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Where is the Place for Black Atlantic Literature and Authorship?

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In her 1949 poem, “The Life of Poetry,” Jewish American poet Muriel Rukeyser asks, in the midst of exile, refuge, flight and terror: “And poetry—among all this—where is there a place for poetry?”¹ Rukeyser’s question clearly draws upon Theodor Adorno’s provocation that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbarism.”² Asking this question poetically, Rukeyser takes up the logic of Adorno’s provocation to insist on continuing to write literature after unspeakable ethnocidal violence—which, rather than creating the condition of impossibility for poetic production, actually compels poesis. Unspeakable devastation necessitates the work of making something out of violence in order to articulate a sense of Being, force us to re(-)member (and put together anew), and imagine a mode of b/Being in the world that can refute the possibility of such brutality’s repetition. For Rukeyser, the place for poetry “among all this” is right in the thick of it.

Although speaking to the condition of Jews after the Holocaust and the (im)possibility of poetry amid anti-Semitic terror, the problematic with which Rukeyser grapples is likewise central for the making of the Black Atlantic, especially as proposed by Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*. Reading Gilroy alongside Rukeyser provokes the question: in the wake of terror, enslavement, colonialism and violence, is there a place for literature? Where is there a place for the author? To reframe Adorno’s proposition, there is no place for Black Atlantic literature amid unspeakable violence if the author is not grappling with and writing the absolute terrors of experience—scenes of horror must be (re)made through cultural production or there can be no poesis. Because poesis cannot cease amid the unspeakable, it must speak the unspeakable aloud and constantly make something out of it. To invoke Slavoj Žižek, how and with what can Black Atlantic literature and authorship “tarry with,” and must it?³ That is, to return again to Adorno’s provocation, the Black Atlantic author must persistently and steadfastly “tarry with” the unspeakable and continue to write of and through suffering and terror to face

it, to reconcile with it, to “live with” it—without attempting to affirm or transcend it. The Black Atlantic author must persist in tenaciously writing through and within the violence that defines their experiences, revealing the necessity of such literature and the importance of producing such a literary practice.

To heed Rukeyser by engaging our reconstructed question—that is, in the Black Atlantic, what is the place for literature and authorship?—is to propose that we grapple with the thought and provocations of her and Gilroy as intimately interconnected. Thinking Rukeyser’s question alongside *The Black Atlantic* emphasizes—insists—on the necessity and imminence of Black Atlantic authorship and literature for continuing Gilroy’s project of thinking the Atlantic as a space for conceptualizing interconnected diasporic Black authorship; resisting absolutism and exceptionalism; and in requiring that Black Atlantic literature and cultural production as a whole are positioned at the center of not only retelling, but “living with” and writing through the hauntings of Black Atlantic experience. Just as Gilroy is a necessary starting point as a prominent thinker of Black Atlantic cultural production and author of a foremost and widely read book on the Black Atlantic space, it is significant that Rukeyser provides this essay’s foundational question because she, too, wrestles with cultural production in the wake of immense ethnic persecution and violence in the Jewish diaspora. Much like Black Atlantic authors such as Aimé Césaire, as a poet, Rukeyser attempted to create a language, style, and prose that could bear the weight of her thinking and experience where language and form fell short. In other words, both Gilroy and Rukeyser interrogate and challenge the ways in which populations that have experienced “all this,” in Rukeyser’s words, confront and try to articulate the weight and terrors of their experiences.

Because this essay engages a Jewish poet’s provocation in order to think the Black Atlantic, it is crucial to acknowledge both the significance of this invocation and Gilroy’s assessment of the intimate interconnection and solidarity between the Black and Jewish diasporas. In particular, Gilroy devotes a portion of his book’s final chapter to yoking Black and Jewish experiences, which he does largely through a conceptualization of Exodus as a crucial connection between Black Atlantic and Jewish diasporic imaginaries. Recognizing Exodus as a story that is central to Jewish history and the population’s contemporary political consciousness and poetics, Gilroy also argues that the Exodus imaginary persists, however differently, in Black Atlantic self-conceptualization and cultural production. Understanding that historical and continued solidarity is imperative for these two groups, this essay questions the efficacy of attending to the interconnections between the two experiences through Exodus—for Exodus does not mean the same for both populations and comparing or conjoining them as such does a disservice to both. By critiquing Gilroy’s engagement with Exodus, this essay encourages a reorientation away from confining or defining the Black Atlantic

experience, and its connection with that of the Jewish diaspora, to such narratives. Questions from Jewish thinkers such as Rukeyser are generative in (re)thinking the place of Black Atlantic literature and authorship, as well as its solidarity with the Jewish diaspora; the two experiences need not be compared.

In this context, this essay, and the questions it seeks to complicate, insist on the necessity of the work of Black Atlantic literature and authorship. As Gilroy points out, the “status of the social story-telling activity has changed as the novel has become a more important genre, reducing the power of autobiography and altering the idea of tradition as the relationship between orality and literacy has itself been transformed.”⁴ The Black Atlantic speaks through an ever-shifting genre, yet the *need to speak*, the *need for a place* for self-expression and self-actualization, is continuous.

What is the place for Black Atlantic literature and authorship? It is, as Toni Morrison writes arguably most directly in *Beloved*, but almost everywhere else in her oeuvre, to “live with” the terrors of what changed as the first enslaved Africans sailed across the Atlantic; to “live with” the hauntings of what still lies deep below the sea; and to remain attentive to what happens on both sides of the ocean as the residents of the Black Atlantic—an oceanic people, a submarine people—cross.

Proposing Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* as the window through which to answer these questions requires an acknowledgment: much of his work centers as much on music as it does on literature. Indeed, the same question may be asked for music, because Gilroy argues that “story-telling and music-making contributed to an alternative public sphere,” which became an “integral component of insubordinate racial countercultures” and self-actualization.⁵ Music is a way in which language is embodied, an oral tradition that traces Black Atlantic history and interaction, and, in doing so, rejects all claims to purity and exceptionalism from any location in the Black Atlantic and diaspora as a whole.

This essay, however, will focus on the place for/of literature and authorship as Gilroy thinks them through an engagement with Richard Wright’s life and work, and also through the work of other Black Atlantic authors, primarily C.L.R. James, Toni Morrison, Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant. In doing so, of import here is not to answer exhaustively our reconstructed question from Rukeyser, because Black Atlantic authors and their literature show that their place is ever-shifting and transforming, like the populations about which they write and of which they are a part. This process of transformation amid (dis)location is grounded in the Black Atlantic experience of terror and diaspora, about which Gilroy writes.

Intersections Between the Jewish and Black Diaspora/Experience

Rukeyser's question already requires a reconsideration of the sources that we use to engage the Black Atlantic and what thinkers, genres and spaces we allow to inform our thinking. Invoking Rukeyser to speak of the Black Atlantic engages the difficulty of critiquing what Gilroy calls "the small world of Black cultural and intellectual history," which "is similarly populated by those who fear that the integrity of Black particularity could be compromised by attempts to pen a complex dialogue with other consciousnesses of affliction."⁶ To cite Rukeyser is to acknowledge that her words bear weight on that with which we are grappling in the Black Atlantic. It is to engage with Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of citationality, which is to say that we are conforming to a model of iterability when we invoke Rukeyser's question—engaging with "this duplication or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is neither an accident nor an anomaly, it is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could not even have a function called 'normal.'"⁷ For Derrida, although citationality is not transcendental, the context in which we cite changes the meaning of the original signifier—in this case, Rukeyser's question. Once we write Rukeyser's original question into a new context—that is, grappling with the place for literature and authorship in the Black Atlantic—the meaning of her question changes. To cite Rukeyser in this essay is to graft her into a different context—believing it to be a generative invocation—and thus to transform the meaning of her question through an acknowledgment of the (non)iterability of it. Or, rather, to insist on the iterability of her question with an acknowledgment that, as Gilles Deleuze suggests, every repetition (or, citation) breeds difference.⁸ Living and writing within this aporia, this essay's project must be to make legible and understandable Rukeyser's question as we cite it in the Black Atlantic context, with a crucial acknowledgment that it can never be divorced from its originary source. We must always resist the total contextual abstraction of that which we cite by writing in a way that allows for iterability, citationality, and transformations, as well as a recognition of the original context and its significance. Thus, to cite Rukeyser is not only to transpose her question into the Black Atlantic context, but also to speak to the interconnection between the Black and Jewish experiences, about which Gilroy has an enduring concern.

This line of inquiry is central not only in questioning the place of Black Atlantic authorship and literature, but also in how and with whom it can "sit with."⁹ With whom can the Black Atlantic converse? And, to repeat Žižek, with whom can the Black Atlantic "tarry?" Rukeyser's poetry and thinking reveal that the Black Atlantic is not an insular, exceptional and absolutist project, but rather one that is part of broader global modernities, violences and silent subjugations. Thus, although acknowledging that specificity matters, Gilroy's project embraces the "common identity and interests" between global anti-colonial struggles to expose how they are "universally

the same.”¹⁰ In attempting to broaden the way in which we approach and understand global anticolonial struggles, Gilroy encourages us to look beyond the rational. That is, the rationality that Western modernity provides must be exceeded in order to think the world otherwise, thereby opening a potential for solidarity by abbreviating absolutism and refusing exceptionalism.

Gilroy calls for renewed interaction with and interrogation of the intimate link between Black and Jewish experiences, despite their discreteness. A priori here we should note is Gilroy’s inattention to the Afro-Jewish population, an acknowledgment of the already-entangled Black-Jewish tradition that escapes *The Black Atlantic’s* critical intervention—itsself a silence that merits its own critique, it is a project that cannot be taken up here. Although Gilroy points to the ways in which the Jewish and Black diasporas are conceptually linked and frames their theoretical entanglements as generative, these diasporas are also already overlapping and entangled. Other scholars have already begun the critical work of revealing how the Afro-Jewish diaspora has its own set of subjugations and silences, issues of migrancy, erasure and subordination, but also of creation. To speak of the interconnection between the Black and Jewish experiences without an understanding that there is a natural affinity between them, for they are already entangled, is also central in rethinking and anti-essentializing the Black Atlantic. Gilroy, unfortunately, poses this as a crucial tenet only at the end of his project for conceiving the Black Atlantic.

Although Gilroy offers a lengthy call for a renewed discourse between Black and Jewish populations in order to understand their historical and continued interconnectedness, he stops short of questioning whether the two should be conceived together, for what purpose, and who it is that benefits and suffers from this conjoining. Gilroy insists that his project is not to “undermine the uniqueness of the Holocaust,” nor the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the violence thereafter.¹¹ However, his project goes beyond that of forging solidarities between Jewish and Black Atlantic experiences—a legacy of solidarity which has certainly been generative and meaningful for both populations. He attempts to draw (sometimes false) equivalences between the populations to construct a deeper bond. We must question why he does this. In many ways, both the Black and Jewish diasporas must grapple with what it means to live “in the wake,” as Christina Sharpe would say, of ethnocidal violence, terror and forced dispersion—they must find ways to “live with” enslavement, the Holocaust and their many and varied afterlives.¹² However, this forced confrontation with the hauntings of ethnocidal violence, as Sharpe points out, does not make the two experiences equivalent, nor does it render an inherent need to conjoin them when critiquing the Black Atlantic condition. In her work, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Sharpe reflects on her initial conceptualization of the “wake,” which was through a course she taught about the “traumatic histories” of the Holocaust and the (mostly United

States/North American) trans-Atlantic slave trade.¹³ Sharpe draws clear distinction between Jewish and Black experiences, despite the foundation of the course being a thinking together of the two.

If one were to understand both the Black Atlantic and Jewish populations as living “in the wake,” their “wakes” are entirely different—to draw an equivalence is to do a disservice to both. To live in the wake or, for the purposes of this essay, to write in the wake for the Black Atlantic author, would be to acknowledge the absolute opacity of “blackness’s ongoing and irresolvable abjection”¹⁴ born of existing within “the afterlife of property.”¹⁵ The Black Atlantic author must grapple with the unceasing need to write and live within and outside of a dehumanizing history of life as property. The Holocaust has its own brutal and dehumanizing hauntings, and no equivalence need be drawn. They are not the same—how or in what ways does Gilroy benefit from insisting on thinking these experiences together and comparing them? What are the effects of Gilroy’s conjoining? Who suffers?

Sharpe points out how her “students held onto whatever empathy they might have for reading about the Holocaust but not for North American slavery.”¹⁶ Sharpe makes clear that it is the Black Atlantic populations who continually know this unevenness of empathy, for the epistemological violence of wake consciousness for the Black Atlantic writer is not the same as that of the Jewish writer—it cannot be, for their histories are distinct. For Sharpe, needing to compare Black and Jewish suffering in order to make Black Atlantic suffering intelligible is but one more violence against both populations—although she herself, through the nature of her course, continues the cycle of comparison to which there is no end and for which there is never a winner, whatever so preposterous a designation may be understood to mean. It is both populations that suffer as they face an unnecessary comparison of their traumas in order to make their painful histories comprehensible. White supremacy and those who perpetrated the very logics that spurred these different violences benefit from this essentialization and elision of specificity—these are the threats this insistent conjoining poses.

Despite the dangers, Gilroy devotes a portion of his book’s final chapter to the yoking of Black and Jewish experience. He apprehends Exodus, for example, as an integral part of Jewish history and contemporary political self-conceptualization and poetics. Gilroy notes that Exodus also, though differently, looms large in the Black Atlantic imaginary, particularly in neo-nationalist movements. Citing Albert Raboteau and James Cone, Gilroy shows how equally critical is the “idea [that] the suffering of both Blacks and Jews has a special redemptive power, not for themselves alone but for humanity as a whole.”¹⁷ Let us, for a moment, “tarry with” the question of redemption in the Black and Jewish traditions. Raboteau, who Gilroy cites, writes about forgiveness and redemption in the African American religious tradition, and the possibility that forgiveness is itself redemptive for the Black American subject. Gilroy also inverts this conceptualization of redemption

and engages Raboteau's understanding of a redemption born of struggle, as well as the idea that the experience of violence is in and of itself redemptive. Is this not a myth of whiteness and white supremacist Christianity's violence? Is the redemptive capacity of terror born of a project of legitimization and justification, or rather, the glorification of suffering? How is the veneration of redemption intimately entangled with power?

To return to Žižek, the objective of the Black Atlantic author and writer must not be redemption, because redemption obviates the need to "live with" and to "tarry with" suffering, trauma and the unspeakable. Although distinct from the project of Black Atlantic literature and authorship with which this essay grapples, Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" exemplifies the Black Atlantic turn toward transcendence and the idea that freedom and redemption are inherently intertwined in the emancipation from "mental slavery." Rather than writing freedom as born of a confrontation with brutalities and "living with" the haunting, Marley writes what becomes an appeal to transcendence. Transcendence and redemption become seductive and refute the project of "tarrying with" the terror of experience, and rather seeks redemption to transcend the secular now.

In refuting transcendence and redemption without confrontation, the Black Atlantic writer conceptualizes "the (in)finite field, in the possibilities, difficulties, cruelties, intensities, desires of our world" so that they "stringently oppose any inclining toward transcendence."¹⁸ Undertaking the act of writing with the purpose of redemption is a very different project than that of writing in order to face and "live with" the haunting. In an absolute refusal of Marley's proposition of the entanglement between freedom, transcendence and redemption, is not the project of the Black Atlantic author to coexist and remain with the hauntings of suffering, not be redeemed by it? The place for the Black Atlantic author is simultaneously terrifying and courageous because it forces them to learn how to live with the presence of unspeakable suffering and death, which is at the very center of Toni Morrison's writing. The question remains as to whether the act of "living with" is itself redemptive—if, through the project of ceaseless writing and making something to "tarry with" the horrors of the Black Atlantic, this ends in redemption. This is unclear, and maybe even undesirable, and so one can never say too many times that a crucial task for Black Atlantic literature is to show the many ways in which one must "live with." The writer must never work or think for the possibility or the proposition of transcending the haunting.

Gilroy does not draw into question the idea that struggle merits redemption, although he does speak to the turn towards death and suicide, particularly slave suicide, as an act of transcendent redemption in Black Atlantic literature. And not only a transcendence but also a redemptive "turn towards an African home."¹⁹ C.L.R. James writes about the death-as-redemption phenomenon in *The Black Jacobins*, speaking both to the enslaved

people “jump[ing] overboard, uttering cries of triumph, as they cleared the vessel and disappeared below the surface,”²⁰ but also of how “life was hard and death, they believed, meant not only release but a return to Africa.”²¹ Here, death is a means through which those enslaved on the Black Atlantic both relieved themselves of suffering and were redeemed. This form of redemption through death is made possible through a submersion in the Atlantic waters—becoming one with the Black Atlantic, making the Atlantic black. This aquatic immersion is an act of resistance against the capitalization of the Black body and is distinct from transcendence. It is a coming into Being in the water, and in doing so, a return to former ways of being—it is almost, literally, an attempt to float home. Death in the Atlantic propels another life—an afterlife—that is entirely born of the ocean. Those who dive overboard and into the deep-sea rewrite what it means to live within and escape the afterlife of property about which Sharpe writes; they become otherworldly, aquatic Beings. Whether looking at this history through Raboteau’s theological understanding of it in the Black Christian tradition, or by engaging it as a practice of Black redemptive imagination through Gilroy, we see that the question of redemption, in the wake of violence, looms large in the Black Atlantic imaginary. It is precisely its seeming ubiquity that demands that we question it.

This new question compels us to return to the Exodus origin story or imaginary. First, however, it is critical to note that Gilroy acknowledges the inhumanity, suffering, and brutality of the Holocaust and the Jewish dispersion thereafter. Yet, he does not link the diasporic Black Atlantic imaginary to the diaspora born of the twentieth-century anti-Semitic cruelties and crimes in Europe. He rather turns to the story of Exodus to link the experiences of the two diasporas. Gilroy contextualizes his argument in the presence of Exodus in the self-conceptualization of prominent black figures, including Marcus Garvey and Martin Luther King Jr., both of whom, according to him, “drew on the power of Old Testament patriarchy to cement their own political authority” by resonating with the figure of Moses.²² Gilroy argues that the Exodus story—concretely, for the Jewish population, and in the imaginary, for the Black Atlantic tradition—created for both groups a diasporic resource. Again, the possibility of and hope for redemption becomes central because the Exodus narrative is one of redemption and vindication in Jewish history as Moses leads the population out of the brutalities of enslavement. In this context, Gilroy posits Exodus as a salient means through which solidarity may be formed between Black and Jewish populations, but he does not pose the foundational question: Is there any equivalence to draw between the two Exoduses? Unlike the Israelite Exodus from Egypt, which was an escape from enslavement, the Exodus of the trans-Atlantic slave trade tore Africans from the continent, their lives and livelihoods and forced them into enslavement and its terrors.

Both Exodus stories are defined, however, by a journey out of Africa. Gilroy does not speak to the inherent Afrophobic nature of the Exodus narrative—that is, that it is only through the flight and exile from Africa that redemption is found. He does not address the dangers of Black Atlantic populations drawing on a story in which an escape from Africa is an act of liberation. For those Africans enslaved, there was no escape, refuge, or redemption in the Black Atlantic Exodus; it placed survival, and little else, at the forefront of the imaginary. The Black Atlantic Exodus represented a coming into enslavement and the dehumanizing brutality of the plantation system in the West—the very conditions which continue to haunt Black Atlantic literature and authorship.

Exodus is the window through which Gilroy conceptualizes Blackness and Jewishness together. In his anti-essentialization project, he does not address the fallacy of drawing an equivalence between the two Exoduses. Nor does he account for the many Black Atlantic populations whose imaginaries do not look to Exodus as their origin story or as an experience that links them to the Jewish diaspora. For Gilroy, it is the Exodus story that makes the concept of diaspora and the condition of (dis)location generative in thinking the relationship between Black and Jewish experience. Gilroy reminds us that, born of these supposedly mutually experienced Exoduses, both the Black and Jewish diaspora pose the difficult political questions of “the status of ethnic identity, the power of cultural nationalism, and the manner in which carefully preserved social histories of ethnocidal suffering can function to supply ethical and political legitimacy.”²³ Gilroy shows how the very “condition of exile, forced separation from the homeland,” and the unceasing experience of ethnically-based oppression and terror allow for the legitimization of aspirations for cultural nationalism and of claims to exceptionalism.²⁴ Without disregarding the immense violence both groups have endured and continue to experience, one must articulate how the instrumentalization of such legitimization both within and outside of their respective communities fuels the inherently oppressive project of cultural nationalism. Legitimation constructs and is reinforced by discourses of exceptionalism for Black Atlantic and Jewish populations, thus enabling the oppressed to justify their cultural nationalist aspirations without fear of reprisal. This legitimization serves the interests of cultural nationalist movements that seek to usurp the right to life and sovereignty of others (with an understanding that no sovereignty is without violence) under their own claims to historical subjugation, ethnocidal violence and terror, while refusing to question the effect on the other others, that is, those who suffer from these nationalist and proto-nationalist projects. Legitimation mystifies the violence inherent to all sovereignty and nationalist movements, of which these two movements are—despite their proposed exceptionalism—no exception.

Interrogating the power of cultural nationalism and exceptionalism inherent to both experiences in the wake of ethnocidal violence and their

contemporary political manifestations illuminates one way in which branches of these diasporas have common ideological underpinnings. Gilroy points to Black neo-nationalist movements, and Africentricity in particular, as displaying a peculiar combination of both Zionism and anti-Semitism.²⁵ Africentricity, according to Gilroy, claims a continuity of African culture amid dislocation, “rely[ing] upon a linear idea of time that is enclosed at each end by the grand narrative of African advancement [...] momentarily interrupted by slavery and colonialism, which make no substantial impact upon African tradition or the capacity of black intellectuals to align themselves with it.”²⁶ While idealizing purity and a continuity with an African past, Africentrism engages (supposedly without contradiction) the vehemently modern idea of territorial sovereignty, Black nationalist projects and inalienable rights to land. In its claim to the purity of ancient tradition, the right to territorial sovereignty and the desire to return to a homeland, Black nationalist aspirations align with the Zionist project.

Gilroy references Martin Delaney, himself a part of an early Africentric imaginary, who had aspirations “of autonomous black settlement in Central and South America,”²⁷ as part of a broader ambition for Black territorial nationalism. In Delaney’s *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, he both “call[s] for American citizenship and in favour of a plan for black emigration to Central or South America that would be announced by his first book.”²⁸ Calls to colonize Central and South American lands such as Delaney’s were made in the mid-1840s. They are part of a long history of sects of Black Atlantic cultural nationalist movements making claims over land to which they are not indigenous. Delaney speaks of Central or South America as spaces of refuge where Black Americans can assert their territorial sovereignty, again invoking an exceptionalism that justifies perpetrating their own violence, dispossession and erasure of another population.

Delaney’s contemporaries manifest in Black neo-nationalist movements such as the Republic of New Afrika, which is known as a “Black separatist movement.”²⁹ The primary goal of this organization is to create an “independent Black majority country situated in the southeastern United States, in the heart of an area of Black majority population, identified as Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina.” Although, unlike Delaney, they do not seek to travel far from their current (dis)location in order to establish a settler colony, nowhere is there an acknowledgment that an indigenous population exists in these spaces that already has been and continues to be dispossessed of their land, sovereignty and right to life. Rather, it frames the Black majority population as the indigenous, rightful people who belong in these states, and thus the New Afrika movement has an unarguable right to establish their own sovereign rule on and govern the land. The mystification of the settler colonial nature of such ethnic nationalist

movements, both historically and currently, returns us to those who or whose territorial aspirations benefit from the project of legitimation.

Gilroy does not attend to the violent assumptions written into these movements' presumption of the right of all non-nationed people to have a territorially inscribed sovereign homeland,³⁰ the "right to return" somewhere, or the right to turn into or be made into the indigenous through persecution. Nor does he question the lands on which these movements choose to lay claim. In doing so, he does not directly address the utter absence of any acknowledgment or discourse on indigeneity written into these cultural nationalist projects. Nor does he speak to the way in which sovereignty always assumes violence in its territorially inscribed borders, for at the heart of sovereignty is a project of displacement, dispossession, subjugation, destruction, erasure and even extermination of the Other. For Gilroy, sovereignty, its inherent violences and its capitalist underpinnings (which can never be separated) are all given and need not be put into question. Both the Zionist project and those of Black neo-nationalists, particularly but not exclusively in the United States, rely on the already assumed erasure and genocide, whether physical or in terms of the law,³¹ of the indigenous population. This is accompanied by an assertion of their own exceptional indigeneity, which takes precedence over the actual indigenous people—these groups' indigeneity becomes entirely irrefutable and claims a natural and ineffable right to the land.

Herein lies the danger of this insistence on exceptionalism—yoked together by plight and promise, these movements at their most extreme represent a dangerous turn towards a perpetuation of the very same logics of violence which created them. Exceptionalism becomes the means through which these movements monopolize a right to violence before seeking to immunize themselves by declaring rightful and original occupancy. The violence of their actions never seems to enter these nationalist movements' thinking—the victims of violence understand themselves to be immunized against any such charge themselves. This allows them to elide criticism and construct an exceptional indigeneity—born of, made in, history—that precedes and exceeds the actual indigenous inhabitants of the land. It is a reminder that the oppressed can always become the oppressor, that nothing is absolute, that there are violences written both within the groups' dispersions and their proposed solutions, and that no historic victim will inherently become an advocate for the right to live of the Other.

For Gilroy, indigeneity seems like a non-question. He does not entertain the idea that one of the consequences of Zionism and Black neo-nationalism is the further deracination, erasure and killing of Palestinians and Indigenous Americans, respectively. Gilroy briefly mentions that "more recent political factors like the identification of Blacks with the Palestinian struggle [...] intervene in any attempts to develop a dialogue about the significance" of interconnections between the Black and Jewish experience.³² One must first

question what Gilroy means by “recent” and what is at stake for him in denying the long tradition of solidarity between Black and Palestinian populations—for solidarity with Palestinians is a truly global and well-established phenomenon that extends to all continents. Likewise, Black and Palestinian solidarity is long-standing and almost as old as the state of Israel itself. Protests by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the early 1960s and Malcolm X’s infamous meeting with leaders of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in 1964 reveal how the civil rights movement in the United States saw itself as intimately tied up with the project of Palestinian liberation. Although Gilroy refuses to address this, it is by looking to these links between Black and Palestinian liberation that we see the Atlantic linking global anticolonial solidarities—one to which Gilroy’s project claims to be committed—through an understanding that terror is multifaceted and not exceptional. Yet, Gilroy refuses to speak on this solidarity movement and does not go deeper into questions of the reason so many Black Atlantic populations are aligning not with Zionism, but with the Palestinian struggle. Equally important is that he does not distinguish between Black solidarity with Jews and with the Zionist movement—for, though they may overlap, they are not the same. These key distinctions are left unattended by Gilroy.

Indeed, we must question what the implications are for Black solidarity with Palestinians—how does this alignment throw Gilroy’s political project into question, and also Black neo-nationalist sloganeering which, in many ways, seeks to impose indigeneity, thereby mirroring the violence of Zionism? These competing solidarities problematize notions of an essentialized and absolute Black identity, which again is at the foundation of Gilroy’s project (which is why it is even more surprising that he does not speak to this connection). If we persist in/with this line of critique, it forces us to “live with” the idea that, within a group, there is always the potential for an identification with both the oppressed and the oppressor, itself an acknowledgment that in this dichotomy the other is never either wholly one or the other. This is a provocation that challenges the aporia in Gilroy’s work. Whether he speaks to it or not, this is what he gives us to think; we must think it because he does not. He refuses to do so.

The Place of Literature and Authors in *The Black Atlantic*

Having considered the context and implications of citing and reconstructing Rukeyser’s question, let us return to the place of Black Atlantic literature and authorship, which is ever-shifting, as there are outside forces that seek to confine and silence it. The place for the Black Atlantic writer is not in a space of equal representation. Like W.E.B. Du Bois’ reference to the “talented tenth,” Gilroy acknowledges that the place of the Black Atlantic author and literature is one in which, as Grant Farred would suggest, there is a “burden of over-representation.”³³ Perhaps even more importantly for Gilroy, the place for the

Black Atlantic writer and their literature is one in which there is a *specific* and forced representation. They become a token, a figurehead, one that must speak authentically about their issues; they must remain *in place*, must speak the absolute Truth about their race (which has already been overdetermined by the demands of history), and remain faithful to tradition. In the enforced alignment between tradition and a requirement of absolute authenticity, Gilroy's critique of a tension between modernity and tradition in Black Atlantic literature comes to the fore. Instead of reinforcing the modern-traditional dichotomy, Gilroy argues that the Black Atlantic is necessarily complicit in both—any search for purity or authenticity will surely be foiled, undone and rendered unsustainable by a realization that only the embrace of one's hybridity can produce a literature that speaks to the realities and potentials of Black Atlantic experience. Thus, Black Atlantic literature, Gilroy argues, must reckon with two competing claims: the romanticized idea of a return to an untouched, pure and authentic Blackness, like that of Africentricity; and the reality that the Black Atlantic is produced by and produces, and is in turn living with and through, Western modernity.³⁴ Gilroy challenges the idea that the place for the Black Atlantic author is in the project of programs like *Presence Africain*, for example, wherein "the creative political responsibilities fell upon the caste of Black intellectuals responsible for both demonstrating and reproducing that unity."³⁵

Is the place for the Black Atlantic author in conformity? In Rukeyser's terms, and that which Gilroy makes clear as his political project, it is not. Gilroy speaks to the possible ways in which:

Black artists experience community through a special paradox. It affords them certain protections and compensations, yet it is also a source of constraint. It provides them with an imaginative entitlement to elaborate the consciousness of racial adversity while limiting them as artists to the exploration of that adversity.³⁶

For the Black Atlantic author, as Farred writes, it is a project wherein there is "a refusal of the metaphysical, even as the metaphysical lurks with the intent of manifesting itself."³⁷ The place for Black Atlantic literature and authorship thus becomes in the refusal of expectation, essentialization and ethnic absolutism. Authors such as Richard Wright challenge the essentialist claim to absolute Black unity that erases difference within the community and propose instead to embrace the many valences of the Black Atlantic through their work. Figures like Wright urge that tradition can "'no longer [be] a guide' for the creative aspirations of Black artists."³⁸ They insist that the Black Atlantic artist and author acknowledge, refuse and think beyond the rational in order to draw reason itself into question.

That is, to challenge the rationality and reason of Western Enlightenment and modernity, the rationalism that justifies racial essentialization and the rational conceptualization of the world which looks

solely to the concrete here and now. Exceeding modernity's understanding of the rational, the Black Atlantic writer must challenge, for example, the world in which "a slaves' desires to run away from bondage were still sometimes being rationalised by medical opinion as an illness-drapetomania or dysaesthesia Aetheopis."³⁹ They must put into question what sort of rationality could justify the bifurcation of freedom and enactment of terror based on wholly constructed racial divisions and the will-to-possess for the perpetuation of the modernizing project. Thus, while the place of the Black Atlantic author and artist is in the refusal of tradition as untouchable and pristine, it must also lie in the refusal of Western modernity and its definition of rationality. It also means deconstructing what Black Atlantic figures such as Delaney purport as "anti-mystical racial rationalism [which] required that blacks of all shades, classes, and ethnic groups give up the merely accidental differences that served only to mask the deeper unity waiting to be constructed"⁴⁰ in order to do away with any attempts at rationalizing racial essentialization and absolutism. In this way, Gilroy shows that the place, or the power, of Black Atlantic authorship and literature is to challenge the "rational" dichotomy between modern and traditional, and thus expose the many fallacies of self-essentialization and absolutism.

Likewise, it means engaging what Gilroy terms a "politics of transfiguration,"⁴¹ wherein the Black Atlantic writer must create (through ceaseless poesis) a new form of rationality that exceeds those which came before without making abject the modernity to which it is heir. In doing so, the Black Atlantic author "reveals the hidden internal fissures in the concept of modernity."⁴² Thinking in and through this politics of transfiguration, the Black Atlantic author must write "new desires, social relations and modes of association within the racial community of interpretation and resistance *and* between that group and its erstwhile oppressors."⁴³ By exceeding previous rationalities, the Black Atlantic author creates the concept anew—writing a Black Atlantic rationality that surpasses the present material conditions and gives life to "utopian desires."⁴⁴ It is a rationality that thinks beyond that which is the now—the limits of the now. It is to think for the utopia (with an understanding that the dystopian is always looming large and ever-present, for there is no utopia that does not contain within itself the seeds of the dystopian and the prospect of its own undoing).

In this sense, Gilroy articulates how Black Atlantic artists and authors, or creative workers in general, must write and create in a way that exceeds their current realities—they must look beyond that which they concretely experience. He articulates how the "relationship between reality and the artistic image is not always simple and direct" because "image and emotion possess a logic of their own," as well as their own counter logic.⁴⁵ It is in Gilroy's assertion that the Black Atlantic author must write outside of reality/rationality, while remaining in tune with the intensely political conditions around them, that explains the importance of Morrison's *Beloved*.

In her novel, Morrison writes the hauntings of enslavement and the Black American condition otherwise, thinking beyond reality and towards an understanding of the tangibility of “slavery and its afterlives.”⁴⁶ One crucial role of the Black Atlantic writer is not only to describe the condition of Blackness, but to exceed the work of the ethnographic in order to speak to it in an imaginary that exceeds reality and creates its own rationality. It is to imagine the world otherwise.

The work of the Black Atlantic writer is ever precarious and in jeopardy. Seeking to write in a different register, their work is always at risk of being understood through “almost exclusively literary enquiries.”⁴⁷ Not always acknowledged as part of another class of Black political intellectuals, their work falls victim to the rigidity of disciplinary boundaries and the label of fiction, which is never wholly fiction at all, for even history itself produces its own fictions. For Gilroy, Wright is the ultimate exemplification of this refusal and confinement. Gilroy articulates how Wright was misunderstood because, among many other reasons, he was restricted to the category of literary figure and thus his intensely political nature and politicized cultural productions were hollowed out. As Wright’s work took a global anticolonial political and philosophical turn, his critics argued that his “inappropriately cosmopolitan outlooks” threatened “his precious and authentic Negro sensibility.”⁴⁸ Instead, according to those who critiqued him, Wright “should have been content to remain confined within the intellectual ghetto to which Negro literary expression is still too frequently consigned” because his ventures outside of the United States—and in that (dis)location, his move from the strictly literary sphere—were understood to make him less of an authentically Black American literary figure; critics framed Wright as distracted, distanced, and out of touch with his “own” culture and his “own” people.⁴⁹ Wright’s extension to political and philosophical work became his own undoing, for he could no longer assert the absolute authenticity to which he once held claim. The place for the Black Atlantic writer for Wright, then, is in the absolute refusal of absolutism, the embrace of hybridity and the writing for a future yet-to-be imagined, a project which he already undertakes in his challenging of absolute claims to authenticity.

In challenging claims to purity and the insistence on constructing a boundary between traditionality and modernity, Édouard Glissant speaks to the difference between African and Western storytelling traditions—that is, that Western poetics always includes the *‘unsayable,’* and thus the erasable, whereas the African text *says it all*, or leaves *nothing unsaid*.⁵⁰ The poetics of unsayability reflects, according to Glissant, “the ultimate manifestation of the economics of the right to property,”⁵¹ which is why he links the literary tradition to the fundamental accumulation of capital and capitalist modes of production. As Gilroy and Glissant both note, already the Black Atlantic does not just inherit the African storytelling tradition, for it is an intimate component of—or rather, its creation through the trans-Atlantic slave trade

was the first act of—Western modernity. Given its location within Western modernity, Glissant critiques an essentialized and romanticized (re)turn to Africa and African modes of being, seeing and writing. Thus, Black Atlantic storytelling must grapple with this quintessentially Western mode of storytelling as well: Where is there a place for Black Atlantic literature and authorship within the unsayable? It is in the writing of that which exceeds Western rationality and the present material conditions—it is in writing the not-yet. As Glissant would say, it is in the scream that renders the unsaid silences audible. This scream, although speaking the unspeakable, may not always be intelligible. This initial or continued unintelligibility—but a fierce determination to say that which is unsaid—is central in endeavoring to undertake the project of creating the language and register which is not-yet. It is in finding new ways to voice and give voice to that which is deemed unsayable; to refuse the unsayable and thus break through the silence.

For Glissant, the place for Black Atlantic literature and authorship is writing-as-*poesis*. Glissant undertakes the work of finding how to proceed with *poesis*, and with what materials, in what language and through what means it must be done—because *poesis* must be ceaseless. And because *poesis* is unabating, it is exhausting and requires a confrontation with the always verifiable limits of the Self. Glissant looks at language and economy together to think the world *from* and despite (dis)location. He insists that “we need to develop a poetics of the ‘subject,’ if only because we have been too long ‘objectified’ or rather ‘objected to.’”⁵² He calls for the creation of a new language through which the Black Atlantic author writes their subjecthood/selfness. “Poetics of the subject” is inherent in what Glissant terms as “free or natural poetics,” which is one in which “any collective yearning for expression that is not opposed to itself either at the level of what it wishes to express or at the level of the language that it puts into practice.”⁵³ For Glissant, Black Atlantic authorship must undertake this *poesis* by writing itself into subjecthood through an expression that is wholly theirs—for to speak the unspeakable, the Black Atlantic author must write in a language where there is “no incompatibility between desire and expression.”⁵⁴ Thus, the Black Atlantic author must seek to say the unsayable by refining and creating an autonomous language that can bear thinking as well as cultivate a communal consciousness.

To think relationally, to think the Black Atlantic not as a finite, essentialized and absolutist space, but as a rhizomatic web⁵⁵ of horizontally reaching identities and processes of continuous and ceaseless transformation, is also central to the Glissantian project. It is to, quite literally, create a new language of productivity that can bear the weight of what Glissant posits as non-history, or a history without history.⁵⁶ For Glissant, particularly in *Poetics of Relation*, it is to understand the ship, and for the purposes of this analysis, the sea, as a space of enforced productivity and death where the human becomes capital, after which it transitions into un-human labor. Something

happens for Glissant on the ever-fluid, ever-distorting surface of the Atlantic, for the point at which the ship hits the water is a point of rhizomatic contact—it leaves an imprint; a difficult to discern but nonetheless immutable mark is left upon the sea. The ocean carries these unerasable, yet ethereal, imprints—themselves a haunting—onto the sand. This imprint, though undetectable, is haunting to all who experience it and are of the Black Atlantic; it is not about verticality.⁵⁷ Glissant speaks to what happens as the ship crosses; the never-ending transformation (or, creolization) that this journey sets in motion; and the forced poetics,⁵⁸ the silencing and the terror that ensue. That is the place for literature and the Black Atlantic writer for Glissant—in the scream of a people forcing their way out of a forced poetics; it is a space that the Black Atlantic participates in making and wherein they *make something*.

Like Glissant, Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* shows that the role of the Black Atlantic author and literature can be to create a language that can give voice to all the formal registers of their scream—it is a language that is not-yet recognized, an informal register, a register that is ceaselessly becoming and being made. When the “need for expression confronts an inability to achieve expression” through the language that he speaks, Césaire must find a way to write himself into the Black Atlantic condition otherwise.⁵⁹ Césaire crafts a new idiom to deal with an experience that cannot be bound by the language which he speaks or in the form in which he writes. Grappling with the shift from oral to written, while still undertaking the unceasing work of attempting to embody the Creole language in writing, Césaire creates a new genre when none exists that can encapsulate the brutality of his experience—work which his Martinican successors, Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau, most prominent among them, continue to undertake. Césaire's engagement with Surrealist poetry and the creation of a new genre attempted to embody diaspora, return and the abjection and estrangement that comes with post-enslavement, postcolonial movement and a colonized education. He finds a new way to write himself into and out of the discomfiture of his condition and “stringently opposes any inclining toward transcendence,”⁶⁰ and in doing so, refuses resolution. Gilroy suggests, taking up Adorno's language, that “some Black writers have already begun the vital work of enquiring into terrors that exhaust the resources of language amidst the debris of a catastrophe which prohibits the existence of their art at the same time as demanding its continuance.”⁶¹ This is Césaire's project, but he is not alone. The Black Atlantic author is never alone, remember? They are always *living with*, or writing with, another. For Césaire, one who frames himself as post-autochthon—that is, he *is* the trees, the mountains, the soil, the sea—he writes literature that is not only from the Black Atlantic but is the Being of Black Atlantic. That is the place for literature and the Black Atlantic writer—in the darkness, on the shores and ever-present upon the waves of alterity.

As he refuses resolution and forces the reader and writer to “live with” the discomfiture of terror, Wright’s work, and James’ *The Black Jacobins*, give us a different way to think about the place for Black Atlantic literature and authorship. In many ways, James’ literature consolidates the unsayable (and, thinking with Michel-Rolph Trouillot, the “unthinkable”⁶²). Gilroy speaks to Wright’s journey as a Black Atlantic author in coming to the realization that it is necessary to write something that forces the reader to confront and problematize all that they think they know and understand. Whereas when Wright wrote *Uncle Tom’s Children*, the white reader “could read and weep over [it] and feel good about [themselves],” he realized that it was his role to write something that “would be so hard and deep that they [the reader] would have to face it without the consolation of tears.”⁶³ He writes of terror in a way that disallows any mourning or discussion to take place on behalf of his readers. Wright forces his readers to look at the horrors, and in turn, makes it clear to them that the horrors are looking back at them, too—for this confrontation is reciprocal, inescapable and immensely vulnerable.⁶⁴

James’ *The Black Jacobins* similarly compels a confrontation with the unsayable so that the reader cannot look away from that which he writes. James precludes the possibility of debate by laying out the violence of the San Domingue Revolution without sanitization. From the beginning, he speaks to the suicides on the slave ships and the “bestial practices [that] were normal features of slave life”⁶⁵ as the Atlantic carried the Black bodies that became cargo on the journey to San Domingo—something of which Gilroy also makes brief mention. This is James’ first writing of the unspeakable and its oceanic impulses. He also speaks to the many revolutionary battles on the island shores, and the way that, for months after the revolution, the people could not eat the fish⁶⁶—there was something in the ocean that remained and remembered; the Black Atlantic itself is—is always—a haunting. The residents of newly independent Haiti knew that there was something still there—blood, death, the soil, the body, dead and alive—wrapped up and sucked into the current of the Atlantic, only to be cast back on the shores for all to live with, again. “Living with” that which the ocean remembers. We see that, unlike Glissant, James does not refuse verticality, for he looks beneath the surface of the ocean to what lies deep below. Through James, we see that this is another place for / of the Black Atlantic author and literature—in a space of brutal self-confrontation and entanglement from which no one can look away, and it always remains liable to wash up on the shores and hide itself deep in the sea.

Writing of the ineradicable and haunting traces from which no one can turn away is Morrison and her novel, *Beloved*, which is a text of great significance for Gilroy. He understands *Beloved* as “constituted by the tension between the racial self and the racial community;” thus, again, reminding us that the Black Atlantic is not an essentialized monolith.⁶⁷ Morrison speaks to an experience that is universal in the Black Atlantic—the impossibility of

forgetting the horror, and the necessity of “living with” that haunting. An essential part of “living with” terror and its afterlives is a refusal of any claim to untouched traditionality, thus challenging Africentrist claims. For Morrison, Black Atlantic writing involves a necessary reckoning with modernity and its violences. Rather than seeking to write with the mythical purity of traditional African cultural modes, Morrison understands that “the significance and meaning of these [African] survivals get irrevocably sundered from their origins”—what remains is an ineradicable trace of what came before the violent dislocation.⁶⁸ Like Glissant, Césaire and many other authors alongside whom Morrison writes, she does not fear the transformation and mixings inherent to Black Atlantic b/Being and creation.

Gilroy spends much time meditating on *Beloved* and the narrative of Margaret Garner—stories which reveal the ways in which Black Atlantic storytelling can bring life to haunting and re-memorialize an experience of the unspeakable. Morrison writes something that one cannot forget, a truth and haunting so indestructible that it threatens to tear the house down, literally⁶⁹—and with it, all our senses of what truth *is*. This takes us back to the question of the Black Atlantic artist understanding the world in a different way. Morrison shows how the “desire to forget the terrors of slavery and the simultaneous impossibility of forgetting”⁷⁰ is a central component of Black Atlantic storytelling—perhaps the most critical part. Because if the Black Atlantic author is not writing the unforgettable, then what is there to write? To return to Adorno’s provocation, the Black Atlantic writer must write because it is possible, through literature, to articulate the haunting of unspeakable human devastation and to re(-)member a way of b/Being in the world. Undertaking the work of writing literature “among all this” human brutality, terror, and haunting, is a project that cannot cease and must continue to be explained. No matter who it is, the Black Atlantic author writes of the haunting that defines this mode of b/Being, and Morrison brings that to life (quite literally, through the character of *Beloved*, but also through her prose). Morrison reanimates the haunting and allows it to speak, move and live. Through Morrison, we understand that that is the true place for literature and the Black Atlantic writer—writing *with* the haunting, writing within the haunting and writing in order to make the haunting sayable.

¹ Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* (Current Books, 1949).

² Theodor Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” in *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003).

- ³ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant Hegel and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
- ⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1993), 200.
- ⁵ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 200.
- ⁶ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 215.
- ⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context” (1971), Alan Bass (trans.), in *Margins of Philosophy*, 307-330, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1982), 320.
- ⁸ See: Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Paul Patton (trans.) (London: Athlone Press, 1994).
- ⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk; Essays and Sketches* (Chicago, A. G. McClurg, 1903. New York: Johnson Reprint Corp. 1968), 52.
- ¹⁰ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 148.
- ¹¹ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 214.
- ¹² Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016): 36.
- ¹³ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 36.
- ¹⁴ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 41.
- ¹⁵ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 43.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 208.
- ¹⁸ Grant Farred, “Theoretical Futures: The Creation of a Concept,” in *Africana Studies: Theoretical Futures*, Grant Farred (ed.), 1-15 (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2022), 2.
- ¹⁹ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 208.
- ²⁰ C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* Second edition revised ed. (New York: Vintage Books 1963), 9.
- ²¹ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 16.
- ²² Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 207.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 208.
- ²⁵ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 211.
- ²⁶ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 190.
- ²⁷ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 20.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ See: <https://jacksonadvocateonline.com/history-of-the-republic-of-new-afrika/>.

- ³⁰ Gilroy suggests that, despite the necessary recognition of uniqueness and specificity in the Jewish experience, there is often rhetoric in Zionist discourse that perpetuates the claim that they are the only 'non-national nation.' Although Gilroy does speak as though this is specific to the Zionist project, it is similar to the sort of exceptionalism that we see in Black neo-nationalist movements, which also display an understanding that they are a non-national nation that deserves territorial and national sovereignty of their own. See Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 213.
- ³¹ In the context of Zionism, legal regimes such as the 1950 law of return represent the erasure of the Palestinian population and the inherent violence that accompanies it through the promise of ethnic and territorial sovereignty and citizenship and the presumption of the absence of (and thus inherent deracination of) the Palestinian. In her paper, "The Race Leapt at Sauteurs": Genocide, narrative, and Indigenous exile from the Caribbean Archipelago, Melanie J. Newton would call these sorts of legal regimes "genocide on paper," as she makes reference to Taíno activist Jorge Estevez's assertion that genocide in the settler colonial project takes place both physically and on paper, that is what he references as historians' enactment of "'paper genocide'" (6) wherein they write out the presence, persistence and histories of the indigenous population in order to justify and perpetuate the settler colonial project. See: Melanie J. Newton, "'The Race Leapt at Sauteurs': Genocide, Narrative, and Indigenous Exile from the Caribbean Archipelago," *Caribbean Quarterly* 60, 2 (2014): 5-28.
- ³² Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 212.
- ³³ Grant Farred, *The Burden of Over-representation* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2018).
- ³⁴ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 219. The first chapter of Gilroy's book works to reveal, through an analysis primarily of the Hegelian dialectic between lord and bondsman, how enslavement and the construction of Blackness are crucial to the project of Western modernity and thus cannot be separated from it. He deconstructs the idea of an 'untouched' and pure African past or imaginary to which those of the Black Atlantic (or those of the African diaspora anywhere) can turn or belong. Gilroy argues that the creation of the "Enlightened man" and the creation of the "Black man" were coeval emergences and the necessary first steps of modernity.
- ³⁵ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 195.
- ³⁶ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 182.
- ³⁷ Farred, "Theoretical Futures," 5.
- ³⁸ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 192.
- ³⁹ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 21.
- ⁴⁰ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 28.
- ⁴¹ Although Gilroy speaks to the politics of transfiguration in the creation of Black Atlantic music, this essay argues it is also important when looking to the role of and place for Black Atlantic literature and authorship.
- ⁴² Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 39.
- ⁴³ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 38.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 169.
- ⁴⁶ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 36.

- ⁴⁷ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 147.
- ⁴⁸ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 173.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Édouard Glissant and J. Michael Dash, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 137.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 149.
- ⁵³ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 120.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Glissant conceptualizes Atlantic relationality and Creolité through a theoretical engagement with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the rhizome. Rather than seeking purity and origins, the rhizome looks at webs of interconnections and multiplicity "create and re-create a web of connections that, in its multiplicity, opens up new theoretical possibilities" (Farred, 5). For Glissant, the slave ship is a rhizomatic space; he also engages the idea of the rhizome through his conceptualization of "what [he] call[s] the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" (11). See: Édouard Glissant & Betsy Wing, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997).
- ⁵⁶ Glissant speaks to the French Caribbean experience of continuous ruptures starting with the "brutal dislocation, the slave trade," which forever shifted the temporal and spatial consciousness of the Caribbean subject (60). He argues that this dislocation and rupture created a gap in history (and the impossibility of ever telling a linearized history as the Europeans tell theirs and the History of the world) and a lack of communal historical consciousness. Glissant calls this dislocation from the ability to tell a linear communal history, "and the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb it all" as 'nonhistory.' See: Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 62.
- ⁵⁷ Here, the idea of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome again becomes critical, for the rhizome refuses verticality, and rather looks to a horizontal web of connections and roots that grow outward, rather than down.
- ⁵⁸ Glissant defines a forced poetics "as any collective desire for expression that, when it manifests itself, is negated at the same time because of the *deficiency* that stifles it, not at the level of desire, which never ceases, but at the level of expression, which is never realized" (120). For Glissant, a forced poetics occurs when an individual or a community cannot achieve expression despite its desire to—there is "an opposition between the content to be expressed and the language suggested or imposed." See: Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*.
- ⁵⁹ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 120.
- ⁶⁰ Farred, "Theoretical Futures," 3.
- ⁶¹ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 218.
- ⁶² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as a Non-Event," in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot & Hazel V Carby, 70-107 (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2015).
- ⁶³ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 154.
- ⁶⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*. Vintage. Hollingdale & J. R. (ed. and trans.) (1886).

⁶⁵ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 13.

⁶⁶ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 359.

⁶⁷ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 219.

⁶⁸ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 223.

⁶⁹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London, England: Vintage Classics 2007). In *Beloved*, the house, 124, which is both the backdrop and active member of the narrative, is haunted. When Paul D Garner comes into 124 for the first time, it begins to shake, and the haunting is felt viscerally.

⁷⁰ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 222.

On the Limitations of Michel Foucault's Genealogy of Neoliberalism

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The methodology of Michel Foucault's genealogy of neoliberalism in *Naissance de la biopolitique* deviates from his other genealogies. In previous works, Foucault's genealogical method explored the messy process by which particular discourses intermesh with power-relations inflecting and sometimes subverting these discourses. *Surveiller et punir*, for instance, describes how disciplinary rationality diffuses itself throughout the prison-system in a variegated and diffuse manner. Not even the panopticon is ever truly implemented anywhere in its pure form. At the beginning of the book, Foucault immediately specifies that actually-existing methods of punishment are not mere expressions of theoretically pre-established legal prescriptions, but are techniques of power always already inserted into pre-existing fields of forces that influence these methods' efficacy and form.¹ Genealogy is not a history of discursive rationalities under laboratory conditions but of political tactics in continuous transformation. Foucault's personal activism certainly helped in acquiring this localised perspective from within institutions themselves.² His critique of disciplinary power communicates not only the intentions of disciplinary authorities but also the experience of the disciplined. Foucault denaturalises disciplinary discourses by revealing the subjective effects of disciplinary power on the disciplined.

Naissance de la biopolitique, on the other hand, focuses on neoliberal rationality in an almost pristine condition, without the messy history of its implementation or the opposition of the governed. The lectures articulate the views of neoliberal economists but do not consider the impact or side-effects of neoliberal governmentality has had on the governed. The main reason for this absence is that Foucault presented this lecture series in 1979, months before the electoral victories of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Foucault simply could not have known how neoliberal rationality would be exercised in government. He was mainly describing the contours of an increasingly vocal group of maverick economists marginalised in the

scientific community of Keynesian economics, and critical of the government interference normalised during the *Trentes Glorieuses*. There was hardly any genealogy of actually-existing neoliberalism to be written at that time.

Taking Foucault's lectures as gospel for the critique of neoliberalism consequently comes with significant downsides. There is, firstly, a problem of descriptive inadequacy. Foucault's brief survey of especially American neoliberal rationality is sometimes wrongfully put forward as an easily applicable, definitive framework for all actually-existing neoliberalisms in their quasi-infinite variety.³ The popularity of Foucault's lectures, however, also creates a problem of critical methodology. Without the perspective of the governed to oppose neoliberal governmental discourses, *Naissance de la biopolitique* seems surprisingly uncritical of neoliberalism.⁴ Even loyal Foucault scholars admit that the "normative stakes" of these lectures are unclear.⁵ Foucault predominantly describes neoliberalism's rise to prominence in a neutral fashion, which makes his lectures seem remarkably void of critical distance.⁶ Foucault's texts are, moreover, regularly punctuated by appreciative remarks. Without a focus on those who suffer from neoliberal power, analogous to how Foucault highlighted the unfortunate fate of prisoners in *Surveiller et punir*, one can be excused for wondering whether Foucault opposed neoliberalism at all. Something is missing in Foucault's genealogy of neoliberalism.

This interpretation problem has led some to accuse Foucault of having been converted to neoliberalism.⁷ In section 1, I argue that the "neoliberal conversion"-thesis in its most radical format overstates Foucault's interest in neoliberalism. It misleadingly presents a methodological problem as a biographical shift in Foucault's philosophy. In section 2, I explain the contours of the methodological limitations of Foucault's genealogy of neoliberalism in *Naissance de la biopolitique*. Foucault voiced the talking points of neoliberal discourse without highlighting how actually-existing neoliberalism would later inflect and alter those discourses. Foucault's goal of this historical exercise was to show the contingency of neoliberalism and foster among his audience a 'critical attitude', a will to resist imposed governmental norms and to affirm the subjective creativity to reinvent one's own subjectivity.⁸ However, this stance is insufficient for tackling actually-existing neoliberalism, as the latter is fully capable of integrating libertine practices of self-experimentation. In the final section, I therefore argue that the genealogy of neoliberalism needs to be supplemented with an immanent critique of neoliberalism. The latter promises a post-disciplinary and minimally invasive form of government that guarantees subjects' freedom to experiment with their own conduct. However, the reality of actually-existing neoliberalisms, viewed from the perspective of the governed, shows neoliberalism to be a negative biopolitics. Neoliberalism is a governmental regime that thrives on precarity and "a savage sorting of winners and losers".⁹ Those who cannot compete or refuse to become entrepreneurs of their own lives are sacrificed

for the prosperity of the population as a whole. A sufficiently critical genealogy of neoliberalism must hence not only show the historical contingency of neoliberal governmentality, but it must also reveal the collateral damage of neoliberal governmentality from the viewpoint of the governed.

Did Foucault convert to neoliberalism?

Interpreters of Foucault's oeuvre have regularly expressed astonishment at Foucault's unexpectedly mild assessment of neoliberalism.¹⁰ When François Ewald and Bernard Harcourt invited Gary Becker himself to respond to Foucault's lectures, the American economist admitted, to his own surprise, that he found no explicit criticisms.¹¹ Some interpreters have even hypothesised a biographically motivated conversion in Foucault's philosophy.¹² Nonetheless, I will show that any strong version of the "neoliberal conversion"-thesis does not stand the test of historical scrutiny. I argue for a weaker version of the "neoliberal conversion"-thesis, which no longer focuses on Foucault's personal biography but on a methodologically motivated elective affinity between Foucault's ethics and neoliberalism. By ignoring how actually-existing neoliberalism would affect subjective conducts, Foucault professed an ethics of self-experimentation unduly assimilable to neoliberal governmentality. To properly formulate this position, one first needs to grasp why the strong "neoliberal conversion"-thesis is wrong. The latter relies on (1) biographical evidence about Foucault's political allegiances, but also on (2) textual evidence of Foucault's appreciation of neoliberal talking points.

(1) The biographical evidence is mostly circumstantial and highly dependent on tendentious readings. Foucault never explicitly aligned himself with neoliberalism, so the evidence often relies on anecdotes indicative of allegedly hidden neoliberal sympathies. Most of these can be given other, equally plausible explanations. For example, Foucault's close collaboration with François Ewald, the later representative of the French employer's organisation MEDEF,¹³ does not prove Foucault himself was neoliberal, since scientific collaborators often hold different political views.¹⁴ The same applies to Foucault's association with the *nouveaux philosophes* and *le deuxième gauche*, two philosophical movements frequently connected to French neoliberalism.¹⁵ Foucault was enthusiastic about almost all appropriations of his work across the political spectrum. He preferred others to *use* his philosophical concepts like tools rather than repeating and defending his insights as if they were fixed doctrine.¹⁶ Foucault was thus happy with instrumentalisations of his thought as distinct as Pierre Rosanvallon and André Glucksmann, on the one hand, and Deleuze and Guattari, on the other hand. A third frequently mentioned factor is Foucault's staunch anti-Marxism, which would have led him to support other anti-Marxist

movements.¹⁷ His anti-Marxism, however, more plausibly derives from his difficult relationship to the *Parti Communiste Français* and his negative experiences from living in communist Poland at the end of the 1950s.¹⁸ Also philosophically, Foucault was critical of Marxist strategic thought. Leninist appraisals of the vanguard party allegedly glorified hierarchical submission to party leadership and lacked the political imagination to think beyond the Leninist model of revolution, according to Foucault.¹⁹ He was interested in alternative forms of political organisation that connected new, horizontalist social movements into transversal political forces.²⁰

(2) The textual evidence for a full conversion focuses on *Naissance de la biopolitique* itself and a 1983 interview about the welfare state.²¹ These texts allegedly show Foucault giving in to neoliberal temptations in exchange for forms of government beyond disciplinary power.²² Foucault, for instance, sympathises with Becker's economic approach to criminal conduct in *Naissance de la biopolitique* insofar as it effectuates an "anthropological erasure of the criminal".²³ In *Surveiller et punir*, Foucault had documented how the criminal was gradually encapsulated in disciplinary institutions that produce docile subjects through meticulous surveillance and normalisation. Disciplinary institutions understood crime as the expression of socio-psychological deviance hidden in the criminal's deep self. The task of disciplinary institutions was subsequently to unearth, decipher, and forcefully normalise this self. Disciplinary power articulates pre-established behavioural norms, which it imposes on individual bodies in order to produce supposedly normal subjects. It identifies the criminal as psychologically deviant to subsequently invade criminals' private affairs and drill a new identity into their subjective conduct.

In Becker's criminology Foucault discerns a less invasive crime-fighting strategy.²⁴ It abdicates any attempts to unravel the criminal's deep self. Criminals are rather *homines oeconomici* like anyone else; they enact their personal preferences on the basis of rational calculations of the expected benefits and costs. According to Becker, criminal activity results from individuals weighing off the benefits of crime against the risks of getting caught. If the return on investment from crime pays off, *homines oeconomici* engage in criminal conduct. Though Becker's economic approach to human behaviour is remarkably superficial,²⁵ it signals a welcome departure, for Foucault, from the psychologistic hermeneutics of the self.²⁶ The economic analysis of crime remains agnostic about criminals' inner motivations or psychological abnormalities. It sticks to the surface of criminal conduct. Becker's solutions are also less invasive: he does not advocate panoptic surveillance but suggests indirect changes to individuals' private calculations.²⁷ Neoliberalism allegedly governs by economic incentives alone. Becker wishes to alter individuals' incentive structures to increase the chances and costs of getting caught, though he simultaneously reminds governments that the costs of crime-fighting must stay below the benefits.²⁸ As Newheiser

summarises, “neoliberal economics allows behaviour to be governed with a light touch, by manipulating the range of choices available”,²⁹ while individuals’ inner selves are off limits for government interventions. Unlike the invasive techniques of disciplinary power, neoliberal governmentality regards individuals and their private desires as black-boxed, forbidden terrain for top-down interference. To reduce crime, governments can only indirectly manipulate environmental factors that influence individuals’ choice architectures.³⁰

Foucault understands this approach to crime as an opportunity for a governmentality more tolerant vis-à-vis minority identities and non-conformist practices of governing oneself.³¹

On the horizon of [Becker’s] analysis we see instead the image, idea, or theme-program of a society in which there is an optimisation of systems of difference, in which the field is left open to fluctuating processes, in which minority individuals and practices are tolerated, in which action is brought to bear on the rules of the game rather than on the players, and finally in which there is an environmental type of intervention instead of the internal subjugation of individuals.³²

Disciplinary institutions paternalistically impose a pre-established form of life on all individual bodies alike. Subjects that fail or refuse to conform to these top-down standards of conduct are forcefully institutionalised and rehabilitated into docile bodies. Neoliberalism ostensibly leaves individuals free to conduct themselves as they please. Supposedly ‘abnormal’ lifestyles are hence more easily tolerated.³³

The 1983 interview about the welfare state reveals a similar suspicion about the paternalism of disciplinary institutions, but it takes Foucault to a critique of social security measures eerily similar to neoliberal refrains of welfare dependency:³⁴

There is in certain marginalisations what I would call another aspect of the phenomenon of dependency. Our social security systems impose a determinate form of life to which they subject individuals. Each person or group that, for some reason, is unwilling or unable to conform to this form of life, will be marginalised by the play of institutions.³⁵

Foucault accuses the welfare state of using social security measures to impose social conformism. Though social welfare is arguably welcome for people in need, Foucault fears that it instils a structural dependency on state assistance among the needy, that facilitates the normalising power of disciplinary apparatuses.³⁶ Welfare institutions impose a dichotomy between deserving poor, with a right to assistance, and undeserving poor, who are unwilling or unable to conform to disciplinary norms. The latter are subsequently excluded from government aid, while the former remain closely monitored and normalised. Foucault warns that excessively docile welfare recipients

gradually lose the capacity to autonomously determine their conduct. They become dependent on paternalistic bureaucratic care. According to Foucault, the demand for state assistance subsequently increases, despite limited public budgets.³⁷ The welfare state's culture of dependency thereby fosters a contradiction between infinite demand for assistance and finite systems of social support.³⁸ Foucault thereby echoes neoliberal tropes about welfare dependency. Chicago School economist Thomas Sowell, for instance, similarly argues that welfare institutions disincentivise individuals from taking care of themselves.³⁹ Because income from state benefits is guaranteed, individuals are discouraged from taking personal initiative to improve their lot. The projected benefits from staying on welfare are too high compared to the effort of taking control and responsibility over oneself.⁴⁰

One can imagine why the neoliberals and Foucault were interested in Milton Friedman's negative income tax.⁴¹ This system would replace any financial support linked to specific misfortunes, like unemployment benefits or state-subsidised health insurance, with a guaranteed minimum income for all. Those who have earnings below the pre-established threshold receive money from the government rather than paying taxes. Friedman's taxation system guarantees citizens' minimal subsistence without granting the state a mandate to determine what people should do with their government subsidies or how they should conduct their lives. Individuals' economic security would be salvaged, while their personal decision-making would remain black-boxed for governmental interference. Friedman's proposal hence signals a significant departure from the invasive practices that Foucault identified in the welfare state.⁴² As Foucault was exploring options for a socialist governmentality, steering away from welfare state paternalism could have looked attractive to reinvigorate a post-disciplinary leftist politics.⁴³ Neoliberalism potentially appeared as an interesting source for inspiration in that project, which would have brought Foucault close to 'progressive neoliberalism', i.e., a neoliberalism that justifies itself in the eyes of the governed by claiming to promote progressive values, like diversity, minority rights, and inclusivity.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, even the textual evidence is insufficient to support the strong "neoliberal conversion"-thesis. In an overall oeuvre spanning thousands of pages, three passages never meant for publication is a meagre basis for such a controversial interpretation, especially if Foucault explicitly says in *Naissance de la biopolitique* that he is not interested in making any value judgments about liberal or neoliberal governmentality.⁴⁵ *Naissance de la biopolitique* or Foucault's interviews only look like published work for us today. Foucault was testing some ideas that he eventually never published himself. Especially for his lectures, one gets the impression of reading a work-in-progress rather than a definitive argument.⁴⁶ In 1979, neoliberalism was not yet the dominant governmental rationality of today, but an emerging counter-knowledge that was steadily displacing the dogmas of Keynesianism.⁴⁷

Foucault hence does not articulate any final judgments on neoliberalism, but provokes his (often Marxist) students to entertain the possibility of an alternative and somewhat counter-intuitive governmental rationality. Contrary to appearances, *Naissance de la biopolitique* is not a book outlining the complete genealogy of neoliberalism, but a collection of public performances meant to encourage students to think differently about economic government.

Furthermore, quotes showing analogous opposition to the disciplinary welfare state between Foucault and the neoliberals only suggests that both had a common enemy, not that they shared the same politics. Foucault is not a neoliberal simply because he similarly dislikes welfare state discipline. The same type of criticism was fairly common among the New Left during the 1970s.⁴⁸ Foucault's worries about welfare dependency are almost identical to Ivan Illich's critique of dependency on public healthcare in *Medical Nemesis*,⁴⁹ while Herbert Marcuse writes in *One-Dimensional Man* that

with all its rationality, the welfare state is a state of unfreedom because its total administration is systematic restriction of (a) 'technically' available free time; (b) the quantity and quality of goods and services 'technically' available for vital individual needs; (c) the intelligence (conscious and unconscious) capable of comprehending and realising the possibilities of self-determination.⁵⁰

Many critical theorists attacked the welfare state's normalising power, but does that make them all closeted neoliberals?

A critical attitude is not enough

One explanation for Foucault's readers' disappointment vis-à-vis his stance on neoliberalism is Foucault's unconventional approach to critique in the late 1970s and early 1980s. When the lectures were published in the 2000s, many readers hoped for a frontal attack on neoliberalism. They expected a variation on Marxist ideology critique, in which Foucault would unmask neoliberalism as a malicious *dispositif* defended by illusory discourses of entrepreneurial wealth and competitive growth.⁵¹ They wanted Foucault to reveal the false consciousness of neoliberal rationality and uncover the unjust realities underneath. For Marxists, this hidden reality would be exploitation and economic dispossession,⁵² but non-Marxists today often use similar argumentative strategies. Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos*, for example, uses Foucault to unmask neoliberalism's democratic pretences as illusions covering up the real erosion of citizenship. However, Foucault stages no frontal attack on neoliberalism and rejects the strategy of ideology critique in general. Foucault's own method of critique even makes him excessively mild vis-à-vis neoliberalism and defend a politics unhelpful in combatting neoliberalism today. He lacks a clear counter-history of neoliberalism written from the viewpoint of those governed under neoliberalism. I call this the weak

“neoliberal conversion”-thesis. Foucault did not actually convert, but his methodology in *Naissance de la biopolitique* leaves gaps that make his ethics easily assimilated by neoliberalism.

According to Foucault’s *Naissance de la biopolitique*, genealogy does not condemn the *status quo* to subsequently propose its own reforms or superior moral standards. It refuses to directly answer the Leninist question of what is to be done with an alternative political project. For Foucault, ‘critique’ constitutes an historical investigation into the conditions of possibility of specific regimes of veridiction and subjection.⁵³ As Foucault argues in *Naissance de la biopolitique*,

Undertaking the history of regimes of veridiction—and not the history of truth, the history of error, or the history of ideology, etcetera—obviously means abandoning once again that well-known critique of European rationality and its excesses [...] The critique I propose consists in determining under what conditions and with what effects a veridiction is exercised, that is to say, once again, a type of formulation falling under particular rules of verification and falsification.⁵⁴

Genealogy explores the historical developments that have made the rise of neoliberalism as an effective governmental rationality possible. *In casu*, Foucault traces the diffusion of neoliberal arguments for free market competition in Germany, the US, and France from the 1930s to ‘70s. It means Foucault is uninterested in proving neoliberal rationality wrong.⁵⁵ Neoliberalism is a ‘truth regime’ and hence emphatically true. Foucault does not question neoliberalism’s claim to rationality but articulates the standpoint of neoliberal economists at face value. Becker hence gladly notes in the discussion with Harcourt and Ewald that, while many humanists have criticised human capital theory for reducing human beings to objective capital, Foucault did not.⁵⁶ He interprets human capital theory not as a faulty anthropology but as a strategic rationality, a ‘principle of intelligibility’ aimed at effectively governing populations.⁵⁷ He treats the identification of human beings with capital not as an affront to human dignity but as an historical fiction of which the *Entstehung* can be explained by the particular historical events that made it into an effective tool of government.⁵⁸ Whether those tools ultimately correspond to reality is not Foucault’s concern.⁵⁹ Jason Read correctly infers that, for Foucault, “any criticism of neoliberalism as governmentality must not focus on its errors, on its myopic conception of social existence, but on its particular production of truth.”⁶⁰

The purpose of genealogy is not to tell what is to be done or unmask neoliberal falsities. If there is a normative stake at all in the genealogical method, it has to be located elsewhere. In a round table discussion in 1978, Foucault clarifies that genealogy should convince people that they do not know what is to be done.⁶¹ It should defamiliarize them from the self-evident truths of the present. What people hold for universal and natural, is ultimately

contingent and historically variable. Foucault champions the genealogical method to systematically destabilise the expertise of dominant governmental rationalities.⁶² Exploring the accidents of history that brought a particular governmentality to prominence highlights the contingency of the present, despite how familiar it might seem from the perspective of those immediately involved.⁶³ History could have gone differently and other governmentalities are possible.⁶⁴ In the case of neoliberalism, genealogical critique shows how accidental its emergence was – centred as it was on the careers of individual economists, like Hayek, Becker, and the Ordoliberalists, in Foucault's rendition – and how contingent its current hold on the truth is. Counter-conducts can purportedly generate new subjugated knowledges and regimes of subjectivation that combat the neoliberal conduct of conducts.⁶⁵ Foucault thus ends *Naissance de la biopolitique* stating that politics ultimately amounts to a struggle between different governmentalities: "What is politics, in the end, if not both the interplay of these different arts of government with their different reference points and the debate to which these different arts of government give rise? It seems to me that it is here that politics is born."⁶⁶

Thanks to the defamiliarization of the neoliberal present, subjects engaged in genealogical critique should develop a new perspective on their own subjectivity. In late writings, Foucault calls this subjective self-transformation "the critical attitude."⁶⁷ According to Foucault, governmental regimes make individuals governable by processing their conduct through specific regimes of subjectivation. In the case of American neoliberalism, individuals are considered *homines oeconomici* that rationally calculate the costs and benefits of their actions in order to maximise the value of their human capital. Showing the contingency of these regimes of subjectivation discloses the fragility of such subjective constructs. Subjects can always relate to themselves differently. In *Le sujet et le pouvoir*, Foucault summarises,

Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. [...] The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state and from the state's institutions but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualisation which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries.⁶⁸

Genealogy denaturalises not only the dominant mode of governing populations, but also the dominant mode of governing oneself.⁶⁹ By estranging individuals from their current subjective identity, Foucault hopes to encourage them to refuse who they are in the eyes of governing authorities. He counts on a will to resist the current regime of subjectivation.⁷⁰ Subjective conduct is purportedly weighed down by regimes of subjectivation that produce only particular subjectivities while discouraging others. Foucault, on the other hand, encourages practices of desubjectivation that allow subjects to

differ from themselves, to reinvent themselves and their relations to themselves.⁷¹ The critical attitude constitutes a refusal of governmentally readymade identities. It is “not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of the passing moments; it is to take oneself as an object of a complex and difficult elaboration”.⁷² This friction between subjects’ will to resist and the regimes that shape their identity creates opportunities to refuse governmentally sanctioned subjectivities and foster alternative subjectivities. The hold of governmental regimes on subjective conduct is temporarily suspended and subjects are subsequently reverted back to a state of absolute potentiality where they can autonomously refashion their subjectivity.⁷³ The critical attitude does not affirm any *actual* subjective identity but the subject as a creative force for an indefinite range of *potential* subjectivities.⁷⁴ As Foucault writes, “we should not only defend ourselves, but also affirm ourselves. We should not merely affirm ourselves as an identity, but as a creative force”.⁷⁵ The critical attitude estranges subjects from who they are to make them experience the full abundance of who they could become. Ultimately, Foucault defends a libertine ethics of self-experimentation,⁷⁶ “the indefinite work of liberty.”⁷⁷

As previously mentioned, Foucault accuses the welfare state and disciplinary institutions, like the prison-system, of excessively determining subjective conducts according to pre-established, disciplinary norms. Subjects have to conform to strict behavioural standards to merit positive disciplinary sanctions. That approach disserves subjects’ experimental explorations of themselves. Opposed to the overbearing surveillance of the welfare state, Foucault pleads for “a security that opens the way for richer, more numerous, more diverse, and more flexible relations with oneself and the environment, while still guaranteeing the real autonomy of everyone”.⁷⁸ The welfare state should abstain from abusing social security systems to impose a particular form of life on welfare recipients. It should guarantee subjects’ real autonomy to explore more diverse and flexible forms of conduct, an aim that arguably the negative income tax promises to fulfil. It is here that a weak version of the “neoliberal conversion”-thesis appears.

Foucault did not literally convert to neoliberalism, but his own project for an ethics of self-experimentation resonates with the neoliberal attempt to limit the state’s mandate to determine individuals’ subjective choices. In *The Last Man Takes LSD*, Dean and Zamora correctly observe that, at the end of the 1970s, Foucault is searching for “the transgression of the normalised self that is produced by the institutions of the modern welfare state”.⁷⁹ Policies like the negative income tax or Becker’s anthropological erasure of the criminal self would provide the governmental context Foucault desires for the ethics of self-experimentation. The subject’s identity is off limits for governmental interference, according to neoliberalism, which allows for subjective experimentations. There is hence an elective affinity between Foucault’s ethic of libertinism and the spirit of neoliberal capitalism. Though Foucault did not

mean for his ethics of self-experimentation to support a neoliberal conduct of conducts, the two are *de facto* compatible and even mutually reinforcing. The paternalistic government of the Keynesian welfare state or the invasive regimentation of the disciplinary prison-system purportedly erode subjective possibilities for self-experimentation, while neoliberalism promises to support subjects in their endeavour to become flexible works of self-reinvention. One can question the extent to which neoliberalism delivers on this promise (see *infra*), but in the political conjuncture of 1970s Western Europe, Foucault and the neoliberals indeed turn out to be odd bedfellows. Neoliberalism seemingly offers an opportunity to enact the critical attitude in a governmental framework more tolerant of flexible selves and minority forms of life. I am not arguing that Foucault himself consciously believed this, but that the methodology of his genealogical ethics in *Naissance de la biopolitique* leads to a form of conduct for which neoliberalism provides fertile ground.

The immanent critique of neoliberalism

Foucault's genealogically established critical attitude reveals an interesting source for potential resistance against governmental regimes, but it ultimately fails to specifically oppose the governmental rationality of neoliberalism. The question is hence how Foucauldian critique can be supplemented with new resources to take more oppositional distance from neoliberalism. As mentioned, what is missing in Foucault's lectures is a thorough investigation of the effects of actually-existing neoliberalism on populations. In 1979, Foucault was investigating neoliberalism as an up-and-coming governmental rationality that promised to institute a post-disciplinary, hands-off approach to the conduct of conducts. He could thus not have anticipated the viewpoint of those suffering under neoliberal governmentality. However, we have information at our disposal that Foucault had not. We have had experience with the concrete implementations of actually-existing neoliberalism.⁸⁰ Neoliberalism is not merely a governmental rationality expounded among economic experts anymore. It has infiltrated governmental institutions and is actively reshaping people's lives. Apart from neoliberalism as a manner of speaking the truth about government, there are hence also concrete 'neoliberalisations', i.e., variegated and unstable attempts to introduce neoliberal rationality into pre-existing institutions.⁸¹ This creates the possibility of comparison and hence of immanent critique: one can start from the neoliberal promise of a post-disciplinary governmentality and explore what actually-existing neoliberalisms have done with this promise. Immanent critique does not need to posit its own normative standards or legislate what is to be done, yet it does more than simply reveal neoliberalism to be contingent and hence open to change and contestation. It shows that neoliberalism is not just a fragile regime of government but also a disappointment in the eyes of the governed.

Did neoliberalism institute the post-disciplinary governmentality it promised in Foucault's rendition? Do actually-existing neoliberalisms only use economic incentives to steer subjective conducts? In practice, neoliberal governmentality aligns itself with disciplinary power rather than displacing it. Actually-existing neoliberal institutions often divide the population into different segments with each their own form of management, some centred on economic incentives alone, others more invasive and disciplinary.⁸² Successful entrepreneurial subjects are often allowed to govern themselves. Governments sometimes steer their conduct with economic incentives like tax deductions or government subsidies, but these subjects have sufficiently internalised the logic of neoliberal conduct to spontaneously behave like neoliberal entrepreneurs. Less successful individuals, however, are often the target of intensive disciplinary surveillance.⁸³ Those who fail or refuse to render themselves governable to neoliberal steering, are disciplined into entrepreneurial lifestyles. Disciplinary power thus remains part of neoliberal governmentality as a tactic of last resort to educate recalcitrant subjects into docile neoliberal individuals. Rather than a government of indirect incentives, neoliberalism enacts a more differentiated governmental strategy that combines indirect incentives with other forms of power, like disciplinary power.

If one compares the governmental rationality Foucault assessed with actually-existing neoliberalism in the welfare state, one observes that Friedman's negative income tax has never been truly implemented. Nor has the neoliberalised prison-system become any less disciplinary.⁸⁴ Welfare state institutions have indeed been dismantled in several countries, but they have more importantly been repurposed to discipline welfare recipients into neoliberal forms of conduct.⁸⁵ Workfare regimes, for instance, forcibly stimulate the unemployed to manage their unemployment as a business.⁸⁶ They use not mere non-binding economic incentives but disciplinary interventions like compulsory job training or non-compliance penalties to closely monitor the integration of individuals on the labour market. The purpose is still to produce docile subjects, only the criteria have changed.⁸⁷ Today, a 'good' unemployed person is not a docile manual worker but a creative and entrepreneurial one-person businessowner. The disciplinary framework to produce this subjectivity remains.

More prescient neoliberals, like Friedrich Hayek, were well-aware that not all subjects would voluntarily embrace neoliberal lifestyles and that harsh disciplining would become unavoidable:

Man has been civilised against his wishes [...] The indispensable rules of the free society require from us much that is unpleasant, such as suffering competition from others, seeing others being richer than ourselves, etc. [...] And it is the discipline of the market which forces us to calculate, that is, to be responsible for the means we use up in the pursuit of our ends.⁸⁸

According to Hayek, human beings are not instinctively drawn to neoliberal competition. Acquiring the entrepreneurial ethos is a refractory process of reshaping subjectivities to fit market demand.⁸⁹ Individuals have to make themselves competitive and adaptable to ever-shifting market expectations. Those who fail or refuse to find their niche in the market have to be disciplined into becoming more docile entrepreneurs.⁹⁰

Rather than classifying actually-existing neoliberalisms as post-disciplinary orders of experimental selfhood, it might be better to identify neoliberalism as what Roberto Esposito calls 'negative biopolitics'.⁹¹ Admittedly, the link between neoliberalism and biopolitics is enigmatic in Foucault's own work. Foucault even apologises in *Naissance de la biopolitique* for failing to clarify the connection.⁹² But if we define 'biopolitics' broadly as any strategy that stimulates the biological and economic vitality of populations, then neoliberalism is a biopolitical regime encouraging the economic productivity of populations through the stimulation of free market competition and entrepreneurship. A helpful reminder is Foucault's own description of the 18th-century police sciences, precursors to liberal and neoliberal governmental rationalities, as a truth regime focused on managing 'the living' (*le vivant*).⁹³ The police sciences most clearly combine a biopolitical and governmental dimension by aiming to strengthen the state apparatus by enhancing simultaneously the health and productivity of populations. The police "*va du vivre au plus que vivre*".⁹⁴ One could analogously argue that neoliberalism steers the population toward enhanced living, but this time not to increase the state's financial or military capabilities, but to strengthen 'the economy' or 'the market'.⁹⁵ Neoliberalism stimulates the vitality of the population in order to generate market growth.

However, neoliberalism constitutes a *negative* biopolitics insofar as it sacrifices the lives of some to enhance the vitality of the population overall.⁹⁶ As Hayek writes, "we may be free and yet miserable. Liberty does not mean all good things or the absence of all evils. It is true that to be free may mean freedom to starve, to make costly mistakes, or to run mortal risks".⁹⁷ Foucault notes that already the police sciences deal with 'indispensable, useful, and *superfluous* life'.⁹⁸ Governmentality requires not only the promotion of life on the level of the collective, but also the concomitant acceptance of suffering and collateral damage on the level of individuals.⁹⁹ Lives unproductive, who drag down the overall prosperity of the population, are better cast aside from the police's perspective. Neoliberal competition as well purportedly promotes the prosperity of the population, but also installs a strict sorting of winners and losers. Some 'losers' might be rehabilitated through disciplinary interventions. Workfare regimes, for instance, invest in the unemployed to render them useful again to the labour market. Others, however, might not be worth this investment.¹⁰⁰ They are condemned to enjoy 'the freedom to starve'. If the reshaping of people's subjectivity is costlier than the contribution to economic growth that these people promise to deliver,

neoliberal rationality advises to abstain from interference. Some individuals' human capital is too low-value to be worthy of being governed.¹⁰¹ These people are subsequently abandoned to their fate. Workfare regimes, for instance, filter between the 'deserving poor', who can attain a lucrative job with sufficient disciplinary coaching, and the 'undeserving poor', the unemployable population left to fend for itself.¹⁰² As Saskia Sassen writes,

There is a *de facto* redefinition of 'the economy' when sharp contractions are gradually lost to standard measures. The unemployed who lose everything – jobs, homes, medical insurance – easily fall off the edge of what is defined as 'the economy' and counted as such. [...] The reality at ground level is more akin to a kind of economic version of ethnic cleansing in which elements considered troublesome are dealt with by simply eliminating them.¹⁰³

By confronting the promises of neoliberal rationality with the subjective effects of actually-existing power-relations at play in neoliberal institutions, one discovers a new critical perspective missing in Foucault's brief, survey-like genealogy of neoliberalism. One can do more than simply show the contingency of neoliberal rationality to provide space for subjugated knowledges to flourish. Taking the perspective of the governed in actually-existing neoliberalism fosters an immanent critique that shows the emptiness of neoliberalism's promise to establish a post-disciplinary order. Once a governmental rationality confronts the subjects whose conduct it is supposed to govern, the latter respond and force governmental agencies to shift gears. In order to render the population governable, neoliberal institutions cannot just govern by economic incentives alone. Neoliberalism has had to adapt to the friction coming from subjects deviating from neoliberal conduct. Neoliberal governments consequently require disciplinary interventions and even the outright abandonment of the unproductive. Actually-existing neoliberalism morphs the promise of a post-disciplinary order into a negative biopolitics. The more friction comes from neoliberalised subjects, the harsher actually-existing neoliberalism must intervene to enforce entrepreneurial norms of conduct.

The perspective of immanent critique comes to the fore when the pressure to become flexible and adaptable becomes harder to bear for ever more subjects.¹⁰⁴ Actually-existing neoliberalism often operates as a regime of precarisation: it makes people vulnerable to market fluctuations in order to impose marketized adaptability.¹⁰⁵ This requires, for instance, dismantling and repurposing welfare institutions to undermine the safety nets that allegedly make individuals live too comfortably in unemployment.¹⁰⁶ This economic precarisation often intersects with other social vulnerabilities to produce a variegated system of differential precarities in the population. The human potentiality to experiment with different conducts and reinvent oneself is thereby subsumed under neoliberal governmentality and transformed into adaptability to market imperatives.¹⁰⁷ The potential to refuse

one's identity and explore new subjectivities is reduced to the generic ability to adapt to changing market demands. People subsequently lose the freedom to determine their own conduct, as this would diminish the subject's flexibility to market forces. Neoliberal governmentality demands subjects to become elastic and malleable bundles of human capital that can be instantly deployed at any point the free market desires. This regime of subjectivation demands significant work on the self.¹⁰⁸ Individuals are engaged in a permanent cycle of self-optimisation where they have to repurpose their human capital to fit ever-changing market expectations. Since they are, moreover, in constant competition with others, there are no limits to how much can be demanded of individual subjects. When the latter's energy has been exhausted, they simply drop out and are discarded. The people suffering from mental burn-out, the dissolution of social bonds, or mere physical exhaustion from constant self-managing are subsequently the collateral damage neoliberalism expels in the name of further economic growth.¹⁰⁹

While Foucault might thus have been worried about an overbearing paternalistic welfare state, the immanent critique of neoliberalism shows how neoliberalism itself is a more serious problem. After decades of actually-existing neoliberalism, the political conjuncture looks starkly different from Foucault's in the 1970s. People long not for more freedom from welfare state surveillance but from the discipline of free market competition. Now that the welfare state is more concerned with reshaping subjectivities to fit market expectations than with providing a safety net from the uncertainties of free market competition, state paternalism is no longer the main obstacle to freer subjective conducts. From the perspective of immanent critique, the reduction of human potentiality to precariously obedient, generic adaptability to market demands is a more urgent concern. Neoliberalism thereby fosters its own culture of dependency: precarious individuals have become dependent on ever-fluctuating markets and on the instances that guard access to economic survival under competitive conditions. Workers, for instance, have to accept decreasing pay, worsened labour protections, and diminished social rights in order to hold on to temporary jobs.¹¹⁰ Haunted by the spectre of becoming superfluous life, these workers agree to the erosion of the social systems that used to protect them from precarity.

In sum, the immanent critique of neoliberalism as a negative biopolitics builds on Foucault's genealogical critique of neoliberalism, but also steers it into a different direction. It presumes the genealogical exploration of the historical conditions of possibility that have allowed neoliberal rationality to emerge as an effective mode of speaking the truth about government. But it also investigates the subjective effects of implementing this governmental rationality in concrete institutions responsible for the government of populations. Actually-existing neoliberalism emerges from the variegated and conflictual interplay between governmental agencies and the subjective conducts they aim to manage. They have thereby instituted a negative

biopolitics that puts excessive weight to perform on the shoulders of individual subjects to conform to entrepreneurial norms of conduct. With the threats of disciplinary interventions and ultimately abandonment, neoliberal agencies often enforce entrepreneurial conducts on subjects that would rather conduct themselves differently.

Conclusion

This essay has highlighted a methodological weakness in Foucault's genealogy of neoliberalism often mistaken for a biographical shift in his philosophy. *Naissance de la biopolitique* is sometimes interpreted as evidence for Foucault's conversion to neoliberalism, whereas its lack of critical acuity stems rather from its methodological limitations. Through a discussion of the "neoliberal conversion"-thesis, I have highlighted those limitations. Though Foucault's appreciative tone in his neoliberalism lectures is surprising, his aim is mainly to defamiliarize readers from the dominant mode of neoliberal rationality so that they can affirm the creative potential to foster new conducts, new identities, and new rationalities. Foucault did not convert to neoliberalism, but sought to destabilise it by revealing its historical contingency. However, as Foucault's surprisingly positive tone shows, this strategy is insufficient for combatting neoliberalism. There is an elective affinity between Foucault's own politics of creative self-reinvention and neoliberalism's promise of a non-invasive, post-disciplinary government by indirect economic incentives alone. Foucault's libertine stance toward subjectivity hence seems easily integrated into a neoliberal conduct of conducts.

I propose to supplement Foucault's genealogical method as he deploys it in *Naissance de la biopolitique* with an immanent critique of neoliberalism from the perspective of the governed. Rather than investigating neoliberal rationality as a promising endeavour for the future, we can study the real-life implementations of neoliberalism and their effects on subjective conducts. Neoliberal rationality is involved in a permanent struggle to shape the conduct of conducts along entrepreneurial and competitive lines, but subjects are refractory living beings whose conducts are not so simply transformed. Neoliberalism has had to give up its post-disciplinary aspirations and turn to the power of discipline and abandonment to enforce neoliberal norms of conduct. Neoliberalism has transformed into a negative biopolitics that sacrifices the lives of unproductive subjects as collateral damage to the overall welfare of the population. Immanent critique thereby reveals how subjects are pushed beyond their limits until neoliberal norms of conduct become unbearable. This intolerability of neoliberalism cannot be directly deduced from the writings of Becker, Friedman, or Hayek.¹¹¹ It becomes manifest in the confrontation between neoliberal rationality and the material living bodies of finite human beings unable to be stretched in the ways neoliberalism requires.

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- ² Jacques Rancière, *Chronicles of Consensual Times*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 127.
- ³ Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste* (London: Verso, 2013), 93-101; Tim Christiaens, 'The Entrepreneur of the Self beyond Foucault's Neoliberal Homo Oeconomicus', *European Journal of Social Theory* 23, no. 4 (2020): 493-511.
- ⁴ Patrick Gamez, 'Did Foucault Do Ethics? The "Ethical Turn," Neoliberalism, and the Problem of Truth', *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 26, no. 1 (2018): 108.
- ⁵ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 55.
- ⁶ Dotan Leshem, 'Foucault, Genealogy, Critique', in *Foucault, Neoliberalism, and Beyond*, ed. Stephen Sawyer and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 104.
- ⁷ Daniel Zamora, ed., *Critiquer Foucault* (Bruxelles: Aden, 2014); Daniel Zamora, 'Peut-on Critiquer Foucault?', *Revue Ballast*, 3 December 2014, <https://www.revue-ballast.fr/peut-on-critiquer-foucault/>. An exemplary critical response is Gavin Walker, 'Introduction: The Late Foucault and the Allegories of Theory', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 121, no. 4 (2022): 645-53. and the other articles in the same special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly*.
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- ¹⁰ Michael Behrent, 'Liberalism without Humanism: Michel Foucault and the Free-Market Creed, 1976-1979', *Modern Intellectual History* 6, no. 3 (2009): 539-68; Michael Behrent, 'Accidents Happen: François Ewald, the "Antirevolutionary" Foucault, and the Intellectual Politics of the French Welfare State', *The Journal of Modern History* 82, no. 3 (2010): 585-624; Geoffroy de Lagasnerie, *La Dernière Leçon de Michel Foucault: Sur Le Néolibéralisme, La Théorie et La Politique* (Paris: Fayard, 2012); Serge Audier, *Penser Le 'Néolibéralisme': Le Moment Néolibéral, Foucault et La Crise Du Socialisme* (Latresne: Le Bord de l'eau, 2015).
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- ¹⁴ Daniele Lorenzini, 'Governmentality, Subjectivity, and the Neoliberal Form of Life', *Journal for Cultural Research* 22, no. 2 (2018): 4.

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- ¹⁶ Michel Foucault, 'Prisons et Asiles Dans Le Mécanisme Du Pouvoir', in *Dits et Écrits I. 1954-1975*, n. 136 (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1391.
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- ¹⁸ Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution* (London: Verso Books, 2021), 40-41.
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- ²¹ Michel Foucault, 'Un Système Fini Face à Une Demande Infinie', in *Dits et Écrits II. 1976-1988*, n. 325 (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1186-1202.
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- ²⁴ David Newheiser, 'Foucault, Gary Becker and the Critique of Neoliberalism', *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, no. 5 (2016): 7; Dean and Villadsen, *State Phobia and Civil Society*, 160.
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- ²⁷ Foucault, *Naissance de La Biopolitique*, 261.
- ²⁸ Gary Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 50.
- ²⁹ Newheiser, 'Foucault, Gary Becker and the Critique of Neoliberalism', 4.
- ³⁰ Foucault, *Naissance de La Biopolitique*, 273.
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- ³² Foucault, *Naissance de La Biopolitique*, 265. English translation from Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 259-60.
- ³³ Serge Audier, 'Neoliberalism through Foucault's Eyes', *History and Theory* 54 (2015): 413.

- ³⁴ Daniel Zamora, 'Foucault, Les Exclus et Le Dépérissement Néolibéral de l'état', in *Critiquer Foucault*, ed. Daniel Zamora (Brussels: Aden, 2014), 96.
- ³⁵ Foucault, 'Système Fini', 1190-91. My translation.
- ³⁶ Zamora, 'Foucault, Les Exclus et Le Dépérissement Néolibéral de l'état', 105; Dean and Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD*, 5.
- ³⁷ Foucault, 'Système Fini', 1196.
- ³⁸ It is remarkable that Foucault hereby repeats another neoliberal talking point, the finitude of state budgets and the need for austerity in state spending. Foucault has made similar claims in other public performances (Behrent, 'Liberal despite Himself', 24-25.), which made him predict in *Naissance de la biopolitique* that "what is presently at issue in our reality, what we see emerging in our twentieth century societies, is not so much the growth of the state and of *raison d'état*, but much more its reduction (*décroissance*)" (Foucault, *Naissance de La Biopolitique*, 197). [Translation from Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 191.] The proponents of the strong "neoliberal conversion"-thesis have yet to discuss this similarity.
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- ⁴⁰ Sowell, 203-4; Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* (London: Verso Books, 2013), 165.
- ⁴¹ Foucault, *Naissance de La Biopolitique*, 208-13.
- ⁴² Michel Foucault, "'Omnes et Singulatim": Vers Une Critique de La Raison Politique', in *Dits et Écrits II. 1976-1988*, n. 291 (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 963.
- ⁴³ Dean and Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD*, 40.
- ⁴⁴ Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London: Verso, 2013), 219.
- ⁴⁵ Foucault, *Naissance de La Biopolitique*, 197.
- ⁴⁶ Sverre Raffnsøe, Marius Gudmand-Høyer, and Morten S. Thaning, *Michel Foucault: A Research Companion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 313.
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- ⁵¹ Terry Flew, 'Michel Foucault's The Birth of Biopolitics and Contemporary Neo-Liberalism Debates', *Thesis Eleven* 108, no. 1 (2012): 46; Hamann, 'Neoliberalism, Governmentality, and Ethics', 49.
- ⁵² David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- ⁵³ Ute Tellmann, 'Foucault and the Invisible Economy', *Foucault Studies* 6 (2009): 22; Raffnsøe, Gudmand-Høyer, and Thaning, *Michel Foucault*, 296; Gamez, 'Did Foucault Do Ethics?', 125.
- ⁵⁴ Foucault, *Naissance de La Biopolitique*, 37. English translation from Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 35-36.

- ⁵⁵ Raffnsøe, Gudmand-Høyer, and Thaning, *Michel Foucault*, 329.
- ⁵⁶ Becker, Harcourt, and Ewald, 'Becker on Ewald on Foucault on Becker', 10-11.
- ⁵⁷ Foucault, *Naissance de La Biopolitique*, 249.
- ⁵⁸ Thomas Lemke, *Foucault's Analysis of Modern Governmentality: A Critique of Political Reason* (London: Verso Books, 2019), 358. Compare this with, for instance, Brown (*Undoing the Demos*, 37.) who deploys exactly the humanism Becker and Foucault avoid, in order to criticise human capital theory.
- ⁵⁹ Foucault, 'Qu'est-Ce Que La Critique?', 48.
- ⁶⁰ Jason Read, 'A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity', *Foucault Studies* 6 (2009): 34.
- ⁶¹ Michel Foucault, 'Foucault Étudie La Raison d'Etat', in *Dits et Écrits II. 1976-1988*, n. 280 (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 851.
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- ⁷⁰ Daniele Lorenzini, 'The Emergence of Desire: Notes Toward a Political History of the Will', *Critical Inquiry* 45, no. 2 (2019): 448-70.
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- ⁷⁷ Foucault, 'Qu'est-Ce Que Les Lumières?', 1393.
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- ¹⁰⁴ See, among others, Alain Ehrenberg, *Le Culte de La Performance* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1994); Stefano Micali, 'The Capitalistic Cult of Performance', *Philosophy Today* 54, no. 4 (2010): 379-91; Franco Berardi Bifo, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (London: Verso, 2015); Ulrich Brückling, *The Entrepreneurial Self: Fabricating a New Type of Subject* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2016); Tim Christiaens, 'Neoliberalism and the Right to Be Lazy: Inactivity as Resistance in Lazzarato and Agamben', *Rethinking Marxism* 30, no. 2 (3 April 2018): 256-74..
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The Phenomenology of Pain and Pleasure

Henry and Levinas

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What is the essence of pain and pleasure? How do they appear and in which way do they affect us? It would be surprising if phenomenology of all disciplines would lack adequate answers to these basic questions, but this is nevertheless what Michel Henry and Emmanuel Levinas argue. Phenomenology prides itself on having progressed beyond the empiricist reduction of experience to associations of sense data through its analysis of intentionality, which reveals the way in which experience is meaningfully structured. According to Henry and Levinas, however, it is precisely the central role ascribed to intentionality that leads to phenomenology's misunderstanding of the immediate and affective life of pleasure and pain.

We will explore how Levinas and Henry give a phenomenological analysis of pain and pleasure without reference to the foundational concept of intentionality. In doing so, we hope to bring them together in a novel way. Levinas and Henry have most often been juxtaposed in regard to their similar and different roles in what has become known as "the theological turn in French phenomenology." Both thematize God within their respective phenomenological projects, but they hold opposing views on the question of immanence and transcendence, the alterity of the other person, along with the Jewish or Christian understanding of God. Still, their criticism of philosophy has much in common, as they both criticize ontology, the concepts of autonomous subjectivity, and the neglect of fundamental passivity.¹ Yet, there is another juxtaposition between them, one that is far less explored in the commentary literature, namely that concerning pain and pleasure and phenomenology's one-sided investment in intentionality. The lack of attention to the role of pain and pleasure is surprising given the fundamental role it plays in Levinas and Henry.²

Through their critique of intentionality, Levinas and Henry are able to open the phenomenology of pain and pleasure by exploring their non-intentional appearance. The interrogation of their phenomenologies lead,

however, to new problems or dilemmas – we will focus on two. First, it seems that pain and pleasure stand in a peculiar relation to the external world. On the one hand, pains and pleasures are intuitively oriented to the external world we enjoy or suffer from. On the other, however, pain and pleasure are classic examples of subjective states whose reality belongs to the subjective experience of them, so that we can imagine undergoing them without any reference to externality.³ Second, concerning their relation, pain and pleasure seem at the same time both similar and different; they share being regarded as subjective experiences – as affections or sensations – but appear as opposites or structurally different when it comes to their particular phenomenality. Faced with these two dilemmas we will see that Levinas' and Henry's responses diverge.

While at first such endeavor seems to have limited value, limited to the regional analyses of pain and pleasure, they also raise profound questions about both phenomenology and our affective life. If traditional phenomenology is not able to capture pain and pleasure given its method and notions, one will have to reassess the status of those methods and notions. And if the meaning of phenomenality, intentionality, and interiority needs to be modified, it will lead to a revision of our very understanding of phenomenology as such. Even more significantly, pain and pleasure along with suffering and enjoyment are not just some affective tonalities among others, but the constitutive tonalities for existence as such; life is fundamentally shaped by these affectivities. As we will eventually claim, pain and pleasure even make up the fundamental condition for our ethical relation to the other.

Intentionality and affectivity

Both Henry and Levinas hold that intentionality is restricted to the objects manifest in the transcendent world, and for this reason does not apply to the region of sensibility, affectivity, and our interior life as a whole. Henry, like Levinas, defends what seems like a truism, namely that pain is a mode of our affectivity understood as some form of impression, charged with feeling, that draws our attention towards itself. For Henry, intentionality cannot account for this affectivity because it implies a distance between what appears to intentionality and the appearance as such. There can be no such distance in pain and pleasure, for these affects are not cast in front of us and aimed at. However, the intentional objects which intentionality ek-statically orients us to, do not give themselves, Henry claims, with any internal feeling or affective tonality of their own. Intentionality illuminates the world “without making a distinction between things and persons, in terrifying neutrality” – which, we note, echoes Levinas' description of “there is.”⁴ As long as we remain intentionally directed to the world, we do not encounter suffering or joy. But since we do suffer and enjoy, the visible world that intentionality aims at

cannot be the sole region of phenomenology. The neglect of the duplicity of appearance characterizes what Henry calls the “ontological monism” of Western thought that does not recognize any appearances apart from worldly, visible manifestations.⁵

More radically, Henry believes that intentionality is not the essence of manifestation, and therefore cannot play the fundamental role phenomenology assigns to it in the first place. This is precisely because of the way intentionality operates with a gap between directedness and the world. Phenomenology takes the content of consciousness for granted without accounting for how it manifests itself as lived and felt. Although it appeals to the appearance of the world, it leaves unexplained how the content – the impressions or hyle – comes into being.⁶ We need to go back to the fundamental understanding of the phenomenon, namely that which shows itself from itself, in its absolute immediacy without distinctions. If the appearance of the world remains in front of us and at a distance, one might think that intentionality compensates for the distance. But when we ask how phenomenology phenomenizes itself, it turns out that it does not show itself either. True, we can turn a new intention back on an existing intentional ray through reflection, but for the new intention to be given to us, we would need a third one to perceive it, and so on – which leads to the absurdity of an infinite regress.⁷ Phenomena may show themselves in front of an intentional gaze, but they never show how they show themselves, and thus leave their self-manifestation completely obscure. If not through intentionality, how do phenomena originally occur? What is their true source which makes them manifest and self-revealing?

Henry argues that the problem of phenomenology’s foundation is solved when we grant the impressional contents of joy and suffering their autonomous weight, independently of constitutive processes. This is so because impressions mark the immediate presence of an appearance that is not only given to a distinct subjective pole. Impressions reveal themselves to themselves – they are self-revelatory: “for there is no possible impression ... unless it touches itself at each point of its being, in such a way that, in this original self-embrace, it auto-impresses itself.”⁸ Impressions do not obey the distance of intentionality which forever throws its meaning in front of itself, for impressions are immediately given as inherent parts of the affectivity that ceaselessly furnishes our immanent, subjective life. Impressions and affections are not caused but affect themselves. Only as auto-affections and as auto-revealing can phenomena appear from themselves, to themselves, and as immanent to the affected self.

Levinas similarly criticizes the theory of intentionality for misunderstanding the way in which the affective dimension of life is lived, and does so in regard to a similar problem that Henry identifies, namely the objectification of affectivity: “The idea of intentionality has compromised the idea of sensation by removing the character of being a concrete datum from

this allegedly purely qualitative and subjective state, foreign to all objectification.”⁹ Phenomenology was led to compromise affectivity as an object due to its own novel discovery, namely that experience cannot be accounted for as a set of received sense data that consciousness later synthesizes. Rather, in accordance with the thesis of passive synthetization, we find that consciousness is directed to objects that are given to consciousness, instead of being consciously produced through judgments. For this reason, phenomenology emphasizes how sensations are given *with* the objects of consciousness; “color is always extended and objective, the color of a dress, a law, a wall; sound is a noise of a passing car, or a voice of someone speaking.”¹⁰ The theory of intentionality objectifies sensations by apprehending them always as the quality of a substance, the correlate of a constituted “consciousness of...”

Like Henry, Levinas does not dismiss the theory of intentionality, which he sees as correctly accounting for our relation to objects. Intentionality is, however, unable to describe the unique way in which affective content is given: “This critique of sensation failed to recognize the plane on which the sensible life is lived as enjoyment.”¹¹ The dimension of affectivity does not regard the perception of an object, but the sensation of a quality, and this sensibility materializes not as “consciousness of...” or grasping “this as that”, but according to its own logic – as pleasant, painful, tiresome, comfortable, etc. It seems that Levinas is extending this critique not only to Husserl but also to Merleau-Ponty when the latter says of sensation that “this elementary perception is already charged with a *sense*...The perceptual something is always in the middle of some other thing, it always belongs to a field.”¹² While Merleau-Ponty would argue that e.g. the sensation of touching a smooth wooden surface cannot be isolated but must always be understood within its field (e.g. as “the wood of *that table*”), Levinas would retort that the *enjoyment* of this touch isolates the sensation, savoring the wood’s texture without regard for what it is a texture of, “a breaking up of the form of a phenomenon which becomes amorphous and turns into ‘prime matter’.”¹³ Enjoyment does not relate to substances, but to qualities. These qualities cannot be reduced to their role in accompanying objects in order to make them perceivable, but provide a unique meaning of their own: “Rather than taking sensations to be contents destined to fill a priori forms of objectivity, a transcendental function *sui generis* must be recognized in them (and for each qualitative specificity in its own mode).”¹⁴

For both Henry and Levinas, the affectivity of sensibility provides something which seems absent in theoretical intentionality, namely an account of why life is experienced as personal.¹⁵ The theoretical vision of intentionality seems to belong to an anonymous observer, whereas the subject undergoing the affects of pain and pleasure are deeply and personally immersed in life. Levinas calls it “the love of life,” arguing that it makes up “The personality of the person, the ipseity of the I.”¹⁶ Henry similarly argues

that this personal and lived dimension of experience cannot go unnoticed by phenomenology, as it explains a crucial aspect of experience:

how it happens that the modalities of one's own life are revealed each time to the one who experiences them, why and how they are precisely one's own, in their sometimes overwhelming original presence, in their real and indeed singular existence.¹⁷

The flesh is the way in which life itself comes into being, and this is why it is never anonymous but always belongs to a self or ipseity. In the affectivities of pain and pleasure, life is not anonymous but personal. Their phenomenality is that of an intimate investment rather than the indifferent distance characteristic of the objects of intentionality.

In their appeal to immediacy and interiority, however, a difference between the two authors starts to emerge, a difference which is already visible in the above privileging of certain terms. For we have elected to use the term *affectivity*, which is to privilege Henry's nomenclature. Levinas does use it, but he also employs another term, *sensibility*, a term Henry would be suspicious to invoke.¹⁸ Henry would furthermore be suspicious due to an important point of difference between the two concerning the question of exteriority.

Henry on pain and pleasure

Henry holds that there is no life without affection, indeed auto-affection, which means that a privileged way to explore the non-intentional life is to start with what he regards as its main affective tonalities, namely suffering and joy. At central junctures, he invites us to regard the most elementary of impressions, where pain serves as the paradigmatic example. For Henry, such impressions are not empirical sensibility that we receive, but self-revelations: they are unavoidably charged with the feeling of pain and, more fundamentally, affectivity of suffering. Pain as impression comes close to Husserl's notion of *original hyle*, except that for Henry, it is not functionally interlinked with any intentional form, but simply given as such. We usually think of pain as a signal reacting to a worldly cause that afflicts our physical body. Such an outward-oriented intentionality is, however, unable to register pain since pain is not manifest in the world, but only reveals itself in the invisible milieu of our interior life. Whatever causes our pain, it will only appear to a subject able to feel it.¹⁹ The feeling of pain is therefore not an event taking place on the objective body at all but only reveals itself in the immediacy of our immanent flesh. To the flesh, pure pain appears without spatial or temporal distance.

Intentionality establishes a distance over its intentional object, and this secures the freedom of the subject. In pain, we are deprived of this freedom since there is no division between the pain and the suffering of it – and the same holds for pleasure.²⁰ It is for this reason Henry arrives at a significant

insight, also central to Levinas, namely that the impossibility of escape is central to suffering pain. There is no other that can suffer one's own auto-affection, and there is no place one can withdraw or escape to. Pain reveals itself without the possibility of distance:

driven against itself, overwhelmed by its own weight, it is incapable of instituting any form of stepping-back from itself, a dimension of flight thanks to which it might be possible for it to escape from itself and from that which was oppressive about its being. In the absence of any divide within suffering, the possibility of turning one's gaze upon it is ruled out.²¹

Regarding our first problem raised in the introduction concerning the exterior and the interior, we see that Henry's reduction to pure pain deliberately leaves out any traces of exteriority. Indeed, the suffering of pain consists in the fact that it is riveted to its own immanence with no way out. This follows analytically from the essence of immanence: "In the essence there is nothing transcendent."²² With no outside or distance, immanence is also totally bound to itself and incapable of freedom. Pain neither points beyond itself, nor does it stem from anything except its own undergoing, as pure auto-affection. We believe Henry is right to underline that pain, at least with a certain intensity, can reveal itself within us as indifferent to its cause or intentional objects, rendering the world irrelevant. Still, we wonder if Henry does not go too far in purifying the immanence. If the closed circle of auto-affection is a milieu where "there is nothing in it of the opposed," one might wonder if Henry does not leave out precisely what makes pain aversive and negative, namely the disturbing sting of pain that invades us.²³ We will return to this later.

First, however, let us pause and ask if we draw a too simplified picture of Henry. Admittedly, there are also passages where Henry seems to modify the exclusion of transcendence and otherness, passages where he explicitly seems to invoke them. He can write that "there is still within this ordeal something other, ... suffering is always more and other than itself."²⁴ The quotation is from one of Henry's last works, *I am the Truth*, and one could suspect that he changed his view on suffering in this later stage of his authorship. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it becomes clear that he in fact sticks to his earlier convictions, for while the otherness he has in mind is certainly connected to the emergence of suffering, it does not designate any intrusion from the external world or transcendence breaking into immanence, but rather the divine Life itself, that is, what generates and upholds the immanence in the first place. "Otherness" here signifies a life that we have not produced ourselves, a life that is given prior to our affirmations and negations. What he has in mind is the fundamental suffering that stems from our utter passivity as life itself comes into itself in the immanence of the flesh. That the very arrival of life can appear as suffering in the first place is because life is always shot through with affectivity, from beginning to end. Despite its appearance, Henry does not invoke some disturbing externality of sorts, and

pain therefore still only reveals itself in the homogenous milieu of immanence.

What about pleasure and joy? The same overlap between the impressional pain and the fundamental affectivity of suffering is echoed in Henry's account of pleasure and enjoyment: the revelation of pleasure is conditioned by a transcendental life that is already affective in essence. Max Scheler believes it is possible to provide analyses of what he calls sensory feelings, such as pleasure, but for Henry, it is insufficient to appeal to sensation since sensation cannot feel its own pleasure but needs a further transcendental condition for it to appear to someone.²⁵ Pleasure cannot be rooted in sensory feelings or our involvement with the world, but must stem from the immanent, fundamental tonalities of suffering and joy that are given prior to and independently of the world. Unsurprisingly, Henry portrays pleasure in much the same way as pain, and not accidentally so, because they both are rooted in the same essence of affectivity.

Henry's answer to our second problem regarding heterogeneity and homogeneity starts to appear: there is, for Henry, at the very least a basic commonality between pain and pleasure. Henry's conception of their relationship is admittedly quite complex. Affectivity follows the passivity of absolute immanence, and for this reason, the affection of suffering is inscribed in this passivity in the sense that the affectivity of suffering remains inexorably riveted to itself, weighed down by its own weight, impotent and without exit. We cannot stop being ourselves. This auto-affectivity is not added on to life but is inscribed in the essence of life from the beginning – life as *Archi-passibility*.²⁶ Suffering is given as a basic affective mood or tonality of this passive affectivity. So, however, is joy, for the very same passivity that makes us suffer life can also give rise to joy. For passivity, Henry argues, not only means being burdened and bound, but also implies the generosity of the joyful appearing of life – life revealing itself prior to any activity. Henry speaks of this joyous revelation as an experience of the self in the arrival of Life or, as his earlier thought presents it, of Being:

The power of feeling is not an abstraction or the idea of a power or capability; it is an experience, the experience of the self of Being in the enjoyment of self... That which arises in the triumph of this arising, in the shining forth of presence, in the *Parousia*, and finally, when there is something rather than nothing, is joy.²⁷

That there is something rather than nothing – *Parousia* of Being – is not the birthplace of philosophical wonder, as Leibniz and Heidegger have it, but the passive overflowing of life in joy. Henry makes it clear that *Parousia*, does not precede or lead to joy, but is given as joy, the joy as the affectivity inscribed in the advent of Being.

Enjoyment and suffering are two Janus-faces, two different tonalities of the same essence. Despite their fundamental oneness, Henry underlines time

and again that impressions and affections always appear with a concrete and determined tonality.²⁸ But here we raise the question of whether Henry can redeem both the claim that there is one essential unity of affectivity and at the same time insist that every affection is distinct in its irreducible tonality. Does Henry not have to choose between either keeping the essential unity of affection, where the distinction relies only on accidental differences, or preserving essential distinctions of suffering and joy by giving up the claim to the unity of the two? Evidently, Henry will not give up their essential unity: “The unity of suffering and joy is the unity of Being itself, viz. the unity of the single and fundamental ontological event, ... in this suffering, Being, senses itself and necessarily experiences itself in suffering and in the enjoyment of this suffering.” Stronger still, he says: “It is one and the same phenomenological content, one single tonality which is thought of as suffering and joy.”²⁹ Given this single tonality at its root, there is no wonder that suffering and joy slip into one another, as we can enjoy our suffering and suffer for the same reason that we enjoy.

How, then, can he account for how our lives undergo variations of suffering and joy through time, along with all the other shades in-between? Henry believes he can preserve a dichotomy in our basic modes of affection without breaking their inner unity. Since the change of moods and tonalities that we undergo cannot respond to external circumstances, it must rely on a movement or transition within the essence of affectivity itself. There is, Henry claims, a kind of dialectic between suffering and joy spread out in time, but one that does not play itself out against any dialectical difference: it transforms *itself* from within, changing within the bounds of the same original essence. This means that the changes we undergo have their foundation in the passing of our immanence, and that this immanence, far from being static, is determined as a transition – precisely between our basic affection of suffering and joy.³⁰ Henry sees this insight captured in the Beatitudes of the Gospels, which he paraphrases as: “Blessed are those who suffer.”³¹ Suffering does not only share the essential structure with enjoyment, but invites a paradoxical transition to enjoyment: “And when suffering reaches its limit point, in despair, as Kierkegaard puts it, ‘the self plunges through its own transparency into the power which established it,’ and the intoxication of life submerges us. Happy are those who suffer.”³² Suffering leads us to the joyous insight that life itself is passively given.

Henry’s analysis leads from impressions of pain and pleasure into the ultimate condition of life which is given as affectivity. But does Henry’s account describe how pain and pleasure are lived? One may feel that pain and pleasure have been deprived of their natural circumstances and turned into something basically interchangeable, perhaps identical in essence. Must we not assume that pain and pleasure, suffering and joy are irreducibly different due to their most obvious phenomenalization – as separated as ice and fire, or more appropriately, as evil and goodness?

Levinas on pleasure and enjoyment

While agreeing with Henry that pain and pleasure are irreducible to intentionality, objectification, and vision, Levinas does not operate with the same sort of dichotomy between affectivity and externality that Henry does. In stark contrast, Levinas sees externality as playing a crucial role in both pleasure and pain. How, then, does he avoid the neutralization of these affectivities that Henry feared would be the consequence of determining them in view of the external horizon of the world, where the “there is” hums its monotonous tune without regard for human existence?³³

Beginning with enjoyment, Levinas does indeed maintain that pleasure opens up an interiority whose independence vis-à-vis the external world is characterized by an affectivity incompatible with the structure of “consciousness of...” In his alternative formulation of “living from...” however, Levinas forefronts rather than omits a reference to the external world which we “live from,” that is, which constitutes and conditions us rather than the other way around. As Raoul Moati describes it, enjoyment is the inverse of intentionality, a situation in which consciousness does not constitute its object but is in fact nourished by it.³⁴ For Levinas, the interior immanence of enjoyment must be understood with reference to our needs, that is, the way in which we are dependent on the world. The wonder of enjoyment for Levinas is precisely how this dependency turns into an independency: “*Living from...* is the dependency that turns into sovereignty, into happiness – essentially egoist.”³⁵ The concretization of an interior egoism whose pleasures are in a sense above and beyond the order of substances is, for Levinas, not in opposition to, but made possible by the ego’s dependence on an exterior world.

In his treatment of enjoyment, therefore, Levinas in fact reverses Henry’s direction of thought: the phenomenality of enjoyment, far from excluding a reference to the exterior, in fact obsessively directs itself towards it. The hedonist is a world-oriented being: “Theophile Gautier’s line ‘I am one of those for whom the external world exists’ expresses that joyous appetite for things which constitutes being in the world.”³⁶ To enjoy is to lose oneself in the variety of pleasures that the world provides without losing oneself – in stark contrast, it is the victorious accomplishment of egoism. This seems to be a very obvious characteristic of the phenomenality of enjoyment. Someone enjoying a piece of strawberry cheesecake is not closed off from the world in the interiority of enjoyment, but rather intently turned toward the cake itself and all its enjoyable aspects (the softness of the cream, the crunch of the biscuit base, etc.). This immersion in the cheesecake is not a loss of self but the triumph of the ego, whose outward orientation is wholly egoistic – the ego is pleasantly lost and thus affirmed in the cheesecake it satisfies itself with. The

interior and exterior relate here without contradiction, which could perhaps be said to be the very definition of enjoyment for Levinas.

Henry argued that the externalization of our interior affections renders them in anonymous neutrality, thus depriving them of the lived tonality that characterizes them as affections. This is, however, clearly not the case for Levinas' hedonist. Rather than some detached humming of an uncaring universe, I relate to the exterior in enjoyment in terms of loving it; "Life is *love of life*, a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear than my being."³⁷ I am not the contents I enjoy, but they do not reach me in their insignificance; this is the world I love to live in, because it provides the possibilities of satisfaction. The orientation of Gautier's hedonist is that of a worldly man who knows which localities provide the best environment for leisure during which seasons of the year, what wine to pair with whatever meal, the superior clothing material for one's pajamas, etc. The external world is here not rendered in its neutrality and indifference toward me, but matters to me in the way it suits me, and feeds my appetite.

But how can we explicate enjoyment without prioritizing the affectivity of this enjoyability, which, as Henry would say, is the only place it manifests itself? What is enjoyment apart from the feeling of enjoyment? The crucial point to maintain here is that enjoyment precisely in its interior, affective phenomenality contains a reference to externality in its outward orientation. Paradoxically, the relation to externality is, argues Levinas, stronger in the subjective feeling of enjoyment than in the intellectual determination of an objective, external world. Enjoyment is not marred by the doubt about the external world. It is satisfied when it is satisfied, and the question of whether it is "really" in touch with the strawberry cheesecake it enjoys makes no sense to it: "To fill, to satisfy, is the sense of the savor, and it is precisely to leap over the images, aspects, reflections or silhouettes, phantoms, phantasms, the hides of things that are enough for the consciousness of..."³⁸ Enjoyment craves and achieves satisfaction. This is why enjoyment is so apt in thought experiments about simulation, like Robert Nozick's experiment machine: enjoyment is the example par excellence of something that could possibly be simulated, for its simulation is virtually indistinguishable from its realization. The complete disregard for the intellectual worry about the external world does, however, not remove the external reference in the phenomenality of pleasure's realization. Gautier's line is again so precise in this context: the utterance "I am one of those for whom the external world exists" refers ironically to the intellectual dilemma that enjoyment simply sidesteps. Giving the despairing Cartesian a pitying yet humorous look, the hedonist continues his nonchalant walk toward his favorite café: Reality certainly exists enough for him so long as they are serving that delicious strawberry cheesecake today.

Rather than constituting an opposition between interiority and exteriority, Levinas sees in enjoyment the pre-reflective overcoming of this conflict: Enjoyment is the way in which I relate to something other and

external that simultaneously is for-me. The otherness of the world is neither the radical transcendence of the Other, nor the Hegelian negation of everything that is not-me, but rather the relative otherness of a world that first reaches me in its agreeability.³⁹ In enjoyment, something which is other arrives in such a way that it suits and interests me. It is therefore in one sense immanent: “I am myself, I am here, at home with myself, inhabitation, immanence in the world.”⁴⁰ I do not go beyond myself in my relation to the world but dwell in it.⁴¹ At the same time, however, that in which I dwell is not me, but something other than me; but “other” precisely in that relative sense of being an agreeable externality.

It is thus with reference to the phenomenality of enjoyment that Levinas includes a relative externality in his account of affectivity. We hold that Levinas, in so doing, presents a better phenomenological analysis than Henry. By focusing on the constitutive problems of phenomenality as such, Henry ironically draws attention away from the sensual phenomenality of enjoyment itself. Since his primary interest lies in the essential conditions of appearing in general, he does not invest much time in the descriptive account of the differences between the distinctive modes of givenness that belongs to the phenomena of pain and pleasure. Moreover, his skepticism towards traditional phenomenology’s ability to account for the phenomena as they are given leads him to radicalize phenomenological reductions to the point where all empirical sensation, things, and the visible world are left out from the pure immanence of self-affectivity.

Henry seems to think of the exploration of such immanent life as the transcendental foundation of everything, eventually enabling the visible world to appear.⁴² Nevertheless, his manner of closing the immanence in on itself causes a problem for this aspiration. As Renaud Barbaras observes: “Although he discovers auto-affectation at the heart of all givenness at a distance, Henry never heads down the opposite path to discover how auto-affectation leads into intentionality, how we can go from immanence to transcendence.”⁴³ Henry fails to do so for good reasons, for having cut the ties to all exteriority, Henry has blocked his way back to the phenomena from which traditional phenomenology starts out and returns. Henry opens *Incarnation* by describing how human beings “feel the difficulty the rise in the sloped lane brings, or the pleasure of a cold drink in summer, or of a light breeze on their face.”⁴⁴ We wonder if Henry by the end of the work, has forgotten the reference to “the sloped lane,” the “cold drink” and “the light breeze” – that is, concrete externality – which Levinas believes the phenomenality of affectivity implies.

Henry’s problem concerns not only the relation between the affectivity of the flesh and the externality this phenomenality implies; it also concerns the flesh itself. As Emmanuel Falque aptly points out, it seems that Henry’s analysis leads to the forgetting of “the very weight of our own bodies.”⁴⁵ This is not the case for Levinas’ analysis of enjoyment, which explicitly raises and

investigates the ambiguity in the experience of enjoyment as pure affectivity on the one hand, and materiality on the other, an ambiguity captured in the formula of “an independency borne of dependency.” Enjoyment is, on the one hand, a kind of pure affectivity in the style of Henry, for it is concretized interiorly as the satisfaction of an ego. Pleasure is phenomenally egoistic, and this can only take place as an affective, lived interiority. On the other hand, however, the externality I live from continues to constitute this phenomenality. The happiness of the ego is not risk-free or frictionless: one must make sure to chew one’s food properly precisely due to its characteristics as an external object that is also independent of me.

This refers not only to the external danger posed by the object of enjoyment, but also the fragility of my own body, which in and due to its enjoyment must risk itself. The body is, for Levinas, this duality of a living egoism elevated above the world in its happiness, but nevertheless fastened to the earth in its materiality: “Life is a body, not only lived body [*corps propre*], where its self-sufficiency emerges, but a cross-roads of physical forces, body-effect.”⁴⁶ In the happiness of its affectivity, in the personal experience of life as lived, the ego feels itself as a body that not only enables but also resists the happiness of the ego. The phenomenality of enjoyment is misunderstood without this friction and the irreducible reference to externality it entails:

The body is the elevation, but also the whole weight of position. The body naked and indigent identifies the *center* of the world it perceives, but, *conditioned* by its own representation of the world, it is thereby as it were torn up from the center from which it proceeded, as water gushing forth from rock washes away that rock...The body naked and indigent is the very reverting, irreducible to a thought, of representation into life, of the subjectivity that represents into life which is sustained by these representations and *lives of them*; its indigence – its needs – affirm ‘exteriority’ as non-constituted, prior to all affirmation.⁴⁷

Life is certainly a “gushing forth” from the fountain of life itself, but its gushing is always already conditioned by its own materiality. This, however, does not annul the gushing. The ego needs the world, but is happy that it needs it: this is the ambiguous paradox resolved in the happy hedonist sitting down at a café for a slice of strawberry cheesecake. Out of its dependence on nourishment, humanity erects restaurants and establishes culinary traditions that serve nothing else than the pleasure of biting into a piece of cake.

Levinas on pain and suffering

Turning to pain and suffering, we find that Henry and Levinas both converge and diverge with regard to this phenomenon as well.⁴⁸ Henry and Levinas are, on the one hand, clearly similar in the way they think that pain and suffering engulf us in interiority, in passivity, and with no way out. Levinas

agrees with Henry that pain fastens me to myself in an insuperable way. As Henry writes, “it is given over to itself, immersed in itself, submerged by itself, and crushed under its own weight,” which leaves us trapped: “There is no possible way out.”⁴⁹ To be in pain is to be hopelessly trapped within it. Levinas agrees; “It is not that the sufferings with which life threatens us render it displeasing; rather it is because the ground of suffering consists of the impossibility of interrupting it, and of an acute feeling of being held fast.”⁵⁰ The painfulness of pain consists in the refusal to slip away from it, in the way it rivets me to myself. Pain is thus very clearly an interior phenomenon, characterized by the way it traps me inside myself. As Levinas explains with regards to the suffering of nausea, the fact that I can be consciously aware of its possible end does nothing to alter the interior *phenomenality* of this suffering, which consists in being nailed to it, and wishing for an end that, in the moment of pain, is not there.

It is, however, this second characteristic – that we wish for its end – that separates Levinas’ analysis from that of Henry. We noted above that Henry does not account for the motivation to escape, but for Levinas, this second moment is indispensable to its appearance. Although pain cannot be explicated without reference to how it fastens me to my interiority, it also cannot be explained without reference to the protest against staying there: “this revelation of being – and all it entails that is weighty and, in some sense, definitive – is at the same time the experience of a revolt.”⁵¹ To be in pain is not only to find this pain inescapable, but also to want this escape, and the latter is needed for the acute status of the former. To say that pain is impossible to escape only has sense insofar as such an escape is sought after, and it is this conflict or tension that more than anything characterizes pain. When Henry writes that suffering is “a suffering without horizon, without hope”, then it seems necessary to add that being without a horizon or hope is insufferable precisely because a yearning toward such a hope or horizon makes up the phenomenality of pain.⁵² Pain is thus not only constituted by a simple, undifferentiated immanence, but by the tension between its presence and the need to escape it.

Henry and Levinas are both close and far away from each other here. For both philosophers, imprisonment in interiority stems from the lack of distance between me and my suffering. As Henry writes, “Between suffering and suffering, there is nothing,” for it is this impossibility of distance that constitutes the acuity of pain.⁵³ In very similar terms, Levinas describes nausea as precisely this identity of myself with it: “For what constitutes the relationship between nausea and us is nausea itself.”⁵⁴ To be nauseated is nothing else than to be trapped in it for there to be no difference between me and being nauseous. But for Levinas, it is equally important to emphasize that this identity between me and my pain is not tautological: “it takes on a dramatic form.”⁵⁵ To present pain only in its immanent, homogenous simplicity is to forget the dramatic tension which makes it undesirable and

therefore painful. Furthermore, rather than being some pure auto-affectivity of the flesh, Levinas sees in pain precisely the encumbered-ness of physicality; "I am going to lay stress on the pain lightly called physical, for in it engagement in existence is without any equivocation...physical suffering in all its degrees entails the impossibility of detaching oneself from the instant of existence."⁵⁶ Henry wants to stress the immanent, non-materiality of the affectivity of pain. Levinas, on the contrary, sees in the experience of pain, as he also did with pleasure, the acute feeling of belonging to our physical bodies, to be embodied; "a feeling of identity between our bodies and ourselves."⁵⁷

When we look at Levinas' later writing on pain and suffering, he turns his attention not so much to imprisonment and escape, but to how pain breaks into our interiority in the first place. Here, it turns out that not only enjoyment but also pain is inextricably linked to exteriority – not as a homely exteriority, for sure, but as something unwelcome and invasive, turning against me. Where sensation is ruled out as still worldly in Henry's account, sensation is indispensable to Levinas' account of pain. As it is employed in Levinas' later phase, sensibility signifies our fundamental exposure, the unmediated manner in which we at once remain open and vulnerable to exteriority. We are fundamentally exposed to pleasure and pain. "The immediacy of the sensible," Levinas notes, "which is not reducible to the gnoseological role assumed by sensation, is the exposure to wounding and to enjoyment."⁵⁸ But he can also speak of the onset of pain in terms of sense impressions, the raw data which make up the basic content of consciousness. Pain initially presents itself as a conscious content similar to how Husserl speaks of color, sound, contact, and other sensations.⁵⁹ But where such content normally will be taken up in our intentional perceptions, pain strongly resists it. There is no way, Levinas holds, that the sensation of pain can be taken up into intentionality or become integrated into the Kantian "I think." Sensation of pain is the very exception to the unifying of consciousness, for pain announces itself in its refusal to be integrated, as the resistant "non-integratable." It is thus charged with its own direction as "in-spite-of-consciousness."⁶⁰ Pain therefore not only evades sense-giving, but opposes it. Pain, then, is evidently not just the opposite face of enjoyment and pleasure, as Henry has it, but signifies a completely heterogenous phenomenological structure.

Why and how does pain oppose consciousness? One may assume that its opposing character derives from its quantity, so that at certain thresholds, the sensation exceeds our capability of receiving it. Although Levinas thinks there is a "too much" inscribed in pain, he does not think its opposition stems from quantity but rather the quality of the sensation. It is its very quality that makes it impossible to integrate – it is qualitatively too much, an excess of what consciousness can bear. Such determination, however, leads to the paradox that pain is first determined as sensual content given to consciousness, then to manifest itself as in-spite-of-consciousness. It is as if

Levinas' understanding of pain is both affirming Henry's immanence and at the same time rejecting it. Moreover, Levinas suggests that such a paradox is not indicative of a philosophical flaw, but rather that it should be preserved as pain's phenomenal character. Sensation opens the meaningful assemblage of data that pain is grafted onto – only to oppose it. In a short passage, we can see how Levinas moves continuously between the two horns of the paradox, saying that pain,

in the guise of experienced content, the *way* in which, within a consciousness, the unbearable is precisely not born, the manner of this not-being-borne; which, paradoxically, is itself a sensation or a datum... Contradiction *qua* sensation: the ache of pain – woe.⁶¹

Henry's analysis of suffering seems to miss the specific way in which pain arrives as unwelcome or even as an adverse intrusion. While Levinas holds that sensations belong to our conscious and thus immanent life, pain still comes with a sense of exteriority, in the sense of "what is disturbing and foreign to itself. *And in this sense transcendence!*"⁶² The specific sense of transcendence as disturbing and foreign relates to pain's quality of being non-integratable as a qualitative excess that has a non-worldly and pre-social sense of exteriority to it. Transcendence of evil, Levinas says, is "the excess of evil, the excess of all exteriority," that is, the pre-social "wholly other," as an exteriority in contradistinction to the ethical Other.⁶³ Suffering pain can therefore not, according to Levinas, be captured adequately by immanence, but implies transcendence in the sense of an excessive and opposing exteriority. Indeed, it is in the very intrusion of the exterior other into our interior life that Levinas locates the original experience of suffering.⁶⁴ To respect the phenomenality of pain, suffering, and ultimately, of evil, no meaning can be assigned to it, and certainly no overall explanation of it in terms of theodicy. The non-integratable character of its fundamental datum resists all theoretical synthetization and integration.

Conclusion: Exteriority and heterogeneity

Behind Levinas' and Henry's different accounts of pain and pleasure, we have detected a common presupposition, namely their critique of phenomenology's misrepresentation of the affective life due to its attachment to intentionality. This presupposition, however, has not prevented Henry and Levinas from developing divergent answers to the two problems posed in the introduction, which we will treat in turn. The *first problem* concerned whether enjoyment and suffering unfold as purely immanent, or whether an external reference is constitutive. No doubt, Henry affirms the former alternative holding that enjoyment, as well as suffering, can only find their sufficient conditions in the unfolding of pure immanence. But as Levinas rightly points out, even if enjoyment is self-enjoyment, it retains a relation to the outside as the contents it "lives from..." Pleasure does not isolate me in my interiority,

but orients itself to that which it finds pleasant, and this reference to a pleasant exteriority is contained in the very phenomenality of pleasure itself. If we turn to suffering with the same problem in mind, both Henry and Levinas agree that its milieu of appearance is immanence and that an important aspect of what makes us suffer is the experience that there is no way out. For Henry, this is so because there is no horizon – spatial or temporal – that outlines an alternative: pure suffering allows for no distance. But since it seems that the self is just as at home with itself in suffering as in enjoyment – both unfolding in the absolute immanence – it is hard to see why the suffering should feel imprisoned or urge to flee it in the first place. Nevertheless, the exigency to flee seems to be precisely what marks the particular dynamism of suffering, which the earlier writings of Levinas capture with precision. It is precisely because he outlines a horizon of exteriority that Levinas captures the impossible urge to escape pain, which in turn mirrors the feeling of being imprisoned in pain with no way out.

What Levinas' later writings add to this is an analysis of the tensions from the opposite angle: pain's arrival from the exterior and its violent penetration into our interior. At this point, we believe Levinas provides the most important critical correction to Henry's account. While it is not surprising that Henry leaves no room for the exterior in his analyses, his reduction is, as he says, radical – we may add, too radical. It is guided by what Rudolf Bernet terms "hyper-transcendentalism," where we are – beyond the strictures of Husserl's reductions – completely purified from any compromise with the world and its contingencies.⁶⁵ But this also means that Henry is prevented from taking into account the foreignness of pain, both in Levinas' sense of excessive exteriority and its "non-integratable" quality. Jean-Francois Lavigne is to the point when he criticizes Henry for neglecting the tensions that are inherent to the experience of pain. Suffering, Lavigne argues, is "not only that which is affected by an 'impression,' but more properly as *aggressed* by a hostile enemy, or an adverse unbearable quality."⁶⁶ While we believe that suffering unfolds in the interiority of the self, Henry simply misses what makes suffering aversive, negative, in short, felt as an unwelcome intruder. In the homogenous sphere of absolute immanence, there cannot be anything disturbing. In fact, Henry's description of pain could more accurately be taken as an account of mood or *Stimmung* – an affectivity that envelopes the self but with no concrete sense of invasion.⁶⁷ Due to the irreducible adversity of pain, Levinas in one place notes that "pain does not just somehow innocently happen to 'color' consciousness with affectivity."⁶⁸ Whether this is alluding to Henry or not is not clear, but it nonetheless appears a very appropriate critique of Henry's confusion about moods and pain.

Where does this leave us concerning our *second problem* concerning the nature of the relation between pleasure and pain? Are they utterly heterogeneous or do they betray a common structure? Henry seems to be attempting to defend two irreconcilable claims: both the irreducibly distinct

tonalities or phenomenological content, and one fundamental identity of suffering and joy as modalities of one essence. Because Henry, according to our reading, gives priority to their identity, suffering and pleasure become tonalities that share the same underlying essence, and thus they both share a homogenous structure. The problem with such homogeneity is that it leads to the result that suffering and enjoyment can pass into one another, disregarding any external circumstances. Henry writes that such passages belong to the essence of life: “And this is because pure suffering is the concrete phenomenological mode according to which the coming of life into itself accomplishes itself, ... something which in the final reckoning is never anything other than *joie de vivre*, the limitless happiness of existing.”⁶⁹ Hence, the very same affectivity can appear both as suffering and happiness. Admittedly, there are examples of people able to transmute pain and suffering into joy, such as Julian of Norwich and other mystics. But we take them as exceptional precisely because the exception confirms the rule. Only if we presuppose the distinct sense we have of suffering and joy can their crossing strike us as exceptional. Moreover, blurring the basic distinction between suffering and joy comes with considerable risk: it threatens to throw us into a state of vertigo where we lose our basic bearings of affective and moral life. In short, we believe it is necessary to hold on to the irreducible heterogeneity of pleasure and pain, joy and suffering, indicated in Wittgenstein’s saying: “The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man.”⁷⁰

In insisting on the distinction between suffering and enjoyment, we must also let go of a binary model because it fails to do justice to their respective givenness. Binary models, such as in classical utilitarianism, must already presume that pain and pleasure are opposing poles of one underlying continuum. But as Paul Ricoeur has pointed out, the phenomenology of pain and pleasure does not give itself as such opposing poles as they cannot be unified by one homogenous phenomenological structure.⁷¹ We take Levinas’ works as a whole to support this position. Admittedly, a heterogenous model of pain and pleasure is not explicitly developed by Levinas himself, but it remains, nonetheless, operative in his writings. To suffer pain is to be nailed to it in such a way that there is no distance where a dialectic with enjoyment could take place. The inescapability of pain closes the door to suffering as a mere modification of enjoyment. In general, we find that Levinas’ delineation of the heterogenous phenomenalities of pain and pleasure is rooted in the distinct ways in which they relate to the exterior. While both enjoyment and suffering entail an exterior reference for Levinas, the way in which they orient us to this exteriority could not be more radically different. Enjoyment “lives from” a world it finds agreeable and is thus at home in the world. Enjoyment seeks to remain where it finds itself accomplished. The invasiveness of pain, however, is not something merely disagreeable. It does not only fail to please me, but invades me despite myself, refusing any horizon of integration. Moreover, whereas pleasure accomplishes a complacent homeliness in its

surroundings, pain cuts us off from any belonging and imprisons us in that which contradicts our very life. These different structures, we think, suffice to indicate that the relation between pain and pleasure is not only a matter of different tonalities, but of essential differences in structures and givenness that prohibit any conflation of the two. Thus, in response to our second problem, we think phenomenology must dispose of any binary determination of suffering and joy in order to reflect their heterogenous phenomenality.

For Henry and Levinas, suffering and enjoyment are not added to our otherwise theoretical grasp, but are located at the most original level of our constitution. We must therefore expect them to have some moral impact, too. But they also stir wonder. For Henry, the suffering of the passivity of life is at the same time joy, and this joy fills us with wonder.⁷² Also alluding to the metaphysical wonder – this time Leibniz’s “why is being and not nothing?” – Levinas quotes Phillip Nemo’s reformulation with approval: “Why is there evil rather than good?”⁷³ Unlike Henry’s invocation of wonder that feeds on the source of suffering and joy alike, Levinas’ sense of wonder concerns the uncompromised difference between evil and goodness. To Levinas, this duality not only de-neutralizes ontology, but establishes the difference at the heart of human concerns that no principle should try to bridge.

But will a Levinasian position imply that suffering and joy, like goodness and evil, are statically fixed? Henry is surely right that suffering and joy do change during the flow of life – and also, on exceptional occasions, that even suffering can be related to goodness. Levinas is not blind to this movement, but it is important to recognize that changes do not stem from the transition inherent to the movement internal to the essence of affectivity. It does not occur on the plane of ontology at all, but from a new vector of externality – the ethical relation. Taking concrete pain as his example, Levinas emphasizes that it is “for nothing,” it intrudes into consciousness, absorbs it, and isolates the sufferer from all communities. And yet, precisely at this point, there is an opening toward the other, “the possibility of a half opening, and, more precisely, the half opening that a moan, a cry, a groan or a sigh slips through – the original call for aid, for curative help, help from the other me whose alterity, whose exteriority promise salvation.”⁷⁴ This half opening from the suffering other exposes itself to me as my responsibility to comfort or help. Levinas does not suggest any mutation of the suffering, but that the non-sense can be reoriented to ethical meaning – to goodness beyond being.

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- ¹ Rudolf Bernet, "Christianity and Philosophy," *Continental Philosophy Review* 32 (1999): 326-27; Dan Zahavi, "Michel Henry and the Phenomenology of the Invisible," *Continental Philosophy Review* 32 (1999): 236.
- ² There are admirable exceptions, Cf. Joshua Lupo, "The Affective Subject: Emmanuel Levinas and Michel Henry on the Role of Affect in the Constitution of Subjectivity," *Sophia* 56 (2017): 99-114
- ³ Cf. Nozick's comment when introducing his famous experience machine: "What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?" - Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1974), 43.
- ⁴ Michel Henry, *Incarnation: A Philosophy of Flesh*, trans. Karl Hefty (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 40.
- ⁵ Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, trans. G. Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 77-78.
- ⁶ Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, trans. S. Davidson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 19.
- ⁷ Henry, *Incarnation*, 36.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.
- ⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 187.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Levinas adds that this is the case for "enjoyment - or suffering," *ibid.* In other words, he believes the same holds for suffering, but since enjoyment is more primordial for him, this is what he focuses on.
- ¹² Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. D.A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 4.
- ¹³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 73.
- ¹⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 188.
- ¹⁵ While many would habitually assume that the constitution of a personal subject would simply be an ethical event in Levinas, enjoyment is in fact an important and often overlooked element in his understanding of the constitution of subjecthood. For more, Cf. Jean-Michel Longneaux, "Nietzsche and Levinas: The Impossible Relation," in Bettina Bergo and Jill Stauffer (eds.) *Nietzsche and Levinas: 'After the death of a certain God'* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2009), 150-164 & April. D. Capili, "The Created Ego in Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*," in *Sophia* 50 (2011): 677-692
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 115
- ¹⁷ Henry, *Incarnation*, 74
- ¹⁸ Lupo, "The Affective Subject," n.6, 102
- ¹⁹ Henry, "Phenomenology of life," transl. N. Hanlon *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 8 (2003): 106.

- ²⁰ Henry, *Incarnation*, 58; cf. *The Essence of Manifestation*, 576-77.
- ²¹ Henry, "Phenomenology of Life," 103.
- ²² Henry, *Essence of Manifestation*, 283.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 232, 283.
- ²⁴ Henry, *I am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. S. Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 204.
- ²⁵ Henry, *Essence of Manifestation*, 615.
- ²⁶ Henry, "Phenomenology of life," 105-06; *Incarnation*, 261.
- ²⁷ Henry, *Essence of Manifestation*, 661. Cf. 285-86.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 657.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 662.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 665.
- ³¹ Henry, *I am the truth*, 201.
- ³² Henry, "Phenomenology of life," 108.
- ³³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1978), 57
- ³⁴ Raoul Moati, *Levinas and the Night of Being: A Guide to Totality and Infinity*, trans. Daniel Wyche (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 55
- ³⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 114
- ³⁶ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 37
- ³⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 112
- ³⁸ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 72.
- ³⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 37.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.
- ⁴¹ This is, incidentally, part of Levinas' critique of Husserl and Heidegger: whereas the latter two regard our *Lebenswelt* or being-in-the-world as a form of transcendence, Levinas determines our relation to the world as a form of immanence, and reserves the term "transcendence" for the relation with the Other
- ⁴² Henry, *Essence of Manifestation*, 511.
- ⁴³ Renaud Barbaras, "The essence of Life: Drive or Desire?," transl. D. Meacham, in *Michael Henry: The Affects of Thought*, ed. by J. Hanson, M.R. Kelly (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 53.
- ⁴⁴ Henry, *Incarnation*, 3.
- ⁴⁵ Emmanuel Falque, *The Loving Struggle: Phenomenological and Theological Debates*, trans. Bradley B. Onishi & Lucas McCracken (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 165.
- ⁴⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 164.

- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 127.
- ⁴⁸ While our discussion of Levinas' analysis of enjoyment draws primarily on *Totality and Infinity*, where Levinas explicates this phenomenon most extensively, our discussion of Levinas' analysis of pain is drawn from other works. This is because we find that the definition of suffering that is found in *Totality and Infinity*, namely that it is "a failing of happiness", is a) unsatisfactory and b) at odds with how he describes suffering elsewhere. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 115.
- ⁴⁹ Henry, *Incarnation*, 58.
- ⁵⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 52.
- ⁵¹ Levinas, *On Escape*, 52.
- ⁵² Henry, *Incarnation*, 58.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Levinas, *On Escape*, 68.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 55.
- ⁵⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other (And additional essays)*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 69.
- ⁵⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, "Reflections on the philosophy of Hitlerism", *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1, trans. Seán Hand (Autumn 1990): 68.
- ⁵⁸ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 64.
- ⁵⁹ Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-other*, trans. M.B. Smith, B. Harshav (London: Continuum, 2006), 78.
- ⁶⁰ Levinas, "Transcendence and Evil" in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University press 1987), 180; *Entre Nous*, 78.
- ⁶¹ Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 78-79.
- ⁶² Levinas, "Transcendence and Evil," 180
- ⁶³ Ibid.
- ⁶⁴ Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 79.
- ⁶⁵ Bernet, "Christianity and Philosophy," 337.
- ⁶⁶ Jean-Francois Lavigne, "Suffering and Ipseity in Michel Henry: The Problem of the Ego's Transcendental Identity," *Analecta Hermeneutica* 8 (2016): 76.
- ⁶⁷ We have Heidegger's analysis of moods in mind, of course without Heidegger's notion of world. *Being and Time*, trans. J. Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY, 2010), 130-36.
- ⁶⁸ Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 79.
- ⁶⁹ Henry, "Phenomenology of life," 106
- ⁷⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears, B.F McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1974) 6.43.

⁷¹ Ricoeur points to structural differences, as pleasure stems from a happy encounter, pain what is foreign to life; activity precedes pleasure, and activity (reaction) succeeds from pain. Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature*, 106.

⁷² Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 661.

⁷³ Levinas, "Transcendence and Evil," 182.

⁷⁴ Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 80.

Sartre and the Phenomenology of Pain

A Closer Look

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Introduction

Conventionally distinguished as a problem for medical professionals, experiences of embodied pain have prompted a significant set of themes and perspectives in the Continental tradition of philosophy. The discipline of phenomenology, in particular, offers thought-provoking approaches for understanding the fullness and diversity of living one's pain in everyday life. In contrast to scientific practices that tend to take for granted the subjective structures of human consciousness in action, the phenomenological framework of lived experience offers profoundly subtle accounts for explaining how a person's pain alters their ways of relating to themselves, to others, and to the wider world around them. In recent years, scholars of phenomenology have undertaken extensive research on the complex relationality between health and human consciousness, including the behavioral grids and existential textures that come with that relationship. Greatly influenced by twentieth century phenomenology, this new development in the scholarship has undergone three distinct waves. The first wave focused on the work of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer to develop a hermeneutic of healthcare practice; the second wave incorporated Maurice Merleau-Ponty to understand illness from an increasingly carnal point of view; and the third and most recent wave has relied primarily on Edmund Husserl to construct the intentionality involved with the consciousness of pain.¹

Interestingly, this expanding index of major twentieth century sources has yet to include and affirm the discoveries of one of the most vocal philosophers of pain and lived experience, the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. This dismissal is especially surprising because one of the most—perhaps the most—highly discussed of Sartre's texts, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), examines the notion of pain at great length in critical junctures of his acclaimed ontological explorations. Indeed, he was the first French

existentialist to take up the question of embodied pain as a matter of serious phenomenological significance. (Merleau-Ponty did not publish *The Phenomenology of Perception* until 1945.) The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to expand the scope of the phenomenological discussion of pain by incorporating more fully the ideas of Sartre so as to better reveal their positive originality. In so far as he uncovers and deconstructs the meaning of pain in lived experience, Sartre offers new angles by which we can better appreciate the finer elements in his philosophical vision. This essay demonstrates that a renewed understanding of Sartrean phenomenology enables us both to re-evaluate the role and dynamic of pain as a source of awakening human consciousness and to uncover the deeper layers of choice-making that inevitably come with the experience of pain in social settings. In doing so, this essay provides evidence that Sartre's phenomenological method, though nearly eighty years old now, is far from exhausted and still offers crucial insights for contemporary contexts today.

The focus of this essay draws from Sartre's interpretation of pain in his section on "the Body" in *Being and Nothingness*. Specifically, I show how Sartre's notion of pain operates in relationship to his three ontological dimensions of embodiment: the body for Itself, the body for the Other, and the body for Itself as known by the Other.² In the first dimension, the initial sensation of bodily disturbance is understood as pain. In the second dimension, the experience of one's bodily pain is layered with the point of view of another and perceived as illness. In the third dimension of the body, illness becomes construed as disease,³ the final layer of pain experience in which the initial embodied disturbance is fully apprehended by another.⁴ These three dimensions (i.e., pain, illness, and disease) not only supply a unique understanding of embodiment but also provide a crucial insight about component of intersubjectivity within the phenomenology of pain.

Fundamentally, I use Sartre's phenomenological approach to argue that our understanding of pain and our attempts to surpass it relate to the fact that we as individuals live in an intersubjective world wherein personal issues such as pain are dynamically associated with other individuals.⁵ In this context, the contemporary doctor-patient relationship—an example that Sartre himself employs—is given due consideration as a telling intersubjective sphere of pain. Recent criticism of Sartre's stratification process of pain, illness, and disease in *Being and Nothingness* has been shaped and colored by an increasingly negative assessment of his notion of the Look; critics presume that the coping experience involved in the intersubjectivity of pain inevitably leads to bad faith (i.e., living without freedom), especially when this experience takes place in view of the Other.⁶ My contention is that Sartre has yet to be incorporated into the lexicon of phenomenologists of pain because his notion of the Look has been misconstrued as an insurmountable hurdle by theorists of health and human consciousness. These critical interpretations, however, have not fully realized the social reversibility of the Look in Sartre's

project. In this manner, I defend Sartre and argue that his explanation of the Look is more effectively tied to his notion of freedom. In so far as Sartre's exploration of the social layering of pain is depicted more transparently, the complications about his notion of the Look will be mitigated and found more amenable for practical applications, for instance, in medical care. Ultimately, as Sartre helps to show, what is imperative is maintaining a field of free subjectivity for individuals as they work with and through their pain in the midst of situations with others.

Sartre on the Body

Sartre's attitude toward the body is slightly ambivalent; he himself struggled with disability throughout his life. In his texts concerning the body, then, he unsurprisingly writes as a kind of dualist in which he sees the body as something to transcend, surpass, or 'get out of'. In his novel *Nausea*, for instance, Sartre provides a scene in which Roquentin is looking in the mirror and begins to question his embodied schema. In disgust, he tries ardently to tear the flesh off of his face. At another moment in the story, in Cartesian fashion, Roquentin later perceives his hand as a cold object full of dead weight below and against his human consciousness. In a third scene Roquentin's hand appears like a crab, a brute creature with sprawling claws.⁷ These multiple literary expressions parallel a special sensitivity to the relationship between pain and embodied consciousness found in Sartre's philosophical work.

Sartre's account of bodily pain in *Being and Nothingness* is as fruitful and rewarding as it is complex and multi-faceted. Sartre diverges from his exploration on multiple occasions, thus, rendering it difficult to fully achieve a concise definition. For this reason, I begin in this section by defining each ontological dimension of embodiment: the body for Itself, the body for the Other, and the body for Itself as known by the Other. Once these definitions have been established, I will further develop them in the next section by discussing Sartre's distinctions between pain, illness, and disease.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre provides an analysis of embodiment by way of three ontological dimensions. The first is the body for Itself, in which the body is used by the individual as a medium for first-person engagement in the world. The second dimension is understood to be the body for the Other, in which the individual's body becomes objectified from the third-person point of view. The third ontological dimension is the body for Itself as known by the Other. This last distinction is unique in the sense that Sartre combines the first two cases of embodiment to further clarify the ontological dimension of what individuals do as they are being watched or caught under the 'gaze' of another. These three dimensions provide an important groundwork for understanding the role of intersubjectivity in Sartre's phenomenology of pain and, therefore, will be discussed at greater length.

In the first ontological dimension, the body for Itself, Sartre argues that our engagement with the world is one in which the body is constantly at play and always implicit in the field of action.⁸ Fundamentally, for Sartre, human consciousness is intertwined with embodied experience. The body is indicative of our contingency, that is, we are automatically endowed with a body and can utilize it for particular tasks as we see fit. Importantly, though, Sartre explicitly departs from both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty who argue in favor of the principle of double sensation. While the body remains a fundamental site of human consciousness it nevertheless relies on the exterior world to be awakened. As Sartre writes:

But this phenomenon of double sensation is not essential: cold, a shot of morphine, can make it disappear. This shows that we are dealing with two essentially different orders of reality. To touch and to be touched, to feel that one is touching and to feel that one is touched—these are two species of phenomena which it is useless to try to reunite by the term “double sensation.”⁹

To be sure, this does not mean that the body is wholly a physical object nor does it mean that the body is entirely a stream of pure consciousness. It is somewhere in between; it is the lived body.¹⁰ As Sartre puts it: “I exist my body.”¹¹ For instance, when I write I use my hand to direct the pen as it draws out the letters on the paper. Although, the object of my consciousness is the writing and not my hand, still, “I am my hand.”¹² The hand is there as a given, like a piece of equipment, but it is not the entire point of attention; I can shift my perception of my body between subjective and objective modalities. In other words, the way in which we experience our bodies occurs, on the one hand, at a distance such that body parts and organs are ‘outside’ or ‘below’ consciousness and, on the other hand, immediately through our bodies as instantiating us in the world. Our corporeity thus can be construed in two paradoxical ways: “Either [the body] is a thing among other things, or else it is that by which things are revealed to me. But it cannot be both at the same time.”¹³ Indeed, this effectively frames Sartre’s distinctions between the body for Itself and the body for the Other: they are two distinct but connected spheres of being.

Consequently, for Sartre, our knowledge of the world is “engaged.” He writes: “‘To be is to-be-there’ ... ‘there in that chair,’ ‘there at that table.’”¹⁴ The simple fact that we have a body is proof of our contingency in the world; there are natural limitations to what we can and cannot do. Furthermore, it is this spatio-temporal contingency in which things are in front of us, behind us, or ‘not within our reach’ that, for Sartre, revivifies the “upsurge” of the body for Itself to utilize and manipulate it to our advantage.¹⁵ “The very nature of the for-itself demands that it be body; that is, that, its nihilating escape from being should be made in the form of an engagement in the world.”¹⁶ Human consciousness cannot escape embodied experience. We are trapped in our

given bodies while simultaneously yearning to overcome their contingent reality.

The second ontological dimension is the body for the Other. As opposed to the first dimension of embodiment in which the body is viewed entirely within the first-person (i.e., for Itself), the second dimension places the body under the third-person viewpoint of another. Sartre calls this the body's "other plane of existence."¹⁷ For instance, the location and operations of our organs are all accounted by means of the Other; the anatomy textbooks and medical studies that provide this information are explicitly not our own.¹⁸ My perception of my embodied self is inextricably linked to the gaze of the Other and, therefore, seemingly lacks the means to ground me as an autonomously conscious being. Hence, whereas Descartes's idea of consciousness is packaged into a version of solipsism, Sartre's metaphysical framework is radically influenced by and predisposed to social relations. Herein, lies the innovative paradox of Sartre's social ontology. For him, the reality of the body for the Other proves that my body can always assert a point of view as the 'Other's Other' and, thus, be brought to life by inter-personal relations.¹⁹ "Because of the mere fact that I am not the Other, his body appears to me originally as a point of view on which I can take a point of view."²⁰ Moreover, in Hegelian fashion, this encounter becomes an arena of conflict between the body for Itself and the body for the Other. Just as the master-slave dynamic amounts to a battle between two sets of consciousnesses, so, too, does Sartre see this realized in everyday lived experience. On the one hand, the body is for Itself and useful to its own field of activity. On the other hand, it appears for the Other as something that exists within their horizons of action, too. Recognition, consequently, takes place in contestation.

The conflict between the body for Itself and the body for the Other becomes decidedly dramatic in the third and final ontological dimension: the body for Itself as known by the Other. This phenomenological distinction becomes most apparent "with the appearance of the Other's look."²¹ Sartre states: "The shock of the encounter with the Other is for me a revelation in emptiness of the existence of my body outside as an in-itself for the Other."²² As we go about our everyday affairs we engage with our surroundings (i.e., seeing, smelling, touching, tasting, etc.); however, for Sartre, as soon as the Other enters into our horizon these sense perceptions now disintegrate into a different plane of action which the Other has now introduced and monopolized. "Thus, at the very moment when I live my senses as this inner point of view on which I can take no point of view, their being-for-others haunts me: they are. For the Other, my senses are as this table or as this tree is for me."²³ In the body for Itself as known by the Other, our consciousness of the world shifts channels and becomes redirected into the domain of the Other. To put it more precisely, to be seen by or caught under the gaze of the Other is to be comprehended by them. The Look signifies a rupture in consciousness; the ego's awareness of itself in lived experience becomes

petrified in time and space. Just as Sartre's famed voyeur is surprised on the stairwell by the stranger, so too does the cogito lose its capacity to authenticate itself in the comfort of an unimpeded social existence. The Look of the stranger on the stairwell flips the power dynamic of thinking away from the voyeur, leaving them existentially naked and without freedom.²⁴ Sartre's point is that the body is the essential locus of the shock and shift in consciousness that we feel while being perceived by others.

Sartre provides an example to further illustrate the relationship between the Look and what it means to be 'known' by the Other as an embodied subject. While volunteering for a medical experiment in Paris, he was placed in an examination room and, as he says, "remained in the Other's presence."²⁵ He writes that as a reflective subject he could apprehend other objects in the room (e.g., the table, the screen, and the lights), but as an embodied subject he was apprehended by the doctor as a mere object among these other objects. As Sartre puts it: "The illumination of the screen belonged to my world; my eyes as objective organs belonged to the world of the experimenter."²⁶ Previously presumed to be a transcendent subject capable of perceiving and reflecting on other objects in the room, Sartre was himself transcended by the doctor and reduced to an object. In short, his body was no longer for Itself. It became increasingly thematized by the Other—known by the Other. In this third dimension, subjectivity is relegated to a third-person point of view in which bodily movements and the possibility for engagement with the world come under the dominion of another's consciousness.²⁷

The account I have provided of Sartre's explanations of embodiment fits neatly with his phenomenology of pain and the significance of intersubjectivity to it.²⁸ The three ontological dimensions of the body correspond to Sartre's three stages of pain. The next section will demonstrate how this is the case and, moreover, how intersubjective relations can change the texture and meaning of the experience of pain.

Sartre on Pain, Illness, and Disease

Sartre's discussion of pain in the body for Itself begins with a vivid illustration for the reader. Imagine it is late in the evening; I am reading a book and I suddenly feel a slight onset of fatigue. At first, the fatigue is felt below consciousness, that is, I am not yet fully aware of it and cannot entirely apprehend it 'as fatigue' because my attention is focused on the book (i.e., the object of consciousness). However, I soon begin to feel a twinge of discomfort in my eyes as I strain to read the lines on the pages. As Sartre writes, "In all this the body is given only implicitly Pain is not yet considered from a reflective point of view."²⁹ So far, we have only "existed" the pain of fatigue; we have not yet localized or apprehended it as an object. We have only experienced it as "eyes-as-pain" or "vison-as-pain."³⁰ The body for Itself exists its pain; it does not yet know it.

Sartre then shifts the narrative bringing us to the edge of the second ontological dimension: “But now suppose that I suddenly cease to read and am at present absorbed in apprehending my pain. This means that I direct a reflective consciousness on my present consciousness or consciousness-as-vision.”³¹ Now, I have established a point of view on the embodied pain; I have made it into an object of potential knowledge as though it were something ‘out there’ like the lamp or armrest adjacent to me. Moreover, the pain is no longer interpreted as simply pain but as something just prior to an illness—that which can be diagnosed. The fatigue in the eyes is no longer merely a passive experience but nears a kind of reflective experience that puts the body at a distance below the mind which now actively strives to apprehend this newly emergent and strange phenomenon. The pain in the body, continues Sartre, suddenly takes on a pattern and rhythm of its own which has my full attention and keeps me constantly aware of when it strikes me, as though by an outside force. At this point, my urge is to locate and ‘catch’ the pain, preventing it from returning once more. The spontaneity of the pain irks me and resists my efforts at containing it, as though the fatigue has a life and mind independent of me. The pain seemingly eludes diagnosis; it ebbs and flows of its own volition according to its own melodic tune.³²

At this level Sartre asks: what has become of the body? It has yet to enter into the domain for the Other; it still remains as the body for Itself. What is presumed to be an illness at this stage (i.e., the pain of drastic, sustained fatigue as verifiably diagnosable), though rising in lyrical intensity, still remains within the bounds of my experience and feeds on my passivity to it.³³ *I alone* am dealing with the fatigue, both captivated and constrained by it. The pain remains an “affective objective” of mere feeling-sensations in which my conscious experience is only texturized further and makes me ever eager to comprehend this new phenomenon.³⁴

In the second stage, pain experience undergoes a new change and, therefore, brings us to the second ontological dimension. The experience is no longer slightly below reflection but advances into the realm of the body for the Other, in which the body is viewed from a third-person perspective.³⁵ By utilizing the concepts and tools of the medical community (i.e., the Other), the pain now becomes fully realized in the form of an illness in the precise sense of the word. Indeed, only by way of using these frameworks provided by the Other do I finally *know* my body’s experience of pain—“which I should in no case have been able to form by myself or think of directing upon my body.”³⁶ By assuming the third-person point of view of the Other (e.g., the medical community), I am finally able to turn my pain into an object and something which can be manipulated. However, the question then becomes *how* I go about overcoming this illness, that is, how I ultimately transcend my bodily ailment and heal the fatigue which continues to plague me. This brings us to Sartre’s third and final layer of pain experience: disease.

So far, we have learned that the fatigue-pain initially felt as a ‘twinge in the eye’ was affective and still below the realm of reflection. Then, the pain intensified and shifted my attention completely in its direction, enabling me to admit that the pain is radiating throughout my body, thus, opening the body’s field of action for Itself. Later, the pain came to be defined and discerned precisely as an illness by way of consulting medical concepts provided by the Other. Now, in the final stage of the pain experience, the illness becomes construed as a disease due to the ontological dimension of the body for Itself as known by the Other.

The identification of the pain as disease occurs when the sustained, diagnosable fatigue becomes a perpetual object of apprehension by the Other (e.g., the doctor), which involves the Other’s constant observation and intervention—their Look. The doctor’s gaze produces a surging rush of thoughts as the news of treatment is moments away. The social suspension mounts in the examination room. This is precisely the moment of tension in which Sartre asserts that the patient is left with a choice. In this last stage of pain experience (i.e., disease), the patient living through the fatigue is brought to a dilemma: either continue to suffer (i.e., exist the pain as the body for Itself) or obey the advice of a doctor (i.e., flee the pain by allowing oneself to be the body for Itself as known by the Other). In Sartre’s vocabulary, this amounts to the difference between submitting to the Look of the Other and accepting their subsequent diagnosis and treatment plan versus rejecting the Look of the Other and choosing an alternative path more readily in tune with one’s individuality. It seems that Sartre would argue that in the former case we presumably shift the onus of our experience onto the doctor. As Sartre writes: “Thus another is responsible for my disease.”³⁷ However, if we do not seek the doctor’s treatment then the pain will continue to overwhelm us. Discerning between these two options is by no means an easy task; the choice is layered with phenomenological riddles. To be sure, Sartre conveys to us a critical question which strikes at the core of the situation: how do we preserve our subjectivity while at the same time submitting to the support and aid of another? We are caught in an existential flux, exacerbated by the Look of the Other.

Criticism and Defense of Sartre

Critics of Sartre’s phenomenology claim that his ideas wrongly render the individual as an unfree, passive agent under threat from a more powerful and dangerous ‘Other’. As early as 1946, Gabriel Marcel observed this difficulty within Sartre’s philosophical arguments: “There is perhaps nothing more remarkable in the whole of Sartre’s work than his phenomenological study of the ‘other’ as looking and of himself as exposed, pierced, bared, petrified by his Medusa-like stare.”³⁸ Today, the same unnerving observation finds itself rehabilitated in a contemporary critique of Sartre’s work and its relationship

to professional medicine. For instance, in “Sartre and the Doctors” Sarah Richmond asserts that Sartre’s ambivalence toward doctors is indicative of the structure of his phenomenological interpretation of pain. She argues that the patient who adheres to Sartre’s ontology of the body and decides to seek the help of a doctor is complicit in committing Sartre’s notion of bad faith.³⁹ Richmond’s ultimate premise for this conclusion stems from her reading that, for Sartre, to undergo illness and by extension the healing process of disease means “to be subject to the doctor’s Look.”⁴⁰ In as much as the patient remains under the third-person gaze of the doctor, they are incapable of remaining in the first-person field of action of the body for Itself. According to Richmond, the shift from the first-person perspective to the third-person perspective of experience implies that the individual has been reduced to an object and, therefore, is ‘caught’ and without freedom. The patient is known by another in a way that they themselves cannot lay claim to. Furthermore, to choose to remain in this state of being caught by the Other (i.e., intervention by the doctor) leads to bad faith.⁴¹ By forfeiting first-person responsibility of healing to that of the doctor’s methods, the patient willfully chooses to be reduced to an object by the Other.⁴² Thus, Richmond concludes that Sartre’s ontology of the body is unfit to answer questions related to healthcare practice because it does not allow for the shifting of responsibility to the doctor.⁴³

Richmond’s claim,⁴⁴ I would argue, is incomplete because it incorrectly approaches and misunderstands the notion of the Look and, consequently, the intersubjectivity of the doctor–patient relationship in Sartre’s account. Her assumption is that the doctor knows us in a way that we do not know ourselves which implies that the doctor is in control of the situation and is reducing us to a Sartrean facticity. The crucial paradox, however, is that we also know the doctor in a way that they do not know themselves. We can reverse the power of the Look. For instance, upon entering the examination room the doctor may ask us a number of questions and propose a series of tests including MRIs, X-rays, or simply take our pulse in which the body is reduced to a facticity to be known by the Other. During this time, we listen intently to the diagnosis results and treatment options meanwhile watching attentively how the doctor might carry out the healing process.⁴⁵ Furthermore, in this case, the patient can actually decline the doctor’s help after seeing their methods.⁴⁶ The Look of the patient enables this reversibility to occur. Upon analyzing the kinds of stratagems the doctor plans to implement, the patient remains free to reject them, challenging the doctor as they attempt to objectify the body and reduce the patient’s subjectivity (albeit for the sake of scientific precision). In this way, the patient retains their capacity of choice-making for Itself and, therefore, in principle, never necessarily or irrevocably sacrifices their freedom in the situation. Sartre refers to this capability to choose even after having been objectified by the Other as our “compass,” an organizing principle or original point of orientation which allows us to scope out the horizons in which we make choices as human beings within a socially dynamic world.⁴⁷ The Look, therefore, can be both deployed by the Other as

well as re-asserted back on them, since the patient can always reestablish their subjectivity over against the doctor and their medical practices.

To be sure, declining the doctor has serious consequences. Sartre himself admits that choices like these come with a price.⁴⁸ Our decisions, whether done in good or bad faith, always set the conditions for our future freedom and, thus, fundamentally reorient our way of being in the world.⁴⁹ Perhaps the patient's perception of the doctor was flawed; it is likely that an MRI, X-ray, or surgery would be of great benefit for delivering a cure to the patient. However, it is also possible that the doctor has made a mistake in their diagnosis of the illness. Herein lies the originality of Sartre's understanding of the layering of pain as an intersubjective experience. He identifies the tension inherent to our experience of pain, namely, that it is never only our own but rather is increasingly caught in a web of relations of alterity. When dealing with my pain, I am not acting within an insulated zone of private experience; my choice for or against certain treatments involves my own perception of my pain, the doctor's view of my pain, and my own perception of the doctor's perception of my pain. We are inescapably entangled with the Other as we try to surmount our ailments; moreover, it is this intersubjective tension which colors the stratification process of pain, illness, and disease at large. Our situational horizons influence and shape how we perceive and try to handle our pain. We exist our pain first-hand, but the doctor's diagnosis and treatment occur from the third-person point of view. The Look does not create this tension *per se* but rather unmasks it and puts it in view of the individual. Though the shock of this kind of social reality can incur a sense of frightfulness and awkwardness, it nevertheless provides a grid in which individuals are better suited to navigate the situations that they find themselves in.

While Sartre is generally labeled a skeptic of professions, he is not an anarchist of modern medical practice. Importantly, his insights address a frequent, yet commonly overlooked, intersubjective dynamic between doctors and patients: the double effects of the Look. He, therefore, provides a phenomenological paradigm by which to locate different points of views (i.e., first-person versus third-person) and how these can lead to tense asymmetries between the two groups concerning the experience of pain. In seemingly ironic fashion, Sartre's recognition of these socially layered variations in pain consciousness also parallels a growing movement within healthcare practice to seek second opinions. In fact, this has become a widespread cultural phenomenon; patients seek second opinions in order to avoid becoming trapped in a third-person treatment that they believe is not conducive to who they are and to the pain they themselves are undergoing. This kind of choice is not only welcomed within the healthcare community but also coincides with Sartre's phenomenological understanding of freedom. In Sartrean terms, the decision always rests with the individual, and they alone are responsible for the consequences of their choices. Freedom, for Sartre, is always about

mapping the subtleties of responsible living. The consequences of the Look can just as easily be redemptive as they can be aggressive.

What was previously taken to be a situation of being for the Other (i.e., of being without freedom) has reversed in favor of the patient and become redefined as being for Itself. In seeking the second opinion after 'seeing' the first doctor the patient shows that they are not completely caught in a moment of bad faith.⁵⁰ While the doctor may be the one providing a treatment strategy for the disease, the patient is the one who ultimately perceives the doctor's opinion and decides whether or not they would like to pursue the treatment with them. The patient, in making this decision, transcends the doctor and reduces them to the practical skills and medical expertise which they offer. This is in fact the process by which patients generally make healthcare choices today; they objectify a diverse array of providers in order to apprehend what the most optimal option appears to be. In so far as this is the case, the patient maintains being for Itself; they modify the meaning of the situation and thus reclaim it. Just as the patient's body exists within situational horizons, so too does the doctor's body. Freedom occurs through our ability to reshape the situation to a constructive advantage. This existential pivot in social relations is always a possibility.⁵¹

It would be wrong to reduce the doctor-patient relationship to only a competition of rivals; however, Sartre's assertion of the intersubjective tensions concerning pain resonates with experience nonetheless. For instance, when we visit the doctor, we have a sense of anxiousness deeply associated with a fear that we will *become* the 'bad news', namely, the disease that the doctor diagnoses and treats. As a result of this third-person objectification, one fears the risk of losing contact with oneself, of being reduced to a mere object for perpetual examination and intrusion.⁵² Furthermore, just as we become an object for the Other (i.e., the doctor) we also increasingly become that object for ourselves. The diagnosis of pain as an illness and the continuous treatment of it as a disease can lock us in a facticity as known by the doctor. Today's medical establishment frequently employs physiological and statistical tools that tend to objectify our bodies as amalgams of matter and nerves.⁵³ In this way, our lived body can be easily forgotten and lose its texture as a first-person consciousness for Itself. For Sartre, it is necessary that individuals remain in possession of their lived experience and thus maintain an attitude capable of unlocking critical—but productive—modes of seeing others in action.

As I have been arguing, a proper theory of pain must be able to recognize the intersubjective tension of the first-person versus the third-person inherent to our experience of pain. Indeed, this is what Sartre himself appears to fear about the role of overly invasive clinical practices, as alluded to in his work. He worries that the lived body in these situations becomes a body for the Other. This shift can radically modify how we look at ourselves because, as Sartre demonstrates in his ontological dimensions of the body,

how we look at our own body also stems from how the Other views it. Though not inevitable, this third-person point of view can threaten to rob us of personal meaning. Sartre's phenomenology effectively recognizes the kind of flight which the look of the doctor as the Other can induce on the body for Itself, consequently, tilting the balance beam of meaning away from the patient and towards the doctor. Importantly, Sartre believes that we can recover our individuality within these compromising situational horizons by recalibrating our consciousness of who we are for ourselves in relationship to who and what is outside of us. In this way, we can rebalance the doctor-patient dynamic, for instance, by seeing the situation differently (i.e., as a first-person consciousness). Sartre's phenomenology, I would argue, emboldens us to view ourselves from the first-person (e.g., for Itself) in order to avoid being frozen in the third-person (i.e., for the Other). Considering pain from the first-person viewpoint reminds us that that pain fundamentally entails an experience of, as Sartre states, "our living it."⁵⁴ The problem is not the presence of the doctor; their aid and expertise is integral to the healing process. Rather, Sartre is identifying what we naturally take for granted in this environment, which is to say that inter-personal relations necessarily imply the shock of another's assessment of us thereby complicating how we see ourselves in lived experience. Hence, we need to be aware of the possibility of objectification and maintain our first-person viewpoint when making medical decisions.

In sum, Sartre's presumable ambivalence toward doctors as an intersubjective experience does not lead to a definitive rejection of the medical establishment. Rather, his "ambivalence" better reveals our relationship to pain as a layering process in which the Other (e.g., the doctor) interrupts our first-person experience and, thereby, changes its texture. In other words, Sartre seems to suggest flipping the doctor-patient dynamic and rearranging it so that the patient maintains a free voice within the situational horizons of the healing process (e.g., their ability to seek second opinions for treatment options). Sartre wants us to realize how the experience of being for Itself illuminates the intricateness of the healing process and the decisions that accompany it. Moreover, understanding the intersubjective layering of pain operative in Sartre's phenomenology—as seen in the doctor-patient relationship—allows us to better comprehend our own, meaningful subjective experience of pain, thereby, renewing our sense of personal freedom in diverse fields of human interaction.

Concluding Remarks

Sartre's phenomenology uncovers original insights in pain, explicating details that deepen the everyday experience of it. While critics such as Richmond may acknowledge the vivid character of his interpretative vision of the experience of pain, she is unable to accept the practicality of his notion of the

Look, for it seems to undermine the possibility of medical treatment. Her criticism, after all, centers on the supposed inevitability of bad faith, as though the patient accepts being locked into an objective existence while under the doctor's gaze. In short, this accepted objectification in the third stage of the disease, consequently, leads to bad faith. Seen from this angle, Sartre is construed as a cynic of science. I argue, however, that critics like Richmond have misinterpreted his notion of the Look, especially in the third ontological dimension. While his idea of freedom does hinge on competitive-like view of social existence that is most explicitly found in the Look, nevertheless his understanding of the simultaneous social layering of pain contains remarkable subtleties. As I have argued, the problem of intersubjectivity in relation to professional medicine has been approached from an incorrect angle. I showed this to be the case in three ways.

Firstly, I began by defining the three ontological dimensions of the body: the body for Itself, the body for the Other, and the body for Itself as known by the Other. Secondly, I demonstrated how Sartre interweaves the experience of pain through each distinction of embodiment, thus, showing what it means to undergo pain, to have an illness, and to cope with a disease. In this way, I made apparent the idea that pain is fundamentally an intersubjective experience in which each dimension of the body reflects the rising presence of the Other as we undergo our pain and try to surpass it. Lastly, I provided evidence that Sartre's existential-phenomenology of pain contains within itself a situational openness to affirmations of freedom. Consequently, I defended Sartre's phenomenological account against Richmond's accusation that his theory of pain is not conducive for professional medicine. My conclusion was that her criticism lacked a complete explanation of Sartre's interpretation of the Look involving pain in the body, particularly in the form of the doctor-patient relationship. As Sartre shows, the Look incurs a deep uneasiness and awkwardness about ourselves and our relationship to others; moreover, these can be exacerbated in situations where our natural limitations appear in view of others. However, the existential linkage between consciousness of pain and social life offers a paradoxical affirmation of freedom: we can at any time choose to flip the power dynamic of the situation by re-taking the Other under our gaze. The notion of freedom is wholly operative in his account but its intricacies indicated in the reversibility of the Look were overlooked by his recent critics.

Sartre's account in *Being and Nothingness* by no means exhausts the growing phenomenological discussions of pain experience. However, re-exploring the insights of his phenomenology of embodied consciousness, especially in connection with the Look, clarifies crucial questions about the intersubjectivity of pain and the doctor-patient dynamic. Pain is a highly interpersonal experience that beckons us to consider asymmetries that might occur between the patient and the physician who operates on them. We, therefore, ought to be aware of the escalating presence of the Other (e.g., the

doctor) and the ways it can potentially alter the lived experience of how we perceive and feel our pain as our own. Sartre might appear to be agnostic—even pessimistic—about the social circumstances surrounding human pain, but he nevertheless provides avenues by which his ideas can be thought anew and with ever-appealing decisiveness.

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- ¹ For a perspective which uses the ideas of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, see Fredrik Svenaeus, *The Hermeneutics of Medicine and the Phenomenology of Health: Steps Towards a Philosophy of Medical Practice* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000). Svenaeus also highlights and critiques Sartre's notion of pain in the body; see Fredrik Svenaeus, "The Phenomenology of Falling Ill: An Explication, Critique and Improvement of Sartre's Theory of Embodiment and Alienation," *Human Studies* 32, no. 1 (2009). For a framework that uses both Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger, see Havi Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness* (Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2013); also see Havi Carel, *Illness: The Cry of the Flesh* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). For a Husserlian framework involving affectivity and intentionality, see Saulius Geniusas, *The Phenomenology of Pain* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020).
- ² Although Sartre, at times, spells these concepts in the lower case in *Being and Nothingness*, I write them in the upper case in order to convey their phenomenological significance as conceptual frameworks throughout the essay.
- ³ In *Being and Nothingness*, the three dimensions of pain experience—pain, illness, and disease—come from the French words *douleur* (meaning bodily aches or soreness), *mal* (meaning recurrent pains or ills), and *maladie* (meaning a full-blown ailment or infirmity which constrains at all times).
- ⁴ To further clarify, Sartre's ontological dimensions do not subscribe to either naturalism or social constructionism. These latter two positions rely either on biological causal mechanisms (i.e., naturalism) or on external socio-cultural constructs (i.e., social constructionism) to explain pain. Sartre's analysis, in contrast, relies on an existential-phenomenological approach which focuses on how we exist things in themselves, namely, pain in itself apart from outside definitions or attitudes of the experience which tend to take the uniqueness of it for granted.
- ⁵ For further reading and criticism of Sartre's reliance on the notion of the Other to understand the experience of pain, see Fredrik Svenaeus, "The Phenomenology of Falling Ill: An Explication, Critique and Improvement of Sartre's Theory of Embodiment and Alienation."
- ⁶ The criticism that Sartre's phenomenology of pain inescapably results in bad faith by virtue of his definition of the Look will be addressed directly in the pen-ultimate section of this essay.
- ⁷ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1964), 4-5, 16-18, 98-99.
- ⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1956), 347. According to Sartre, the body is

construed as the object *par excellence* of the human psyche; it is ever-present to us in waking life and in dreams.

⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 304.

¹⁰ See Dermot Moran, "Sartre on Embodiment, Touch, and the 'Double Sensation,'" *Philosophy Today* (2010): 136 -137.

¹¹ *Being and Nothingness*, 351.

¹² *Being and Nothingness*, 323.

¹³ *Being and Nothingness*, 304

¹⁴ *Being and Nothingness*, 308. Here, Sartre refers to engagement in the world as an ontological necessity.

¹⁵ *Being and Nothingness*, 322. As Sartre writes in poetic fashion: "Thus, the world from the moment of the upsurge of my For-itself is revealed as the indication of acts to be performed; these acts refer to other acts, and those to others, and so on The thing perceived is full of promises; it touches me lightly in passing, and each of the properties which it promises to reveal to me, each surrender silently consented to, each meaningful reference to other objects engages the future."

¹⁶ *Being and Nothingness*, 309.

¹⁷ *Being and Nothingness*, 339.

¹⁸ *Being and Nothingness*, 303.

¹⁹ For further explanation about the assertion of points of views and knowledge of the Other, see S. Kay Toombs, *The Meaning of Illness: A Phenomenological Account of the Different Perspectives of Physician and Patient* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), 58-60.

²⁰ *Being and Nothingness*, 340.

²¹ *Being and Nothingness*, 351.

²² *Being and Nothingness*, 352.

²³ *Being and Nothingness*, 352.

²⁴ *Being and Nothingness*, 259-261.

²⁵ *Being and Nothingness*, 311.

²⁶ *Being and Nothingness*, 311.

²⁷ Sartre calls this ontological movement "transcendence - transcended" (*Being and Nothingness*, 291-292, 339).

²⁸ For further reading on the body and intersubjective relations in Sartre's ideas, see Luna Dolezal, "Reconsidering the Look in Sartre's 'Being and Nothingness,'" *Sartre Studies International* 18, no. 1 (2012).

²⁹ *Being and Nothingness*, 332.

³⁰ *Being and Nothingness*, 333.

³¹ *Being and Nothingness*, 335.

³² *Being and Nothingness*, 336.

³³ *Being and Nothingness*, 337.

³⁴ *Being and Nothingness*, 337.

³⁵ *Being and Nothingness*, 355. While it is apparent that Sartre is arguing to treat illness from a reflective point of view, it does not follow that illness automatically and immediately leads to the body for the Other. In his discussion of pain for the Other, he explicitly states that in prior sections “we had to stop midway in our description because we lacked the means to proceed further” (355). By this I take him to mean that the “magical” and “melodic” character of pain impeded our chances at a full reflective treatment of it in which we fully apprehended it as an object. In other words, the pain still appeared to evade diagnosis. Indeed, in this context, we can finally see that only by way of utilizing the language and intellectual tools of the Other do we initially gain a transcendent position over and against the pain and can truly call it as an illness.

³⁶ *Being and Nothingness*, 355.

³⁷ *Being and Nothingness*, 356.

³⁸ Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Manya Harai (Freeport, NY: The Philosophical Library, Inc., 1969), 51.

³⁹ For a succinct discussion of Sartre’s notion of bad faith in *Being and Nothingness*, see Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 385-389.

⁴⁰ Sarah Richmond, “Sartre and the Doctors,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 18, no. 4 (2010): 519.

⁴¹ Sarah Richmond, “Sartre and the Doctors,” 520.

⁴² “Sartre and the Doctors,” 528.

⁴³ “Sartre and the Doctors,” 518. Richmond puts her points plainly: “Sartre’s phenomenology is not suitable for this task.”

⁴⁴ Richmond’s analysis, though incomplete concerning the issue of bad faith, does revitalize an important development which other phenomenologists have explored: the stratification process of pain experience. For particular discussions on this general topic, see Saulius Geniusas, “Pain and Intentionality,” in *Perception, Affectivity, and Volition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, ed. Roberto Rubio, Shigeru Taguchi, and Roberto Walton (Springer International Publishing AG, 2017), 113-133. Geniusas frames this phenomenological discovery in terms of Husserl’s solution to a debate between Carl Stumpf and Franz Brentano. Indeed, Geniusas further shows that Sartre’s analysis of pain actually coincides with Husserl’s conclusion that pain begins affectively below reflection but later moves into the domain of reflective consciousness as an intentional experience (116 - 126).

⁴⁵ Another point might be further considered here. The patient can ‘read the room’ in trying to understand whether or not this particular practice or physician displays certain qualities that coincide with what they feel is important to the healing process. For instance, the doctor may be impolite or seem to convey a lack of focus; they might even have cold hands or halitosis. These things are not only valid reasons to decline treatment but also ways in which the patient knows the doctor in a way that that doctor does not know himself; their transcendence is transcended.

⁴⁶ Havi Carel cleverly puts the situation’s reversal this way: we “can touch back” (*Phenomenology of Illness*, 53).

⁴⁷ *Being and Nothingness*, 463-464, 475.

⁴⁸ *Being and Nothingness*, 454.

⁴⁹ *Being and Nothingness*, 464.

⁵⁰ This coincides with Sartre's notion of transcendence - transcended whereby being for Itself establishes a position over and against the Other and lays claim to the situation (*Being and Nothingness*, 291-292, 339).

⁵¹ *Being and Nothingness*, 350.

⁵² If I may add a personal note to this observation. I myself suffer from two herniated discs which make simple activities like walking, sitting, eating, and sleeping very difficult and painful to accomplish. Furthermore, I objectify myself as a result of the doctor's diagnosis; I treat and see myself as the diagnosed disease (e.g., as 'the herniated discs'). This kind of attitude, in Sartre's terms, reduces me to a facticity and constrains my possibilities in the world.

⁵³ For further discussion on the general importance of the first-person experience of pain and rising levels of asymmetry between patient and doctor in today's medical climate, see Fredrik Svenaeus, *The Hermeneutics of Medicine and the Phenomenology of Health: Steps Towards a Philosophy of Medical Practice*, 29-33, 146-148.

⁵⁴ *Being and Nothingness*, 463. The point of orientation must be accommodating to the first-person experience of the patient's pain. For further reading on this kind of stance and the importance of the lived body in a Husserlian context, for instance, see Saulius Geniusas, "The Subject of Pain: Husserl's Discovery of the Lived-Body," *Research in Phenomenology* 44, no. 3 (2014).

The Gift of Mourning

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Here we touch on what remains no doubt the unavoidable problem of mourning, of the relation between gift and grief, between what should be non-work, the non-work of the gift, and the work of mourning.¹

Is mourning possible? Or impossible? And if impossible, in what sense impossible? What does this mean, in turn, for what we do as human beings in the face of the normal, natural experience of mourning the death of the other? How can we mourn? How *should* we mourn? For some, these questions arise on account of the death of a beloved pet, a friend, a child, a spouse, and/or a parent. Perhaps they arise even on account of the death of their own faith in God, others, humanity, and/or the universe. Yet since 2020, these questions have become especially emphatic with Covid-19 spreading across the globe disrupting, transforming, and ruining many people's lives. With little risk for hyperbole, I suspect that not a single person's life was left untouched by the effects of Covid. Moreover, I suspect that how Covid touched each person's life in some degree or another centered around each person experiencing the inflexible law of life: that one of two people will experience the other die.² This world-event of a pandemic gave rise to worldwide deaths each of which touched someone somewhere, each of us, personally thereby leaving virtually everyone wondering what is happening to me, to us, to the world, etc. For some, this event led to a mourning that overcame them leading them to be added to the number of deaths during Covid though not from the virus but by their own hand. For others who survived not just the deaths of the others around them but, perhaps, also their own appeal to end their own life, the mourning left to be done and left to be undergone left them in a place teeming with possibility. This place teeming with possibility in the aftermath of the death of the other or in the throws of mourning is the site that I explore in this paper with Jacques Derrida, and a few others, as my guide.

To explore the theme of mourning after Derrida, the questions with which I began cannot help but be posed, imposed, exposed, and answered even if only in part. Derrida's work on mourning, whether in his own eulogies

in, for example, *The Work of Mourning*, or in his many reflections and ruminations on mourning throughout his writings, is especially important today for helping us understand what we are doing and what is happening to us when we mourn. For his approach to thinking under the heading of deconstruction and especially in and through *différance* points him in each context toward the nuance, complexity, and difficulties that attend the topic, philosopher, or text under consideration. By bringing mourning under *différance* or through Derridean deconstruction is, then, especially important to begin considering some of the nuances of this complex phenomenon of mourning. At a time when the West, with its focus turning more and more toward mental health awareness, is getting better at allowing and giving people the time to mourn, we continue to need some assistance on this front as shown, for example, by the new definition of “prolonged grief disorder”³ in psychology’s DSM 5. While helpful for diagnosis in a clinical setting, this definition seems to revitalize the idea in Sigmund Freud regarding the *pathology* of melancholy or to the more recent, yet related, trite remark months or years after someone dies: Just get over it already. Derrida’s work on mourning can help move this openness to mourning, even when “prolonged,” even further.

Within Derrida’s works and the scholarship on it, this question of mourning has been explored in terms of the relationship of mourning and melancholia or introjection and incorporation regarding the remembrance and forgetting that attends mourning.⁴ I am challenging this conversation by relating mourning to what follows the Derridean logic of the gift. Derrida has broached this relationship among mourning and the gift, in both *Given Time: 1* and *The Gift of Death*, yet he does little to explain or explore this relationship. He provides many insights on what this relationship of the two may entail, and I aim to trace some of these insights in an effort to grapple with the possibilities that open themselves to us through mourning someone who has died. With this, the gift that occurs, according to Derrida, *sans voir, sans savoir*, and *sans avoir* disrupts any economy of exchange by interrupting it in a transformative, evential instant. Such a gift is given unexpectedly, in secret, and im-possibly as it conditions its own possibility. I argue that mourning is not necessarily a moment in which we can give such a gift, but mourning opens us to the possibility, namely the im-possibility, of a gift. More precisely, when we mourn, we can open ourselves to the type of giving that lays at the root of Derrida’s ethico-political hopes under the heading of an other friendship and democracy to-come that have profound implications for our being-with one another in the world. Mourning opens to such an im-possible gift because mourning exercises an ethos ready for an event. Mourning welcomes the gift in being ready not to be ready for its surprise, that is, mourning is ready for the coming of something that for all intents and purposes seems impossible. In this, mourning becomes a chance for the gift.

To explore these themes and thesis, I take as my guides not only Derrida but also Aristotle, Cicero, and Søren Kierkegaard. Each of these figures turns carefully toward the phenomenon of surviving the death of the other in order to describe what friendship and love ought to look like in general. According to these figures, the love and friendship at the edge or border of life and death give relief to the love and friendship that should be practiced and cultivated with the living. To follow this trajectory of thinking, what is at stake with the gift according to Derrida must be clarified so that the phenomenology of mourning offered by a look at friendship to the dead can be seen as making possible the coming of an impossible gift. Understanding this role that mourning can play culminates in a responsibility to mourn with ethical, political, and ontological implications.

Derrida on the Gift

As Derrida explores the theme of the gift throughout his writings, he tends to relate it to another of his important themes—the event. Both themes develop and enrich one another to the extent that Derrida’s understanding of the gift becomes a paradigm for his understanding of the event as an eruption of contingency into everyday life that is unexpected and world transforming. He even tells us, “There is not an event more eventful than a gift that breaks up the exchange, the course of history, the circle of economy.”⁵ The gift “should be an event” because in breaking up the circle of economy, the gift “has to arrive as a surprise.”⁶ The gift is the gift event. Accordingly, the gift operates as a paradigm for understanding his account of an event because the gift operates following a logic of the *sans*. A gift occurs for Derrida *sans voir*, *sans savoir*, and *sans avoir*.⁷ In disrupting an economy of exchange by interrupting it in a transformative instant, a gift is given unexpectedly or without being able to see it on the horizon (*sans voir*), is given in secret outside the realm of calculative rationality (*sans savoir*), and is given without any person possessing what is given (*sans avoir*). Through this logic of the *sans*, a gift is given unexpectedly, in secret, and im-possibly as it conditions its own possibility. In order to understand how the gift for Derrida is this paradigm of the event, we must understand its conditions for possibility as well as impossibility.

These conditions are the economy of exchange that occurs with everyday gift giving. When one person has the intention of giving something to another person who receives it, gift giving is made possible. In other words, “A gives B to C.”⁸ These are “the conditions for the possibility of the gift” because “for there to be gift, gift event, some ‘one’ has to give some ‘thing’ to someone other, without which ‘giving’ would be meaningless.”⁹ The gift involves a giver, a givee, and the given. Without these three, we could not speak about giving or the gift at all. Therefore, a gift (*don*) for Derrida occurs

as a *dissymmetrical* or asymmetrical event of giving insofar as A gives, C receives, and B is the gift.

However, as experience teaches, everyday gift giving is *not* dissymmetrical. What normally occurs in everyday gift giving is a circular cycle of giving, receiving, *and* returning. And this return constitutes the reciprocal economy that nullifies the gift on Derrida's understanding. In such a reciprocal economy, the giver puts the givee in a place of debt on account of the given. So the givee is obligated to give something in return. A "Thank you very much," perhaps, which effectively completes the circle of exchange. Of course, a further thank you gift from the givee might be given, which would complete the circle while possibly effecting another circle of exchange. Economy always "implies the idea of exchange, or circulation, of return."¹⁰ And this return nullifies the gift by ridding of its dissymmetry. The economy causes the initial giver to become an *expectant* givee insofar as he or she expects something in return. Similarly, the initial givee becomes an *indebted* giver insofar as he or she is expected to give something back as a sign of appreciation for what has been given. Such an economy gives rise to a calculated generosity in which the gift (*don*) becomes a present (*cadeaux* or *présent*). The giving of presents is, in turn, a kind of profitable giving. Person A gives presents in order to receive something in return; Person B receives presents with an indebtedness to reciprocate. In this way, these three conditions of the possibility of the gift—the giver, the given, and the givee—"designate simultaneously the conditions of the impossibility of the gift."¹¹ Thus, if the gift is to remain possible, the very conditions of its possibility become the conditions that ultimately constitute the economy that the gift event disrupts. The gift *as an event* must surprise us, exceed any horizon of expectation, resist the confines of static, conceptual construction, and exhibit singularity. The gift must occur *sans voir* and *sans savoir* in this regard. The gift, then, cannot enter the economy of exchange between giver, givee, and the given because this economy reduces any surprise to an expectation that arrives on a determined, expected, and economic horizon.

Nevertheless, Derrida maintains that the gift and the economy that it makes possible, which in turn makes the gift impossible, must always remain in concert together. We cannot fall into the trap of metaphysical thinking that would pursue the *pure* gift as a transcendental signified apart from economy. The gift needs the economy as much as the economy needs the gift. Accordingly, Derrida has no qualms, *per se*, with economy. After all, he says, "[G]ive economy its chance."¹² We must still "give consciously and conscientiously."¹³ Yet even while we give economy this chance to do what it does, we must also know how the gift disrupts it because for the event to be possible, for the gift to be possible as the unexpected disruption of the economy, this economy must be there to be interrupted and transformed. The gift *as an event* must surprise and exceed any horizon of expectation including the rational, profitable calculation within the economy. The gift disrupts this

economy according to an excessive generosity and temporality of the instant. So rather than the calculated, profitable generosity of the economy, the gift operates according to an “excessive generosity,” that is, a giving that gives not for profit but without return.¹⁴ In such excessive generosity, the gift then becomes a “dissemination without return.”¹⁵ The gift as gift is given without any need for something given back. The gift, then, “must not circulate, it must not be exchanged If the figure of the circle is essential to economics, the gift must remain *aneconomic*.”¹⁶

And this aneconomy of the gift follows a peculiar kind of temporality. In the circular economy of presents, the temporality at play is itself the present. This economy deals with presents that present presence. A present is always presented in the present. Derrida’s image for this is “time as [a] circle.”¹⁷ Though a present is present, a gift operates according to the aneconomic temporality of the to-come. This is the unexpected, surprising in-breaking or irruption of a future into the present that breaks and enters based upon its own conditions of possibility and not those of the economy at play. Understood as an event, a gift operates in a temporality that fractures or keeps out of joint any such notion of a present now. This would mean that the event breaks into and out of the presence of the economy of exchange. For this reason, Derrida says that the gift happens “at the instant.”¹⁸ And as Parmenides in Plato’s *Parmenides* maintains, an instant is a “queer thing ... lurk[ing] between motion and rest—being in no time at all.”¹⁹ This instant is an interruption of the temporally present economy of exchange. As such an interruption, “this instant of breaking and entering [*effraction*] (of the temporal circle) must no longer be part of time.”²⁰ This instant is “paradoxical” because it breaks into and out of time all the while retaining a relation with time.²¹ As Geoffrey Bennington says, “The gift is never (a) present ...; it is given in a past which has never been present and will be received in a future which will never be present either.”²² The gift is never lived-through, in other words, because the event remains irreducible to any past, present, or future modality. As such, the event cannot be brought into the present of presence. And yet the instant at which a gift happens both opens and transforms time for something new to happen. As such an opening, it exceeds time all the while relating to time. This instant that breaks into the temporality of the economy of exchange is what happens when a gift event that is to-come arrives. Temporality fractures at the instant of the arrival of a gift.

In order for the gift *instantly* to do this, the gift must operate in secret as im-possible. The giving and receiving of the gift must operate outside the order of knowledge and being known. Consequently, Derrida insists that the gift is possible there where the giver does not give with any intentions of giving and the givee does not receive with any recognition that she has received. The gift must, thus, occur *sans savoir* and *sans avoir*. He writes, “At the limit, the gift as gift ought not appear as gift: either to the givee or to the giver. It cannot be gift as gift except by not being present as gift.”²³ The gift

operates in the order of secrecy insofar as the parties involved cannot know that a gift has been given. If this gift enters the order of knowing, then it enters the circle of exchange and can no longer interrupt and transform this circle. This secret operation of the gift that removes it from the realm of consciousness allows for the gift to surprise, to break in at the *instant*, and to interrupt the economy of exchange according to its own conditions of possibility and not those of the economy. In other words, the gift event can arrive but its arrival must appear *im-possible* written with a hyphen to show that this does not mean “that there is no gift.”²⁴ The impossibility of the gift with no hyphen would mean no gift is possible or that a gift is an impossible possibility that will never occur. However, the im-possibility of the gift with a hyphen means that the coming and inter-ruption of a gift event would resist the current conditions of possibility all the while bringing its own conditions of possibility.²⁵ For an event to occur, in other words, the event must *seem* impossible to the current conditions of possibility. The occurrence of an event is something that is only possible to think *until* the event itself occurs because through its occurrence, an event makes the impossible possible and actual. What once was only possible in thought is now possible in experience *after the event* because the event’s own unexpected breaking into the status quo makes itself possible. An event is its own possibilization because an event transforms the current conditions of possibility through its own conditions of possibility that before the event seemed impossible. A gift event is only phenomenologically impossible until it breaks into phenomenality transforming phenomenality itself through its rupture. In order for the gift to surprise, break in at the instant, and operate secretly, the gift must, then, “keep its phenomenality”²⁶ because phenomenalization of the gift would annul the gift by making it a present that enters the economy of exchange. To paraphrase the epigraph of *Given Time: 1*, phenomenality takes all our gifts making them presents; we give the rest of our gifts to the instant, to whom we would like to give all of them.²⁷

Therefore, we give economy a chance by keeping the economy of exchange open, trembling, a little uncertain, or a little off-center. We must keep the circle loose in order “to create an opening for the *tout autre*,”²⁸ for the coming of the wholly other, of the event, of the gift event, that is, “of an alterity that cannot be anticipated.”²⁹ Giving economy a chance by knowing how such an economy works and how the gift disrupts it is precisely what will have helped keep the circle open to the to-come of the event. What is needed, then, to prepare for the gift is an openness to its eventuality, that is, to its to-come and its in-breaking at any instant. An ethos of welcome toward this coming of the gift event is needed. Such an ethos would welcome the gift by being ready not to be ready for its surprise. And mourning may just help to develop such an ethos of welcome insofar as mourning opens the mourner to the call of responsibility to the other whether dead *or* living.

Mourning's Welcome in Loving the Dead

Derrida's *Politics of Friendship* begins to unpack how mourning can be this kind of ethos insofar as Derrida suggests that mourning can prepare for a new kind of politics that he names here, and elsewhere, a democracy to-come. His development of this democracy occurs in and along his engagement with the readings in the history of philosophy of the epigraph—first attributed to Aristotle by Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*—"O my friends, there is no friend."³⁰ Derrida explores the meanings of this epigraph by deconstructing the history of meanings of this phrase in the works of, to name a few, Diogenes, Augustine, Cicero, Montaigne, Friedrich Nietzsche, Maurice Blanchot, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Luc Nancy, Carl Schmidt, and, naturally, Aristotle himself. Through this *Wirkungsgeschichte*, he sees a development of a politics that is ruled by and formed around an economy of exchange. However, in the shadows and cracks of this history he finds glimmers of and hopes for a development of a politics, a democracy to-come, ruled by the gift under the guise of friendship and what he ultimately names "lovence" (*aimance*)—a becoming love of friendship and a becoming friendship of love.³¹ This is another friendship or, perhaps more aptly put, an *other* friendship because it remains other to the canonical tradition of friendship under the hegemony of reciprocity, the fraternal, and brotherhood. Thus, he deconstructs the history of the politics of friendship gathered around this Aristotelian epigraph in order to open this history to an unexpected, eventful, and surprising reconfiguration of the friend and politics. In the end, Derrida seeks lovence as a possible friendship that is "without hearth"³² or home and that breaks free from the confines of the familiar, reciprocity, and the brother. This other friendship would be "aneconomic"³³ because it would not be grounded upon an economy of exchanging presents in the present. Rather, this friendship would operate according to the logic of *the gift* insofar as it would be grounded upon a giving without reciprocity. Derrida writes, "This logic calls friendship back to non-reciprocity, to dissymmetry or to disproportion, to the impossibility of a return to offered or received hospitality; in short, it calls friendship back to the irreducible precedence of the other."³⁴ In addition to being aneconomical, the lovence operative in a democracy to-come would be unexpected and transformative in its arrival insofar as it would recondition the conditions of possibility for friendship and politics themselves. Adhering to the logic of the gift, the arrival of lovence and a democracy to-come will have been the arrival of an event. And mourning can help prepare for this arrival.

His deconstruction of this politics of friendship comes face to face with the relationship between gift and mourning by suggesting that the practice of friendship to the dead is, perhaps, what can open us to this aneconomic friendship of lovence and its democracy to-come. He writes, "It is indeed through the possibility of loving the deceased that the decision in favor of a certain lovence comes into being."³⁵ Derrida argues that friendship to the dead

via mourning is dissymmetrical because regardless of how much is done for the dead, the dead cannot reciprocate. Nor do the mourners and survivors of the dead have any expectation for the dead to reciprocate. After all, the dead give no recognition of what is given them in our mourning. Consequently, friendship to the dead via mourning is one in which someone loves the dead for nothing, that is for nothing in return.

Derrida sees this development especially in the works of Aristotle and Cicero. By looking at their works on friendship to the dead, along with a supplement from Derrida's long-time interlocutor, Kierkegaard,³⁶ we see in these figures that mourning opens the mourner to the coming of the gift event of love. Mourning may not be the gift itself, but the gift of mourning can help us keep ourselves and our economies of exchange open to the coming of what we cannot see coming. In this regard, the accounts of mourning from these philosophers show that mourning opens us to the gift as *sans voir*, *sans savoir*, and *sans avoir* because mourning participates in an unexpectedness, a lack of knowing, and a lack of having or possessing. Together these philosophers develop a logic in which mourning is a limit situation that allows us to see how friendship and love is to be practiced with the living. With this, friendship to the dead becomes emblematic of the affirmation of life and responsibility to the other that Derridean deconstruction points toward.³⁷

We can begin to see how mourning those who have died opens us to a gift event in Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics*, a text that Derrida draws on extensively in *Politics of Friendship*. Two moments in Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* are important in this regard. In the first moment, during the seventh book, Aristotle is continuing his exploration of the friendships of excellence, utility, and pleasure by breaking each of them into two types "one kind based on equality, the other on superiority."³⁸ The first type concerns a relationship of equality and reciprocity between friends. In such a friendship, says Aristotle, the parties "are friends."³⁹ This would be the kind of friendship that the gift event would disrupt because the focus is on the equality and reciprocity of those involved. Aristotle discusses this type only briefly before focusing extensively on the second type concerning a relationship of inequality or non-reciprocity. While he insists that this second type remains a type of friendship, the parties involved are not considered friends. So this friendship lies on the fringes of the concept of friendship itself, which is partly why Derrida takes interest in it and why this iteration of friendship lies close to the gift. In this non-reciprocal friendship, "the superior ought to claim either not to return the love or not to return it in the same measure" to the one with whom she is in a friendship.⁴⁰ This kind of friendship resists the tit-for-tat type of thinking that dominates the reciprocal friendship by not even requiring that love be returned. Though Aristotle immediately mentions the friendship between a human and a god as an instance of this non-reciprocal friendship, friendship to the dead can be included here as well, which Aristotle seems to imply in the second important moment of his text. In this

regard, friendship to the dead would be a friendship in which the circle of exchange is no longer the currency. Consequently, friendship to the dead would keep us open to an aneconomy in which reciprocity, the giving and receiving of debts, and repayment are no longer the focus. Such friendship would keep those in relationship open to what operates *sans voir* and *sans savoir*. The second moment in Aristotle's text develops this idea directly.

He ends Book 7.4 with a direct praise of friendship to the dead on account of the focus in such a friendship of inequality on the act of loving rather than the passivity of being loved. He writes, "We praise those who persist in their love towards the dead; for they know but are not known."⁴¹ He praises friendship to the dead through mourning because such friendship is motivated by the act of loving itself and not the receiving of love. In this focus on the actualizing of love, that is the *energeia* of love, rather than the potentiality and passivity of being loved, the love given to the dead is superior to the love received by the dead precisely because the one who loves is not known by the dead. The dead cannot reciprocate by knowing and loving in return the one who loves, yet the one who loves continues in her love without this reciprocity. Once again, mourning keeps those who mourn open to the aneconomy of the gift because it keeps those in relationship open to the giving of something without any intention of receiving back and receiving without any recognition. Such friendship keeps us open to what operates *sans savoir* and *sans avoir*. Mourning develops an ethos of welcome to something aneconomical.

Cicero continues the development of this theme in his *De Amicitia*. In remembering what Laelius once had to say about friendship, Cicero praises those who mourn the dead because friendship to the dead represents the true origin of friendship, namely in a love that does not calculate. Cicero ponders the origin of friendship by asking whether friendship is born from a desire for reciprocity or from "another cause, older, more beautiful, and emanating more directly from Nature herself."⁴² If friendship arises from reciprocity, then "friendship is felt on account of weakness and want so that by the giving and receiving of favors one may get from another and in turn repay what he is unable to procure of himself."⁴³ In this regard, friendship would be engendered, run, and ruled by circles of economy dealing with presents and the present. If this were the case, then any openness to the coming of the gift remains annulled indefinitely. Cicero disapproves of friendship based on reciprocity, even though it is a common view of friendship, because such friendship "limits friendship to an equal interchange of services and feelings" by basing the friendship on a "petty accounting" that keeps "an exact balance of credits and debits."⁴⁴

In contrast, the "older" origin of friendship is to be found in love "for it is love [*amor*], from which the word friendship [*amicitia*] is derived."⁴⁵ This origin of friendship in love resists any focus on "calculation of how much profit the friendship is likely to afford."⁴⁶ Thus, true friendship, or as he names

it earlier “that pure and faultless kind,”⁴⁷ begins without calculation, reciprocity, or give and take. This aneconomic origin of friendship in love means that friendship springs not “from the hope of gain ... not for the purpose of demanding repayment;” instead, true friendship’s “entire profit is in the love itself.”⁴⁸ True friendship, as Aristotle said, is in the *energeia* of love. This true friendship “is richer and more abundant than that [ruled by the counting of credits and debits]” because true friendship is not concerned with making sure it “pay[s] out more than it has received.”⁴⁹ Such friendship is akin, says Cicero, to his understanding of the love of self. The love of self is non-reciprocal because “everyone loves himself, not with a view of acquiring some profit for himself from his self-love, but because he is dear to himself on his own account.”⁵⁰ A true friend can only be found if “this same feeling were transferred to friendship ... for he [the friend] is, as it were, another self.”⁵¹ Therefore, when Cicero writes, “Wherefore friends, though absent, are at hand ... and—harder saying still—though dead, are yet alive; so great is the esteem on the part of their friends These things make the death of the departed seem fortunate and the life of the survivors worthy of praise,”⁵² we see that he praises friendship to the dead out of love for the dead because in this friendship the focus is on *true* friendship grounded in a love that loves excessively, which is to say without economy, reciprocity, and calculation. Such friendship is *sans voir*, *sans savoir*, and *sans avoir*. And as such, this friendship to the dead through mourning keeps us open to a gift that would disrupt any economy of exchange.

Kierkegaard builds upon these accounts of mourning in Aristotle and Cicero by bringing into relief in his *Works of Love* that loving the dead through mourning is instructive for how we are to live life daily with the living. Mourning opens us to responsibility for the other whether dead or living. As Kierkegaard concludes his chapter from *Works of Love* on loving the dead, “The work of love in recollecting one who is dead is thus a work of the most unselfish, the freest, and the most faithful love [R]ecollect the one who is dead and just in this way learn to love the living unselfishly, freely, and faithfully.”⁵³ His explanation of mourning as an act of the most unselfish, free, and faithful love shows that this relation to the dead opens us to the gift because this friendship driven by love (i.e. *lovence*) operates *sans voir*, *sans savoir*, and *sans avoir*.

The most direct connection between mourning and the gift occurs through Kierkegaard’s description of mourning as an act of unselfish love because here mourning is described in aneconomic terms. He writes, “When one wants to make sure that love is completely unselfish, one can of course remove every possibility of *repayment*. But this is exactly what is removed in the relationship to one who is dead.”⁵⁴ Loving the dead through remembering them is the most unselfish love because the dead, as Aristotle and Cicero have also noted, can in no way provide any repayment. No thank you from the dead, no return love, nothing can be given back from the dead to the one who

mourns. While love of the living can be “reciprocal love,”⁵⁵ following an economy of exchange, the love to the dead is non-reciprocal and, as a result, gift-like. Love of the dead operates without the knowledge of and without the expectation, the horizon, of anything in return. Mourning is an unselfish love that operates *sans voir* and *sans savoir*. And for Kierkegaard, as for Derrida, if love is to be love, it must operate according to this excessive logic where we love for nothing, that is for no thing in return. For the hope and prospect of repayment in our love of one another “make one unable to see with complete clarity what is love.”⁵⁶ But in loving the dead, we open ourselves to this excessive love. Mourning opens to the disruption of an economy of exchange by the in-breaking of an excessive gift event.

Moreover, the love of the dead operates *sans avoir* for Kierkegaard because of the freedom and faithfulness operative in this love. Through this love’s freedom and faithfulness, mourning operates without any conditions that hold this love to an accounting of credits and debits. This is no love by extortion.⁵⁷ Whereas the living other can compel us to love him, her, or it, Kierkegaard insists that the dead cannot compel us so. He writes:

[I]n connection with other human love there usually is something compelling, daily sight and habit if nothing else, and therefore one cannot definitely see whether it is love that freely holds its object firm or [if] it is the object that in some way compellingly lends a hand. But in relation to the dead, everything becomes clear. Here there is nothing, nothing compelling at all.⁵⁸

For the dead are no longer present for us to hold in our expectant grasp of repayment. Quite literally, then, nothing itself compels us to mourn the dead. When we love the dead, we do it of our own accord. We do it freely. We do it for no thing at all. Furthermore, the dead themselves cannot compel us to be faithful or steadfast in our mourning of them. In fact, as experience shows and Kierkegaard describes, loving and mourning become more difficult as time passes because the dead are no longer present to “beckon” and “bind us” to them.⁵⁹ Kierkegaard writes, “When two who are living *hold* together in love, the one *holds* on to the other and the alliance *holds* on to both of them. But no alliance is possible with one who is dead.”⁶⁰ No holding or having at all. Consequently, mourning is *sans avoir* and, thereby, the most faithful.

Kierkegaard insists that mourning is an important work of love because only when we love the dead are we then practicing, that is working, at love in its fullest, excessive, gift-like expression. Loving the dead guides us in “rightly understanding life: that it is our duty to love the people that we do not see but also those we do see.”⁶¹ Moreover, by loving those who we do not see, those no longer present, or the dead, we open ourselves to loving the living with an aneconomic, excessive, and gift-like love. Then we are opening ourselves for the coming of what we could not see coming, of we know not what, of what we cannot control. Then, we are opening ourselves to the gift to break-in and

transform the conditions of possibility around us. This journey from Aristotle to Kierkegaard on the relation of mourning and friendship helps to show why Derrida concludes his *Politics of Friendship* by saying that “the great canonical meditations on friendship ... belong to the experience of mourning.”⁶² And, moreover, that this experience of mourning “reveals and effaces at the same time this ‘truth’ of friendship,”⁶³ namely that mourning welcomes the coming of the *other* friendship, of love, and its democracy to-come that follows the lineaments of the gift.

Responsibility and Mourning

Consequently, mourning carries a certain “weight.” As Elizabeth Rosner has noted in her memoir on being the daughter of a survivor of the Holocaust, this idea of mourning carrying *weight* is “an appropriately physical as well as metaphorical term” because it carries a “palpable sensation of burden and heaviness” that is missed by the abstract notions of obligation.⁶⁴ Just as, existentially speaking, our own being and notion of self carries a weight to which we are responsible for responding and attending, so too does the death of the other and mourning require our response and our attention as part and parcel of “the incalculable coming of the other.”⁶⁵ The weight of this responsibility suggests that it is not only important but also costly. We carry this weight as we, drawing on Derrida’s reflections on the poetry of Paul Celan, *carry* (*tragen*) with us the others who have died.⁶⁶ Carrying this weighty responsibility helps prepare for a gift event by preparing us and our worlds, phenomenologically speaking, for the in-breaking and transformation of a gift. This is not to say that mourning *will* lead to such a gift event because mourning can, as stated, end up being too much for a survivor to the point that mourning spells their end. Mourning may end in suicide, addiction, or psychological madness. However, assuming that a person survives and continues living with her mourning, in what Derrida describes as the *différance* of mourning and melancholy, that is in the worklessness of mourning, mourning harbors the possibility or the impetus for bettering our lives with one another in at least two distinctive ways.

First, mourning the other in daily life allows us to be *faithful* in an ethico-political sense to the in-breaking of a gift event.⁶⁷ The “fidelity to death” or “faith ... to whom and to what happens to be dead”⁶⁸ that mourning practices helps to cultivate, in turn, a faithfulness to the coming of what we cannot see coming in the name of the event. We become better stewards, in other words, of allowing for the gift to disrupt the various economies of exchange around us insofar as mourning makes us and our worlds hospitable to the coming of what we could not see coming by opening ourselves to the surprise of such an event. The unexpectedness of the death of the other and concomitant mourning prepares us “to be ready to not be ready,”⁶⁹ which is precisely the *ethos* or attunement that must be taken when welcoming an event. Such an

attunement to the event through mourning can help the survivor see that the goal of mourning is not to move past the past because it is never truly passed insofar as the past death of the other continues to haunt the present from out of the ways it transforms the future. Rather, the goal of mourning becomes allowing the past to transform the present and the future by “reconfiguring relational habits so that they continue to mark the truncated relation [with the dead], but in a way that opens up new possibilities for engagement.”⁷⁰ But this opening and possibility, or the new possibilities after the death of the other, can only become actual by taking up the responsibility to carry the other and the world in the aftermath of death. For only through “carrying the other and his world ... can [there] possibly be another one and unique world.”⁷¹

And beyond just this personal, existential re-imagining of new ways to live in response to the death of the other, mourning can also have a broader ethico-political impact. Derrida even maintains that no politics can exist “without an organization of the time and space of mourning ... without an *open hospitality* to the guest as ghost.”⁷² And he frames the entirety of his thinking of politics and the democracy to-come around the themes of justice and the death of the other. For his exploration of the themes of the ghost, spectrality, inheritance, and “others who are not present” is done precisely “in the name of justice. Of justice where it is not yet, not yet there, where it is no longer.”⁷³ Such an explicit thinking of politics in and through mourning is currently happening under the name of agonistic or rebellious mourning. Athena Athanasiou presents the mourning of “the urban feminist and antinationalist movement Women in Black of Belgrade (*Žene u Crnom* or *ŽuC*)” as “agonistic mourning” in the way that their mourning challenges the ethical and political power structures in Belgrade.⁷⁴ This movement formed in response to the nationalist military violence in the mid-1990s after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The group performs nonviolent, public demonstrations while dressed in all black in order to practice solidarity with victims of war violence, especially the violence done to women refugees during wartimes, and the families who have lost loved ones in these contexts. Athanasiou’s anthropological work makes a connection among the political protest and dissidence of the mourning practiced by those in *ŽuC* with the idea of preparing for and being faithful to a gift. Athanasiou maintains that the mourning of this organization restructures the temporality for the political body by allowing for the death of the oppressed to haunt the present of the “nation’s body and psyche.”⁷⁵ In this way, the mourning of this group opens the political world of Belgrade to a “historicality” revolving around “an incalculable moment, or a ‘flash,’ of a new and intensified awareness, which might take the form of a crack, even a revolutionary occasion, into the order of homogeneous, chronological time.”⁷⁶ Much like the gift itself in Derrida’s discussion, the mourning of *ŽuC* opens the body politic to the in-breaking of an event by calling into question and challenging the economies of exchange in the political life of the nation. Through giving economy a chance by

challenging its own national attempts to forget the death of those who had been oppressed and marginalized while living, this agonistic mourning prepares the world for the coming of something new that can disrupt the economy itself. In this way, mourning can transform the loss of the other “into a performative power that leaves traces in the body of politics,”⁷⁷ thereby opening the political space itself to be transformed by a gift event.

Cindy Milstein develops this same performative power of mourning through her idea of “rebellious mourning.” She writes:

Our grief ... can *open up* cracks in the wall of the system. It can also *pry open* spaces of contestation and reconstruction, intervulnerability and strength, empathy and solidarity. It can discomfort the stories told from above that would have us believe we aren't human or deserving of life-affirming lives—or for that matter, life-affirming deaths.⁷⁸

Mourning can be a way to fight for truth and justice in the worlds in which we find ourselves because it can be a way of “reassert[ing] life and its beauty” by allowing us to “struggle to undo the deadening and deadly structures intent on destroying us.”⁷⁹ For instance, Benji Hart, an artist and activist in the Chicago area, maintains, along Milstein's view, that mourning “shows that I have not given in, not accepted the current, violent reality as inevitable, nor forfeited belief in my own right to life.”⁸⁰ Mourning, for Hart, can be used in order to begin to repair the social injustices around racial, sexual, and economic lines in our various communities. The poet Claudia Rankine echoes this sentiment when she describes the national mourning of political movements, like Black Lives Matter, as “a mode of intervention and interruption”⁸¹ of the public space that allows us to develop a feeling for the Levinasian *other* who looks differently, believes differently, and votes differently. In this way, mourning the dead other we cannot see can help us to see and understand better the other who we can see in our communities. Rankine writes, “Grief, then, for the deceased others might align some of us, for the first time with the living.”⁸² Much like the mourning of *Zu*C, mourning the oppressed and marginalized who are not only often overlooked while living but even more so in their death, can help society as a whole, and perhaps even an entire nation, not only to remember the marginalized but to better treat the other in their midst.

Public art aimed at mourning the oppressed is often used for precisely this reason.⁸³ As the artists Melanie Cervantes and Jesus Barraza write:

We hope that the visual works that we create ... interrupt the violence of forgetting that silences and negates our history. The pieces we create can be visual aids for political education and discussion; they can be used as public declarations of grief, and are both figurative and literal signs of a larger public memory project that resists dominant narratives that seek to criminalize and villainize the victims of police and state violence.⁸⁴

Such “solidarity art” is meant to be “a tool to continue shaping culture specifically in the way we imagine what justice means in our society” and as “a way to take up public space and stand in solidarity” with the victims and the survivors of the victims.⁸⁵ In this way, survival, the living on after (*survivre*) the death of the other, or the carrying of the death of the other becomes more than simply an individual act of mourning. Mourning is fertile for being faithful to the coming of an event intent on transforming the worlds around us by breaking into and disrupting the economies of exchange in our worlds. Mourning the oppressed and marginalized who are not only overlooked while living but even more so in their death can challenge national, political attempts to forget their death. By not allowing the dead to be forgotten, mourning can begin to transform and interrupt the economy of national memory by not allowing the past to simply be passed. Mourning allows the past to haunt the present, thereby allowing the present to be open to the event-to-come. In being with the dead through mourning, we become open to the surprise of the living by demanding that our worlds be more just and less forgetful of those who have died and who continue to shape who we *are* individually and collectively.

Accordingly, second, mourning reminds us of the integral connection between life and death. The relation of life and death has been an important theme in the history of philosophy as far back as Heraclitus’ ruminations on *phusis* through his experience of the bow. As he writes, “The name of the bow is life (*bios*), but its work is death.”⁸⁶ However, whereas this tradition typically focuses on the death of the self in its discussion of the connection of life and death, we find with mourning the important relation among life and the death of *the other*. In this regard, mourning the other helps us to develop a better understanding of who we *are* ontologically as human beings by beginning and ending with our being-with the dead. Hans Ruin maintains that humans have a “basic socio-ontological predicament” insofar as we “live not only with the living but also with the dead.”⁸⁷ This predicament is ontological because this “*being with the dead ...* determines human existence down to its basic condition and sense of self.”⁸⁸ Yet this predicament is sociological and political because “we belong to a polis not only of the living but also of the dead.”⁸⁹ Learning to live means to inhabit the shared space with both the living and the dead and to do so in “a responsible way” because life is always a matter of “life after, as inheritance, ancestry, legacy, and fate.”⁹⁰ So to Plato’s announcement in the *Phaedo* that philosophy is “practice for dying and death” (64a), Ruin adds, “[Philosophy] is also the art of learning how to live with the dead and to share the earth with those who have been.”⁹¹ Life is always *survival* in this regard because life is a matter of living on after those we have lost. Derrida never ceases to remind us of this with his notion of life as *survivre*. We begin to learn what living means, says Derrida, through “the other and by death” because life is only ever lived with the other and in the aftermath of death and loss.⁹² Thus, learning comes “from the other at the edge of life.”⁹³ Mourning is more than simply an individual act done out of

respect for the dead or cultural necessity. Rather, our relation to the dead via mourning shapes who we *are* individually and collectively. Mourning, then, is originary because it is part of the warp and woof of life.⁹⁴

Consequently, how we mourn the other or carry the dead other with us in life is no trivial concern. Mourning carries weight. Carrying the other in our mourning is a weighty responsibility. And realizing this integral relation between life and death allows us the possibility to become better at practicing mourning itself. We can improve on *carrying* the other by recognizing how integral such mourning is to life itself. We can be better by understanding the weight of this responsibility. And in becoming better at mourning the other, we can become better at preparing our worlds for the coming of what we could not see coming. In developing an ethos of welcome to the in-breaking of a gift event, an ethics of mourning is cut precisely to fit the event. Mourning opens us to the politics of friendship under the name of love and its accompanying democracy-to-come whose logic is the gift. By preparing us for the breaking in of a new politics of friendship that transforms and re-possibilizes the world, mourning develops an ethos of welcome to the gift. The gift of mourning is to keep us open to the gift.⁹⁵

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1 Counterfeit Money* trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 36. Citations appear hereafter as GT followed by the page number.

² I am paraphrasing Derrida when he writes, "A fatal and inflexible law: one of two friends will always see the other die" (*Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan* trans. Thomas Dutoit, Outi Pasanen, et. al. (New York: Fordham, 2005), 139).

³ Celia B. Harris, Ruth Brookman, and Maja O'Connor, "It's not Who You Lose, It's Who You Are: Identity and Symptom Trajectory in Prolonged Grief," *Current Psychology* (2021), 1.

⁴ Geoffrey Bennington, "In the Event" in *Derrida's Legacies: Literature and Philosophy* eds. Simon Glendinning and Robert Eaglestone (New York: Routledge, 2008), 26-44; Harris B. Bechtol, "Event, Death, and Poetry: The Death of the Other in Derrida's 'Rams,'" *Philosophy Today* 62.1 (2018): 253-268; Dennis Schmidt, "Of Birth, Death, and Unfinished Conversations" in *Gadamer's Hermeneutics and the Art of Conversation* ed. Andrzej Wiercinski (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 107-114; Dennis Schmidt, "What We Owe the Dead" in *Heidegger and the Greeks Interpretive Essays* eds. Drew A. Hyland and John Panteleimon Manoussakis (Bloomington, IN: Indiana, 2006) 111-126; Michael Naas, "History's Remains: Of Memory, Mourning, and the Event" *Research in Phenomenology* 33 (2003): 75-96; Timothy Secret, *The Politics and Pedagogy of Mourning: On Responsibility in Eulogy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015); Gregg Lambert, *Return Statements: The Return of Religion in Contemporary Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), esp. 93-94, 103, and 106; Hans Ruin, *Being With the Dead: Burial, Ancestral Politics, and the Roots of Historical Consciousness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018); Shelly Rambo, *Resurrection Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), esp. 4-5 and 156n7.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Une certaine possibilité impossible de dire l’événement” in *Dire l’événement, est-ce possible? Séminaire de Montréal, pour Jacques Derrida*, ed. Gad Soussana, Alexis Nossu, and Jacques Derrida (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001) 93. Translations are my own.

⁶ Ibid 92.

⁷ In developing this logic of the *sans*, I follow Derrida’s statement about the call of *Come* to an event, “But will I have been able to say to you, *come*, without knowing, without having, without seeing [*san savoir, sans avoir, sans voir*], in advance what ‘come’ means to say [*veut dire*]” (Jacques Derrida, *Parages* transl. John P. Leavey et. al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 15).

⁸ GT 11.

⁹ GT 12 and 11.

¹⁰ GT 6.

¹¹ GT 12.

¹² GT 30.

¹³ GT 63.

¹⁴ GT 82.

¹⁵ GT 100.

¹⁶ GT 7.

¹⁷ GT 9.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Plato, *Parmenides* 156e in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997). An important itinerary for the event’s temporality runs from Plato’s understanding of “the sudden” in *Parmenides*, to Aristotle’s notion of movement in his *Physics*, to Kierkegaard’s understanding of repetition and the decision of faith, up through the work of Heidegger, Derrida, Nancy, and the recent French philosopher Claude Romano.

²⁰ GT 9 translation modified.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 190.

²³ GT 14 translation modified.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, “On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, eds. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 59.

²⁵ For example, Derrida writes, “It may be, then, that the order is other—it may well be—and that only the coming of the event allows, after the event [*après coup*], perhaps, what it will previously have made possible to be thought [I]t would be only the event of revelation that would open—like a breaking-in, making it possible after the event—the field of the possible in which it appeared to spring forth, and for that matter actually did so” (Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 1997), 18. Citations appear hereafter as PF followed by the page number.

²⁶ GT 14.

²⁷ The epigraph of *Given Time* reads, “The King takes all my time; I give the rest to Saint-Cyr, to whom I would like to give all” (GT 1).

²⁸ John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 172.

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 81. Citations appear hereafter as SM followed by the page number.

³⁰ PF, vii.

³¹ John D. Caputo, “Who is Derrida’s Zarathustra? Of Fraternity, Friendship, and a Democracy to Come,” *Research in Phenomenology* 29.1 (1999): 190. See also Jacques Derrida, “Heidegger’s Ear: Philopolemy (Geschlecht IV)” in *Reading Heidegger: Commemorations* ed. John Sallis (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 180, 183, and 189 where he discusses *aimance* as coming before the distinction between love and friendship.

³² PF 154.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ PF 63.

³⁵ PF 10.

³⁶ I develop the importance of Kierkegaard for understanding Derrida’s *Politics of Friendship* in “Oh My Neighbors, There Is No Neighbor” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 90.4-5 (2019): 326-343.

³⁷ This approach overcomes the criticism that friendship to or love of the dead is understood as the only true form of friendship and love, which would entail that friendship or love is not toward the living. M. Jamie Ferreira defends Kierkegaard against such a critique along these same lines (*Love’s Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard’s Works of Love* (New York: Oxford, 2001), 209-227).

³⁸ Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: Volume Two* ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1239a1. Citations appear hereafter according to the Bekker numbering.

³⁹ Ibid, 1239a5.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 1239a17.

⁴¹ Ibid, 1239b1.

⁴² Cicero, *On Old Age. On Friendship. On Divination*, trans. W. A. Falconer. Loeb Classical Library 154 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), 139 or viii.26. Citations appear hereafter with the chapter number followed by the paragraph number.

⁴³ Ibid, viii.26.

⁴⁴ Ibid, xvi.58.

⁴⁵ Ibid, viii.26.

⁴⁶ Ibid, viii.27.

⁴⁷ Ibid, vi.22.

⁴⁸ Ibid, ix.30-31.

⁴⁹ Ibid, xvi.58.

⁵⁰ Ibid, xxi.80.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid, vii.23. The first half of this passage serves as the epigraph to the entirety of Derrida's *Politics of Friendship*. This epigraph remains in the background for the majority of Derrida's text except for the moments where Derrida provides something specific about the *other* friendship for which he hopes.

⁵³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. and ed. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 358. Citations appear hereafter as WL followed by the page number.

⁵⁴ WL 349 emphasis mine.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ WL 351.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ WL 354.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ WL 355 emphasis mine.

⁶¹ WL 358.

⁶² PF 290.

⁶³ PF 295.

⁶⁴ Elisabeth Rosner, *Survivor Café: The Legacy of Trauma and the Labyrinth of Memory* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2017), 153. Rosner draws on the work of Sabine Bode who helped to pioneer the idea that past trauma is carried from first generation survivors into the second and even third generations of these survivors themselves. This carrying of past trauma is now being connected with epigenetics to argue that trauma is passed down not merely societally and in the family unit but genetically through the epigenome.

⁶⁵ François Raffoul, *Thinking the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020), 295. I am drawing explicitly from his careful distinction between traditional responsibility and responsibility understood "as responsiveness" (294). However, Raffoul does not make the connection here between this coming of the other and the death of the other.

⁶⁶ see Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, esp.135-169 and Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign* Volume II trans. Geoffrey Bennington. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 258-290.

⁶⁷ In using ideas of being faithful to or stewards of the event, I am drawing on the work of Alain Badiou regarding the event especially as this is developed in Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁶⁸ Derrida, *Beast and the Sovereign II*, 153.

⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 361.

⁷⁰ Catherine Fullarton, “Grief, Phantoms, and Re-membering Loss” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 34.3 (2020), 291.

⁷¹ Rodolphe Gasché, *Europe, or the Infinite Task: A Study of a Philosophical Concept* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 319. cf. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 196 where the victim of trauma must ultimately turn to developing “a new self” by developing new relationships and establishing new beliefs through which “the survivor reclaims her world.”

⁷² Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 61. Emphasis mine.

⁷³ SM xviii; cf. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 76fn.

⁷⁴ Athena Athanasiou, *Agonistic Mourning: Political Dissidence and the Women in Black* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 2.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 181.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 72.

⁷⁸ Cindy Milstein ed., *Rebellious Mourning: The Collective Work of Grief* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 8-9 emphasis mine.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 4.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 21.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 38.

⁸² *Ibid*.

⁸³ cf. Maria del Rosario Acosta López, “Memory and Fragility: Art’s Resistance to Oblivion (Three Colombian Cases),” *The New Centennial Review* 14.1 (2014): 71-98.

⁸⁴ Milstein, *Rebellious Mourning*, 215.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 218 and 224. The artists speaking in these passages are Oree Originol and Zola.

⁸⁶ F39 in *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy: The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the Major Presocratics* Part I ed. and trans. Daniel W. Graham (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁸⁷ *Ruin, Being With the Dead*, 3.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 3.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 7.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 201.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 14.

⁹² SM xvii.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ cf. Michael Naas, “When it comes to mourning” in *Jacques Derrida: Key Concepts* ed. Claire Colebrook (New York: Routledge, 2015), 117 where he maintains that mourning is originary for Derrida because “a mourning for the other is the unchanging form of our lives.”

⁹⁵ Many thanks to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on my paper.

The Interrelation of Dialectic and Hermeneutics in Paul Ricoeur's Early Philosophy of the Self

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Paul Ricoeur is generally regarded as one of the most important representatives of hermeneutic philosophy, a discipline that is often set in opposition to dialectical philosophy. Nevertheless, Ricoeur never excluded dialectic from his thinking but often relied on it to deal with various problems. Richard Kearney counts altogether six different dialectics of central importance to Ricoeur's oeuvre: between phenomenology and hermeneutics, imagination and language, myth and tradition, ideology and utopia, evil and otherness and narrative and history.¹ While Ricoeur's hermeneutics and these different dialectics have been the subject of a vast number of publications, the general interrelation between dialectic and hermeneutics in his philosophy has not yet been sufficiently explored.

In this essay, I will present an interpretation of the interrelation of hermeneutics and dialectic in the context of Ricoeur's theory of the self, which he developed in the early 1960s. The potential for a productive connection between the two philosophical disciplines is rooted in their common purpose, i.e. the mediation with the Other. Each performs a different function within a theory of a self that is not constituted in pure identity with itself but whose constitution includes the mediation with the Other. In *L'Homme faillible*, Ricoeur develops a dialectical model of reflexive self-consciousness based on the notion of an *affirmation originnaire*. However, this dialectic – and this is a specific feature of Ricoeur's theory – is complemented by a hermeneutic mediation developed in *La Symbolique du mal*. I will argue that hermeneutics and dialectic stand in an interdependent relationship that combines a structural model of reflexive self-consciousness (dialectic) and a mediation of

consciousness with a transcendent Other by the capacity of imagination (hermeneutics).

Let me briefly outline the program I will unfold in this essay. First, I will discuss why the mediation with the Other is a necessary moment of reflexive self-consciousness for Ricœur by relating it to the phenomenological distinction of ecstatic and reflexive acts (1). Then, I will describe the fundamental structure of Ricœur's dialectical mediation with the Other, first negatively by comparing it to Hegel, then positively by comparing it to Johann Gottlieb Fichte. The central notion of the dialectical mediation is effort, which has important similarities with Fichte's notion of *Streben* (2). In a further step, I will describe the hermeneutic mediation with the Other based on Ricœur's hermeneutics of symbols. The central notion of the hermeneutic mediation is imagination (3). Finally, I will develop an interpretation of the interrelation between both the dialectical and hermeneutic mediations in Ricœur's theory of the self by interpreting effort and imagination according to the modal categories of reality (force) and possibility (capacity) in rationalist philosophy (4).

The Self and the Other

Ricœur's theory of the self joins a tradition of decentering of the subject. This term contains both a negative and a positive definition. Negatively, it can be defined as a critique of concepts of subjectivity that claim an immediate transparency of consciousness to itself as well as an immediate identity of the subject-pole and the object-pole of reflection. Ricœur describes the act of pure reflection, against which he wants to distinguish his own concept of reflection, as the

act of returning to the self, by which a subject recovers, with intellectual clarity and moral responsibility, the unifying principle of the operations in which it disperses and forgets itself as a subject.²

However, we can also identify a positive meaning of the decentering of the subject since it refers to a concept of subjectivity that does not abstract from a genuine reference to the Other. Rather, the Other is seen as an essential moment in the constitution of the self, whose existential structure appears as a complex totality of ipseity and alterity. In *Soi-même comme un autre*, Ricœur expresses the fundamental assumption of his philosophy of the self:

[...] that alterity is not added to ipseity from the outside in order to prevent its solipsistic tendency, but belongs to the core of the meaning and ontological constitution of ipseity.³

However, this does not sufficiently define Ricœur's concept of decentering because an important distinction within this concept has not yet been taken into account. Already in *Le volontaire et l'involontaire*, the decentering of the

subject takes place on two levels that need to be distinguished: on the level of existential ontology and on the level of reflexive philosophy.⁴ The first level of decentering refers to the ecstatic interpretation of existence that Ricœur develops following Gabriel Marcel and Martin Heidegger. In the context of his destruction of metaphysics, Heidegger shows that, beginning with Descartes, the appearing being is set in an opposition to the subject and is reduced to a mere objectum (“Gegen-stand”). For the Cartesian subject, which affirms itself in the pure immanence of self-consciousness, the object of cognition is merely an external thing.⁵ Ricœur adopts Heidegger’s critique and rejects the assumption that the ego-subject constitutes itself in pure, i.e. unmediated self-reference, in favor of the assumption of an ecstatic participation in being:

The self [...] must abandon a claim secretly hidden in all consciousness, abandon its desire for self-positing, to welcome a nourishing spontaneity as an inspiration that breaks the sterile circle the self forms with itself.⁶

The ecstatic constitution of consciousness or, as Jean Greisch writes, the simple presence of the world is the reason for the decentering of the subject at the level of existential ontology.⁷

However, it is the ecstatic character of existence that points towards a second, reflexive decentering of the subject, questioning the transparency of one’s own acts in reflection. In order to have a methodically secure ground, the task of an existential ontology indirectly points towards the question of the reflexive transparency of ecstatic acts, which for Ricœur is questioned precisely because of the ecstatic structure of consciousness. In Husserl’s phenomenology, intentional acts are to be distinguished from acts of reflection, which refer to the intentional, first-order acts.⁸ Ricœur adopts this distinction with a double modification. First, he adopts the radicalization of the intentionality of consciousness into an ecstatic of existence, which was developed by phenomenologists like Heidegger and Sartre. Consequently, even self-consciousness must be mediated by the Other:

The concept of intentionality explicitly states that, if all meaning is for a consciousness, no consciousness is self-conscious before it is conscious of something towards which it transcends itself [...].⁹

Second, he abandons Husserl’s assumption that ecstatic acts are transparent in reflexive acts. Because the reflected act is necessarily intertwined with the Other by virtue of its ecstatic structure, it can never fully coincide with the reflective act, which remains immanent to consciousness. The notion of a gap between ecstatic consciousness and reflexive consciousness is a basic insight of Ricœur’s reflexive philosophy:

Reflexive philosophy merely extends the duality of acting consciousness and the objective function of understanding; it is no

longer the classical duality of acting and knowing; it is a more subtle splitting, within acting consciousness itself, between its pure power to posit and its elaboration through 'the mediation of psychological elements'.¹⁰

While classical theories of reflexive self-consciousness presuppose an immediate transparency of consciousness to itself, Ricœur understands this very fact as the major difference between his reflexive philosophy and the Cartesian cogito.¹¹ Pure reflection can only assure us of the mere certainty of existence, but it can by no means generate a knowledge of the self, understood as the transparency of one's own acts in reflection. Thus, the cogito of pure reflection is "at once the unmistakable certainty that I am and the open question of what I am".¹² Ricœur expresses this basic insight in a negative definition of reflection: "Reflection is not intuition."¹³ Of course, Ricœur does not abandon the purpose of achieving transparency of the ecstatic acts in reflection. In contrast to theories of an immediate epistemic self-consciousness, however, his philosophy of reflection can be considered a theory of a mediated epistemic self-consciousness.¹⁴

Beginning in the early 1960s, Ricœur presents a theory of concrete reflection that allows for a mediated and approximate transparency of the ego. This theory combines a dialectic with a hermeneutics. In his anthropological study *L'Homme faillible*, he develops a model of reflection that forms a dialectical trinity of a primary affirmation, an existential negation, and effort/desire. With this dialectical model of reflection Ricœur prepares his transition to the hermeneutics of symbols, with which he realizes his project of an empirics of the will in *La Symbolique du mal*. The close connection between dialectic and hermeneutics is first indicated by the fact that both books are published as non-independent parts of the second volume of the *Philosophie de la Volonté*, which is entitled *Finitude et Culpabilité*. I will argue that both dialectic and hermeneutics perform a specific function with regard to the mediation of the self with the Other, and that it is only their interrelation that allows for a sufficient theory of a mediated, reflexive self-consciousness.

The Dialectical Mediation of the Self with the Other

Since the time of speculative idealism, dialectic has presented itself as a specific way of mediating identity and difference. Heidegger, for example, assumes that the dialectical philosophy of speculative idealism prepared a way to no longer conceive of identity as a mere sameness ("als das bloÙe Einerlei"), but to understand it in its synthetic character, i.e. as mediation with the Other.¹⁵ In the dichotomies left behind by Kant's critical philosophy, Ricœur sees a crucial motivation to proceed to a dialectical thinking that allows us to grasp the unity of opposites.¹⁶ In the context of his philosophy of the self, dialectic offers a way for Ricœur to mediate the Other as a constitutive moment of the identity of the self. This mediation occurs within a model of

reflexive self-consciousness which is structured by the moments of primary affirmation, existential negation and effort/desire.

In this section, I will develop an interpretation of this dialectical mediation with the Other by comparing it to the two dialectical models of reflexive self-consciousness developed by Johann Gottlieb Fichte and G.W.F. Hegel. Some interpreters claim a close connection of Ricœur's model of reflection to Hegel's dialectic.¹⁷ The reference to Fichte is made by Ricœur himself, albeit indirectly, for instance when he refers to Jean Nabert, from whom he adopted the triadic model of reflection, as the French successor of Fichte.¹⁸ I will argue that a) interpretations that approach Ricœur via Hegel fail to account for the specific nature of dialectical mediation with the Other in Ricœur and thus must fail to adequately reconstruct the connection between dialectic and hermeneutics within Ricœur's theory of the self, while b) an adequate reconstruction of Ricœur's dialectic of self-consciousness can be elaborated by approaching it via Fichte. Both arguments are based on the following structural implications of Ricœur's dialectical model of reflection:

- a) an absolute primacy of the primary affirmation (pure identity)
- b) the irreducibility of alterity/negativity within reflexive self-consciousness
- c) a mere approximate, non-totalizing mediation in effort/desire

2.1 Why not Hegel?

For an interpretation of reflexive self-consciousness in Ricœur, Hegel at first glance seems to be a suitable reference, not only because he applies the mediating function of dialectic to a model of reflexive self-consciousness but also because this model has some similarities with Ricœur's model. First, similar to condition b) of Ricœur's model, Hegel rejects the assumption of an immediate identity of the subject-pole and the object-pole of reflection. Instead, the Other becomes a constitutive moment of reflexive self-consciousness that is

the reflection from the being of the sensual and perceived world and essentially the return out of the otherness.¹⁹

The ego must reflect itself in the Other in order to transcend the abstraction of a pure identity with itself. Second, the dialectical mediation with the Other is described in the concept of desire. Desire maintains a double reference: an ecstatic reference to the Other and a reflexive reference to the self's own identity.²⁰ In desiring the Other, the reflexive moment of desire is revealed in that self-consciousness desires not only the negation of the desired object but also the affirmation of its own identity. This is why Hegel says that self-consciousness has a double object.²¹

The dialectical structure of Ricœur's model of reflexive self-consciousness, however, cannot be clarified by reference to a Hegelian dialectic, since the latter is not compatible with conditions a) and c) of Ricœur's model. The incompatibility with condition c) results from Hegel's speculative claim to achieve a total mediation of opposites in a dialectical unity. Ricœur, on the other hand, seeks only an approximate mediation that acknowledges the irreducibility of human finitude, and expresses his suspicion of Hegel's claim for a total mediation:

As mediations multiplied and lengthened, the ambition to totalize them in a Hegelian system seemed increasingly futile and suspect. It was not only the indirect and mediated aspect of reflection that imposed itself, but also its non-totalizable and ultimately fragmentary side.²²

The incompatibility of a Hegelian dialectic with condition c) is also acknowledged by those authors who associate Ricœur more strongly with Hegel.²³ Gonçalo Marcelo, for instance, sees the essential difference to Hegel in the fact that Ricœur's "dialectic does not produce a synthesis, but endless passages from one pole to another."²⁴ This difference – strongly reminiscent of Hegel's own critique of Fichte's dialectic²⁵ – still allows us, in Marcelos opinion, to consider Ricœur's incomplete mediation as a deviation from the basic model of Hegelian dialectic. In contrast, I want to emphasize the fundamental difference between Ricœur and Hegel that arises when we additionally consider the incompatibility of Hegelian dialectic with condition a), i.e., the absolute primacy of primary affirmation. Ricœur expresses conditions a) and b) in his essay *Négativité et affirmation originaire*:

It is possible and necessary to recover a philosophy of the primacy of being and existence that deals seriously with the emergence of philosophies of negation.²⁶

The challenge, then, is to find a structure of reflection that presupposes the primacy of the pure identity of the ego with itself without suspending negation/alterity as a constitutive moment of finite consciousness. Here it is worth considering Hegel's critique of Fichte, which is aimed at the latter's assumption of an absolute primacy of pure identity. Fichte derives his absolute and unconditioned principle in an abstracting reflection from the law of identity $A=A$. Hegel, however, does not regard the law of identity as a true law of thought, but merely as an abstraction from the opposition constitutive of concrete identity.²⁷ He therefore rejects an absolute primacy of a first principle and instead emphasizes the non-self-sufficiency of abstract identity as a mere moment of dialectic as such, but also of self-consciousness.²⁸ Since conditions a) and c) of Ricœur's dialectic are not compatible with Hegel, I argue that we should look for another approach to its interpretation.

2.2 Why Fichte?

Instead of approaching Ricœur's dialectic via Hegel, I would like to emphasize the advantages of interpreting Ricœur's dialectic via Fichte.²⁹ It is possible to demonstrate structural similarities with Fichte's dialectic that are helpful in reconstructing his own dialectic. This reference to Fichte allows us to identify the moments of primary affirmation, existential negation, and effort/desire as a dialectical model of reflexive self-consciousness that corresponds to the aforementioned conditions of the mediation of the ego with the Other. This assistance, in turn, is necessary to reconstruct the interrelation of dialectic and hermeneutics in Ricœur. I would like to list five central similarities between Fichte and Ricœur:

i) *Affirmation originaire* is quite an opaque concept in Ricœur's philosophy. He adopted it from Jean Nabert, where – as his main interpreter Paul Naulin admits – it raises considerable difficulties of interpretation.³⁰ Here, the reference to Fichte proves to be particularly fruitful, since it allows an interpretation of this concept through Fichte's concept of *Tathandlung*. Such an interpretation is developed by Vieillard-Baron: "The primary affirmation evokes, though not explicitly, [...] Fichte's Ego = Ego."³¹ In Fichte, *Tathandlung* is an act in which the absolute ego is posited in pure identity with itself and therefore requires no reflexive mediation. I propose to interpret Ricœur's primary affirmation by analogy as an ideal act in which no difference between act and reflection has yet been established.

ii) This ideal act, however, needs to be supplemented by a second act, which is also constitutive for finite consciousness and which corresponds to condition b) mentioned above. Fichte defines the product of this second act formally as the negation of the ego posited in the first act, i.e. as non-ego.³² This second act is a necessary moment of the constitution of the ego, because, as Fichte tells us, consciousness is possible only by reflection, which requires the distinction of a subject-pole and an object-pole of cognition.³³ Without negation of the pure identity posited in *Tathandlung*, there could be no consciousness, not even self-consciousness.³⁴ Similarly, Ricœur defines the second act as a constitutive negation: "It is only by passing through this existential negation, which we have called perspective, character, vital sentiment, that the primary affirmation becomes human."³⁵

In a progressive analysis, Ricœur tries to show how existential negation results in an opposition immanent to consciousness, which he refers to as the non-coincidence of the ego with itself. This opposition finds a parallel in the opposition between the absolute ego and the finite ego, developed by Fichte in §5 of his *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*.

iii) In both Ricœur and Fichte, position and negation are necessary but not symmetrically structured moments in the constitution of finite consciousness, since *affirmation originaire* as well as *Tathandlung* have a primacy over negation, which accounts for condition a) of Ricœur's dialectic.

For Fichte, *Tathandlung* is the absolute and strictly unconditioned principle of all human knowledge, whose content and form cannot be derived from any other principle. The second act is materially dependent on the first one, since only what has already been posited can be negated. Primary affirmation also has a primacy over negation in Ricœur. Against Sartre, he argues that negation cannot be conceived as the origin of consciousness. Rather, negation itself is merely “the flip side of a more primordial affirmation”.³⁶ Therefore, the origin of negation must be found in a being “that is the beginning of the rest, without having a beginning of its own.”³⁷

iv) The mediation is carried out by the effort (or desire) to overcome the difference immanent to consciousness. In Fichte, the mediation of the ego and the non-ego by limitation leads to the main antithesis of the practical part of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, i.e. the opposition of the absolute and the finite ego. This opposition cannot be mediated by theoretical reason. Therefore, mediation can only take the form of a practical demand. Thus, it is the object of an infinite *Streben* (effort), which Fichte also qualifies as an effort of the ego to be strictly identical.³⁸ Ricœur, on the other hand, adopts from Nabert the assumption that the difference of ecstatic acts and reflective acts is to be mediated by effort, which is the basic concept of his model of reflexive self-consciousness: “Reflection is the effort to recapture the ego of the ego cogito in the mirror of its objects, works, and finally acts.”³⁹

v) In order to mediate between positivity/identity and alterity/difference, effort must not only be defined as effort for pure identity, but also is defined by both Fichte and Ricœur as a tendency that maintains a constitutive relation to both identity and alterity. Fichte accounts for this requirement by identifying effort as an activity that is both finite and infinite. As a finite activity, effort aims at a real object and thus establishes the reference to the alterity of the non-ego. As an infinite activity, effort transcends the limit set by the object toward the ideal of a strictly identical ego.⁴⁰ For Ricœur and Nabert, effort also bears a “double relation”⁴¹: to the positivity of the primary affirmation as well as to the lack of being caused by negation. This double relation is reflected in the conceptual distinction between effort and desire: “Existence, we can say now, is desire and effort. We call it effort to emphasize its positive energy and dynamism; we call it desire to emphasize its lack and indigence.”⁴² Nevertheless, this distinction is only a conceptual one. For Ricœur, effort is itself desire, and desire is also effort. Only their unity can provide a ground for self-consciousness: “Effort and desire are the two facets of the Self’s position in the first truth: I am.”⁴³

Due to this constitutive opposition within effort, a final mediation of identity and alterity is impossible. Rather, the reappropriation of the original identity can only be approximated. This corresponds to condition c) of the dialectical mediation of the self with the Other.

The Hermeneutic Mediation with the Other

In a historical perspective, hermeneutics can also be understood as a method of the mediation with the Other. In Friedrich Schleiermacher, hermeneutics already performs a mediating function between individual acts of meaning and their necessary expression in the transindividual structure of language, which presents itself to the subject as the relative Other of its own acts.⁴⁴ In Arthur Schopenhauer, we can observe for the first time the attempt to relate the mediating function of hermeneutics to the ambiguity of ecstatic and reflexive consciousness.⁴⁵ Finally, it is Heidegger who explicitly relates the hermeneutic mediation to the question of the self. Thus, hermeneutics allows for the bridging of the gap between being and the understanding of *Dasein*.⁴⁶ Ricœur relies on these historical models and integrates a hermeneutic mediation into his concept of reflexive self-consciousness. Every hermeneutics, so he tells us, serves for the understanding of the self by the detour through the Other.⁴⁷

The hermeneutic mediation with the Other must also be interpreted in light of the fundamental assumption of Ricœur's philosophy of reflection, namely the difference between ecstatic and reflexive acts. In this section, I will argue that this difference is hermeneutically mediated in a process which – adopting Don Ihde's distinction of a "'first' and 'second' order of indirectness for the understanding of experience"⁴⁸ – can be divided into two distinct processes of mediation: first, the Other, by which the ecstatic experience is structured, is transformed into a linguistic (symbolic) meaning. In a second step, the opaque meaning of the symbol is made transparent by interpretation. Both steps aim at transforming the ecstatic experience of a transcendent Other into a possible object of reflexive appropriation. It is for this reason that Ricœur claims that self-consciousness constitutes itself "in its depths through symbolism".⁴⁹

3.1 The Mediation of the Other and Symbolic Meaning by Imagination

The first mediating step concerns the relation of a pre-symbolic, non-linguistic Other, to which living experience is ecstatically related, and its symbolic expression. An important difference to dialectical mediation is that in case of hermeneutics not only a difference immanent to consciousness is mediated, but the alterity of consciousness with a transcendent Other. In order to make this mediation comprehensible, it is first necessary to show what can be understood by a transcendent, pre-symbolic Other. In *La Symbolique du mal*, Ricœur develops a systematization of various emanations of the symbol that sheds light on the Other. As the first emanation Ricœur identifies cosmic symbols and characterizes them as manifestations of the sacred, which, as an intentional object of consciousness, structures experiences of one's own finitude. Another dependence of consciousness is revealed by the oneiric dimension of the symbol, which relates the origins of conscious meaning to

unconscious desire. Desire, unlike the sacred, is not an intentional object of our experience but an energetic disposition of existence. The Other, which is expressed in the poetic dimension of the symbol, is not sufficiently defined in *La Symbolique du mal*. Richard Kearney tentatively defines it as an “intentional projection of possible meanings,” indicating the projective character of the self in regard to its own possibilities.⁵⁰ The Other dealt with in these different emanations is obviously quite divergent. The ecstatic Other is defined as an intentional object, as an energetic disposition or as projections. Ricœur obviously has a wide concept of *ἔκστασις*. Thus, the Other can only be defined negatively as something that is transcendent to consciousness but structures conscious experience in different ways.

The transcendent Other is transformed into a linguistic (symbolic) meaning by – and this is crucial for Ricœur – a human capacity. The capacity that enables the transposition of the Other into a linguistic meaning is imagination. From the beginning, Ricœur develops his theory of imagination in terms of its mediating function.⁵¹ Especially in his later œuvre on textual hermeneutics, he elaborates a theory of the productive function of imagination, which he will refer to as semantic innovation. It allows living, ecstatic experience to emerge as linguistic meaning through the restructuring of semantic fields at the level of predication: “It is, I believe, at the moment when new meaning emerges from the ruins of literal predication that imagination offers its specific mediation.”⁵²

However, the explanation of the functioning of imagination by means of predication, which became the focus of Ricœur’s philosophy of language after his exploration of discourse linguistics, cannot be applied without difficulty to the concept of the symbol. This is because predication occurs at the level of the sentence but symbols are defined by Ricœur as signs, i.e. linguistic units below the level of the sentence. Ricœur does not provide a sufficiently elaborated theory of imagination in the context of his hermeneutics of symbols. We can assume that in the intended but unpublished last volume of his *Philosophie de la volonté*, in which Ricœur planned to develop a poetics of the will, a deeper reflection on the functioning of imagination was supposed to follow. However, any reconstruction of imagination within Ricœur’s symbolic hermeneutics must remain speculative. This is an essential deficiency of Ricœur’s hermeneutic of symbols, since it is not sufficiently clear how the mediation of pre-symbolic alterity and symbolic meaning takes place.⁵³

Nevertheless, we can conclude that already for symbolic hermeneutics the mediation of the Other into a linguistic meaning by imagination is an essential thought, for it is only the transformation of the Other into linguistic meaning that allows an approximate elucidation of ecstatic acts in a reflexive way. Indeed, the alterity that is essential to ecstatic experience is reproduced at the level of symbolic expression. But alterity, which appears in an ontological perspective as something transcendent to the self, is transformed

by imagination into a structure of meaning that is rooted beyond the self but grounded in a capacity of the self, as Ricœur tells us in *De l'interprétation*: "There is no symbolism before the human speaker, even if the power of the symbol is rooted at a more basic level."⁵⁴

This ambiguous status of symbolic meaning between the self and the Other is reproduced in Ricœur's thoughts on the freedom of imagination, which he emphasizes in his account of the poetic dimension of the symbol. Poetic imagination is creative and figurative in the formation of symbols.⁵⁵ In contrast, if we think of Ricœur's interpretation of unconscious representations in Freudian psychoanalysis, it becomes apparent that the activity of imagination is not completely free.⁵⁶ Since imagination transforms a non-linguistic Other into a linguistic meaning, the meaning of symbols is structured by the non-linguistic Other.

3.2 The Mediation of Opacity and Transparency by Interpretation

The second step of mediation deals with the transformation of the latent symbolic meaning into an approximate transparency by interpretation. Although the pre-symbolic Other is transformed into a linguistic meaning by imagination, this meaning is not yet transparent, but merely given in an opaque way as a latent symbolic meaning. The second step of hermeneutic mediation mediates between the latent and the manifest meaning of the symbol. The latent meaning is to be made approximately transparent by interpretation of the manifest meaning. This mediation is necessary because of the actual opacity of the symbol, which is grounded in the relation of symbolic meaning to the pre-symbolic alterity. The pre-symbolic Other, Ricœur writes, is to be expressed in language but can never be completely transformed into linguistic meaning.⁵⁷

Ricœur illustrates this by example of Freud's concept of *Triebrepräsenzanz*. According to Ricœur, the psychoanalytic interpretation aims at deciphering an energetic disposition, which itself is not meaning but blind force. In the concept of *Triebrepräsenzanz*, a representation (*Vorstellungrepräsentanz*), i.e. a linguistic meaning, is combined with a merely quantitatively defined amount of psychic energy. The pure quantity of energy represented in affect, which does not pass into representation, is, according to Ricœur, "desire as desire."⁵⁸ Desire, for Ricœur, is a "non-symbolizable core"⁵⁹ of unconscious representations that cannot become fully transformed into linguistic meaning because of its non-linguistic, purely energetic essence. Psychoanalysis, however, aims precisely at the cognition of this non-symbolizable core, which can only gain meaning through the interpretation of its representations constituted by imagination. Ricœur describes the resulting problem: "If desire is the inexpressible, it is originally turned toward language; it wants to be uttered; it can become speech."⁶⁰

With regard to the outlined decentering of the subject, this indicates that consciousness is not decentered towards a relative Other, i.e. towards another meaning, which in principle could be translated into a completely transparent meaning, but towards an Other transcendent to consciousness, whose alterity is irreducible. A complete transparency of symbolic meaning is impossible because of the opacity of the symbol, but also because of the cultural contingency of symbolic expression and the lack of exactness of the rules of interpretation.⁶¹ Interpretation therefore remains an infinite approximation to the ideal of complete transparency of symbolic meaning.

The Interrelation of Hermeneutics and Dialectic in Ricœur's Theory of the Self

Having described the dialectical and the hermeneutic mediation with the Other, the question of their interrelation can now be raised. To this end, I would first like to point out that the structural implications of the dialectical mediation are also reflected in the hermeneutic mediation with the Other:

- a) The primacy of the self is reflected in Ricœur's basic concern to appropriate the Other within the self by a capacity of the self.
- b) The irreducibility of negativity is reflected in the very fact that the latent meaning of the symbols is structured by an irreducible pre-symbolic alterity.
- c) The hermeneutic mediation with the Other is also only approximate. The definition of interpretation as an infinite task prevents total mediation.

Given these parallels, it seems likely that hermeneutics and dialectic are somehow related. I suggest that they perform different but interdependent functions in mediating the self with the Other in reflexive self-consciousness. In this case, however, the problem is to identify these functions. I think Ricœur gives us a hint of how to interpret the interrelation of hermeneutics and dialectic, precisely in the passage from *L'Homme faillible* to *La Symbolique du mal*. *L'Homme faillible*, in which Ricœur develops the dialectical model of reflection, is meant to be an intermediate step towards *La Symbolique du mal*, where he develops the hermeneutics of symbols. This is because in *L'Homme faillible* Ricœur wants to reveal fallibility only as the possibility of evil, while in *La Symbolique du mal* he wants to explain the reality of evil. We find this hint in the very first sentence of *La Symbolique du mal*: "How do we pass from the possibility of human evil to its reality, from fallibility to fault?"⁶²

Fallibility and fault are thus put into relation by means of the modal categories 'possibility' and 'reality'. However, if we remind ourselves of the central terms of both the mediations with the Other – effort as the central term of the dialectical mediation, imagination as the central term of the

hermeneutic mediation – an interpretation seems possible according to rationalist authors who have interpreted force (effort) and capacity (imagination) as modal categories.

Ricœur does not conceal the fact that his concept of effort is rooted in Spinoza's notion of conatus. In the rationalist philosophies of Spinoza, Leibniz and Wolff conatus is thought as a certain kind of force which is attributed to a substance. Force is generally understood as the reason for the realization of change/action of a substance. Conatus is further specified in that it is a force that is insufficient to complete an action or change because of an external resistance. Thus, Kant writes in his *Lectures on Metaphysics* that conatus is a mere effort ("Bestrebung"), because it is resisted⁶³ – a determination that is reflected in Fichte's conception of effort as a finite activity, since there was no effort without resistance.⁶⁴ The reality of a change/action, however, implies its possibility, which is ontologically conceptualized as the substance's capacity to change/act. This is how we read it, for example, in Christian Wolff: "By capacity, a change is merely possible; by force, it becomes real."⁶⁵

By referring to rationalist ontology, we might be tempted to interpret Ricœur's notions of imagination (capacity) and effort (force) as modal categories that refer to the possibility and reality of concrete self-consciousness, i.e. a self-consciousness that mediates the self with the Other. In this interpretation, imagination, the central term of hermeneutic mediation, could be considered as the possibility of the mediation of the self with the Other, whose (incomplete) realization would only be effected by effort, the central term of dialectical mediation.

However, some problems arise if we were to simply transpose the rationalist concepts onto Ricœur. For example, Ricœur's use of these concepts must not be interpreted in a substance-ontological way. It is clear to him that existence must not be disclosed in terms of a "metaphysics of substance" but in terms of living acts.⁶⁶ Even if we concede that this displacement of substance ontology in favor of act ontology is already developed by Fichte, who no longer defines the subject in terms of substance, we still need to clarify the actual meaning of categories like 'possibility' and 'reality' as detached from the notion of substance. Moreover, if we consider how Ricœur actually applies these modal categories in the two volumes of *Finitude et Culpabilité*, another problem arises regarding this interpretation. Compared to Wolff, Ricœur seems to apply the modal categories in reverse. The dialectical model and effort as its central concept are treated as possibility, hermeneutic mediation and the capacity of imagination as reality.

In order to solve these problems, we should consider Ricœur's references to rationalist philosophy to be less a strict demonstration but rather a free, creative appropriation that has an illustrative purpose with regard to an adequate interpretation of concrete self-consciousness. In this reading, the dialectical notion of effort merely makes possible concrete self-consciousness

by mediating the difference immanent to consciousness, i.e., the gap between ecstatic and reflexive acts, within a model of reflexive self-consciousness. The dialectical trinity thus describes a structural model of finite self-consciousness. However, in order to make ecstatic experience as such a possible object of reflexive cognition, Ricœur has to transcend the structural model of dialectic. It is only through the hermeneutic mediation of imagination that an actual mediation with a transcendent Other takes place. Vice versa, the hermeneutic mediation with the transcendent Other can only be integrated into a theory of reflexive self-consciousness by referring to a dialectical model of reflexive self-consciousness. Thus, the interrelation between dialectic and hermeneutics in Ricœur's philosophy of reflection is to be specified as follows: the hermeneutic mediation of self-consciousness becomes possible only by dialectical mediation, but the dialectically grounded possibility of concrete self-consciousness becomes real only by the hermeneutic mediation of the transcendent Other.

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- ¹ Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricœur: The Owl of Minerva* (Burlington: Ashgate 2004), 9.
- ² Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, "De l'interprétation," in *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II*, ed. Paul Ricœur (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1986), 29: "[...] acte de retour sur soi par lequel un sujet ressaisit, dans la clarté intellectuelle et la responsabilité morale, le principe unificateur des opérations entre lesquelles il se disperse et s'oublie comme sujet."
- ³ Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1990), 367: "[...] que l'altérité ne s'ajoute pas du dehors à l'ipséité, comme pour en prévenir la dérive solipsiste, mais qu'elle appartienne à la teneur des sens et à la constitution ontologique de l'ipséité."
- ⁴ Jean-Marc Tétaz, "Eine Philosophie des Selbst, aber keine Reflexionsphilosophie. Hermeneutik als Theorie der konkreten Subjektivität," in *Hermeneutik des Selbst - Im Zeichen des Anderen. Zur Philosophie Paul Ricœurs*, ed. Burkhard Liebsch, (Freiburg/München: Karl Alber 1999), 138-141.; the distinction of an ontological and a reflexive focus of Ricœur's philosophy is also drawn by Theodoor Marius van Leeuwen, *The Surplus of Meaning. Ontology and Eschatology in the Philosophy of Paul Ricœur* (Amsterdam: Rodopi 1981), 69-71.
- ⁵ Martin Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," in: Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege*, ed. by F.-W. v. Herrmann (Frankfurt a. M.: Vittorio Klostermann 2003), 106-113.
- ⁶ Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, *Le volontaire et l'involontaire* (Paris: Aubier 1950), 17: "[L]e moi [...] doit renoncer à une prétention secrètement cachée en toute conscience, abandonner son vœu d'autoposition, pour accueillir une spontanéité nourricière et comme une inspiration qui rompt le cercle stérile que le soi forme avec lui-même."
- ⁷ Jean Greisch, *Fehlbarkeit und Fähigkeit* (Berlin: LIT Verlag 2009), 53
- ⁸ Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch. Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie* (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag 2009), 77.
- ⁹ Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, "Phénoménologie et herméneutique," in *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II*, ed. Paul Ricœur (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1986), 63: "[L]a thèse de

l'intentionnalité pose explicitement que, si tout sens est pour une conscience, nulle conscience n'est conscience de soi avant d'être conscience de quelque chose vers quoi elle se dépasse [...].”

- ¹⁰ Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, “L’acte et le signe selon Jean Nabert,” in *Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d’herméneutique*, ed. Paul Ricœur (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 2013), 297: “La philosophie réflexive n’a donc fait que reporter plus loin la dualité de la conscience opérante et de la fonction objective de l’entendement; ce n’est plus la dualité classique de l’agir et du connaître; c’est un dédoublement plus subtil, au sein même de la conscience agissante, entre son pouvoir pur de se poser et sa production laborieuse par ‘la médiation d’éléments psychologiques’.”
- ¹¹ Paul Ricœur, “Heidegger et la question du sujet,” in *Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d’herméneutique*, ed. Paul Ricœur (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 2013), 314.
- ¹² Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, “La question du sujet: le défi de la sémiologie,” in *Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d’herméneutique*, ed. Paul Ricœur (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 2013), 330: “[...] à la fois la certitude indubitable que je suis et une question ouverte quant à ce que je suis.”
- ¹³ Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, *De l’interprétation* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1965), 51: “[...] réflexion n’est pas intuition.” - The term “negative definition” is borrowed from Pierre Colin, “Herméneutique et philosophie réflexive,” in *Paul Ricœur: Les métamorphoses de la raison herméneutique*, eds. Jean Greisch and Richard Kearney (Paris: Cerf 1991), 28-29.
- ¹⁴ The distinction of an immediate and a mediated epistemic self-consciousness is developed by Ernst Tugendhat, *Self-consciousness and self-determination* (Cambridge/London: MIT Press 1986).
- ¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 2008), 11-12.
- ¹⁶ Paul Ricœur, “What is Dialectical?,” in *Freedom and Morality*, eds. Richard Brandt and John Bricker (Lawrence: University of Kansas 1976), 182-183.
- ¹⁷ Alexis Itao, “Paul Ricœur’s Hermeneutics of Symbols: A Critical Dialectic of Suspicion and Faith,” *Kritike - An Online Journal of Philosophy* 4,2 (2010), 1-17; Stephen Dunning, “History and Phenomenology: Dialectical Structure in Ricœur’s The Symbolism of Evil,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 76,3 (1983), 343-363; Gonçalo Marcelo, “From Conflict to Conciliation and Back Again: Some Notes on Ricœur’s Dialectic,” *Revista Filosófica De Coimbra* 38 (2010), 359-360; David Rasmussen, *Mythic-Symbolic Language and Philosophical Anthropology. A Constructive Interpretation of the Thought of Paul Ricœur* (Den Haag: Nijhoff 1971), 75; Greisch, *Fehlbarkeit und Fähigkeit*, 86.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Ricœur, *De l’interprétation*, 52.
- ¹⁹ Own translation. Cf. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1986), 138: “[...] die Reflexion aus dem Sein der sinnlichen und wahrgenommenen Welt und wesentlich die Rückkehr aus dem Anderssein.”
- ²⁰ The distinction of an intentional (or ecstatic) and a reflexive moment of desire is made by Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire - Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press 1987), 25.
- ²¹ Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 139.
- ²² Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, *Réflexion faite: autobiographie intellectuelle* (Paris: Éditions Esprit 1995), 40: “En même temps que les médiations se multipliaient et s’allongeaient, l’ambition de les totaliser dans un système hégélien m’apparaissait de plus en plus vaine et suspecte. Ce

n'était pas seulement le côté indirect et médiat de la réflexion, mais son côté non totalisable et finalement fragmentaire, qui s'imposait."

- ²³ Greisch, *Fehlbarkeit und Fähigkeit*, 86; see also Marcelo, "From Conflict to Conciliation and Back Again: Some Notes on Ricœur's Dialectic," 359.
- ²⁴ Marcelo, "From Conflict to Conciliation and Back Again: Some Notes on Ricœur's Dialectic," 354.
- ²⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "Differenz des Fichte'schen und Schelling'schen Systems der Philosophie," in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Jenaer Schriften 1801-1807*, eds. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1986), 72.
- ²⁶ Own translation. Paul Ricœur, "Négativité et affirmation originaire," in Paul Ricœur, *Histoire et Vérité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1955), 336: "[I]l est possible et nécessaire de récupérer une philosophie du primat de l'être et de l'exister qui tienne compte de façon sérieuse de ce surgissement des philosophies de la négation."
- ²⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse. Erster Teil. Die Wissenschaft der Logik* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1986), 237.
- ²⁸ Hegel, "Differenz des Fichte'schen und Schelling'schen Systems der Philosophie," 57.
- ²⁹ I developed a more detailed comparison between the philosophies of Fichte, Nabert and Ricœur in Michael Steinmetz, *Subjekt und Psychoanalyse - Die Freud-Interpretationen Paul Ricœurs und Jacques Lacans* (Baden-Baden: Ergon 2023), 32-53.
- ³⁰ Paul Naulin, *Le problème de Dieu dans la Philosophie de Jean Nabert (1881-1960)* (Clermont-Ferrand: Association de Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Clermont-France 1980), 42.
- ³¹ Own translation. Cf. Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron, "Bergson et Nabert, lecteurs de Fichte," *Fichte-Studien*, 13 (1997), 103: "L'affirmation originaire évoque, sans le nommer, [...] le Moi = Moi de Fichte."
- ³² Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, J.-G. Fichte Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vol. 1,2, ed. Reinhard Lauth (Stuttgart/Bad-Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog 1965), 266.
- ³³ Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, 403: "[...] weil Bewußtseyn nur durch Reflexion, und Reflexion nur durch Bestimmung möglich ist."
- ³⁴ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre*, J.-G. Fichte Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vol. 1.4, ed. Reinhard Lauth (Stuttgart/Bad-Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog 1970), 214.
- ³⁵ Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, *L'Homme faillible, Finitude et Culpabilité 1* (Paris: Éditions Points), 188: "[L]'affirmation originaire ne devient homme qu'en traversant cette négation existentielle que nous avons appelée perspective, caractère, sentiment vital."
- ³⁶ Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, "Négativité et affirmation originaire," 350-351: "[...] l'envers d'une affirmation plus originaire."
- ³⁷ Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, "Négativité et affirmation originaire," 357: "[...] qui fait commencer le reste sans avoir soi-même de commencement."
- ³⁸ Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, 400: "[...] das Streben des Ich, schlechthin identisch zu seyn."

- ³⁹ Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 51: “[L]a réflexion est l’effort pour ressaisir l’Ego de l’Ego Cogito dans le miroir de ses objets, de ses œuvres et finalement de ses actes.”
- ⁴⁰ Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, 402f.
- ⁴¹ Jean Nabert, *Éléments pour une éthique* (Paris: Aubier 1971), 20.
- ⁴² Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, “Existence et herméneutique,” in *Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d’herméneutique*, ed. Paul Ricœur (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 2013), 45-46: “L’existence, nous pouvons maintenant le dire, est désir et effort. Nous l’appelons effort, pour en souligner l’énergie positive et le dynamisme, nous appelons désir, pour en désigner le manque et l’indigence.”
- ⁴³ Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 53: “Effort et désir sont les deux faces de la position du Soi dans la première vérité: *je suis*.”
- ⁴⁴ Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, ed. by M. Frank (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1977), 77-80.
- ⁴⁵ Cf. Daniel Schubbe, *Philosophie des Zwischen - Hermeneutik und Aporetik bei Schopenhauer* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2010); for a comparison of Schopenhauer’s and Ricœur’s hermeneutics cf. Michael Steinmetz, “Schopenhauer als Protophänomenologe des Willens? - Schopenhauer und Paul Ricœur zur Willensfreiheit,” in *Facettenreiche Existenz - Schopenhauers Philosophie als Knotenpunkt der Disziplinen*, eds. Michael Steinmetz and Dominik Zink (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2023), 151-179.
- ⁴⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer 2006), 15: “Das Dasein ist zwar ontisch nicht nur nahe oder gar das nächste - wir sind es sogar je selbst. Trotzdem oder gerade deshalb ist es ontologisch das Fernste.”
- ⁴⁷ Ricœur, “Existence et herméneutique”, 40.
- ⁴⁸ Don Ihde, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1971), 96-98.
- ⁴⁹ Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, *La Symbolique du mal, Finitude et Culpabilité 2* (Paris: Éditions Points), 211: “[...] dans sa profondeur par le moyen du symbolisme.”
- ⁵⁰ Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining - Modern to Post-modern* (New York: Fordham University Press 1998), 148.
- ⁵¹ Mary Schaldenbrand, “Metaphoric Imagination: Kinship through Conflict,” in *Studies in the Philosophy of Paul Ricœur*, ed. Charles E. Reagan (Athens: Ohio University Press 1979), 58f.
- ⁵² Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, “L’imagination dans le discours et dans l’action,” in *Du texte à l’action. Essais d’herméneutique II*, ed. Paul Ricœur (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1986), 243: “C’est, selon moi, dans le moment d’émergence d’une nouvelle signification hors des ruines de la prédication littérale que l’imagination offre sa médiation spécifique.”
- ⁵³ Ihde, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology*, 96.
- ⁵⁴ Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 25: “Il n’y a pas de symbolique avant l’homme qui parle, même si la puissance du symbole est enracinée plus bas [...].”
- ⁵⁵ Jean-Luc Amalric, *Paul Ricœur, l’imagination vive - Une genèse de la philosophie ricœurienne de l’imagination* (Paris: Hermann Éditeurs 2013), 331.
- ⁵⁶ Paul Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press 1976), 58.

- ⁵⁷ Paul Ricœur, “Parole et symbole,” *Revue des sciences religieuses* 49 (1975), 156.
- ⁵⁸ Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 439: “[...] le désir comme désir.”
- ⁵⁹ Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 439: “[...] fond non symbolisable.”
- ⁶⁰ Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 441: “[S]i le désir est l'innommable, il est originellement tourné vers le langage; il veut être dit; il est en puissance de parole.”
- ⁶¹ Paul Ricœur, “Herméneutique et réflexion,” *Archivio di filosofia*, 32 (1962), 20-21.
- ⁶² Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, *La Symbolique du mal*, 205: “Comment passer de la possibilité du mal humain à sa réalité, de la faillibilité à la faute?”
- ⁶³ Immanuel Kant, *Vorlesung-Metaphysik/Volckmann*, Kant's gesammelte Schriften XXVIII,1 (Berlin: de Gruyter 1968), 434: „Der Conatus Bestrebung [...] bedeutet also eigentlich die Unzulänglichkeit einer todten Kraft, da diese aber nur durch den Widerstand todt ist, so ist etwas in Bestrebung bloß weil ihm widerstanden wird.“
- ⁶⁴ Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre (1794)*, 404: “Im Begriffe des Strebens selbst aber liegt schon die Endlichkeit, denn dasjenige, dem nicht *widerstrebt* wird, ist kein Streben.”
- ⁶⁵ Own translation. Cf. Christian Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, Gesammelte Werke 1,2 (Hildesheim: Olms 1983), §117: “Durch das Vermögen ist eine Veränderung bloß möglich; durch die Kraft wird sie wirklich.”
- ⁶⁶ Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, *Négativité et affirmation originaire*, 360: “[...] métaphysique de l'essence.”

Conflict of Interpretations

On Paul Ricoeur's Contributions to the Philosophy of Technology

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Recent literature regarding how French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's work relates to the philosophy of technology appears *prima facie* to be contradictory. Philosophy of technology is the systematic treatment of philosophical issues (e.g., technological design, risk, morality) using the assumption that such issues dynamically interact with a given technological artifact or technique in the social sphere. This is opposed to treating technology as being a mere higher-order instantiation of more fundamental philosophical problems. In one sense, Ricoeur has been charged with failing to contribute original work directly to the field by resisting the empirical turn of the discipline in the 1980s and taking a thoroughly pessimistic view of technology that relies on a questionable distinction between persons and things—perhaps due to his early approximation with the Frankfurt school and Habermas.¹ In this view, Ricoeur's work does not add anything new, at least directly, to the discipline but is still valuable to the philosophy of technology through other features of his work such as his hermeneutics and narrativity.

In another sense, some argue Ricoeur adds to the field by directly thematizing technology when studying ethics and human capability and that he cannot be thought of as merely ignoring the complex relationship between the social sphere and technology.^{2,3} Here I offer a synthesis of both views and I suggest that Ricoeur goes beyond just thematizing technology, but offers what I call a 'proto-empirical' philosophy of technology that is open to the remainder of Ricoeur's hermeneutic thought. In this way, Ricoeur did not resist the empirical turn as if it were contradictory with his overall project but was merely on the cusp of it due to his famously cautious philosophical approach, meaning his work is potentially consistent with contemporary perspectives.⁴

As such, I intend to argue that the aforementioned views are not at odds, but rather capture important truths about the nature of Ricoeur's

philosophical project. At one level, Ricoeur's philosophy of technology must be viewed through temporarily parsing apart technology and technique (i.e., an instance of persons and things); in doing so, Ricoeur can be thought of as directly adding to the field, at least in the sense that Wolff^{2 5} advocates, by avoiding the reduction of meaning into merely technical questions. This is an important contribution to the philosophy of technology, whether or not one is convinced of its correctness, as it suggests that there is a dialectic between 1) the abstracted and ambiguous 'technologies' and 2) the practical, concrete experience of those who use 'techniques'; it is this dialectic that can create new possibilities of action and practice which can then be followed to understand the material and sociological implications of technology when collapsing the dialectic. However, by advocating for this working, semantic distinction, Ricoeur finds himself primarily addressing technology in a deterministic sense rather than a social constructionist sense (i.e., failing to sufficiently address material and social concerns), where the ladder makes up roughly the last thirty years of scholarship.^{1 6}

In the end—using Kaplan¹ and Wolff² as proxies for general lines of thought—we see each view seems to be incomplete regarding Ricoeur's intention; however, it is clear that both positions are inspiring in their own right in regard to how Ricoeur's thought can influence 21st century scholarship. As it turns out, both Kaplan and Wolff have most recently converged toward a middle ground in 2021 and I hope is to make the destination of their convergence explicit. In fact, in section II, I describe the positive positions each thinker advances as a way to demonstrate that even the initial disagreements between thinkers are already quite compatible and that scholarship should now become forward thinking as we brush off Ricoeur's *corpus*.

It is worth stating explicitly why I have selected Kaplan and Wolff as interlocutors. Kaplan, a careful scholar of Ricoeur's critical philosophy and a philosopher of technology in his own right, has developed his perspective within the new empirical wave of philosophy and, thus, is intimately familiar with where Ricoeur diverges from recent scholarship. Wolff, a well-regarded Ricoeuran scholar and political philosopher with a focus on decolonialism and existential phenomenology, is also a consistent and valuable contributor to the philosophy of technology using Ricoeur's *corpus*. Both Wolff and Kaplan represent two different types of Ricoeuran thinkers in the space. Within the direct philosophical treatment of technologies, Kaplan represents a "no direct value added" view due to Ricoeur taking a purportedly outdated stance on the ontological status of technology, whereas Wolff takes a "underappreciated value added" view, where Ricoeur contributes far more than he is typically credited.

I briefly use these views as proxies to demonstrate that Ricoeuran scholars are generally undecided about how we should think about Ricoeur's work in the present technological age (i.e., which parts to adopt and which

parts to discard). My intention is not to remake the arguments made by Wolff and Kaplan for *why* we should use Ricoeur's work; on this, I defer to each thinker. However, I intend to add that Ricoeurian scholars, and those not yet acquainted with his work, need not grit their teeth as they use Ricoeur's *corpus* to study technological artifacts as they interact with the world—as if we must selectively interact with some of his work while trying to not absorb problematic ontological commitments about technology. Ricoeur's philosophy of technology, while distinct from current literature, is entirely consistent with the empirical turn of the philosophy of technology and is poised to find immediate application. I offer a few brief areas of future research to conclude in section III.

What does Ricoeur mean by 'Technology' and 'Technique'

Philosophy of technology over the last thirty years has tended to focus on the practical features of technology. In this way, a given technological artifact operates as an embedded, dynamical feature of a social environment. For instance, a mobile device informs a person's ontological status in the world and how persons relate to each other, while that person(s) predicate(s) meaning into the actual artifact–technology and persons are reflexively linked. As such, it would follow that technology, in the abstract, does not have governing logic that can be confronted with purely critical analysis. Rather, technology must be studied via how particulars reflexively interact with human society or given cultures—both in how it “reflect[s]” and “change[s]” human life, individually, socially, and politically.”⁷ This view is in response to some 20th century thought, such as Habermas, which had a transcendental focus that pushed back on human life being decontextualized and reduced to technology and instead emphasized persons as they relate to other persons. It has been recently noted that Ricoeur finds himself aligning frequently with this view.⁸ In this way, those advocating for such a transcendental position might be seen as taking a ‘pessimistic’ view of technology in that technological artifacts first and foremost are a threat to the rich interpretative meaning of the lifeworld. Thus, a distinction between persons and things is made.

On the surface, Ricoeur's thought might be improperly placed, in its entirety, among this class of philosophers. It is true that Ricoeur was primarily concerned with a similar project as Habermas, namely avoiding the reduction of cultural meaning or specific heritage to technological processes that act as a sort of universal rationality, but this is not all that Ricoeur believed was the case as some like early Kaplan¹ have argued. Ricoeur and those like Habermas ultimately have distinct approaches in important areas related to technology, like ideology⁸. It might be helpful to begin by tracing Ricoeur's thought through each of his proposed levels of analysis of human “civilization;”⁹ in doing so, we will be able to see one of the ways Ricoeur thematizes technology, as Wolff² briefly discusses.

The clearest instance of Ricoeur's analysis of human civilization can be seen in his 1965 article, translated into English in 1973, "The Tasks of the Political Educator". In the article, he is primarily concerned with discussing in what 'analytic' level of society an educator can be most effective; in using the term 'analytic', Ricoeur is proposing a working distinction between each proposed level when, in reality, they cannot be taken as distinct and instead create a tensional aspect across layers.⁹

¹⁰ Ricoeur breaks civilization into "industries", "institutions", and "values", where civilization broadly gestures at all of humanity which is constituted by the three aforementioned layers.

"Industries" [*«outillages»*] as a category finds itself at the highest and most abstract level of society. It is something "which goes beyond the level of tools, machines, and even of techniques."¹¹ In this way, industries are the "accumulation of experience" that can be understood using "the tool and the machine,"¹⁰ but are, in reality, an abstraction of a mere instance of a technological artifact's use. In this way, through industries, tools survive their "occasional use."¹⁰ Industries are instead accumulated or conserved bodies of technological relations between communities and artifacts that belong to the whole of humanity. It is here where we see the typical critique of Ricoeur's position as he seems, on the surface, to take on a transcendental position, speaking as if technology is one homogeneous concept. He offers the same sort of claim with general knowledge and the sciences by saying that they "can be considered as an industry crystallized into disposable good" that leave "traces" that are "accumulated under the form of works, visible monuments, books and libraries, which comprise the experience of humanity."¹⁰ In fact, he says, "this unique and universal aspect of civilization has always existed, but it is only now that we can become vividly conscious of it" due to the levels of which innovation has occurred recently.¹⁰

Ricoeur was similarly clear about this civilization category in his 1965 chapter "Universal Civilization and National Cultures" by arguing that civilization, defined the same way as above, has a positive and negative sense. In the positive sense, as previously mentioned, Ricoeur believes there is one "original universality, with its scientific character, [which] permeates all human technics with rationality"—meaning that the whole of humanity has the potential to benefit when something new is created.¹² On the negative side, this creation of a universal rationalization—which is constituted in part by the abstract sense of technology along with science and general knowledge—creates a "sort of subtle destruction . . . of the ethical and mythical nucleus of mankind"¹³ via the reduction and homogenizing of specific cultures or heritages.

In this way, technology at the most abstract level of industries has a tension between "the new rationality of calculating efficiency and the old rationality of our shared cultural and political life."¹⁴ This is what leads Kaplan to the following conclusion:

On the few occasions when Ricoeur did discuss technology, he generally agreed with Heidegger, Marcuse, and Habermas, each of whom contrasts the dehumanizing characteristics of technology and technological reasoning with more humane forms of experience and action¹⁵...The problem with this pessimistic view is that it is unoriginal, limited, dated, and false. There are too many different things we call technology to be captured by the notion of a single technological rationality that ostensibly underlies them all. The empirical approach to technology studies understands it hermeneutically and contextually: technology must be interpreted against a cultural horizon of meaning, like any other social reality.¹⁴

It is here where those who take the view of Kaplan¹ would be correct if Ricoeur has no additional complexity in his thought. At the highest level of civilization, in the most abstract sense, technology for Ricoeur can be viewed in a pessimistic way as globalization in the post-1950s led toward hyper-efficiency and what is ostensibly called “neoliberal” ideology. For Ricoeur, this trend threatened to reduce social meaning to mere instances of tool use, scientific data, and general innovation preserved over time in some universal rationality without the use of contextual and hermeneutical thought.

However, Ricoeur’s work cannot be left here as it leaves his view incomplete in two ways. First, Ricoeur does not believe that technology in the most abstract sense is intrinsically pessimistic, but rather that it is tensional and ambiguous;¹⁶ this is a type of claim—namely that a phenomenon is both ambiguous and tensional—that is established throughout his corpus, for example in how he thinks of live metaphors.¹⁷ Second, technology in the ambiguous sense can only be fully understood by acknowledging the character of Ricoeur’s definition of “technique”.

Let us first deal with the ambiguity of technology. Ricoeur is not interested in discussing technology in a transcendental sense for the sake of technology itself, but rather his abstraction of technology into an ambiguous, universal rationality is a “recognition that it [technology] is an indispensable part of affirming the unity of humanity, the irreducibility of politics and the significance of valuation.”¹⁸ This is because, in conducting his analytical study of civilization, Ricoeur continues to work beyond industries into institutions and values. Here, institutions are defined as the discourse of “politics—that is to say, the exercise of decision making and force at the level of the community.”¹⁹ Below the institution are values, by which Ricoeur means “concrete valorizations such as [those which] could be apprehended in the attitudes of men in regard to other men—in work, property, power, temporal experience, etc.”²⁰ This brings Ricoeur to the following conclusion: “[a]n available tool remains an abstraction independently of the value that we give it and which inserts it into an historical context. An industry is only useful and only operates if it is appreciated and positively valorized [via concrete

values].”²⁰ Here, we can start to question whether Ricoeur’s thinking really is as all or nothing, or “take it or leave it”, as some suggest.^{21 22}

In this way, for Ricoeur, when trying to understand technology, it must always be embedded at a contextual level because “[e]ach historical group only appropriates its own technical and economic reality through institutions” rather than some transcendental meaning of technology.²³ In other words, Ricoeur “[speaks] of ambiguity in opposition to progress” because “[t]here is progress in the order of industry in the widest sense one can give this work which not only includes material techniques but also intellectual and spiritual attainments. But what men do through their institutions is always uncertain.”²⁴ As such, technology for Ricoeur is a multiplicity of histories that can only be understood through institutions of power and local techniques.

It should be recalled here that technology is not just ambiguous. In parsing technology apart from techniques, we see why Ricoeur has his working distinction between persons and things. A recent thesis written by Carney²⁵ shows that techniques for Ricoeur “are the outcome of practical engagements and questions [in institutional work] but they also, in turn, raise further questions and challenge practical understanding” when separated from technology.²⁶ In separating the technological from the technical, the study of technology can become properly hermeneutical between the dialectic of applied knowledge [«*techné*»] and theoretical, industries-based knowledge [«*technologie*»]. In Ricoeur’s words, “[t]here is no technique that is not applied knowledge, and there is no applied knowledge that does not depend on knowledge that has first renounced all application. *Praxis* cannot summarize man. *Theoria* is also its *raison d’être*.”²⁷ In taking the ‘long route’ through interpreting a given technical use of a tool in context and how it relates to its place within technological history at the abstract level, it can be seen how new interpretative possibilities of meaning emerge.

We can see this sort of approach in full bloom in Ricoeur’s “The Adventure of Technology and Its Planetary Horizon”²⁸—his clearest “proto-empirical” philosophy of technology. In the article, he essentially takes on a particular artifact, namely the Sputnik satellite, and explores its implications to social contexts in a nuanced and multi-valued perspective—including the sociohistorical engagement of work, consumption, and self-understanding.²⁹ We also see verbiage that we would not expect to see if Ricoeur truly took a pessimistic, purely deterministic view of technology. For instance, consider the following:

Tool, sign, [and] institution imply each other: as such the tool, finally, proceeds with the power to transform things via discourse [«*parole*»], and according to a prescribed order. We can turn these three notions over as we wish, each one referring to the others. In this sense there is no beginning of the technique prior to that of humanity; the beginning

of the technique merges with the beginning of humanity, which all at once works, speaks and puts in order its social relations.³⁰

If we take Ricoeur's persons and things distinction seriously about technology in a metaphysical sense, he is at risk of contradicting himself. However, we must remember that Ricoeur speaks of this distinction throughout his work in only a semantic sense—in other words, Ricoeur, just as his complicated relationship with 'modernity', has no ontological commitment between persons and things but is merely interested in showing that one discourse cannot be reduced to the other.³¹ In regard to his discussion of technology he claims that his analytic method is "only provisionally determining a series of levels and articulating these levels;"³² similarly, he has said elsewhere about the physical and non-physical (e.g., technological artifacts and their context) that "this semantic dualism [...] can only be a point of departure" because "[i]n a certain way—how I am not sure at all—it is the same body that is experienced and known; it is the same mind that is experienced and known; it is the same person who is 'mental' and 'corporal.'"³² As such, through parsing apart technology and technique, Ricoeur has given us an explicit path toward understanding technology as Wolff² advocates; in doing so, we are afforded the remainder of Ricoeur's frameworks to explore the empirical dimensions of technology as Kaplan¹ advocates.

I should briefly point out that even though Ricoeur engages with a specific technology, namely Sputnik, its uniqueness in the Ricoeur corpus demonstrates that, while Ricoeur indirectly acknowledges that engaging with a technological artifact at such lengths is fruitful, he remains firmly in a 'proto-empirical' school of thought.

Bridging the Literature

Thus far, we have been able to explore generally what Ricoeur has to offer to the philosophy of technology in an explicit sense through a single example. Like much of Ricoeur's work, he is thorough and comprehensive in scope in his writings about technology. In different places in his *corpus*, he takes a balanced approach to both the conceptual and analytical sides of his exploration while being careful not to parse them apart. As such, it has been shown that Ricoeur is aware, if not accepting, of the positive and inevitable contributions technology makes to thought and society,³³ while also warning against a potential technological monopoly in epistemological, cultural, and societal forms that Kaplan¹ elegantly lays out. Through this exploration, we have shown how the pessimistic view of Ricoeur's philosophy of technology, represented by Kaplan,¹ is not supported by full extent of the literature. However, the highly optimistic view, which is represented by Wolff,² while supported in several instances must be constrained; specifically, while Ricoeur does directly thematize technology in a 'proto-empirical' way, the

sparseness of this work suggests that Ricoeur cannot be thought of as pervasively resisting a deterministic view of technology.

Having dealt with the negative and positive arguments, I offer a few brief comments on both approaches that Kaplan¹ and Wolff² utilize—where each philosopher has served humbly, via each of their brilliant and thorough writing, as a proxy for two general views on Ricoeur’s work in technology. Specifically, I make explicit that, despite the pessimistic and optimistic tenor of each view, respectively, both thinkers believe Ricoeur can add to the philosophy of technology in contemporary literature. I agree with both thinkers on this front, and in fact, am hoping to solidify the relevance of Ricoeur’s perspectives as a helpful tool for current scholarship.

Kaplan¹ and Kaplan⁴ engaged in a careful reading of what is largely missing in Ricoeur’s philosophy of technology. Ricoeur, while having traces of empirical leanings in his work as I have shown here, rejected the empirical turn due to his interests lying elsewhere—even if it should be considered consistent with the philosophical tools Ricoeur provides. I share Kaplan’s later observation, citing Abel³⁴, that “[f]or moral reasons, Ricoeur takes great pains to respect the differences among the philosophies he brings together” instead of trying to synthesize the best parts of various philosophies.³⁵ Even with Kaplan’s thorough critique, he offers an inspiring take on what Ricoeur can offer the philosophy of technology. He powerfully captures in clear and meticulous writing five broad themes from Ricoeur’s work that can serve as productive philosophical frameworks for thinking about contemporary technologies¹ with a similar follow up again in Kaplan.³⁶

Kaplan¹ suggests that we can draw upon the work of Ricoeur to better understand the philosophical connotations of technology, using four central themes. First, Kaplan proposes that we view technological objects as ‘texts’ in the sense that Ricoeur used the term – they bear meanings that are not solely tied to their creators or users. Second, Kaplan introduces Ricoeur’s model of hermeneutics as a tool for reconciling the technical aspects of technology with its social implications, illustrating how these two facets are intricately linked. Third, Kaplan refers to Ricoeur’s interpretive theory of narratives to explain how technology is woven into the tapestry of our personal stories, influencing our self-perceptions and life experiences. Finally, Kaplan points to Ricoeur’s moral-political philosophy as a means of assessing the ethical and suitability of technology, promoting the idea of democratic involvement in setting the course for technology policy.

Let’s look at this value through a brief example. Consider the popular smart phone application “Instagram” as a technological artifact for study. On Kaplan’s account, we can apply the four major frameworks derived from Ricoeur’s work to better understand the philosophical implications of this specific technology. You will notice that each theme essentially co-opts a

thread of Ricoeur's thought rather than using it for its intrinsic value to study technology.

Theme 1: Technology as text. Considering Instagram as a text in the Ricoeurian sense, we recognize that it has meanings and implications independent of its creators and users. The platform, in this sense, can be seen as a cultural artifact that is constantly being created, modified, and interpreted. Users engage with Instagram by posting photos, stories, and comments, but the platform itself also shapes the way people interact with it. For instance, it can abstract traditional understandings of friendship to "likes" as affirmation, mutual following as passively maintained connection (as opposed to actively reinforcing the relationship through mutual understanding and discourse) and limit the visibility and type of social discourses (e.g., via the recommendation algorithm and comment character limits). Thus, Instagram is not only a product of its users but also an influential force in shaping their behaviors, norms, and expectations.

Theme 2: Hermeneutics. Ricoeur's concept of hermeneutics can be applied to understand the dialectical relationship between the technical and social dimensions of Instagram. On the one hand, Instagram is a technological platform with specific features and design elements that enable photo-sharing and social interactions. On the other hand, these technical features are intertwined with the social practices, norms, and values of its users. For instance, the type of content lends itself well to Instagram—highly visual and engaging depictions of the world—can lead to reinforcing particular social values. For instance, the platform allows for highly curated and attention-grabbing photos of a given user (e.g., "selfies"), which can reinforce and communicate cultural norms of attractiveness, can suggest the desirability of particular products for achieving those norms, and can exclude posts or users that fall outside of those norms (e.g., via Instagram's algorithm "deciding" what content is or is not engaging). To fully understand Instagram, we need to recognize the interplay in this spirit and appreciate how the technical aspects of the platform influence and are influenced by the social behaviors of its users.

Theme 3: Narrative theory of interpretation. Instagram, as a technology, figures into the stories of our lives by allowing users to create, share, and consume visual narratives. The rise of the "influencer," where people's influence on a community is measured through literal, quantifiable metrics of follower counts, views, likes, and so forth, communicates particular narratives to users about whether or not they have broader social value or worth. Through posting photos, stories, and comments, users actively participate in shaping their own identities and experiences, as well as those of others. The rising visibility of certain stories, identities, and experiences suggests something about how people should or could think about their own stories. Instagram thus serves as a platform for self-expression, storytelling,

and the construction of personal and collective narratives, which ultimately helps to define who we are and how we perceive the world.

Theme 4: Moral-political philosophy. Ricoeur's moral-political philosophy can provide a framework for evaluating the rightness and appropriateness of Instagram as a technology. Questions about privacy, data ownership, and the impact of social media on mental health and well-being are essential to consider. In this context, his work suggests that democratic participation in technology policy becomes crucial, as it allows for the inclusion of diverse perspectives in the decision-making process. Such participation can help ensure that Instagram and similar platforms remain transparent, accountable, and adaptable to the needs and values of their users.

Despite Kaplan communicating these frameworks, he left out some of the more nuanced components of Ricoeur's thinking about technology in "The Adventure of Technology and Its Planetary Horizon" and "The Tasks of the Political Educator," which I used to suggest Ricoeur's work escapes the charge of being "unoriginal, limited, dated, and false"¹⁴ in section I. Kaplan has softened his view on this front in his recent 2021 book chapter.³⁵

Wolff², who had the benefit of writing roughly 14 years after Kaplan¹ with a presumably greater accessibility to Ricoeur's scholarship, takes command of Ricoeur's entire corpus through the early 2000s and can explore several explicit ways Ricoeur directly thematizes technology in a productive, original way. I will describe just two here. First, Wolff credits Ricoeur with the careful examination of the ambiguity of technology. In-line with what I have shown in section I, Wolff argues that Ricoeur saw technology as having both positive and negative aspects and sought to explore this ambiguity in relation to various issues. A clear example of this, as Wolff fully unpacks, is how Ricoeur examines urbanization with its technological advances and how it can bring both opportunities and pathologies.³⁷ Through this examination, Ricoeur aimed to develop a nuanced understanding of the ethical implications of technological development and adoption in society. Secondly, Wolff credits Ricoeur with exploring how technology exists as an aspect of human abilities to act and draws from countless examples over the entirety of Ricoeur's career to communicate the point. Specifically, Wolff highlighted the ways in which Ricoeur thought technological developments can expand or limit our ability to act in certain ways, particularly through power (e.g., "power to do something," "power over someone"). Through this consideration, Ricoeur aimed to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between technology and human agency.

However, caught up in his thoughtful and positive argument, Wolff fails to make explicit that Ricoeur, while having more than nothing original to say about technology, does resist the empirical turn in a way that is perhaps inappropriate given his breadth of scholarship. Wolff also does not seem to fully acknowledge some of the commitments, whether semantic or otherwise,

that Ricoeur makes and therefore leaves the reader wanting more in the analysis of Ricoeur's "proto-empirical" works.

As such, each philosopher's perspective seems to compliment the other while also reinforcing the adage *ne quid nimis*—nothing in excess. In other words, the primary disagreement between each thinker seems to be about what it means to have direct relevance to the philosophy of technology (i.e., whether thematizing technology is a direct contribution). However, both works are a success at revitalizing life into Ricoeur's philosophical project and reinforces with inspiring rigor that Ricoeur still has much to say here in the 21st century. As such, I content from section I that Ricoeur's views are consistent with contemporary efforts and, here in section II, I content that the indirect disagreement between Wolff and Kaplan is a non-issue for those hoping to use Ricoeur's work in contributing to the philosophy of technology in both highly practical and forward-thinking ways.

This sentiment is reinforced via the release of the brilliant anthology *Interpreting Technology* edited by Wessel Reijers, Alberto Romele, and Mark Coeckelbergh.³ In this work, we see five accounts of Ricoeur engaging with theories of technology – three of which I have engaged with here (i.e., Wolff, Kaplan, and Carney). Part two offers five additional pieces dedicated to Ricoeur's treatment of ethics as applied to Technology. Part three of the anthology offers roughly 100 pages of Ricoeur's relevance to continued scholarship in the 21st century. The areas of analysis include health information and telecommunication technologies, Ricoeur's novel work on metaphors as applied to software development, the connection between narrativity and the 'black box' of artificial intelligence, and how hermeneutics can allow for responsible innovations in various fields of technology. However, in the next section, I take the opportunity to briefly outline under discussed applications of Ricoeur's frameworks.

Future Applications: Ricoeur's Thought in Philosophy of Technology

As we venture further into the digital age, the application of Ricoeur's philosophy to the realm of technology and technology-related questions gains ever greater importance. In this section, I briefly suggest several potential areas of Ricoeur's ideas for future work that are severely under-discussed or have not previously been proposed.

Philosophy of Information

The philosophy of information is a branch of philosophy that explores questions regarding information, including its nature and dynamics, the philosophical problems it raises, and the philosophical concepts it suggests. The term 'information' has diverse meanings across disciplines and can range

from questions dealing with semantic information³⁸ to quantified metrics of information present in data (e.g., Shannon Information³⁹). Across fields, particularly those interested in the quantification of information, researchers have mostly dealt with technical questions related to information-theoretic measures (i.e., the literal application and performance of the measures). For instance, in my home discipline of computational neuroscience, we spend a great deal of time applying information-theoretic measures to track “information flow” across neuronal networks (e.g., during “functional connectivity” research)⁴⁰ without properly dealing with whether the information being quantified or tracked is of intrinsic significance to the system at hand or whether it is merely something that is quantifiable. Within different information metrics and different disciplines, it is prescient for researchers to engage with questions such as “can meaning be reduced to computation,” “is a given information metric or concept of intrinsically significant to the system of study and what are the criteria (or lack thereof) that would allow for such a judgment,” and “is information, especially in numerical forms, properly interpretable.” Through Ricoeur’s *corpus*, we can engage with the degree to which information could be hermeneutical and the processes we could take as we look for meaning within information. This thread could be helped directly through Ricoeur’s dialectic between technique (i.e., the literal quantification of information) and technological concept of information (i.e., the ambiguity of information and its impact and role). I will explicitly turn my attention to this thread in future work.

Online Personal Identity and Rights Over Those Identities

The proliferation of digital platforms and social media has led to the construction of online personas that may diverge from or even conflict with our offline identities. Ricoeur’s narrative theory of interpretation can serve as a lens through which to explore how online personal identities are created, maintained, and transformed over time. By examining the role of digital platforms as texts, we can assess the impact of technology on our self-understanding and investigate the ethical implications of online self-presentation, including the effects of social comparison, cyberbullying, and online privacy. Additionally, as digital legacies persist after our physical demise, questions arise concerning the rights and identities of the deceased in online spaces. To what degree are our online identities proper instantiations of our personal identities? Do some platforms abstract away more features of personal identity and, as such, are they dehumanizing or communicating which features of personal identity are sufficient for the narratives of oneself to persist? Is there a distinction between commodifying one’s online identity and likeness, and by extension the identity and likeness of others, and commodifying the physical and mental form of an individual in the absence of a virtual medium? Ricoeur’s concept of the text, as well as his moral-political philosophy, can provide a potential framework for understanding

the ethical responsibilities of digital platforms. Furthermore, Ricoeur's emphasis on the phenomenological hermeneutics highlights the importance of interpreting and reinterpreting these digital legacies in light of changing social, cultural contexts, and lived experience, as well as the potential legal implications of digital inheritance.

Artificial Intelligence (AI), Software, and Machine Ethics

The rapid development of AI and machine learning technologies raises complex philosophical questions about autonomy, responsibility, and the nature of meaning. Ricoeur's work can be applied to explore the semantic constructions and ethical implications of AI and software via unpacking through Ricoeur's hermeneutical work on metaphors intrinsic within the design of a given technological artifact.⁴¹ By employing Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics and moral-political philosophy, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of AI's role in society and its impact on human values, while guiding the development of ethical AI systems that align with human needs and desires. It is also clear that Ricoeur's work in linguistics (e.g., *Threefold Mimesis*) can elucidate the limits of some of these technologies, particularly Large Language Models (LLMs), such as chatGPT, and can suggest ways of thinking about their use in educational pedagogy or within private enterprise.

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While not an exhaustive list, the application of Ricoeur's philosophy to these pressing areas of technology, and science by extension, offers a rich and promising avenue for future work when placed within a broader discourse with other diverse thinkers. By engaging with the dialectical relationships between technical and social dimensions, narrative construction, and moral-political concerns, we can strive for a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which technology shapes and is shaped by the human experience. Through such inquiry, we can hope to foster a more thoughtful, inclusive, and ethical technological future.

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- ⁴ Kaplan, David M. 2021. "Ricoeur's Critical Theory of Technology." In *Interpreting technology: Ricoeur on questions concerning ethics and philosophy of technology*, by Wessel Reijers, Alberto Romele, and Mark Coeckelbergh, 61-74. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
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- ⁷ Kaplan, "Paul Ricoeur and the Philosophy of Technology," 46.
- ⁸ Kaplan, "Ricoeur's Critical Theory of Technology," 68.
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- ¹⁰ Wolff, "Ricoeur and the Philosophy of Technology," 101.
- ¹¹ Ricoeur, "The Tasks of the Political Educator," 143.
- ¹² Ricoeur, Paul, and Charles A. Kelbley. *History and Truth*. Northwestern University Press, 1965, 274.
- ¹³ Ricoeur and Kelbley, *History and Truth*, 276.
- ¹⁴ Kaplan, "Paul Ricoeur and the Philosophy of Technology," 49.
- ¹⁵ Kaplan, "Paul Ricoeur and the Philosophy of Technology," 42.
- ¹⁶ Wolff, "Ricoeur and the Philosophy of Technology," 108.
- ¹⁷ Bloniasz, Patrick F. "On Cognition and the Tension of Live Metaphors." *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2020): 499-516.
- ¹⁸ Wolff, "Ricoeur and the Philosophy of Technology," 101.
- ¹⁹ Ricoeur, "The Tasks of the Political Educator," 144.
- ²⁰ Ricoeur, "The Tasks of the Political Educator," 146.
- ²¹ Kaplan, "Ricoeur's Critical Theory of Technology," 68.
- ²² Feenberg, Andrew. *Transforming Technology: A Critical Theory Revisited*. Oxford University Press, 2002.
- ²³ Ricoeur, "The Tasks of the Political Educator," 144.
- ²⁴ Ricoeur, "The Tasks of the Political Educator," 145. See also *cf.* 144-147.
- ²⁵ Carney, Eoin. "Technologies in Practice: Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Technique." University of Dundee, 2018. <https://discovery.dundee.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/82fa9056-1363-467d-920b-a099f91e9cb4>.
- ²⁶ Carney, "Technologies in Practice: Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Technique," 3.
- ²⁷ Ricoeur, Paul. "Travail et Parole." *Esprit* 198, no. 1 (1953): 116. My translation.

- ²⁸ Ricoeur, Paul. "L'aventure Technique et Son Horizon Planétaire." *Autres Temps* 76, no. 1 (2003): 67-78.
- ²⁹ Wolff, "Ricoeur and the Philosophy of Technology," 101-102.
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- ³¹ For full discussion on "Semantic Dualism" throughout Ricoeur's work, see: Hünefeldt, Thomas. "Semantic Dualism and Narrative Identity-Paul Ricoeur on the Cognitive Sciences." *Cognitive Processing* 6, no. 3 (September 2005): 153-56.
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La radicalité du manger

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Introduction

Nous vivons aujourd’hui dans un monde où notre manière de manger est mise à la question du point de vue moral. Nous avons besoin d’une éthique du *manger*, nous avons à juger du bien ou du mal des différents points de vue – carnivorisme, végétalisme, véganisme, etc. – et à différents niveaux – libéralisme et élevage, droits des animaux, etc. La surconsommation et le gaspillage alimentaire posent toujours problème dans la société capitaliste contemporaine et provoquent des crises économiques et environnementales. Mais nous posons rarement la question fondamentale de savoir ce qu’est *le manger* ou, plutôt, celles de savoir quel est le rapport, dans l’acte de manger ou dans l’alimentation, entre le mangeant qui vit du mangé et le mangé qui nourrit le mangeant, comment le mangé se transmue en mangeant et, surtout, la question de savoir si le manger n’est pas un acte spécifiquement humain. Ces questions sont essentielles à quiconque se demanderait ce qu’une “éthique du manger” désigne du point de vue philosophique¹. Nous voudrions ici tenter de répondre à cette série de questions. Notre but est de montrer que le sujet (le mangeant) et l’objet qu’il mange (le mangé) ne sont pas distincts l’un de l’autre et que la dichotomie qu’on dresse entre eux n’a lieu qu’après une opération subjective et artificielle, d’origine humaine. Cette dichotomie est au fondement de la hiérarchie qui prévaut dans le monde anthropocentrique, et que nous voudrions questionner.

Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) s’est interrogé sur le *manger* et a montré la radicalité de l’acte qu’il représente,² bien que le rôle du *manger* au sein de son travail en général n’ait pas encore été étudié dans le détail.³ Levinas décrit l’absorption du sujet qui mange dans le monde et le rapport entre le mangeant et le mangé, déterminé comme un rapport non-humain. Sa pensée offre la possibilité de comparer l’acte de manger et l’acte de travailler, et de montrer que si dans le travail le sujet saisit le monde, quand il mange, il peut aussi être

saisi par le monde qui se montre à lui dans la nourriture. La subjectivité revisitée à partir du problème du *manger* et de la faim est une subjectivité fragile et décentralisée, unifiée avec son environnement qui l'entoure. Le problème de la faim est essentiel pour comprendre la subjectivité et la subjectivation, mais il a jusqu'à présent été ignoré.⁴ Ce problème a une dimension politique que nous n'aborderons pas ici directement, mais dont nous examinerons les présupposés philosophiques. Le cadre de notre travail⁵ est une philosophie environnementale qui doit s'interroger sur l'influence de la crise environnementale tout en étudiant ces présupposés. À cette fin, il nous faudra commencer par l'analyse phénoménologique de la faim, du manque et de l'acte de manger, et le comparer avec l'acte de travailler chez Levinas. Il s'agit d'esquisser la possibilité, au moins théorique, pour le sujet, de ne plus se définir comme le seul qui mange (le mangeant), mais aussi comme celui qui est absorbé par le monde et son environnement.

Pour commencer, nous rappellerons que dans *Le temps et l'autre* (1947) et dans les réflexions qui l'ont précédé, Levinas évoque un "primat du manger." La relation de l'être-au-monde à l'égard du monde n'est pas une relation théorique comme par exemple la représentation, mais une relation réelle et corporelle que Levinas définit comme une relation entre le besoin et la nourriture. Avant le processus de la subjectivation le sujet pré-dicatif est conçu comme celui qui mange. Dans cette relation, la violence n'intervient pas, car il n'y a pas de sujet/objet clairement polarisé.

Nous montrerons ensuite que cette relation sans sujet se pose en contraste avec le "travail," acte par lequel on tente de saisir le monde à l'aide de la main. Dans *Totalité et infini* (1961), Levinas affirme que le sujet travaille avec ses mains dans le monde, ce qui lui permet d'identifier les choses au monde et de les posséder. Ce rapport de dominant-dominé par la saisie est un aspect totalitaire de l'existence du sujet. La sincérité du manger elle-même doit être distinguée d'une relation subjectivante et active de l'acte de travail. En d'autres termes, il y a toujours une certaine "droiture" et de la sincérité dans le manger qui a sa raison dans le besoin, et c'est en cela précisément qu'il peut y avoir de la place pour une éthique du manger.

Nous montrerons enfin que dans l'acte de manger, la subjectivité non seulement saisit le monde, mais est absorbée dans le monde, alors que dans l'acte de travailler, elle saisit la matière et la domine. On n'oubliera pas de souligner que le monde naturel peut menacer la subjectivité en la détruisant (les catastrophes naturelles, etc.). Ainsi nous décentrerons le concept de la subjectivité afin de montrer que l'acte de manger n'est pas spécifiquement humain, et que le mangé et le mangeant n'ont pas une relation unilatérale. Sur ces fondements, nous pourrions, dans une tentative écologiste, déconstruire le rapport entre l'humain et le monde et critiquer la configuration anthropocentrique du monde où il se pose lui-même au centre, et avec cette configuration les présupposés philosophiques dans lesquels nos politiques et nos idéologies sont enracinées.

L'acte de *manger* comme processus de subjectivation

Le temps et l'autre est un livre constitué à partir des manuscrits des cours de Levinas au Collège Philosophique, dont le directeur était Jean Wahl. Dans la deuxième partie de ses quatre cours, qui est notre point de départ, il nous semble que Levinas dépasse le cadre de l'analyse phénoménologique heideggerienne, tout en soulignant le rôle de la matérialité qui ne constitue pas seulement l'objet, mais aussi un sujet.

L'analyse de la matérialité chez Heidegger, tout comme l'analyse de l'ustensilité, est insuffisante d'après Levinas parce qu'elle ne peut saisir la condition corporelle de l'être-là, à savoir la nourriture. Elle représente une mise en question de l'inconditionnalité de la différence ontologique. Levinas, au contraire, souligne la matérialité de la vie quotidienne pour comprendre le processus de la subjectivation. Certes, la condition matérielle a pu être considérée dans l'histoire de la philosophie comme un "malheur profond"⁶ ou comme la tragédie d'un "enchaînement à soi-même."⁷ Cependant, en même temps, nous "ne mangeons et n'aspérons pas dans un monde illusoire," mais nous nous préoccupons "de pain plus que d'angoisse."⁸ "De là, l'accent de grandeur qui émeut dans un humanisme partant du problème économique, de là le pouvoir même que possèdent les revendications de la classe ouvrière de s'ériger en humanisme."⁹ Si on comprend la matérialité quotidienne ainsi, on voit que le besoin de la nourriture précède le concept du système d'outils.

La vie de l'homme dans le monde ne va pas au-delà des objets qui le remplissent. Il n'est peut-être pas juste de dire que nous vivons pour manger, mais il n'est pas plus juste de dire que nous mangeons pour vivre. La dernière finalité du manger est contenue dans l'aliment. Quand on respire une fleur, c'est à l'odeur que se limite la finalité de l'acte. Se promener, c'est prendre l'air, non pour la santé, mais pour l'air. Ce sont les nourritures qui caractérisent notre existence dans le monde. Existence extatique — être hors de soi —, mais limitée par l'objet.¹⁰

L'idée de Levinas ici est la suivante : les choses ne sont pas des objets minutieusement arrangés par le sujet en proportion des utilités, un système d'outils, mais d'abord des nourritures, qui caractérisent et définissent son existence. La relation pré-thématique avec l'objet est la "jouissance."¹¹ L'objet de la jouissance "s'absorbe" dans la subjectivité et en même temps, il "s'éloigne" dans le sens où il se pose à l'extérieur de sa reconnaissance comme tel. La donnée hylétique perd ainsi son hylé quand elle se donne au sujet. Ce double mouvement est articulé dans le modèle du manger. C'est en mangeant l'autre que, écrit Levinas, le sujet l'atteste autant qu'il "s'accomplit" comme l'autre que le sujet.¹²

Pourquoi Levinas définit-il la relation de jouissance à partir du manger ? La jouissance s'exprime chaque fois différemment – “respirer, boire, manger, aller au musée, lire, se promener, etc.”¹³ –, mais il s'agit chaque fois de même, selon lui, de fonder à travers le manger une relation matérielle originaire :¹⁴

... le besoin est un intervalle franchi où la dualité disparaît. Assimilation du monde extérieur par le sujet. Tout besoin satisfait est en premier lieu satiété, le fait d'avoir mangé. Primat du manger. C'est cela la signification de la jouissance du besoin.¹⁵

Ainsi la jouissance du besoin se définit-elle comme l'assimilation du monde extérieur. Là se trouve la signification de l'acte de manger — primat du manger. Il est impossible de fonder le processus d'assimilation du monde sur son propre besoin, sur l'acte de respirer, de se promener et d'aller au musée. Il est plus convenable en revanche de le fonder sur l'acte de manger. Seul l'acte de “mordre sur” peut prétendre à la “maîtrise sur l'être.” Le manger est aussi un geste d'auto-révigoration dans la morsure, c'est un retour du moi au soi et de la satisfaction,¹⁶ même si le manger n'est pas la finalité absolue de la jouissance,¹⁷ mais un simple résultat. C'est la nourriture qui est sa finalité (donc c'est l'environnement qui est la finalité en soi).¹⁸

Bien sûr, cependant, “nous ne sommes pas assez naïfs pour nous imaginer que la description de la jouissance, telle que nous l'avons menée jusqu'ici — corresponde à la vie de l'homme concret.”¹⁹ En effet, l'homme ne vit pas seulement pour la satisfaction de ses besoins. Il peut aussi souffrir de maux de tête parce qu'il est un *cogito* réfléchissant. “En fait, l'homme a déjà reçu des enseignements et sa vie est commandée par la réflexion. Mais, en fait aussi, il n'a jamais abandonné l'orientation esthétique qu'il donne à l'ensemble du monde.”²⁰ Ainsi, en dépit du fait qu'il se définit comme une subjectivité réfléchissante, Levinas décrit l'homme en contraste avec sa condition matérielle dans la vie concrète à partir du manger. Il se concentre sur l'acte de manger dans son livre majeur, *Totalité et Infini*, mais à partir d'une autre perspective, comme on le verra dans la suite.

La comparaison avec le *travailler*

Dans *Totalité et Infini*, Levinas ajoute un point de vue qui nous permet de comprendre la distinction entre deux actes : le manger et le travailler. Il les compare à partir de leurs propres relations au monde.

Le manger a son origine dans le “besoin” qui le précède. Le besoin n'est pas seulement un manque, mais il est aussi une condition du bonheur. La relation humaine avec le monde n'est pas définie par Levinas comme un désespoir, mais comme une “dépendance heureuse.” L'homme trouve sa propre identité grâce au besoin qui est le fondement de sa propre identification. Grâce au besoin, on peut sortir de l'existence indéterminée – l'

“il y a” – dans laquelle le sujet n’existe pas encore. En tant que sujet mangeant, je peux trouver de la satisfaction dans le milieu naturel. Je transforme ce milieu en mangeant, mais je suis transformé moi-même. Le besoin selon Levinas ne représente pas quelque chose à surmonter, puisque le corps et ses besoins sont cruciaux pour la subjectivité. Le corps même n’est pas une prison ni un “esclavage de l’esprit,” mais un lieu de la jouissance qui vient de l’alimentation.²¹

Selon Levinas, il y a deux actes impliqués dans la jouissance. D’une part, il y a la dépendance du mangeant de l’objet : le mangeant doit se nourrir et ne peut survivre, ni former sa propre subjectivité sans l’environnement qui l’entoure. Levinas nomme l’acte de manger la “transmutation de l’autre en Même.” Dans cette expression, “l’autre” est la nature qui se modifie pour devenir une partie de l’homme (le Même). D’autre part, cette dépendance initiale rend possible l’indépendance de l’homme dans laquelle il trouve du plaisir de l’autre qu’il mange. Cette indépendance introduit une distance entre l’homme et le monde, le Même et l’autre. L’homme devient rassasié, indépendant de son environnement, mais il n’en est jamais complètement indépendant car il aura toujours de nouveaux besoins et aura toujours faim.

En d’autres termes, pour Levinas, manger signifie “vivre de” quelque chose. Manger n’est pas le même acte que l’acte de parler, de représenter un objet ou d’agir sur lui : “Vivre de pain, n’est donc ni se représenter le pain, ni agir sur lui, ni agir par lui.”²² L’acte de manger n’appartient pas à la conscience, cet acte dépasse la conscience, même si bien sûr cet acte ne peut se trouver en dehors d’elle. Levinas utilise la métaphore du baiser pour montrer que la conscience qui mange “embrasse” ce qu’elle mange. Le mangé n’est pas une simple fin pour l’homme qui le mange de sorte qu’il n’ait pas d’autre identité que d’être un objet qu’on dévore. Le mangé n’est pas réductible non plus à un contenu de la vie, ce qui implique que le mangé est indépendant du mangeant.²³

Selon Levinas, le travail en revanche fait apparaître l’objet comme quelque chose qu’on peut définir, comme un objet disponible au sens phénoménologique du terme. La matière travaillée perd son indétermination. Si on travaille, on ne se rend plus compte de ce que “vivre de” son environnement signifie et on façonne le monde pour qu’il ne puisse plus nous menacer. Levinas va jusqu’à dire que la nature en devient une “nature morte.”²⁴ Lorsque l’être de l’objet est “neutralisé,” il paraît impossible de se perdre dans le goût du monde. C’est pour cela qu’une fois la chose nous appartient, elle perd son être : “...la chose, en tant qu’avoir, est un étant ayant perdu son être.”²⁵ Nous travaillons le monde et notre environnement perd son indétermination. Nous y voyons non plus une matière et une chose dans laquelle on pourrait se perdre, mais un objet que nous utilisons.

Pour expliquer la relation entre l’homme et le monde qui se joue dans le travail, Levinas utilise la métaphore de la main qui prend des choses. Le

mouvement de la main est un mouvement fondé sur l'économie. La main prend des choses de la nature pour que ces choses puissent lui appartenir. Dans ce rapport entre la main et la matière, l'environnement perd sa dimension indéterminée et son indépendance parce qu'il est maîtrisé. Levinas dit que "le travail "définit" la matière" — la matière devient ainsi utile.²⁶

Le travailler humain, le manger non-humain

Dans cette théorie levinasienne, on retrouve la critique de la matérialité définie comme un outil chez le premier Heidegger. Les choses ne sont jamais définies que par leur utilité, qui est toujours déjà séparée de leur propre finalité et de leur valeur. Dire que toutes choses du monde peuvent être saisies par la main implique une hiérarchie dont l'homme occuperait le dernier échelon, un anthropocentrisme. Pour cette raison, la choseité heideggérienne est refusée par certains penseurs environnementaux, qui revendiquent la capacité d'agir des animaux, surtout dans le domaine de l'écologie.²⁷ Si Levinas au contraire assume que les choses naturelles qui nous entourent ont une valeur intrinsèque, indépendamment de l'usage de l'homme, alors sa pensée peut servir les discussions environnementales d'aujourd'hui.²⁸ S'il nous faut une nouvelle écologie fondée sur la capacité d'agir comprise comme un acte non seulement humain, mais aussi non-humain, nous pouvons commencer par le manger comme le conceptualise Levinas car cet acte est, pour ainsi dire, non-humain. Corinne Pelluchon a essayé d'élargir le cadre levinassien pour repenser l'éthique animale ou la bio-politique dans son œuvre, *Les nourritures : Philosophie du corps politique* (2015).²⁹

Non seulement les humains, mais tous les vivants mangent d'autres vivants et ils sont eux-mêmes mangés par d'autres vivants³⁰. Ce simple fait nous permet de réaliser que les humains ne sont pas au centre du monde. Par l'acte de manger, tous les vivants sont reliés. Le mangeant n'est qu'un des foyers qui apparaissent et disparaissent dans le dynamisme du monde. Cela signifie que notre propos ne se réduit pas à une "éthique du manger" mais se définit plus généralement comme une esquisse d'éthique de l'être-ensemble, parce que bien et mal ne sont pas pensables à partir de l'acte de manger, mais à partir des rapports généraux que l'on entretient avec les autres entités, qui seraient cruels ou généreux, irréparables ou durables. Levinas insiste aussi sur le primat du manger, alors qu'il relativise le primat du travail, d'agir de manière active et consciente. Le sujet chez Heidegger, Sartre ou Husserl est, on pourrait dire, un sujet actif, un travailleur. Cette pensée présuppose que le sujet agit librement et transforme son environnement sans être transformé par lui. Pour pouvoir réfléchir différemment à nos subjectivités, il faut d'abord repenser cette définition et ensemble, avec Levinas, comprendre le sujet comme étant passif, se perdant dans son environnement, dans le goût des objets naturels qui le forment et transforment. Réfléchir autrement à nos subjectivités du point de vue politique pourrait amener à comprendre le sujet comme celui qui participe à l'acte de manger ensemble avec tous les

organismes qui mangent ou autrement absorbent leur environnement dans un mouvement non-unilatéral, avant qu'il soit un sujet travaillant.

Les penseurs environnementaux réfléchissent à la capacité d'agir dans un contexte plus large. Peter Singer l'élargit aux animaux, Hans Jonas à tous les vivants y compris les plantes et récemment, J. B. Callicott à la Terre entière dans son "hypothèse de Gaïa" et le "biocentrisme. Si on peut suivre Callicott et élargir le concept de communauté à toutes les entités, la hiérarchie éthique ou la notion anthropocentrique du monde doit être abandonnée, puisque tous les vivants s'entre-mangent. On pourrait concevoir la communauté non pas comme un cercle formé autour de son centre – ce qui amène toujours à la position d'une hiérarchie et présuppose un concept de réciprocité menant à des apories (par ex., un lapin, peut-il être un agent éthique, même s'il est incapable de répondre à nos actions éthiques ?). Il nous faut une communauté ouverte et sans frontières qui ne soit pas fondée sur un concept de réciprocité, mais sur le concept de l'alimentation éthique et de l'altérité du monde pour pouvoir repenser la responsabilité des modes actuels de notre alimentation.

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¹ Pour des interprétations inspirées par la phénoménologie, cf. Jacques Derrida, "Il faut bien manger" ou le calcul du sujet," *Cahiers Confrontation* 20 (1989); Michelle Boulous Walker, "Eating Ethically: Emmanuel Levinas and Simone Weil," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (2002); Cristina Vendra, I am hungry, therefore I am. Paul Ricœur's hermeneutic phenomenology as a model for food existentialism," *Philosophical Inquiries* 1 (2022); Corine Pelluchon, *Les nourritures: Philosophie du corps politique* (Paris: Seuil, 2015). Il existe les textes sur la philosophie du goût (Philosophy of Taste). Cf. Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Elizabeth Teffler, *Food for Thought: Philosophy and Food* (London: Routledge, 1996); Deane W. Curtin and Lisa M. Heldke, *Cooking, Eating, Thinking* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992) etc.

² Howard Caygill souligne le fait que l'analyse de la jouissance est une partie importante de la pensée lévinassienne, comme le montrent les *Carnets de captivité* dans lesquels s'esquisse une philosophie socialiste (en contraste avec l'hitlérisme) chez Levinas qui n'a, malheureusement, jamais abouti. Cf. Howard Caygill, "Levinas' Prison Notebooks," *Radical Philosophy* 160 (2010), 27-35.

³ Cf. David Goldstein, "Emmanuel Levinas and the Ontology of Eating," in *Gastronomica* 3 (2010), 34-44.

⁴ Par exemple, dans *Le désir et le monde* (Paris: Hermann, 2016) Renaud Barbaras dresse une distinction entre le désir et le besoin encore anthropocentrique et la manière dont il pense cette dichotomie montre qu'il ignore complètement la problématique de la faim.

- ⁵ Cf. Alžbeta Kuchtová, “Humanity as a New Image of the Divine Absoluteness. In The Modern Experience of the Religious,” in *The Modern Experience of the Religious* (Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2023), 343-367 ; Alžbeta Kuchtová, “Pojem inakosti a environmentálna filozofia - Emmanuel Levinas a Martin Buber [The Concept of Otherness and Environmental Philosophy - Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Buber],” in *Filozofia* 2 (2022), 85-96; Alžbeta Kuchtová, “Hierarchy in Society, and What About Nature?,” in *Filozofia* 7 (2023), 578 - 586; Rui Matsuba, “La critique contre l’écologie chez Emanuele Coccia,” in *Limitrophe* 2 (2023), 20-28.
- ⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini* (La Haye: Martinus Nijhof, 1971), 39. Goldstein montre que le manger a un rôle central dans la pensée de Levinas.
- ⁷ Ibid., 45.
- ⁸ Ibid., 42.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 45.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 46.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Œuvres complètes*, tome 2. *Parole et silence et autres conférences inédites au Collège philosophique* (Paris: Grasset-IMEC, 2011), 156.
- ¹⁴ Si l’on en croit l’ordre de la note, cette partie a été écrite en 1943.
- ¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Œuvres complètes*, tome 1. *Carnet de captivité suivi* (Paris: Grasset-IMEC, 2009), 120.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 121.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 165.
- ¹⁸ Goldstein montre que dans *De l’existence à l’existant*, Levinas se demande si le manger peut vraiment être considéré comme un besoin. Cf. Goldstein, “Emmanuel Levinas and the Ontology of Eating”, 35.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 164.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 164f.
- ²¹ Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 113.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Ibid., 114.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 127.
- ²⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “La réalité et son ombre”, in *Les Temps Modernes* 38 (1948), 77.
- ²⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 71.
- ²⁷ W. S. K. Cameron, “Heidegger’s concept of environment in *Being and Time*”, *Environmental Philosophy* 1(2004), 34-46.
- ²⁸ “Car s’il est impossible d’attribuer une valeur intrinsèque à la nature, alors l’éthique environnementale n’a plus de raison d’être. Si la valeur intrinsèque fait défaut à la nature, alors l’éthique environnementale n’est en effet rien d’autre qu’une application particulière de

l'éthique qui règle les relations entre les hommes. Pour dire la même chose autrement, si la valeur intrinsèque fait défaut à la nature, alors toute éthique environnementale *non anthropocentriste* est disqualifiée." (J. Baird Callicot, *Éthique de la terre*, trans. Pierre Madelain [Paris: Wildproject, 2010]), 112.

²⁹ Corine Pelluchon, *Les nourritures: Philosophie du corps politique* (Paris: Seuil, 2015).

³⁰ En analysant le rapport mangeant-mangé dans son livre *Métamorphoses*, E. Coccia montre qu'il y a une transformation d'une vie à une autre vie dans l'acte de manger. C'est une manière de comprendre que toutes vies sont liées à travers la métamorphose. Cf. Emanuele Coccia, *Métamorphoses* (Paris: Payot et Rivages, 2020), 123ff.

The Seduction of Metaphors

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Love is a self-made thing

Love is a self-made trap

– Kae Tempest, “I trap you”

The Book of Traps and Lessons, 2019

In a note from 1875, Nietzsche considers words to be seducing philosophers and capturing them in the nets of language: “The seducers of philosophers are words, they wriggle in the nets of language.” (KSA 8:6[39]) One of the reasons for this seduction, Nietzsche explains, is that philosophers do not question the prejudices that are embedded in language and believe that through language they are getting at the essence of things, “they really believed that in language they had knowledge of the world.” (HH 11) Philosophers are therefore misled into believing in a metaphysical true world and language becomes the place *par excellence* where metaphysics operates. Language conditions the philosopher to think metaphysically, for instance through the opposition between object and subject or doer and deed¹. By taking language for granted, philosophers take metaphysical dualisms for granted. To the contrary, Nietzsche argues that we must escape these dualisms, that we must not fall for the seduction of language.

In this essay, I argue that Nietzsche’s metaphor of seduction can be understood as a critique of language and of the metaphysical dualisms embedded in it. However, confronting this metaphor to the metaphor of truth as a woman reveals that Nietzsche himself might have been caught “in the nets of *language*.” Is there a way to escape these nets or are philosophers bound to be trapped in them? I answer this question in three steps. First, I focus on the metaphor of seduction that Nietzsche uses to criticise the metaphysics of language. Second, I explore how Nietzsche’s metaphor of truth as a woman shows that he himself has been seduced by this metaphor and falls back into the metaphysical traps he is trying to overcome. Third, I explore how Hélène Cixous’s use of language in *Angst* offers an alternative to

the seduction of metaphors. Her literary use of language aims at uncovering the metaphysics of language and at offering a poetic alternative.

Nietzsche and the Metaphor of Seduction

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche considers many philosophical ideas to contain a *contradictio in adjecto* in which philosophers believe because of the seduction of words:

There are still harmless self-observers who believe in the existence of “immediate certainties,” such as “I think,” or the “I will” that was Schopenhauer’s superstition: just as if knowledge had been given an object here to seize, stark naked, as a “thing-in-itself,” and no falsification took place from either the side of the subject or the side of the object. But I will say this a hundred times: “immediate certainty,” like “absolute knowledge” and the “thing in itself” contains a *contradictio in adjecto*. For once and for all, we should free ourselves from the seduction of words! (BGE 16)

The analysis of the expression “I think,” Nietzsche argues, reveals that philosophers are being misled by language. Where philosophers see an “immediate certainty” runs in fact a whole process of thought that establishes an agent, an action, a cause, etc. As for the opposition between subject and object, the ideas of agent, action or cause are metaphysical presuppositions rather than matters of fact. To say “I think” cannot be immediate because it presupposes a whole metaphysical framework, namely the metaphysics of the subject.

Nietzsche specifies this idea by arguing that certainty comes from comparing different states of thought and can therefore never be “immediate:”

Enough: this “I think” presupposes that I *compare* my present state with other states that I have seen in myself, in order to determine what it is: and because of this retrospective comparison with other types of “knowing,” this present state has absolutely no “immediate certainty” for me. (BGE 16)

There is no immediate certainty, just as there is no thing-in-itself nor absolute knowledge. These philosophical “certainties” have led philosophers to strange conclusions, especially to believe in the existence of a true world different from the apparent one and to overlook the world of appearances in favour of this metaphysical true world. Because of their focus on certainty, truth, and the metaphysical true world, philosophers have overlooked important aspects of life such as bodily matters or what Nietzsche calls the “nearby things” in opposition to the philosophers’ “important things” in *The Wanderer and his Shadow*.² As Nietzsche argues in a note from 1884, it is the

seductions of language, “*die Verführungen der Sprache*,” (KSA 11:26[300]) that leads philosophers to underestimate bodily things.

In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche pursues his investigation of the seduction of language by focusing more specifically on the concepts of force and action, thus revealing how philosophers usually overlook the physical and the bodily.

But there is no such substratum; there is no “being” behind doing, effecting, becoming; “the doer” is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything. The popular mind in fact doubles the deed; when it sees the lightning flash, it is the deed of a deed: it posits the same event first as cause and then a second time as its effect. Scientists [*Naturforscher*] do no better when they say “force moves,” “force causes,” and the like—all its coolness, its freedom from emotion notwithstanding, our entire science still lies under the misleading influence of language [*Verführung der Sprache*] and has not disposed of that little changeling, the “subject” (the atom, for example, is such a changeling, as is the Kantian “thing-in-itself”); no wonder if the submerged, darkly glowering emotions of vengefulness and hatred exploit this belief for their own ends and in fact maintain no belief more ardently than the belief that *the strong man is free* to be weak and the bird of prey to be a lamb—for thus they gain the right to make the bird of prey *accountable* for being a bird of prey. (GM1 13)

In this famous passage, it is not only the philosophers who are seduced and misled by language, but also the popular mind and the scientists (*Naturforscher*). Against the positing of an agent behind a deed—which requires a notion of causality: the agent causes the deed—Nietzsche considers that there is no doer behind the deed. It is because the “fundamental error of reasons are petrified” in language that we consider it necessary to posit such a doer. It is our belief in the notion of causality that brings us to this consideration. But, as Nietzsche argues, this idea is problematic as it suggests that the strong is responsible for being strong as much as “the bird of prey is *accountable* for being a bird of prey.” Language and the fundamental errors of reason embedded in it forces nature to be counter-nature, the strong to be weak.

The idea of seduction also appears in relation to the will to truth. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche argues: “The will to truth that still seduces us into taking so many risks, this famous truthfulness that all philosophers so far have talked about with veneration: what questions this will to truth has already laid before us!” (BGE 1) The will to truth seduces us into taking risks because we are led to believe its certainties. Nietzsche’s philosophy requires taking risk, and more specifically taking a risk regarding the value of truth: “And, believe it or not, it ultimately looks to us as if the problem has never been raised until now, – as if we were the first to ever see it, fix our gaze on it,

risk it. Because this involves risk and perhaps no risk has ever been greater.” (BGE 1) It is a risk because it moves away from certainty and towards the realm of the perhaps. Thus, Nietzsche considers that “philosophers of the dangerous Perhaps” are approaching. These philosophers are opposed to the “fundamental belief of metaphysicians” that is “the *belief in oppositions of values*.” (BGE 2) Against the metaphysical belief in opposition of values, the philosopher of the future considers that they are “merely provisional perspectives” that need to be worked on. Against the dualisms of metaphysics, the philosopher of the future argues for the fluidity of perspectives.

Language seduces the philosopher into believing in “absolute knowledge” and into rejecting bodily things. It is this danger that Nietzsche aims to avoid by offering a different conception of philosophy in which language is no longer considered metaphysically, but as a way to deconstruct metaphysics. It is in this sense that his “new language” is strange: “We do not consider the falsity of a judgment as itself an objection to a judgment; this is perhaps where our new language will sound most foreign.” (BGE 4) This new language is a language of “dangerous perhaps.” Against the dualisms of metaphysical language, Nietzsche suggests using language poetically (in the etymological sense of *poiesis*, making) and this poetic use of language requires metaphors. Seduction is already a metaphor that personifies language, and it is inscribed in a broader metaphorical network.

The Seduction of Metaphor

Der Wahrheit Freier — du? so höhnten sie
 nein! nur ein Dichter!
 ein Thier, ein listiges, raubendes, schleichendes,
 das lügen muss,
 das wissentlich, willentlich lügen muss,
 nach Beute lüstern,
 bunt verlarvt,
 sich selbst zur Larve,
 sich selbst zur Beute
 das — der Wahrheit Freier?...
 Nur Narr! Nur Dichter! (KSA 6.377-378)

The poem “Only Fool! Only Poet” stages the poets’ opponents as declaring them fools. While the poets consider themselves to be “suitsors of truth,” the opponents reply “Only Fool! Only Poet!” In a sense, this poem replays the

Platonic move of banishing poets from the ideal city because they are not telling the truth and thus corrupting the minds of the citizens.³ But what is more interesting in this poem is the fact that the poets consider themselves as “suits of truth,” thus pursuing the metaphorical line of seduction discussed in the previous section. The poets would be, in this context, trying to seduce truth and, to do so, they need to lie willingly. Poets are compared to animals who must lie, bringing the body back in the bodyless philosophical pursuit of truth.

There is an opposition between the poet and the philosopher as both pursuing truth: the former focuses on the body and the senses while the latter has an “ideal” conception of truth. This opposition reflects Plato’s philosophy, but Nietzsche is critical of this picture as he blames Plato for establishing a “true world” behind the world of appearances. By using metaphors and embracing poetry, Nietzsche attempts to overturn Plato’s philosophy, as he describes his philosophy in an early note: “My philosophy is an *inverted Platonism*: the further something is from true being, the purer, the more beautiful, the better it is. Living in illusion as the goal” (KSA 7:7[156]).

The metaphor of the poet and the philosopher as suits of truth is further developed through Nietzsche’s famous metaphor of truth as a woman. At the beginning of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche compares truth as a woman whom philosophers attempt to charm. However, the little success they have had in this enterprise suggest that philosophers are not very good at it. This metaphor has been the subject of many interpretations, especially because of Nietzsche’s misogyny and of his critical approach to truth. However, we can read this metaphor of truth as a woman through the metaphor of seduction to offer a slightly different picture. Ruth Abbey insists on the fact that we must find a middle ground between misogyny and metaphor in approaching Nietzsche’s conception of women: focusing only on misogyny shadows interesting parts of Nietzsche’s reflection while focusing only on metaphor “risk depoliticizing Nietzsche’s works.”⁴ She therefore suggests that the works of the middle period “neither entirely demean women nor exclude them from the higher life.”⁵

In this context, the metaphor of truth as a woman can enlighten some of Nietzsche’s concepts. Kelly Oliver for instance suggests that the woman “destroys the authority of the metaphysic of truth by substituting a multitude of interpretations for the dogmatist’s one, objective, reality.”⁶ The metaphor of truth as a woman therefore moves the theory of truth from a dogmatic one to a perspectival one. For Frances Nesbitt Opper, it is the seduction of truth that brings Nietzsche to consider it a woman: “Truth then enters Nietzsche’s work as Life, whose seductive veil—the veil of maya, of sensation and form, of metaphor, of art—keeps us in love as we work through our difficulties in accepting Life as serpent changeable only, and connected to time and the earth.”⁷ Both Oliver and Opper suggest that Nietzsche’s metaphor of truth as a woman aims at offering an alternative conception of truth that is concerned

with life in its seductive veil. Where the traditional conceptions of truth fail to account for life, fail to charm truth as a woman, this metaphor suggests that we need to focus on the seductive veil.

In other words, as Babette Babich suggests, “To catch the truth of untruth, we need a logic attuned to the fragrance of thought, and deliberately, firmly rooted in metaphors elided as such, taken as true. This would be an aesthetic logic. And only a logic of imaginary truth or symbolic untruth could be supple enough for the confessions of a dogmatist, supposing truth is a woman.”⁸ The metaphor of truth as a woman escapes dogmatism and becomes a way of escaping metaphysics. Against traditional logic, Babich argues that there is an aesthetic logic at play in Nietzsche’s works, and I would argue that we could call it a poetic logic insofar as it involves the creation of interpretations. Metaphors are ways of escaping metaphysics because they escape the dualisms that structure metaphysical language. Poetry becomes a way of escaping traditional philosophy and dogmatism.

This criticism of the metaphysics of language is already at play in Nietzsche’s early unpublished essay *On Truth and Lie* where he considers concepts to be dead metaphors. He suggests that the construction of language moves from the unicity of metaphors to the generality of concepts and that this move is essentially metaphysical. It is through this becoming general, this “equation of non-equal things,” (TL 1) that language becomes metaphysical. In order to move away from this metaphysical conception of language, Nietzsche suggests going back to metaphors, to the liveliness and uniqueness of metaphors. Pursuing Nietzsche’s thought on that matter, Jacques Derrida suggests that concepts are marked by a history of metaphors and that metaphor is therefore central to philosophical discourse: “Our certainty soon vanishes: metaphor seems to involve the usage of philosophical language in its entirety, nothing less than the usage of so-called natural language *in* philosophical discourse, that is, the usage of natural language *as* philosophical language.”⁹ In order to uncover the working of metaphysics in language, we therefore need to understand how the concept of metaphor works within the philosophical text. For Nietzsche, returning to the metaphorical origin of concepts seems to be the solution to the problem of metaphysics.

However, this undermining of metaphysics does not necessarily lead to the end of metaphysics. As Antoine Mériau suggests, while Nietzsche rejects a certain form of metaphysics it does not reject all metaphysics, because metaphysics is a seduction process that can never stop.¹⁰ According to Mériau, Nietzsche rejects a form of reactive metaphysics but accepts an active one: “Reactive seduction separates the true world from the apparent one and makes us live in the false world. Active seduction can also separate the world in two, but it makes us live in the superior world, in the true world.”¹¹ This interpretation however misses an important point in Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysics, namely that by abandoning the real world the world of appearances is also abolished. It is the whole dualism that

Nietzsche aims to overcome and Mérieau's distinction between active and reactive seductions remains trapped in this dualism.

In trying to escape the metaphysics and seduction of language, Nietzsche uses metaphors. But the metaphor of truth as a woman, rather than escaping metaphysics, reinstates and reinforces a dualism at a different level. The opposition between man and woman remains effective, such as the opposition between active and passive as Mérieau suggests. In keeping these oppositions alive, Nietzsche's metaphor of truth as a woman falls back into the traps and seduction of language. In other words, Nietzsche is being seduced by language and by the efficacy of metaphor. His use of the metaphor of truth as a woman brings him back to the metaphysics he is trying to escape.

The difficulty lies in the fact that in order to talk about the metaphysics of language, we must use language. As we must use language to express our thought, the danger and seduction of language is always already there. In discussing Paul de Man's reading of Nietzsche, Andrea Mirabile considers that this seduction of language is the seduction of rhetoric: "De Man's seduction of rhetoric is, after all, the seduction of the illusory natural coincidence between word and thing: metaphors, such as 'state,' 'man,' or 'love,' and literary artifices, such as euphonies and evocative images, draw readers aside (in Latin *seducere* means to draw aside) from the vertiginous, almost unbearable negative truth of the noncoincidence of language and reality."¹² What is at play is no longer the adequation between the real world and the world of appearances, but the adequation between word and world. The metaphors, rather than helping readers to get closer to the world, seduces them and draws them aside from the noncoincidence of language and reality. Without this rhetoric, the connection between word and world reveals its artificial character.

For Sarah Kofman however, Nietzsche's metaphor of truth as a woman also brings a positive dimension, through another image, that of women's small ears:

Women's small ear is this third ear mentioned by Nietzsche, the artistic ear which, positioning itself beyond metaphysical oppositions such as truth and falsehood, good and evil, depth and surface, clarity and obscurity, is capable of hearing (understanding) an incredible (unheard) language incommensurable with vulgar language and its logic or metaphysical presuppositions, an ear which is sufficiently noble to discern the pathos of distance, the difference which separates Heraclitus's ear from that of the metaphysicians who later appropriated that language in a virile manner in order to obscure it and reduce it to vulgar reason by way of illuminating it.¹³

For Kofman, women's small ear is a way to escape metaphysics. Philosophers need to explore this small ear in order to escape the traps of metaphysics. Kofman argues that Heraclitus's use of language (that leads Aristotle to

consider him obscure) is closer to the woman's small ear than to the metaphysician's ear. This artistic small ear requires going back to metaphors and away from the generality of concepts.

Philosophers are usually seduced by the metaphysics of language and fall into the trap of believing in the generality of concepts. Nietzsche, and Derrida after him, suggests that going back to metaphors is the best way to avoid falling into this trap. However, metaphors are also a tool of language, that cannot be extracted from the metaphysical language in which they are used. In a way, metaphors also participate in this seduction of language and the risk is to take metaphors as a new generality. The problem is not necessarily with language itself, but with the way we relate to language. The same goes for truth, it is because we consider truth to be the most valuable and essential part of life that we fall for it. The metaphor of truth as a woman therefore suggests that the problem lies not in women or men, but in the way the opposition of values is embedded in language. With this metaphor, Nietzsche perpetuates the metaphysical dualism that opposes man and woman, and thus reiterates against his will the dualisms that are related to it.

The question therefore remains, can we escape the metaphysics of language, can we escape the charm of truth, can we escape the seduction of life? In a sense, we cannot. But we can be aware of that by working with metaphors in order to affect language in new and different ways. We must however remain cautious as these metaphors can seduce us into going too far. There is a seduction of metaphors that lead poets and philosophers to fall into traps of language, where language becomes an autoreferential playground. The danger of metaphor is the danger of rhetoric as the effects of speech are not totally controllable. Can we use metaphor to escape dualisms without falling back into them?

Overcoming Dualisms

Hélène Cixous offers an interesting insight on this question. In *The Newly Born Woman*, she suggests that the metaphysics of binary oppositions is based on the man/woman dualism:

Through dual, hierarchical oppositions. Superior/Inferior. Myths, legends, books. Philosophical systems. Everywhere (where) ordering intervenes, where a law organizes what is thinkable by oppositions (dual, irreconcilable; or sublatale, dialectical). And all these pairs of oppositions are couples. Does that mean something? Is the fact that Logocentrism subjects thought—all concepts, codes and values—to a binary system related to “the” couple man/woman?¹⁴

Cixous questions the notion of “couple” that marks the history of metaphysical oppositions. If thought is organised in opposing couples, is the man/woman dualism the most fundamental one? In that case, Cixous further

argues, it seems that undermining this “fundamental couple” is a prerequisite to transforming thought, and she considers bisexuality as a way to overcome the man/woman couple. As Alan Schrift argues: “When Nietzsche addresses issues of gender, his thinking remains constrained within the human, all-too-human prejudices which he, as a transvaluer of values, should be faulted for not having gone beyond. By setting Nietzsche’s discussion of plenitude and generosity together with Cixous’s discussion of feminine libidinal economies and the giving of gifts, the affinities between their respective accounts emerge in a way that shows how Nietzsche might have gone beyond his misogynistic prejudices.”¹⁵ According to Schrift, Cixous offers an alternative to Nietzsche’s misogyny and a way to go beyond the prejudices of gender. According to Cixous, the hierarchy that is established within these oppositions is related to the activity/passivity opposition: “Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition: activity/passivity.”¹⁶

This opposition between active and passive brings us back to Nietzsche’s philosophy, and reveals once again that him too, has been trapped by the seduction of metaphysics. Mériéau’s opposition between a good (active) metaphysics and a bad (passive) one does not help him out, to the contrary as it further perpetuates the dualistic logic of metaphysical thinking. What is the way out of this trap? Can we even get out while using language or is language a tool that is already necessarily metaphysical? Cixous shows that there is a way out of this metaphysical language, and it is by using language in a creative way. That is not only by using metaphors that are, as we have seen, one of the traps that language uses to seduce us, but by deconstructing the logic of language and thought.

Her book *Angst* is exemplary of such a creative use of language. It explores the fear of loneliness by relating two abandonments: that of the lover and that of the mother. Rather than following a linear narrative plot, this book expresses the inner turmoil of the narrator’s psychic life. In exploring this feeling of loneliness, the narrator moves away from language and back to the experience (from the generality of concepts to the uniqueness metaphor to follow Nietzsche’s idea in TL):

C’était l’époque de la Grande Solitude. J’étais dehors. On ne peut y arriver que seule. On n’y parlait pas de langue ordinaire ; rien ne peut être expliqué. Les choses qui s’y passaient ne se disaient pas, je les connaissais, je les exécutais. Elles se décidaient dans notre corps. Je voyais tout. Sous l’angle de l’éternité. Toutes les choses étaient décisives. Les décisions s’accomplissaient dans notre chair, sans un mot.

[It was the time of the Great Loneliness. I was outside. You can only get there on your own. No ordinary language was spoken; nothing can be explained. The things that happened were not expressed in words; I knew them; I carried them out. They were decided in our bodies. I saw

everything. From the point of view of eternity. Everything was crucial. Decisions were made in our flesh, without a word.]¹⁷

There is no ordinary language; there is no generality; there is no way to express what is felt. There is only the feeling of the flesh that is decisive, without a word, without language. In this context of going back to the flesh, metaphors are of no help: “Si seulement c’était de la métaphore! Mais ce qui s’écoule du corps, ce n’est pas seulement de l’urine et des fèces, ce sont tous les organes de l’amour.” [“If only this were a metaphor! But it’s not just urine and faeces running out of the body, but all the organs of love.”]¹⁸ The body, the flesh, is something that is experienced and is not metaphorical. The metaphor is already a move away from the experience of the flesh and towards the generality of language.

In this sense, metaphors are a trap, a web of language that attempts to entrap the subject:

Les phrases noires se détournent de quelque chose qui devait être immonde. Il ne les disait pas. Il les avançait. Elles ne serpentaient pas vers moi. Elle faux fuyaient. « Que vous soyiez arrivée au moment voulu par un autre ! » Leur puissance, leur finesse de mouches, j’étais piquée. Leurée. Leurs pattes d’araignée. Leur toile de métaphores, d’allusions étouffées. J’étais requise, harcelée, suppliée. Accusée de lenteur, de prudence. Entolée dans une guerre. Sans l’ennemi désigné. Je ne te cherchais pas. Personne ne me retenait. Il attendait que je me confonde avec lui dans une querelle dont j’ignorais l’origine. Un combat reprenait. C’était ma faute. Quand je vous rencontre à l’avant-dernier jour. Des plaintes étaient déposées. Je me débattais dans la toile.

[The black words were avoiding something that must have been foul. He didn’t ‘say’ them. He ‘put them forward’. They didn’t win their way towards me. They hedged. ‘You came at the right time for another!’ Their power, craftiness—I was stung. Taken in. Their spidery legs. Their web of metaphors, smothered innuendos. I was summoned, pressed, beseeched. Accused of being slow, cautious. Recruited for a war. Without knowing the enemy. I didn’t come looking for you. No one was holding me back. He was expecting me to join him in a quarrel whose origin I didn’t know. A battle was beginning all over again. It was my fault. When I meet you on the day before the last. Complaints had been lodged. I was struggling in the web.]¹⁹

The narrator is trapped in the sentences and the metaphors of the other, her past lover (but also a certain idea of language). The narrator is “struggling in the web” of metaphors, like Nietzsche’s philosophers “wriggle in the nets of language,” and Cixous uses the spider metaphor to express the feeling of being entrapped. Metaphors are dangerous in the sense that they bring back to language, but they are also a way of escaping the trap, of expressing what cannot be expressed.

In contrast to the narrator's struggle—a contrast that is expressed in the opposition between “phrases noires” and “phrases blanches”—the language of the other is affirmative. “Ses phrases blanches me sidéraient. On aurait dit qu’elles parlaient pour moi.” [“His transparent sentences staggered me. You would have thought he was speaking for me.”]²⁰ His sentences speak for her, thus denying her subjectivity by entrapping it in the “objectivity” of language. But this language is no more objective than hers, it is just more affirmative:

Il me parlait dans sa langue, sans hésiter. Comme s’il avait eu l’assurance que je la comprendrais ; que je devais l’entendre. Ce n’était pas la mienne. C’était une langue étrange, dans laquelle les pronoms me désignaient à tout bout de champ, sans merci. Une langue d’affirmation. Je ne pouvais pas dire non. Et pas de place dans sa voix pour ce qui aurait fait question. C’était une voix qui m’arrêta, qui m’effrayait ; me donnait envie de fuir, m’en empêchait, me rivait de mon gré au lit que je ne pouvais plus quitter, dans lequel je me terrais, je m’enfonçais, je rapetissais, je me sentais rajeunir et oublier.

[He talked to me without hesitation in his own language. As if he were sure that I would understand it; that I had to hear it. It was a strange language whose pronouns came straight for me at every turn, pitilessly. A positive language. I couldn't say no. And he left no place in his voice for doubt. It was a voice that checked me, frightened me; made me want to run away, kept me willingly riveted to the bed which I couldn't leave, where I had gone to ground; buried myself; shrunk, felt myself getting younger and forgetting.]²¹

There is no space for doubt in the language of the other, there is no space for the narrator to object or escape. The language is so affirmative that it cannot be contested. The language oppresses the narrator and forces her to bury herself in doubt. In the same way, the language of metaphysics represses the language of experience.

More than doubt, the positive language of the other brings the narrator to the feeling of angst, of anguish. This existential feeling that nothing makes sense anymore, that there is no escape from language, no escape from the web of metaphors. This angst is what prevents the narrator from speaking: “Tu veux parler de l’angoisse qui te coupe la parole.” [“You want to talk about the anguish that leaves you speechless.”]²² However, it is also in speech that angst comes to existence. The rupture (in the sense of the break-up but also in a broader sense of rupture) operates in language, and more specifically in writing:

Trois jours sans sens, les mots crèvent les bêtes se fuient, le chevaux deviennent fous et s’entredévorent. Plus de phrases. Personne ne peut plus jurer. Sauf de rien. La rupture était écrite : dans le papier, avant que les mots s’y laissent tomber. Tu penses cela, ce n’est pas une consolation. Rien n’est accidentel. Pas d’erreur.

[Three senseless days, words burst apart, beasts flee from each other, horses go mad and devour each other. No more phrases. No one can be sure any more—except that he's not sure of anything. The split was written in the paper, before the words fell onto it. That's no consolation. Nothing happens by chance. There is no mistake.]²³

The rupture is written on paper and thus acquires the force of positive language. The consequence is that nothing makes sense anymore, 'three days without meaning.'

Speech generates angst that in turn generates a loss of meaning. But it is also through speech that meaning can be gained back, by playing with words, by making sense of these words. One example is the play on meaning (*sens*) and blood (*sang*). These words sound similar but have a different meaning: "J'avais perdu trop de sens. Je voyais trouble." ["I had lost too much sense. Things were confused."]²⁴ The narrator lost too much meaning, but also too much blood. Her vision is blurred by the lack of blood and meaning, both on a physical and on a linguistic level. "Ton sens ne fait qu'un tour. Je vois tout !" ["In a flash you see. I see everything."]²⁵ The tables are turned here as the other becomes angry while the narrator understands and sees everything.

This relation between meaning and blood reminds of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in which Zarathustra says: "Of all that is written, I love only that which one writes with one's own blood. Write with blood, and you will discover that blood is spirit." (Z, "On Reading and Writing") Blood is spirit for Zarathustra, blood is meaning for Cixous. And Nietzsche further adds: "Whoever writes in blood and aphorisms does not want to be read, but rather to be learned by heart." (Z, "On Reading and Writing") Writing in blood (and therefore reading blood) is not a matter of sole intellectual activity but is a bodily experience. Kelly Meyer connects Nietzsche and Cixous around their emphasis on the primacy of the body: "In their texts, both Nietzsche and Cixous emphasize the primacy of the body and the merely secondary role of consciousness; similarly, both negate the unitary subject who lords it over the body, emphasizing plurality within. But for Nietzsche, recognizing the centrality of the body in our intellectual endeavors and the manifold, contradictory nature of consciousness is not part of any putative 'écriture féminine'; it is a masculine insight par excellence. Indeed, those who assert the contrary—to seek to develop and maintain 'objective', metaphysical systems based on the distinction between mind and body—amount to inadequate men."²⁶ In this bodily experience the question of meaning and blood brings up the question of truth. A factual truth against a physical or emotional truth:

Cette scène est si violente qu'après-coup personne n'a la force de la raconter. Ni le cœur, ni la langue. Et personne n'a la vérité. Car pendant la scène, le vrai s'est retourné en faux, le doute s'est installé dans la

certitude comme s'ils avaient été conçus l'un pour l'autre, il pouvait faire nuit en plein jour et personne pour protester.

[This is such a brutal scene that afterwards no one has the strength, nor the heart, nor the tongue, to tell it. And no one knows the truth. Because during this scene what was true has become false; doubt has made itself at home with certainty as if they were made for each other—you could say night was day and no one would argue.]²⁷

Once again, no one has the heart nor the language to tell the original scene of abandonment. Because the scene disrupts the idea of truth, casts doubts on its certainty. Doubt and certainty are linked together and cannot be separated. The only truth resides in the personal experience; it is an existential truth:

Tout reste vrai. Illusions, projections, agonies, poumons blessés, arrêts du cœur ; sécrétions de la chair et de l'éloignement. Tout faux ? Il est vrai que seules les vérités, sans événement, les croyances, sont absolument, personnellement vraies : l'amour, la vie, ce qui n'arrive pas, ce qui est, ce qui ne se passe pas ; ce qu'on ne peut pas se raconter ; la mort. Tout le reste est une fiction.

[All is true. Illusions, projections, death-struggle, wounded lungs, heart failure; secretions of the flesh and of distance. All false? It's true that only truths, beliefs when nothing happens, are absolutely personally true: love, life, what doesn't come, what is, what doesn't happen, what you can't tell yourself; death. All the rest is lies.]²⁸

What is absolutely true are the most personal things. The rest is a fiction. A linguistic construction that entraps us into believing things. What is primordial is what we feel, what cannot be said but only experienced. As soon as we enter the realm of language, we fall into a world of fiction.

Conclusion

Language is full of traps that guide and restrain our ways of thinking. Language seduces us into believing in the categories of thought. Nietzsche uses this metaphor of seduction to explain the force of metaphysical language. But he himself is seduced by language and the metaphor of truth as a woman, rather than overcoming dualisms, further enforces them. Nietzsche is seduced by the metaphor that has an undeniable stylistic and performative force, but he does not realise that behind this force lies the seduction of metaphysics. To overcome these dualisms, we need to move away from language and back to the experience. However, such an experience cannot be shared unless translated in language. This moment of translation is when the creative powers of language need to be used at their maximal capacity. Cixous offers a way of escaping these dualisms by reconsidering how meaning and truth

work. In this overcoming of dualisms, truth and meaning are moved from the realm of objective certainty to the realm of personal subjective experience.

List of abbreviations for Nietzsche's works

KSA: *Kritische Studienausgabe*, edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter and DTV, 1999)

HH: *Human, All Too Human I*, trans. Gary Handwerk (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000)

WS: *The Wanderer and his Shadow*, in *Human*, in *All Too Human II*, trans. Gary Handwerk (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013): 145-294.

BGE: *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Marion Faber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)

GM: *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)

Z: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Graham Parkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

TL: *On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense*, in *Writings from the Early Notebooks*, trans. Ladislaus Löb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 253-264.

¹ "Objekt und Subjekt – fehlerhafter Gegensatz – kein Ausgangspunkt für das Denken! Wir lassen uns durch die Sprache verführen." (KSA9:10[D67])

² "Conversely, the high estimation for the 'most important things' is almost never wholly genuine: the priests and metaphysicians have admittedly gotten us completely accustomed to a hypocritically exaggerated *use of language* in these areas, and yet not changed the tune of our feeling that these most important things are not to be taken to be as important as those disdained nearby things." (WS 5)

³ The poem "Only Fool! Only Poet!" epitomizes many of Nietzsche's thought and various interpretations have arisen. I have argued elsewhere that this poem—and more broadly Nietzsche's *Dionysus-Dithyrambs*—offers an inverted Platonism (Philip Mills, "Ma philosophie est un platonisme inverse": une lecture de *Rien qu'un fou, rien qu'un poète!* comme réévaluation des rapports entre philosophie, vérité, et poésie", in Céline Denat and Patrick Wotling, eds., *Nietzsche. Les textes de 1888* (Reims: Épure, 2020), 159-167). Among other interpreters, Christina Kast suggests that this poem reveals Nietzsche's attempt to ground philosophy in poetry and Nathalie Schulte connects it to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to show the complex relation between truth and lie. (Katharina Grätz et al., eds., *Nietzsche als Dichter: Lyrik - Poetologie - Rezeption* (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 377-99; Grätz et al., 273-95.)

- ⁴ Ruth Abbey, 'Beyond Misogyny and Metaphor: Women in Nietzsche's Middle Period', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 34, no. 2 (1996): 234.
- ⁵ Abbey, 235.
- ⁶ Kelly A. Oliver, 'Woman as Truth in Nietzsche's Writing', *Social Theory and Practice* 10, no. 2 (1984): 197.
- ⁷ Frances Nesbitt Opper, *Nietzsche on Gender: Beyond Man and Woman* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2005), 187.
- ⁸ Babette E. Babich, 'The Metaphor of Woman as Truth in Nietzsche: The Dogmatist's Reverse Logic or Rückschluß', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 12 (1996): 35-36.
- ⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 209.
- ¹⁰ Antoine Mérieau, 'Nietzsche: La métaphysique de la séduction', *Philosophique*, no. 16 (2013): 160.
- ¹¹ Mérieau, 153-54. My translation: "La séduction réactive sépare le monde vrai du monde apparent, mais nous fait vivre dans le faux monde. La séduction active peut aussi séparer le monde en deux, mais elle nous fait vivre dans le monde supérieur, dans le monde vrai."
- ¹² Andrea Mirabile, 'Rhetoric of Seduction and Seduction of Rhetoric in Paul de Man's Allegories of Reading', *Enthymema*, no. 2 (2010): 19.
- ¹³ Sarah Kofman, 'Nietzsche and the Obscurity of Heraclitus', trans. Françoise Lionnet-McCumber, *Diacritics* 17, no. 3 (1987): 48, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464834>.
- ¹⁴ Susan Sellers, ed., *The Hélène Cixous Reader* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 38.
- ¹⁵ Alan D. Schrift, 'Logics of the Gift in Cixous and Nietzsche: Can We Still Be Generous?', *Angelaki* 6, no. 2 (2001): 119.
- ¹⁶ Sellers, *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, 38.
- ¹⁷ Hélène Cixous, *Angst*. (Paris: Des femmes, 1977), 243. English translation by Jo Levy, Hélène Cixous, *Angst*, trans. Jo Levy (London: Calder, 1985), 190.
- ¹⁸ Cixous, *Angst*, 14. English translation by Jo Levy, Cixous, *Angst*, 11.
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Testing Anthropocentrism

Lacan and the Animal Imago

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Commenting on a text is like doing an analysis.¹

Jacques Lacan's "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I* As Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" (1949) is perhaps the most recognised and influential account of the initiation of human identity psychoanalysis has to offer.² Lacan provides us with a narrative about how we come into being as human, and how this particular identity secures its exceptional status in the moment of its constitution. This article is motivated by the observation that in this story charting the unique nature of *human* subject formation, Lacan invokes ethological evidence at several key points to generate his argument; furthermore, he was one of the first psychoanalytic thinkers to do so.³ For at the same time as "The Mirror Stage" provides an origin story about the self-definition of human species being, Lacan draws on research investigating the role the imago plays in the processual creation of a self in chimpanzees, pigeons and locusts. This analysis focusses on the chimpanzee as a site of ethological comparison which in effect provides an animal analogue to the mirror stage phenomenon.

A central point is the fact that whilst Lacan's relationship to the animal in "The Mirror Stage" is a complex one, critical commentary on the text almost uniformly fails to address this relationship, despite the fact that every other aspect of Lacan's seminal essay has been critically sifted through and mulled over for decades. Scholars tend to simply document the animal references in their exegeses of the text, but do not theoretically engage with their actual assumptions. That is, rather than attending to Lacan's own ambivalence, criticism generally oscillates between wholesale disregard or superficial exegetical description, and tends to function with a reading that understands the figure of the animal as a confirmation of human/animal difference.⁴ Two exceptions to this rule, the contributions of Ziser⁵ and Buse⁶ attend to the question of the animal within "The Mirror Stage" more thoroughly, although

both interpret Lacan's position as one of straightforward anthropocentrism, as well. Although as Elizabeth Grosz notes, his use of ethological research could very readily be read as "illustrations of the socializing effects of the internalization of the image of another of the same species on the individual," and as such, "interpreted as universalist both within and across species," and yet, such an interpretation is never critically considered.⁷

Arguing against this critical backdrop, which symptomatically reflects Lacan's own uncertainty regarding how to consider animal subjectivity, I propose that if one examines the fine grain of this short text, it is not clear that Lacan's position is a squarely anthropocentric one.⁸ Indeed, it is not altogether clear *what* Lacan's position is, or if in fact he holds only one. As although Lacan does, in ways that are relatively unequivocal, commit to anthropocentrism in moments of the text, it is the other, less clear, moments throughout his argument that are of interest here. This article considers how and why Lacan manages, or rather, seems unable to manage, the figure of the animal within his thought. To do this, rather than follow routinely accepted interpretations, I consider long passages, different translations, and discussions from various moments across his corpus, as well as returning to the detail in the ethological sources Lacan himself references. For a careful examination of his thesis – specifically in dialogue with his sources – suggests that he is struggling with the task of fixing the human in place. Striving to generate a sense of humanness inoculated against the animal, his search for a sureness of identity shows signs of strain; Lacan's account is often unclear, contradictory, and confused. In following the different pulls of the writing, Lacan's explanation enacts the problem it attempts to describe, exposing the limits of what psychoanalysis – a discourse predicated on seeing what falls out of sight – is able to bear about its own investments in, or attachments to, particular articulations of human selfhood. The theory of the mirror stage thus presents us with a paradigmatic case study of the fate of the human in psychoanalytic thought, and the difficulty of reckoning with a figure that psychoanalysis constantly presumes, at the same time as it provides the resources to undo.

The Chimpanzee

All sorts of things in the world behave like mirrors.⁹

In the very second paragraph of the Mirror Stage essay, Lacan evokes an animal subject- specifically, a chimpanzee:

Some of you may recall that this conception originated in a feature of human behaviour illuminated by a fact of comparative psychology. The child, at an age when he is for a time, however short, outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can nevertheless already

recognize as such his own image in a mirror. This recognition is indicated in the illuminative mimicry of the *Aha-Erlebnis*, which Köhler sees as the expression of situational apperception, an essential stage of the act of intelligence. This act, far from exhausting itself, as in the case of the monkey, once the image has been mastered and found empty, immediately rebounds in the case of the child in a series of gestures in which he experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates – the child's own body, and the persons and things around him.¹⁰

The “fact” of the psychological comparison that Lacan cites here is the very kernel of his mirror stage theory, that which conceivably sparked his imagination and spurred him to write probably his most central, and most foundational, theoretical contribution to psychoanalysis. And yet curiously, it rests upon a comparison to an animal, and is without reference aside from that to the ethologist, Wolfgang Köhler.¹¹ However, some theorists suggest that the child/chimpanzee's response to self-reflection is derived more specifically from the work of child psychologist Henri Wallon.¹²

Both Köhler and Wallon were influential psychologists in their own right who had written on chimpanzees and self-reflection. However, the two men drew strikingly different conclusions about their subjects. Köhler was one of the pioneers of Gestalt psychology and also the first person to apply Gestalt theories to animals. In the 1920s, Köhler conducted a series of experiments to test chimpanzees' abilities to learn, problem-solve, use tools, and employ critical thinking skills. Particularly interested in intelligent behaviour, he completed various tests with chimpanzees that would become canonical within comparative psychology.¹³ Of specific relevance to Lacan's interests, Köhler documented the chimpanzees' reactions to their mirror images, and concluded that they could recognise their reflections, and indeed found great pleasure and fascination in them. He published his results in a six-year study entitled *The Mentality of Apes*.¹⁴ Wallon was a child psychologist who, in 1931, performed what he called the “mirror test,” in which he compared the reactions of human infants and chimpanzees upon encountering their mirror reflections. When humans and chimpanzees reached approximately 6 months, Wallon contended that both could recognise the image as their own, but whilst the chimpanzees quickly become uninterested, the infant continues to be mesmerised. These findings were published in his 1934 book *Les origines du caractère chez l'enfant*, along with research pertaining to infant development, child psychology, and comparative animal studies.

Notwithstanding the uncertain provenance of Lacan's research on the chimpanzees, Lacan only references Köhler. Critics have sought to explain why a reference to Wallon goes unacknowledged in the text even though at least superficially it is Wallon rather than Köhler's conclusions that seem to

undergird Lacan's argument. For example, Lacan's biographer Elisabeth Roudinesco argues the case for explicit plagiarism – but what still remains unknown is *why* it goes unacknowledged.¹⁵ Although Wallon's narrative of cross-species experiences of self-reflection certainly confirms what Lacan presents to us, I read Lacan as referencing Köhler instead of Wallon for several reasons. For one, Lacan *does* cite Köhler's name, and never Wallon's; Köhler's insight theories share much with Lacan's theory of the mirror stage; and Lacan references Köhler's notion of situational apperception and the "*Aha Erlebnis*" as significant points. Most importantly, Köhler was famous for his study on insight behaviour and chimpanzees, and is the only authority referenced in the discussion of child and chimpanzee behaviour (and his work *The Mentality of Apes*, in which he discusses chimpanzee reflection at length, had been translated into French). These are the most robust indicators that he probably was the scientific authority behind Lacan's gloss. However, if Lacan *is* referencing Köhler, given he is presenting evidence contrary to Köhler's argument, why do so? And if referencing Wallon, why not cite him? Furthermore, why, in Wallon's place, cite another scientist who completed an analogous study on chimpanzee-child behaviour on reflection whose conclusions countered Lacan's argument? These questions bear on the conclusions we can draw from Lacan's analysis here. For example, if read generously, it would remain questionable just how much Lacan's reading of Köhler gels with Köhler's own findings. If read more parsimoniously, Lacan's interpretation of Köhler would be blatantly incorrect, and his adherence to Wallon's research (and thus the likelihood of him referencing the latter's study), patently self-evident.

Given all of the above, and the profound difference in conclusions about animal behaviour between Wallon and Köhler's, the fact that critics typically read Lacan as referencing Wallon does reveal a particular interpretive bias; the question is thus why Wallon is disproportionately inferred over Köhler, and what this bias reveals.¹⁶ As using Wallon would further justify a reading of "The Mirror Stage" that confirms human exceptionalism, and an interpretation that Köhler was in fact Lacan's source would challenge this reading, we can read the ambiguity in this simple citational puzzle as emblematic of Lacan's apprehension about human/animal difference, one which persists throughout the entirety of this text. Rather than conclusively resolve this difficulty, my point is instead to underscore the ambiguity here, and to emphasise the fact that we don't, in fact, quite know.

To return to our analysis of this passage: in the following sentence, Lacan uses the "*Aha-Erlebnis*" expression, referring to a term coined by twentieth century German Gestalt psychologist and linguist Karl Bühler; a German phrase whose literal translation is "aha-experience".¹⁷ What Bühler intended by this concept was akin to an epiphany, or to put it in his own words, "a eureka" moment.¹⁸ Otherwise put, it names an experience or insight that reveals itself suddenly: for example, a solution to a problem that has up

until that point remained unsolved, or even entirely unrecognised. Lacan emphasises the monumental significance of the jubilation evidenced by the human infant that is lacking in the chimpanzee: it signifies *recognition*. The “*Aha-Erlebnis*” and Köhler’s concept of insight learning, another school of psychological thought he founded, suggests that these moments of recognition are informed, conscious, and the outcome of critical thinking and reflection; directly opposed to an unthinking, instinctual, learned or imitative response. Thus when Lacan stipulates that the infant’s behaviour in front of the mirror is seen by Köhler to be an indication of “situational apperception, an essential stage of the act of intelligence,” he is inferring that the infant’s behaviour speaks of a primordial intelligence, an ability to thoughtfully apprehend its world, and one that he considers meaningful.¹⁹ Whilst Lacan refers to “this feature of human behaviour,” his formulation is ambiguous. Interpretation is open to two potentially contradictory points, namely, that nonhumans can exhibit similar behaviour, or, that he reserves the mirror stage for the human.²⁰ Although content to concede that the infant is developmentally delayed in comparison to the chimpanzee in relation to instrumental intelligence, Lacan simultaneously implies that the child *will* eventually intellectually surpass the chimpanzee. Curiously, this fact is implicit but always read *as if* stated explicitly. And yet, the former allows for a far more open interpretation.

In this typically Lacanian seven-line sentence he explains that, in direct contrast to the child who is “far from exhausting itself,” the monkey “exhaust[s] itself ... once the image has been mastered and found empty”.²¹ What, though, does it mean to find an image “empty,” and why is it that, given the openness of this question, Lacan and his critics have overwhelmingly neglected to explain or entertain it?²² Similarly, what does this emptiness entail such that it would produce a response of exhaustion – put otherwise, what does it mean to exhaust oneself in confrontation with one’s reflection? To ponder these questions, it is worth briefly returning to the original French, in which the term *inanité* is used. With its obvious closeness to the English “inanity,” this word does not literally translate to “empty” but rather is closer to the meaning evoked by the English word “pointless.” There is a significant difference between the chimpanzee finding her reflection empty, void or hollow, and considering it pointless. Interestingly, one interpretation might assume this difference in translation moves from a lack of intelligence or psyche in the chimpanzee to its clear presence, however this seems far too simple. While certainly different, whether the chimpanzee found her reflection to be empty or to be pointless, both are conceptually evocative responses, and neither reading forecloses the possibility of self-recognition.

In a ten-line sentence in “The Freudian Thing,” Lacan again discusses the chimpanzee in front of the mirror with reference to the question of

intelligence.²³ A similar pattern of ambivalence regarding human/animal difference, and the key role of intelligence in self-recognition, is evident:

This is a point that I think I have myself helped to elucidate by conceiving the dynamics of the so-called *mirror stage* as a consequence of a prematuration at birth, generic to man, from which results at the time indicated the jubilant identification of the as yet *infans* individual with the total form in which this reflexion of the nose is integrated, namely, the image of his body: an operation which by being performed at a glance (*à vue de nez*), is of much the same kind as the “aha!” that reveals to us the intelligence of the chimpanzee (we never fail to be amazed when confronted by the miracle of intelligence on the faces of our peers), does not fail to bring with it deplorable consequences.²⁴

Here too, we cannot arrive at a sure conclusion about Lacan’s position. Illustrating human/animal likeness, Lacan refers to the chimpanzee as one of “our peers,” and argues that the experience of the baby in front of the mirror “is of much the same kind” as the chimpanzee, and similarly acknowledges the intelligence of chimpanzees.²⁵ At the same time, Lacan’s assumption that the mirror reveals the animal’s intelligence to us perhaps also suggests that it was not clear or known to us beforehand. What is interesting is that his phrasing “generic to man” could be interpreted as a reference to the human-specific nature of the mirror stage, or the human-specific nature of the human’s “prematuration at birth,” which he mentions on several occasions.²⁶

Yet if we consider Bruce Fink’s translation in the first complete English edition of the *Écrits*, Lacan states that the chimpanzee exhausts itself “in eventually acquired control over the uselessness of the image”.²⁷ Could it be that Lacan reads the chimpanzee as recognising, but not misrecognising (as the human baby does) her image, and thus dismissing it as useless – as going through a psychical process of self-recognition and awareness that is not followed by the “deplorable consequences” of alienation?²⁸ The choice of “uselessness” perhaps introduces a sense of utility, and one that differs again in meaning and theoretical consequence from emptiness and pointlessness. This translational dissonance is clearer still in Lacan’s presentation “Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis” published in 1948, a year before “The Mirror Stage.” It is worth quoting a passage from the 1948 text in full in order to highlight this consistent ambiguity in understanding exactly how the chimpanzee engages with its image, and in turn how Lacan understands, and narrates, this engagement:

But what demonstrates the phenomenon of recognition, implying subjectivity, are the signs of triumphant jubilation and the playful self-discovery that characterize the child’s encounter with his mirror image starting in the sixth month. This behavior contrasts sharply with the indifference shown by the very animals that perceive this image – the chimpanzee, for example – once they have tested its vanity as an object;

and it is even more noteworthy as it occurs at an age when the child lags behind the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, only catching up with the latter at eleven months of age.²⁹

In this passage, we are given still another interpretation of how the chimpanzee encounters its image; in this case, it responds with indifference. Tellingly, this is the same passage (and the first time) in which Lacan expressly states that recognition (whether specular or otherwise is not specified) implies subjectivity. This is also the first instance in which Lacan refers to the chimpanzee having an affective response to her image: “indifference” implies a value judgement made and felt in order to dismiss the image as no more than an object.³⁰ Interestingly however, “indifference” potentially entails an acknowledgement and comprehension of the subject in question in order to express disinterest, or to dismiss it.³¹ Simultaneously, this description jars with the prior three in its description of the chimpanzee’s relationship with the image as characterised in part by vanity, in contrast to “emptiness” or “uselessness.” Furthermore, testing the mirror’s vanity as an object implies utility (the utility of vanity?), a meaning quite different to emptiness, uselessness and indifference.

One would assume vanity, especially that pertaining to one’s mirror image, would require a sense of self, of aesthetics, of psychical complexity, perhaps even of art. To this end, wouldn’t one assume that the psychical architecture put into place by one’s experience of the mirror stage, especially that relationship between the I and the Ideal-I that it inaugurates, is necessary to understand and thus experience what it might mean to be vain, or narcissistic; perhaps something Lacan would concede? Given the fact that a subject’s response to the mirror to “test its vanity” could equally be used to argue that they possess, rather than lack, self-recognition, this problem raises the question of why this passage gets interpreted in only one way (the latter), adding further evidence to the thematic blind spot regarding the human exclusivity of self-recognition in readings of the text.³²

Additionally, what Lacan does clearly state in this passage is that “animals ... perceive this image,” providing the chimpanzee as one example.³³ That is, the passage maintains that indifference is expressed after the chimpanzees have perceived their reflection, and explored their vanity with the mirror. The passage does not state that the chimpanzees *lack interest* in their reflections, but rather suggests that their interest is limited to vanity. Is it possible that, rather than a wholesale denial of recognition or selfhood to animals, that Lacan is accounting for a difference in desire and affect: the child displays jubilation, the chimpanzee, vanity? Why should it be that the former connotes self-discovery and the latter, its absence? For instance, surely the presentation of indifference to one’s image could illustrate *both* self-recognition *and* lack of interest in one’s reflection. Moreover, one could assume that Köhler’s research suggests that chimpanzees have not “seen” (themselves, or more generally) prior to his provision of a mirror. This

perhaps implies that self-recognition in animals could only occur after human intervention. However, at the same time one could assume that Köhler's research does not suggest that the animals were incapable before the provision of a mirror, but rather that after this particular interaction the chimpanzees fundamentally changed the way they acted.

It is not possible for either response to guarantee the presence or absence of self-recognition, and all that it entails for Lacan's argument. Read generously then, we can assume that Lacan is simply illustrating the presence of a difference in affect, or broadly, in response, between species upon encountering their reflections. Interestingly, if human babies respond to their mirror image by crying or grimacing, this indicates a problematic trajectory for the psychological development of that infant.³⁴ But significantly, it is never suggested that this "negative" affective response indicates an inferior intelligence, a lack of self-recognition, or a primitive mode of perception or psychological capacity. These different, and contradictory iterations of the same moment suggest that Lacan is faltering, putting his ambivalence, or what appears to be his confusion, on display. What is noteworthy here is that even as Lacan stutters, all of his textual accounts, even with his shifting terminology, are quite open. Resisting the desire to decide, and preserving this openness, I turn to another iteration of his argument.

The human-chimpanzee comparison is again discussed in "Presentation on Psychological Causality," by which point we have a firmer understanding of the meaning of Lacan's reference in "The Mirror Stage," as well as further examples of this running theoretical inconsistency in his efforts to describe (or perhaps prescribe?) the chimpanzee's response to its reflection.³⁵

This behavior is none other than that of the human infant before its image in the mirror starting at the age of six months, which is so strikingly different from the behavior of a chimpanzee, whose development in the instrumental application of intelligence the infant is far from having reached. What I have called the triumphant assumption [*assumption*] of the image with the jubilatory mimicry that accompanies it and the playful indulgence in controlling the specular identification, after the briefest experimental verification of the nonexistence of the image behind the mirror, in contrast with the opposite phenomena in the monkey – these seemed to me to manifest one of the facts of identificatory capture by the imago that I was seeking to isolate. It was very directly related to the image of the human being that I had already encountered in the earliest organization of human knowledge.³⁶

In *this* explication, the possibility of self-awareness again turns on a shift in affect (between jubilation – the human baby – and its apparent opposite – the chimpanzee) but not in any straightforward way. That is, whilst Lacan

explicitly elaborates a clear bifurcation in response between human and chimpanzee, he does not impart a value judgement to this difference; what he does do, however, is exploit this difference in order to carve out an expressly unique space for the human. If we divide the passage in two, the ambiguity of the second sentence enables different readings: one could query whether the chimpanzee's distinct response definitively concludes that it does not assume its image, and thus experience a mirror stage of sorts.

Further, consistent in his conceptual ambiguities, Lacan again introduces something he does not mention in other descriptions of this moment – that “after the briefest experimental verifications” the infant confirms that there is not an image “behind the mirror”.³⁷ This comment is typically interpreted to suggest that the infant furtively checks to see that there is nothing behind the mirror: he expects for example, another baby that he is in fact looking at rather than himself.³⁸ Indeed, Lacan's commentators claim that the infant realises that there is no other baby “in” or “behind” the mirror, however the chimpanzee doesn't, and instead believes for a time that it is looking at another chimpanzee. This is one area where Lacan appears to cite Köhler correctly: Köhler's work with chimpanzees detailed that they did, for a time, check behind the (hand) mirror as if expecting there to be another chimpanzee. They soon realise that they are looking at themselves, however, and adjust their behaviour accordingly. What is curious is the question of how the human infant would be able to check to ensure there was not another child behind, within or beyond the mirror “sunk in his motor incapacity” as he is.³⁹ Whether Lacan literally means that the infant has some means of looking physically behind the mirror, as with a hand-held mirror or a hanging small mirror in a cot, is unclear. However, surely the baby's lolling back and forth, pressing up against the mirror, and constant fascination with the tactile sensation of the mirror could be interpreted as a means of “checking” the validity of this image, even if not physically capable of a more rigorous examination. Testing its peripheries, pressing up against it, gazing up and around at its edges, noting the difference between mirror and carpet, or mirror and wall, this investigative desire certainly seems to be in evidence as much as is physiologically possible, even if simply executed, in the babies' visual engagement with the mirror.⁴⁰ On this point however, given that the chimpanzee behaves in the same manner, the use of this point as a point of difference does not hold, instead only obscuring the directional clarity of Lacan's thought.

For instance, whilst Lacan informs us that the chimpanzee is at this point smarter than the infant, he does not tell us why, or how, this is, just that it is; nor how the infant, from this cognitively inferior state, can “nevertheless” apprehend something that the chimpanzee cannot.⁴¹ That is, despite the fact that he lacks access to the minds of both, he infers the apparent difference of their mental states from their behaviours. However, given that both the animal and the human behave similarly, are allegedly cognitively lacking and

unable to articulate their world in his terms, and thus in a way *are* symmetrically positioned, how *would* Lacan diagnose one as intelligent and one as intellectually lacking? Furthermore, even if behaviourally analogous, whether the chimpanzee comprehends what the human does remains a question, and thus, so too does its equivalent: whether the infant comprehends what the chimpanzee comprehends, or indeed, anything at all. But it is precisely this difference that concerns us, as Lacan's formula, albeit provisionally perhaps, appears to presume an answer. For if we follow his argument very generally, we could conclude that the baby perceives the mirror image of the human, whereas the chimpanzee apparently perceives emptiness. Yet as the chimpanzee is cognitively advanced, could Lacan be arguing that the chimpanzee either never perceived anything, or perhaps once perceived something, but now no longer does; or, no longer cares about what it initially perceived? Similarly, it follows that if the chimpanzee is cognitively advanced, and the mirror stage is an act of intellection and comprehension (again, both positions Lacan is wedded to), we could deduce that there may be something about the disinterest in one's image or lack of self-recognition that is in fact symptomatic of intelligence. Indeed, assuming that the chimpanzee and the infant *do* behave in manners that are "strikingly different," it is not clear why this difference should in fact hold any evaluative weight.⁴² And whilst Lacan does not appear to advance a moral judgement based upon this difference in species response, he nevertheless stresses this difference in each rendition of the mirror stage, which implies that it must carry some consequence for his argument. Here again, we see Lacan's habit of comparing the chimpanzee to the infant in order to initially confirm some sense of equivalence, only to reverse his decision, and use the same piece of evidence to confirm difference. This repetition adds sticking points within the text, increasing the number of conflicting moments that punctuate his narrative with uncertainty and indecision.

Whilst the animal is oriented to incapacity and the human to capacity, the inherent openness for alternative interpretations of the text is significant. Given the complexities and questions that we've found within Lacan's research, and that the evidence he presents *is* quite open and abstruse, it is instructive that he narrates this claim as if self-evident, as if monosemous. For instance, although many claim that he upholds the centrality of the human intellect over its duller nonhuman counterpart, such an argument does not permit us to consider certain questions that Lacan may have himself been musing over.⁴³ Simply put: why would the human infant's reaction to its reflection be the benchmark for inquisitive self-awareness? Why would there be only one expression or reaction which demonstrates an awareness of self? Presumably the expression of jubilation would not manifest identically across species, and the chimpanzee would not have to mime the human infant in order for its response to be meaningful. What seems to be implicit in Lacan's omission and his deductions is a sense, even if hesitant, that the human infant's response is the "correct," or at best, the meaningful one in regard to

the measure of intelligence. Certainly, this is the assumption made by his interpreters. However, why this is so proceeds unelaborated, as if a certain unproblematic faith in anthropocentrism can stand in for the provision of an answer or explanation.

Indeed, given that the length of time in front of the mirror is taken as an indicator of intelligent self-perception, one possible reading is that the chimpanzee is of superior intelligence, as evidenced by its ability to recognise its reflection in a shorter period of time than the human. To press this point further: Lacan confirms that the chimpanzee found its mirror image “empty”.⁴⁴ But given Lacan’s commitments, wouldn’t the very concept of the mirror phase complicate the notion of reflection such that one could not speak in terms of an image or self-reflection ever “simply” being “just” an image?

Lastly, if we pause and consider Lacan’s intimation that the chimpanzee *is* of superior intelligence, shouldn’t this imply that her self-reflection is potentially more pregnant with possibility than that which is currently available to the infant? The fact that the chimpanzee is uninterested in her reflection does not prove that she fails to comprehend this moment’s enormity; rather, it opens up the question of why she responds to her reflection with apparent impassivity, and forces us to consider the myriad reasons that may explain such a response. In other words, whilst Lacan’s ellipses are freighted and his preferential interpretations revelatory, could it be that he does not entertain this possibility in his argument in order to deflect attention away from something that may undermine his thesis? Given that Lacan repeatedly informs us that the infant is intellectually behind the chimpanzee, it must not be the infant’s intelligence that enables it to participate in the mirror stage – as Lacan could presumably still argue that it is what is specific to the human which, even in this primordial state, is superior, precisely as it is not instrumental. In other words, the natural superiority of the human requires no argument. This impasse naturally provokes the question: if it *is* Lacan’s aim to argue that the infant has an advantage over the animal – the disproportionately intelligent animal – if not intellect, what *is* securing this advantage? And is there something in this dyadic relationship of advantage and disadvantage, cognitive acuity and cognitive lacking, psychical capacity and psychical deficiency, that might carry or conceal a particular ideological commitment in its undertow?

§

A brief examination of four different iterations of Lacan’s argument shows that the implications are not self-evident; rather, we have is four different renditions of the same event. They show that Lacan is unclear on exactly how to evaluate the chimpanzee’s reaction, and that the apparent proximity between human and animal, what any difference may mean, and whether the chimpanzee in fact experiences a mirror stage, are issues whose answers are

hard to guarantee. As if unable to manage these incongruities, echoing Lacan perhaps, these points are glossed over by his critics and instead narrated in a straightforward manner, as though the puzzle he presents us with can be sanitised and hygienically straightened out. Although his comments about the human animal distinction and the question of intelligence and psychical capacity remain open, they are consistently read as incontrovertible evidence of the human's overall lead; a generous interpretation that would read animal agency and subjectivity into Lacan's text is never seriously entertained.

In order to better understand Lacan's convoluted reasoning, we now turn to the work of Wolfgang Köhler, the psychologist whom Lacan cites in his discussion of the chimpanzee. It is necessary to examine Köhler's incredible research regarding chimpanzee self-reflection, and the uncanny resonances with, and deviations from, this evidence that Lacan admits. Throughout his 1925 classic, *The Mentality of Apes*, Köhler details a range of experiments relevant to self-realisation and recognition. However I will focus on the specific examples that detail the relationship between chimpanzees and their specular images.⁴⁵ In discussing presenting a small hand mirror to the chimpanzees, Köhler describes the following scene:

It has been recounted that some monkeys, dogs, cats, and even birds, when faced by their own reflections in a mirror, react – even if only momentarily – as though a real individual of the same species stood before them. When we gave the chimpanzees a hand-mirror for the first time, they looked into it and at once became intensely interested. Each one wanted to look, and tore the wonderful object out of the other's hand; and I was only able to observe methods of proceeding with both mirror and the picture behind it, when eventually Rana captured the hand-glass and escaped with it to a remote corner of the roof. She gazed long and intently into the mirror, looked up and then down, put it to her face and licked it once, stared into it again, and suddenly her free hand rose and grasped – as though at a body behind the mirror. But as she grasped emptiness she dropped the mirror sideways in her astonishment. Then she lifted it again, stared fixedly at the other ape, and again was misled into grasping into empty space.⁴⁶

The exercise is, then, a veritable obsession from which they fail to tire (so much so that Köhler had to stop his mirror studies as the chimpanzees would steal the hand mirrors he used); we can recall the slightly obscure wording Lacan employs during his discussion of chimpanzees and the mirror image: "once the image has been mastered and found empty".⁴⁷ Arguably this refers to the process through which the chimpanzee comprehends the mirror, as reflection alone, and realises the emptiness of the image; empty, because the mirror does not conceal anything "behind" it, does not contain or portray another animal, but only reflects.⁴⁸ Certainly then, this passage provides the source evidence for some elements of Lacan's argument concerning the chimpanzee, however what he recounts and what he excludes from Köhler's

account is significant. Although Köhler mentions that the chimpanzees try to find “the other ape,” which is consonant with Lacan’s interpretation, Lacan simultaneously fails to mention Köhler’s insistence on the chimpanzee’s obvious and ongoing fascination with the mirror.⁴⁹ Indeed, that “each one wanted to look” and that the chimpanzees “looked into it and at once became intensely interested,” not to mention Rana who “gazed long and intently” at her image, is not elaborated in the illustration Lacan provides.⁵⁰ Rather, it is directly contradicted.

Further, Köhler’s recounting of Rana’s behaviour is eerily reminiscent of Lacan’s description of the human infant in front of the mirror. Staring enraptured, observing it from different angles, moving her face up against it, licking it, and trying to grasp its meaning – this *is* the behaviour that human infants express in filmed depictions of the mirror stage. In the following paragraph Köhler informs us that, hardly unmoved, the group’s captivation by the mirror “did not decrease ... but remained so strong that the playing with reflecting surfaces became one of the most popular and permanent of their ‘fashions,’” such that the small hand-glass provoked a contagious enchantment throughout the group of chimpanzees.⁵¹ Indeed, Köhler notes that the chimpanzees quickly discarded the mirror as they discovered the reflecting propensity of various objects: “having once had their attention drawn to it, they mirrored themselves in anything at all available for the purpose: in bright pieces of tin, in polished potsherds, in tiny glass splinters, for which their hands provided the background, and, above all, in pools of water”.⁵² One cannot help but recall the myth of Narcissus here, especially in light of the fact that it inspired the naming of the psychological constitution that Freud first postulated, which in turn inspired Lacan’s notion of the mirror stage.⁵³

In Köhler’s recounting of Tschecho’s behaviour we come across another description that is startlingly similar to Lacan’s picture of the jubilant human infant. It provides him with opportunity to draw behavioural, and possibly, psychological, parallels between human and animal responses to self-reflection:

I have often observed Tschecho for long at a time sunk in contemplation of her own reflection in a pool. She played with it: bent far over it and drew back slowly, shook her head backwards and forwards, and made all kinds of grimaces over and over again. Finally, she dipped her great hand into the puddle, shaking and wagging her head, and let the water trickle back onto the picture in the water.⁵⁴

Köhler states that the chimpanzees were “constantly looking at themselves,” finding objects for this purpose “which we humans would never have thought of”.⁵⁵ So enthralled were the chimpanzees by the enigma of reflection that as soon as their urine pooled on the cement floor of their cages they were discovered “bending sideways, with eyes fixed on the liquid,” moving their

heads “slowly to and fro in order to catch the reflection of objects from outside the window.”⁵⁶

Contra Lacan’s comment regarding the chimpanzee’s eventual disinterest, Köhler took this ongoing behaviour as proof of “how absorbing was the phenomenon of reflection to them”.⁵⁷ This is instructive for our purposes here, as the chimpanzees are re-cognising things that had been in their everyday worlds (reflective surfaces like tin, urine, glass) as enticing and beguiling, though they were once ubiquitous and ordinary. Alongside a new-found obsession with their own image, this psychical process *is* the nature of the recognition Lacan contends that the mirror stage calls forth.

More so, Köhler conducts another stimulating experiment that concerns self-awareness with the chimpanzees by presenting them with photographs of themselves. These photographs were “examined with great attention,” and treated in a similar way to the mirror.⁵⁸ Collectively coveted, inspected, gazed at and mulled over, the chimpanzees again tried to interrogate the reverse side of the photographs. Köhler documents one particularly curious response, from a chimpanzee named Sultan. Upon seeing his own portrait, Sultan “suddenly raised his arm and stretched out his hand towards the picture, in the specific gesture of friendly greeting...palm inward.”⁵⁹ Sultan performs this ritual “wave” whenever the photograph is turned to face him, with “gaze fixed on the photograph,” though stops immediately when he is shown its opposite blank face.⁶⁰ Köhler informs us that Sultan only uses this particular gesture for greeting humans or other animals, and never inanimate objects. Earlier in the text, he describes this same greeting as beholding a “special emotional value ... a special character,” and elsewhere discusses the role of mutual hand clasping in chimpanzee behaviour as not specific to greetings as such but rather proper to the “spontaneous expression of joy and sympathy on special occasions.”⁶¹

This is surely a compelling scene, another in which the community of chimpanzees do not simply utilise as a tool nor dismiss an object embodying their image, but become preoccupied by something in it that they recognise, or identify (with). Whether this is an example of self-awareness, the assumption that there is another, individual, chimpanzee, or something entirely different, allows us to suggest that there is something *meaningful* about these personal photographs for the chimpanzees. At minimum, we could simply understand these facts collectively as instances that insinuate complexity inhering within the relationships chimpanzees have with their image – whether that of their own, or their species. Additionally, the gesture of greeting, the “wave” by which Sultan salutes his own photograph, recalls something of the same gesture that human babies and toddlers routinely enact during their ecstatic moments in front of the mirror, seeming to embody a kind of interpellative “Hey, You!” that is taking place between the I and its specular double. Independent of how it is interpreted, this is an interested, inquisitive response from the chimpanzees, and serves as another point of

comparison between the human infant's exuberance and the enthrallment of its closest hominid. It is therefore all the more significant that this account is absent from Lacan's discussion, prompting the question of why this particularly relevant material should be absent, and what this absence signifies and enables.

In a telling statement, Köhler concludes, "What strange beings are the chimpanzees, to be *permanently attracted by the contemplation* of such phenomena, which can bring them not the least tangible or 'practical' benefit."⁶² In contrast to Lacan who insists that the chimpanzees utilise the discovery of reflection as a simple tool, Köhler seems to imply that the paradox of the mirror for the chimpanzees and the fascination it accords is *not* of a practical or instrumental value. To Köhler, it serves a purpose that is contemplative, perhaps intellectual, certainly affective, even quite possibly, metaphysical. Again here, even if generously read, none of the terms Lacan employs – emptiness, exhaustion, utility, uninterest – remotely align with the richly textured intersubjective, social and psychical world that Köhler unfolds for us. Distinct terms with distinct meanings, the terms Lacan offers all differ considerably amongst themselves, as well as deviating generally from Köhler's evidence. To ameliorate Lacan's comparison here, one would have to differently configure this point such that we might use this apparent difference in interpretation as an opportunity to open up the meanings of concepts like contemplation or metaphysics, and emptiness and utility, to question if their juxtaposition is necessarily self-evident. Nevertheless, Köhler's research presents evidence that suggests a comparative case would be possible between chimpanzee and human rather than a contrasting one; why is it then that Lacan reads difference where Köhler sees likeness? And at what scholarly cost is Lacan able to maintain this omission?

This question is even more laden considering the nature of the intervention Köhler seeks to make in his text. The context in which Köhler was writing was dominated by a dismissal of the notion of nonhuman intelligence.⁶³ The theories of American psychologist Edward L. Thorndike and German psychologist Oskar Pfungst came to prominence and dominated the debate in animal research in the 1920s and 1930s, a debate that was tentatively posing questions about the possibility of a nonhuman mind. Both Thorndike and Pfungst conducted comparative psychological research with a range of animals and, by and large, concluded that animals lacked cognitive ability, and learnt simply through accidental success (coincidence) and imitation. The effect was to question their capacity to learn with intention. Their work was highly influential, and psychologists interested in learning processes aimed to prove that animal behaviour could be understood simply with reference to either of these readings. It was in direct response to Thorndike's thesis and its hegemonic acceptance at that time that Köhler set out to research chimpanzees, inspired to find out "whether [animals] do not behave with intelligence and insight under conditions which require such

behaviour,” conducting most of his research on the process of learning and problem solving.⁶⁴

Köhler devised a range of experiments which all required problem solving in order to uncover a key to a puzzle. Germane to Lacan’s interests, most of these had an explicit focus on the importance and role of vision in perception and learning. His studies had several key findings. He claimed that chimpanzee behaviour was never random but always sensible from a particular perspective: the “errors” the simians made were similarly not random or without reason but instead meaningful. Perhaps most importantly, chimpanzees did not overcome the obstacle of their experiment by means of trial and error learning, but instead through insight.⁶⁵ In fact, Köhler classified the chimpanzee’s errors into three categories, one of which he referred to as “Good errors.”⁶⁶ “In these,” he states, “the animal does not make a stupid, but rather an almost favourable impression.”⁶⁷ Instead of reading their lapses in “reason” as straightforwardly indicative of an inherent vacuity (as did colleagues such as Thorndike), here Köhler acknowledges the generativity of error and the productive potential of apparent “mistakes.” Furthermore, he demonstrates his own openness to the complexity of animal behaviour, in place of an investment in finding and diagnosing stupidity too readily. Contrary to Thorndikean logic, then, during his simple experiments, he noticed that after the obstacle was realised, the chimpanzees would pause, mull, and after some time, and at an ostensibly arbitrary moment, suddenly approach the puzzle and immediately solve it without hesitation. In the case of gaining access to a food item that required the use of objects arranged in new ways, the animals would fail continuously for some time. Then suddenly, they would purposefully use the object or arrange the tools in the correct way in order to get the food, as if the realisation had emerged from nowhere. Having understood the riddle, thought it through, and then realised the answer, the chimpanzees would master Köhler’s problems with a few quick steps which he describes as “unwaveringly purposeful.”⁶⁸ This led him to define his concept of insight learning as a relationship or fact that had otherwise gone unacknowledged. It involves the sudden emergence into perception and consciousness, as if by a sudden cognitive leap or the thunderclap of a pattern of points that abruptly align to make something unseen visible. Distinct from direct observation or the observation of the actions of someone else, and in contrast with trial and error as a methodology to problem solve, learning due to insight requires cognition and forethought. Providing the criterion to discriminate a thought-out solution from a chance discovery, insight learning is a cognitive experience, one that demands that the subject visualise, or contemplate, the complexity of the problem and solution internally before initiating a behavioural response. Furthermore, insight learning engenders a permanent change as the arrival of insight brings with it a realisation that remains, and can be repeated in the future. The implication is that the chimpanzees were genuinely learning.

Importantly, Köhler's application of insight learning to chimpanzees confirmed that he read their behaviour in terms of responses – considered, thoughtful, and full of intent. His main intervention was the theory that chimpanzees *are* able to act intelligently, and that expressions of *apparent* intelligence were not simply due to chance. He was specifically putting forward a notion of chimpanzees as subjects who can respond, not only react. Indeed, his entire book is full of moments describing the chimpanzees reflecting, contemplating, perceiving, being self-aware and social, emotionally sophisticated animals; in fact, his reflection on their affective complexity is a discernible theme throughout the text. What Köhler's work demonstrates is that if there is a dividing line segregating the human mind from that of the chimpanzee, it is not absolute. Reading Lacan's interpretations against Köhler's open and progressive text, along with the fact that Lacan should cite his specific research – certainly make Lacan's interpretations seem all the more conscious, decisive, and instructive.

§

In examining Köhler's work in some detail, we discover that, instead of elucidating the meaning of the animal-human comparison in Lacan, it only confounds his argument further still. Charitably read, the one point that resounds within Lacan, and withstands his self-contradictions and narrative missteps, is that the chimpanzee and the human act differently. When we turn to Köhler, however, we find overwhelming evidence to the contrary. More so, it is no mere difference between Köhler's findings and Lacan's description of them but a categorical contradiction. That Lacan's description contravenes Köhler's evidence (which is the theoretical fulcrum of his essay) raises pertinent questions concerning Lacan's position that the mirror phase is human specific.

For instance, why cite Köhler, or cite him in place of Wallon? Why omit, or misrepresent, vital information from his research? Given that a reference to Wallon would have provided evidence for the theory that humans and chimpanzees do respond differently – and furthermore, that this point confirms human exceptionalism – the fact that he instead employs Köhler, whose research evinces the opposite and was progressive even in Lacan's time, complicates an already intricately dense puzzle. A notable motif is that when Lacan comes across commonality – for instance, between reactions to mirror images across species – his response is to segregate. In order to write the story of the subject formation not only of human individuals but of human species being, he must choose a departure point which requires the construction of a "before" from a position he perceives as the "after." His particular configuration positions the human as that which arrives, and renders the "before" of the human, (and thus, the before of culture, language and mind), the nonhuman world. Acting as the tane in his argument, the

animal must pre-exist in order for the human to come into existence. However, as explained, under any close examination or scrutiny this narrative easily dissolves: at one moment, the animal is distinct from the human, in another they co-exist on a continuum of subject formation. Once the species barrier Lacan struggles to maintain is reconsidered, these distinctions tremble under the slightest interrogation. Furthermore, whilst animals reoccur throughout Lacan's oeuvre (elephants, sticklebacks, bees), when formulating his initial theory of the mirror stage in the 1930s and 40s, the scientific study of animal behaviour was only emerging, and was entirely ignored by psychologists who rigorously defended an immutable break between the human and the animal.⁶⁹ Although ethology and comparisons with animal behaviour would eventually enter into psychological discussion, Lacan forecast this turn. His anticipation perhaps provides one insight into why his 1949 presentation of "The Mirror Stage" was initially met with an apathetic response.⁷⁰ Otherwise put: if it was not simply unnecessary, but unconventional to the point of potentially inviting critique, why should Lacan use ethological research in his paper at all – let alone use it only to dismiss its findings? Functioning like a retraction, Lacan concedes Köhler's findings, but not his conclusions; Lacan cites his research, yet only in the most impoverished way.

Since what matters is what one reconstructs of a narrative, we might question not how, but *why* Lacan arrived at the conclusion he did; why did he shape this new ethological research into the particular story that he told? Because, if we consider the lapses and incongruities in his engagement with the chimpanzee, what we encounter as a persistent motif is a wavering position, a lack of theoretical consonance, and a reoccurring ambiguity that is in evidence in the pattern these moments in the text eventually form. One point is certain: Lacan's retelling of the chimpanzee-human comparison fails to adhere to either pole – that the chimpanzee may similarly experience some form of a mirror stage, or whether this is exceptional to the human – in interpretation. He neither commits to a radical anti-anthropocentrism (as does Köhler), nor to a wholesale dismissal of animal agency and the confirmation of human uniqueness (like that of Wallon).⁷¹

It is surely a strange gesture to effectively foreclose the question that is being asked, and then, in turn to reject the empirical material relevant to this very question. How then do we make sense of Lacan's amnesia, and render intelligible what we might call the "symptoms" that materialise in our investigation? Certainly, Lacan's inconsistencies suggest the presence of a struggle with thinking species difference; it suggests his own conflictedness, along with an inability to decide *how* to place the human in relationship to the animal. Simultaneously, it could be that Lacan could not, or would not, confront an accurate entertaining of Köhler's scholarship given it holds the potential to alter the trajectory of his entire argument. Lacan's theory exhibits an uncertainty that manifests in the ambiguous position he holds regarding

the exact nature of human/animal self-recognition. I read this as being symptomatic of an ambivalence in how to think the identity of the human more broadly. Psychoanalytically speaking, it is somewhat predictable that this ambivalence should play itself out in the very essay whose aim is to justify a sense of human exceptionalism, and is routinely taken up as confirming this position uncritically.

§

Is what thinks in my place, then, another I?⁷²

Who, then, is this other to whom I am more attached than to myself, since, at the heart of my assent to my own identity it is still he who agitates me?⁷³

This article has argued that in “The Mirror Stage,” Lacan evinces significant ambivalence regarding the question of human specificity, and of nonhuman agency. In turn, he leaves the psychological concept of the mirror stage open to multiple interpretations and revisions. Attending to Lacan’s ambivalence in the text gives us a new way to approach this classical material, one that differs from traditional interpretations as the evidence that Lacan uses does not support the conventional interpretation of his position. What is of interest to this argument is that he consistently provides evidence for a reading of “The Mirror Stage” that cannot render its meaning straightforwardly human-specific; and therefore, anthropocentric. His persistent inability to know where, or perhaps how, to ontologically place the animal undulates through the text like an unconscious pulse. These facts, along with the blind spots, contradictions, and ambiguities we have identified in “The Mirror Stage” form an impasse that demonstrates that it is not necessarily clear what Lacan’s position on animal subjectivity is. If we accept the ethological disruptions to Lacan’s project of defining the human, perhaps the key investment shifts from diagnosing Lacan’s commitment to likeness or difference between human and animal self-reflection to confirming Lacan’s failure to create a meaningful divide between humans and the natural world. This inability to maintain a boundary in the very attempt to do precisely this is productive, as Lacan provides us with a model of anthropocentrism that always undermines itself in its efforts of self-constitution. After all, Lacan’s wavering line on the question of animal subjectivity is not surprising; it would seem as if the very integrity and specificity of human identity is what is at stake here.

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- ¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 1, Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, trans. John Forrester and ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 73.
- ² From here on I will use the abbreviation, "The Mirror Stage," when referring to Lacan's essay, whilst I will refer to the mirror stage or phase in reference to the psychological phenomenon he describes. For a detailed exegesis of Lacan's essay, see 'Author,' 2018.
- ³ Dylan Evans, "From Lacan to Darwin," in *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, ed. Jonathan Gottschall and David S. Wilson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 38-55; See, for instance, Kelly Oliver, *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to be Human* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 247. To place these discussions in context, it is worth recalling that Lacan's consistent use of animal examples and zoological case studies throughout his career is perhaps symptomatic of another thematic trend of Freud's that he remains faithful to. As Kelly Oliver has noted, "In nearly every essay he wrote, Freud mentions animals: animal examples, animal anecdotes, animal metaphors, animal idioms, and, of course, animal phobias" (2009, 247). Not only is the list of species long, but as Oliver notes, the most foundational of his concepts, "including the primary processes of displacement and condensation, the castration complex, the Oedipal complex, anxiety, neurosis, and the family romance" all revolve around animals (247). In addition, some of Freud's most famous cases are inextricably bound up with animals: Little Hans and his horse phobia, Little Arpad with his chicken phobia, the Rat-Man, the Vulture-Man and the Wolf-Man, to name a few. Furthermore, his obsession with feral children, his reliance on Darwin and later in life, his obsession with his own pet dogs who were included in sessions with his analysands, reveal an enduring fascination with animal others: conscious or unconscious. As Oliver observes, "whenever Freud needs an example to prove his point, he trots out the animal phobias" (261).
- ⁴ Michael Billig has for instance noted this theme, see Michael Billig, "Lacan's Misuse of Psychology: Evidence, Rhetoric and the Mirror Stage," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 (2006): 1-26.
- ⁵ Michael Ziser, "Animal Mirrors: Poe, Lacan, von Uexküll, and Audubon in the Zoosemiosphere," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 12 (2007): 11-33.
- ⁶ Peter Buse, "The Dog and the Parakeet," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 22 (2017): 133-145.
- ⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 33.
- ⁸ This intervention is situated within a broader gesture within scholarship on the animal which seeks to revisit canonical thinkers and texts in an attempt to trouble the ease with which their contributions are too hastily diagnosed as anthropocentric. See, for instance, Daniel Cook, "The More-Than-Human Other of Levinas's Totality & Infinity," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, 30 (2022): 58-78, and Christina M. Gchwandtner, "What About Non-Human Life? An 'Ecological' Reading of Michel Henry's Critique of Technology," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, 20 (20120): 116-138.
- ⁹ Jacques Lacan, "A materialist definition of the phenomenon of consciousness," in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book 2, The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli and ed. Jacques Alain Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1954] 1988), 49.

- ¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (London: Routledge, [1966] 2001), 1-2; A further inconsistency, Lacan uses the words "monkey" (*singe*) and "chimpanzee" (*chimpanzé*) within "The Mirror Stage" interchangeably, even though a chimpanzee is not in fact a monkey, but a great ape.
- ¹¹ Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 1.
- ¹² For instance, regarding those who presume Lacan is citing Wallon, see Lionea Bailly, *Lacan: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: One World, 2009); Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Phillipe Julien, *Jacques Lacan's Return to Freud: The Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary*, trans. Devra Beck Simiu (New York: New York University Press, 1994). Regarding those who read Lacan as citing Köhler, see Raymond Tallis, *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory* (New York: Palgrave, [1988] 1995); Christopher Peterson, *Bestial Traces: Race, Sexuality, Animality: Race, Sexuality, Animality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); and Brian Robertson, *Lacanian Antiphilosophy and the Problem of Anxiety: An Uncanny Little Object* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- ¹³ Gabriel Ruiz and Natividad Sanchez, "Wolfgang Köhler's the Mentality of Apes and the Animal Psychology of his Time," *Spanish Journal of Psychology* 17 (2014): 1.
- ¹⁴ Wolfgang Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, trans. Ella Winter (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, [1925] 1957), 268.
- ¹⁵ Elizabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Chicago: Chicago University Press, [1986] 1990), 414; It is important to pause here to acknowledge the habitual style within Lacan's work that assumes an intellectual authority that is not demonstrated in the manner typical to rigorous scholarly work (Billig 2006, 22; Evans 2005, 45). As Michael Billig notes, given his "references to the master-slave relationship of language, it is not difficult to say that Lacan places his readers in the subservient position of needing to accept the authoritative word of the master" (2006, 21). Indeed, Lacan enacted this dynamic with his seminar audiences. Curiously, it appears to be manifest in interpretations of "The Mirror Stage" which also, as a general rule, do not reference (or at times appear to even read) his sources. Wallon is however not the only notable influence missing from "The Mirror Stage," in which a lack of bibliographic detail and key oversights both within the text and throughout Lacan's scholarship comprise a pattern. Although, see Yannis Stavrakakis, "Wallon, Lacan and the Lacanians: Citation Practices and Repression," *Theory, Culture and Society* 24 (2007):131-38. Stavrakakis notes (in direct response to Billig), Lacan was "a practicing analyst who never hesitated to stress the distance between his work and standard academic discourse," and much of his published work consists of transcribed lectures, for which citational practices are indubitably different (2007, 134).
- ¹⁶ See, for instance, Elizabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Chicago: Chicago University Press, [1986] 1990), 143.
- ¹⁷ Lacan, The Mirror Stage, 1.
- ¹⁸ Karl Bühler, *Theory of Language: The Representational Function of Language*, trans. Donald Fraser Goodwin (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, [1934] 2011), 10.
- ¹⁹ Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 1.
- ²⁰ Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 1.
- ²¹ Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 2.

- ²² Lacan, “The Mirror Stage,” 2.
- ²³ Jacques Lacan, “The Freudian Thing,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, [1956] 2001), 151-152.
- ²⁴ Lacan, “The Freudian Thing,” 152.
- ²⁵ Lacan, “The Freudian Thing,” 152.
- ²⁶ Lacan “The Freudian Thing,” 151.
- ²⁷ Jacques Lacan, “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, [1966] 2001), 94.
- ²⁸ Lacan, “The Freudian Thing,” 152.
- ²⁹ Lacan, “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” 92.
- ³⁰ Lacan, “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” 92.
- ³¹ Lacan, “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” 92.
- ³² Lacan “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” 92.
- ³³ Lacan, “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” 92.
- ³⁴ Catherine Clement, *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 85.
- ³⁵ Jacques Lacan, “Presentation on Psychical Causality,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, [1946] 2002), 151.
- ³⁶ Lacan, “Presentation on Psychical Causality,” 151.
- ³⁷ Lacan, “Presentation on Psychical Causality,” 151.
- ³⁸ See, for instance, Lionel Bailly’s *Lacan: A Beginner’s Guide* (2009).
- ³⁹ Lacan, The Mirror Stage, 2.
- ⁴⁰ See, for example, the following YouTube videos for a visual illustration, noting in particular the recurring behaviour which appears to denote a kind of checking of the mirror’s outline, and a touching and grasping of the mirror’s surface: Nicola L, “Baby in the mirror,” Youtube video, 2:03, June 11, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7Box3Yp1Yk>; Jessica Pressman, “The Mirror Stage,” YouTube video, 2:03, June 6, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DW-pyip7Yo>.
- ⁴¹ Lacan, “The Mirror Stage,” 1.
- ⁴² (Lacan [1966] 2002, 151)
- ⁴³ See Todd Dufresne, *Returns of the French Freud: Freud, Lacan, and Beyond*, (London: Routledge, 2013); Bruce Fink, *Lacan on Love: An Exploration of Lacan’s Seminar VIII, Transference* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017); Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, trans. Douglas Brick (California: Stanford University Press, 1991), and Malcom Bowie, *Lacan*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), and Debra Bergoffen, “Casting Shadows: The body in Descartes, Sartre, De Beavoir, and Lacan,” *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, 4 (1992): 232-243, for just a few examples of this consistent interpretative theme.

⁴⁴ Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 2.

⁴⁵ Although this study is discussed by Lacan and his commentators in terms of the chimpanzee only, Köhler's study also included two orangutans (Köhler [1925] 1957).

⁴⁶ Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 268.

⁴⁷ Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 2.

⁴⁸ Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 268.

⁴⁹ Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 268.

⁵⁰ Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 268.

⁵¹ Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 278.

⁵² Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 278.

⁵³ Lacan's concept of the mirror stage is very heavily indebted to early Freudian conceptions of human psychological development; here, primary narcissism, first introduced by Freud in his 1914 essay: Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works, XIV (1914-1916)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, [1914] 2001), 67-73. Elisabeth Roudinesco defines it thus: "Primary narcissism is a first state, prior to the constitution of the ego and therefore auto-erotic, through which the infant sees his own person as the object of exclusive love - a state that precedes his ability to turn towards external objects" (2003, 29). It is this stage, this "first state," that provides the framework for the subsequent development of the ego, which is arrived at, rather than given (29). Freud's logic in positing a primary narcissism prior to the ego runs as follows:

I may point out that we are bound to suppose that a unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed. The auto-erotic instincts, however, are there from the very first; so there must be something added to auto-erotism - a new psychical action - in order to bring about narcissism. ([1914] 2001, 77)

That is, humans are born with auto-erotism, but require "something added" in order to experience primary narcissism, which is a constitutive and formative facet of ego development (77). Freud argues that the infant initially is composed of a range of sensations and experiences, but due to his infantile state, simply experiences these sensations as a kind of synesthetic kaleidoscope, anchored in no one body, limb, or object. These experiences are not organised into a system of signification, nor do they form any patterns, and the infant lacks any notion that there is a subject who perceives. Throughout this stage, the infant's libido is focused solely on its own body: it cathects its entire "self" with its libido, and loves only itself. He referred to this self-love as "the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation," as the desire which compels the impulse to survive (73). This is the state of primary narcissism, and it is the ensuing second step, that is the intervention of the social, that provides the necessary psychological action to bring the infant out of primary narcissism. The "something" that is "added" to enable the formation of the ego, unlike the biology that preceded it, then, is Culture (77). What the advent of the embryonic ego does here is establish a sense of identity; an elemental "me" that unifies these diverse perceptions which otherwise are experienced as heterogeneous and dispersed, although they now emerge as somewhat centred and amalgamated. Grosz summarises this symbiotic play of perception and the ego, which allows the development of the subject as a surface, by explaining, "The ego is a consequence of a perceptual surface; it is produced and grows only relative to the surface" (1994, 32). Once inaugurated into the social, the infant can

identify with other subjects and objects, and introject them to form its ego ideal. With the formation of the ego ideal, the infant begins to distance itself from primary narcissism and starts to cathect objects beyond its own body. Despite this debt to Freudian thinking, Lacan's only explicit reference to primary narcissism in "The Mirror Stage" occurs when he narrates the transition from primary narcissism to secondary narcissism (the conversion of ego libido to object libido) when he states that "the specular *I* turns into the social *I*" ([1966] 2001, 4). Here, Lacan is referring to the mirror stage moment at which the infant grasps itself as an object, and thus realises other bodies and objects in their relationship to him. Together these form the terms of reference necessary for him to form a primitive sense of self.

⁵⁴ Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 278.

⁵⁵ Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 278.

⁵⁶ Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 270.

⁵⁷ Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 278.

⁵⁸ Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 275.

⁵⁹ Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 275.

⁶⁰ Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 275.

⁶¹ Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 258; The nature of this hand-clasping gesture has since been validated by Jane Goodall and others. In an article in which she discusses the lexicon of chimpanzee and other primate gestures, social behaviour, as well as the complexity of chimpanzee social life, she outlines that common hand gestures and greeting gestures include the holding out of a hand, which is sometimes responded to by clasping the held out hand, as in a common human handshake. Due to the considerable cross-species parallel, Goodall argues that the handshake greeting gesture of certain human cultures may be derived from the greeting repertoires of chimpanzees. See Jane Goodall, "The Behaviour of Free-living Chimpanzees in the Gombe Stream Reserve," *Behaviour of Chimpanzees 1* (1968): 161-311.

⁶² Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 270, emphasis added; Since Lacan's time, self-recognition and mirror tests, such as the famous red dot test, have substantially increased in sophistication. For further reading on the red dot test, see the initial work of its creator, Gordon Gallup Jr., namely: Gordon Gallup Jr., "Mirror-image stimulation," *Psychological Bulletin* 70 (1968): 782-93, and Gordon Gallup Jr., "Chimpanzees: Self-recognition," *Science* 167 (1970): 86-97. And yet, in contemporary experiments with chimpanzees, including infant chimpanzees, their behaviour upon being placed in front of a mirror is consistent with the captivation that Köhler describes. Running back and forth, pacing, and moving extremely close to the mirror and then in the next moment far away from it, these responses resemble precisely what human infants do upon the observation of their own specular double. Animated and engaging in what seems to be gleeful play behaviour, it certainly appears as if these chimpanzees are also caught in the enchanting throes of curious self-discovery. Indeed, it was Darwin's very descriptions of his encounter with orangutans at the zoo, seeing them gaze into a looking-glass, that inspired the mirror test. Darwin's descriptions of these events largely align with Köhler's findings, and can be found in: Charles Darwin, "Supplemental Note on Sexual Selection in Relation to Monkeys," in *The Origin of Species by Means of Sexual Selection and The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, ed. Robert M. Hutchins, (Chicago: William Benton, [1876] 1952), 598-600, and Charles Darwin, *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals*, ed. Francis Darwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1890] 2009), as well as in recently published personal notes, see Jon Van Whyhe and Peter Kjærgaard, "Going the whole orang: Darwin, Wallace and the natural history of orangutans," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 51 (2015): 53-63. Of considerable similarity to Köhler's chimpanzees is a

section from these personal notes, in which, as per Lacan, Darwin frames self-recognition and the nature of reflection as a puzzle:

Both were astonished beyond measure at looking glass, looked at it every way, sideways, & with most steady surprise. - after some time stuck out lips, like kissing, to glass, & then the two did when they were first put together. - at last put hand behind glass at various distances, looked over it, rubbed front of glass, made faces at it - examined whole glass - put face quite close & pressed it - at last half refused to look at it - startled & seemed almost frightened, & evidently became cross because it could not understand puzzle. - Put body in all kinds of positions when approaching glass to examine it. (Darwin in Whyte and Kjærgaard 2015, 58; unconventional punctuation is original)

Interestingly, whilst the “*Aha-Erlebnis*” expression was coined by Bühler, it was never employed by Köhler in discussing chimpanzee behaviour. In fact, in Charles Darwin, “A Biographical Sketch of an Infant,” *Mind*, 2 (1877): 285-94, Darwin recounts complex relationships between mirror recognition and his own toddlers, even recording an instance with one of his children who recognised his reflection by exclaiming, “ha!” (Billig 2006, 18).

⁶³ Gabriel Ruiz and Natividad Sanchez, “Köhler’s *Mentality of Apes*,” 6.

⁶⁴ Köhler in Gabriel Ruiz and Natividad Sanchez, “Köhler’s *Mentality of Apes*,” 6.

⁶⁵ Gabriel Ruiz and Natividad Sanchez, “Köhler’s *Mentality of Apes*,” 6.

⁶⁶ Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 167.

⁶⁷ Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 167.

⁶⁸ Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 169.

⁶⁹ Evans, “From Lacan to Darwin,” 47.

⁷⁰ Evans, “From Lacan to Darwin,” 47.

⁷¹ Although, his commentators tend not to perceive this ambiguity and the dilemma it raises, most read him to be arguing in line with Wallon on this point.

⁷² Jacques Lacan, “The Instance of the letter in the Unconscious,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, [1966] 2002), 435.

⁷³ Lacan, “The Mirror Stage,” 190.

Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*

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Introduction

Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Derrida: we have been without two of the 20th century's greatest philosophers for some time now, but questions regarding the relationship between phenomenology and postmodernism, and more generally regarding the relationship between perception and language, remain with us. It seems that these relationships may be clarified by considering the relationship of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida to Husserl and by arguing that the great wave of postmodernism that washed *past* Merleau-Ponty's work after his premature death was not fully warranted, at least without further consideration. Thus, one of the main goals here will be to carefully consider Derrida's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Husserl, particularly regarding what Husserl said about the relationship between perception and language. Moreover, this careful consideration will involve a defense of how Merleau-Ponty understands Husserl. Yet, perhaps the greater goal here is to better understand the relationship between phenomenology and language, between perception and language, even the relationship between perception and cognition (which only occurs with the assistance of language), and even the relationship between facts and essences. These relationships have yet to be fully understood, yet it will be argued that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy gets us closer than what was achieved by either Husserl or Derrida.

This essay is divided into three main sections. Section 1, *Merleau-Ponty's Interpretation of Husserl's Letter*, opens with a consideration of Jacques Derrida's criticism of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Husserl's letter to Lévy-Bruhl, that Husserl downplayed the concern for essences to focus on lived-through perception, and a consideration of Derrida's claim that Merleau-Ponty still harbored certain of Husserl's transcendental tendencies. Textual evidence will be provided to show that it is Derrida who is misinterpreting Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty claims that Husserl was *still*

concerned with the conceptual production of essences and that Husserl sought to focus on both experience and essences. Moreover, it will be argued that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is certainly not Husserl's, for Merleau-Ponty does not cling to the conceptual production of essences, certainly in the way that Husserl did.

Section 2, *Husserl at the Limits*, seeks to further confirm Merleau-Ponty's understanding of Husserl by considering Merleau-Ponty's now published lectures on Husserl: that he sought to return to experience *and* continue to produce conceptual essences---and that Merleau-Ponty disapproved of the latter while, nonetheless, reframing it for use in his own philosophy.

Section 3, *The late Merleau-Ponty and Husserl's Letter*, returns to the earlier consideration of Husserl's letter to Lévy-Bruhl. Now we will see that Merleau-Ponty recognizes Husserl's return to experience, recognizes that Husserl still sought the conceptual production of permanent essences, but also recognizes that Husserl realizes that his imaginative conceptual variation could not fully capture this experience. Merleau-Ponty seeks to overcome this tension in Husserl's thought, for we will see that Merleau-Ponty believes that it is speech and finally written language that help give permanence to conceptual essences, with these essences now appearing as a creative sublimation of a broader lived-through experience that can never be fully captured or expressed.

Merleau-Ponty's Interpretation of Husserl's Letter

Derrida takes issue with Merleau-Ponty's characterization of the late Husserl as embracing situated worldly experience and as moving away from *a priori* thought. Let us critically evaluate this statement. Here is Derrida's claim:

The part devoted to relativism in . . . [Husserl's] celebrated Letter to [Lucien] Lévy-Bruhl [in 1935] can be interpreted in this way [that is, as moving toward experience and away from abstract thought]. From that letter . . . we might think . . . that Husserl renounced the historical *a priori* discovered by imaginary variation . . . This is notably the reading that Merleau-Ponty proposed: 'In a letter to Lévy-Bruhl, . . . Husserl seems to admit that the facts go beyond what we imagine and that this point bears a real significance. It is as if the imagination, left to itself, is unable to represent the possibilities of existence which are realized in different cultures . . . [Husserl] saw that it is perhaps not possible for us, who live in certain historical traditions, to conceive of the historical possibility of these primitive men by a mere variation of our imagination.'¹

Thus Derrida *does* claim that Merleau-Ponty claims that the later Husserl is turning toward a greater focus on lived experience and away from the intuition of essences by way of the imagination. What seems to be at issue

here is that Merleau-Ponty finds in Husserl a move toward an existential phenomenology, a phenomenology rooted in perceptual experience, with less emphasis on imaginary variation (Husserl's eidetic reduction) or on conceptual construction, while Derrida rejects this claim and believes that he never prioritized perception over *a priori* analysis in the way that Merleau-Ponty suggests.² Yet, even with this criticism, Derrida still apparently believes that Merleau-Ponty is guilty of remaining too Husserlian, of still adhering to Husserl's transcendental tendencies, as we will see below. In addition, it is also clear that Derrida does not accept Merleau-Ponty's appeal to perceptual experience, as we shall see.

Considering the textual evidence, it appears that Derrida's belief is not accurate. After all, Merleau-Ponty does cite *what Husserl actually says* about the importance of the lived-through worldly experience in the Lévy-Bruhl letter. Husserl does say this, *and* this seems to be what Husserl is actually doing in his last work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, particularly in §9, Galileo's Mathematization of Nature.³ Taking up the letter first, this is the Husserl passage that Merleau-Ponty quotes: "It is a task of the highest importance, which may be actually achieved, to feel our way into a humanity whose life is enclosed in a vital, social tradition and to understand it in this unified social life. This is the basis of the world which is no mere representation but rather the world that actually is for it." In addition, Husserl here goes on to say that "historical relativism has its incontestable justification as an anthropological fact." Merleau-Ponty continues his exposition of Husserl's position stating that "while anthropology . . . may have the first word in the gaining of scientific knowledge, it does not have the last. Historical relativism is now no longer dominated at one stroke by a mode of thought which would have all the keys of history and would be in a position to classify all possible histories before any factual inquiry. On the contrary, the thinker who wishes to dominate history in this way must learn from the facts and must enter into them."⁴ Husserl continues this line of historical, existential thought in *Crisis*:

In the intuitively given surrounding world, by abstractively directing our view to mere spatiotemporal shapes, we experience 'bodies'—not geometrical-ideal bodies but precisely those bodies that we actually experience, with the content which is the actual content of experience. No matter how arbitrarily we may transform these bodies in fantasy, the free and in a certain sense 'ideal' possibilities we thus obtain are anything but geometrical-ideal possibilities: they are not the geometrically 'pure' shapes which can be drawn in ideal space...⁵

Husserl is here clearly making a case for the importance of lived experience, that this experience of actual spatiotemporal shapes is not the same as an ideal construction, and is making the case that the ideals abstracted from it are not the same as the pure shapes of ideal space. Husserl continues:

The geometry of idealities was preceded by the practical art of surveying, which knew nothing of idealities. Yet such a pre-geometrical achievement was a meaning-fundament for geometry, a fundament for the great invention of idealization . . . It was a fateful omission that Galileo did not inquire back into the original meaning-giving achievement which, as idealization practiced on the original ground of all theoretical and practical life --- the immediately intuited world (and here especially the empirically intuited world of bodies) ---resulted in the geometrical ideal constructions. He did not reflect closely on this: on how free imaginative variation of this world and its shapes results only in possible empirically intuitable shapes and not in exact shapes; on what sort of motivation and what new achievement was required for genuinely geometric idealization.⁶

Again, what is being stressed here is the founding of the idealities of geometry in practical experience, in a practical experience that has been forgotten, resulting in the separation of geometrical idealities from experience, resulting in the alienation of science from actual experience, resulting in the crisis of European sciences. Yet, for our present purposes, what is significant here is that what Merleau-Ponty says about Husserl (about his appeal to lived experience) is clearly present in Husserl's *Crisis* as well as in his letter to Lévy-Bruhl, a claim Derrida says is not justifiable.⁷ The above quoted texts indicate otherwise.

Furthermore, while Derrida accuses Merleau-Ponty of misinterpreting Husserl, the text reveals that it can certainly be claimed that Derrida is guilty of misinterpreting Merleau-Ponty. For example, Derrida accuses Merleau-Ponty of claiming or at least implying that Husserl, when thinking about future possibilities, was "deducing factuality itself *a priori*."⁸ Yet, Merleau-Ponty never makes this *claim* about Husserl, that all future facts must be deducible from the eidetic essences, and the *implication* appears to be more Derrida's than Merleau-Ponty's. From what Merleau-Ponty states, it appears that for Husserl the *essential structures* of future events must conform to the eidetic essence. He never claimed (or implied) that Husserl believed that he could derive *all* future *particularities* from these essences. Merleau-Ponty is certainly aware that future particularities may be different or unpredictable for a present *essential* structure while the future *essence* remains predicable. In fact, even regarding the grasping of an essence in the present, what is important is the essential structure not the incidental particulars. If we are searching for the essence of an object such as a lamp, we will focus on its ability to emit light but not on the fact that the material of which it is made is shiny or a certain color. Moreover, the incidental particulars would not be deducible from the essence, in the present or the future.⁹

While it is true that Husserl still appeals to essences and conceptual analysis, lending some credit to Derrida's interpretive claim, which we will consider momentarily, for now let us consider an additional point made by

Derrida: that his criticism of Husserl is aimed at *all* phenomenology, including Merleau-Ponty's. Lawrence Hass even seems to think that this implies that Derrida believes that Merleau-Ponty likewise still adheres to certain transcendental tendencies, that he still relies on *prior conceptual powers* to make sense of the perceptual experience.¹⁰ Yet Merleau-Ponty is certainly aware that transcendental philosophies, with their stress on the conceptual, tend to presuppose a distinction between sensibility and the understanding, a distinction that he does not accept within his own philosophy.¹¹ He mentions that even an intellectualist like Kant admitted that all knowledge begins with experience, that even the *a priori* must start from here, and, in making this claim, Kant must then admit that there is no way to make a precise distinction between sensibility and the understanding, between the factual and the *a priori*.¹² However, even though Merleau-Ponty is clear about this, it seems that Derrida (and Hass) presuppose that Merleau-Ponty adheres to this distinction between sensibility and understanding,¹³ when in fact he conflates matter and form, which is clear from his comments regarding Kant's *a priori* and from his embrace of the Gestalt theory of perception, with its claim that the simplest perception is a figure against a ground, that form is initially perceptual structure. Moreover, given Merleau-Ponty's treatment of the lived-through body, that it cannot be understood as a mere thing or as the exemplification of an abstract concept, that it actively meets the world in the creation of meaning, the subsequent meaning of a perceived thing (its form if you will) must be understood as given within this engaged context and as given with its content. Thus, the argument that Merleau-Ponty remains committed to certain of Husserl's transcendental themes, of prior conceptual powers to make sense of perception, with its seeming corollary of the separation of the understanding and perception, is a misrepresentation. In fact, Derrida's framing of this whole reading of Merleau-Ponty and his interpretation of Husserl presupposes this distinction between "*de facto* and *de jure*, existence and essence," the factual and the *a priori* (see note above) when Merleau-Ponty's has already gone well beyond it.

In addition, Derrida says that the work of social scientists certainly uses imaginary variation to help gain access to universal invariants. However, he proceeds, "since these invariants will teach us nothing about the specific character of a particular society or epoch, I will--especially--have to 'empathize' (*einzufuhlen*), as Husserl said to Levy-Bruhl. But this empathizing (*Einfuhlung*) . . . cannot exactly institute science *de jure*. *Einfuhlung* itself is possible only *within* and *by virtue* of the *a priori* universal structures of sociality and historicity."¹⁴ But is this true? Is empathy possible only within *a priori* universal structures? Merleau-Ponty argues just the opposite. It is through the lived empathy that the universal is formed, that we recognize the other who is *similar* (and yet also different). The universal is thus built from a recognition of numerous similarities (as well as the recognition of differences). In lived-through perception, my experience opens upon a shared world, upon a field that is experienced as public, as existing in its own right, and it is in this lived-

through experience that I catch a glimpse (via empathy, for human bodies are similar and similarly open upon this shared, pre-existent world) of what others live as their experiences opens upon this one same world. Our experiences overlap as we act into the world together. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is certainly not just about the description of one's own experience. It starts with this experience, compares it to other experiences, then compares these, by way of dialogue, to the experiences lived through by others – in order to form general concepts and more precise yet still provisional conceptual essences. These “essences” can then be used to help make sense of future events, even though they may be changed by them. Moreover, while transcendental thought distinguishes between matter and form, between sensibility and the understanding, Merleau-Ponty, as we have seen, conflates the two experiences, for lived-through perception is already oriented, already meaningful. Form is first and foremost gestalt perceptual form, and it is from this already meaningful perceptual form that the abstract form of concepts, by additional comparison to other meaningful experiences and the meaningful experiences lived-through by other perceivers, is created. Thus, Merleau-Ponty offers a counter example to Derrida's claim that empathy takes place only within the context of an *a priori* structures. True, since we are able to sympathize and empathize with others because our bodies *experientially* open upon the shared structures of a perceptual field, this field is presupposed, but the formation of general concepts and even *a priori* conceptual structures *follow from* a sublimation of this perceptual field and a comparison of experiences that occur within it.

Derrida's above reference to the work of social scientists is undoubtedly reference to Merleau-Ponty's discussion of this issue in “Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man” – which Derrida cites in the preceding pages, as noted above. My contention here is that Merleau-Ponty's discussion makes more sense than Derrida's. Yet it should be mentioned here that Merleau-Ponty does recognize the value of “case studies” when discussing Husserl's intuition of essences, since, for example, the principle of gravity, as he states in “Phenomenology and the Science of Man,” can be read from a single event.¹⁵ When discussing case studies and induction, here as well as in *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*,¹⁶ he agrees with Husserl and Léon Brunschvicg that induction should not be characterized as it has been done by J.S. Mill's, one that is not simply the successive perception of particulars in search of commonalities to be abstracted, but one that uses an orienting hypothesis in order to grasp truly meaningful comparisons. It is in *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language* that he more explicitly mentions Kurt Goldstein's focus on case studies and his effort to grasp the meaningful core of what is being studied, rather than simply trying to bring the greatest number of facts under some general claim. Yet Merleau-Ponty proceeds to say that the facts and meaning, the respective domains of science and philosophy, cannot exist apart from one another. Thus, if we think of the Goldstein example, the case study reveals the core meaning of what is being studied,

but this meaning, at some point, must be related to other cases in an inductive manner.

Merleau-Ponty is thus well aware of strict empiricism's two fundamental problems. First, if knowledge is taken to be grounded in immediate observation of sense particulars, then knowledge is simply the *result* of contingent events, which isn't really knowledge at all. In fact, this approach ends in skepticism, for knowledge presupposes the *meaningful grasping* of events, which is not accounted for in the strictly empiricist approach.¹⁷ Secondly, as we have just seen, since the first problem indicates the difficulty of accounting for the appearance of meaning in the observation of a particular, strict empiricism will have difficulty accounting for the observation of a common meaning among particulars.¹⁸ This raises a serious problem for induction by enumeration, induction that searches for common meanings in successive observations of similar particulars. It is these problems that Merleau-Ponty seeks to avoid with his version of the phenomenological approach, with its attempt to bring together meaning and facts. Again, Merleau-Ponty does say, as perhaps Derrida is implying, that a case study can reveal a primary sense, one that is more enlightening than a study that proceeds merely by induction. He is aware that this sort of induction needs the orientation of meaning. Yet, the meaning uncovered in the case study is not an *a priori* in the way that Derrida implies here in his discussion of Husserl's intuition of essences, the *a priori* as a necessary conceptual truth. The "essential" meaning uncovered by way of the case study remains provisional and open to future alteration with the appearance of new observations.

Furthermore, while it is true, as Derrida says, that Husserl did not seem to square his *relative worldly historical experience* with his *conceptual eidetic analysis*, it must be recognized that Merleau-Ponty is fully aware of this. In fact, Merleau-Ponty says that Husserl, throughout his career, but especially toward the end of it, tried to do both – and, furthermore, that Husserl's ultimate stress on conceptual analysis and essences was wrong – at least as Husserl approached it. As Merleau-Ponty states with respect to Husserl's work,

. . . we find themes that do not seem to go together . . . There is in phenomenology at its beginning the will to come back to the lived, and there is at the same time . . . certain logicist components--and, in a sense, it is the opposite. Is it a question, with phenomenology, of constituting a table of concepts or essences - which would be the logicist tendency - or is it a question of restoring lived experience? The two things seem to be quite different, almost opposed . . . However, the fact is that from the beginning, Husserl says that he wants both . . . And this is what allowed me to say earlier that Husserl was never really a logicist.¹⁹

Thus, Husserl wanted to do both, return to lived experience and logical, conceptual analysis of it, and, even more, Merleau-Ponty interprets him as leaning more toward lived experience in the latter part of his career but, unfortunately, as ultimately still appealing to conceptual analysis and the search for essences. Yet, Merleau-Ponty's own philosophy certainly does not try to incorporate the lived-through, historical, existential into a transcendental phenomenology and its prioritizing of essences, as Derrida appears to think he does. Consider Merleau-Ponty's comments in his lectures on Husserl, entitled *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*²⁰: "the crisis of European science" that Husserl addresses in his later writings "is due to *Sinnentleerung* [the emptying out of sense]." For Husserl, Merleau-Ponty says, "the immediate remedy [for this problem] is historical *Besinnung* [reflection] to reawaken the *Urstiftung* [original founding or institution] and all of its horizons." The remedy is a historical reflection that is able to grasp the "interior of the history which bears the ideality," i.e., the human meaning as it has been developed. Now, this seems like a laudable goal, a laudable way to try to escape the alienation produced by the tradition. Yet here Merleau-Ponty immediately questions this goal and asks "can we still do this? Isn't total reactivation [of the past] impossible?"²¹ Yet, even more, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to state that "we still need to know whether Husserl is mistaken to maintain intemporal formulas: *unbedingte Allgemeingultigkeit* <'unconditional general validity'> (*Husserliana* VI 366). Is there coincidence with the totality of the *Urstiftung*, if the tradition is always forgotten? We shall see [to] it to raise the question. Wouldn't coincidence be the death of the logos since forgetfulness makes the tradition fruitful?"²² Merleau-Ponty's answer, to his clearly rhetorical questions, is not fully stated here, but, based on his overall philosophy (as well as the rhetorical nature of his questions), it must be that a coincidence with the totality of the founding is not possible, (or, more precisely, that an intellectual coincidence in the present with the totality of the founding is not possible), that Husserl is mistaken to maintain intemporal formulas such as "unconditional general validity," and that a total coincidence with the past world would mean the death of the *Stiftung logos* (the lived-through origin with its multitude of open possibilities.) Thus, in his own work, Merleau-Ponty is certainly not going to try to incorporate the historical/existential into the intemporal formulas, expressed in conceptual language, of a possibly transcendental phenomenology, as Derrida appears to claim, for we see here that he is critical of Husserl's attempt to do this. The attempt was made by Husserl, but not by Merleau-Ponty.

Rather, Merleau-Ponty proclaims that cognitive powers of the understanding are not separate from lived-through perception but are a *prolongation* or *sublimation* of the body's *perceptual orientation* toward the world and others. Granted, cognitive powers bring something new, but, again, this new power is a sublimation or a sublation or an *aufheben* in the Hegelian sense, in the sense of an emergent growth or development that solves the problems of preceding levels by integrating them in the global functioning of

the organism with a greater awareness and in a more efficient and unified way. Cognitive powers are a continuation of the human body's power of perceptual orientation and must not be considered outside or above it.²³

Again, Merleau-Ponty does not deny the innovation and significance of abstract thought, expressed as it is with the assistance of language, mathematical symbols, algorithms, geometric formulas, and the like, for he recognizes that abstract calculations can be achieved without having to refer, at each step, to their source in perceptual experience. However, if at some point these abstractions do not refer back to the perceived world as we live and encounter it, then they render themselves meaningless. Merleau-Ponty expresses it this way:

Thus, nothing limits our power to formalize, that is, to construct increasingly general expressions of the same fact. But however far one proceeds with formalization, its signification remains in suspension, actually means nothing, and has no truth at all unless we refer its superstructures back to a visible object. To signify, to signify something as a decisive act, is therefore accomplished only when that something's constructions are applied to the perceived as the source of signification or expression.²⁴

It is appropriate here to mention phenomenology's *Fundierung* relationship. When speaking about how Husserl understands the relationship between the power of perception and the power of the mind or the relationship between perception and the intuition of essences (*Wesenschau*), Merleau-Ponty states the following.

Husserl often says that to see an essence one must begin by having a perception, which serves as a base, or point of departure for a *Wesenschau* but not as the source of its validity. The relation between perception and *Wesenschau* is one of founding [*Fundierung*]; perception, that is, serves as the ground, or pedestal, on which an insight into essences is formed. Thus insight into essences is an intellectual taking over, a making explicit and clarifying of something concretely experienced, a recognition that it comes after something else, from which it starts, is essential to its nature. It also knows itself to be retrospective. The idea that it succeeds a more direct contact with the thing itself is enclosed in its very meaning.²⁵

The way Merleau-Ponty understands and uses this *Fundierung* relationship is as follows. It is understood as a two-way relationship whereby terms influence each other reciprocally and simultaneously, yet with one of the terms remaining more primary. When considering the relationship between perception and language (which expresses thought), we must understand that these terms influence each other reciprocally and simultaneously, yet with perception as the more primary term. Perception, which is interested, sensual, and emotional, suggests or motivates certain expressions in painting and

song, as well as in speech and the written word. A variety of expressions is always possible and there is no definitively correct expression, yet some expressions are more clarifying than others, and these are the expressions that we should accept. Merleau-Ponty expresses this profoundly in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

Describe very precisely the way perception masks itself to itself, make itself Euclidean. Show that the pregnancy of the geometrical forms is grounded intrinsically (not culturally) in that they, better than others, allow an ontogenesis (they stabilize being . . .), but that this intrinsic pregnancy, in order to retain all its meaning, must be maintained within the zone of transcendence, within the context of pre-Being, of the *Offenheit* of the *Umwelt* [openness of the environment], and not dogmatically considered self-evident—the Euclidean perception has a privilege, but it is not an absolute privilege, and it is contested as absolute by the transcendence—which demands the Euclidean world as one of its aspects.²⁶

Thus, different interpretations are always possible but some are more clarifying than others because they allow ontogenesis, because they help stabilize being, because they are more accurate than other interpretations. Yet they do so in the context of lived-through perceptual experience, as a sublimation of it, and it is to this open environment of lived-through perceptual experience that we must always return, always checking our expressions for the accuracy of their interpretations.²⁷

One gets the impression, for some interpreters of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy (for example, Derrida and perhaps Hass as well), that the *Fundierung* relationship between perception and expression is less reciprocal than Merleau-Ponty intended, with more emphasis given to the power of linguistic expression, for linguistic expression (interpretation) seems to be doing the most important work. Contrarily, while Merleau-Ponty does stress that this relationship is reciprocal, his emphasis is on the power of the perceptual, with perception understood as engaged and adaptive movement, as an actively aware orientation, with perception even understood as the earliest form of expression.²⁸ Perception is our first expression, for it takes scattered givens from our perceptual field and helps express them as a meaningful structure, helps express them as a *sense*, with matter and form conflating into one another, with the perceptual field and the perceiving body crossing into one another (*Fundierung*) in the creation of *sense*. It is this meaning or sense that suggests or motivates other forms of expression,²⁹ that is sublimated through perception, even though the expressions of speech can fold back upon the perceived in a way that can help creatively orient it. Yet, the primary term here is still perception, with this primordial meaning being sublimated in more integrated, higher forms. Thus, primordial expression comes from below, if you will. Now, as we have seen, it is certainly true that speech and language fold back upon perception, that speech and language are

doing some of the work of expression, and that speech and perception fold into one another and cooperate, so to speak, that they cannot really be separated, yet, still, with perception remaining the more primary term in the relationship. Derrida's work implies that expression comes from above, from a power of linguistic expression (for language is a trace that erases the original trace of perception³⁰).

Derrida explicitly claims the following about phenomenology and perception. "And contrary to what phenomenology which is always phenomenology of perception – has tried to make us believe, contrary to what our desire cannot fail to be tempted into believing, the thing always escapes. Contrary to the assurance that Husserl gives us a little further on, 'the look' cannot 'abide.'"³¹ Furthermore, Derrida says: "Now I don't know what perception is and I don't believe that anything like perception exists. Perception is precisely a concept...And I believe that perception is interdependent with the concept of origin and center and consequently whatever strikes at the metaphysics of which I have spoken strikes also at the very concept of perception. I don't believe that there is any perception."³²

Derrida clearly disregards the importance of the lived-through existential meaning of perception and of Merleau-Ponty's fundamental approach. He misses this lived-through perceptual experience in Husserl as well, in *Crisis*, in the already referenced §9 on Galileo – where Husserl talks about people's lives, their lived experience in practice, where measurement begins in praxis, and which reads quite differently than the appended "The Origin of Geometry." Husserl claims that Galileo forgets this life world, where the mathematization of nature, of natural shapes, begins to be idealized by geometry, where the natural shapes are treated as idealized shapes – which they are not. As we have seen, both lived-through experience and the formal are present in Husserl's work. Merleau-Ponty recognizes the importance of both, while Derrida downplays the former (and the latter in his own philosophy of linguistic deconstruction).

It should also be mentioned that David Carr, writing in his translator's introduction to *Crisis*, mentions that Husserl was not at all clear about the role of historical analysis in his later work. Carr even quotes Derrida, who states: "Though it is constantly *practiced* in the *Crisis* . . . itself, this new access to history is *never made a problem there*."³³ Thus, Husserl seems to be doing one thing in the section on Galileo, seeking to capture life-world experience, without fully clarifying what this means, and something different in the appended "The Origin of Geometry," seeking essences. If commentators focus mostly on the latter, then they are likely to miss or significantly downplay, as Derrida appears to do, the former. As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty recognizes this tension in Husserl's thought, the desire to do both description of lived-through experience and essential analysis, with Merleau-Ponty favoring the former and disapproving of the latter, at least as it is conceived by Husserl. Again, Merleau-Ponty is not naively claiming that Husserl returns

to lived-through experience, leaving the intuition of essence completely behind. After all, he does say that Husserl goes back to “imagined” origins, that Husserl is not attempting to do actual historical analysis. He does critically say that Husserl still puts experience in intemporal (conceptual) formulas, but he also sees the *existential* in the late Husserl, the appeal to the life-world. As we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty expression comes out of lived-through embodied perception. Even though it can be creative, intellectual expression in language is primarily a sublimation of the perceptual. Derrida gives too much to the power of language to freely interpret, as if language is an independent power brought to bear on perception, rather than the perceptual *logos* being a precursor to linguistic expression, rather than the perceptual being sublimated in painting, music, dance and poetry, speech, and finally in the more abstract expressions of written language.

Husserl at the Limits

To further confirm the case for this interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's relationship to Husserl (that he recognizes that Husserl *does pursue lived experience*, as well as essential analysis), let us return to some of the details of Merleau-Ponty's treatment of late Husserl in *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*. As Merleau-Ponty says here, it is within one's practical activity that the passive and active fold into each other, and that the present is sensed and merges with the past. Also, as he continues his characterization of Husserl's *historical* thought, i.e., his bringing together of the past with the present, Merleau-Ponty states that geometry itself “consists in ‘spiritual’ being...engendered by human activity, belonging to our human space. I know this because it is a trace: Friday's footprint.”³⁴ In other words, since it is impossible for us to be historically present at the actual empirical origins of geometry, we are left with what might be imagined to be its origins, i.e., some practical human activity that presumes a certain *human sense*, just as Robinson Crusoe realizes that he is not alone on the island when seeing human footprints in the sand. Some human sense must accompany the original human activity that we can still presently observe. In the case of geometry, the first written formulas reveal a certain human presence and sense (human beings who were able to create *meaningful* geometrical formulas), just as the human footprints left in the sand on what appeared to be a deserted beach reveal a human presence and, presumably, some purposeful human activity.

We must attempt to retrace this lived-through human sense that has unfolded in human history. We can do this because certain meanings are sedimented in various social institutions. They are established as stable meanings that can be repeated and that suggest various future developments – and to which we must return if we seek to more fully understand that from which we have arisen, to more fully grasp the pathway of the past to our present. These sedimented meanings act as a trace (or suggestion) of a human

sense that is not now fully present, or, to some extent at least, is even absent (because they exist in the remote past). We can nevertheless get a glimpse of the past because it is *our* past, because we are connected to it from the present as time periods overlap as they recede and proceed in time. Yet Merleau-Ponty recognizes that we cannot return to the past to *fully recapture in conceptual form* the human meanings, the lived-through horizon of experience, that began to be instituted there. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty critically stresses here that this *Stiftung*, this founding or instituting of meaning, must be considered as open-ended, as providing a horizon of multiple possibilities, not as totally enveloping, not as implying fully defined terms for one fully determined future.³⁵ While Husserl seemed to recognize this open-endedness of lived-through experience, that a number of future possibilities are implied by it, he also remained sympathetic to the idea of an all-enveloping thought, even to a thought that is permanent.

For Husserl, it is written language that takes the final step toward the founding of the permanence of meanings constructed by human activity. Here is Merleau-Ponty on Husserl's position.

Through the written, meaning is virtually in the world. The permanence of ideal being rests on that of the world as containing virtualities of *Erzeugung* [[production]]. The ideal world supported by the sensible world. The written as element of the sensible world is *erfahrbar* in *Gemeinsamkeit* <'experience in common'>. As the element of the world of the nameable, it is *Eezeugbar* [in *Gemeinsamkeit*] [[production in common ground]]: its sensible inter-existence entails also inter-existence of sense...it is permanent as meaning, i.e., as element of the sayable and (correlatively) of the speech...³⁶

The ideal meanings of geometry, for example, enjoy a permanence in existence because the written word, displaying a continuous sensible existence in the world (for what is written down today will still appear on the same page tomorrow), becomes a placeholder in the sensible world for the ideal. Merleau-Ponty continues his exposition of Husserl.

But in order for there to be truly coproduction, or *Deckung* [[coincidence]] of the present with the past, there has to be in addition 'simultaneity,' *Ineinander*, [i.e., the present act overcoming itself towards the acts of yesterday or towards those of others, encountering the act again in the coupling, i.e., the passage of one thought into another or into *Dokumentierung* [[documentation]]...The written is the...<'transformation of the original mode of being of the sense structure'> (*Husserliana VI 371*)...]³⁷

Thus, it is written language that helps hold the past together with the present as they simultaneously slip apart, as the past slides away from the present. Thus, there is an absence that is given in the context of a presence, and, in Husserl's thought, it is written language that helps make this possible.

Yet, this is only part of the story for Merleau-Ponty, for there is something more fundamental than language, and, as we have seen, that is perception. Let us once again pursue an understanding of the role of perception, now in the context of language and time, for it is here that we will see a fundamental difference between Merleau-Ponty's thought and Husserl's. Merleau-Ponty often reads Husserl as seeking a third dimension, here something that can be regarded as a common source of ideality and historicity. For Merleau-Ponty, this third dimension is the experience of the embodied perceiving subject opening upon and intermingling with the public field of the world as it unfolds in time. Or, to restate this with reference to the ideal (ideality) and the temporal flow of immediate events (historicity), as my lived-through perceptual experience opens upon and intersects with the public field of the world as it unfolds in time, I think of the ideal in the closeness of the immediate past, as it passively passes from my present thought, as the present actively folds back into it and partially retains it. Merleau-Ponty makes this clear in the following passage drawn from *The Visible and the Invisible*:

Every ideation...is formed in a space of existence, under the guarantee of my duration, which must turn back into itself in order to find there again the same idea I thought an instant ago and must pass into the others in order to rejoin it also in them. Every ideation is borne by this tree of my duration and other durations, this unknown sap nourishes the transparency of the idea; behind the idea, there is the unity, the simultaneity of all the real and possible durations, the cohesion of one sole Being from one end to the other.³⁸

It is Merleau-Ponty's reference to temporality here that helps clarify a fundamental disagreement with Husserl. In Michael Kelly's excellent overview of phenomenology and time consciousness,³⁹ he draws our attention to Husserl's two modes of intentionality with respect to time. The first can be characterized as a meaningful flow of experience from the present away from the past and towards the future, with these moments overlapping with no precise boundaries between them. This is referred to as a horizontal mode of intentionality. The second mode, called transverse intentionality, can be characterized as an objectification of the transcendent object that appears in and through the first mode. For example, as I walk around the exterior of a building, I first see the front, then the side, then the back, and so on, with these lived-through moments of experience passively flowing into one another and overlapping. Here I participate in the horizontal mode of operative or latent intentionality. Yet, according to Husserl, with the second mode of transverse intentionality, I am able to engage with the library as a transcendent object, as a singular object appearing through and even beyond the flow of experiences, which is intellectually represented in a present "now."⁴⁰

Kelly proceeds to inform us that Merleau-Ponty rejects this latter mode while embracing the former. First of all, for Merleau-Ponty, it is lived-through

experience itself that highlights the present (albeit the present in the wide sense of including and shading into the past and future). As Merleau-Ponty puts it: "Time exists for me only because I am situated in it, that is, because I become aware of myself as already committed to it...Time exists for me because I have a present. No one of time's dimensions can be deduced from the rest. But the present (in the wide sense, along with its horizons of primary past and future), nevertheless enjoys a privilege because it is the zone in which being and consciousness coincide..."⁴¹ Moreover, if this is the case, that is, if experience is centered in the "present" of a field, then there is no need for a reflective synthesis of experience. "There is no need for a synthesis externally binding together the *tempora* into one single time, because each one of the *tempora* was already inclusive, beyond itself, of the whole open series of other *tempora*, being in internal communication with them, and because the 'cohesion of a life' is given with its *ek-stase*" – with the present moment of experience leaping out of itself toward temporal, spatial fields which are experienced as dimensions of a bodily-being-in-the-world. For Merleau-Ponty, then, as my lived-through experience opens upon a stable public world, the moments of time hold together or cohere as they also slip apart, and do so on their own, so to speak, and do so because there is a *natural* cohesion and stability, because there is a *natural* spread of time – which also produces, right along with cohesion and stability, absence and difference.⁴²

Now, just as moments of time hold together because they are a part of a stable world (a world that embodied perceptual consciousness is thrown into), and just as the experience of this cohesion provides the basis for the cohesion of speech, language and thought, for Merleau-Ponty the terms of speech and thought, as we have seen above, fold back upon the perceived to help further unify it, even to help form stable essences, especially with the help of written language. Yet, for Merleau-Ponty, unlike for Husserl, what remains primary here is the horizontal mode of lived-through experience, not the traverse mode of fixed, intemporal essences, for, again, these essences are created with the help of written language, which is based on the flow of lived experience, which is always unfolding temporally. Yet, just as it is still true that speech and written language, in turn, help stabilize the temporal flow of experience, of the past and present encroaching upon one another, they also help the movement of thought from one person to another by a similar passive/active encroachment. I passively listen to the others and actively take up their speech, just as they listen to and take up mine. Yet, it is written language that ultimately helps create "ideal significations," for they rely on written language for their continued existence, for written language is there (as a sensible object) for all to see and use over time, even if no one is present to think these thoughts for some time.

Thus, some of what we see in Husserl's thought, the *Ineinander* (or flowing into one another) of past and present (horizontal temporality), the *Ineinander* of lived-through perceptual experience and language, and

the *Ineinander* of speaking and listening, we also find in Merleau-Ponty's thought. When discussing language in his later works, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes a number of forms of *Ineinander* chiasm (of crossing or flowing into one another): the chiasm of the embodied perceiver *and* the perceived world, as the primordial source of meaning; the chiasm between the active, gesturing body *and* linguistic gestures, as our lived-through bodily perceptual encounter with the world sublimated in our linguistic gestures as they fold back on the perceived world to help express it more clearly, with a variety of expressions remaining possible,

yet with some expressing more clearly than the others; the chiasm between speaking and listening; the chiasm between linguistic expressions (especially in written form) and the ideal significations they express (with written language accounting for the continued existences of the ideals).⁴³

Merleau-Ponty offers little criticism here in his lectures of Husserl's *Ineinander* or dialectical view of language, with aspects of experience crossing into and defining one another, other than Husserl's tendency, in spite of his appeal to the *Ineinander* of aspects of experience that occurs in lived-through experience, to retain a transcendental (traverse) and analytic perspective in search of intemporal conceptual essences.⁴⁴ The sense is that he is in agreement with Husserl's (horizontal) *Ineinander* view of experience and language but remains critical of Husserl's (traverse) attempt to grasp, analytically and cognitively, each aspect of experience and language as an explicit act, with intemporal results. It is fair to say that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language is primarily a philosophy of speech, with speech as a sublimation of perception, and with written language as a sublimation of speech, as a more abstract expression of speech, or, simply, merely as speech written down, or more negatively, as a reification of speech. Of course, Merleau-Ponty is aware that written language does have new properties, such as providing continued physical existence to constructed ideal essences, but also that it primarily remains a sublimation of perception and speech.

The late Merleau-Ponty and Husserl's Letter

Let us now return to the late text *The Visible and Invisible* to clarify some final points. Continuing the passage quoted above, Merleau-Ponty states:

Under the solidity of the essence and of the idea there is the fabric of experience, this flesh of time, and this is why I am not sure of having penetrated unto the hard core of being: my incontestable power to give myself leeway, to disengage the possible from the real, does not go as far as to dominate all the implications of the spectacle and to make of the real a simple variant of the possible; on the contrary, it is the possible

worlds and the possible beings that are variants and are like doubles of the actual world and the actual Being.⁴⁵

Thus, I am able to pause and reflect and consider variations of my current experience, in order to determine what is not essential to it, but I cannot *definitively* determine what is essential. Experience (perceptual experience in the widest sense: seeing, hearing, touching, etc.) is always richer than my ability to vary it in my imagination. Here we are back at the meaning Merleau-Ponty expresses when considering Husserl's letter to Lévy-Bruhl. Merleau-Ponty favorably states that Husserl is considering the vital importance of lived-through experience and that the method of free variation in the imagination cannot possibly anticipate all of what experience can and does provide. Yet he also critically realizes that Husserl still clings to a conceptual analysis associated with the search for essences.

Merleau-Ponty makes clear that within the context of his own philosophy that there is no "space" for a pure thought or pure essence or pure ideality that is separate from speech. When speaking, he says, we find "the recuperation of a passivity by an activity," we find a taking up of the other (the other as world, as the past, as other human subjects) in a lived-through relationship of mutual influence. This "is how I think within the other person and how I talk with myself. Speech is not a product of my active thought, standing in a secondary relation to it." Rather, "it is my practice," and, in fact, it is lived-through, active speech that produces the thought, originally as a sublimation of perception. Therefore, as we have already seen above, we should not place ideal meanings outside of speech but "introduce an essential mutation in speech, namely, the appearance of writing. It is writing which once and for all translates the meaning of spoken words into ideal being, at the same time transforming human sociability, in as much as writing is 'virtual' communication, the speaking of x to x which is not carried by any living subject and belongs in principle to everyone, evoking a total speech."⁴⁶ Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, it is writing that helps us understand the existence of ideal meanings over time, that even helps provide for this existence, for without the language, and without living subjects to take it up, these ideals would fade away.

We have seen that Merleau-Ponty does read Husserl as moving away from his early focus on essences and reflective eidetic analysis (as found in *Logical Investigation*⁴⁷) and toward a greater recognition of lived-through experience (as in *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, "Letter to Levy-Bruhl" and in *Crisis*⁴⁸), and according to Merleau-Ponty this is true especially with regard to language, with the later Husserl displaying a greater recognition that language is an "operation through which private thoughts acquire intersubjective value and, ultimately, ideal existence (*Ursprung der Geometrie*)."⁴⁹ Now, we have also seen that Merleau-Ponty is not naïve enough to think that Husserl has turned his eidetic phenomenology into an existential one, for he clearly states that Husserl remained committed to intemporal

essences, and he states (more than once) that he is “pushing Husserl further than he wished to go,” that he recognizes in Husserl’s work possibilities that were not fully expressed by Husserl.⁵⁰

Thus when Derrida says that Merleau-Ponty is misrepresenting Husserl’s thought, he is stating what Merleau-Ponty (to some degree at least) has already admitted, yet with Derrida expressing a different (negative) attitude toward this “free” interpretation. This is somewhat ironic given Derrida’s own method of “deconstructive” analysis, whereby he displays *tensions* in another author’s work and brings them to the surface—expressing and exposing inconsistencies that were hidden or only implied.⁵¹ Apparently it is alright for Derrida to do this but not Merleau-Ponty. Now, we have seen that Merleau-Ponty certainly recognizes the possibility of multiple interpretations of a body of work, yet we have also seen that he also values the interpretations that are the most accurate and clarifying. If new, creative interpretations create something useful, fine. There may be no need to thus be concerned about the accuracy of the interpretation. Yet, if we want to say what an original author says (including nature itself as “author”) and draw something new yet still implied from what was actually there, then accuracy is paramount. Merleau-Ponty recognizes both of these modes of interpretation, while Derrida is known for stressing free interpretation, even though here he inconsistently criticizes Merleau-Ponty of an “inaccurate” interpretation of Husserl’s work, thus assuming that there must be an accurate one. What Merleau-Ponty is stressing with his reading of Husserl is the latter mode, for he points out what Husserl *actually* says and he points out what *possibilities are implied* in what he says. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, Husserl’s “notion of an experienced essence, or an eidetic experience, contains in germ the consequence that I have just drawn from it.”⁵² Derrida should have no problem with Merleau-Ponty’s more creative interpretations, again, given that his own philosophy tends towards the *free interpretation* of text, with little or no regard for an author’s original intention.⁵³ Yet, by the standards of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, and his use of phenomenology’s *Fundierung* relationship, some interpretations are better than others. What he actually attempts to do and what has been stated in the above essay align with this view, that some interpretations are better than others, for they are more clarifying. An attempt has thus been made here to defend Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Husserl against Derrida’s claims that he misrepresents Husserl’s thought and to do so by carefully considering an analysis of pertinent texts, to do so by showing that Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation is more clarifying. Yet what is clearly of greater importance is to consider how these texts were able to help us better understand the relationship between perception and language. Thus, an attempt has also been made to show that Merleau-Ponty’s supposedly surpassed works are the texts that get us closer to this clarifying understanding than most, or at least closer than the works of either Husserl or Derrida.

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey (Stony Brook, N.Y.: N. Hays, 1978), 111-112. The Merleau-Ponty passages quoted by Derrida can be found at Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man," trans. John Wild in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1964), 43-95. Hereafter cited in the text as PrP. See also Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 98-113, especially 107-108; Edmund Husserl, "Letter to Lévy-Bruhl" in *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, vol. 8. (London: Routledge, 2008), 349-354.

See also Dermot Moran, Lukas Steinacher, "Husserl's letter to Lévy-Bruhl: Introduction" in *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, 325-347, which provides a detailed context for the letter; Dermot Moran, *Husserl's Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 285-287; Leonard Lawlor, *Derrida and Husserl: The Basic Problem of Phenomenology* (Indiana University Press, 2002). Lawlor carefully considers Derrida's *Introduction of Husserl's "The Origin of Geometry,"* as well as Derrida's earlier dissertation *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy*, trans. Marian Hobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), which prepares Derrida for the developed criticisms he makes in his later works, particularly with regard to the phenomenology of language. See especially Lawlor's Chapter 5, "The Root, That is Necessarily One, of Every Dilemma: An Investigation of the *Introduction of Husserl's "The Origin of Geometry,"*" pp. 88-142.

² In a discussion of Husserl's phenomenology and his phenomenology of language, Merleau-Ponty designates the following as an early work: Husserl, *Logical Investigation*, trans. John Niemeier Findlay (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970). Original German: *Logische Untersuchungen*, 1900-1901. And he designates the following as a later work: Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. Dorion Cairns. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969). Original German: *Formale und Transzendente Logik*, 1929. See Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 85-86. Of course, the following should also be considered among later works: Husserl's "Letter to Lévy-Bruhl" and his *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970). Hereafter referred to as *Crisis*. Original German, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, an unfinished 1936 manuscript by Husserl, ed. Walther Biemel (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954).

³ Husserl, *Crisis*, 23-59.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 90-92.

⁵ Husserl, *Crisis*, 25.

⁶ Husserl, *Crisis*, 49.

⁷ Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*, 112.

⁸ Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*, 112.

⁹ See Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 70.

¹⁰ See Lawrence Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 167. Here is Derrida's claim: "[Merleau-Ponty] insists . . . that the rights of relativism . . . are preserved and 'conserved' by 'the intentional analyses' of transcendental phenomenology." Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*, 111, my bracket addition.

- ¹¹ See Donald A. Landes, "Between Sensibility and Understanding: Kant and Merleau-Ponty and the Critique of Reason," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 29 (3) (2015), 335-45, especially 337, 339-342.
- ¹² See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 220-222. See also Douglas Low, "Merleau-Ponty and Transcendental Philosophy," *Philosophy Today* 57 (Summer 2013): 279-294, especially 281.
- ¹³ Hass here also mentions that Derrida holds that all phenomenology operated within the distinction "between *de facto* and *de jure*, existence and essence. . ." (which, Derrida goes on to say, cannot occur "prior to the question of language"). Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 21.
- ¹⁴ Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*, 114.
- ¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 68-70.
- ¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*, trans. Hugh Silverman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1979), 4-10.
- ¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty. *The Primacy of Perception*, 43-44.
- ¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 68-69.
- ¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier et autres dialogues, 1946-1959*, transcription by Jérôme Melançon (Paris: Verdier, 2016). I have provided the translation here, yet also see Cormac Coyle, "Interviews with Maurice Merleau-Ponty," trans. Cormac Coyle, 2020. <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1588&context=honors>
- ²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, ed. Leonard Lawlor with Bettina Bergo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001). Merleau-Ponty is here referring to Husserl's *Crisis*, which includes "The Origin of Geometry" as an appendix.)
- ²¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, 32, my bracket additions.
- ²² Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, 20. The translator of this text, Leonard Lawlor, uses "pointed brackets" < > to translate Merleau-Ponty's use of German terms or to provide an English translation of a German passage from a Husserl text cited by Merleau-Ponty. See Lawlor's comment on page xl. The square brackets [] are my addition. The reference to *Husserliana VI* is Merleau-Ponty's. Merleau-Ponty also treats Husserl's philosophy of language, as we will see below. See also Merleau-Ponty *Signs*, 84-97.
- ²³ See Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 7, where Merleau-Ponty discusses the "characteristic operation of the mind" in a broad perceptual context.
- ²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 106. See also Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 385-386, 446-448, and Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by the Working Notes*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 149ff. Referred to as VI in the text.
- ²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 68. The bracket addition is provided by the translator.
- ²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 213.
- ²⁷ Moreover, to add to what we have already seen above, we know that a *perception* is correct if it provides the greatest balance of clarity and maximum richness. See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 318.

- ²⁸ See Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 78: “All perception and all human action which presupposes it, in short every use of the human body, is already primordial expression. This means that perception is...the primary operation which first constitutes signs as signs. Perception makes what is expressed dwell in signs, not through some previous convention but through the eloquence of their very arrangement and configuration.”
- ²⁹ See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 187: “If we consider only the conceptual and delimiting meaning of words, it is true that the verbal form . . . appears arbitrary. But it would no longer appear so if we took into account the emotional content of the word, which we have called above its ‘gestural’ sense, which is all-important in poetry, for example. It would then be found that the words, vowels and phonemes are so many ways of ‘singing’ the world, and that their function is to represent things not, as the naive onomatopoeic theory had it, by reason of an objective resemblance, but because they extract, and literally express, their emotional essence.”
- ³⁰ See M.C. Dillon, “Preface: Merleau-Ponty and Postmodernity” in *Merleau-Ponty Vivant*, ed. M.C. Dillon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), especially xxvi-xxviii. See Jacques Derrida, “*Différance*,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago University Press, 1982), 13, 15, 24, and also “Ousia and Gramme: Note on a Note from *Being and Time*,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, 66.
- ³¹ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. D. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 103.
- ³² Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences” in *The Structuralist Controversy*, eds. R. Macksey and E. Danato (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1972), 272.
- ³³ Husserl, *Crisis*, xxxv-xxxvi and footnote 28 on xxxv.
- ³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, 28. Merleau-Ponty is undoubtedly here referring to the character Friday in Daniel Defoe’s novel *Robinson Crusoe*.
- ³⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, 24.
- ³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, 57, my double square brackets.
- ³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, 58, my double square brackets.
- ³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 112.
- ³⁹ Michael Kelly, “Phenomenology and Time-Consciousness” in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, *A Peer-Reviewed Academic Resource*, see especially sections 1.e. and 4, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/phe-time/>
- ⁴⁰ Husserl *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1983-1917)*, trans. J. Brough (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), § *The Double Intentionality of Retention and the Constitution of the Flux of Consciousness*, 105-110. Original German, *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewußtseins (1983-1917)*, ed. R. Boehm (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966).
- ⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 423-424.
- ⁴² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 421, and *ek-stase* 70, 430, and comments regarding Laplace’s nebula, 432.
- ⁴³ See Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 144-145, 149-155, as well as above.

- ⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France, 1952-1960*, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 120-121.
- ⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 112-113.
- ⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France, 1952-1960*, 119.
- ⁴⁷ This was noted above.
- ⁴⁸ Noted above.
- ⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 84-85.
- ⁵⁰ See Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 72, and Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 160.
- ⁵¹ For an excellent, clear, and brief treatment of Derrida's method of deconstruction, see Douglas Kneale, "Deconstruction" in Micheal Groden and Martin Kreiswirth eds., *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 185-191. The best brief overview of Derrida's philosophy of which I am aware is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's translator preface to Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, preface and trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), ix-lxxxvii. Perhaps the best brief overview of Derrida's philosophy, especially as it is related to Husserl's thought, and written in his own hand, is Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. Davis Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).
- ⁵² Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 72.
- ⁵³ See Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-Modernism and the Social Science: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 29-30.

Raymond Aron and the ‘Sense of Compromise’ in Democracy

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Compromise in political philosophy has emerged as a compelling and timely subject in the past decade, with political scientists and philosophers, such as Avishai Margalit, Amy Gutmann, Dennis Thompson, Daniel Weinstock, and Fabian Wendt¹ exploring its value for democracy within the tradition of analytical philosophy. So far, the field of continental philosophy has seen very few pioneering investigations on this subject.²

This article attempts to establish the meaning of “the sense of compromise” in Raymond Aron’s thought and offers a new interpretation of this equivocal wording.³ Surprisingly, the works of R. Aron, one of the most eminent French political thinkers of the twentieth century, remains rarely studied in English-language scholarship – his extensive corpus of 35 books, 200 academic articles, and numerous editorials, are yet to be fully translated.⁴ While the existing literature discussed extensively R. Aron’s theory in light of intellectual trends and politics in postwar France⁵, it seemed to have gone unnoticed that compromise could be a fundamental concept to characterize further R. Aron’s political theory. I argue that the concept of compromise might point to a more nuanced reading of his theory of democracy. The use of “-ism” labels, from “liberalism” to “conservatism,” traditionally used to define his political doctrine, tend to downplay the nonconformity of his positioning.⁶ Indeed, R. Aron sought to cultivate a non-dogmatic thinking, the mere idea of an ideological system being abhorrent to him.

However, the concept of compromise appears almost surreptitiously in Raymond Aron’s essays, turning this inquiry into a notoriously difficult task. Compromise comes out only over a few pages of the volume *Democracy and Totalitarianism* and *Introduction to Political Philosophy*. It unfolds equally, although in a less obvious way, in *Main Currents in Sociological Thought* and in *The Opium of the Intellectuals*.

By analyzing R. Aron's conceptual ambiguity on compromise in a pluralist democracy, I shall make sense of its various meanings and implications. In particular, I shall seek to disentangle the meaning of the "sense of compromise," an expression featured in R. Aron's writings. The "sense of compromise" mentioned by R. Aron seems to hint at a political predisposal to mutual concessions, in the absence of available clear-cut rules or common definition of compromise. As we navigate through these various definitions, it will appear necessary to identify several "figures" of compromise, surfacing in his essays. I will thus propose a typology of compromises, based on the evidence found throughout his books. For each type of compromise, I will outline their moral and political limits, as suggested by the philosopher. The last section of this article will expound upon the former typology and infer certain criteria to distinguish moral from immoral compromises, criteria that are subsequently discussed.

The concept of compromise, laid out by R. Aron, offers key insights into the principles of democratic regimes and political institutions. I argue that compromise can shed light on R. Aron's democratic theory and that, conversely, R. Aron's understanding of compromise can help us sharpen the meaning of the term. For R. Aron, the "sense of compromise" captures the unique essence of a liberal democratic regime in a pluralist society and is exemplified, albeit in different forms, in various social, political, and economic domains.

The Fundamental Ambiguity of Compromise in a Pluralist Regime

In *Democracy and Totalitarianism*, compromise is mentioned at the beginning of the chapter "Concepts and variables." R. Aron grants it a prominent place in his theory of political regimes. Compromise is presented as one of the two primordial principles on which a pluralist and democratic regime rest (both terms can be used interchangeably). From the outset, compromise is held as a foundation for a pluralist regime. Democracy is pictured as the regime of compromise:

In a pluralist regime, the principle is a combination of two sentiments that I will call *respect for legality or rules* and *a sense of compromise*.⁷

This definition is asserted as an axiom, rather than as a result of a demonstration. In this chapter, R. Aron maintains that each political regime depends on a principle that organizes its existence and the effects of law. He considers that multi-party pluralist regimes, resting on a principle of "respect of legality" and "the sense of compromise," are the opposite of single-party regimes, based on a principle of faith and fear.⁸ Therefore, compromise sets the ground for a democratic regime. In this sentence, R. Aron takes up Montesquieu's heritage for whom each political regime has its own governing

principle, sustained by political emotions. However, he also departs from the classical enquiry on forms of governments upon several points.⁹

A few pages earlier, R. Aron had already outlined the absurdity to devise an timeless and anhistorical classification of political systems. The multiplicity of social regimes renders, according to him, obsolete the search of the best regime in the abstract sense.¹⁰ Instead, R. Aron prefers to focus on political regimes in modern industrial societies.¹¹ For that reason, the "sense of compromise," understood as a basic principle of a pluralist regime, will therefore only be valid within the limits of modern industrial societies under consideration.

I choose to name this argument the *humble epistemology*.

According to R. Aron, the increasing complexity of pluralist political regimes has consequently split in two the principle of democracy. Its principle remains the respect of legality but is combined with a "sense of compromise." What does this imply? Mainly, that it has become impossible to define the political problem, and thus democracy, by a single and unique question:

The political problem does not seem to me, in the present state of reflection, to be defined by a single question. The given fact nowadays is that we are aiming for various objectives, we want values that are not obviously contradictory, not necessarily granted either.¹²

If we elaborate on the aforementioned principle of a pluralist regime, it is as if one had to include both a written core (the rules, the laws) and an unwritten core ("the sense of compromise") within the principle.

The unwritten character of compromise could have two distinct meanings.

Firstly, it would be an unwritten principle *related* to the respect of written laws. As such, compromise would be a kind of "spirit of the laws," a sort of counterweight to strict legality, as laws can never provide for everything in democracy. It could either act as a corrective to existing laws, or it could be mediated by law to reinforce their application.

Secondly, compromise could also refer to an absolute principle, transcending the respect of laws, which would be valid in itself. It would thus refer to a social reality, this time irreducible to legality. If we keep in mind R. Aron's broader political philosophy, "the sense of compromise," taken in that sense, could then hint at a representative system, allowing individual rights, values and liberties to coexist under a strong executive power. Compromise could provide the conceptual openness needed to grasp *in concreto* the diversity of human behaviors in the polity. It would no longer be a matter of restraining oneself to the respect of law, a written code imposed by delegates or legislators. Compromise would be located at a different normative level, allowing space for equitable solutions and resolving tensions between private

individual aspirations and the public good – compromise would hint at a conflictual and messy social reality, in opposition to any ideal view of a perfectly unitary society, featured in monopolistic regimes.

A way to address the dilemma posed by a dual understanding of the “sense of compromise,” would be to assume that R. Aron sketches the contours of a legal pluralist regime, and that, within this framework, compromise could be primary or secondary to the law. In these two hypotheses, compromise would take on the meaning of an unorganized political source of law or a political regulation of institutional life.

However, there does not seem to be *strictly speaking* an order of priority between the two “sentiments” at the heart of the principle. There is no rationale in R. Aron’s text for stating that it is either the respect of legality, or the sense of compromise, that play a leading role in democracy. This conclusion is congruent once again with R. Aron’s approach and his refusal to confine democracy to a single certitude.¹³

Nevertheless, the coordination of legal, formal rules, with practices, customs and particular policies, represents a common challenge for pluralist regimes. The “sense of compromise” appears to put in tune these two conflicting demands. It implies a continuous form of political invention in a democratic regime that is based on mutual concessions between elected public officials and citizens. Indeed, compromise puts legality under tension, while being itself determined by a set of legal rules and procedures in a representative democracy.

If the order of priority between these two sentiments is of little importance to R. Aron, it remains meaningful to note that the relationship between the respect of legality and compromise can be discussed: is one element used to counterbalance the other, to rectify it, or to deal differently with the issue of pluralism? Does compromise apply to the respect of legality or is it located at the level of representative institutions? The uneasiness to define precisely the meaning of “the sense of compromise” can be summarized in a thesis pertaining to the *complexity of the principle*.

Therefore, in R. Aron’s study of the pluralist regime, the “sense of compromise” is of crucial importance, while welcoming different possible interpretations. Compromise refers to a plurality of forces, setting aside the search for the best regime. It prevents politics from being locked into a purely legal worldview and gives sufficient room for a critical debate to take place.

Several objections can however be raised against this interpretation. On the one hand, it is legitimate to ask whether compromise is a constitutive element of democracy, or whether it is the democratic principle itself - is it an all-encompassing or nested within concept? Besides, is it a “normative concept,” by which to assess conducts, or a “descriptive concept,” an observation about the characteristics of a given society? To put it differently,

is it an ideal or merely a positive description designed to preserve a state of things?

Its inclusion by R. Aron in the category of principle suggests it could be a normative concept. However, what is the exact nature of this norm? It would seem that compromise is not a "strict" norm, but an "intermediate" norm, which complements the respect for the law. Besides, compromise is not a mere principle but also a "sentiment." Based on a subjective appreciation, it has the merit of being adaptable to different debates, but has the disadvantage of being vague and unfixed in its content.

If the principle of democracy is two-fold, meaning, if the pluralist regime is split into two major foundations or pillars - respect for legality and a sense of compromise - does not compromise bring a worrying normative uncertainty to democracy from the point of view of political theory? Would it not bestow structural instability to a political order?

Figures of Compromise

To answer these concerns, we must try to trace back the multiple meanings of compromise, put forward by R. Aron throughout his work. To do so, one must delineate figures of compromise, *i.e.*, worlds that capture a self-contained view of compromise.

The "sense of compromise" is presented as a fundamental principle of democracy in *Democracy and Totalitarianism* and *Introduction to Political Philosophy*. However, its meaning oscillates between an end and a mere means. On the one hand, compromise is pictured as an instrument to help realizing desirable democratic values, such as respect for peaceful competition: "After all, to accept compromise is to recognize the partial legitimacy of others' arguments, it is to find a solution that is acceptable to all."¹⁴ On the other hand, it is, or should be, a principle, or even a virtue, of modern societies: "the essential virtue of democracy, the principle of democracy in the sense of Montesquieu, is not virtue, it is the spirit of compromise."¹⁵

This contradiction is only apparent: its aim is to reveal the complex and ductile nature of compromise. In a similar way, R. Aron acknowledges that: "the notion of compromise is difficult, equivocal. Based on language, it is considered either laudatory or pejorative. In other words, this concept is not defined in itself, but in relation to values accepted in society¹⁶." For this reason, it seems imperative to establish a typology of different historical compromises mentioned by R. Aron, in order to shed further light on this blurry concept.

Three fundamental categories have emerged over the reading of R. Aron's works, which we shall name as follows: *the political-pluralist*

compromise; the economic compromise; the foreign policy compromise. We shall analyze these three models, using the general conceptualization process of ideal-types from Max Weber, an author who was also debated in some of R. Aron's work.¹⁷ Each ideal-type that we highlight, however, is not pure or perfect, in the sense that each presents a value judgment, an assessment of something as good or bad in light of R. Aron's political values. Another difference with the concept laid out by M. Weber is that we have constructed each ideal-type through antinomies. Eventually, unlike M. Weber, R. Aron did not seek to systematize human behaviors but to present a theoretical framework for comparing empirical political systems. It seems that all examples put forward by R. Aron are not just illustrative cases, but are philosophical arguments in their own right, providing relevant intellectual resources for exploring, and perhaps solving, a problem of political philosophy.

A first case of political-pluralist compromise could be the French Fourth Republic. The compromise at the basis of the regime is portrayed in a negative way. A text published in *Combat*, entitled "La stérilité du compromis, politique française" ("The Sterility of Compromise, French Politics") depicts the Fourth Republic as the regime of compromise *par excellence*, in the pejorative sense of the word.

Indeed, for R. Aron, the Fourth Republic is a pluralist regime corrupted by an overblown principle of peaceful competition, leading to a system in which the Parliament holds excessive power. The philosopher judges harshly this political-pluralist compromise, which no longer allows for a sound partisan competition, but is turned into a strategic means of coward abstention. Compromise reflects a spirit of faction and bestows a regime of parties:

Compromise, whether it is average, leaky or mixed, solves nothing; it has only one justification: the lesser evil. But a policy that is justified exclusively by evils it avoids is doomed to sterility. A country does not find its unity by dint of fearing its divisions.¹⁸

The condemnation is firm: compromise is politically sterile. A doctrine of "neither-or" is itself neither a synthesis nor a median agreement of opposing doctrines. In this excerpt, compromise comes forward in an unfavorable light: it forces political parties to take incoherent stances and paralyses the action of the state. Far from being presented as a principle of democracy, it perverts and threatens it, by provoking the resurgence of the antidemocratic practice of legislative decrees.

In *The Committed Observer (Le spectateur engagé)*, R. Aron also vilifies Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, another figure of the political-pluralist compromise: he states that, with the French President, "you always have the feeling that everything can be arranged by negotiations, by compromise, by being reasonable¹⁹." But, according to R. Aron, there are inexorable conflicts with

the FCP (French Communist Party), as the communist class struggle fosters a worldview prohibiting any possibility of compromise.

In sum, there is an antinomy between compromise and effective decision-making, on the one hand, and between compromise and the stability of executive power, on the other. However, the positive aspect of the political-pluralist compromise lies in the acceptance of plurality. After being presented as a source of a corrupted democracy, compromise is analyzed as its fundamental principle.

The democratic compromise induces, for R. Aron, a non-revolutionary or anti-revolutionary regime. For R. Aron, the ultimate antonym of compromise is therefore revolution. A sound political-pluralist compromise favors peaceful competition for the sharing of power, whereas revolution rejects a distribution of political power amongst separate branches, by conflating power in the "popular sovereign." This viewpoint becomes obvious when R. Aron states the following: "the taking and exercise of power through violence presupposes conflicts that negotiation and compromise do not succeed in resolving, in other words, the failure of democratic procedures²⁰."

While democracy is the regime of compromise, showcasing the tension between contradictory personal interests and acceptance of plurality, revolution overthrows the two pillars of democracy: it breaks down the respect of rules, as well as the sense of compromise, to impose a monopoly of thought, justifying violence embodied by a unique party.²¹ R. Aron also summons compromise in *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, on the chapter on Vilfredo Pareto, with the portrayal of "pluto-democrat" nineteenth-century Italian politicians. R. Aron presents Giovanni Giolitti as a "moderate liberal" in politics and economics and opposed to brutal repression: "his dictatorship is soft, excelling in compromise, in favors that neutralize or rally the adversary and relies on electoral corruption to ensure a majority²²." This quote shows the ambiguity of compromise when it weakens the civic idea.

But how rational is it for R. Aron to defend the pluralist virtue of compromise, as opposed to the monopolistic regime, and then to point at the threat and lack of effectiveness of compromise in democracy? It would appear to be a complete inconsistency. In fact, R. Aron's understanding of compromise is inseverable from Montesquieu's framing of passions.²³ In this sense, compromise is a principle that self-contains its own possibility of corruption and negation. Compromise remains a site of unsurpassable internal contradiction; precisely because the "sense of compromise" is a "sentiment," in other words, a passion, it provides enough commitment for a foundation of a political regime, but also risks destroying the principled balance and favors its downfall. The democratic regime draws its strength and its weakness from a passion for compromise that dominates it: halfway between the collective political passion and the principle of government,

compromise plays a fundamental and structural role in R. Aron's understanding of democracy.

The second ideal-type is the economic compromise, or the freedom to undertake, to produce wealth and to trade various goods and services to achieve that end:

Freedom of trade implies competition, and competition is a kind of conflict, but one that is settled by compromise rather than by weapons. These conflicts become a formidable challenge for peace from the moment when states take over the interests of private companies or ensure a monopoly for themselves in colonies or areas of influence. Whoever uses force to exclude other countries from legitimate competition is effectively guilty of aggression.²⁴

In the economic field, compromise is, for R. Aron, rational and well-founded. As long as the state authorizes healthy competition and does not establish a monopoly, compromise is justified and desirable. However, there is no guarantee that economic compromises are bearers of peace as such, nor that they promote *per se* equality.²⁵

R. Aron cites the example of taxation: the latter makes it possible to reduce the income gap and guarantees a certain efficiency, if the tax is well-distributed and collected. However, it is impossible to conceive a constant and infinite progress towards income equality. The compromise here is the acceptance of a certain degree of inequality. Another historical example of economic compromise is put forward by R. Aron, in opposition to a Marxist theory of class relations. It refers to the alliance established between the Orleans Monarchy and the Legitimist Monarchy, in France, that made it possible and necessary to resort to compromises for the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie.²⁶

Seen in this light, compromise leans towards a much more ideological meaning, since the supporters of respect of compromise are situated more on the right of the political spectrum. The actors from this political obedience are likely to better understand the "need to establish a wise compromise between contradictory objectives."²⁷ In this sense, the discussion around compromise was part of R. Aron's political fight against the FCP and the Soviet Union. The economic compromise is thought in conjunction with two major values for R. Aron that can be coined as "progressive liberalism" and "freedom of enterprise."

Compromise in foreign policy is, however, treated differently than compromises in the economic realm.

The repulsive figure that R. Aron convokes is the compromise between France and Nazi Germany, which refers to the Defeat of 1940, to the loss of honor and the humanist vision of the republican world. The Second World war is portrayed as the result of negotiators' failure to listen to the interests of

Russia and Germany during the Paris Peace conference of the First World War (1919).²⁸ Not without a certain irony, R. Aron states: "as a deep psychologist named Hitler once said, between interests, compromises are always possible, between worldviews, never."²⁹ To put it another way, R. Aron considers that conflicts rooted in differences of principle or ideology cannot be resolved by compromise. Principles cannot be compromised, while interests are always more amenable to compromise-oriented solutions.

A positive figure of compromise, on the other hand, is the United States' armistice at the end of the Korean War in 1953:

For the first time, the United States is experiencing the fate that has been the fate of European countries for centuries: they are coexisting with an enemy, whose threat they experience daily. Against the moralists, ready to crusade, against the military proclaiming that there is no substitute for victory, the President and Secretary of State accepted a compromise in Korea, whose moral scope and diplomatic consequences were equally important.³⁰

The compromise became, through the armistice, a renunciation to victory, a recognition of a limited power that gave the ability to entertain good relations with the enemy. The compromise solution acknowledged the impossibility of resolving the dispute by other means than force and provided an acceptable alternative to both parties, a positive outcome even for warmongers.

R. Aron mentions the Korean War in several other articles. He locates the source of compromise in the implicit will of South Koreans and North Koreans not to expand the war: "The two sides will not officially agree on the fate of Korea, they will practically agree to maintain the partition, but they will not be able, politically or morally, to proclaim or ratify this agreement."³¹

The value difference between these two examples of compromise in foreign policy rests, for R. Aron, on the disconnection between interests and principles: the United States can make a compromise out of interest, but an armistice cannot be signed, as it would call into question the American conception of the world. In the absence of circumstances conducive to an agreement, compromise will therefore be restrictive and favor the status quo. An agreement with a belligerent power, determined to quarrel, could lead to the escalation of tensions in the region, or the destruction of either one.

Therefore, the antinomy of compromise in foreign policy is war. Without compromise, there shall be war; that is also why compromise is preferable to the absence of conflict resolution. The competing powers give rise to two opposing solutions: "war or compromise. What is false is to add that compromise necessarily takes the form of a negotiated agreement"³².

This sentence makes it clear that R. Aron distinguishes further between negotiated compromise and compromise without formal agreement. The first is based on two fundamental elements: the same civilization and the same

conception of international relations, that is, the respect of diplomacy, recourse to the same “professional ethics” and “reasonable Machiavellianism”:

When the States coming to grips belong to the same unit of civilization, when they obey the same conception of international relations, when they also use diplomats bound by the same professional ethics and the same reasonable Machiavellianism, compromises are negotiated, confirmed, ratified.³³

The second type of compromise is grounded on the idea of a limited war and refers to a Cold War compromise. Compromise is rejected in the face of ideologies or incompatible worldviews, in the absence of a shared category. It is dictated by historical circumstances, rather than being the outcome of a voluntary agreement. In both cases, compromise must adapt to the requirements of the present crisis: “to negotiate an agreement, there must be two of us, we must speak the same language, obey the same principles.”³⁴

In short, compromise comes along in different ideal forms, but almost inevitably becomes perverted when it is implemented in the non-ideal world. As R. Aron reminds us on several occasions: “The West is a victim of this: the idea of government by discussion, consent or compromise is perhaps an ideal, but the practice of elections or assemblies is a practice, among others³⁵” or, alternatively: “in a given regime, it is a matter of reaching a reasonable compromise between incompatible demands.”³⁶

At the end of this journey, the easiest compromise to achieve appears to be, for R. Aron, the economic one: he reiterates this view in *Democracy and Totalitarianism*: “the good compromise is often easy to obtain for economic matters; it is widely used.”³⁷ The political-pluralist compromise tends to be corrupted by human passions. Additionally, foreign policy compromise is necessary for peace but requires that parties share a certain set of ideologies and worldviews, which makes it harder to obtain.

Raymond Aron’s Criteria for a Fair Compromise?

If compromise seems inevitable to R. Aron, it cannot be inferred from this premise that it would also be desirable. This rests upon a simple idea: we cannot deduce a norm from a fact, *i.e.*, we cannot conclude that compromise is a normative ideal by acknowledging its necessity. Even if R. Aron remains allusive on this topic, from his ideas can we establish a typology of fair and unfair compromises, also named by R. Aron as “good and bad use of compromise”?

Certain criteria surface from the analysis. Firstly, R. Aron seems to be adamant on the distinction between what we can view as a compromise on interests and a compromise on principles. The latter is more questionable, as

it would contradict political and moral ideals, whereas compromise on interests (economic compromise, in particular) would only involve purely strategic aspects and would be less akin to moral and personal integrity loss. A possible rebuttal to this implicit dichotomy would be that it is often difficult to draw a demarcation line between these two types of compromises. This is especially the case for the field of foreign policy, since certain strategic compromises can lead to the realization of certain values. Moreover, it is not excluded that interests can be transformed into moral principles, or *vice versa*.

On the other hand, R. Aron seems to make a distinction between compromise in foreign policy and compromise in domestic policy. According to him, internal compromise within the state has the potential to lead to lasting agreements that are favorable to pluralism. It can be a positive force capable of preserving the balance of power in a country, when it does not paralyze the state, as was the case in the Fourth Republic. On the other hand, compromise in foreign policy, in the absence of agreement with states that do not share the same national interests, is more delicate. Compromise is then simply synonymous with deterrence: it features a moderate strategy to avoid the risk of military conflict, or is the only tool available to guarantee the survival and integrity of a state's territory and its values.

However, one might ask if there are sufficient grounds for this distinction. Can we not consider that domestic policy is increasingly dependent on foreign policy, with the growing interconnection of trade? Besides, European and international law have imposed various adaptations on domestic law, multiplying sources of legality. These legal adjustments are not negligible, as they have had an impact on the French Constitution itself - for example, the French Constitution is no longer the exclusive source of protection for fundamental rights. Thus, criteria that should help to distinguish domestic from foreign policy are less obvious. The spheres' boundaries in international and domestic matters become increasingly difficult to draw; internal affairs no longer refer to a delimited and homogeneous space, cut off from an external space of foreign relations.

Finally, R. Aron implies that there should be two conceptual levels of compromise. The first level reflects upon compromise as a democratic principle, the second upon its use, good or bad. What are the consequences of dissociating a philosophical principle from its practical use and handling by citizens or vested powers? In fact, R. Aron seems to consider compromise not only through its use, but as a way to highlight some constitutive difficulties of choice. In this sense, the "sense of compromise" does not mean to substitute ideal theory to ordinary uses. "The sense of compromise" is thus a principle; it stands at equal distance from idealism (an abstraction without application) and realism (which would lead to sacrificing lasting interests to cunning strategies) - its use does not send it back to a lower level of value, but allows to make intelligible the functioning of its principle.

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In conclusion, to uphold an Aronian “sense of compromise” as a democratic principle, it would be necessary to comply with a certain number of rules, both at the national and international level, written and unwritten, which would guarantee that a regime can be sanctioned by a moral judgment.

According to R. Aron, “the sense of compromise” is a powerful force of democracy: it ascribes pluralism within democracy, while it can be akin to corruption and instability, especially when political parties adversely affect its efficiency. As long as “the sense of compromise” works smoothly, compromise strengthens the sound working of a multiparty system, that is the safeguard of the individual liberty. Nevertheless, compromise appears to be more consensual in economic endeavors, since only private interests are at play. In the field of international relations, R. Aron is more ambivalent: he considers that compromise is crucial, as long as it helps to avoid war and does not undermine certain worldviews that rest on the idea of personal liberties protected from arbitrary state power. In the absence of shared worldviews, the “sense of compromise” will be limited to maintain a status quo. Certain distinctions could surely be reframed, namely the overly rigid opposition between compromise of principles and compromise of interests. However, R. Aron’s offers valuable insights on the role of “the sense of compromise” in democratic values and institutions.

By avoiding using “anti-liberal” or “liberal” qualifications, we have sought to demonstrate that R. Aron’s political philosophy can be explained by alternative terms that are less Manichean. The status of democracy and its critique in R. Aron’s thought are not grounded in liberal or anti-liberal sources, but in the ambivalence of compromise itself. This is why R. Aron defends democracy not as the best regime in the classical sense, but as the least bad of the known alternatives. For that reason, it seems more cumbersome than enlightening to qualify his philosophy under prefabricated labels. It becomes clear that R. Aron is not comparing side by side democracy and totalitarianism according to certain metaphysical values. On the contrary, it is the concept of compromise that helps to conceptualize the difference in nature between democracy and totalitarianism, on the basis of pluralism, while accounting for the “end of the ideological age.”³⁸

Compromise thus flourishes on the soil of ideologically fragmented democracies. Compromise is also a sign of transition from R. Aron’s search for the best system in classical political philosophy, to modern sociological thought. Through this concept, R. Aron acknowledges that the most desirable regime cannot possibly be determined in a purely abstract way. It remains a subject of inquiry whether R. Aron intends to imply that “the sense of compromise” in democracy serves as the sole safeguard against all forms of totalitarian rationality.

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² See, Laure Assayag-Gillot, "Le compromis selon Paul Ricœur," *Négociations*, 1, no. 29 (2018), p. 103-120.

³ Footnotes will refer to the original French publications - all translations of excerpts are my own. The scope of my research on "compromise" in R. Aron's thought is limited to several key works, namely the articles "Stérilité du compromis" (1946), ("Sterility of Compromise") published in French in *Combat*, "En quête d'une philosophie de la politique étrangère" (1953), ("In Search for a Philosophy of Foreign Relations"), available in French in the *Revue française de science politique*, as well as the following essays: *Introduction à la philosophie politique* (1952) (*Introduction to Political Philosophy*), *L'opium des intellectuels* (1955) (*The Opium of the Intellectuals*), *La société industrielle et la guerre* (1959) (*War and Industrial Society*), *Les étapes de la pensée sociologique* (1967) (*Main Currents in Sociological Thought*), *Paix et guerre entre les nations* (1962) (*Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*), *Démocratie et totalitarisme* (1965) (*Democracy and Totalitarianism*), *Liberté et égalité (cours au collège de France)* (2013). These writings develop, to my knowledge, the most salient arguments and examples on the concept of compromise.

⁴ Elisabeth Dutartre-Michaut, José Colen, "Introduction," in *The Companion to Raymond Aron*, Elisabeth Dutartre-Michaut, José Colen eds., (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 2.

⁵ Many edited volumes on R. Aron deal with his liberalism and antitotalitarianism. I shall limit this bibliographical list to English titles. One should mention the remarkable essay of I. Stewart that seeks to situate R. Aron's legacy in the French liberal tradition and debates over totalitarianism. See Iain Stewart, *Raymond Aron and Liberal Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). For an analysis of his Aron's political concepts and reasoning, see Bryan-Paul Frost, Daniel J. Mahoney (ed.), *Essays in Honor of Raymond Aron, Political Science in the Age of ideology* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007), and Daniel J. Mahoney, *The Liberal Political Science of Raymond Aron: A Critical Introduction* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1991).

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- ⁷ R. Aron, *Démocratie et totalitarisme* (Paris, Folio, 1965), 85. (*Democracy and Totalitarianism*).
- ⁸ "Looking for what could have been the answer from a disciple of Montesquieu to the question of the principle of a monopolistic party regime, I found, without being quite certain, two sentiments. The first is faith and the second is fear," Aron, *ibid.*, 87.
- ⁹ On the extent to which R. Aron is indebted to *The Spirit of Law* and his transposition of a Weberian understanding onto *The Spirit of Law*, see Iain Stewart, "Aron's interpretation of Montesquieu," in *Raymond Aron and Liberal Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 190-199.
- ¹⁰ "In more general terms, since a political regime is linked to a social organization, to a diversity of possible and real social organizations, it seems to discourage in advance the search for the best regime in the abstract sense." (*Ibid.*, 45)
- ¹¹ "In fact, I will follow here a cautious method. I will limit myself to sketch a classification of the political regimes whose validity I will restrict to the modern industrial societies," *ibid.*, 44-45.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 52.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 33: "In other words the formula: ultimately, everything is explained either by economy or by technique, or by politics, is, as such, meaningless."
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.
- ¹⁵ R. Aron, *Introduction à la philosophie politique* (Paris: Livre de Poche, [1952] 1997), 52.
- ¹⁶ R. Aron, *Démocratie et totalitarisme*, *op. cit.*, 86.
- ¹⁷ I will not dwell on R. Aron's criticism of Max Weber's ideal-types, whose main drawback seems to reside, for R. Aron, in an implicit selection principle that could not guarantee pure objectivity. On R. Aron's political reading of M. Weber, and his possible blind spots in understanding M. Weber's sociology, see Peter Breiner (2011), "Raymond Aron's engagement with Weber: Recovery or retreat?," *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 11 (2011): 99-121.
- ¹⁸ R. Aron, "Stérilité du compromis," *Combat*, 5 September 1946.
- ¹⁹ R. Aron, *Le spectateur engagé* (Paris: Livre de poche, [1981] 2005), 375.
- ²⁰ R. Aron, *L'opium des intellectuels* (Paris: Pluriel, 2010), 45.
- ²¹ "A revolutionary power is by definition a tyrannical power," *Ibidem*.
- ²² R. Aron, "Vilfredo Pareto," in *Les étapes de la pensée sociologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 494.
- ²³ Although Montesquieu did not, strictly speaking, elaborate a theory of passions, it is nevertheless obvious, according to Jean Goldzink, that the principles of *The Spirit of Laws* depend on collective and political passions. See Jean Goldzink, "Passions," Dictionnaire Montesquieu [online], edited by Catherine Volpilhac-Augier, ENS de Lyon, September 2013.
- ²⁴ R. Aron, *L'opium des intellectuels* (Paris: Pluriel, 2010), 165.
- ²⁵ "No economic regime by itself eliminates the risks of war because none puts an end to the state of nature that reigns between rival sovereignties. None guarantees that States will cease to impute

sinister designs to each other and that they will not prefer cooperation to rivalry and compromise to fighting.” R. Aron, *La société industrielle et la guerre* (Paris: Plon, 1959), 39.

²⁶ R. Aron, “Les sociologues et la révolution de 1848,” in *Les étapes de la pensée sociologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 290.

²⁷ R. Aron, *L’opium des intellectuels*, 95.

²⁸ R. Aron, “En quête d’une philosophie de la politique étrangère,” *Revue française de science politique*, 3 (1953): 74.

²⁹ R. Aron, *La société industrielle et la guerre* (Paris: Plon, 1959), 594

³⁰ R. Aron, *L’opium des intellectuels*, 224.

³¹ R. Aron, “En quête d’une philosophie de la politique étrangère,” *Ibid.*, 81.

³² *Ibid.*, 80.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁵ R. Aron, *L’opium des intellectuels*, 287.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 315-314.

Review Essay

What World is This? On Judith Butler's Ethico-Politics of Breath and Touch

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It's July 2020, in the midst of a lockdown brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. I'm at home with my partner, and we're about to log in a Zoom lecture to be delivered by Judith Butler "at" the European Graduate School (EGS). I place "at" in scare quotes since it had become almost a commonplace to start Zoom sessions by reflecting on the location of the meeting. We're "here," together, yet we're all separated in our homes, offices or wherever we may be. The word "uncanny" comes to mind, as we had only been using Zoom for a few months and the experience hadn't yet been naturalised as a "new normal."

I approached this online lecture with a sense of hope to reconnect with an environment that had been lost in those first months of a global pandemic: spaces of academic gathering and sharing of thoughts. What I sought from this talk was an attempt to make some sense of what we were living through following the disruption brought about by the initial shock of the pandemic; a feeling of "*is this really happening?*" In many ways, the pandemic manifested itself as a traumatic rupture that blocks thinking, even if ample opinion pieces and analyses that politicise the pandemic were being put forward within days of this global phenomenon.¹ Colleagues who, like me, were living through the pandemic on the Mediterranean island of Malta were already writing, a few weeks into the pandemic, about how this uncanny situation was making more visible existing social and economic inequalities, or how the Maltese authorities' decision to impose a lockdown in a detention centre had racist overtones.² Incidentally, Malta features in the postscript of the book under review, in Butler's critical remarks on grievability, asking us to consider the collapse of world that forces people to flee their home and attempt to cross the Mediterranean in conditions of great risk and danger, to be met with an EU policy, reiterated by Maltese authorities, that threatens to push back

migrants to other countries, refuses to rescue boats carrying migrants, or subjects them to detention in conditions that betray international law.

I was eagerly anticipating Butler's "take" on COVID-19, their invitation to think through the pandemic and the disruptions brought with it. What followed was an hour of deep thought, reflection and pathos. Butler's thinking about the pandemic combined socio-political analysis with a consideration of the developing realities that the virus presented, while also acknowledging the affective registers of loss, sorrow and disquietude that permeated those initial pandemic months. These were some of the opening words of Butler's lecture:

However differently we register this pandemic, we doubtless understand it as global. It implicates us in a world, a world of living creatures whose capacity to affect one another can be, well, a life or death matter. I'm not sure I would say that this is a common world we share since many of the resources of the world are not precisely shared. And there are those who understand themselves to have no share of the world.³

Implication. Common world. Living creatures. To affect and be affected. Life and death. Scheler and Merleau-Ponty. Those would be some of the keywords for Butler's lecture and for their following work on the pandemic.

These lines would be reworked by Butler, first into a journal article,⁴ then into the introduction and opening chapter of the 2022 monograph, titled *What World is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology* (henceforth *WWIT*).⁵ Apart from these publications, Butler has made a number of contributions discussing the pandemic in the form of published interviews, newspaper articles, and various Zoom talks and interviews that can be freely accessed online.⁶ Butler's previous monograph, *The Force of Nonviolence* (henceforth *FN*),⁷ had just come out as the virus was marking its presence globally. So, a number of interviews with Butler about that book considered the pandemic in relation to the arguments presented in it. In fact, the pandemic presented yet another occasion to think about systemic racism and sexism, grievability and the climate crisis, all being matters that featured in *FN*. In many ways, then, *WWIT* builds on *FN* and previous books by Butler, this time reconsidered through the specific context of the pandemic.

What marks this book as different from any of Butler's other books, apart from the pandemic context, is the phenomenology angle that serves as a sort of methodological springboard for the thoughts presented in it. As indicated by its subtitle, in this book Butler elaborates a *pandemic phenomenology*. In a sense, the whole pandemic experience lends itself to phenomenological inquiry insofar as it foregrounded key phenomenological themes, not least experience itself, but also other notions such as embodiment, touching, mortality, breathlessness, isolation, anxiety and care. In these last two years and counting, one way to philosophise has become to consider

questions and lamentations such as: *what is it like to live through a pandemic? What is it like to be intubated and ventilated? What is it like to lose a loved one and be physically unable to attend their memorial service? What is it like to have to go to work knowing that that work is exposing you to the virus?*

It is perhaps for this reason that in the third chapter of *WWIT*, titled “Intertwining as Ethics and Politics,” Butler situates this book alongside the efforts of critical phenomenology, where first-person experiential accounts are seen as inseparable from socio-political and historical factors that inform the constitution of experiences. In this regard, Butler embraces the gesture of critical phenomenology, namely to “*breathe new life* into the phenomenological tradition and reveal its ethical, social and political promise.”⁸ Thus, critical phenomenology is characterised as an approach to reading phenomenological texts in such a way that reveals their latent *critical breath*; or even to release the underlying critical breath in phenomenological ideas.

Breathing is, in fact, a central notion in *WWIT*. It is a guiding thread in this book, not just as a reading or analytical strategy of breathing new life into texts, but also as a literal experience and as a concern of Butler’s thinking on ethics and politics. Multiple senses of the term “breathing” interlace in Butler’s work. There is the sense of political movements that struggle in order to make social norms more conducive for breathing. As Butler writes in *Undoing Gender*, the possibility of breathing, literal and metaphoric, has been one of the goals of a number of social movements that work to distinguish “among the norms and conventions that permit people to *breathe*, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself.”⁹ Moreover, in *FN* Butler points towards the politics of breathing in the sense that, for some individuals and groups, breathing in this world does not come easily or is made impossible through chokeholds.¹⁰ There is also the added significance that breathing takes in the context of the pandemic, where one’s breath could be the source of infection for another and where one’s need to breathe renders them vulnerable to becoming infected.

All these senses of breathing come together in *WWIT*, making the book at once a reflection on pandemic times, an analysis of major political issues of our time (systemic racism, sexism, climate crisis, etc.), as well as a phenomenological reflection that urges us to rethink subjectivity, ethics and politics. As is characteristic of several of Butler’s recent work (most notably, *FN*), *WWIT* seamlessly oscillates across different registers: from the micro (living in lockdown during the pandemic) to the macro (institutional violence and global inequalities) through the psychic (the account of gender melancholia and its links with some politicians refusing to mourn losses) towards praxis (detailing the manifesto and transversal strategies of resistance movements such as *Ni Una Menos*). This approach is instrumental to Butler’s thinking throughout *WWIT*, which insists on drawing connections between different types of oppression, inequalities and violence, within the

context of a pandemic occurring amid the destruction caused by a climate catastrophe that reinforces and is reinforced by systemic racism and sexism.

But before elaborating further on the political conclusions found in Butler's latest book, it is useful to dwell further on the role that phenomenology plays in *WWIT*. In this book's first chapter, titled "Senses of the World: Scheler and Merleau-Ponty," we find extended engagements with phenomenologists Max Scheler (on the tragic) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (on touch and the intertwining). Regarding Scheler, Butler focuses on his 1915 article, "On the Phenomenon of the Tragic," written in the midst of the first world war. There, Scheler defies Husserl's philosophy by not giving a principal role to the transcendental ego, at least when it comes to understanding the nature of the tragic. For Scheler, the tragic is "a way in which the world exhibits itself."¹¹ Butler reads Scheler as claiming that the tragic appears in the aftermath of a great loss or destruction of something or someone valuable, leaving behind it not only grief "but the shock or bewilderment that the world is such that an event like that could happen at all."¹²

Following Scheler's suggestion that the tragic marks the destruction of a positive value, Butler considers what gets destroyed in the pandemic tragedy: "One value is touch. The other is breath. Another is the complex surfaces and enclosures of the world."¹³ This identification of touch and breath as values is illuminating on various counts. Firstly, it invites us to think about how these were transformed by the pandemic. Moreover, it enables us to read touch and breath as twin notions around which Butler's ethical and political philosophy revolve. This is what I will refer to as *an ethico-politics of breath and touch* operating in Butler's recent work.

Butler writes that "under pandemic conditions, the very elements upon which we depend for life carry the potential to take life: we come to worry about touching someone, and breathing their air," and that this worry amounts to "a kind of perpetual sorrow that afflicts all the joints of sociality."¹⁴ Out of this opening reflection with Scheler, Butler elicits the two core questions that animate *WWIT*, namely: *what makes a life livable?* and *what is an inhabitable world?* Butler notes that to ask the first question – *what does it mean to live a livable life?* – is not the same as asking questions such as *what is the good life?* or *what is the meaning of life?* or even *what will make me happy?* Butler maintains that "'livability' is ultimately a modest requirement. ... One is looking, rather, to live in such a way that life itself remains bearable so that one can continue to live. In other words, one is looking for those requirements of a life that allow a life to be sustained and to persist."¹⁵ Livability amounts to having the conditions of life that make it possible for one to *desire to live*. Since, as Butler notes, "under some conditions of restriction – incarceration, occupation, detention, torture, statelessness – one may ask *is life worth living under these conditions?*"¹⁶

Engaging with the second core question raised in *WWIT* – *what is an inhabitable world?* – Butler draws a distinction between the world and the earth. This suggests a broader ecological and planetary dimension that is increasingly colouring Butler’s work. The “world” is a space and time of inhabitation, whereas the “earth” persists in places uninhabited by humans. Ultimately, questions of livability and uninhabitability coincide. Phenomena such as climate destruction make the world uninhabitable while “if we live human lives with no limits on our freedom, then we enjoy our freedom at the expense of a livable life.”¹⁷ This is a provocative formulation which Butler makes with regard to libertarian understandings of freedom and the form these took in the context of the pandemic. Such understandings revolved around notions of personal liberty and unbridled agency. Of course, Butler (2022b) is not arguing against personal liberty; rather, they are pointing our attention to “another form of freedom that is sidelined by this one, and it emerges amid social life, a life that seeks a common world, a life that is free to seek a common world” (33). This other form of freedom demands the dissolution of certain notions of agency and individuality. As the title of an article by Butler (the contents of which re-appear in *WWIT*) makes clear, “Creating an Inhabitable World for Humans Means Dismantling Rigid Forms of Individuality.”¹⁸ One form that this dismantling can take, following Achille Mbembe’s suggestion, is to shake off the notion of the world in favour of the less anthropocentric notion of the planetary, a notion which also challenges national boundaries as drawn by geographical maps.¹⁹ Importantly, this rethinking of freedom and, thus, of selfhood places at the center the *porosity of the body* rather than its definitive boundaries. Butler contends that the notions of interdependency, intertwinement and porosity can help us to think anew key ethical and political concepts in view of contemporary predicaments such as the pandemic. To further elaborate this point, Butler turns to the late work of Merleau-Ponty for inspiration.

This is not the first time that Butler has drawn on Merleau-Ponty’s work, but perhaps in no earlier book-length text by Butler has he occupied such a central role, even if they rework and extend his ideas in different directions than those pursued by the French phenomenologist. Different aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy feature quite extensively in Butler’s work on, for example, gender or the role of affectivity in subject-formation. It is, however, the Merleau-Ponty that Butler draws upon in *Senses of the Subject*²⁰ – the later Merleau-Ponty – that plays an important role in *WWIT*. In the first three chapters of *WWIT* Butler refers to Merleau-Ponty’s essay, “Eye and Mind,” and especially his posthumous *The Visible and the Invisible*. Butler reworks his poetic and profound reflections on touching in order to think about ethical relationality in the context of the pandemic. Like breathing, touching is something we cannot do without, yet both were features of life that obtained a heightened sense of danger in pandemic times. In the COVID-19 era, statements like “I feel your breath on my body” or “I can feel your touch” mean potential danger, if not death. But, for Merleau-Ponty, the

intertwinement is not the site of danger, but rather of a harmonious interconnection and interrelatedness (incidentally, it is this optimism in Merleau-Ponty's account that Butler, drawing on psychoanalytic notions of rage and aggression, will object to). For Merleau-Ponty, this intertwinement forces us to rethink the "I" as necessarily interrelated. Regarding the intertwinement of touching, Butler maintains that it is not a matter of there being an "I" who goes on to touch something; rather:

this "I" is always catching up with the scene of touch that makes me possible The power of touch does not originate with me. The tangible understood as a field or a dimension of the world – a way in which the world is exhibited – is thus there as I touch something, and as I feel my own touch, or redouble my touch in touching something else. I touched that other person, but my own flesh gets in the way since at the moment of touch, I cannot evade my own touch in touching the other, although I may wish to.²¹

Contrary to Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," Butler follows Merleau-Ponty when claiming that "I cannot come into being without being touched, handled, and maintained, and I cannot touch or handle or maintain without having first been formed in the crucible of those practices."²² I've been touched, therefore I can touch; I can touch, therefore I've been touched. The notions of activity and passivity too get problematised in this account, as touching and being touched become entangled. Butler adopts this chiasmatic language from Merleau-Ponty to insist that "bodies are interlaced with one another,"²³ and "to be a body at all is to be bound up with others and with objects, with surfaces, and the elements, including the air that is breathed in and out, air that belongs to no one and everyone."²⁴ Going beyond ontological models that posit individuals as discrete and isolated has ethical and political consequences on how we think of interdependency.

Considered in this way, clean water, breathable air, proper shelter, adequate clothing and access to health care start to be seen as basic requirements for a livable life. Everyone has these requirements because no life is self-sufficient. As Butler writes in *WWIT*, "I am not fully sealed as a bounded creature but emit breath into a shared world where I take in air that has been circulating through the lungs of others."²⁵ Parts of me end up in you, and parts of you end up in me, in this situation that is sometimes wondrous and other times painful. I need to breathe in air; and I need to let you breathe in air too. To paraphrase Cornel West, we are like "a cracked vessel."²⁶ And we leak, we over-flow; the other spills over into us. There is an ethical impulse implied here, but also a political commitment that aspires for a social configuration in which infrastructures of support – shelter, health care, safety from violence – are secured for everyone. It is in this seamless way that Butler's pandemic phenomenology intertwines with a renewal and reanimation of socialist ideals.²⁷

The relational ontology presented by Butler is also a critique of prevailing frameworks that define humans as separate individuals motivated to behave only in terms of self-interest. For Butler, this way of thinking “is a liberal conceit that underwrites a great deal of moral philosophy.”²⁸ Individuality is, at best, a tenuous achievement and an imagined status, argues Butler, and not the starting point of deliberation. In fact, when thinking about ethics and politics the primary helplessness and dependency of the infant is a more helpful reality than the presumed uprightness of the adult.²⁹ The denial or disavowal of the ethico-political implications of intertwinement is what results in the prevailing notion of unbridled liberty, which turned out to be deadly in the context of the pandemic. This is also the same logic that contributes to the destruction brought about by climate change.

In the second chapter of *WWIT*, titled “Powers in the Pandemic: Reflections on Restricted Life,” Butler expands further on how global responses to the pandemic fell short of acknowledging the interconnected character of lives and the corresponding obligation to organise the world according to principles of radical equality. Butler argues that it is market and neoliberal values that underpinned the predominant global response to the pandemic, ultimately amounting to “a necropolitical plan – exemplifying perhaps in a remarkably vivid way the death drive thriving at the heart of the capitalist machine.”³⁰ An example of this killing machinery that Butler reflects on is the discursive construction of “reasonableness” with regard to “the right number of deaths, the right extension of the horizontal line, the level that establishes the number of deaths we are willing to live with in order to keep markets open.”³¹ Throughout *WWIT* Butler takes issue with this approach to lives and deaths, critiquing the statistical systems of representation, metaphors of health and illness, graphs, “curves” and calculations of morbidity, “usually posed by those who do not consider themselves a possible factor in the equation.”³²

In the context of this discussion, Butler evokes Derrida’s notion of the incalculable value of life and inquires into the significance that such a notion can have in light of how some lives – particularly workers’ – were deemed to be dispensable during pandemic times. Butler powerfully links this discussion with a consideration of Marx’s identification of a contradiction underpinning capitalism. Marx had argued that capitalism forces the worker to work in order to secure a wage, yet unsustainable working conditions can mean that the worker gets ill or injured and becomes unable to work and earn a subsistence. This deadly contradiction was apparent throughout the pandemic as workers were, quite literally, working themselves to death. Not just in the sense of being over-worked, but also in the way that work made certain workers more exposed to infection, illness and death. Furthermore, Butler notes that, more cruelly, many of these people – often Black or brown, migrants, or poor – belonged to social groups that even before the pandemic did not have adequate access to quality health care. For this reason, the term

“preexisting conditions,” a term used to explain why someone was more susceptible to die of the virus, came to stand in as a euphemism that names a structural inequality rather than a “biological condition.” So, in the same way that the “reasonableness” of death counts was constructed through the neoliberal governmental rationality, so too were “preexisting conditions.” As Butler puts it: “for populations that never had access to health care or who were disadvantaged by racism, illnesses that once could have been treated become ‘preexisting conditions’.”³³ Butler contests the “crass utilitarianism”³⁴ of this calculating logic that determines who and how many people get their health and life sacrificed in the name of “health of the economy.” From this, Butler draws a connection between an inaccessible health care system, the disproportionate number of deaths in certain communities, and the social groups that were more negatively impacted by the pandemic. Questioning Foucault’s distinction between “killing” and “letting die,” Butler notes that “it is systemic racism that links the two.”³⁵

Butler remarks on how at the beginning of the pandemic, there were some who thought that, “even for a brief duration, that the pandemic could function as a great leveler, that it would be the occasion for imagining a more substantial equality and a more radical form of justice.”³⁶ After all, everyone was susceptible to getting the virus, everyone breathes air that might be carrying the virus, everyone touches surfaces that might contain the virus. Yet, the pandemic exacerbated and brought to the fore the vast disparities and inequalities that plague the world. Regarding the utopian way of thinking (and I confess that I was one of these naïve utopians), Butler maintains that “we were not exactly wrong, but neither were we well prepared to bring about the world we imagined.”³⁷ It suffices to consider the huge inequalities surrounding the global distribution of vaccines in order to see the fundamental failure of the world to recognise the extent of global interdependency. The ethical implications of this interdependency are noticed by Butler in a statement by a WHO director who at one point argued that: “None of us can accept a world in which some people are protected while others are not.”³⁸ Ultimately, Butler concludes, the ethical and political outlook that must follow from awareness of this interdependency is one that takes “the world” as its measure since, after all, “only a global commitment can honor global interdependency.”³⁹

Another destroyed value, besides touching and breathing, that Butler points towards is the equal value of lives as an ideal. Following Scheler’s characterisation of the tragic, Butler notes how in pandemic times and beyond, it is the value of life, “a value that only makes sense in light of the claim that *all* lives are equal or should be treated equally,”⁴⁰ that risks being destroyed when lives are left to descend into the populated pits of unlivability. In the face of this intolerable reality, Butler invokes the anguished exclamation that guides the book – *what world is this?* – as a contestation or indictment of the world, and as an “urgent call to animate or

renew a different sense of world governed by another set of collective values."⁴¹

One such value that Butler posits in the fourth chapter of *WWIT* is that of *equal grievability*. Butler's thinking on grievability has developed throughout several books, namely *Precarious Life* (henceforth *PL*)⁴² and *Frames of War* (henceforth *FW*),⁴³ and once again it receives a systematic discussion in *FN*. Indeed, one can consider those three books as a trilogy of sorts that develops a philosophical vocabulary (rather than a unitary theoretical framework) revolving around notions of precariousness, vulnerability, relationality, interdependency, grievability, equality and nonviolence.⁴⁴ It could be said that such conceptual architecture has been developed through a spiral return by Butler to this constellation of concepts in their various works, each time introducing a new emphasis which further extends the remit and domain of the theorising. In *WWIT*, Butler reflects on how in *FN* they had argued that whether a life is deemed grievable or not is linked with the meaning of socio-economic inequalities and is an expression of violence. Thus, in Butler's thinking, grievability-equality-nonviolence form a conceptual cluster. Importantly, as reflected in the fourth chapter's title, "Grievability for the Living," although grief may be associated with death – specifically the grief experienced by those who survive the loss of another – Butler insists that grievability is actually a trait that is applicable to the living: "to say of a living person that they are grievable is to say that they would be grieved were they to be lost. It is also to say that the world is, or should be, organized to sustain that life."⁴⁵ Butler continues that recognising that one's life is ungrivable is to live with "a somatic sense of dispensability" and "a lived conviction"⁴⁶ that the world is such that some lives do not matter and will not be safeguarded.

Butler concludes the chapter on grievability in *WWIT* with a moving reflection on, to echo the subtitle of *PL*, the powers of mourning. They refer to the forms that mourning took under conditions of pandemic: from the difficulty of Zoom memorials to the pain of being unable to be close to a dying person in hospital, and the impossibility of gathering to communally mark a loss of life. This leads Butler to poignantly ask: "A purely private form of mourning is possible, but can it release or assuage the open cry, the stories, the songs that petition the world to bear witness to this loss in its singularity within a social fabric of interwoven lives?"⁴⁷ Moreover, such reflections on mass mourning force us to move beyond the association of mourning with proximity and familiarity, as Butler reminds us that one need not know the deceased person before one can mourn them, before one can be undone while becoming animated by that loss. On this matter, Butler's poetic lines on grief, oozing ache and tenderness, must be quoted at length:

Whatever the age, the value of that person is now carried in the lives of others, a form of acknowledgement that becomes an incorporation, a living echo, an animated wound or trace that transforms those who live on. Just because someone else suffers in a way that I have not suffered does not mean that the other's suffering is unthinkable to me. Our bonds are forged from echoes, translation, and resonances, rhythms, and repetitions, as if the musicality of mourning makes its way past borders by virtue of its acoustic powers. The loss that the stranger endures echoes with the personal loss one feels, even as it is not the same. Because it is not the same, it echoes. An interval becomes a link. Strangers in grief nevertheless have formed a kind of collectivity.⁴⁸

The power of text such as the above quotation seems to have been felt by the three writers who, in their endorsement of *WWIT*, all remarked on the texture of Butler's prose. Lewis R. Gordon referred to it as "a stunningly poignant book;" Lisa Guenther as "a thoughtful meditation;" and Jacqueline Rose as a "remarkable meditation." *WWIT* is a text that doesn't just work on an intellectual level (if a text ever works on just that level), but affectively too. This is perhaps what led respondents to a series of lectures Butler delivered at the University of Girona in October 2020 – where essentially the entire draft of *WWIT* was delivered by Butler in the form of four lectures, followed by responses from a number of scholars – to describe the lectures as "very moving" or "touching." In a sense, I feel that *WWIT* offers an account of a kind of godless morality or a meditative reflection that follows the death of god (and so many other human and ecological deaths). To evoke an image they often use to describe grief, Butler's text touches the reader as if "one is hit by waves."⁴⁹ The text moves and flows; it seduces and soothes. It is a style of writing and an ethos of thinking that is otherwise than the – often phallogocentric – gesture of argumentation. It is a tone that echoes Butler's account of ecstasy in *PL*. There, Butler writes that "to be ec-static means, literally, to be outside oneself, ... to be transported beyond oneself by a passion, but also to be *beside oneself* with rage or grief."⁵⁰ Going on to address their readers directly, Butler continues: "I am speaking to those of us who are living in certain ways *beside ourselves*, whether in sexual passion, or emotional grief, or political rage."⁵¹ And, before proceeding with their discussion, notes, "I am arguing, if I am 'arguing' at all,"⁵² suggesting that rather than premises and arguments, philosophy may have more to do with the body, affect, rage and grief. In this sense, one can speak of the *poetics* of Butler's philosophy, or perhaps its *autopoietic* or even *ethopoietic* quality.⁵³ Perhaps it is a quality that is related to the ethico-politics of touch and breath; Butler's philosophy can touch the reader, making them breathe the hastened breath of passion, the sombre air of grief, the winds of rage, or the exhilaration of ecstasy.

The ethos of Butler's work can also be seen embodied in the way they approach and read texts. Deconstructively, certainly, but in their own words, it seeks to present "an aspirational reading."⁵⁴ The way Butler describes this

way of reading recalls their description (on its own terms) of critical phenomenology as seeking to “breathe new life into the phenomenological tradition.”⁵⁵ A few pages later, Butler reflects on the rhetoric gesture adopted in *WWIT*, namely that of invoking a “we”; an aspirational “we” that, like an aspirational reading, attempts to breathe life. Let us not forget that, as Butler observes, aspiration and breathing share an etymological concern: “looking for a space in which to breathe is not the highest ethical aspiration, but it is there, etymologically embedded in aspiration itself, and does seem to constitute something of a precondition for any viable, that is, livable, ethical reflection.”⁵⁶ An aspirational reading breathes new life into a text to dislodge it from fixed readings; while Butler’s aspirational rhetoric is “a way of hoping for ‘we’ that does not yet exist.”⁵⁷ The tenor of Butler’s work, ultimately, invites us to see anew and reimagine ourselves and the world – a phenomenological motif if there ever was one.

It is this urgent critical reimagining that Butler pursues in the postscript of *WWIT*, titled “Transformations,” through a considered reflection on the political actions of the Movement for Black Lives and *Ni Una Menos* (Not One Less). In this chapter, Butler focuses also on *The Feminist International*,⁵⁸ a book by a leader of the latter Latin American grassroots feminist movement, Verónica Gago. Butler notes that this social movement has a complex agenda; although its initial mobilisation was opposition to violence against women, its political vision gradually expanded: “it opposes dictatorship, contemporary forms of revisionism, wage inequalities for women, femicide and rape, capitalist exploitation, and extractivism, and it also promotes radical democracy.”⁵⁹ Butler refers to the group’s practices, from taking to the street, to taking *over* the steets, open parliaments and assemblies, to – especially during the pandemic – extending its cross-regional and online solidarities, publications, and online gatherings. Moreover, Butler reflects on the significance of the feminist strike which Gago, following Rosa Luxemburg, understands “both as an event and an ongoing collective process. ... [T]he strike always exceeds the act or the event, marking a vector of temporalities from which a new temporal horizon emerges or can emerge.”⁶⁰ Inspired by this movement, as well as other movements such as Black Lives Matter, Butler argues that effective resistance in contemporary times takes the form of transregional and transversal action, keeping “the relationship between affect and action alive,”⁶¹ transforming outrage into collectivity, and not giving up on revolutionary promise.

In relation to these social movements, Butler sympathetically refers to the work of The Care Collective, the group of scholars and activists behind *The Care Manifesto*.⁶² This is significant since, in the past, Butler has always tended to avoid embracing the discourse of care in relation to ethics and politics, particularly because of some of its proponents’ moralistic failure to capture the aggression underpinning relationality, as well as its essentialising association of care with maternity.⁶³ Yet Butler embraces the work of The

Care Collective, who politicise care, highlight its psychoanalytic complexities, and acknowledge its etymological associations with “concern, anxiety, sorrow, grief, and trouble.”⁶⁴ Consequently, Butler reads their efforts as being in line with those of the other social movements discussed in this postscript, who all in their different ways insist that morality only takes substantial form when connected with a wider critique of inequality and exploitation. In this regard, *WWIT* is a masterclass in showing how individual experiences are constituted within socio-political realities, and also in explicating how today’s major political concerns can and must be thought together if we are to hope for effective political change.

Butler concludes *WWIT* by insisting that the porosity of our being means that we cannot exist without each other. This implies going outside of the bounded self and *opening toward the world*. It is “the world” that Arendt wrote about when she wrote about the human condition of being born into a condition of cohabitation which we do not choose. Common existence is an ambivalent predicament we cannot do without; to actively quench this unchosen bond is a genocidal impulse, as Arendt charged Eichmann.⁶⁵ It is a situation mired with heterogeneity and plurality, with love and care, with community and beyond nation, with tension and unease, with kin and strangers, with humans and non-humans. It is a world we all live in relation to, and persisting in it demands sustaining. As Butler’s final words in *WWIT* make clear, our survival in this world depends on a particular political vision; one that can be called an ethico-politics of breath and touch, that is:

A politics that is committed to a world in which we can all breathe without fear of contagion, fear of pollution, or fear of the police chokehold, where our breath is intermingled with the world’s breath, where that exchange of breath, syncopated and free, becomes what is shared.⁶⁶

- ¹ A number of early responses by philosophers and writers to the pandemic include Fernando Castrillón and Thomas Marchevsky (eds.), *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy: Conversations on Pandemics, Politics, and Society* (London: Routledge, 2021), Brad Evans, “The Quarantine Files: Thinkers in Self-Isolation,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 14, 2020, lareviewofbooks.org/article/quarantine-files-thinkers-self-isolation/, and Hank Scotch (ed), “Posts from the Pandemic,” *Critical Inquiry* 47, no. S2 (2021): S1-S142. Other philosophers have even compiled their different pieces on the pandemic in book form, such as Giorgio Agamben, *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics*, trans. Valeria Dani (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York: OR Books, 2020), and Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic! 2: Chronicles of a Time Lost* (New York: OR Books, 2020).
- ² For political analyses of the pandemic situation in Malta, see Kathrin Schödel, “Give Yourself a Break. Stop Making Sense of a Virus!” *Isles of the Left*, March 22, 2020, www.islesoftheleft.org/give-yourself-a-break-stop-making-sense-of-a-virus/, and Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone and Daniel Vella, “Treating the ‘Other’ as Disease: Hal Far Open Centre as a Zone of Contagion,” *Isles of the Left*, April 29, 2020, www.islesoftheleft.org/treating-the-other-as-disease-hal-far-open-centre-as-a-zone-of-contagion/.
- ³ This lecture, titled “Losing Touch: Fragments on the Inhabitable World,” was delivered on July 15, 2020, and can be accessed here: vimeo.com/ondemand/judithbutler/454511431.
- ⁴ Judith Butler, “A Livable Life? An Inhabitable World? Scheler on the Tragic,” *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology* 5, no. 2 (2022): 8-27.
- ⁵ Judith Butler, *What World is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).
- ⁶ Videos of Butler speaking on the pandemic that are freely available online include conversations with Florence Dore and Andrew Perrin (May 2020), Amia Srinivasan (July 2020), Mel Y. Chen (September 2021), Simon Critchley, Cornel West and Glenn Greenwald (December 2021) and Jacques Rancière (April 2022). Moreover, published interviews and other articles on the pandemic include Judith Butler, “Capitalism Has its Limits,” *Verso*, March 30, 2020, www.versobooks.com/blogs/4603-capitalism-has-its-limits, and George Yancy, “Judith Butler: Mourning Is a Political Act Amid the Pandemic and Its Disparities,” *Truthout*, April 30, 2020, truthout.org/articles/judith-butler-mourning-is-a-political-act-amid-the-pandemic-and-its-disparities/.
- ⁷ Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (New York: Verso, 2020).
- ⁸ Butler, *What World is This?*, 74 [emphasis added]. Butler’s quotation is taken from the back cover blurb of Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon (eds.), *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020).
- ⁹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8 [emphasis added].
- ¹⁰ Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 116-17.
- ¹¹ Butler, *What World is This?*, 21.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.
- ¹⁷ Butler, *What World is This?*, 32-33.
- ¹⁸ Judith Butler, "Creating an Inhabitable World for Humans Means Dismantling Rigid Forms of Individuality," *TIME*, April 21, 2021, time.com/5953396/judith-butler-safe-world-individuality.
- ¹⁹ Sindre Bangstad and Torbjørn Tumyr Nilsen, "Thoughts on the Planetary: An Interview with Achille Mbembe," *New Frame*, September 5, 2019, www.newframe.com/thoughts-on-the-planetary-an-interview-with-achille-mbembe/. Interestingly, in a short article from April 13, 2020, Mbembe frames his discussion of the pandemic in terms of a notion of a *universal right to breathe*. See Achille Mbembe, "The Universal Right to Breathe," trans. Carolyn Shread, *Critical Inquiry* 47, no. S2 (2021): S58-S62.
- ²⁰ Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).
- ²¹ Butler, *What World is This?*, 36.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 44.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 37-38.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.
- ²⁶ Cornel West (with David Ritz), *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud, A Memoir* (California: SmileyBooks, 2009), 251.
- ²⁷ Butler, *What World is This?*, 27, 48.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ²⁹ For a wonderful critique of rectitude, see Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, trans. Amanda Minervini and Adam Sitze (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016) [2014].
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 85.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 49.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 84.

⁴¹ Ibid., 85.

⁴² Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004).

⁴³ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009).

⁴⁴ An early synopsis from the publisher, in fact, suggested a continuity between these three books, as it described *The Force of Nonviolence* as being geared “[t]owards a form of aggressive non-violence - following on from Butler’s *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*.”

Available at: www.giffordlectures.org/news/books/force-non-violence-ethico-political-bind.

Another commonality between the three books is their publisher, *Verso*.

⁴⁵ Butler, *What World is This?*, 92.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 96.

⁴⁹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 21.

⁵⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 24.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ I borrow this term from Foucault, when in the context of a discussion of Plutarch, he defines it accordingly: “*Ēthopoiein* means making *ēthos*, producing *ēthos*, changing, transforming *ēthos*, the individual’s way of being, his mode of existence. *Ēthopoisos* is something that possesses the quality of transforming an individual’s mode of being.” See Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005 [2001]), 237.

⁵⁴ Butler, *What World is This?*, 80.

⁵⁵ Butler, *What World is This?*, 74. One wonders whether what Butler calls “aspirational reading” could be compared with Sedgwick’s idea of reparative reading, as opposed to paranoid reading. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-51. However, interestingly, when referring to aspirational reading, the source that Butler cites is actually Fred Moten’s essay, “The Blur and Breathe Books,” from the book *Black and Blur*, which is the first part of his trilogy *Consent Not to Be a Single Being*. See Fred Moten, *Consent Not to Be a Single Being: Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 245-69.

⁵⁶ Judith Butler, “Ethical Ambivalence,” in *Nietzsche and Levinas: “After the Death of a Certain God,”* eds. Jill Stauffer and Bettina Bergo (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 70.

⁵⁷ Butler, *What World is This?*, 80. For more on the aspirational character of the “we,” see Judith Butler, “‘We the People’ - Thoughts on Freedom and Assembly,” in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 154-92.

⁵⁸ Verónica Gago, *Feminist International: How to Change Everything*, trans. Liz Mason-Deese (New York: Verso, 2020 [2019]).

⁵⁹ Butler, *What World is This?*, 103-04.

⁶⁰ Butler, *What World is This?*, 104.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁶² The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (New York: Verso, 2020).

⁶³ Butler's wariness on "the ethics of care," and indeed on "the ethics of vulnerability," can be seen in statements such as: "There are those who worry that vulnerability, even if it becomes a theme or a problem for thinking, will be asserted as a primary existential condition, ontological and constitutive, and that this sort of foundationalism will founder on the same rocky shores as have others, such as the ethics of care or maternal thinking." See Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, eds. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 22.

⁶⁴ Butler, *What World is This?*, 106 [emphasis in original].

⁶⁵ Judith Butler, "Quandaries of the Plural: Cohabitation and Sovereignty in Arendt," in *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 151-80.

⁶⁶ Butler, *What World is This?*, 109.