefore result in the subject’s unfreedom as well.

Desire does not grant its objects any freedom. It instead functions to show “that they are only there to be destroyed and consumed.” And yet the desiring subject remains forever dependent on the consumption and negation of the object for his own self-affirmation. In a state of desire, the subject does not freely create himself. He is instead entangled in “valueless interests,” and finds his own identity imprisoned by the superficial objects of his desire. The mode of intelligence, on the other hand, does not try to consume things but instead “abandon[s] all intercourse with the thing as a given individual... making a concrete object of sense into an abstract matter of thought.” We can understand this abstracting tendency as the aesthetic basis for racial stereotypes. In order for racial identity to become commodified to the extent that it has exchange value in the capitalist marketplace, it must necessarily be disassociated from its origins in individual personhood. Hence, for the consumer consciousness, racial identity is generalized and packaged. Under racial capitalism, identity becomes universally fungible.

Hegel aesthetics, when applied to our current world, may offer insight into how our history of racial violence is bound up with a broken consciousness that treats Black and brown people as either disposable objects or abstract stereotypes. Both of these modes function to detach identity from indivisible, unique personhood and distill it into a fungible widget—something completely liquid and interchangeable. But in order to see how this deficient consciousness evolved with capitalism, we need to bring in Marx. Marx flips Hegel’s idealist thinking on its head to produce a materialist dialectic, wherein capitalism limits our aesthetic relation to others to the sphere of commodity. For Marx, it is the material structures of life that condition our relationships to nature and to one another. “Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.” Ideas themselves are shaped by our material relation to the world.

We can now begin to see how the material structures of capitalism reinforce the ideological and aesthetic structures of racism. Capitalism and its institution of private property frame the ultimate value of things as simple commodities to be exchanged for money. “Money is the pander between need and object, between human life and the means of subsistence. But that which mediates my life mediates also the existence of other men.”

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23Hegel, 43.
24Hegel, 41.
25Hegel, 41.
26Hegel, 42.
for me. It is for me the other person." Capitalist and worker alike are means to the nonhuman end of commodity. Commodity, as the dominant material relationship of racial capitalism, distances us from each other as humans and grounds white people, especially, in a broken perception of racial Others as objects in two-dimensions: production and consumption, with each valued only for the sake of the other.

The institution of private property pushes us to value life through the Hegelian mode of desire—the owning, consuming, negating of things and, consequently, people. As bell hooks puts it, just as it was “this black body that was most ‘desired’ for its labor in slavery,” it is now “this body that is most represented in contemporary popular culture as the body to be watched, imitated, desired, possessed.” When we are alienated from what we produce, we are also alienated from each other and, ultimately, ourselves. A change in this deficient form of consciousness therefore requires a change in the material relations of life. This is why, for Marx, the “abolition of private property” would lead to an “emancipation of the senses.” Once this commodified way of life ends, things will no longer be fundamentally exchangeable and will start being valuable in and of themselves.

Implicit in Marxist thought and its precursors in German idealism, is an immensely powerful truth, one that has been expressed by great thinkers from Frederick Douglass to Angela Davis, namely, that racism is not something that wholly benefits white people at the expense of Black people; it is a spiritual plague that afflicts Black and white people alike. Foundational for this is the idea that freedom is not a zero-sum game. Freedom is not the neoliberal “freedom” to buy and sell. It is not a matter of any individual’s license to possess or dispossess. Freedom is only ever sustainable and self-increasing in terms of the collective prosperity of a community of people. And the converse is true of unfreedom and misery. Alienation is always shared communally, though it manifests differently for different people. A guiding principle of this paper, therefore, is that wherever you look for the oppression of Black people, you will find it bound up with the emotional and spiritual brokenness of white people. This is not to absolve any individual of their responsibility to choose compassion. It is rather to emphasize that the task of unraveling racial capitalism requires not just an economic revolution but an aesthetic revolution. It requires that all people undergo an existential shift away from commodified relationships with themselves and others. To begin to understand how this can be done, we must examine how racial capitalism plays into our society both materially and psychologically.

Eating the Other: How Racial Identity is Commodified by and for the White Psyche

For most people on the left, it is easy to see how capitalist power structures have historically commodified racial identity for the purposes of dividing the working class and exploiting the labor of marginalized groups. What is less clear is how racial identity today often remains commodified and consumed under the liberal auspices of “diversity” or “multiculturalism.” If we are to develop authentic and effective methods of activism, it

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28 Karl Marx, Third Manuscript: Private Property and Labor, 135.
30 Marx, 113.
31 This is not to say that racism harms white people in the same way or to the same degree as Black people. There is, without doubt, a big difference. This is only to say that racist frameworks taint the freedom of all people and, therefore, that the suffering of Black and white people exists on the same continuum.
is vital to understand how even seemingly progressive ideologies can sometimes serve to reproduce racial identity as a commodity.

At the root of capitalism's commodification of identity is the neutral fact that racial and cultural difference is inherently interesting to human beings because it is a source of novelty. It is only once this fundamental curiosity is instrumentalized by commodity culture that harm is done. Perhaps the clearest example of the mechanics of this subtle transition from innocent curiosity to racial alienation can be found in American youth culture, where white teenagers often measure their own levels of social capital or “coolness” based on how they emulate and consume Black culture. A notable empirical study of this comes from the anthropologist Mary Bucholtz, who did a year of fieldwork observing and interviewing students at the racially diverse Bay City High School in San Francisco.

According to Bucholtz, Black students at Bay City High, because of their status as trendsetters, were often viewed by their white counterparts “as cool almost by definition.” But white students who sought to emulate their Black peers had to walk a thin line between being cool and being accused of cultural appropriation. This meant that, in order for white students to comfortably borrow linguistic and cultural styles from their Black peers, those styles had to become “deracialized” —removed from their original context of Black personhood. As Bucholtz elegantly puts it, “it may be said that appropriate whiteness requires the appropriation of blackness, but only via those black styles that are becoming deracialized and hence no longer inevitably confer racial markedness on those who take them up.”

The Black origins of youth trends in music, dance, fashion, sports and language are well-documented. And yet, as white youth embrace certain elements of Black culture, these elements, at least in their minds, become deracialized.

It’s important to pinpoint the meaning of “deracialization” in relation to the common discussion of “cultural appropriation.” The argument that white people should not emulate Black culture simply because it does not “belong” to them is incomplete. The appropriation of Black cultural styles is not just problematic because white people are “stealing” them, but because white people are merely using Black styles to gain social capital with other white people. The real harm of deracialization is that it allows for the social commodification of Blackness; it allows white people to abstract and instrumentalize Black styles without making any effort to commune with the people who invented them or understand the deeply personal reasons why they did so.

We are now beginning to see how white consumer consciousness so often reduces racial identity to its mere qualia, its abstract representation, detaching it from the human bodies where it originates and thereby allowing identity to be packaged as a commodity to be exchanged in the social or economic marketplace. The next question we need to ask is, why?

Bell hooks gives a compelling answer in her 1992 essay “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” which explores the tacit motivations behind white people’s decontextualization and consumption of Black identity. Hooks ties the inclinations of both white and Black people to commodify and consume racial identity back to capitalist alienation and existential angst. As she puts it:

Masses of young people dissatisfied by U.S. imperialism, unemployment,
lack of economic opportunity, afflicted by the postmodern malaise of alienation, no sense of grounding, no redemptive identity, can be manipulated by cultural strategies that offer Otherness as appeasement, particularly through commodification. The contemporary crises of identity in the west, especially as experienced by white youth, are eased when the “primitive” is recouped via a focus on diversity and pluralism which suggests the Other can provide life-sustaining alternatives.\textsuperscript{34}

One of Hooks’ central points is that far too much of what white people see as “boundary breaking” interactions with Black and brown people are merely the consumption of commodified racial identity— the eating of the Other. In contemporary Western society, the consumption of racial difference is seen not only as a thrill but as a transformative and virtuous experience. But the conditions of racial capitalism make it so that one can seek an aesthetic encounter with a racial “Other” while never truly relinquishing positions of privilege or straying from one’s mainstream comfort zone.

In truth, people of all backgrounds are faced with the challenge of relating to unknown Others. The attempt to reconcile self with Other, and deeper, the longing to do away with that harsh dichotomy, is a defining aspect of human existence and sociality. But racial capitalism strips the authenticity from natural attempts at outreach and precludes the possibility of reconciliation. It plays on my fear that, if I were to truly confront the Other, I would have to confront myself. Or, more precisely, that if I stopped relating to the Other as the shadow of a person, his radiance would drag me into the light.

Racial capitalism extends an invisible hand and offers us a deal. It says: “why face the inconvenience of leaving your home for the Other, when you can have him delivered straight to your door? Why face the discomfort of looking the Other in the eye, and seeing yourself reflected there, when you can have him served to you on a platter— a delicious object that you can consume without fear of him biting back.” And because genuine confrontation of the Other necessitates genuine self-confrontation (and we are desperately afraid of that) we nod our heads and allow our genuine desires for communion to be blunted, cheapened and channeled into the feverish pursuit of commodified humanity.

And yet commodified Otherness still has enough \textit{schein}, enough of the crude appearance of novelty, that we still believe its reified, fetishized, form can be a source of self-transformation. Hooks gives the example of a conversation she overheard between a group of white boys at Yale who were talking about the thrill of trying to have sex with women from as many racial groups as possible. These were boys who claimed a progressive politics. They saw themselves as non-racists, “who choose to transgress racial boundaries within the sexual realm not to dominate the Other, but rather so that they can be acted upon, so that they can be changed utterly.”\textsuperscript{35} This is the central myth of racial capitalism— that one can be positively transformed by the consumption of Otherness.

One term that hooks invokes to help explain why white consciousness associates transformative pleasure with the consumption of racial otherness is “imperialist nostalgia” — the mystification of colonized cultures that results from the alienated white person’s longing for an idealized version of what their ancestors have destroyed.\textsuperscript{36} More apparent in everyday life, however, is the market’s framing of Otherness as the source of a more pleasurable way of life or a deeper connection to nature. “In the cultural

\textsuperscript{34}Hooks, 369.  
\textsuperscript{35}Hooks, 368.  
\textsuperscript{36}Hooks, 369.
marketplace, the Other is coded as having the capacity to be more alive.37 This is also a point emphasized by Frantz Fanon, who suggests that “the Blacks represent a kind of insurance for humanity in the eyes of the Whites. When the Whites feel they have become too mechanized, they turn to the Coloreds and request a little human sustenance.”38 Hence we find white people turning to blackness not simply to disrupt the status quo, but as a means of saving their very souls.

Fanon observes that, from birth, the white man is told that “in a society such as ours, industrialized to the extreme, dominated by science, there is no longer room for your sensitivity.”39 Existentially speaking, the white man’s relationship with the world is “one of appropriation. The white man wants the world... he enslaves it.”40 Instead of being taught to be in the world or with the world, it is drilled into the white man that it is his destiny to possess the world. Here, we can think back to Hegel’s critique of desire as a mode which undermines the freedom of the desiring “subject.” The inauthenticity of this ethos is the primary source of the white man’s alienation, his numbness, and therefore the driving force which leads him to see blackness as “a metaphor for freedom, an end to boundaries.”41 The real tragedy of the commodification of identity is that it cheapens and distorts the true opportunity for the kind of communion where there is mutual choice, mutual recognition of prejudice, mutual listening and looking.

White people seek connection with Black identity because they believe their souls may be saved by blackness, because they think their humanity might be found in blackness, because they think they see a more honest relation between mind and body in blackness. And this cannot be reduced completely to the fetishization or consumption of racial Otherness. As both Black Marxists and intersectionality theorists will tell you, marginalized people do have an extraordinary power to liberate us all through new interpretations of culture and new visions of the world. But white people must realize that there is more complexity to blackness than the messianic vision of soulfulness that is often presented by the vendors of racial commodity. It is only once the white man understands this, once he turns off the television and connects with people who embody Black personhood, that he can encounter Black people in their wholeness and see that they, like him, are broken in their own way. Only then can the white man come to know that his freedom is eternally bound up with the freedom of his Black brother whom he both fears and loves—the ‘Other’ in whom he desperately searches for himself. The white man’s reaching out for both freedom and pleasure in blackness reveals the deeper brokenness of Western society’s system of racial capitalism—a culture of self-commodification that alienates Black and white people alike.

The conditions of racial capitalism permeate all aspects of American life, which means that the commodification of racial identity affects the consciousness of Black people as well. As hooks notes, racial capitalism often seduces minority populations with the promise of recognition and advancement.42 It folds Black people into consumer culture largely by compelling them to consume their own commodified images. As a result, “communities of resistance are replaced by communities of consumption.”43 Commodified

37Hooks, 370, my emphasis.
39Fanon, 107.
40Fanon, 107.
41Hooks, 388.
42Hooks, 370.
43Hooks, 375.
representations of racial identity are sold to Black and white people alike, both of whom consume them largely as a means of numbing the alienation that is, ironically, produced by capitalism in the first place. In other words, racial capitalism creates the demand for commodified expressions of identity by robbing us of true ones. It’s as if, having lost myself, I went to the store to buy a doll that looked like me and then let it do all the talking. White dolls talk to Black dolls and the people behind them rarely talk to each other. Hence the Black Marxist view is that, just as commodity culture dulls white people’s receptivity to critical consciousness, it diffuses Black people’s power to ignite critical consciousness.

Having sketched the metaphysical and existential undercurrents of racial capitalism, I will now discuss how this system extends to the ways that white institutions commodify people of color for the sake of both social and monetary profit.

**Selling the Other: How Racial Identity is Commodified by and for White Institutions**

White people’s desire to be spiritually and morally transformed by the consumption of Black images continually manifests itself in the form of economic demand. As Patricia Hill Collins puts it, “the black culture industry recognizes [that] most market demand for products and services stems not from needs but rather from unmet desires that must be constantly stimulated.” It is no secret to vendors and advertisers that the commodification of racial identity has become profitable. In our world of mass media and advanced global capitalism, the young Black bodies that used to be valued for their labor power are now also commodified in a different way. Whereas, previously, Black images were degraded in order to justify labor exploitation, now the images themselves are appropriated and sold. “In essence, the bodies and images of young African Americans constitute new commodities that are central to global relations of consumption, not marginalized within them.”

Many of the clearest examples of such commodification come from the hip hop industry. Rap is a form of Black expression that is known in the marketplace as a “crossover genre,” a style that, like rhythm and blues before it, is very popular with white people across the globe. This is not to say that white people should not listen to rap music. But we should problematize the fact that Black people’s images are so often tied to the profitability of institutions owned and operated by white people. We should not only be resistant to the content of commodified Black images but also to the fact that they are treated as commodities by the advertising and entertainment industry. Despite the fact that some Black individuals themselves profit greatly from the sale of their images, the underlying bad faith of the (predominantly white) capitalist vendors is revealed in that they do not seem to care whether the representations of Black identity they are selling are positive or negative. “Athletes and criminals alike are profitable,” Collins writes, “not for the vast majority of African American men, but for the people who own the teams, control the media, provide food, clothing and telephone services to the prisons, and who

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46. Collins, 305.

47. Collins, 300.
consume seemingly endless images of pimps, hustlers, rapists, and felons.\footnote{Collins, 311.} In response to this issue, many Black people have taken ownership of their own enterprises. Many rap artists, for instance, have started their own record labels and clothing lines. From a Black Marxist perspective, however, this method is still deeply flawed because it preserves the essential medium of commodification.

Black people are not strangers to the desire to share in the profits of the global consumer market, much of which is made up of young people who purchase the event tickets, clothing, shoes, and sports drinks of hip hop culture. But regardless of who profits from this, the representations of Black people’s bodies remain tied to structures of profitability.\footnote{Collins, 311.} Collins, who specializes in Black feminist thought, calls out the marketing of “Pimp Juice,” a sports drink owned by the rapper Nelly, as commodifying Black sexuality and reinforcing the conventional dichotomy of Black men as pimps and Black women as prostitutes. Here lies another distasteful aspect of racial capitalism; in a world where racial identity is widely commodified, it is often the case that “black people become target audiences for their own degradation.”\footnote{Collins, 313.}

Indeed, racial capitalism so saturates our minds and institutions that even “diversity” initiatives, which are ostensibly aimed at the advancement of Black and brown people, can be tainted by commodification.

In America’s current political culture, especially among corporate and academic institutions, racial diversity is a virtue that is inevitably tied to social and economic capital. As Nancy Leong puts it in an article for the \textit{Harvard Law Review}, “in a society preoccupied with diversity, non-whiteness is a valued commodity. And where that society is founded on capitalism, it is unsurprising that the commodity of non-whiteness is exploited for its market value.”\footnote{Collins, 313.} This is why we see things like the University of Wisconsin photoshopping a Black student into a brochure, Walmart aggressively recruiting non-white employees to create the appearance of representation, or George W. Bush reassuring the NAACP that he has many Black friends.\footnote{Leong, 2153.} These are just a few examples of how white consumer consciousness, as sketched in the previous section, reaches for commodified blackness as a means of possessing both an outward and inward virtuousness. The common theme is that, in each of these instances, we find white people reaching for blackness only insofar as it helps craft a marketable version of themselves. Here we can again see the dialectical manner in which commodity culture reifies white and Black people together.

The inauthentic nature of neoliberal “diversity” efforts is also revealed by the general experience shared by many people of color where they are qualified for a job, hired into a predominantly white institution (at least in part) because of their racial identity, but then denied the things they need to find comfort and success in the workplace. And indeed there is evidence that, even as diversity hiring and training initiatives become more prevalent, the well-being of Black and brown workers may be worsening.\footnote{Karen, Brown. “The Fear Black Employees Carry.” \textit{Harvard Business Review}, (April 30, 2021).} The commodifying conditions of racial capitalism produce the harmful irony that our legal and social focus on performative diversity often does not liberate people of color so much as it relegates them to the status of “trophies’ or ‘passive emblems.”\footnote{Leong, 2156.} This superficial approach to diversity leads many predominantly white institutions and

\footnote{Collins, 311.}
\footnote{Collins, 311.}
\footnote{Collins, 313.}
\footnote{Leong, 2153.}
\footnote{Leong, 2156.}
white people to treat people of color as prized trophies, rather than embodiments of personal identity—a phenomenon the African Studies scholar Jodi Melamed has termed “neoliberal multiculturalism.” Diversity efforts that commodify those they intend to support cannot be called anti-racist. The question then becomes, can anti-racism make progress within the commodifying fog of racial capitalism?

After sitting through all the arguments thus far, many Marxist readers might be left frustrated and nursing doubts as to whether anti-racism efforts can genuinely break free from commodity culture. Is it at all possible to make permanent inroads against racism from within a system of capitalism? Many Black Marxists are highly skeptical. One of the loudest and most distinguished among them is Dr. Adolph Reed, a political theorist who routinely denounces the liberal obsession with identity politics and anti-racism as fundamentally secondary to class struggle.

The Prospects for Anti-Racism Under Racial Capitalism

Reed’s criticism of anti-racism is grounded in a diagnosis of racial capitalism that is similar to the one I have just outlined. Namely, that anti-racism seeks to reform race relations only within the system of capitalism that itself reproduces racism. In other words, anti-racist efforts are limited in that they are ultimately aimed at increasing the commodity-value of Black and brown people instead of dismantling that value system altogether. As Reed puts it:

Notwithstanding its performative evocations of the 1960s Black Power populist militancy, this antiracist politics is neither leftist in itself nor particularly compatible with a left politics as conventionally understood. At this political juncture, it is, like bourgeois feminism and other groupist tendencies, an oppositional epicycle within hegemonic neoliberalism, one might say a component of neoliberalism’s critical self-consciousness; it is thus in fact fundamentally anti-leftist.

Reed argues that the current project of anti-racism treats white supremacy as “an amorphous, ideological abstraction” and is therefore inclined to direct its energies toward superficial and arbitrary crusades. In reality, there is only one struggle, and it plays out along the lines of class, not racial identity. And it is only as a result of class struggle that true racial equality can be achieved.

If racial capitalism was a garden weed, Adolph Reed would view its roots as capitalist class hierarchy and its stem as racism. Hence, for Reed, anti-racist efforts remain ignorant of the essential gardening principle that a weed will always grow back stronger if you merely cut it off at the stem. This is largely the basis for his bold claim that anti-racism is counterrevolutionary. Reed’s argument is compelling, especially when we consider how racist politics have evolved into increasingly insidious forms in response

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58 Reed, 108.
to the ongoing fight for civil and human rights. We see this in the U.S., for example, with slavery giving way to Jim Crow and the War on Drugs, and internationally, with the evolution of colonialism from industrial to financial extraction from the Global South.

If we start from the central idea laid out by this paper, that racism is fundamentally connected to the aesthetics of commodified identity, then it becomes possible to stray from Marxist orthodoxy and suggest that we can work “backwards” from the ideological to the material; possible, that is, to hope that an “emancipation of the senses” might precede or coevolve with economic revolution. With this premise in hand, it becomes plausible that anti-racism, even if practiced as aesthetic resistance, can acknowledge racism’s symbiosis with capitalism and directly target its roots in the commodification of racial identity.

If we look at the historical theory that grounds Cedric Robinson’s idea of racial capitalism, we see that capitalism has not necessarily produced racism so much as the two have coevolved and now reinforce each other. It is here that Robinson’s definition of “racial capitalism” strays from Marxist orthodoxy. As Robin D.G. Kelley summarizes, “Robinson challenged the Marxist idea that capitalism was a revolutionary negation of feudalism. Instead, capitalism emerged within the feudal order and flowered in the cultural soil of a Western civilization already thoroughly infused with racialism.”

If cultural and racial supremacy has functioned to reinforce ruling economic orders throughout history, including in pre-capitalist society, then perhaps anti-racism can help reshape the unstable conditions of advanced capitalism and break the fever of neoliberal ideology. If, contrary to Reed’s linear view of capitalism causing racism, we use Robinson’s insight to draw a more reciprocal or circular relationship between the two, then the fight against racial capitalism can begin at any point on the circle. If the totality of the weed we are looking to pull can only ever be considered racial capitalism, then we can start pulling from either end; a struggle against racism implies a struggle against capitalism, and vice versa.

If racism is a tool of capitalism, let us blunt it. If racism is an aesthetic of capitalism, let us show its ugly face to the world. Even if we are to accept Reed’s premise that racism is always epiphenomenal to capitalism, the effort of anti-racism can be cast in terms of helping people understand that capitalism is distasteful because it produces racism. Even if the weed of racial capitalism is as resilient as Reed thinks, perhaps if we darken its leaves people will stop mistaking it for a flower. We can acknowledge that anti-racism is largely an attempt at an aesthetic revolution. And we can grant that any aesthetic revolution must ultimately aspire to a material revolution. But we must also acknowledge that aesthetics matter. To reject the aesthetic of a commodified racial Other is to resist capitalism.

The most powerful forms of anti-racism—those that may ultimately amount to anti-capitalism—must help us to recognize and recoil from the aesthetics of commodified racial identity. If anti-racism is to undermine the foundations of racial capitalism, it must teach us to recognize that encounters with commodified Others may serve to titillate and numb but never to transform or inspire. Perhaps, then, the truest form of anti-racism comes in the form of great works of art—the kind that pulse so deeply with the dynamic truth of identity that all commodified interpretations of existence, when held in comparison, are revealed to be lifeless.

Conclusion

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At the core of our violent history of racism is the commodification of racial identity that has evolved as a central feature of capitalism. Insight into the alienating effects of racial capitalism can be drawn from Hegel's idealist aesthetics and their inversion in Marx's materialist critique of capitalism and the ideology of commodification. Just as capitalism and its money institution reduce goods and services to their exchange value, racial capitalism reduces people to superficial, consumable images of racial identity. The material and ideological conditions of racial capitalism can be seen on the production side with the brutality of slavery, mass incarceration, and labor exploitation. But today, the frontier of racial capitalism lies with the commodified reproduction and consumption of racial identity. This system is enthusiastically, and often unconsciously, participated in by both white and nonwhite people who seek existential anchorage and the salvation of identity amid the revolving alienations of postmodern life. In our current atmosphere, where racial diversity is a mark of virtue, the commodification of racial identity is also used by predominantly white institutions who wish to market the images of Black and brown people without investing the resources required for their sustainable success. The result of all of this is that white and nonwhite people alike are alienated from each other and, in turn, from themselves.

But racial capitalism may not be an endless wasteland in which any genuine attempts at anti-racism are doomed to wither on the vine. On the contrary, the fact that racism and capitalism are interwoven is precisely what grants anti-racism revolutionary potential. The fact that racial capitalism is experienced most immediately through the aesthetics of racialized commodity suggests that aesthetic resistance can prepare the ground for material revolution. It is clear that the weed of racial capitalism must be torn out root and stem. The struggle for racial justice must be united with the struggle for economic justice; and this union must be rooted in a critical consciousness that transcends race. But any attempts at reform must operate with full awareness that the systemic reality of racism still hangs overhead. This means we must find the courage to look the Other in the eye, and the vulnerability to let him look back. The wisdom, that is, to see that courage and vulnerability are the same thing. Only then will it become clear that there really was no “Other” to begin with. Only then can we find joy in other people and cultures without objectifying and consuming them. And only then will we be able to reach deep enough within ourselves to withdraw forms of expression so elemental that they defy consumption. Yes, we suffer a commodity culture,

But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me,
And write about me —
Black and beautiful —
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be
Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me.
References

The Problem of the Political:
Aristotle and the Rule of the Virtuous Man

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Abstract

The pambasileia, or the rule of the most virtuous man, creates an internal paradoxical relationship within the confines of Aristotle’s Politics. This originates from a logical tension between Aristotle’s teleological (goal-oriented) and eidetic (part-whole) accounts of the city, both in serving the human need for political expression yet also superseding the interests of individuals. With this relationship in mind, I extrapolate the problems latent in direct rule by the virtuous man to continued political problems involved with transforming his role into that of a virtuous lawgiver, which Aristotle presents as his solution to the problem of the political. Although this transition ameliorates some of the exclusionary problems of the pambasileia, it nonetheless renders citizens as administrators and interpreters of law rather than true deliberators in their exercise of political animality. In this sense, the rule of law still retains a monopoly over the logos of the city, barring its members from complete exercise of citizen virtue.

There is a fundamental political problem inherent in singular rule by the most virtuous man, or the pambasileia. Within the confines of Aristotle’s teleological framework, establishing ethical and political justice as goal oriented, this form of rule creates the problem of an anti-political model since men are barred from existing as political animals with the completion of one man’s virtue as necessary ruler of the city. Although the complete and virtuous ruler delivers just laws and legislation to the city, he also subordinates the city through his rule since he himself constitutes a whole human being and is therefore complete without the city. The city becomes an unnecessary aberration, destroying the eidetic part-whole arrangement (described through citizen-ruler and citizen-city relations) that gives men meaning as political animals. Aristotle attempts to solve this problem latent in the teleological account by rendering the virtuous man a law giver, not ruler of the city. However, does this solution solve the fundamental problem of the political? If constitutional law has the authority of ideal virtue, I argue that this would still create a similar anti-political problem because politics would only ever exist as the administration and interpretation of the law as laid down by the virtuous ruler. This would limit the participatory exercise of the logos or “reasoned speech” in political affairs necessary for the completion of man’s nature as a political animal. Even if this may be necessary to preserve justice, the eidetic arrangement is still destroyed because the virtuous law, much like the virtuous ruler, renders the city obsolete. As a result, the law as a whole and as an extrapolation of the virtuous man’s rule would likewise supersede the city itself.

The problem arises from the fact that man is a political animal by phusis (nature). This is a central and underlying premise which serves as the basis for Aristotle’s moral
and political philosophy, and it is one that I concur with. According to Aristotle, humans can be typologically defined through their life activity, like any other animal, and this life activity is a reflection of their nature. As such, man’s \textit{phusis} can be discovered through the investigation of his \textit{ergon} (the activity in correspondence with achieving nature). This is because with a teleological understanding, \textit{ergon} exists for the sake of the completion of \textit{phusis}. When this natural activity is done well, it can be determined to be done excellently or with virtue. For Aristotle, that which makes humans distinct from other animals, and therefore constitutes their natural activity, is their capacity of \textit{logos} since “human beings are the only animals who possess reasoned speech.”\textsuperscript{61} As a result, it becomes natural and necessary for human beings to form political communities to exercise this inherent will into practice. This condition is required for humans to live completely and achieve the flourishing state of \textit{eudaimonia}, namely, happiness.

Furthermore, Galston, in his study of Aristotle’s republican legal theory, points out that because humans have the natural capacity for reasoned speech and inherent desire to exercise this faculty, humans are more political than any other animal through their ability to distinguish “the useful and the harmful, the just and the unjust, and good and evil.”\textsuperscript{62} Humans are thus social creatures with the powers of moral reasoning and the speech to articulate, express, and formulate their moral concerns to one another in a social setting. The uniqueness of these abilities for human life demonstrates that this is a key if not the prime component of human natural activity, which must be exercised for a complete human existence.

Thus, the exercise of civic virtue fulfills human strivings by enabling them to develop their political nature toward a common project, manifesting itself by living well through the formulation of a city, defined as a political community. As a result, citizenship becomes a key component in achieving the good life under Aristotle’s conception of human existence. Aristotle defines citizenship expressly as “nothing else so much as by his having a share in judgment and rule or office.”\textsuperscript{63} Human beings do not gain purpose from simply the status of being a citizen; they require the opportunity for judgment, involving the process of rule and being ruled. According to Aristotle, citizenship has an active and participatory quality. In fact, citizenship must have this quality in order to fulfill the human urges related to being a political animal. The human person’s ability to engage in the moral and political concerns that affect their community is essential to their ability to exercise human virtues. In this sense, citizenship becomes the \textit{praxis} (the practical expression) of man’s political animality. A man must necessarily be a citizen to also be fully human. Thus, while in a deviant regime citizenship may not correspond with living well, in a just regime, man’s participation as a citizen gives him the chance to achieve the completion of his \textit{phusis}, leading him to the end universal \textit{telos} of \textit{eudaimonia}.

The city therefore exists for the individual purpose of achieving the \textit{eudaimonia} of its constitutive members through collective participation and living well in accordance with virtue. It is fundamentally teleological in its architectonic structure, yet there is a fundamental tension that arises since political participation does not always create virtuous law, and likewise virtuous laws do not always render further citizen participation. Aristotle further delineates an eidetic account in which he seems to reverse his prior logic, stating that “the city exists by nature and that it has priority over the


\textsuperscript{63} Aristotle, \textit{The Politics of Aristotle}, 1257a22.
individual since the citizens constitute a part-whole arrangement, and the city as the communal locus of political participation constitutes a whole. Distinct individuals, according to Aristotle, are fundamentally insufficient in themselves when isolated, and the primacy of the city is therefore required. Paradoxically, individuals need the city in order to fulfill their nature as political animals, yet within the confines of their status as citizens they occupy the role of a permanent part.

This arrangement only works in a state of political equality in which the participating citizens maintain a state of equal virtue and no one individual can permanently supersede any other. For this reason, Aristotle claims that “anyone who lacks the capacity to share in community, or has no need to because of his self-sufficiency, is no part of the city and as a result is either a beast or a god.” The existence of the city is dependent on the existence of individual human parts, who in themselves are not self-sufficient and require the city by their nature. This problem is addressed by Galston, who points out the inherent tension between the teleological and eidetic accounts of civic virtue. Being a political animal means that one is subordinate as a part to the whole of the city, yet the city exists for the sake of the completion of its parts to achieve eudaimonia. The concept of civic virtue thus captures the tension between the idea that political life is, in whole or in part, what fulfills human beings and the idea that political life requires forgoing personal fulfillment in the name of something more important. There is an inherent sacrifice in being a citizen as one being subject to the rule of others and to political subordination by the city. Yet, the city is that which provides personal fulfillment to those who participate as free and equal parts.

Aristotle also establishes that since eudaimonia is the teleological aim of human life through political participation, virtue must be the qualification for determining political rule. This is due to the fact that the cultivation of virtue is that which enables the person to achieve eudaimonia in the Nicomachean Ethics and constitutes the end telos of human life, exemplified by his statement that “human good turns out to be activity of the soul exhibiting virtue.” Rulership is thus justified through meritocratic status, or rule by the aristos—the most excellent men in the city, and a deviant regime would base its qualifications on something other than virtue (honor or wealth being two examples). As such, “it is in the best regime that the citizen is the one who has the ability, and makes the choice, to be ruled and to rule with a view to the way of life that accords with virtue.” Virtue is the human method of achieving eudaimonia, but since humans are inherently political, this can only be achieved through the setting of participation, which exercises the uniquely human element of logos.

Yet, one may observe again the conflictual nature of the teleological account and the eidetic account. The eidetic part-whole account of the citizen and the city establishes a prioritization of the whole since justice is defined as the general achievement of the virtues necessary for eudaimonia. Under this logic, a regime may also be deviant if it prioritizes interest of any specific group or caste (often articulated through the private interests of oligarchs or of the demos). Because of this arrangement, Aristotle states that “the political good is justice, and justice is the common advantage.”

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good is prioritized, meaning that which increases the opportunity for virtuous living for the community as a whole ought to be pursued as justice. However, as demonstrated before, virtue is the requirement for rule for the laws of the city to be most just. As indicated by Lindsay, “human nature’s uneasy mix of reason and passion give rise to a paradoxical requirement that the best city’s rulers be ‘god-like’\(^70\) in order to preserve justice and virtuous living. Yet, this again leads to a paradoxical arrangement because giving the power of rule to the most virtuous man results in limiting the political and bars the citizens from exercising the \textit{ergon} of their \textit{phusis}. This entails nothing but acting politically through the exercise of \textit{logos} in a manner that would train one in virtue. This is why singular rulership, even by the most virtuous, is insufficient: it destroys the participatory nature of politics that gives the city its legitimacy by eliminating its purposefulness.

Aristotle further develops this problematic tension through a hypothetical exercise and asks what a political community ought to do if there is one man who is surpassing in virtue. What Aristotle asserts is striking: this individual would be unlike any kind of man prior to him because he would constitute a whole in himself, being self-sufficient, and as such “no longer be regarded as part of a city.”\(^71\) Such an individual would therefore be, relative to the members of the community, “a god among human beings,”\(^72\) and this man of surpassing virtue would necessarily be unequal to the citizens and thus more deserving of political power. However, this would also necessarily include the complete exclusion of people who make up the city from exercising citizen virtue. The man surpassing in virtue rules justly over the city by providing it virtuous laws, but he simultaneously enslaves its populace and bars them from the exercise of their humanity. Thus, Aristotle even admits that banishing the preeminent through ostracism contains “a certain political justice”\(^73\) in that it preserves the political equality of the citizens and the chance to exercise their capabilities as political animals.

Yet, Aristotle concludes that in the case of such an individual, the city must reward the virtuous man with rule “not in part but simply”\(^74\) if one is to maintain the political justice of the city, prioritizing virtue as the proper authority of governance. The terrible choices left are either to destroy the basis of just rule or to permanently exclude the community from political rule. What results in the case of rule by the preeminently virtuous person is a kind of despotic rule that is “more closely to approximate the ‘affection of a slave and master’ than it does a political relation.”\(^75\) The problem here is clear: individuals in the city ruled by the \textit{pambasileia} will not be able to develop their skills as citizens by ruling and being ruled in turn. This is akin to political slavery. Even though the laws themselves are not unjust, they are implemented in an unjust fashion which prohibits the inhabitants of the city from exercising their nature as political animals.

Alternatively, Aristotle devises a third potential solution beyond direct participation or singular rule by the \textit{pambasileia}: an established law or constitution should rule and not any one man. If such a man of preeminent virtue were to appear in the political


\(^{71}\)Aristotle, \textit{The Politics of Aristotle}, 1284a3.

\(^{72}\)Ibid.

\(^{73}\)Aristotle, \textit{The Politics of Aristotle}, 1284b3.

\(^{74}\)Aristotle, \textit{The Politics of Aristotle}, 1288a15.

community, his existence would upset the very purpose and being of the city and destroy the eidetic part-whole arrangement. But since the best man is preeminent in the exercise of logos, “they themselves are law.” Thus, the virtuous man has the ability to lay down the legal structure of a virtuous community since he has a view to what the natural law truly entails. This individual would therefore serve to supply the nomos (law) of the city rather than serve as the pambasileia, or the virtuous and just ruler. In this sense, the virtuous ruler will instead serve as the virtuous law giver, establishing the rule on which all following manifestations of the political community will follow, although indirectly and not by holding office. Through this method, the virtuous person will “consequently... be perpetual kings in cities.” A ruler cannot rule indefinitely. Even if he exemplifies god-like status in moral and intellectual virtue, he still remains mortal and corporeal as a human being. Yet, as a law-giver, the ruler may exercise a ‘perpetual’ influence upon the city without holding office. This appears to be a solution to the problem of the virtuous ruler destroying the eidetic account since other men would govern in his stead. At the same time, it preserves the justice of the teleological account through the continued administration of virtue.

Aristotle establishes constitutionalism as the primary method of preserving justice and participation in the city through a dialectical interpretation of the role of particulars and universals. On one hand, a regime which holds virtuous laws as superior retains a perfect logos in the manifestation of nomos. Governed by pure and impartial rationality, the city then seems to “bid god and intellect alone to rule.” This develops the problem of practical application. If the law is to rule in its entirety, then it lacks phronesis—the practical wisdom necessary to apply law to the muddiness of worldly and human affairs. However, rule vested into a single virtuous man presents the problems as aforementioned, and administration by ordinary men creates the problem that “anyone who bids a human being to rule adds on also the wild beast.” Aristotle thus endorses a mixed regime in which the laws of the city are structured for virtuous rule while restraining the ability for future rulers to challenge the fabric of the law, and in so doing, restrains the ‘wild beast’ of man from interfering too far with the internal structure of the virtuous law. Men thus become administrators and interpreters in their service to the city, which at least lends a certain degree of participation that would be unnecessary with the direct rulership of the supremely virtuous. In this manner, Bates points out that the rule of law as laid out by the virtuous man is “preferable to the pambasileia because the laws can educate the many for judgment, whereas nature’s ability to teach the many is questionable.” For Aristotle, the perpetual rule of the law of the virtuous man would serve as a system of education, in which men could learn human virtue through administration and interpretation.

But if the virtuous man is in himself the law, and the law continues throughout time despite the death of the ruler through that of a constitution, can we even distinguish between his rulership and his establishment of law? The rule of the virtuous man, while indirect, remains perpetual. Even though he is not actively forming routine policy, the man of preeminent virtue still after death possesses complete sovereignty over the logos of politics through his ‘perpetual influence,’ since in itself “law is intellect without appetite.” There is no meaningful difference between the virtuous man ruling the city

79 Ibid.
and his establishment of law. The virtuous man exerts a monopoly over the regime of the city regardless, which constitutes its morality and ideology. This in fact is the intent since the person who lays down the laws is already judged to be preeminent in virtue. The problem here is that a man's status as a political animal necessitates him to exercise the faculty of logos over moral right and wrong, of which Aristotle's model of active citizenship is supposed to manifest but which his model of virtuous law-giving severely limits. Thus, one could argue that even though the rule of law permits more political participation than the direct rule of the virtuous man, it nonetheless outlaws pluralism and prohibits the members of the city from participating in a politically meaningful and deliberative manner, rendering its participants merely as administrators and at best arbiters or interpreters rather than true deliberators. This is further complicated by the fact that "if the laws cannot rule, neither can men"\textsuperscript{82} since law is a product of man. It may be precisely that preeminent rule by a singular virtuous individual or a preeminently virtuous law dissolves meaningful political participation, since both the virtuous man and the virtuous law constitute a whole. This would destroy the eidetic account because citizens are no longer able to recoup wholeness through the participatory experience of the city.

Yet, the rule of law is nonetheless necessary if provided by a virtuous lawgiver, since virtue is the qualification for rule. Because of this qualification, restraining the participatory capacity of the citizenry becomes necessary in order to preserve the justice inherent in right rule. Thus, a practical need for law is required to fulfill the teleological imperative. As Bates rightly points out, “this is the strongest argument for the rule of law versus the rule of one superior good man (pambasileia), in that the rule of law restrains and channels desires that affect political decisions.”\textsuperscript{83} Limits on political ambition and deviance from proper rule manage to preserve the justice established by the preeminently virtuous lawgiver. Thus, as mentioned previously, this limit on individual political will establishes a kind of perpetual rule that extends beyond the life of the supremely virtuous or his capability of direct rule over the city. The rule of law therefore “inclines the polis [citizens] in the direction of continence, or self-restraint (enkrateia), for moderation describes the state in which the virtuous mean is both chosen and desired.”\textsuperscript{84} Ultimately, this arrangement establishes the supremacy of law, preserving the teleological account of the city so long as the law is provided by the virtuous. However, this nonetheless still hampers the eidetic structure of the city since the true exercise of political power is restrained. Men are barred from any form of political participation that would truly develop the faculty of logos embedded in their natures as political animals.

If one is to take Aristotle’s conception of the Human as a political animal seriously, then this amounts to a serious political problem in which justice and civic participation exist in opposition to one another due to the fundamental split between the teleological and eidetic accounts of the city. This is exemplified through the internal paradox of the rule of the preeminently virtuous man, who in establishing virtuous moral law for the city, eliminates civic participation and therefore the very basis by which the city is justified as a part-whole arrangement. This is because the preeminently virtuous man is nearly indistinct from the law itself. Although the law of the virtuous lawgiver provides more participatory flexibility than that of the direct rule over the city, this arrangement still limits civic participation to that of administration and interpretation because the virtuous

\textsuperscript{82}Bates, Aristotle’s "Best regime": Kingship, democracy, and the Rule of Law, 187.
\textsuperscript{83}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{84}Lindsay, “The ‘God-Like Man’ Versus the “Best Laws: Politics and Religion in Aristotle’s Politics,” 503.
man continues to exert a monopoly on the use of *logos* in political affairs. Thus, the eidetic arrangement can only be maintained by rule of the free and equal in the city. Rule by the preeminently virtuous or by virtuous law renders the city obsolete since the law as a whole and as an extrapolation of the virtuous man's rule would likewise supersede the city itself.

**References**


**Appendix**


This translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is briefly used to provide context for the *Politics*. This is because the *Nicomachean Ethics* serves as the groundwork for Aristotle's political considerations. The relationship between the two is telling since it establishes a direct connection between morality and politics. Aristotle's ethics sets up his basic assumptions about human anthropology and the importance of *eudaimonia* as the natural aim of human life, which he then extrapolates onto justice and politics. This source was primarily used to illuminate the basis for Aristotle's *Politics*.


I used the Simpson translation of Aristotle's *Politics* as the prime source for my arguments. This was the required primary text for the course and was therefore employed to craft credible and consistent arguments as to Aristotle's teleological and eidetic accounts of the purpose of the city. I used this source throughout the entirety of my essay to draw out the conflict between these two accounts that is demonstrated by the thought exercises of the 'preeminently' virtuous man. This was used to articulate my thesis that even if such an individual were to serve as a lawgiver rather than ruler of the city, the inherent tensions between the teleological account and the eidetic account would nonetheless remain.


This book was used as secondary literature and reference material. Its main importance to this essay was to provide greater evidence and detail to Aristotle's dialectical arguments between the partisan for the virtuous ruler and the partisan for the laws. Furthermore, I used this source to articulate the role of law as a limit on the political, serving to at once preserve the justice of the virtuous man but consequently still
reducing the participatory experience of the citizens. In turn this supplied evidence that while law may be necessary to preserve the teleological account, it nonetheless damages the eidetic account and prohibits the active exercise of citizen virtue.

This law review article was used as secondary literature and reference material. It provided a thorough analysis of the implications of man being a political animal for republican-oriented legal theory. This article well articulates the connection between logos and civic participation as a result of the political animality of man. By doing so, it demonstrates the importance of increasing deliberative processes, stemming from Aristotle’s eidetic account.

This academic article was used as secondary literature and reference material. This source directly discussed the political implications of rule by the preeminently virtuous man versus his establishment of law. In this paper, the article was used to provide evidence that direct rule by the virtuous man results in the creation of a despotic arrangement rather than a political community. Yet it also outlines the fundamental problem that the teleological arrangement requires the city’s rulers to be god-like. Furthermore, this source provided important information on the role of law in preserving the virtues of moderation in the city, which I used to articulate my argument that this still constitutes a limit on the ability to exercise civic virtues.
The Limits of Speculation: Knowledge of the Absolute in Kant, Hegel, and P.T. Raju

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Abstract
This essay concerns the status of the Absolute as an object of knowledge in the works of Kant and Hegel. More specifically, what follows will take its cue from P.T. Raju’s criticism of Hegel’s idealism. In order to defend Hegel’s claim that the Absolute can be known, while addressing Raju’s misinterpretations of Hegel’s position, I have drawn on the latter’s criticism of Kant’s transcendental approach to the Absolute. This will provide a framework for the stronger claim that the Absolute, considered as a determinate object of knowledge, is indispensable for the practice of metaphysics. Following Hegel, I will argue against Kant’s interpretation of the Absolute as a formal postulate of pure reason; that is, a useful instance of intellectual artifice that is unknowable as an object. Similarly, I will argue that we should reject Raju’s conception of the Absolute as a figure of transcendence – an infinite entity that is inexplicable and indeterminate but which nonetheless grounds all finite, determinate knowledge. Put another way, the Absolute is neither transcendental nor transcendent. Instead, I will pursue Hegel’s claim that the Absolute is an immanent principle expressing the logic of conceptuality as such. It allows us to move beyond the limits of ordinary concepts and to discern the essential nature, and dynamic unity, of thought and reality. It is on this basis that I argue for the indispensability of the Absolute for metaphysics.

Introduction

To ask whether the Absolute can be known is to question the breadth and purpose of metaphysics. As a concept present throughout the history of Western philosophy, the Absolute has borne witness to various and often contradictory interpretations (e.g., God, the One, Plato’s Forms, Spinoza’s substance etc.). But if we take the Absolute as an exhaustive explanatory principle – and this seems to be where many interpretations converge – then knowledge of the Absolute is tantamount to knowledge of the fundamental nature of the world. In Truth and Reality, P.T. Raju argues that the Absolute is beyond the grasp of metaphysical speculation. His position unfolds through a critique of Hegel’s idealism and the latter’s claim that the Absolute can be known. To illustrate what is at stake in these opposing conceptions of the Absolute, I will consider Raju’s position through its resemblance to Kantian philosophy. I will argue both that Hegel’s critique of Kant contains the insights necessary for a refutation of Raju’s position, and that Hegel’s account of the Absolute is ultimately more convincing. More than this, I will make the stronger assertion that the Absolute is the sine qua non of metaphysics; that it is indispensable for thinking as such. In order for this claim to be meaningful,

the Absolute must be taken in the Hegelian sense, not as an expedient postulate of pure
reason, nor as an object of mystical transcendence, but as an articulation of the immanent
logic of intelligibility. In other words, I will argue that Hegel’s conception of the Absolute
allows for a metaphysics capable of addressing the fundamental nature of thought and
reality.

1. Transcendental Logic and Inexplicability

Lucien Goldmann suggests that the most significant feature of Kant’s philosophy is
its concern with the possibility of attaining the Absolute. This possibility, ultimately
rejected by Kant, inspired the post-Kantian tradition of German Idealism which
reached its apotheosis in the works of Hegel. Therefore, any discussion of Hegel’s
conception of the Absolute ought to begin with Kant’s critical approach to metaphysics,
and with his answer to the first question around which the architectonic of pure reason
is organised, namely, ‘what can I know?’

1.1 The Limits of the Understanding and the Transcendental Dialectic

In the ‘Transcendental Analytic’ of the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant attempts to
circumscribe the extent of reason’s legitimate employment in order to secure a foundation
for objective knowledge. He argues that the limits of thought must be established if
its operations are to be substantiated. This is known as the transcendental method:
to determine the extent to which a particular experience is objective (i.e., knowable),
one must first discover the conditions of the possibility of experience in general. For
Kant, these are found in the architecture of cognition – in the faculties of thought and
their interconnection. Kant pays specific attention to the limits of the understanding;
that is, to the faculty of concepts and judgements (what Hegel refers to as ‘common
logic’). Kant’s ‘Copernican Revolution’ in philosophy, therefore, situates the subjective
structure of cognition as the locus of objective, determinate knowledge. He argues that if
the grounds of knowledge were to be derived empirically from the domain of contingent
appearances, or derived from pure thought without reference to experience, there would
be nothing to secure the objective validity of our judgements. Instead, objective validity
requires the intervention of a cognitive subject who subsumes the indeterminate manifold
of sensible intuition under universal a priori concepts (that is, concepts without sensible
content, prior to experience). This requires some clarification.

According to Kant, the faculty of sensibility and its a priori forms, space
and time, provides cognition with immediate representations that are apprehended
non-conceptually as intuitions. Until these intuitions are organised and mediated
through the application of certain concepts, or ‘categories’ (i.e., the a priori forms the
faculty of the understanding), they remain indeterminate and contingent representations
– merely appearances. Any determination of appearances as objects of possible experience
involves the combined operations of the intuitive faculty of sensibility alongside the

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87 Kant rejects the possibility of attaining the Absolute through theoretical, or speculative, reason.
The same does not hold for reason in its practical or teleological application (the subject matter of
the second and third critiques respectively).
88 Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (New York:
Cambridge University Press, 2009), 677 (A 805/B 833).
conceptual and predicative faculty of the understanding. Hence Kant’s well-known statement that ‘thoughts without [empirical] content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.’\textsuperscript{89} We must now consider what Kant has to say about the consequences of transgressing the limits of sensible intuition. But first, it should be noted that Kant has established an epistemological dualism in which the objectivity of our concepts rests on an extra-conceptual foundation (i.e., the intuition of appearances). This dualism will be the focal point of Hegel’s criticism of transcendental idealism, specifically as it relates to the doctrine of the thing-in-itself and Kant’s treatment of the Absolute. I will discuss Hegel’s criticism in the second half of this essay.

Kant argues that legitimate cognition extends as far as the application of the categories to objects as they appear. An object is simply any determinate representation given in experience. As mentioned above, in order for a representation to be determinate, and not merely an appearance of which little can be said, a predicate must be applied to the concept of the object. This act of predication occurs through judgement – that is, the discursive capacity to give an account of an object, generally in the form of a declarative statement. In this sense, ‘the limits of the understanding’ refers to the domain of objective validity within which appearances can be judged and made intelligible as objects of possible experience. When we overstep this limit and attempt to determine the nature of things in themselves – that is, the nature of whatever is thought to lie behind an appearance\textsuperscript{90} – cognition falls into ‘dialectic,’ Kant’s term for ‘the logic of illusion.’\textsuperscript{91} This is the topic of the second half of the \textit{Critique}: the ‘Transcendental Dialectic.’ We must now consider what the logic of illusion involves. Its implications for Kant’s criticism of the Absolute will be discussed more thoroughly in the following section.

For Kant, thought is finite insofar as the understanding restricts our cognition to the realm of conditioned\textsuperscript{92} appearances. The understanding does not possess a concept adequate to the unconditioned totality of appearances (i.e., the Absolute). Nonetheless, thought invariably transgresses its internal limits due to the nature of our judgments. The three categories of relation within a judgement of the understanding (categorical, hypothetical, disjunctive) correspond to three species of transcendental ideas (paralogisms, antinomies, and the Ideal of Pure Reason), which are the product of the faculty of reason. Kant’s distinction between reason and the understanding in terms of their legitimate use is crucial. While the understanding allows appearances to be determined directly as objects of possible experience by furnishing cognition with the categories necessary for judgement, the faculty of reason does not provide categories and is not, therefore, directed towards experience. Rather, reason generates principles, the purpose of which is ‘to bring the understanding into thoroughlygoing connection with itself.’\textsuperscript{93} Unlike the categories, a principle of reason does not ‘prescribe any law to objects, and does not contain the ground of the possibility of cognition [...], but rather is merely a subjective law of economy for the provision of our understanding.’\textsuperscript{94} In other words, reason organises whatever knowledge is generated through the use of the

\textsuperscript{89}Kant, \textit{Critique}, 194 (A 52/B 76).
\textsuperscript{90}This is an imperfect characterisation of the thing-in-itself. It is not an ontological concept referring to that which actually lies behind appearances. Rather, it is a logical representation that allows Kant to negatively circumscribe a domain for the legitimate application of concepts.
\textsuperscript{91}Kant, 384 (A 293/B 249).
\textsuperscript{92}An object is conditioned to the extent that its existence depends upon the effective presence of some other condition.
\textsuperscript{93}Kant, 391 (A 306/B 363).
\textsuperscript{94}Ibid.
understanding. Its principles are subjective and explanatory, and it does not, therefore, provide a foundation for objective knowledge. We are now in a position to understand what Kant means by the logic of illusion. Illusions emerge when a principle of reason is illegitimately applied to an object. That is, when we mistake a merely subjective principle for a determinate concept capable of grounding an objective judgement. As mentioned above, this process results in the emergence of transcendental ideas – non-conceptual, indeterminate representations transcending the limits of the understanding. Again, such ideas are not objects of knowledge. They are the result of our failure to ground knowledge in experience. According to Kant, transcendental ideas are a necessary by-product of syllogistic reasoning. This is because logical inferences do not refer to objects (unlike judgements, through which objects are predicated). In the following section I will focus on the third species of transcendental idea, the 'Ideal of Pure Reason,' as it is here that Kant discusses the disjunctive form of the syllogism and its transcendental by-product: the idea of the Absolute. For Kant, therefore, the Absolute does not reveal itself directly to thought, and it cannot be predicated with concepts. Rather, it is the product of thought's ill-fated attempt to transcend its finitude by logical means alone.

### 1.2 The Transcendental Idea of the Absolute

Through the faculty of the understanding, being (the realm of objects external to thought) appears to us as a system of conditions. The faculty of reason, as though working against the understanding, induces us to search for the completion of this system by developing a transcendental idea of the unconditioned. As Kant writes in the introduction to the 'Transcendental Dialectic,' 'the proper principle of reason [...] is to find the unconditioned for conditioned cognitions of the understanding, with which its unity will be completed.' This occurs in several ways (i.e., according to the analogy between an idea and the syllogistic form under consideration), but I will focus solely on the idea of the Absolute discussed in the 'Ideal of Pure Reason,' 'which [...] has as its theme the unconditioned unity of objective conditions of the possibility of objects in general.' As mentioned above, the logical determination of the Absolute occurs through a disjunctive syllogism, taking the form of 'P or Q, not P, therefore Q.' As Kant explains:

‘[In] a disjunctive syllogism [...] the major premise contains a logical division (the division of the sphere of a general concept), the minor premise restricts this sphere to one part, and the conclusion determines the concept through this part.’

For Kant, the either/or relation contained in the major premise of a disjunctive syllogism allows for the logical determination of the whole through a determination of its parts. In terms of the transcendental use of reason, ‘the [...] major premise for the thoroughgoing determination of all things is none other than the representation of the sum total of all reality’ (i.e., the Absolute). Thus, in the realm of appearances, we observe a reciprocity or community of parts. We are naturally inclined to search for a concept by which these parts are related to each other as a whole; that is, as a fully determinable absolute system. But the understanding falls short of this concept insofar as the Absolute lies beyond the limits of experience. In other words, the scope of

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95 Kant, 392 (A 307/B 364).
96 Kant, 459 (A 406/B 433).
97 Kant, 556 (A 557/B 605).
98 Ibid.
our cognition is restricted by the finite nature of ordinary concepts, and this restriction forecloses the possibility of an infinite synthesis through which the unconditioned could be accounted for as a determinate object of knowledge. At best, reason supplies us with an indeterminate, transcendental idea of the Absolute. It is here that we first notice the resemblance between Kant’s and Raju’s conceptions of the Absolute. In a point of criticism directed against Hegel (the merits of which I will discuss below), Raju mirrors Kant’s approach to common logic and the understanding. He argues that ‘the form of judgement is inadequate to any process except that of the logical, which is implication.’ Therefore, ‘logic cannot determine the nature of reality,’ let alone the sum total of all reality: the Absolute.

1.3 Inexplicability as a Constitutive Principle

Like Kant, Raju emphasises the finite nature of thought and the transcendent, non-conceptual nature of the Absolute: ‘The Absolute can be said to be infinite […] only if it is regarded as supra-rational, as transcending thought.’ It is therefore impossible to draw a determinate connection between the finite and the infinite. In this sense, the Absolute, as the infinite, is not a concept, but an integrality the wealth of which cannot be exhausted by conceptual determinations. Echoing Kant’s critique of syllogistic reasoning, Raju claims that ‘the so-called perfect disjunction which is said to exhaust the nature of the subject through the predicate is a fiction.’ In other words, the unfolding of a disjunctive syllogism does not terminate in a concept of the Absolute through which a series of parts are exhaustively related to one another as a systematic whole. But this does not prevent us from thinking of the Absolute as an idea. Hence, Raju maintains that ‘we have a vague knowledge of the infinite.’ That is, we encounter the infinite ‘through […] limitations,’ as something obliquely suggested by the finite nature of ordinary concepts.

So far, Raju and Kant’s conceptions of the infinite are indistinguishable. Our consciousness of the restricted nature of the understanding encourages us to speculate about something lying beyond its limits, but this something cannot be known. However, Raju goes a step further. An idea of the infinite is not only thought’s inevitable by-product, ‘it is the logical presupposition of our finite knowledge.’ For Kant, this is inadmissible. The infinite does not constitute knowledge. It is not an objective principle grounding the validity of our judgements. Its significance is merely that of a regulative postulate: a theoretical expedient guiding our cognition towards a point of completion it will never reach. As Kant writes:

‘Reason never relates directly to an object, but solely to the understanding […] hence it does not create any concepts (of objects) but only orders them and gives them that unity which they can have in their greatest possible extension, i.e., in relation to the totality of series; the

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99 Raju, Thought, 31.
100 Raju, 32.
101 Raju, 31.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
104 Raju, 36.
105 Raju, 37.
106 Raju, 36.
understanding does not look to this totality at all [...]. Thus reason really has as object only the understanding and its purposive application.\textsuperscript{107}

Therefore, the Absolute, as the product of reason, is not an object of knowledge for Kant. From the standpoint of experience, the Absolute is inexplicable. Only as a transcendental idea does it take on the subjective significance of a principle through which our thought is organised and regulated. But according to Raju, insofar as ‘thought is permeated through and through by an inexplicable element,’\textsuperscript{108} inexplicability itself must be the constitutive principle of knowledge and experience. It is here that Raju invokes the concept of māyā found in Advaita Hinduism. Māyā refers to the veil of illusion (in Kantian terms, the transcendental limit of finite knowledge) that obstructs thought’s access to Brahman (the Absolute).\textsuperscript{109} Like Kant, Raju stresses that ‘appearances which cannot be fully pierced by thought should be due to a principle which makes one thing not transparent to another.’\textsuperscript{110} But unlike Kant, Raju makes the ontological claim that this principle ‘is the cause of the whole world:’

‘Its [māyā] nature is “I am ignorant,” “I do not understand myself and the other.” It cannot be said that ajñāna [or māyā as “ignorance”] is mere absence of cognition. For I know that I do not understand. There is therefore the presence of cognition. Hence this ignorance is not merely negative, but has a positive aspect. It is therefore regarded [...] as the material cause of the universe.’\textsuperscript{111}

Later in the text, Raju explicitly relates his position to Kant’s: ‘We may modify Kant’s view and say that the Ideal of Reason as a coherent whole is regulative and yet as an integrality is constitutive.\textsuperscript{112} But what does it mean to say that a supra-rational integrality is constitutive? By postulating the inexplicability of the infinite as an ontological first principle, Raju’s argument falls into circularity. That which escapes knowledge is in some way present to consciousness insofar as we have knowledge. But having knowledge presupposes that which escapes knowledge. One is reminded of Donald Rumsfeld’s famous contribution to epistemology: the known unknowns connect the known knowns to the unknown unknowns. In other words, what cannot be determined is made into the precondition of our capacity to determine anything whatsoever. But how can ignorance and illusion ground determinate knowledge? By treating inexplicability as the constitutive principle of knowledge, Raju is faced with the difficulties Kant attempted to side-step by conceiving the Absolute as merely a regulative idea. While Kant can refer to the forms of judgement and the understanding, derived a priori from the structure of subjectivity, Raju is incapable of supplying any criteria for objective validity. In the opening of the \textit{Critique}, Kant maintains that he had to ‘deny knowledge in order to make room for faith.’\textsuperscript{113} It seems that Raju takes this enterprise more seriously than Kant himself. While Kant’s project is critical, Raju approaches metaphysics as an exercise in mysticism in which the possibility of knowledge is denied altogether. Here we can relate

\textsuperscript{107}Kant, 590-91 (A 644/B 672).
\textsuperscript{108}Raju, 44.
\textsuperscript{109}It should be acknowledged that the assimilation of ancient Eastern philosophy to modern Western philosophy is a matter of controversy. Since Raju explicitly draws upon Kant, I believe it can be justified in this instance.
\textsuperscript{110}Raju, 156.
\textsuperscript{111}Raju, 156.
\textsuperscript{112}Raju, 241.
\textsuperscript{113}Kant, 117 (B xxx).
Raju’s conception of the Absolute to his critique of Hegel. Based on the inexplicability of the Absolute, Raju rejects Hegel’s speculative logic, which claims to establish a foundation for absolute knowledge by articulating the passage from the finite to the infinite.

2 Speculative Logic and the Absolute

To a certain extent, both Kant and Raju are correct from an Hegelian perspective. The finite forms of judgement cannot determine the Absolute because, as Hegel points out, the ‘Truth [of the Absolute] is always infinite, and cannot be expressed or presented to consciousness in finite terms.’ But this does not mean that the Absolute should be relegated to an indeterminate postulate of pure reason. This contention is the basis for Hegel’s critique of Kant. Kant’s epistemological dualism, shared by Raju, treats knowledge as an ‘intermediate medium or instrument,’ standing between the finite, subjective forms of thought and an inaccessible realm of being. Being, in this sense, resembles Kant’s concept of the thing-in-itself – that which lies beyond the limits of experience, but which cannot be predicated with concepts and thereby determined as an object of knowledge. Ordinary concepts only allow us to draw extrinsic connections between the forms of thought and their external contents – Hegel’s term for this is ‘external reflection.’ These contents emerge as appearances, or opaque reflections, of being as such. For Hegel, if thought cannot penetrate being then not only is absolute knowledge impossible, but the foundations of knowledge must give way to scepticism – a scepticism he attributes to Kant’s concept of the thing-in-itself. Hegel’s criticism of the thing-in-itself requires some consideration.

According to Hegel, it is not the case that Kant was entirely wrong, but that he did not go far enough in his attempt to ground objective knowledge. Though a necessary stage in the development of consciousness, the dualism of thought and being must be resolved into a higher unity. ‘If this unity is not realised, only a formal reflection that opposes itself to the content exists.’ In other words, from Hegel’s perspective Kant’s approach is compromised by his refusal to close the gap separating the intelligible form of the appearance of the object (being, the thing) and the objective content of the thing-in-itself. This gap – the dualism of thought and being – undermines the possibility of knowledge. If the object itself cannot be explained, then neither can the process by which thought subsumes the content of the object under its forms of intelligibility. Put simply, the validity of any judgement concerning an object of experience cannot be demonstrated if thought cannot provide an account of itself. Without this, thought can only be treated as an abstract medium whose contents emerge inexplicably and from afar; from a putative realm of being external to thought. Insofar as this realm, the realm of the thing-in-itself, is ultimately impenetrable, Hegel can argue that Kant has left his system vulnerable to scepticism. As mentioned above, Hegel addresses this difficulty by positing the unity of thought and being – the claim that the determination of the form of an object’s intelligibility is, quite simply, a determination of what that object is. The realisation of this unity rests upon Hegel’s unique approach to contradiction and the dialectical method through which he criticises common logic and the understanding. As I will demonstrate, Hegel’s critique of Kant serves as a guiding thread for his development of an ontological,

116Hyppolite, Logic, 36.
or speculative, logic capable of determining the Absolute. It will also allow me to address Raju's misinterpretations of Hegel's position.

2.1 The Critique of Common Logic

Although Hegel criticises Kant's finite conception of thought, he does not claim that common logic is otiose. As Robert Hanna points out, 'Hegel's logic in fact preserves the entire edifice of common logic while still using the critique of the latter as a motivation for its own self-development.'\textsuperscript{117} Judgements are useful, allowing us to fix meanings, to generalise, and to relate objects to one another externally. But this externality means that judgements are finite, and that they do not exhaust the possibilities of thought. Hanna explains 'external reflection' in the following way:

'External reflection is the idea that a certain apparent feature of the object is elicited by the judgement, and is then hypostasised into a separate thing: the predicate. This hypostasised predicate is then applied to the thing as if it were simply another thing “over against” the original object. [... ] The judgement is as it were rebuilding the object by means of the adhesive copula after having ruptured it in its primordial concreteness.'\textsuperscript{118}

We now understand that any knowledge acquired through external reflection is reified or 'hypostasised,' in the sense of being finite and partial. However, it is not the case that a judgement of reflection is necessarily incorrect because of this, but neither is it 'true' in the Hegelian sense. In other words, such a judgement is untrue because the form of its concept is inadequate and, therefore, incapable of wholly determining its object. It may be correct in a limited sense, but it cannot be considered true.\textsuperscript{119} As I have mentioned, this is why Raju claims that the Absolute is unknowable. But he goes on to mistakenly ascribe to Hegel the position that the Absolute can be known as an 'object of thought' by means of a finite judgement, or judgement of reflection, that relates the finite to the infinite (or Absolute):

'Hegel’s view is [...] untenable. The infinite certainly is not an object of thought. If it is, for that very reason it ceases to be infinite. The position involves that the infinite as an object has thought standing over against it. But unless the infinite includes thought it no longer remains an object. But then thought, too, would be no more in order to relate the finite and the infinite.'\textsuperscript{120}

However, Hegel is in complete agreement with Raju. The predicates of common logic result in a proposition that could not possibly capture the nature of the infinite. To make a judgement in the form of 'the subject (the infinite) is any predicate x,' would be to transform the infinite into a finite entity, the nature of which is supposedly exhausted


\textsuperscript{118}Hanna, "Common Logic," 259.

\textsuperscript{119}Adequate judgement relates to Hegel's distinction between 'in-itself' and 'for-itself.' To judge an object as it is in-itself is to proceed abstractly, i.e., to say what an object is independently of its determinations: just that thing, there, by itself. By contrast, to consider an object as it is for-itself is to provide a determinate account of its conditions of possibility. In this sense, a judgement establishing what an object is for-itself is a (true) determination of the object in its conceptual adequacy – what the object is for the concept that constitutes its formal condition of possibility.

\textsuperscript{120}Raju, 36.
by an abstract predicate. In other words, if the infinite is reduced to finite terms it ceases to be infinite. Although he does not reject judgement altogether, Hegel's approach bears little resemblance to the view criticised by Raju. It is not the case that, 'Hegel depends merely on logic.' What Raju fails to understand is that Hegel is performing an immanent critique of common logic and the forms of judgement in order to develop a richer conception of thought's possibilities; one extending beyond the confines of the understanding, and one in which the unity and primordial concreteness of the object is restored.

2.2 Dialectical and Speculative Logic

According to Hegel, a judgement is finite insofar as 'each type of judgement or inference implicitly presupposes a relation or a mediation that has not been expressed in its own form.' Immanent, or dialectical, critique involves making this mediation explicit. It allows us to look beyond thought's finitude from the standpoint of finitude, and to establish the possibility of a speculative logic of the Absolute in which the unity of thought and being is restored.

Hegel's idealism treats the Absolute both as a constitutive principle and as an 'object' of knowledge. Initially, the Absolute is inexplicable for thought. It is registered in some sense, but only as the intimation of its eventual disclosure. In other words, for Hegel the Absolute does not remain inexplicable. The resemblance between Hegel's and Raju's positions stops here. Knowledge cannot be grounded on inexplicability without falling into dialectical contradiction. But Hegel's treatment of the dialectic is unique: it is not merely an instance of falsity or illusion, as it is for Kant, but that which drives consciousness towards the supersession of inexplicability. It is the force animating thought's self-movement, culminating in absolute knowledge. But what does this process look like?

Thought's self-movement begins with the fixed, finite determinations of the understanding. These determinations announce their limit implicitly by referring to that which escapes common-logical concepts. Thought is then driven to undo its fixity in order to approach what was hitherto excluded from its determinations. In other words, thought broadens the scope of its concepts towards a greater universality. This is the point at which the limits of the understanding give way beneath the pressure of dialectical critique. In logical terms, dialectics refers to 'the movement of thought that responds to a limit defined by understanding by going on to what it implies: the contrary concept that lies beyond the limit.' Hence Hegel's claim that from the standpoint of dialectical logic, 'to call a thing finite or limited proves by implication the very presence of the infinite and unlimited.' But thought does not simply move back and forth between contraries. By tracing the passage between contradictory determinations, thought is able to think the structure of its own movement. In other words, consciousness develops a 'notion' of itself and enters the domain of speculative logic. Hanna defines the notion as 'the implicit higher-order unity which makes it possible for the common-logical judgement

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121 Ibid.
123 Hegel's use of the term 'object' is ambiguous, as will be seen in the following section.
125 Hegel, Logic, 117.
to display itself as limited and internally oppositional in the first place." When the implicit unity of the notion is made explicit, thought becomes conscious of its own nature. External contradictions between concepts now refer to moments of thought’s internal self-mediation; that is, to moments of the ‘Idea.’ As Hegel writes, ‘this life which has returned to itself from the bias and finitude of cognition, and which by the activity of the notion has become identical with it, is the Speculative or Absolute Idea.’

2.3 The Absolute Idea

To the extent that Hegel approaches logic as an ontological enterprise – as opposed to merely formal or transcendental – his conception of the Idea bears little resemblance to Kant’s. For the latter, ideas are subjective postulates of pure reason. For Hegel, on the other hand, the Idea is the ‘unity of the Subjective and Objective.’ It is thought’s determination of being as the being of thought, and therefore thought’s determination of itself. The unity of the Idea ‘is consequently the absolute […] truth, the Idea which thinks itself.’ In other words, the Absolute Idea is pure, determinate thinking. As thought develops a more comprehensive account of its own structure by surveying the complexity of its internal mediations, it recognises the Absolute Idea – which is none other than thought itself in its most precise and enriched articulation – as the constitutive principle of reality. It is no longer the case that being, or reality, is approached as thought’s independent other, or as the external appearance of an inaccessible thing-in-itself. For Hegel, being is always already contained within thought as its self-reflection and self-objectification. In this way, the Absolute can be reconceived as the final result of a series of dialectical transitions, beginning with the abstractness and formalism of the understanding and concluding with the concrete identity of thought and being. Absolute knowledge, therefore, refers to thought’s capacity to think itself in its own movement. But this is not the point at which thought’s self-movement stops altogether. This would be to turn the Absolute into a finite principle or negative limit postulated from the standpoint of finitude. Instead, Hegel posits the Absolute as the principle of thought’s infinite potentiality:

‘Generally speaking, an object means […] a negative confronting me. But in the case where thought thinks itself, it has an object which at the same time is no object: […] its objectivity is suppressed and transformed into an Idea. Thought […] in its unmixed nature involves no limits; it is finite only when it keeps to limited categories […]. Infinite or speculative thought, on the contrary, while it no less defines, does in the very act of limiting and defining make that defect vanish. And so infinity is not […] to be conceived as an abstract away and away for ever and ever, but in the simple manner previously indicated.’

Therefore, the Absolute is what allows for ‘a thinking that thinks its own operations in the most comprehensive way possible.’ It is thought’s essential dynamic and the principle which holds that nothing is impenetrable. To know the Absolute is not simply to

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126 Hanna, 261.
127 Hegel, 373.
128 Hegel, 374.
129 Ibid.
130 Hegel, 62-63.
131 Burbidge, 99.
know everything. Rather, it allows us to anticipate the possibility of comprehending even that which is not yet present to consciousness insofar as the latter can be related back to thought’s awareness of its own constitutive nature. Thus, the Absolute can be described as the principle of freedom, since freedom best characterises a thinking that is both fully transparent to itself and that unfolds without external limitations. As Hegel writes, ‘man is most independent when he knows himself to be determined by the Absolute Idea throughout.’\\(^{132}\)

**Conclusion**

Disagreement regarding the nature of the Absolute reflects a deeper concern over the purpose of metaphysics as an intellectual vocation. For Kant, metaphysics serves a dual purpose. For the faculty of reason in its theoretical use, metaphysics is regulative: a useful speculative exercise in which the posing of unanswerable questions humbles our intelligence and directs our judgements towards greater clarity. On the other hand, metaphysics leaves room for ideas (such as Freedom and God) which cannot be determined but which are nonetheless indispensable for practical reason, that is, in the realms of ethics and religion. The Absolute is doubly significant for Kant, despite its indeterminacy as a concept. Raju follows Kant to a certain extent. He shares the latter’s conviction that the Absolute is unknowable, but he departs from transcendental logic by framing unknowability as an ontologically constitutive principle. Since Raju does not move beyond the formal perspective of the understanding, his argument results in the sort of contradiction that brings metaphysical speculation to a standstill. This is why Hegel criticises the understanding and common-logical judgements. By developing the implicit ontological significance of logical contradictions, Hegel adopts the higher-order perspective of their ultimate resolution. This perspective allows us to think the Absolute as the dynamic principle through which knowledge investigates its own presuppositions and transcends its own limits. Ultimately, Hegel’s idealism reflects the conviction that thought is not impotent in the face of an inaccessible ‘beyond.’ Metaphysical questions can be answered and the fundamental nature of thought and reality can be known.

**References**


\(^{132}\)Hegel, 283.
About Meteorite

Meteorite is a student-run publication at the University of Michigan dedicated to recognizing valuable contributions in philosophy by undergraduates all over the world. The journal was founded by students at the University of Michigan in 1998, however, publication of the journal has been spotty and punctuated by large periods of inactivity. In 2018, the journal was revived (for the fourth time!) and a new editorial staff was formed. Since then, Meteorite has been accepting submissions annually. This year, we had our third annual, consecutive conference highlighting the authors who were selected to feature in this year’s edition. Many thanks to our authors who were able to join us via Zoom, and of course, to Nicholas Bloom and Shaira Marquez, our Spring 2023 conference chairs, whose tireless efforts and hard work resulted in a wonderful, engaging, and thought-provoking day of discussion. While this year’s conference was virtual, we are excited and hopeful for the prospect of future, in-person Meteorite conferences. More information on this year’s conference can be found at our website:
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This year, we read and discussed many essays from undergraduate students and selected the most original, thought-provoking, and well-written of these for publication. We are pleased to present you this edition, and we appreciate everyone who contributed to this year’s issue.

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