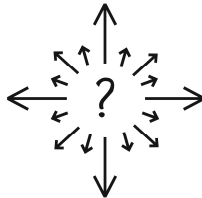


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Dr Alexander L. Gungov
Editor-in-Chief
Sofia Philosophical Review
E-mail: agungov@phls.uni-sofia.bg

Website: www.sphr-bg.org

All prospective contributions should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

Review materials should be sent to the Senior Book Review Editor at:

Mr. Karim Mamdani
280 Donlands Ave.
Unit 403
Toronto, ON
M4J 0A3
CANADA
karim.mamdani@gmail.com

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. A SMALL BOOK	7
ON THE RATIONAL IMAGINATION	
Donald Phillip Verene (Emory University)	7
II. BOOK REVIEWS.....	43
Donald Phillip Verene, <i>The Philosophic Spirit: Its Meaning and Presence</i> . Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2023, 146 pp. €29.90. ISBN: 9783838217819	
Evangelos Kalfopoulos (Sofia University & University of Coimbra)	43
Douglas Giles, <i>What Left and Right Mean: Clarifying the Political Spectrum</i> . Boston: Game Over Books, 2022. 39 pp., \$5.49, ISBN: 978-1-7358808-2-2	
Vincenzo Filetti (Sofia University).....	49
Hannah Dawson & Annelien de Dijn, <i>Rethinking Liberty before Liberalism</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 298 + xii pp. £22, 99. ISBN: 978-1-108-94839-5	
Inês Pinheiro (NOVA University Lisbon).....	58
Dan Corjescu, <i>The Global Ape: Between Extinction and Transcendence</i> . Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2022, 260 pp., €34.90, ISBN: 9783838216126	
Alexander Gungov (University of Sofia).....	69
III. ASPIRATION CORNER.....	73
Heidegger's Interpretation of Paul: The Care of the Self and Others in the Proto-Christian Experience of Life	
Luigi Panella (University of Bergamo).....	73
"Bio-power" in <i>Homo Sacer I</i> and <i>The History of Sexuality</i> – Agamben's Completion and Correction of the Foucauldian "Theory of Power"	
Yuting Wang (Radboud University).....	85
Kant's <i>First Critique</i> and the Ineffectiveness of Transcendental Arguments	
Matthew Clemons (Stony Brook University)	93
Eating Ethically	
Leonie Overbeek (PhD Candidate, University of Sofia)	104

Exploring the Connections between Attention and Literature with Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch Michela Dianetti (University of Galway)	109
III. ANNOUNCEMENTS	125
Master's Program in Philosophy Taught in English at the University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski"	125
Doctoral Program in Philosophy Taught in English at the University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski"	128
IV. INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHORS	131

I. A SMALL BOOK

ON THE RATIONAL IMAGINATION

Donald Phillip Verene¹

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CONTENTS

Preface 9

Introduction: Ars Poetica 12

1. Absolute Knowing 16

2. Symbolic Form 21

3. Poetic Wisdom 26

4. A Musical Joke 32

Epilogue 38

Other Writings 41

Preface

The language of literature breaks down
precisely at the task of expressing in explicit
form the larger generalities—the very generalities
which metaphysics seeks to express.

A. N. Whitehead

My intention in the pages that follow is to consider some old themes, themes I have considered before, the fabric of thought of which, I think, still remains firm. These themes are associated with four authors—Hegel, Cassirer, Vico, and James Joyce—and with a particular work of each—*Phänomenologie des Geistes*, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, *La Scienza nuova*, and *Finnegans Wake*. I intend to add some new perspectives to what I have previously said on each of these works. The order in which I discuss these works is the order that I came to them in the course of my philosophical and literary education. This short work may be regarded as a semi-autobiographical philosophical pamphlet, directed to the reader who may have some passing interest in these works or who is considering studying them for the first time. It is not my aim to present a traditional academic text and so I have not attached footnotes, but in some instances I have included interlinear citations that can take the reader to standard editions or translations of the works by the four authors.

I say little about Plato, but I believe Whitehead is correct in his well-known statement: “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.” The figure of Plato and his sense of Socratic thinking that runs throughout his dialogues is never far from the thought of my four authors. Hegel says that Plato’s *Parmenides* is the greatest artistic production of ancient dialectic. Cassirer sees Plato as the beginning of philosophical Idealism, and he regards Plato’s *Seventh Letter* to be the first time in the history of thought that language is recognized as the beginning of knowledge. Vico names Plato as the first of the authors he had always before him, and he claims Plato established that there are certain eternal truths in our minds that are not of our own making. In the Classbook section of *Finnegans Wake*, Plato’s name appears as “P. t. l. o. a. t. o.”

which is then spelled out as “plates to lick once and turn over” (*plato*, Spanish = plate), Take a lick (a look) at Plato and turn things over. Once we have read Plato we never again see things in the same way.

I place Joyce among the philosophers because I regard *Finnegans Wake* as a literary work of the rational imagination. Heinrich Straumann, Professor of English at the University of Zurich, met for a conversation with Joyce in what turned out to be a few days before Joyce’s sudden death. Straumann reported that Joyce had “an expression of friendly irony [the trope most closely associated with philosophy]” and “led the conversation with a certain light objectivity, as one who has a perfectly well-defined attitude towards most things but who is quite ready to revise his thinking with regard to their relationship to each other; almost more like a philosopher than an artist.”

Joyce told Straumann, regarding *Finnegans Wake*, not to “pay any particular attention to the allusions to place-names, historical events, literary happenings and personalities, but let the literary phenomenon affect one as such. If a premise of the work must be sought, then it should be a knowledge of the philosopher Giambattista Vico, to whom he was greatly indebted.” This advice concerning Vico is the same that Joyce had given, over the years, to those who asked him for guidance in reading the installments of his *Work in Progress* that became *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce’s masterpiece is the greatest commentary on Vico’s *Scienza nuova* written to date, and it will very likely never be equaled. Joyce has given us not only a literary version of Vico’s new science of humanity, he also has given us a literary version of what Hegel (“hegelstomes”) calls a “science of the experience of consciousness.”

What I mean by “rational imagination” rests on my view that philosophy is a kind of literature. Poetry is the essence of literature. It is the product of the “emotional imagination.” In a work such as *Finnegans Wake* these two kinds of imagination can be joined. It is possible in general to move between philosophy and poetry because they both exist only in words. Every poet, as poet, intends to give form to the emotions through words that bring forth images. Every philosopher, as philosopher, intends to give form to reason through words that bring forth ideas. We may be led to ideas through metaphors, but the ideas are presented for judgment by thought.

Every philosopher seeks a judgment on the truth of a set of the ideas that are advanced, parallel to that sought in a legal proceeding. The

philosopher intends these ideas to be found true beyond a reasonable doubt. Philosophy is jurisprudential. The imagination is the means needed to form whatever is in question so that it is present for judgment. Reason alone cannot take the mind to a point beyond doubt. Imagination preserves what first comes to the mind through perception and places it in memory. We can, by the power of imagination, call forth from memory that which applies to a given situation that involves a question. Imagination can do so with a sense of the immediate that approaches that of perception.

What is called forth by such an act of recollection can thus become a subject of thought and be placed for consideration within a structure of ideas present in the storehouse of memory. The presence of the question allows the mind to engage in the logic of dialectic. Dialectic causes the mind to turn thought back upon itself and formulate a point of view. Once the mind is in possession of a point of view formed by the rational imagination and subjected to judgment, our thought can seek a place in the Republic of Letters. Here we can think.

Introduction: Ars Poetica

Philosophers should go to school with the poets. Both philosophy and poetry require *ingenium*—a talent or genius for perceiving similarity in dissimilars. It is a natural disposition to put the world together in thought. The poets and the philosophers require the Muses because the Muses hold the secret of speech. The Muses, as Hesiod says in the *Theogony*, tell of “what is and what will be and what was before, harmonizing in their sound” (38-39). The Muses sing of all things, of gods and humans and of earth and sky. In the *Phaedo*, in the hour before his death, Socrates turns to Crito and says: “For know you well, my dear Crito, that to express oneself badly is not only faulty as far as the language goes, but does some harm to the soul” (115e).

What the Greeks call “to do philosophy” (*philosophhein*) requires the trope of metaphor. In the *Poetics* Aristotle says: “The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius” (1459a). In addition, doing philosophy requires the trope of irony. Quintilian, in his *Institutio oratoria*, says, in regard to irony, “we are asked to understand the opposite of what is said” (9.2.44). Irony may also be accomplished by the use of analogy or allegory to put forth the absurdity of a given claim (8.6.54-56). Socrates is the master of irony. In the first book of the *Republic* he is confronted by Thrasymachus, the noted Sophist and orator, who says: “Heracles! Here is that habitual irony of Socrates” (337a). Metaphor and irony depend upon *ingenium*. Metaphor brings things together; irony keeps them apart. In reading philosophy it is a mistake to look for the arguments. Instead, look for the metaphors that make the arguments possible and look for the way in which the arguments lead to the opposite of what was originally thought to be the case, as Socrates does in his *elenchos*.

The poet sees with the bodily eye and keeps thought in touch with it through the image. The philosopher sees with the bodily eye but then goes on to see with the mind’s eye, by means of contemplation (*theōria*, *theōrein*). The philosopher does what Joyce, in *Finnegans Wake*, calls “two thinks at a time” (583.07). In the *Euthyphro* Socrates asks the religious expert, Euthyphro, if he can tell him what *hosion* is (piety, holiness, righteousness). He meets Euthyphro near the King-archon’s court, where Socrates is awaiting trial, on charges of irreligion and impiety.

Socrates does not claim to know what *hosion* is. If he can learn what it is from Euthyphro, Socrates can announce him to be his teacher. Euthyphro confidently offers some examples that can be observed, as well as some possible ways to speak about *hosion*, but he is unable to say, consistently, what it is. He is unable to see what *hosion* is with the mind's eye. Thus there is no chance he can put what is necessary into words. Socrates has shown that although he is accused of impiety, no one, not even a religious expert such as Euthyphro, can say what piety is. Socrates is brought to trial on a charge which cannot itself be explained. It is Socrates's irony that intrigues us throughout the dialogue.

Horace says, in his "Epistle to the Pisos" known as *Ars poetica*: "Poets wish either to benefit, or to delight, or to offer words pleasing and helpful to life" (333). The purpose of poetry is threefold—to benefit, in the sense of offering instruction; to delight, in the sense of offering the reader or listener repose from concern; and to be helpful to life, in the sense of moving the recipient of what is said in the poem in a good direction and indicating a way to accept what cannot be otherwise. The poet instructs, delights, and moves, in the sense of conveying some practical wisdom. What Horace claims as the purpose and value of the poet can also be claimed of the philosopher. The philosophic spirit, achieved through contemplation, should instruct, delight, and move those who possess it.

The well-known poem of the American poet, Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica" shares the title with Horace's "Epistle." The final two lines of MacLeish's poem present us with a view opposite to that of Horace. These two often quoted lines are: "A poem should not mean/But be." A poem simply is what is and as it is. It need not be more or less of itself. It need not instruct, delight, and move, or in any sense have a purpose beyond the presence of itself. Whatever the reader makes of it is due to the reader. Of philosophy we might also say: A philosophy should not mean/But be. A philosophy is the result of thought thinking itself. It comes into being through contemplation and is what it is. A philosophy either has an effect on whoever takes it up or it does not. At the heart of this sense of the philosophic spirit is this form of stoicism. To pursue philosophy for pragmatic purposes is a mistake. But the philosopher may rightly attempt to find a middle between Horace and MacLeish.

The most famous consideration of the relation between philosophy

and poetry is Plato's suggestion, in the tenth book of the *Republic*, "that there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (607b). Joyce, in the middle of the first book of *Finnegans Wake*, offers an assurance regarding this quarrel, "hoping against hope all the while that, by the light of philophosy, (and may she never folsage us!) things will begin to clear up a bit one way or another within the next quarrel of an hour and be hanged to them as ten to one they will too, please the pigs, as they ought to categorically, as, strictly between ourselves there is a limit to all things so this will never do" (119.04-09). With his spelling of philosophy as philophosy, Joyce reminds us of the association it has with the Greek word for light—*phōs*—the contraction of *phaos*. Philosophy is the love (*philia*) of light or clarity. Clarity is a "fine madness" (*fine folie*). Aristotle says in *De anima*: "As sight is the most highly developed sense, the name *phantasia* [imagination] has been formed from *phaos* (light) because it is not possible to see without light" (429a). Both poetry and philosophy direct our vision—poetry with the *eikōn*, philosophy with the *eidōs*.

Socrates suggests to Glaucon, in their conversation in the last book of the *Republic*, that should they need to defend the earlier expulsion of the poets from their ideal city, their city in speech, they can say that the argument (*logos*) determined their decision and that, if the protectors and lovers of poetry or the poets themselves can present a counterargument, the poets could be readmitted. If such an apology, such a defense, is not forthcoming, Socrates and Glaucon will chant, as a counter-charm, their argument that poetry, left to its own devices, is unable to teach virtue. Such action will be necessary because they agree they are still charmed by the poetic sense of things, especially through the poems of Homer.

The terms of the quarrel go back to what is described in the *Laws*, when at one time philosophers were attacked for their naturalistic doctrines of the soul and the universe and accused of not believing in the gods. These claims about philosophical doctrines "provoked a lot of hostility; poets, in particular, joined in the chorus of abuse and among other iniquities compared the philosophers to dogs howling at the moon" (967c-d). We can wish, with Joyce's comment, that the love of wisdom that is philosophy may "never folsage us!"—*saige-fol*—drive us "wise-crazy."

Plato confronts the ancient quarrel by writing poetic philosophy, dialogues that are to be performed in the theater of the mind. The dialogues are a dialectic of *logos* and *mythos*. We even see this in the last

pages of the *Republic*, when the Platonic Socrates turns from the argument (*logos*) to recounting the tale (*mythos*) of the ring of Gyges, to show that should we, as just human beings, possess such a ring—that can make its wearer invisible—would be tempted to commit acts for which there would be no consequences.

Then Socrates recites the details of the myth of Er—the warrior who came back to life on the funeral pyre and told of observing the journey of souls in the afterlife and of their need to choose what life to lead upon their rebirth. Because Er revived, and could recollect his afterdeath experience, Socrates says to Glaucon, “a tale was saved and not lost; and it could save us, if we were persuaded by it, and we shall make a good crossing of the river of Lethe and not defile our soul [*psychē*]” (621b-c). We will be careful not to defile our soul, even if, as with the ring of Gyges, we are tempted to act not always with prudence and justice, because we will eventually face the moment of choice that Er witnessed taking place in the afterlife. It is a truth that only the poetic imagination can tell, and its truth can be told only when it is joined with and presented through the rational imagination.

1. Absolute Knowing

There is no question that Hegel wrote the most difficult book to read and comprehend in the history of philosophy, his *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807). It ends with a chapter titled “*Das absolute Wissen*.” It is a short chapter, similar in length to the untitled pages of introductory remarks with which Hegel begins the work, in which he warns the reader that the path his work will take can be regarded as “the way of doubt” (*der Weg des Zweifels*), and even more, as “the way of despair” (*der Weg der Verzweiflung*). Hegel’s work is not difficult because of a technical vocabulary. Hegel intends to have philosophy speak German, as Socrates had philosophy speak Greek, extending the meanings of ordinary words so as to put forth new insights. Hegel’s work is difficult because it is a narrative of self-knowledge, taking us back through human memory, showing the path that consciousness has travelled to gain its experience.

As the reader with fortitude begins from the sense-certainty of natural consciousness and proceeds on Hegel’s path, entering each stage with the hope of superseding the illusion experienced in the stage before it, *absolute Wissen* stands on the distant horizon. The Owl of Minerva stands ready to take flight, as it will, in Hegel’s last published work, on the *Philosophy of Right*. What the reader may not realize is that “absolute knowledge,” in the sense of “absolute knowing” (Hegel uses the verb *wissen* as a noun, *das Wissen*), is present as the goal of every stage of consciousness. Consciousness enters each stage thinking that it now has a grasp of the absolute in the form of that stage, only to discover that that stage falls apart, due to its internal incoherence, just as occurred in the stage before it. Consciousness forgot that the previous stage failed to unite what was in-itself with what was for-itself. Consciousness is seeking to transform the opposition of *Anundfürsichsein* into *Anfürsichsein*.

Now at this next stage it must begin all over again. It is a path of despair, as Hegel says, “aber vergißt es nur ebenso immer wieder und fängt die Bewegung von vorne an“ (par. 109). Consciousness recollects one stage of itself after another, without the ability to unify the two moments of itself as it attempts to know its object. Consciousness has no choice but to go on, because how else may it put aside its propensity to doubt? Its choice, again and again, is to attempt self-determination and achieve freedom of thought or to recede into the dullness of scepticism. The purpose of philosophy is to

find a way to overcome scepticism. Consciousness repeatedly fails to accept its own ignorance as the basis of thought.

Hegel's phenomenology is a tale of melancholy. But Hegel has a sense of humor. In the Preface he tells us that the absolute of Schelling, based on the identity of opposites, is the "night in which all cows are black" (*alle Kühe schwarz sind*). The stages of Hegel's *Weg* are similar to the forms of foolishness of Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff*. Each shows us an aspect of the human. To take ourselves seriously as we pass through the portraits of consciousness of Hegel's *Weg* is not possible. Every stage is a form of human irony. From time to time Hegel reminds us that we (*wir*) are witnessing these stages. We are no longer in them.

But this is also ironic because we have not fully transcended these stages. We find ourselves still attached to them in various ways because we keep to some extent seeing ourselves in them, or in part in them. They are in our memory, to recollect, even if at the beginning of Hegel's *Weg* they were present only in the background. Hegel keeps us reading because we have no other choice if we wish to acquire a grasp of ourselves. There is no better means to acquire self-knowledge. Socrates has left us with Hegel. Hegel has the ability to take us beyond the attachment to thought as reflection to thought as speculation, to the exercise of the rational imagination instead of being absorbed in criticism, in *Kritik*.

Kant, in the "Preface to First Edition" of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, says: "Our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism [*Kritik*], and to criticism everything must submit." Criticism, critical thinking, can never supply consciousness with wisdom—with a knowledge of things divine and human and acquaintance with the causes of each. Criticism can only perpetuate itself, always holding out the possibility that because of it, a perfect state of affairs will appear. Whenever criticism appears to attain a result, the result is sooner or later the subject of further criticism and in need of revision. What is arrived at is never enough. The perfect state is always yet to be achieved. Criticism can only continue itself as a form of thinking. It has no ability to bring forth absolute knowing or even partial knowing.

The alternative to critical thinking is dialectical thinking. What we may call the "critical sentence" is always negative in its form. The subject is opposed in the predicate. A negative judgment is asserted. In the Preface to the *Phenomenology* Hegel explains the speculative sentence (*spekulativer Satz*) as containing a dialectic between subject and predi-

cate. The meaning of the subject is expressed in the predicate. When we move attention from the subject to the predicate we find that the meaning of the predicate depends upon its relation to the subject. When we direct attention back to the subject, the meaning of the subject is redefined. The expression of the increased meaning of the subject leads to a new predicate.

The original version of the sentence is *aufgehoben* in the subsequent version—the meaning is both cancelled and preserved. In the speculative sentence consciousness increases its grasp of its object. Consciousness, through this dialectic, moves closer to a sense of the True as the whole. The subject and predicate are not placed in opposition to each other, as occurs in the critical sentence. Instead, in the speculative sentence the difference between subject and predicate emerges as a harmony. Through this rhythm consciousness progressively engages in self-determination. Consciousness comes to know itself. Its thinking has a rhythm; it is musical.

The aim of consciousness coming to know itself is to attain absolute knowing. Absolute knowing is a state in which consciousness experiences itself as a whole—a state in which consciousness as something in-itself corresponds to consciousness as something for-itself. Consciousness is then *Anundfürsichsein*. At the stage of absolute knowing consciousness has learned how to accept the presence of “and” (*und*) as joining its grasp of its object as there before it with its grasp of its object as part of what it is—its being. The problem each stage of consciousness realizes, on Hegel’s phenomenological ladder, is that there the two senses of its act of knowing cannot be transposed into one in which their opposition is eliminated in a seamless whole. The whole is an encircling of the internal opposition of in-itself and for-itself but not more.

The fundamental, decisive difference between all the stages of consciousness that Hegel describes and that of absolute knowing is that absolute knowing is the complete acceptance of the “and.” It is not possible for consciousness to eliminate the opposition of in-itself and for-itself that defines its being. This acceptance is human wisdom itself. Wisdom is to accept things as they are—the self to accept the nature of itself, to accept human nature. All of what Hegel means by *absolutes Wissen* is stated in the two lines with which he concludes his *Phänomenologie*. He takes these two lines from Schiller’s poem, *Freundschaft* (Friendship).

As they appear in Schiller's poem, these lines are: "Aus dem Kelch des ganzen Seelenreiches/Schäumt ihm—die Unendlichkeit" (From out of the chalice of the whole realm of the Soul/Foams for Him—Infinity). Hegel alters the lines to read: "Aus dem Kelche dieses Geisterreiches/Schäumt ihm seine Unendlichkeit" (Out of the chalice of this realm of spirits/Foams forth to Him His Infinity). Hegel substitutes "dieses Geisterreiches" ("this realm of spirits") for "des ganzen Seelenreiches" ("the whole realm of the soul") in the first line and "seine Unendlichkeit" ("His Infinity") for "die Unendlichkeit" ("Infinity") in the second line.

The infinity of Schiller's poem leaves us with Hegel's "bad infinite" (*Schlecht-Unendliche*) the infinite that is a series that goes on and on without a way to determine an endpoint. By transposing the line to "His" (*seine*) infinity, Hegel suggests the "true infinite" (*wahrhafte Unendliche*), the infinite of an existing whole that systematically and determinately recapitulates itself, as does the course of consciousness, recollected by us as a whole. The *Geisterreich* is the realm of spirit in all its moments and stages, as presented in Hegel's foregoing work. At the end of Schiller's poem the World Master, or God, is left in pathos. The Divine fails to create a companion equal to Himself. In Schiller's version pathos prevails, because God's existence as an infinite being is left in the condition of the bad infinite. In Hegel's version God's existence has a tragic face. God's relation to the forms of His creation is that of a fellow sufferer, along with human consciousness, on its path of despair. Although His being is that of the true infinite, God suffers the quest to make actual and determinate all the moments within His infinite existence. As human beings created in the image of Divine existence, we realize that we cannot resolve the opposition of in-itself and for-itself into our own unity, and absolute knowing is our acceptance of this opposition. The opposition always remains.

In Hegel's version the World Master is left with the re-collection (*Er-Innerung*) of His own creation, as in fact are we, the readers. We are given a final image to recollect as the form of our inner life, our *Innerung*, the path we have travelled. We must recall the forms of *Geist* that are really ourselves—our own infinity. The first language of infinity is the image. The whole work ends in this image, an image of the inability of the Divine to bring its own creation and its own being to a point of rest. We, the readers, like the Divine, are forced back into the forms of our creation, to seek the perfect friendship with them—with ourselves—

that makes their truth the whole.

Hegel's book, like most philosophical books, is a book of prudence. It relates the sense of prudence that the philosopher needs in order to make a way in the world. Now that, with Hegel, we have recollected all the principal forms that human beings have experienced of *Geist*, we have at our disposal a fund of knowledge for anticipating how to confront situations as they repeat themselves in the course of our life. When we encounter a particular situation we can bring it, in our consciousness, under whatever form of spirit is described in Hegel's ladder of stages.

We now possess the power of the Muses. We recognize what at present is and can recognize what has been in regard to it. And we can recognize the course it will take—its future. The ability to engage in such recognition is the key to prudence. We may take our actions accordingly. As the “we” who have comprehended Hegel's phenomenology, we know what is and what was before and what will be as we locate whatever is in question, as one of the stages of consciousness that we can recollect. There is no knowledge more valuable than this. It is the wisdom of absolute knowing.

2. Symbolic Form

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant reaches a point where he asks: “How, then, is the *subsumption* of intuitions under pure concepts, the *application* of a category to appearances, possible?” (B177; A138). He says, further: “Obviously there must be some third thing, which is homogeneous on the one hand with the category, and on the other hand with the appearance, and which thus makes the application of the former to the latter possible” (B177; A138). This third thing must be both intellectual and sensible. Kant says he will call this thing the “transcendental schema” and that he will call the procedure of understanding the schemata, the “schematism” of pure understanding. The schema is “a product of imagination [*Einbildungskraft*]” (B179; A140). The theory of the schema—the schematism—then, is the key to the problem of knowledge. It is the “open sesame” for which Kant’s reader has been waiting.

But then the reader’s hopes are dashed. Kant says: “This schematism of our understanding, in its application to appearances and their mere form, is an art concealed in the depths of the human soul [*ist eine verborgene Kunst in den Tiefen der menschlichen Seele*], whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover, and to have open to our gaze” (A141; B180-81). All of human knowledge depends upon the mind’s ability to connect what is conceived in thought with what is apprehended in sensibility. Kant does not claim it impossible to discover the means or workings of this art, but he cautions that we should not expect to discover it. His caution is firm enough that we might conclude that to attempt to seek out the inner form of this art may be futile.

The first edition of Kant’s *Critique* appeared in 1781 and its second edition in 1787. One hundred and forty years later, Ernst Cassirer, in a lecture at the Warburg Library in Hamburg, showed that it was possible to solve the riddle of the art of the schematism. To do so it was necessary for Cassirer to pass beyond Kant and his own Neo-Kantian beginnings and to look to the essay, “Das Symbol,” by the Hegelian aesthetician Friedrich Theodor Vischer that appeared in 1887, in a volume honoring Eduard Zeller. Later, Cassirer will support his claim that the critique of reason becomes the critique of culture with a phenomenology of knowledge based on Hegel’s conception of phenomenology.

The term *symbolische Form* is unique to Cassirer's philosophy; it is the title of his multivolume, major work—*Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1923-29). According to Dimitry Gawronsky, in his biographical essay on Cassirer included in the Library of Living Philosophers volume, Cassirer said that as he entered a streetcar in Berlin in 1917, the conception of the whole plan of the philosophy of symbolic forms flashed before him. The terms *Symbol* and *Form* are not unique to Cassirer, but his synthesis of them is unique. To use the term "symbolic form" is immediately to call to mind the work of Cassirer. Vischer uses the terms *Symbol* and *symbolisch* in various combinations in his essay but he never states the precise combination of *symbolische Form*. Cassirer intends to expand Vischer's aesthetic conception of the symbol into a sense of the symbol that can encompass each form of the human spirit.

In his Warburg lecture Cassirer gives his most explicit definition of symbolic form. He says: "Under a 'symbolic form' should be understood each energy of spirit [*Energie des Geistes*] through which a spiritual content or meaning is connected with a concrete sensory sign and is internally adapted to this sign." A symbol, then, is at once inseparably "spiritual" (*geistig*) and "sensible" (*sinnlich*). There are three general kinds of symbols—images, words, and numbers. Primary sources of images are myths and the arts, of words are ordinary speech and prose writing, and of numbers are mathematics and scientific formulas and systems of notations. These are manifestations of three functions of consciousness that Cassirer describes in his volume, *Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis* (*Phenomenology of Knowledge*).

The *Ausdrucksfunktion* (expressive function) of consciousness is the source of the symbolic form of mythical thought. All forms of human knowledge originate in mythic thought. This first function of consciousness is followed by *Repräsentation* (representation), engendered by the *Darstellungsfunktion*, which is at the basis of natural language when used as a means to denote and classify the things of the world. The third function is the *Bedeutungsfunktion* or purely significative function that underlies theoretical thought, in which systems of symbols are produced to construct levels of meaning.

In the *Phenomenology of Knowledge* Cassirer offers a perceptual thought experiment of how symbolic form is the basis of the stances that consciousness can take on the object (vol. 3, pt. 2, ch. 5). He asks his reader to consider a *Linienzug* or graph-like drawing. We may first ap-

prehend it as something having purely sensory qualities. We react to its shape, the tension in it, the motion it suggests, and so forth. Then we may shift our attention to see it as a geometric figure showing certain proportions and relations. We may then pass from this mathematical sense of the lines and regard it as a mythical-magical sign that is intended to divide the sacred from the profane sphere. We may pass from this mythical sense to grasping the lines as an aesthetic ornament, appreciating its visual qualities as such.

We can now imagine how this object or any object can stand as a symbol and be taken by consciousness in any direction. In his discussion of “Myth and the Psychology of the Emotions” in the *Myth of the State*, Cassirer remarks that “it is a common characteristic of all symbolic forms that they are applicable to any object whatsoever” (pt. 1, ch. 3). What is before the knowing consciousness as an object is really there. It is not an invention of consciousness. The meaning the object has is what consciousness ascribes to it through its “symbolic act.” How the knowing consciousness forms the object is determined by how it can be understood to fit into the order of human knowledge as a whole.

In interpreting Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms the reader’s attention naturally tends toward determining what Cassirer means by “symbol.” For Cassirer there is nothing in the experience of consciousness that is outside the formative power of the symbol. There is no hyletic stratum that is not also noetic. As Cassirer says in his late work, *An Essay on Man*, the human being is *animal symbolicum*. In so saying Cassirer is pointing out that what it means to be *homo sapiens*, a rational animal, is to grasp all of what is, in terms of the symbol. If we look to the second term of Cassirer’s unique “symbolic form” we are taken back to Plato. Cassirer rightly regards Plato as the founder of Idealism. The true object of philosophical reasoning is *eidōs*. The *eidē* are seen by the mind’s eye as it looks past the features of particular things presented to the mind by the bodily eye, dependent on the senses. The Platonic *eidē* are substances the nature of which can be reached by dialectical thinking.

Plato’s idealism leaves us with the question: How can we engage in dialectical thinking such that we can grasp the *eidē*? Cassirer advances the answer to this question in his early, fundamental work in the philosophy of science—*Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* (1910). We must pass beyond the logic of the substance-concept, which is a

logic of description of the object. The substance-concept places the particular under the universal of a class that contains the particulars of the same type. Thought then advances, in pyramid fashion, to greater and greater inclusive classes. In so doing, the particular becomes less and less determined by the universal. The problem of determining the particular is there at the beginning of the pyramid. At the level of the *infirmæ species* the class-concept shows what the particulars under it have in common, but it has no power to determine how each particular in a class differs in its particularity from any other.

The function-concept is internally dialectical. The particulars are conceived as variables that are ordered in a series by a principle of the series that is not a member of the series: $F(a,b,c, \dots)$. The members of the series have no intrinsic meaning. Their meaning is dependent on the place they occupy in the series into which they can be placed in terms of the law or rule of the series. This law or rule has no intrinsic meaning. Its meaning depends upon how it is realized in the construction of the series. The principle of the series and the variables of the series are of two logical types that differ to each other in kind. The function-concept is held together by an internal dialectic of these two logical types.

As Cassirer says, these two elements of the function-concept are a representation of what Hegel means by his dialectical interpretation of the *Begriff*—the “concrete concept.” The two elements of the function-concept can change places in relation to a system of function-concepts. Thus the principle of the order of the variables in one series can itself be a variable in a series of a different logical type and any variable in the original series can be taken up as a principle to order a series of another logical type. In this manner the function-concept can expand thought in a completely determinate fashion indefinitely. In this expansion thought can achieve what Hegel, in his *Science of Logic*, calls a “true infinity” (*das wahrhafte Unendliche*), as opposed to the infinity characteristic of the expansion of the substance-concept, in which one particular simply succeeds another in an infinite series that is unable to determine itself as a series—what Hegel calls a bad infinity (*die schlechte Unendlichkeit*).

Cassirer wrote two series of books. One expresses his views of the history of philosophy, such as his multivolume study, *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, along with his other seminal studies of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The other is addressed to his systematic philosophy of symbolic forms. He brings these two together in his late

An Essay on Man, which opens with the sentence: “That self-knowledge is the highest aim of philosophical inquiry appears to be generally acknowledged.” The symbolic forms are both forms of knowledge and forms of culture. Knowledge is not something outside of culture; it is the basis of culture. Myth and religion, language, art, history, and science are each ways of thinking and ways of existing. As Plato sees the state that he describes in the *Republic* as the human being writ large, Cassirer sees the forms of culture as the human being writ large. Plato’s picture is ideal. Cassirer’s picture is actual.

The reader may finally ask: What is the role of philosophy in human culture? Is philosophy a symbolic form alongside the other symbolic forms? Cassirer’s answer is stated in a manuscript written in c. 1921-27. Cassirer says: “It is characteristic of philosophical knowledge as the ‘self-knowledge of reason’ that it does not create a principally new symbol form, it does not found in this sense a new creative modality—but it grasps the earlier modalities as that which they are: as characteristic symbolic forms. . . . Philosophy does not want to replace the older forms with another, higher form. It does not want to replace one symbol with another, rather; its task consists in comprehending the basic symbolic character of knowledge itself” (*PSF* 4, Appendix).

Philosophy, for Cassirer, does not accomplish this task by building a final system of knowledge or culture. In his manner of philosophizing, Cassirer agrees with the approach of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment opposes the “spirit of systems” (*esprit de système*) but in so doing it does not give up the “systematic spirit” (*esprit systématique*). Cassirer takes up this sense of systematic spirit in the form of what he calls “systematic overview” (*systematischer Überblick*) or “systematic review” (*systematischer Rückblick*). The purpose of this sense of philosophy, for Cassirer, is to show that human culture as a whole is a process of progressive self-liberation. Philosophy has the role of showing that the various symbolic forms of culture all complement each other. Each symbolic form is inclined to attempt to dominate all of culture. In politics, as Cassirer demonstrates in *The Myth of the State*, this attempt at domination of all of culture involves taking human emotions back to the level of myth. Philosophy acts against this inclination and promotes harmony among the forms. Philosophy enters into the “inner form” of each and yet maintains its own position of seeing the truth of culture as a whole. Philosophy shows us the mentality of peace.

3. Poetic Wisdom

The longest of the five books of Vico's *Principj di Scienza nuova di Giambattista Vico d'intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni* (*Principles of New Science of Giambattista Vico concerning the Common Nature of the Nations*) (1744) has the title "Della Sapienza poetica" ("On Poetic Wisdom"). Vico says: "The first gentile peoples, by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets who spoke in poetic characters. This discovery, which is the master key of this Science, has cost us the persistent research of almost all our literary life" (par. 34).²

Among the axioms on which the new science is founded, Vico says: "Children excel in imitation [*nell'imitare*]; we observe that they generally amuse themselves by imitating whatever they are able to apprehend. This axiom shows that the world in its infancy was composed of poetic nations, for poetry is nothing but imitation. . . . for the arts are nothing but imitations of nature, and in a certain way 'real' poems" (pars. 215-17). Children first use words to reproduce things, not to represent things. This same sense of reproduction is found in the arts. Those who have a poetic sense of the world regard the things of the world not as something other but as an aspect of themselves. The world is not an "it" but a "thou." How children acquire language is exactly the same as how humanity originally acquired language—what Vico calls "poetic characters" or "imaginative universals" (*universali fantastici*).

As human beings acquire and expand poetic wisdom by means of imagination (*fantasia*, the "making imagination"), they make poetic versions of all the forms that are later articulated through reason, once philosophy has developed from poetry. Thus, in the book on "Poetic Wisdom," Vico presents descriptions of poetic metaphysics, logic, morals, economy, and politics. These are followed by the poetic forms of the natural sciences—poetic physics, cosmography, astronomy, chronology, and geography. The fields that study the forms of the civil world and those that study the natural world all begin in poetic forms of thought. Human beings form themselves and the external world first through the

² The paragraph enumeration is common to all English editions and is present in most Italian editions. Of the three English translations, I recommend that of Bergin and Fisch.

power of *fantasia* and then transpose these, over time, into orders of conceptual thought.

Vico's intention is to make a science of the human world to stand alongside the science of the natural world of Newton and Galileo. The laws of nature are discovered by the makers of modern science. The laws themselves are manifestations of the divine making of God. God makes the things of the world, including human beings. Human beings have the power to make their world as an extension of human nature. Because human beings make the human world they can make a knowledge of it as history. History is human nature writ large. Each nation is a version of human nature. Since all nations are the productions of human nature they all have what Vico calls an "ideal eternal history" (*storia ideal eterna*).

Vico does not intend the word "ideal" in a normative sense. He intends it in the sense of a mental image that allows us to comprehend the actual internal development of any nation. Although nations vary in the details of their development they all exhibit a pattern of three ages—an age of gods, an age of heroes, and an age of humans. This is a sequence governed by providence. It is not determined by any power of human decision. Once a *corso* of these three ages comes to its end, providence allows for a *ricorso*, a retrial.

Vico interprets the histories of all nations in terms of *corso e ricorso*. He leaves unsaid what transpires at the end of a *ricorso*. Vico never uses these two terms in the plural—he never speaks of *corsi e ricorsi*. For Vico there is no ideal moment realized in history. In one of his axioms Vico divides each of the three ages into two phases: "Human beings first feel necessity, then look for utility, next attend to comfort, still later amuse themselves with pleasure, thence grow dissolute in luxury, and finally go mad and waste their substance [*finalmente impazzano in istrappazzar le sostanze*]" (par. 241).

Vico may regard the heroic age to be the most fortunate. In terms of this axiom it is a time of comfort and pleasure. The heroic age involves the realization of virtues, upon which society depends, in the form of heroes. In a late oration (1732) Vico takes up the theme of *De mente heroica* (*On the Heroic Mind*), in which he advocates the nobility of pursuing an education that would entail a sense of the sublime, and of learning that seeks a grasp of the whole of human thought. When we find ourselves in the third age, in which the pursuit of luxury that will

ultimately end in madness dominates, we can approach the heroic, at best, only through the life of the mind.

To formulate his new science of the civil world Vico had to overcome the approach of the seventeenth-century natural-law theorists, in a manner analogous to the fact that Newton and Galileo had to overcome the Aristotelian-Scholastic form of natural philosophy, and Bacon, in his *Novum Organum*, had to reconceive the logic of induction in order to support empirical observation—his method of “think and see” (*cogitare videre*).

Vico takes much from Hobbes, although he cites Hobbes only four times in the *Scienza nuova*, and only in passing. Vico held in high regard Hugo Grotius’s *De Iure Belli ac Pacis* (*On the Law of War and Peace*). The great flaw in Grotius’s work was his inadequate grasp of the origin of civil society. This was also a flaw in other natural-law theories, such as those of Selden and Pufendorf. Grotius says: “Thus many, finding themselves weak when taken singly and apart, did for fear of being oppressed by those that were stronger, unite together to establish, and with their joint Forces to defend Courts of Judicature, to the End they might be an Overmatch for those whom singly they were unable to deal with.”

Grotius’s statement is similar to Hobbes’s claim that, in the beginning, people found themselves in a state of nature, “a time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man.” The evidence for this hypothesis is the fact that people lock their doors and chests to protect themselves and their property from others. Hobbes admits that there may never have been such a time: “I believe it was never generally so, over all the world.” But Hobbes is at a loss to provide a full account of the origin of society. Grotius thinks of the origin of society as a matter of contract law, an agreement that may be made in the interest of the stronger, but an agreement undertaken by the stronger and the weaker, nonetheless.

Vico, in accord with his axiom that: “Doctrines must take their beginning from that of the matters of which they treat” (par. 314), saw that a doctrine of natural law required a doctrine of the origin of society. To say what something is, is to say what its origin truly is, and how it develops from this origin. The place to begin this account is the fifth book of Lucretius’s poem, *De rerum natura*. The Academy of the *Investiganti* in Naples had for its device a setting dog, with a motto from Lucretius: *Vestigia lustrat*, perhaps a reference to the comment in the first book of his poem regarding how the

reader may recognize the meaning and truth of his doctrines: “For as hounds very often find by their scent the leaf-hidden resting-place of the mountain-ranging quarry, when once they have hit upon certain traces of its path, so will you be able for your self to see one thing after another in such matters as these, and to penetrate all unseen hiding-places, and draw forth the truth from them” (1. 404-09).

Vico’s early poem, of 155 lines, “Affetti di un disperato” (1692), expresses Lucretian moods. In reading Grotius, Pufendorf, and Hobbes, Vico would have thought back to his memory of reading the fifth book of Lucretius. In his autobiography Vico relates how, in developing his philosophical position, he studied Lucretius and the views of Epicurus, which are the basis of Lucretius’s poem, but that he found that these views could not yield a moral philosophy suited to the Christian religion. Vico could not accept the Epicurean metaphysics of chance as at the basis of the cosmos. But the motto of the *Investiganti* is close to Vico’s claim and advice to the reader regarding the proof of his science: “Indeed, we make bold to affirm that he who meditates this Science narates to himself this ideal eternal history in so far as he makes it for himself by that proof ‘it had, has, and will have to be’” (par. 349).

To establish the origin of the gentile nations Vico brings the account in Genesis of the universal flood together with the description of the emergence of human life from the acquisition of fire, and the founding of agriculture and cities described in Lucretius’s *De rerum natura*. Furthermore, he joins this account of the origin of the nations with the conception of *Jus gentium*—the law of nations, which all peoples observe—of the *Digest of Justinian*.

The Lord said to Noah: “For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground. And Noah did all that the Lord had commanded him” (7.4). The gentile nations arise from the offspring of two of the three sons of Noah—Ham and Japeth. The offspring of the two sons become giants and wander the great forest of the earth for two hundred years, until the atmosphere dries out sufficiently to allow thunder and lightning to emit from the sky. A few of the giants who are more proto-human than the others respond to the thunderous sky as the presence of Jove. From this experience they develop themselves in terms of the three principles of humanity—religion, marriage, and burial. They make great clearings in the forest and found families,

later cities, and later nations—the great city of the human race. The offspring of Noah’s third son, Shem, do not become giants and, after one hundred years, they establish the nation of the ancient Hebrews. They remain in isolation, retain the religion of Noah, preserve themselves in normal stature, and cultivate memory, the basis of education.

Lucretius says that human beings acquired fire, from either lightning strikes or flames emitted from natural friction of the branches of trees rubbing together. They were shown new ways by “those among them who were pre-eminent in genius [*ingenium*] and strong in mind. Kings began to found cities . . . and they divided cattle and lands and gave them to each according to beauty and strength and genius. . . . Afterwards wealth was introduced and gold was discovered” (5.1091–1116). Because of the introduction of wealth, ambition was stimulated and kings were slain. Social order that had existed under kings came apart. “So things came to the uttermost dregs of confusion, when each man for himself sought dominion and exaltation.” This state of affairs required the creation of laws. “For mankind, tired of living in violence, was fainting from its feuds, and so they were readier of their own will to submit to statutes and strict rules of law” (5.1136–1150). Lucretius thus provides an account of how the rule of law enters social life—what is stated only abstractly by the seventeenth-century natural-law theorists. Vico, like Lucretius, understands society as a process of development.

The *Digest* says: “*Jus gentium* is common only to human beings among themselves” (1.1.4). Vico’s purpose in his new science is to show the “common nature of the nations.” Common to all nations is that they develop at their own rate, independently, in terms of *storia ideal eterna* (ideal eternal history). Vico says: “What we are demonstrating in this work: that the natural law of the gentes [*il diritto natural delle genti*] was by divine providence ordained separately for each people, and only when they became acquainted did they recognize it as common to all” (par. 550). *Jus gentium* is a natural law, but it is not natural law in the sense of a rational ideal to which all law is to approximate or be assessed. *Jus gentium* is actual, natural law—law which is common to all nations and which can be so demonstrated. Only *jus civile*, or positive law, law that is the product of legislative authority, differs from one nation to another. Vico’s science of history is the demonstration of the existence of *jus gentium*. The truth of *jus gentium* is verified by the fact that each nation begins from and develops from poetic wisdom. Each

nation, as Vico says, has its Jove. As physical law is the key to comprehending the natural world, so human law is the key to comprehending the civil world. Divine law is providence.

4.

A Musical Joke

Joyce takes the title of his masterpiece, *Finnegans Wake*, from the Irish ballad, “Finnegan’s Wake.” The ballad describes the scene of a wake for Tim Finnegan, a hod-carrier known to have a love of whiskey, to have “a sort of tiptlin’ way,” who fell from a ladder and was presumed dead.

They rolled him up in a nice clean sheet,
And laid him out upon the bed,
With a gallon of whiskey at his feet,
And a barrel of porter at his head.

At the lunch at the wake “a row and a ruction soon began.” In the row a “noggin of whiskey” is thrown.

The liquor scattered over Tim;
Bedad he revives, see how he rises,
And Timothy rising from the bed,
Says, ‘whril your liquor round like blazes,
Thanam o’n dhoul, do ye think I’m dead?’

The phrase that begins the last line means: “Your soul from the devil.” Tim Finnegan is revived by whiskey, the “water of life.” He has only been unconscious. The joke is on us, we who thought him dead.

Joyce takes the reader of *Finnegans Wake* through a more than 600-page expansion of a forty-four line ballad. Joyce told the Swiss critic, Jacques Mercanton, that he made *Ulysses* “out of next to nothing,” and that the installments of *Work in Progress* that would become *Finnegans Wake* he was “making out of nothing. But there are thunderbolts in it.” All of humanity is in every moment of humanity. All of humanity is in Tim Finnegan and the musical joke of his wake. A visitor to Joyce, Terence White Gervais, asked Joyce if his book should be understood as a blending of literature and music. Joyce replied, “No, it’s pure music.” Gervais asked further if there were levels of meaning to be explored in it? Joyce replied, “No, no, it’s meant to make you laugh.” Joyce told Mercanton: “I am only an Irish clown, a great joker at the universe.” Joyce’s comments echo the lines in the ballad: “Wasn’t it the truth I told you,/Lots of fun at Finnegan’s Wake.” The truth is properly told in the joke. Joyce, to a drinking companion, revised “*In vino veri-*

tas” to “*In risu veritas.*”

A song, a ballad, is never sung only once. It is sung again and again. Joyce, fluent in Italian, intends the reader to grasp the two parts of “Finnegan”—*fine*, “end” and *ancora*, “again” or “once more.” “Hohohoho, Mister Finn, you’re going to be Mister Finnagain!” (005.9-10). The title of the ballad has Finnegan’s (possessive); Joyce’s title does not—Finnegans (plural). We are all “Finnegans” because in *Finnegans Wake*, “Here Comes Everybody. An imposing everybody he always indeed looked, constantly the same as and equal to himself and magnificently well worthy of any and all such universalisation” (032.19-21). Joyce can ask for “Fairplay for Finnians! I will have my humours” (521.33-34). We Finnegans should not take ourselves too seriously. It’s our sense of humor that will let us keep our souls from the devil—that will make us human.

How will Joyce make this joke up out of nothing? It will need to be a “*funferal*, engraved and retouched and edgewiped and pudden-padded.” It will need to be “sentenced to be nuzzled over a full trillion times for ever and a night till his noodle sink or swim by that ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia” (120.10-14). This reader can be “calling unnecessary attention to errors, omissions, repetitions and misalignments: that (probably local or personal) variant *maggers* for the more generally accepted *majesty* which is but a trifle and yet may quietly amuse” (120.15-18). A wake is not a funeral. It is a fun for all. Finnegan awakes at his wake. We are all like Finnegan because once we are awake at our birth we are at our life-long wake, until our death and funeral. “Hahahaha, Mister Funn, you’re going to be fined again!” (005.12-13). During our life we will always experience “The seim anew” (215.23) and “vicereversing” (227.19).

We might expect that Joyce would have recommended the “Ballad of Tim Finnegan” whenever he was asked for advice on what to consult in order to comprehend the parts of *Finnegans Wake* that he was publishing. But time and again Joyce recommended that one should read Vico’s *Scienza nuova*, which at that time did not exist in English translation. It did exist in Michelet’s French translation, to which Joyce referred anyone who did not read Italian. Joyce thought well of Michelet, and the name Michelet appears in *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce told Padraic Colum, who did not know Italian, that he might read Michelet’s translation. He called Colum’s attention to a passage in Michelet’s introduction

that in Vico's work there is "une grandeur imposante et une sombre poésie qui fait penser à celle de Dante." However, the only way to comprehend well Vico's presence in Joyce's work, I think, is to know Italian. How does Vico, the eighteenth-century Neapolitan professor of Latin eloquence, enter into Joyce's great joke?

The reader who knows Vico's life and thought finds Vico everywhere in the work. Everybody is everywhere in Joyce's work, but Vico is there more than anybody else, often with Dante nearby. Both Vico and Finnegan fall from a ladder. On the first page of his autobiography, Vico describes his fall headfirst (*col capo in giù*) from a ladder, at age seven. He remains unconscious (*senza moto e privo di senso*) for a good five hours. He is expected, by the surgeon, either to die or to grow up stolid (*stolido*). Because of the grace of God (*la Dio mercè*) Vico awoke. As a result of the fall he took on the temperament characteristic of those who engage in profound thought and ingenuity (*l'ingegno*).

Giambattista Vico's temperament is melancholic. He is a child of Saturn as well as a child baptized with the name of John the Baptist. Vico's fall was providential. It is the first of various falls of various kinds that Vico undergoes in his career, in accord with Proverbs 24:16: "For a righteous man falls seven times and rises again; but the wicked are overthrown by calamity." Vico's career was an individual version of his "ideal eternal history," governed by providence.

Vico appears in his Latin name, *vicus*, in the half-sentence that begins *Finnegans Wake*. In Italian, a *vico* has the meaning of a *villaggio* (village) or a *borgo* (group of houses). In the dialect of Southern Italy (*l'Italia meridionale*) *vico* becomes *vicolo*, meaning a *via urbana di dimensioni modeste* (an alley or lane, not a main thoroughfare). The Latin root of *vicus* can denote a row of houses, a quarter of a city, as well as a street or a village. *Vicus* is cognate of Greek, *oikos* (a house, abode, dwelling), see its use when Odysseus returns home (*Odyssey*, 24.358). Cicero in *Pro Milone* says: "nullum in urbe vicum, nullum angiportum esse dicentibus in quo Miloni conducta non esset domus" (64). The English word "wick" comes from *vicus*. Vico is Earwicker. Through Vico's ear we hear the thunderword of Jove that begins the speech of the gentile nations. Vico is both place and time, a village and a road. "The Vico road goes round and round to meet where terms begin." (452.21-22).

Joyce is "Shem the Penman" (125.23). Joyce's given name, James, is Shem in Irish. As the penman he is the maker of the great joke that is

Finnegans Wake. The joke brings forth letter from the litter of the dirt-dump of history. Litter becomes letter becomes literature through the pun. “When men want to write letters” they are “pen men, pun men” and are “fun men, hen men” (278.18-22). The pun man is like the hen that pecks up the letter from the dump near the beginning of the book. Joyce can make his joke through his puns, but he needs someone to deliver it. Otherwise it remains his joke and not also ours. Joyce the penman needs Vico the postman. Vico is Shem’s opposite, “Shaun the Post” (206.11). Vico’s given name of Giovanni is John in English and Shaun in Irish.

Joyce pens the complete physics of the human world. He needs Vico’s metaphysics in order to deliver the physics to the reader. It is necessary “to twist the penman’s tale posterwise” (483.02-3). The pen men are not to be trusted because their aim is “Fin for fun!” (297.04) and “patpen fun for all” (301.13). Prudence would have us “Shun the Punman!” (93.13). But Vico is the postman. He is “Old Vico Round-point” (260.15). He is “Johnny Post” (278.13). He makes his rounds on the road of history that “moves in vicious cycles yet renews the same” (134.16). Joyce is attracted to Vico because Vico comprehends that all ends are beginnings and all beginnings come to an end. All is a joke to be told again and again, like a song is to be sung again and again. All is the “Storiella as she is syung” (267.07-8).

The pen men, like the Muses, can sing both true and false songs, but can sing true ones when they will. “This the way to the museyroom. Mind your hats goan in! . . . This way the museyroom. Mind your boots goan out” (008.09-10.22-23). Vico says: “The decisive sort of proof in our Science is therefore this: that, since these matters have been established by divine providence, the course of the things of the nations had to be, must now be, and will have to be [*dovette, deve, dovrà*] such as our Science demonstrates” (par. 348). The proof of Vico’s science, his metaphysics of history, depends upon the art of the Muses.

The Muses tell of what was, is, and is to come. Vico makes this not a contingent sequence but a necessary sequence. For the pen men, the museyroom (the term “museum” means the place of the Muses, who represent the arts of humanity) can be visited in the reverse—hats to boots. But for the postman there is one direction. From the past we become the present and from the present we become the future. Even though the future becomes the past it is a repetition, a *corso* and *ricorso*. The Muses are the origin of music. Music orders time and teaches pro-

portion. The postman's presence keeps an order to the penman's tale.

Finnegans Wake is "the book of Doublends Jined" (020.15-16)—joined to "the lingerous longerous book of the dark" (251.24). The book takes us into the night from which we are trying to awake. We are "Beside the rivering waters of, hitherandthithering waters of Night!" (216.04-5). But—"Tell me of John or Shaun?" (216.01). John Vico, the reliable postman, points the way toward the light. He says: "But in the night of thick darkness [*densa notte di tenebre*] enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by human beings, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind" (par. 331).

The reason Joyce adds to his comment—that he was making his work out of nothing, but that it contains thunderbolts—reminds the reader who knows Vico's *Scienza nuova* that language, made by the proto-humans that found the gentile nations, also is made out of nothing. When the world dries out after the universal flood these giants experience thunder for the first time. When they cry out, in terror (*spavento*) of this noise in the sky, they imitate it. Vico says: "These interjections of Jove should give birth to one produced by the human voice: *pa!*; and that this should then be doubled: *pape!*" (par. 448). Through this act of imitation they form the first word—"Jove." Once one thing can be named, everything can be named.

Joyce is recreating language. Vico makes his science out of nothing. This fact explains his sudden comment: "So, for the purposes of this inquiry, we must reckon as if there were no books in the world [*come se non vi fussero libri nel mondo*]" (par. 330). Like Joyce, Vico draws into his work citations to the widest number of books and expressions imaginable, but in none of these works can the reader find what is in Vico's science or Joyce's wake. Joyce is a Dubliner. With the luck of the Irish, chance furnishes him what he needs. Vico is a Napoletano. *L'arte di arrangiarsi*—the art of improvisation, of making something out of nothing—furnishes him, as it does Joyce, with what he needs. Their readers discover thoughts they otherwise would never think.

What does Joyce mean by saying that *Finnegans Wake* is pure music? He means that the text is best read aloud. It contains the sounds of human speech and by speaking its lines we can bring forth this natural music. But I think Joyce means more than this. To read the work we

must be “earsighted” (143.09). Even more, Joyce means that each word in the work is precisely where it should be. We can no more steal a line of *Finnegans Wake* than we can steal a line of Shakespeare. The reader coming to Joyce’s language may have the reaction that viewers have had on first encountering abstract art: that anyone can do this. In fact, Joyce received the response that this is not literature. A musical composition, when finished, cannot be changed. In a poem each word functions completely as part of the poem as a whole. A musical composition can be and is interpreted by a conductor or soloist. But the proper interpretation of a musical composition or a poem only brings our feelings and thought further into it.

With the disappearance of classroom instruction in grammar, spelling, pronunciation, as well as diction, and the elimination of the teaching of literature and world history, there may soon be no one left to read Joyce’s writings. Anyone reading *Finnegans Wake*, as well as *Ulysses*, should know that it may be among the last times these works will be read. The ability to grasp the tropes of metaphor and irony and the sense of humor needed to move through Joyce’s use of language may no longer exist. Moreover, the solitude and patience that support the art of reading may no longer be part of the experience of individuals. Also missing may be education in how to extract ideas from particular expressions and to turn them into subjects for contemplation.

Those who have the ability to read *Finnegans Wake* “with the loot of learning?” (108.07) will have their sense of Night changed, along with their sense of speech and their sense of humor. They will find themselves “circling the square” (186.12), “cursed and recursed” (029.09), “in lashons of languages” (029.32), and “vicereversing” (227.19) in “Acomedy of letters!” (425.24). But despite the above forebodings, “Let us auspice it” (112.18), because “Putting truth and untruth together a shot made be made at what this hybrid actually was like to look at.” (169.08-10).

Epilogue

To do philosophy requires an act of self-determination. It is an act that provides the self with a freedom of thought that only the rational imagination can achieve. Once this act is achieved we find ourselves with Dante and Virgil as they encounter the Virtuous Pagans at the beginning of their journey of the *Divina commedia*. We are greeted by a “monstrous clap of thunder.” Then we encounter four figures: “It is Homer, singing master of the earth. Next after him is Horace, the satirist, Ovid is third, and Lucan is the fourth.” They then include Dante and Virgil in their number. They are escorted to “a great Citadel.” It is there to represent philosophy as the ancient embodiment of reason. Dante then sees, on high, Aristotle, “the master of those who know.” Then appear “Socrates and Plato at his side before all others there.” Then, “Democritus, who ascribes the world to chance, Diogenes, and with him there Thales, Anaxagoras, Zeno, Heraclitus, Empedocles.” These were metaphysicians, followed by, among others, “Linus [likely Livy], Seneca the moralist,” who tell us of human conduct in terms of history and the ethics of Stoicism.

Leaving Dante’s circle of Limbo we can find ourselves at our desk, with Goethe’s Faust: “I have, alas, studied philosophy, jurisprudence and medicine too, And worst of all, theology with keen endeavor, through and through—And here I am for all my love, the wretched fool I was before.” But then we might recall Lavatch, in Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well*, in which the old lord Lafeu, who asks Lavatch (who has just said, of himself: “I have not much skill in grace”): “Whether dost thou profess thyself, a knave or a fool?” And Lavatch replies: “A fool Sir, at a woman’s service, and a knave at a man’s.” Philosophers are sceptical of their own knowledge, and the public sees them as fools or as pursuing ideas that are of questionable value to society.

Given this uncertain position, philosophers may look to the ancient figure of prudence, Odysseus, the figure of “twists and turns driven time and again off course,” but who arrives at Ithaca, initially in disguise. The practice of prudence is accomplished by the logic of the mask. The philosopher, like Odysseus, is wise to appear in a mask—to appear harmless, as Pythagoras does, when asked by Leon, the tyrant of Phlius, if he is wise. Pythagoras replies that he does not possess wisdom (*sophia*) and is only a “lover of wisdom,” a *philosophos*. Pythagoras’s prudent answer makes philosophy possible within the confines of soci-

ety. Philosophy is not a form of politics, nor is it poetics; it is contemplation, and an acceptance of contemplation is always difficult with society because it is the one human act that is the most difficult to control. Contemplation lifts the self out of the norm of ordinary conduct.

Polydore Vergil, in his work *On Discovery*, writes of the origin of philosophy. Taking his view from Cicero's *On the Orator*, he says that philosophy can be divided into three parts. They are: "The obscurity of nature, the subtlety of discourse and then life and morals; the first the Greeks call physics, the second dialectic and the third ethics" (1.16.4). Philosophy is concerned with three things—the world of nature, language and logic, and human nature. Philosophy, then, is concerned with what is, with being, and with human being, and with how these can be put into words in a way that is agreeable to reason. Logic is an extension of grammar. Without grammar, language, its use in discourse, is a stream of sounds, impressions, and feelings. Without grammar supported by logic we are unable to speak or think in terms of ideas. Without the ability to present ideas in words we are unable to think—to connect thoughts to perceptions. Without the ability to use words, we live in the world without theoretical comprehension, common sense, or prudence.

We can turn to Leonardo Bruni, to his letter to Lady Battista Maltesta of Montefeltro on his views of the study of literature. By literature Bruni means the world of letters and learning. By learning Bruni says he means "a legitimate and liberal kind which joins literary skill with factual knowledge, a learning Lactantius possessed and Augustine, and Jerome. . . . The person aiming at the kind of excellence to which I am calling you needs first, I think, to acquire no slander or common, but a wide and exact, even *recherché* familiarity with literature. . . . Study reveals and explains to us not only the words and syllables, but also the tropes and figures of speech in all their beauty and polish" (2-5). Without Socrates alive in the agora, we have before us the ongoing conversation recorded in the world of letters. As is well known, all education is self-education, and self-education is self-determination. Self-determination allows us access to the life of the mind.

We might do well to keep before the *Tablet of Cebes*, by an anonymous author of the first century A.D., held in high regard by the sixteenth and seventeenth-century humanists. The allegorical tablet depicts a series of ascending circles. These circles represent stages of human life. As the figures pass from one circle to the next above it they

must choose between virtue and vice and apprehend the difference between ignorance and error. Their ascent leads toward true education. Most people are drawn off by attachment to false education. Only a few are shown on the *Tablet* to arrive at true education and to obtain the ultimate, inner circle of happiness. They become the few among the many.

Other Writings

Hegel

Donald Phillip Verene. *Hegel's Recollection: A Study of Images in the "Phenomenology of Spirit."* SUNY Series in Hegelian Studies. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985.

Cassirer

Donald Phillip Verene. *The Origins of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Kant, Hegel, and Cassirer.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011.

Vico

Donald Phillip Verene. *Vico's "New Science": A Philosophical Commentary.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015.

Joyce

Donald Phillip Verene. *James Joyce and the Philosophers at "Finnegans Wake."* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016.

General

Donald Phillip Verene. *The Rhetorical Sense of Philosophy.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021.

II. BOOK REVIEWS

Donald Phillip Verene, *The Philosophic Spirit: Its Meaning and Presence*. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2023, 146 pp. €29.90. ISBN: 9783838217819

Evangelos Kalfopoulos
(Sofia University & University of Coimbra)

Donald Phillip Verene's latest book is a contribution to the meaning of philosophy, a contribution that is highly valuable, extremely timely and useful. Not only because the prevailing spirit of our time requires a kind of a philosophical resistance, but also because it requires the specific kind of philosophical resistance that Verene is offering. This gets clearly articulated throughout the book but particularly towards the end when Verene proposes that we follow the method of Giambattista Vico to read philosophy, finding four authors who will "serve as master *topoi* from which to think our own thoughts."¹ What this method is gets hidden in the Aristotelian understanding of *topoi*, which could be roughly translated as "examples," and provided the means used by the humanist philosophers of the Italian Renaissance (of whom Vico is the intellectual descendant) to oppose the metaphysical and essentialist approach of scholastic philosophy, prioritizing the teaching of rhetoric over metaphysics and dialectics.² This humanist tradition has great value in an era characterized by post-modern continental critical posthumanism or a technocratic posthumanism declaring the advent of cyborgs and Artificial Intelligence, and this alarming situation gives the book special urgency.

The book is divided into four parts: the first three comprising a discussion of four authors and the last one focusing on eight modern au-

¹ Donald Phillip Verene, *The Philosophic Spirit: Its Meaning and Presence* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag 2023), 135.

² See Panagiotis Kondylis, *The Modern-era Critique of Metaphysics* [in Greek] (Heraklion & Athens: PEK, 2012), especially 107–32.

thors. The number of authors is a direct reference to Vico. The overarching framework of Verene's exposition is stated in the introduction in the famous Delphic injunction to "know thyself." As Verene notes, this guiding principle of philosophy gets articulated within two separate philosophical tendencies: "speculative philosophy and skeptical philosophy retain self-knowledge at the center of their thought. The memory of the Delphic precept becomes the hallmark of the philosophic spirit."³ Now that we have a clear understanding of what Verene takes as the philosophic spirit, we can turn to the different eras that he examines.

The first section is entitled "Beginnings" and concentrates on the figures of Hesiod, Thales of Miletus, Pythagoras and the Agrigentian philosopher-poet Empedocles. Hesiod is best known as the poet of the *Theogony* and the didactic *Works and Days*. As a poet, he is credited with invoking the Muses, the protectors of the arts and providers of divine inspiration, daughters of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. It is memory that is of philosophical interest to Verene⁴ who notes that "Without memory there is no possibility of self-knowledge because there is no self without memory and without memory there is no knowledge."⁵ Thales is invoked not only as the first of the pre-Socratics, but also as the possible author of the "know thyself" principle, because his life points to the fact that the philosophic spirit pertains to this world but also beyond it. Pythagoras was the first to coin the word "philosopher," taken to mean the lover of wisdom, and with this property he distinguishes between philosophers and those who exercise power, giving much-needed freedom of expression to the former. Empedocles, known for his descent into the Etna volcano and his subsequent apotheosis, provides us with the idea of cycles of creation and destruction and serves as another paradigm of the place of the philosopher between the earthly and the divine worlds, as a lover of wisdom.

In the section on the ancients, Verene begins with Socrates and his elenctic method. Socrates, according to Verene, redefines the meaning of philosopher, as not just a spectator of the world but an actor in it, while also providing a method to reach knowledge of ourselves via dialectics, in the sense of speaking with others, in which we come to understand our

³ Verene, *The Philosophic Spirit*, 24.

⁴ See Donald Phillip Verene, *Hegel's Recollection* (New York: SUNY, 1985).

⁵ Verene, *The Philosophic Spirit*, 30.

limitations and ignorance. Plato is the second ancient on whom Verene focuses, specifically his discussion on the quarrel between the philosophers and the poets, expelling the latter from his ideal city in the *Republic*. The poets are the servants of mimesis, but they cannot determine what is worthy of imitation. Verene notes that the quarrel involves two kinds of seeing, one being the bodily vision of the poets and the other the vision of the mind that contemplates the ideal forms, which alone determine what is worthy of imitation. The philosopher introduces questioning, and thus skepticism, into thought and strives to surpass it. Verene concludes: “the ancient quarrel now is resolved. It bequeaths to us who come after it the dialectic between the image and the idea, between the metaphor as supplying the beginning points of thought and the question as supplying the continuance of thought.”⁶

When he turns to Aristotle, Verene concentrates on his ethical philosophy, which he correctly describes as not a science but an art, before turning to his description of the contemplative life, full of the philosophic spirit and alone capable of providing real happiness. He concludes this section with a discussion of Lucretius’s poem *De rerum Natura*. The Epicurean tenet upheld in the poem and stressed by Verene is that “All is mortal, including the human soul. Knowing this fact about ourselves, we can accept our own mortality, because we cannot alter it. It is the constant condition of life. Once we accept this condition, we may seek to enjoy our existence as humans as much as we can, while we can.” How different is this Epicurean materialism from the unbounded and thus counterfeit scientific version of our age!

The next section is devoted to four Christian thinkers. The first is the late antique philosopher Boethius, who tried to combine Christian faith with reason, an effort depicted in the choice of verse and prose he includes in his work *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Although Boethius is traditionally credited as the first of the scholastic theologians, Verene argues, showing his reliance on skeptical and speculative philosophy, that Boethius’s spirit is one of Christian humanism. The speculative strand is further highlighted by the presentation of St. Anselm and his famous ontological proof of the existence of God. Verene states that the gist of the argument is that “in both logical and rhetorical terms, [it]

⁶ Ibid., 55.

shows what it means, in metaphysics, to have thought think itself. God's existence is pure thought...The rational is the real."⁷ This last phrase sounds familiarly Hegelian, and it is Hegel whom Verene summons to conclude that, with Anselm's proof, we approach the true infinite. The section then seeks the balance in two skeptical figures, Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno. Cusanus is an important Renaissance humanist, who invigorated Socratic ignorance as "learned ignorance." Verene quotes Cusanus as advancing the idea of a limit to human knowledge: "We can never possess what anything is in its own being, what it is in and of itself (quiddity)."⁸ With Bruno, we are reminded that sometimes the philosophic spirit needs to depart from the multitude but also confront what it erroneously takes to be common sense.

The last section, entitled "Moderns" is also the longest in the book, treating eight figures instead of four. The first chapter is concerned with Descartes and his philosophical Archimedean point, that of the self of the "ego cogito." Verene treats the Cartesian subject as a version of the "know thyself" principle and notes that "Socrates brings philosophy down from the heavens and into cities and homes. Descartes brings philosophy out of its role in medieval thought as the agent of theology and provides philosophy with its own place to stand."⁹ As theology moves into the background, the importance of politics and the state come forward and it is to the latter that Verene moves next, examining the figure of Thomas Hobbes and his *Leviathan*. In Hobbes's conception, the state is a modern Leviathan and the individual subject needs a guide to live in the modern state. As Verene says, Hobbes shows that inequality can never be overcome in human societies and that politics differs from ethics.

One famous topic of Verene's scholarship – making him a world-wide authority on the subject – is Giambattista Vico. Vico is concerned with providing a science of human affairs and "realized that the *idea of law* that is at the basis of the new science of nature is also at the basis of a new science of the world of nations derived from the *ius gentium*, the law common to all peoples, described in the Roman *Digest of Justinian* (1.1.4)."¹⁰ The history of nations is characterized by cycles of rise and

⁷ Ibid., 75.

⁸ Ibid., 78.

⁹ Ibid., 88.

¹⁰ Ibid., 96.

fall and is directed by divine providence. Vico's genius appears when he says that, because we are the makers of civil society and its history, we can have knowledge of it as a sort of self-knowledge. Next, Verene turns to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the solution he gave to the question of human progress in the Age of Enlightenment. Rousseau makes a distinction between true and false philosophy, with Verene commenting that "False philosophy is that which proceeds to explain and to justify critically the success of the sciences and arts, showing how much we have gained from them. True philosophy is an activity of the soul's discourse with itself in the attempt to discover what is to be human. Rousseau's philosophy is neo-Socratic."¹¹

With the next pair of authors, Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Verene argues that we are in the midst of the modern version of speculative philosophy. Verene walks us concisely and successfully through Kant's efforts to systematically combine reason with experience, focusing on the way that schematism connects intuitions and concepts in the faculty of imagination. Furthermore, he quotes a passage from Kant that emphasizes the notion of the limits that surround our understanding, which is taken to be like "an island, enclosed by nature itself within unalterable limits,"¹² and is surrounded by an ocean of illusions. The danger of speculative thought is the transgression of these natural limits. This constant risk of movement inherent in speculative thinking is captured by Hegel's dialectics and specifically the "speculative sentence." The internal movement between subject and predicate in the speculative sentence always results in a sublation, an "*aufhebung*," which rests upon the recollection of the previous forms of the subject. It forms a gallery of past, present and future images of the self, which is simultaneously a gallery of ironies. Verene says "The irony is that we cannot stabilize consciousness to form a whole. It keeps separating itself into various stages, one stage leading to another. The self looks at itself one way, and then it finds yet another way to look at itself."¹³

Verene's most recent modern pair is that of Ernst Cassirer and Alfred North Whitehead. Cassirer is best known for his philosophy of symbolic forms and the importance he attributes to the symbol. Accord-

¹¹ Ibid., 104.

¹² Ibid., 111.

¹³ Ibid., 117.

ing to him, man is an *animal symbolicum* and not a rational animal. Philosophy does not create its own symbols – as myth, religion, art, history, science do – but rather “grasps the previous modalities as that which they are, as characteristic symbolic forms.”¹⁴ Because of this characteristic, the duty of the philosophic spirit is to provide harmony between the competing symbolic forms within a human culture. Whitehead is widely known as the collaborator of Bertrand Russell and for saying that all of European philosophy is simply a series of footnotes to Plato. Through a brief but thorough exposition of Whitehead’s concepts of process, prehension and eternal objects, that latter quote is substantiated.

Verene’s use of past philosophers, along with his drifting back and forth between skeptical and speculative philosophy, provides a concise and brilliant exposition of the philosophic spirit. The philosophic spirit is presented by Verene as a much-needed new humanism that needs to be articulated by philosophy, a humanism that reintroduces the idea of limit because it is only ever within limits that we can try to achieve the self-knowledge that is pursued by philosophy. For this reason, the book not only surveys the philosophical topoi of the past, but itself serves as an example of a new philosophy of limit-seeking humanism.

¹⁴ Ibid., 122.

Douglas Giles, *What Left and Right Mean: Clarifying the Political Spectrum*. Boston: Game Over Books, 2022. 39 pp., \$5.49, ISBN: 978-1-7358808-2-2

Vincenzo Filetti
(Sofia University)

Douglas Giles has produced a very clear text, written in a language free of jargon and, above all, able to get straight to the point. The schematic and essential division allows one to address issues which, as the author claims, have often generated confusion and prejudices that are not confirmed by the facts. At the beginning of the introduction, Giles specifies his intention by writing: “In this book, I want to clarify the meaning of the terms ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ and the left–right political spectrum in a way that helps us better understand political and social conflicts.”¹

In the first chapter “What ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ Mean” Mean, after explaining the etymology of the word “politics” with reference to the ancient Greek polis, the author explains the historical origin of the concepts of right and left by speaking of the French Revolution. The historical clarification is illustrative. In 1789, in the French National Assembly, supporters of the king chose to sit to the right of the assembly president, and opponents of the king sat opposite them on his left. Within this basic framework there should be no doubt about the meaning of “conservative or reactionary” and “revolutionary or progressive.” Yet this historical clarification risks oversimplifying, even trivializing the concepts of right and left. The correct interpretive key to the concepts of left and right is not any underlying ideology but, according to the author, a completely different concept: the structure of power.

To understand Giles’ approach, two conundrums associated with the traditionally defined left–right divide need to be mentioned. The proclamations of Stalin and Hitler, read through the lens of pure ideology, leave no doubt about what left and right are. However, if, as the author suggests,

¹ Douglas Giles, *What Left and Right Mean: Clarifying the Political Spectrum* (Boston: Game Over Books, 2022), 4.

we analyze the way power flows and is shared and implemented, we perceive that the basic structure of the Soviet communist and Nazi governments are similar. Indeed, Giles says, there is little or nothing to distinguish between the policies and actions of Stalin and Hitler. Both Hitler and Stalin persecuted Jews, quashed dissent, invaded neighboring countries, and ran totalitarian governments that suppressed freedoms. Any meaningful conception of the political left and right would have to show Hitler and Stalin on the same side of the political spectrum.²

Another example that demonstrates the inconsistency of the ideological approach is abortion. The received dogma in the United States is that the right wants less government interference in individuals' lives and the left wants the government to run people's lives. Yet, in the stark concreteness of reality, the right believes that laws are needed to prohibit a woman from having an abortion, and the left seeks laws establishing a woman's right to abortion. In other words, practice disavows ideology and therefore clarifies what happens in reality, disproving the ideological presuppositions. It follows that the approach generally considered leftist, i.e. that the overarching state plans the lives of citizens, is actually the approach applied by the right in handling the abortion issue. On the contrary, the idea that the state should not intervene – the supposedly right-wing approach – is instead precisely exemplified by the left, which would like women to decide for themselves. Ideological assumptions are often the filters or lenses through which we evaluate various problems and situations. It almost seems that deliberate blindness to the concrete work performed by a part of the right or left is a shield against the "pain" of discovering the inconsistency between what is proclaimed and what is really done.

A further example taken from the history of the French Revolution, though not specifically described in Giles' text, can help clarify the discrepancy between ideals and reality, between ideology and practice. The establishment of the famous Committee of Public Health, made up of only twelve members, strongly contradicts the democratic Constitution of 1793, which provided for popular sovereignty and universal male suffrage. Not only was the Constitution suppressed (although it was claimed that such suppression would be temporary) but the Committee

² Ibid., 7.

assumes and combines two powers: the legislative and the executive.³ Giles' theses are supported by this historical example which clearly shows how the power structure of the Committee was narrow and elitist, contradicting the democratic principles professed by the Jacobins, the co-protagonists of the French Revolution. Furthermore, the concentration of legislative and executive power in the hands of only twelve people demonstrates the dictatorial character of those who, paradoxically, inspired not only the democratic Constitution of 1793 but also the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (*Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*) of 1789.⁴ The declaration proclaimed, among other things, that the purpose of every political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression. Instead, the Committee of Public Health violated people's freedom by instituting trials and arbitrarily passing sentences, paradoxically playing the role of the oppressor.

Giles makes us see that one cannot simplistically conceive the origin of any kind of political left as being of the Jacobin type if, as he himself writes, the left today requires greater circulation of power among people. We need to clarify the concept of the left by analyzing, as Giles suggests, the structure and circulation of power. Power concentrated in the hands of twelve people, the few who have the power to write and enforce laws, proves that the circulation of power is deliberately restricted.

In short, Giles specifies that whether power circulates in a small or large number of people is the real revealing factor of how power itself is structured. On this basis, to return to Hitler and Stalin, there is no fundamental difference between the two rulers in their use of power and there is no structural difference in their power. In both the Nazi and the Soviet states, only a very few people had power. Giles makes it clear that Hitler and Stalin were both autocrats who ruled by fiat over the civil and military sectors of their society. Moreover, their decisions were not open to debate or criticism.⁵

³ Alessandro Isoni, "Il Comitato di salute pubblica e la dittatura del terrore (1793–1794)," *Itinerari di ricerca storica* 1 (2014), 11–38.

⁴ Robert Roswell Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of Terror in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁵ Giles, *What Left and Right Mean*, 9.

Another big misunderstanding concerns the concept of the rights of the person. Giles writes that nowadays the standard left–right political spectrum is based on the alleged dichotomy of the rights of individuals (the right) versus the force of the government (the left). It also tends to repeat the myth that the left is about state control of the economy, whereas the right is about economic freedom. On the basis of these assumptions, there is the risk of not understanding once again how the right and the left approach rights and freedom. Since no one would dream of denying rights and freedoms, it is necessary to understand in detail who rights and freedoms refer to. In their general and generic proclamations, both the left and the right agree on the concept of rights for people.

However, on the one hand, we find those who would deny the extension of rights to certain social groups; and, on the other, it is the legitimate role of government to protect the powerless from exploitation and abuse and provide for the general welfare. Suffice it to mention the rights denied to immigrants not only in the United States but also in Europe by right-wing parties, who see immigrants as a threat to social stability despite the favorable view of authoritative banking sources regarding immigration. According to the Bank of Italy, as reported in the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, more immigrants are needed for the Italian economy.⁶

Giles therefore reveals the paradoxical aspect that the right-wing parties who voraciously defend the interests of the banks are the very ones that don't agree with their views on immigration. Indeed, Giles' reflections allow us to carefully read social reality and to understand its sometimes mystifying interpretations, tainted by an ideological prejudice that takes on an almost dogmatic character. Viewing matters in terms of power concentration also demythologizes the political spectrum. Notions of a titanic struggle between left and right may be romantic, making for good press, but they do not reflect the realities of human society. Rather, Giles states, understanding the conflict between left and right as one over the circulation or concentration of power puts the ques-

⁶ “Pnrr, non si trova forza lavoro. Allarme di Bankitalia ‘Servono più immigrati,’” *La Repubblica*, February 6, 2023, https://www.repubblica.it/economia/2023/02/06/news/bankitalia_pnrr_servono_piu_lavoratori_piu_immigrati-386241034/ (accessed October 12, 2023).

tion of power where it belongs, as the primary motive and goal of human political action.

Interpretive schemes sometimes risk confusing ideas and, in the second chapter of his book, “The Fake Political Dimension.” Giles explains how the so-called Nolan Chart is deceptive. This chart is a diagram of the political spectrum created by the American libertarian activist David Nolan in 1969, representing political views along two axes: economic freedom and personal freedom.⁷ Nolan’s dual axis attempts to replace the traditional political spectrum by portraying political attitudes on a Cartesian graph. One axis stands for left–right and the other reflects some other sentiment, most commonly labeled as “authoritarian–libertarian” or “statist-libertarian.”

According to Giles, the dual-axis chart deliberately obfuscates the discussion of political orientation by creating a false dimension. Nolan invented the chart as a marketing ploy to sell libertarian ideology and promote the U.S. Libertarian Party that he founded. It is no coincidence that Nolan placed the term “libertarian” in the center of the chart and at the top, in a way typical of marketing communication schemes. Without going into the details of the various versions of the chart, we can say that Nolan’s original chart took a grain of truth and oversimplified it into the bromide of “freedom.” He then artificially split personal and economic freedom into separate axes to obscure the central truth that the left–right axis is the circulation of power versus the concentration of power.

The Nolan chart tends to hide that libertarianism is inherently right-wing in its drive for the concentration, not circulation, of “liberty.” On the pretext of demonstrating that the word “state” implies a violent and oppressive government, the Nolan chart wants to convey the message that “the state” is the worst and libertarianism the best social structure. In this way it hides that power is concentrated in the hands of a few, who are reluctant to comply with the rules and restrictions that would guarantee freedom for all and a greater circulation of power. Giles, in fact, says that eliminating the state would not lead to more freedom. Indeed, what libertarians want is to be free of responsibilities and accountability to others and thus immune from criticism.

In the third chapter, addressing the question of the “Fake Left and

⁷ Giles, *What Left and Right Mean*, 16.

the Reactionary Right,” the author proposes the horseshoe theory: the political spectrum curves back on itself such that the far left and far right of the spectrum converge. The claim is that the far left and far right have far more in common with each other than with the political center. According to Giles, the far left and the far right are neither left nor right. This is because what they have in common is a relative lack of positive values, succumbing to fear and hatred of those they see as their enemies. Basically, both sides try to destroy the political positions of the other without proposing an alternative. That is, their ideological prejudices prelude a real political dialectic and exacerbate the dispute until it degenerates into a shouting match that is not at all constructive.⁸

In the fourth chapter “What Is Conservatism,” Giles undertakes to define conservatism in depth, emphasizing that conservatism manifests itself in multiple areas: fiscal, religious, and social. The author specifies that the various expressions of conservative ideologies share a common goal: the restriction of power to a small group, creating a two-tiered society of haves and have-nots. In the context of conservatism, it is necessary to distinguish vested conservatives from resentful conservatives. The vested conservatives are very wealthy people who define themselves as an upper class, superior to the masses. They attempt to conserve current socioeconomic inequalities because those inequalities benefit them. They prefer that business not be constrained by state rules, that taxes are low, and that the government works to favor the rich.⁹

The resentful conservatives, while not as rich as the vested ones, demonstrate a sense of exclusivity, considering themselves the “right” ethnicity professing the right religion, and feel that they are oppressed. They feel threatened by this or that slice of the population. For example, ethnic, religious or sexual minorities, threaten the purity of their ethnicity, preventing a return to a mythical past which, as Giles underlines, never existed. This is, in my opinion, the most interesting aspect in his description of resentful conservatives.

“Make America Great Again” is an expression that was fashionable in the Trump era. It had a very strong appeal precisely because it mythologized a past in which society had happily crystallized. This kind

⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁹ Ibid., 29.

of conservative does not understand changing customs, the evolution of culture, the birth of new social needs, and confronts the emergence of the new with a paranoid attitude. A term deriving from ancient Greek defines them: misoneists. Simply put, they are fearful and intolerant of innovation or change, mythologizing the past. If Trumpism in America is the clearest example, Brexit in the United Kingdom represents a complementary aspect to Trumpism, with fear of immigrants and the specter of other nations within the European Union having equal rights with the United Kingdom.¹⁰ Because conservatism is the desire to restrict power to a few, according to Giles, it necessarily sees the majority of people as the enemy. In other words, the conservative vision is simplistically dualistic: Us vs. Them. This helps us understand the xenophobia, racism, sexism, and homophobia that permeate both vested conservatives and resentful conservatives. The latter would be the labor of the former and therefore other-directed and manipulated.

In the fifth chapter “What Is Liberalism?” Giles’ own perspective emerges clearly, although it was already implied from the very beginning. The difference between this chapter and the those preceding lies in the explicit statement that “Liberals’ overall goal is a society that works for all people.”¹¹ However, at the beginning of the chapter, the author states that we need to distinguish between two quite different uses of the word “liberal.”¹² This difference can be partly explained by Isaiah Berlin’s negative and positive liberties.¹³ Negative liberties refer to what we are free from – restrictions and coercive forces like bullying and intimidation. Positive liberties include what we are free to do – having the ability to act of our own free will.

Having made this clarification, Giles briefly summarizes the historical origins of the negative liberties by tracing their origin in the 1600s, when the aristocracy wanted to free itself from the power of the king, his influence and his restrictions. It is no coincidence that parliamentary monarchy was born thanks to the English revolution of 1649, which eventually led to the birth of a strong parliament capable of con-

¹⁰ Ibid., 32.

¹¹ Ibid., 37.

¹² Ibid., 35.

¹³ Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 118–72.

taining the power of the king. The problem, as Giles points out, is that the aristocrats wanted to increase the circulation of power, but only to their class, not to the “lower” classes.

In contrast, the term “liberal” refers to economic liberalism, libertarianism, neoliberalism, and anarchism. This view shifts the concentration of power from government to individuals and corporations and is self-centered and exclusionary. From this it follows that “liberal” has a right-wing political connotation. Other uses of “liberal” came not from the aristocracy but from other elements of society. These people strove to increase positive liberties for the majority, not just for the aristocracy. In this regard we must distinguish two further meanings. One meaning is based on Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s view that what matters is the concept of the greater common good. According to this perspective, positive liberty is what is good for society as a whole. The second version focuses on positive liberties that cultivate the ability of individuals to make their own choices. In contrast to the right, the latter view considers the state as a means to guarantee everyone’s freedom as well as to promote collective well-being.¹⁴

At this point in the book, the author’s ideological alignment is clear, although it is fair to emphasize that this alignment is technically explained by the concept of the distribution and circulation of power. Giles believes that sharing power in a stratified way, spread over several social levels, would avoid the concentration of power in the hands of a few. In this way, the fundamental liberties for all would be guaranteed. As Giles writes, the people who use “liberal” to mean increasing positive liberties for all members of society, regardless of class, are properly liberals or left-wing. In this last part, the author warns that the aforementioned freedoms cannot be conquered without struggle. Indeed, he forcefully states that liberals are on the left side of the political spectrum, struggling to increase the circulation of power in society. And he adds: that means fighting existing unjust power structures. This is why Giles can state the hard reality: the historical norm is that excessive concentrations of power lead to injustice. This norm explains some right-wingers’ belief that structural inequalities are natural and not to be changed.¹⁵

¹⁴ Giles, *What Left and Right Mean*, 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

Giles' position is reaffirmed in the conclusion of the text when he writes that every improvement to society has come from the diligent efforts of those who believe in the basic principle of the left or liberalism – that power should be more widely circulated across society and that all of us should have liberties and opportunities. We owe a lot to the many brave people who have fought for liberal causes and have increased power for more people.¹⁶ The best way to build a society in which power is distributed on multiple levels is, according to the author, through a dialogue capable of dealing with the complexities of society and power relations. Believing in dialogue means having an optimistic vision of human nature, and, to support this view, we cannot fail to mention the perspective of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Habermas puts his faith in communicative action and believes that there can be positive interaction thanks to authentic communication between people. In such communication the other is not treated as a tool, as Habermas says, since there is a real interest in the other and in the other's proposals. Finally, Giles would seem to be in tune with another optimistic vision of man proposed by the visionary economist Jeremy Rifkin, who bases his idea on the research of the great evolutionary scientists. They have studied the human nervous system and discovered that we are hardcoded to be empathetic, to be cooperative. If this is the true nature of humanity, we could say that Giles' trust in dialogue is well placed.

¹⁶ Ibid., 38.

Hannah Dawson & Annelien de Dijn,
Rethinking Liberty before Liberalism.
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Inês Pinheiro
(NOVA University Lisbon)

“All men and women are either *liberi homines*,
free persons, or else *ar servi*, slaves.”¹

The book’s proposal

The debate on how to conceptualize liberty has, as one of its pivotal points of departure, Isaiah Berlin’s *Two Concepts of Liberty*. The discussion regained momentum and grew with Quentin Skinner’s *Liberty before Liberalism*, whose central argument is that the neo-Roman concept of liberty (that of not being subject to another person’s will) had been nearly obliterated from our collective memory by the rise of the perspective of liberalism. The liberal view posits that freedom is essentially based on non-interference as opposed to the neo-Roman one that argues that it consists of the absence of subjection and dependence, tangible or merely hypothetical. This, in turn, allows us to be in control of our will. Neo-Roman thinkers defend that a person can only be free by living in a free state, which has led some proponents of the neo-Roman view, Skinner most notably, to associate it with democratic government, something that Berlin categorically denied concerning his preferred definition of freedom, that of negative liberty.

The book *Rethinking Liberty before Liberalism* aims to take Skinner’s *Liberty before Liberalism* and consider it from new perspectives. The editors begin by outlining the developments that unfolded after the delivery and subsequent publication of Skinner’s lecture. When it comes to the adopted methodology, we are told that it “thinks with and through *Liberty before Liberalism* to open up new histories of liberty, as well as

¹ Hannah Dawson and Annelien de Dijn, *Rethinking Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 235.

examining the historiographical and theoretical taxonomies that structure our understanding of the present and the past.”² It thus seems to adopt the Cambridge School’s methodology of historical contextualism.

The book is organized in three distinct parts. In the first – “Authors” – we find three chapters, each of which analyzes the work of a different thinker from the early modern period (Michel de Montaigne, Hugo Grotius, and John Locke), but placed in the context of the neo-Roman theory of liberty. In the second section – “Hierarchies” – there are four chapters whose goal is to break the limits of the citizen-state relation on which Skinner’s work was grounded. Each of the contributions offers us a new perspective on examples from the Enlightenment that think hierarchies differently, namely in terms of gender, race, and the participation of citizens in public life. The last part – “Traditions” – has the goal of establishing connections between the neo-Roman theory and other lines of thought, such as liberalism, counter-revolutionary thinking, socialism, and human rights. Finally, we have Skinner’s response to the debate created by his original work, in which he revisits it and reassesses its standing in our own time.

Early modern thinkers in the context of neo-Romanism

In chapter 1, Felicity Green insists on the crucial psychological dimension of the neo-Roman theory of liberty, which has been overlooked by the scholarship. She concentrates on thinking about liberty “outside the familiar neo-Roman canon”³ and thus: beyond the state. Michel de Montaigne is the thinker she elects to accompany us. Though clearly not a neo-Roman, Montaigne also focuses on the threat of domination. Nevertheless, by considering fortune and passions as constraints on our liberty, Montaigne steps away from neo-Romanism. He portrays a free person as someone detached from the world, in order to limit the number of commitments that, as Montaigne characteristically argues, might lead one to “mortgage one’s will.” Green highlights that the awareness of one’s condition doesn’t have to accompany our loss of freedom since “if I remain oblivious to my enslaved condition, whether because of a lack of capacity, understanding, or opportunity to recognize it as such, it is hard to see why this should make me any less op-

² Ibid., 2.

³ Ibid., 21.

pressed.”⁴ In essence, Green’s main argument is that we could think about neo-Roman liberty as a status of persons, rather than in terms of freedom of action or choice.

How to achieve self-government is a question approached by Martin van Gelderen in chapter 2. He establishes a link between metaphysical questions about the freedom of the will and political discussions on freedom by bringing forth the contribution of Hugo Grotius, who “developed a rich notion of the freedom of human being, as being master of one’s own actions, free from non-domination, indeed as being one’s own *dominus*.”⁵ He places Grotius’ thought in the context of the Dutch Republic’s debates on freedom of conscience and shows us a gap in the neo-Roman theory of liberty: this line of thinking does not consider any metaphysical questions about the freedom of the will. However, if it postulates that one is only free if one is subject to one’s own will, isn’t it essential that our will is, in itself, free? This strikes me as a problem that ought to be addressed, and Van Gelderen’s contribution seems a solid starting point. Grotius’ defense of freedom of conscience is particularly complex as he “takes freedom back to God’s will,”⁶ while also grounding it in the combination of the Roman notion of man being *sui iuris* and the Greek concept of *autexousia* (roughly translated as the ability to be “self-moving”).

In chapter 3, Hannah Dawson reflects on John Locke’s neo-Romanism which is, in a certain sense, dubious. Dawson extends the debate started by Green regarding the psychological facet of neo-Roman theory, and defends the notion that jurists and writers did not share the same perspective. For jurists, the importance of not being subjected to the will of others resided in being able to lead one’s life as one pleased; for writers, following reason and morality was what granted us autonomy. Locke considers civil liberty as not being dependent on the uncertainty of another person’s will and this in turn prompts his definition of tyranny as the exercise of arbitrary power. Nevertheless, Locke supports the existence of prerogative powers that allow the executive authorities to act at their discretion when the legislature or the law fail to act. How can this dual positioning be consistent with the neo-Roman view? Dawson answers by saying that Locke did not regard prerogatives as an arbi-

⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁵ Ibid., 57.

⁶ Ibid., 43.

trary form of power, and that he saw freedom as leading to a reflexively wise life (not one where we do as we please). But do the neo-Roman theorists moralize freedom by defending that it is associated with wise choices? This would hardly seem to be the case.

Incorporating multiple hierarchies in neo-Romanism

In chapter 4, Rachels Foxley turns our attention to John Milton's writings, which, like Locke, adhere to the view that makes a distinction between liberty and licence. Milton insists that there are a great number of people who are not free because they are not fitted to be so and draws on the ideas of "rightful subjection" and "lawful mastery." One of his prime examples is that of the husband-and-wife relationship, where the wife owes obedience to her husband. Foxley ends up arguing that Milton tolerates slavery despite it being intolerable for a man like him; however, if we look at Milton's reasoning as articulated by Foxley, living in a lawful form of subjection does not amount to slavery. So I feel the former argument needs further support. If we take into consideration Foxley's pivotal point, that "the theory of neo-Roman liberty in its essence simply defines liberty; it does not argue that all are entitled to that liberty,"⁷ we find one of the most important ideas necessary to understand and coherently criticize neo-Roman thinkers. The perception that neo-Roman liberty does not necessarily entail equality is something that misled Skinner himself in *Liberty before Liberalism*.

In chapter 5, Annelien de Dijn argues that in early modern Europe there were other solutions to the problem of institutionally securing freedom. Skinner, in De Dijn's view, focuses too strongly on the English mixed-constitution proposal, since there were republics in continental Europe whose thinkers sought to turn into "democratic republics" guided by majoritarian notions. The authors De Dijn studies are the De la Court brothers, Spinoza and Rousseau, all of whom wanted to end the oligarchical regime they faced either in the Netherlands or in Geneva. Following De Dijn, these thinkers defended a "relatively inclusive political regime"⁸ as well as the notion of majoritarianism, which is "the idea that freedom could only be preserved if the people ... was allowed to rule without re-

⁷ Ibid., 95.

⁸ Ibid., 100.

straint.”⁹ De Dijn fully endorses a *Rousseauvian* view according to which the will of everyone is to find its expression in the law. This in turn leads to a state governed by a single assembly, against whose sovereign power there is no right of appeal. But let us then consider Rousseau: how much of a democrat was he? The *volonté générale* is a normative pattern that assesses the legitimacy of the political structure and is, consequently, the ultimate justification for power and laws. Thus, in Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, not only is the *volonté générale* not necessarily equivalent to the will of the majority, but for one to acquire civil liberty, one must abide by the *volonté générale*. It follows that, absurdly, one might even be compelled to be free. Thus, the democrat in Rousseau ought, perhaps, to be downplayed and the consonance between majoritarianism and the neo-Roman theory of liberty reframed.

In chapter 6, Sandrine Bergès devotes herself to exposing other facets of unfreedom, in particular those based on gender differences. To do this, Bergès invites us to read women who wrote about their own situation and regarded marriage as an institution that reduced wives to the condition of slaves. An important proponent of this argument was, of course, Mary Wollstonecraft. Additionally, we see how some French female thinkers, particularly Olympe de Gouges and Marie-Jeanne Roland, contested the prevalence of the public sphere in disregard of the private one, in a way that enabled them to address issues of family life, motherhood and citizenship. All these three women agreed when it came to the need to make clear how women could participate in the public political life of the state, never forgetting that the private sphere in which the family plays a central role is a constitutive part of that same political realm, a perspective which future research ought to consider more thoroughly.

In chapter 7, René Koekkoek finishes the section on hierarchies with an account of how neo-Roman conceptions and arguments were used in the eighteenth century to both promote and deny the value of equal liberty for all. His main argument is that the thinkers in the Age of Atlantic Revolutions (c. 1770s–1790s) related republican concepts to the enslavement of black Africans, remarkably, both in favour of and against slavery. So, since “republican arguments could be used both for and against slavery, their impact was in the end not decisive in the long

⁹ Ibid.

road to abolition.”¹⁰ This is a good introduction to the connection between neo-Romanism and the discourses on slavery, but Koekkoek also introduces the ideas of “real slavery” and “metaphorical slavery,” and I believe this distinction can be further worked on, especially when it comes to conceptualizing slavery solely as a metaphor.

Neo-Romanism intertwined with other traditions

Neo-Romanism’s concept of freedom is fundamentally opposed to that of liberalism. So much so, that Skinner presented it as an alternative to the hegemonic liberal view. Nevertheless, in chapter 8, Eric Nelson contests Skinner’s biases of limiting his concern to the prevalence of the utilitarian conceptualization of freedom as the absence of impediments to our actions and argues that we should also look at continental European traditions that greatly influenced contemporary debate. He turns to liberalism, in particular to Kant’s Pelagian theological position, according to which “human freedom alone could vindicate God’s justice, both punitive and creative.”¹¹ This leads Kant to conclude, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, that freedom “is rightly defined as the independence from being constrained by another’s choice”¹² – a notion later retrieved by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, which remarkably leads Nelson to contend that Rawls’s theory of justice is partly grounded in neo-Roman premises. This is, to say the least, a rather debatable argument, since Rawls is in fact quite explicit when it comes to his commitment to the liberal perspective according to which liberty consists of not being hindered in our choices. Nelson therefore opens the door to a stimulating debate on this question.

Combining the counterrevolutionary thought of the French revolution’s opponents with the neo-Roman conception of liberty is surely an unexpected proposal, but this is precisely what Matthijs Lok sets himself to do in chapter 9. Lok argues that counterrevolutionaries like François Xavier de Feller and Charles Alexandre Calonne use the neo-Roman concept of liberty against the French revolutionaries. Feller, for instance, considers that there is a true and a false liberty, the first being “the moderation of state power, not by representative institutions, a constitution, or a free

¹⁰ Ibid., 137.

¹¹ Ibid., 163.

¹² Ibid., 168.

press, but by a historically grown ‘ancient constitution’ sanctioned by divine authority.”¹³ According to Lok, Feller’s idea of freedom has neo-Roman traces because he believed that “the arbitrary character of revolutionary government made all citizens in effect ‘slaves’ without rights.”¹⁴ In a way that somehow parallels Locke’s defense of the royal prerogative, Calonne shows total skepticism regarding the existence of a unifying popular will, and thus not only defends the idea that the National Assembly’s power was a threat to the liberty of the French, but that royal prerogative ought to be reinstituted in order to restore the lost liberties. In fact, Calonne “saw a strong connection between a free monarchical government and the protection of the civil rights of French subjects.”¹⁵ This link between civil liberties and political freedom leads Lok to consider Calonne as invoking a neo-Roman notion. Consequently, uncommon as this line of thinking is, I believe there is room for further work.

When thinking that the neo-Roman theory of liberty might play an important role in the present, in chapter 10 Bruno Leipold certainly gives us problems to consider. Leipold joins communist thinking with the neo-Roman theory of liberty, something briefly mentioned in *Liberty before Liberalism*. His effort ends up not only establishing a link between different traditions, but also bringing to light how the neo-Roman concept of liberty can be applied to yet another hierarchical dimension, that of the employer and employee relationship. According to Leipold, Marx’s account in *Das Kapital* of how the capitalist class gradually asserts itself by depriving the peasants of their means of production clearly shows that in this manner they enslaved the workers by forcing them to sell their labour force. Following this argument, Marx and Engels successfully advance the claim that work conditions denote a structural form of control that leads to the enslavement of the workers, a form denominated as “wage-slavery.” The communist argument would be that it is the capitalist’s ownership of the means of production that forces the proletariat to sign work contracts that reinforces their enslavement: the workers simply have no choice but to do this in order to survive. There does seem to be a clear neo-Roman influence in Marx’s analysis, as he considers that “the arbitrary capacity of the individual capitalist to interfere in the working lives

¹³ Ibid., 183.

¹⁴ Ibid., 192.

¹⁵ Ibid., 187.

of their workers resembles the discretionary power wielded by an absolute monarch over their subjects.”¹⁶ However, we know Marx did not propose any kind of neo-Roman solution. Instead, he defends the collective ownership of the means of production. This would end “wage-slavery,” but never restore freedom (in the neo-Roman sense) to the individual, as everyone would become reliant on everyone else.

In chapter 11, Lena Halldenius advances the case for the contribution of the neo-Roman theory of liberty to the philosophy of human rights, as it can offer a better method than most contemporary accounts. Halldenius strongly criticizes approaches that defend the logical precedence of human rights in comparison with law systems, and their standing outside the political sphere, because they should be regarded as universal morals requisites. This approach has culminated in the elaboration of lists of rights that depend on feasibility parameters and ultimately lead to empty speeches. The neo-Roman conception would instead help us to think about what rights are for, and allow us to see that they would be accompanied by the fundamental liberties that should be present in all states. Consequently, freedom cannot be assessed by a momentary glimpse because “assessing a person’s freedom requires a complex understanding of her normative social and political situation over time.”¹⁷ Despite it not being completely clear how we could put this into practice, Halldenius’ proposal is an alternative that deserves further investigation.

Skinner’s reassessment of his own work

Quentin Skinner’s own reflections on *Liberty before Liberalism* are presented in a very clear and methodical way. He begins by underlining how important it is not to label the theory he retrieved in 1998 as “republican.” Despite most of the literature having adopted this nomenclature: “I still prefer to describe the theory as a neo-Roman one.”¹⁸ This is supported by two main reasons: 1) because a great number of its early modern advocates did not defend the creation of republics instead of regulated monarchies; 2) and because this theory was largely developed on the basis of ancient Roman juridical sources.

¹⁶ Ibid., 197.

¹⁷ Ibid., 222.

¹⁸ Ibid., 233.

This latter point is particularly important since Skinner now argues that these legal sources are of the utmost importance for the neo-Roman theory of liberty, most notably the definitions present in the *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, later incorporated in *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae*, a treatise on English common law initially attributed to Henry de Bracton (whose authorship is now disputed by scholars). In *De Legibus*, Skinner writes that we come across the crucial distinction between *liberi homines* (which includes both men and women) and *servi*, the foundational element of the neo-Roman theory of liberty. We can conclude that there are two important characteristics of *liberi homines*. The first is that someone who is free cannot be under the *dominium* of someone else. The second complements the latter and consists in the attribution of a “distinctive form of power” (a *facultas*) to the free person, which in turn allows them to delineate their own path without needing to justify themselves to anyone else.

There is another distinction put forward in *De legibus* that further complicates our analysis: that between acting *sui iuris* (in one’s own right) and living *in aliena potestate* (under the power of others). The previous comparison might lead to the conclusion that anyone who did not live according to their own right would be considered a slave. However, there are people who, despite not fully acting *sui iuris*, are not to be regarded as slaves. As Skinner puts it: “we are being told ... that to be a slave is to lack *libertas*, but to lack *libertas* is not necessarily to be a slave.”¹⁹ The cases which Bracton treats are those of children, servants, women, and people who are under the guardianship of others. Bracton’s consideration that these forms of subjection are beneficial to the subjects involved, as it guarantees their safety and well-being, adds another layer to this distinction.

After this initial reassessment, in which Skinner complexifies our account of neo-Roman liberty by detailing these juridical sources, he proceeds to answer the critics of the neo-Roman theory of liberty. Skinner begins by turning to the commonly used reasoning of necessary vs. sufficient conditions, arguing that it is a mistake to consider interference as either one or the other. It cannot be a sufficient condition of freedom to not be interfered with because one can be unfree even if there is no

¹⁹ Ibid., 239.

tangible inhibition from others, and neither can it be a necessary condition as we can be interfered with without losing our freedom. Skinner's aim is to delineate a concept that rivals the mainstream assertion of freedom as non-interference. This leads him to present civil liberty as "that condition in which we are not subject to the power and hence the arbitrary will of anyone else."²⁰ In his response to critics, Skinner addresses the points made by the other contributors to this volume concerning the limited number of sources, the lack of metaphysical and psychological dimensions, and the narrowness of the theory's scope. To conclude, Skinner presents his reflections on how the neo-Roman theory of liberty can play a crucial role today.

A question of method

A note regarding the methodology adopted by the authors needs to be added. The only one who explicitly states his approach is Matthijs Lok, who refers to the Cambridge School's historical contextualism.²¹ But this seems to be the approach entailed by the "Introduction" and which, I believe, was followed by all the contributors. Nevertheless, I have the feeling that the backbone that ran through all the essays in *Rethinking Liberty before Liberalism* and held them together – the neo-Roman theory of liberty advanced by Skinner – sometimes weakened. This might be due to the multitude of rich and elaborate perspectives condensed in less than 300 pages, resulting in a certain degree of inconsistency – for instance, in talking about republicanism despite it not being entirely accurate to do so. Or it could be the result of a lack of methodological rigor when analyzing particular historical contexts, prompting us to further reflections. There are passages where the reader might get lost in historical digressions and lose track of the pertinence of the matter in question. When working in the history of philosophy, and adopting a contextual approach, one must redouble the effort to think the past in its own terms. Sometimes, this may not have been fully accomplished.

²⁰ Ibid., 247.

²¹ Ibid., 180.

Where does the neo-Roman theory of liberty stand?

Finally, one of the questions that might legitimately arise is: if the neo-Roman theory of liberty is so linked to exclusions and misogynist and racial prejudices, is there any room for us, in the present, to make use of it? After all, as we flip the pages, we come to realize that one of the most valuable contributions of the authors is to clearly show how many of the proponents of the neo-Roman theory of liberty held an extremely narrow perspective about whom freedom was applied to, mainly ignoring relations between individuals in spheres other than the state, for example in the workplace or in domestic life. Even so, I believe that the best way to retain this concept of liberty is as the condition of not being subject to the will of others. The neo-Roman conception of freedom also stipulates that we cannot be free if our fundamental rights are not secured, that each and every citizen must be able to engage in public political participation, and underlines how intolerable silent forms of oppression are, further amplifying how it can play an important role today.

By covering such a wide range of perspectives regarding the concept of neo-Roman liberty, *Rethinking Liberty before Liberalism* adds value to the ongoing discussion on this matter and offers us relevant reassessments of Quentin Skinner's *Liberty before Liberalism*. This is done by not only analyzing individual thinkers, but also by questioning whether this theory might harbour internal contradictions. It also reframes the question of liberty in other spheres besides the state, like gender relations and slavery, and compares the theory with other streams of thought in the history of political philosophy, such as liberalism and socialism. In essence, in this book the neo-Roman notion of freedom is confronted with ideas put forward by broad spectrum of thinkers; and, for doing so, the contributors to this volume can rightfully be praised for paving the way for further and deeper research into the multiple facets from which we can think about the neo-Roman notion of liberty.

**Dan Corjescu, *The Global Ape: Between Extinction and Transcendence*.
Stuttgart: ibidem – Verlag, 2022, 260 pp.,
€34.90, ISBN: 9783838216126.**

Alexander Gungov
(University of Sofia)

In his new book, Dan Corjescu explores a wide range of topics related to human society. These range from the emergence of the human species and the first form of communal organization, to issues of war and peace, the origin of language, the role of religion, science and technology, the drawbacks and advantages of modern and contemporary philosophy, and an elucidation of the history of genocide, including the twentieth-century Holocaust. The leading interpretive angle of the entire book is a philosophical rethinking of the entire history of humanity until today.

The author credits the first human communities with reaching a collective self-consciousness and viewing the world from the perspective of a kind of intersubjectivity. He gives arguments in support of the thesis that religion, in its origin, did not follow a pattern of anthropomorphism but rather a special animal-morphism. Corjescu sees in trans-humanism and related trends a new form of millenarianism, and he assumes that the human opposition to universal entropy might lay the foundations for the religion of the future. He juxtaposes the idea of free will with that of enlightened fatalism, when one is rationally aware of various causal changes. In this way, his exposition transforms the status of the Kantian ethical concept of free will into an ontological and epistemological concept that obviously follows Hegel. Corjescu divides contemporary philosophy into two camps. One has developed on the European continent, in Germany in particular, and is permeated by an obscurantist anti-Enlightenment sentiment which leads to a dead-end of declinism and pessimism. The second flourishes in the Anglo-Saxon world and genuinely embodies Enlightenment rationalism. The latter secures a progressive world outlook, being a philosophy based on being respectful to traditional Western values: political liberalism and individual rights. The members of the first philosophical camp include Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Spengler, Husserl, Heidegger, the Frankfurt School

thinkers, and, surprisingly, Zygmunt Bauman (for mostly blaming instrumental reason and bureaucracy for the Holocaust). In contrast, the second camp is predominantly represented by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke and the tradition they established. A special position is assigned to Hegel, who, in spite of his German ancestry, is in accord with true Enlightenment thinking; Hegel's advantage is explained by his dialectics of the progression of freedom in the course of human history.

There is no doubt that a sense of decline and pessimism characterizes most of the philosophers in the continental European tradition. It is certainly justified to state that the Frankfurt School theorists overemphasized culture (in the German sense of *Kultur*) at the expense of social and political matters, thus presenting a distorted picture of social life during and after World War II. However, it should be added that, by doing so, the Frankfurt School were far removed from Marxism, and it is very problematic to establish any links between the two. Additionally, it is also true that, before Levinas, all of Western philosophy, including progressive liberals, was egocentric. However, it does not reflect well on the book that a philosopher of so great a magnitude as Levinas is only referred to via secondary sources, while scholars of tertiary importance are presented through their own writings.

The same must be said of the treatment of Ernst Cassirer, whose fundamental works on symbolic forms are not included in the bibliography, even though Corjescu's discussion of thinking and language devotes attention to symbolization. Last, but not least, Marx, who is mentioned several times in the book, only appears in the bibliography through Peter Singer's *Marx: A Very Short Introduction*. Moreover, in spite of Corjescu's obvious competence in many subjects, his book leaves the impression that the main, if not the only, trend of Marxism in the twentieth century was Stalinism. Important Western Marxists, such as Antonio Gramsci, György Lukács, Louis Althusser, and Étienne Balibar, are omitted. The book also fails to mention the post-Stalinist dialectical and historical materialism, which was thoroughly non-Stalinist, disseminated from Stalin's death in 1953 up until 1989 and 1991.

From an author as familiar with Hegel's philosophy as Corjescu, one would not expect the characterization of the declinist and pessimistic trends in contemporary philosophy as "completely wrong," with the progressive and optimistic tendencies deemed "completely right." Such extremes are abstract, one-sided, and provide only a partial truth. A He-

gelian approach would require viewing them not as self-sufficient, separate parts, but as moments of the whole of contemporary philosophy, which seems to resemble an intellectual bipolar disorder. The declinist philosophy, with its hopelessness, seems to constitute the depressive pole, while liberal philosophy, with its optimism, fits the definition of the manic phase of the bipolar totality. Against this background, a concrete, genuine philosophy would be one where the above separate characteristics—pessimism and optimism—are present in a sublated form, the inseparable moments of a third form. Candidates for such a concrete whole include Christian trends in philosophy, with their inherent teaching of a sinful world and the hope for redemption, as well as versions of Marxism that acknowledge our predicament as one of exploitation, hegemony, and reification—leading to the deterministic appeal (very similar to Corjescu’s enlightened fatalism and to Hegel’s concept of socio-political freedom) for a struggle to abolish the economic and political conditions responsible for that social predicament.

Finally, I would like to stress this book’s belief in the capacity of human imagination and reason to work “for a noble open-ended future of Man.” It is my conviction that the book will attract the interest of numerous readers, and even those who disagree with the author’s style and argument will be willing to read it, or at the very least, to engage with it due to the significance of the questions raised and the variety of answers provided or implied.

III. ASPIRATION CORNER

Heidegger's Interpretation of Paul: The Care of the Self and Others in the Proto-Christian Experience of Life

Luigi Panella
(University of Bergamo)

Abstract: This paper is part of a wider re-interpretation of Heidegger's ethical thought, primarily through the lens of Michel Foucault's concepts of "Care of Self and Others". Contrary to past interpretations, it is well-known today how Heidegger has widely explored ethical-political themes – such as the nature of political "community" (*koinonía*) in Aristotle and Saint Paul – in his early University courses. One of the most emblematic cases is that of the lectures held in Freiburg during the Winter semester of 1920-1921 entitled *Introduction to Phenomenology of Religion*, dedicated to an interpretation of early Christianity and the proto-Christian experience of life starting from the *Letters* of Paul – particularly the two *Letters to the Thessalonians*. This religious context highlights a very peculiar form of care of the self, which can be primarily understood as "care for the divine" – and also sheds a more comprehensible light on Heidegger's later view on global *Technik*.

Keywords: care of the self – ethics – Dasein

While professing an «*a-theistic* philosophy in principle»¹, the early Heidegger intended to interpret the field of Christian religious experience as an exemplary case that allows us to understand the original dynamic of existence, of human life in its "facticity" and "thrownness", finitude and historicity – and particularly in its tendency to fatally lose itself (in the temptations of the world) or to redeem itself through "salvation" (not in a metaphysical sense). This insistence on the ethical-practical dimension

¹ M. HEIDEGGER, *Interpretazioni fenomenologiche di Aristotele*, a cura di E. Mazzarella, Guida, Napoli 1990, p. 224.

of the 1920-1921 lessons about Paul is also underlined by the Italian curator of *Phenomenology of Religious Life* Franco Volpi, who – starting from his own renewed research about the Care of the Self – states that

by transposing onto the philosophical level the *páthos* that animates the proto-Christian experience of existence, in which salvation or perdition is always at stake, and not a simple cognitive description, Heidegger understands and practices philosophy not as a theoretical activity among the others, as a system of theories and doctrines indifferent to life, but as an understanding of life that implies a form of life and gives shape to life. Philosophy is not just knowledge. But it is also a life choice: it is salvation and redemption.²

Hence the evident theoretical relevance of these lessons for the purpose of an “ethical” re-reading of Heidegger. The intent of the German philosopher is a philosophical understanding of life in non-theoreticist and non-objectifying terms (as opposed to the neutral and reifying sense of “science” and phenomenological epistemology): «[The understanding of life] is not an *Ent-leben*, a “suspension of life”, but rather a hand-in-hand proceeding with it, illuminating its direction and orienting it towards its *Eigentliches*, “what is proper to it”, its “authenticity”»³. Hence the need to grasp life in its effective motility (*kinesis tou bíou*), in the concrete-existential “how” of its “actuation” (*Vollzug*), «life as *práxis*, a movement in which success or failure, salvation or perdition are in play»⁴, which leads Heidegger to investigate the proto-Christian experience of existence as it occurs in the «world of others in the community (*Mitwelt der Gemeinde*)»⁵. In Paul’s case, the community is that of Thessalonica, to whose members he addresses himself – by letter – as apostle and “preacher” (*Verkündiger*). His task is to *understand* the community that is losing itself, to *help* it rediscover itself and to *guide* it to salvation: «The goal is “salvation” (*hé soteria*), ulti-

² ID., *Introduzione alla fenomenologia della religione*, in ID., *Fenomenologia della vita religiosa*, a cura di M. Jung, T. Regehly, C. Strube, ed. it. a cura di F. Volpi, tr. di G. Gurisatti, Adelphi Edizioni, Milano 2019⁸, p. 23.

³ Ivi., p. 23.

⁴ Ivi., p. 27.

⁵ Ivi., p. 119.

mately “life” (*hé zoé*)»⁶. Therefore, his preaching does not aim to doctrine and dogma, but rather «to the existential communication to the community»⁷. The discursive relationship (mediated by epistolary writing) and the *ethical* relationship are established between the preacher (“World of the Self”, *Selbstwelt*) and the community (“World of the Others”, *Mitwelt*). This is why Heidegger – as he will also later do while examining the figure of the Aristotelian rhetorician in 1924 – engages in a careful phenomenology of the concrete “how”, both of preaching and of the preacher in his apostolic mission-vocation:

Now, however, we no longer take the objective historical context into consideration, but rather we grasp the situation as if we were writing the letter together with Paul: we carry out the act of writing – or dictating – the letter together with him. The first question is this: how does Paul relate to the situation (*Situation*) of the one who writes the letter to the Thessalonians? What is his experience of them? How is his *World of the Others* given to him in the situation of writing the letter? This goes hand in hand with the question: how does *Paul* position himself towards this world of others? [...] The relationship between the people Paul addresses and Paul himself is as *he* has it. [...] Paul himself is also contained in the nature of the community (of the *tinés*). The Thessalonians are such as to have fallen to his lot. In them he necessarily also experiences himself. [...] In writing Paul sees them as those into whose lives he has penetrated. Their having-become (*das Gewordensein*, *genethênai*) is connected to his entry into their life [...]. The Thessalonians are there because he himself, and they in their having-become, are mutually connected (*miteinander*). [...] Paul’s life depends on the strength of the faith of the Thessalonians. He therefore leaves himself completely to their fate.⁸

Having clarified «*how much Paul offers little in theoretical-dogmatic terms*» in his preaching, since it does not have the characteristics of demonstration and doctrine but rather of an experiential and exis-

⁶ Ivi., p. 107.

⁷ Ivi., p. 181.

⁸ Ivi., pp. 127, 133, 134 and 137.

tential «worldly wisdom (*weltliche Weisheit*)»⁹, Heidegger can therefore focus on the fact that the authentic communication towards the *Mitwelt* of the faithful is given only in a precise ethical-personal and emotional “situativity” of the preacher, who must allow – following an intensive *being* and speaking-with others – the members of his own community (*koinonia*) to also reach a specific “situatedness” (*Befindlichkeit*). That is, if on the one hand what Paul «says to them, and how he says it, are determined by his personal situation (*Situation*)»¹⁰ – that is, by the fact that he took care of his own “world of the self” in a way that most of his interlocutors have not already done, or, on the other hand the members of the community, to reach their *Situation*, need preaching, which

captures man in a given moment and then lives constantly and simultaneously in the actuation of life. [...] The essential thing is that the preaching always remains present in a vital way (*mitlebendig*), and not just as a grateful memory.¹¹

In the receiver of the sermon something is «moved, awakened, disturbed, *pushed* into the fundamental experience *relating to the world of the self*», since the aim of preaching is to arouse a «new fundamental articulation of life» which «demands in itself, from part of anyone who *comes* across it, the “mutual confrontation” (*Aus-einander-setzung*)» between preacher and listener¹². Only those who, having taken care of themselves, “have” themselves, can help others do the same, since they would not be able to do so alone: «They cannot save themselves because they do not have themselves, because they have forgotten their own self, because they do not have themselves in the clarity of authentic knowledge. Therefore they can neither seize nor save themselves»¹³.

The key task of the preacher is therefore first of all to “recall” his interlocutors to assume their own Christian existence with a *Bekümmern*, a «constant and radical care (*mállon*)»¹⁴, inducing in them a «knowledge of restlessness (“the certainty of eternity” – not inert), which does not stop and

⁹ Ivi., p. 154 and cfr. p. 158.

¹⁰ Ivi., pp. 140-141.

¹¹ Ivi., p. 159.

¹² Ivi., p. 177.

¹³ Ivi., p. 144.

¹⁴ Ivi., pp. 183.

does not allow rest, but rather works in the opposite direction»¹⁵. Regardless of the scriptural mediation, Heidegger interprets Paul's letters as an «*existential, concerned 'meditation' on the situation*»¹⁶, which presupposes an interactive mutual care where the *being* of the one who takes care of others and the *becoming* of those who listen – in view of “conversion” (*Umwendung*) – constitute a single whole. However, to be truly durable (*durchhaltend*), stable (*ständig*) and radical (*radikal*), the preaching must have the forms of the *parresia*, a word that appears verbatim in the *First Letter to the Thessalonians* (1Ts 2, 2-7) but not in Heidegger's course, and which anticipates the analysis of the truthful *éthos* of the Aristotelian (as opposed to the sophist) rhetorician during the lessons of 1924. It is an attitude of frankness, transparency and openness of speech as courageous, necessary, useful and true speech which excludes – as widely analysed by Michel Foucault – any type of flattery, mystification and boasting of the speaker (or writer). Referring to the *Sermon on the Cross* (1Cor 1, 17-18), Heidegger states that preaching takes place

not in the form of wisdom discourse – so that the cross is not emptied by much chatter – but only through his simple and appropriate speech. This is the only way, and there is absolutely no possibility of chitchat here, as long as the “how” is understood. [...] This sermon is conceived exactly in such a way that absoluteness and non-affection are decided in relation to it: it represents an either/or and leaves no room for superficiality and opinions – grandiloquent speeches that hide the authentic. *The scandal must not be neutralized and attenuated by a receptive attitude which, through discourse and wisdom, averts the gaze from it, and therefore does not remain radically open. The situation of existential care held radically ready in itself.* [...] To preach with the required simplicity, a radical sticking to oneself is necessary, always looking at the cross only from this perspective.¹⁷

Having therefore clarified the “how”, we can now move on to the existential-experiential content of Paul's preaching. According to Heidegger's interpretation, the actual experience of community life and proto-Christian religiosity is the very experience of historicity and tem-

¹⁵ Ivi., p. 184.

¹⁶ Ivi., p. 185.

¹⁷ Ivi., pp. 189-190.

porality as such. «Christian religiosity experiences [‘transitive’] temporality as such»¹⁸, in a «when» which has a very particular meaning:

It is a time without its own order and without fixed points, etc. It is impossible to grasp this temporality based on any objective concept of time. The “when” (*das Wann*) is in no way conceivable in objective terms.¹⁹

Escaping any order, calculation and ordinary concept of time, preaching has as its primary objective the indication of the right behavior (*éthos*) towards the fundamental eschatological problem of early Christianity, namely that of the *parousía*, the «Second Coming at the end of time»²⁰. To the “when” of the *parousía*, to the “time of the End”, the Christian must relate with a specific “how”:

The “when” question leads back to my behavior (*Verhalten*). The way in which *parousía* is in my life refers to the actuation of life itself. [...] The “when” is determined by the “how” of behaving, which in turn is determined by the actualisation of the actual experience of life in each of its moments.²¹

The difficulties in putting this behavior into practice are mainly of two types. First of all, this kind of waiting should not be confused with the mere expectation or hope (*elpís*) of an objective future event, since the relationship to be had towards the “when” is that of the “instant (*Augenblick*)”, of the “right moment” (*kairós*), grasp of an unproducible, unpredictable and incalculable time due to its extreme “concentration”:

There is still only a little time left, the Christian constantly lives in the “yet only” (*das Nur-Noch*) which increases his anguish. Concentrated temporality (*zusammengedrängte Zeitlichkeit*) is constitutive of Christian religiosity: a “yet-only”; there’s no time to procrastinate.²²

Referring to the famous passage of *1Thess* 5, 1-3 in which recurs the image of the day of the Lord that suddenly arrives «like a thief in the

¹⁸ Ivi., p. 118. See also ivi., p. 121.

¹⁹ Ivi., p. 145.

²⁰ Ivi., p. 138.

²¹ Ivi., pp. 144 and 147.

²² Ivi., p. 162.

night», Heidegger underlines the extraordinary and decisive character of the *kairós*, towards which we must know how to answer with our “how”, our actual behavior:

For *those* who have no hope, therefore are afflicted, yet possess apparent joy and security, it comes as “sudden” and inevitable; *unexpected*; not prepared for it; they are not *given* any means to overcome and take a position. [...] They are in darkness, hidden from themselves (actualisation). They don’t “see” *in that direction*, they run away from themselves. [...] For the wise the day does not come (like the thief in the night) – not with a suddenness from which one cannot escape.²³

The second difficulty arises from the circumstance that, according to the *Second Letter to the Thessalonians* (2, 3-12), the *kairós* of the *parousía* would be preceded by an “apocalyptic” situation of extreme danger (war, disorder, ruin, iniquity, perdition, etc.) due to the advent of the Antichrist, whose “satanic” power would consist in misleading and deceiving believers by passing himself off as God himself (2*Thes* 2, 3-4). The *kairós* itself can therefore become ambiguous and unrecognizable, making it necessary to have a profound ethical decisiveness that unmasks the fraud of the “Adversary”, since the false Event of the Antagonist (the danger) and the truthful Event of the Messiah (salvation) are so similar:

The meaning of the announcement of the Antichrist is the following: we must recognize the Antichrist as such. [...] Based on the ability to recognize the Antichrist, one decides who is truly Christian. [...] At the sudden appearance of the Antichrist everyone must decide, and even the careless (*der Unbekümmerte*) decides by the very fact of being such. Those who remain undecided have already placed themselves outside the context of the implementation of the necessity of waiting, joining the *apollúmenoi* [lost].²⁴

Ultimately there are «two different ways of life» regarding *kairós* and *parousía* noted by Heidegger, which clearly anticipate both the fa-

²³ Ivi., pp. 197-198.

²⁴ Ivi., pp. 151-152.

mous pages of *Being and Time* about authentic and inauthentic life. On the one hand, we have the *apollūmenoi* («the outcasts (*die Verworfenen*)»), those who, deprived and forgetful of themselves, «since they have been blinded by the Lord of this world, that is, by Satan»²⁵, attach themselves to the world, «since it offers them peace and security»²⁶. Far from any eschatological-apocalyptic restlessness or anguish – from which Christian life draws its authentic lifeblood, according to Heidegger – they remain obtusely «captured by what life offers, while, as for knowing themselves, they are in the darkness»²⁷. Among these there are those who do not make the “when” of the *parousía* a decisive existential question, but rather a chronological-objective one, speculating on it with «no real personal interest in it. They remain bogged down in the mundane»²⁸. They live in wordly laziness, indecision and carelessness, busy in pure “chatting” (*schwätzen*) and in the quiet hope and expectation of the future Event. However, mere expectation and Christian hope are structurally different since, for the authentic believer, only the «*tò nûn* of the context of actualisation in which he actually finds himself is decisive, not the expectation of an event highlighted as being temporally in the future»²⁹. On the contrary, the “outcasts”, not aware of the *kairological* and “concentrated” character of the *parousía* and deceived by the appearance of the Antichrist in the guise of God, become slaves of the aforementioned without realizing it: not seeing the danger as danger, «they decay from the original care for the divine»³⁰. The chatters (*Schwätzer*), making the matter of redemption too convenient, have relieved others of the appropriate *Bekümmern* for God and themselves, condemning themselves and others to live in *Abfall*, in “decay” from themselves, therefore living an *ethical* life unprepared for an Event that will end up turning into their condemnation: «For this reason they will be *absolutely annihilated* – Paul does not know any mere post-existence (*Postexistenz*) of the damned from the distance of God – and they will

²⁵ Ivi., p. 154.

²⁶ Ivi., p. 144.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ Ivi., p. 156.

³⁰ Ivi., p. 155.

lose their *zoé*. [...] The Antichrist, *parousía of the lost*³¹.

On the other hand, there are the *klêtoi* (from *klêsis*, “vocation”), «the called (*die Berufene*)», those who, thanks to reflection on their own lives and its actualisation, live «in the “light” of self-knowledge»³². They exist precisely *in* that anguish, restlessness and existential insecurity which, against all banal hopes and expectations, finds fertile ground for the seed of an authentic “call”, at the height of desperation and necessity. Paul addresses them not to attenuate, but rather to increase the anguished tension towards themselves, to further intensify their genuine conscience and the correct resolute *éthos* in the heart of the Apocalypse, so that they can recognise the Antichrist as such and prove themselves to be true Christians. Aware that the greatest danger is not seeing the danger as such, the preacher knows that his action as master lies in ensuring that his interlocutors are always alert, resolute and prepared so that «through faith, the deception of the Antichrist can be recognized as deception»³³. Therefore, what his existential communication calls for is first and foremost the enduring, constant and radical “care” (*mállon*) of the self, necessary not only to see the danger, but above all to «keep oneself ready» to *take on* the danger itself, on the existential level, during its maximum satanic explication – as moment, place and proof of salvation:

This danger is revealed only to the man of faith, and the appearance of the Antichrist is directed against the believer, who constitutes a “test” for the wise man. [...] The appearance of the Antichrist is not a purely fleeting event, but rather something in which the fate of everyone is decided, even those who already believe.³⁴

The kairological “when” of the *parousía* thus takes on all its apocalyptic drama, remodulating both the relationship with the “significances” relating to the *Umwelt* – which are transformed into “temporal goods” – and with the world-of-others. Furthermore, a peculiar danger-salvation dialectic takes shape, which will later be summarized by Heidegger in the light of the “history of Being” (*Seinsgeschichte*) with the famous verse by Friedrich Hölderlin: «*Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das*

³¹ Ivi., pp. 155 and 203.

³² Ivi., p. 144.

³³ Ivi., p. 157.

³⁴ Ivi., p. 155.

rettende auch. [But where there is danger, / Even that which saves grows]»³⁵. This underlines the non-separability between the resoluteness of decision and the *hic et nunc* of maximum insecurity, affliction and desperation. It is to all this that the called person must correspond, with the right *éthos*, in addition to the fact that, regardless of listening to his preacher, for him

managing to enter into such an actualisation context is an almost hopeless undertaking. The Christian knows that this facticity cannot be achieved by one's own strength, but comes from God – the phenomenon of the effect of grace. [...] Actualisation surpasses the strength of man. He is not thinkable on the basis of his own strength. [...] For Paul: only God works all things in sending Christ! Therefore: not the works of man, but grace!³⁶

Therefore, due to the constitutive eschatological weakness of the proto-Christian *Dasein* towards the Events that dominate him in the history of salvation (*Heilsgeschichte*), it follows that the only possible behavior for the believer, the only self-care and wisdom (resolute and ready in his decision) which distinguishes him from the outcast, is that of a “catechontic resistance” towards the Antichrist. Here emerges the enigmatic figure of the «*katéchon* (that which holds back [*zurückhält*] the Antichrist)»³⁷, which Heidegger – unlike Carl Schmitt – interprets in a strictly existential, non-historical sense, as the ethical actualisation of Christian life: «if you remember the knowledge of faith, then you also know now and must know *tò katéchon*, the restraining force that subdues (*das niederzwingende Haltende*) [the Antichrist]»³⁸. But this means that for every believer

in the face of the Antichrist it can only be a question of resisting (*durchhalten*). [...] hold fast (*festhalten*), the fruit of pure faith. [...] *Apostasy*: its arrival also means standing firm (*feststehen*) and can only be recognized on the basis of this firmness (*Feststand*).³⁹

³⁵ ID., *La questione della tecnica*, in ID., *Saggi e discorsi*, a cura di G. Vattimo, Mursia, Milano 2016², pp. 22 and 26.

³⁶ ID., *Introduzione alla fenomenologia della religione*, cit., pp. 164-165 and 171.

³⁷ Ivi., p. 156.

³⁸ Ivi., p. 203.

³⁹ Ivi., pp. 202-203.

In the supreme danger and supreme necessity – concludes Heidegger – for Paul the most important thing «is not that you see the objective ‘when’ in it, but rather that you stand firm (*feststeht*) in it, do not waver and do not worry about the signs of the time *in this way* [...] forgetting the capital question⁴⁰ – and, as reiterated elsewhere: «Paul only says: stand firm (*steht fest*) and preserve the traditions of which you have experience»⁴¹.

Therefore emerges in this context one of the “practical-operational limits” of Heideggerian conservative ethics, since, according to this interpretation, the “actualization” of the authentic Christian life does not actually imply any particular practical “activity” on the part of the man *re-called* by time and historicity. The right *éthos* is that of vigilance and determination, but in fact it is reduced to an attitude of resistance and “catechontic” firmness towards the Event of the Antichrist, whose real defeat is not in the power of man, but exclusively of the *parousía*, Second Event of the Messiah. “Squeezed” by these two Events – and powerless in the face of both – according to Heidegger man can only meditate, watch out and resist, concentrated in a wait that is not idle and chattering, but which nevertheless remains a wait. Furthermore, here begins to emerge that conception of the role of the “called” and the “chosen” which – in the dynamics of the *Heilsgeschichte* as *Seinsgeschichte* – will remain practically unchanged throughout the German philosopher’s later works. A clear example of this are the last words of the 1935 course *Introduction to Metaphysics*, where Heidegger questions the Greek concept of “Origin” in order to open up to the even more original “New Beginning” of Thought:

Knowing how to question means knowing how to wait, even for a lifetime. [...] The essential thing is not the count, the essential thing is the opportune time, that is, the right moment and the due perseverance: “*Denn es hasset / Der sinnende Gott / Unzeitiges Wachstum*” [Because the thinking God hates / what grows at an inopportune time].⁴²

⁴⁰ Ivi., p. 203.

⁴¹ Ivi., p. 157.

⁴² ID., *Introduzione alla metafisica*, tr. di G. Masi, present. di G. Vattimo, Murcia, Milano 2015², pp. 210-211.

Reiterating the need not to abandon the question of being (*Seinsfrage*), these words would constitute the beginning of the gradual farewell from active involvement in the militant National Socialism, of which – initially – Heidegger had highlighted «the intimate truth and greatness of this movement (i.e. the encounter between planetary technology and the modern man)»⁴³. In fact, he believed that Nazism could constitute *that* ethical-political catechontic *éthos* towards Americanism and Sovietism, for Heidegger both sides of the global Technique (*Technik*), which, in an apocalyptic vision, embodied the figure of the Antichrist.

⁴³ Ivi., p. 203.

“Bio-power” in *Homo Sacer I* and *The History of Sexuality* – Agamben’s Completion and Correction of the Foucauldian “Theory of Power”

Yuting Wang
(Radboud University)

Abstract: The current research compares the power structure of biopolitics discussed by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben to determine if Agamben has “corrected” or “completed” the “Foucauldian thesis.” This paper refers mainly to Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) and Foucault’s monograph *The History of Sexuality* (1978). I argue that *Homo Sacer I* corrects and completes the “Foucauldian thesis” by applying the Foucauldian “theory of power” to the fundamental structure of politics, i.e., the symmetric relation between “sovereign power” and “bare life,” as well as the process of the production of “bare life,” which marks a paradigm shift in the realm of political philosophy.

Keywords: Bio-power, Sovereign Power, Biopolitics, Foucault, Agamben.

1. Introduction: In what sense does Agamben complete and correct the Foucauldian thesis?

In this paper, I explore the exact meaning of “correct or at least complete” the “Foucauldian thesis.” In doing so, I locate the key of connection between the two philosophers who pursue the question of “biopolitics.” I explain that the term “bio-power” indicates “old sovereign power equipped with modern knowledge-power” in the Agambenian context. Furthermore, I explain why Agamben has “corrected and completed” and Foucauldian thesis by applying it to the originary structure of politics. Agamben’s *Homo Sacer I* is more than a perfection of Foucault’s work; it is also a marked pivotal paradigm shift. Because the approaches of the two philosophers are so different, Agamben’s work cannot replace Foucault’s historical and theoretical insight.

Let us begin with the following quotation of Agamben in *Homo Sacer I*:

*“The Foucauldian thesis will then have to be corrected or, at least, completed, in the sense that what characterizes **modern politics** is **not** so much the inclusion of zoe in the polis - which is, in itself, absolutely ancient - **nor** simply the fact that life as such becomes a principal object of the projections and calculations of State power. Instead, the decisive fact is that together with the process by which the **exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life** - which is originally situated at the margins of the political order - **gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, bios and zoe, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction.**”¹*

As Agamben indicates, he will correct or at least complete Foucault's thesis. This triggers many misunderstandings. Let us take a closer look at Agamben's expression. First of all, imagine that we are “in Agambenian shoes.” From this standpoint, do I believe *Homo Sacer I* to be a correction of the Foucauldian thesis? Or completion of it? Or both? Or neither?

Under normal circumstances, when I declare “I am going to correct something, or at least complete it,” do I actually want to correct it or complete it? Of course I want to, and possibly think that I have already accomplished my goal. At the beginning part of this paper, I refrain from making a judgment on whether Agamben has accomplished what he claims to do. Rather, in regard to what Agamben intends to do, I point out the nuance between “a project of correction” and “a project of completion.”

In the usual sense, “completion” means the action of pushing something to its final stage; and “project of completion” is for the sole purpose, or at least main purpose, of accomplishing such perfection. This indicates “completion” is built ON the “original.” Instead of perfecting the Foucauldian thesis and nurturing it to maturity, however, Agamben “uprooted” and “re-planted” it in his system of political philosophy built around “sovereign power,” “exception,” and “bare life.” If one believes that Agamben promises to deliver “a project of comple-

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 9. In this article, quotations are highlighted in bold by the author.

tion” of the “Foucauldian thesis,” it is certainly reasonable that one would deem the Agambenian project a failure or even a betrayal.

Criticism of Agamben’s claim was initiated because he diverted his discussion from the historical-genealogical train of thought to a structural analysis of the power mechanism of modern bio-politics. Above all, Agamben’s subversion of the “Foucauldian thesis” is fundamental: Foucault believes “sovereign power” and “bio-power” to be two distinct techniques of power, while Agamben believes the former to be the “originary structure” and the latter merely “characteristic.” This distinction is developed further below.

I propose that *Homo Sacer I* is mainly a “project that corrects” the “Foucauldian thesis,” and that the completion of the Foucault thesis is a secondary task of Agamben’s discussion. As for the difference between the tasks of “completion” and “correction,” Paul Patton claims that, “[h]is ‘correction’ of Foucault consists of the claim that the entry of bare life into the sphere of political calculation and the exercise of sovereign power involved **no radical transformation of political-philosophical categories**... His ‘completion’ of Foucault draws upon his own account of the manner in which bare life was originally included in the political realm, namely in the form of an ‘inclusive exclusion’...”²

I mostly agree with Patton’s argument. I disagree with Patton’s assumption, however, that the discussion of how “bare life” is included in the political realm by “exclusion” is the “completion” of the Foucauldian thesis. In my opinion, the two aspects that Patton mentions both belong to the category of “correction,” and Agamben’s “completion” of the Foucauldian thesis is carried out in the discussion of how doctors and scientists exercise power on biological life. Also, Agamben suggests that Foucault’s research has revealed a “hidden point of intersection between the juridico-institutional and the biopolitical models of power,”³ but he fails to elaborate the latter. Agamben’s investigation into Nazism certainly explores this “hidden point.” Therefore, it is legitimate to define such an investigation as “completion.”

² Paul Patton, “Agamben and Foucault on Biopower and Biopolitics,” in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life* (California: Stanford University Press, 2007), 205.

³ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 4.

2. “Bio-power”: the Foucauldian thesis and the Agambenian thesis

Foucault’s approach to the study of power is historical, not theoretical. “The goal of my work during the last twenty years has not been to analyze the phenomena of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis. My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects.”⁴ Because the Agambenian system of power is highly “theoretical,” by contrast, Agamben may have brought the theory of power to another level; nonetheless, his theory of power cannot replace the “Foucauldian thesis.” I also want to apply quotation marks to “biopower” and “sovereign power” throughout this paper to emphasize the fact that these two powers in the Foucauldian context and the Agambenian paradigm are not identical. To be precise, in the Foucauldian context, “biopower” and “sovereign power” are equal in importance to techniques of power, while the Agambenian “sovereign power” in modernity is of a “biopolitical character,” i.e., one “sovereign power” is fundamental, the other characteristic.

What is the “Foucauldian thesis” mentioned by Agamben? And what does the “Agambenian thesis” look like after its “correction” of the “Foucauldian thesis”? To answer these two questions, I first point out that the “Foucauldian thesis” mentioned here is not the same as Foucault’s own opinion, but Agamben’s interpretation of Foucault’s thought. Therefore, our answer will not be in one of Foucault’s works, but in *Homo Sacer I*. I think we can find the answer to the first question on page 3 of the book: “At the threshold of the modern era, natural life begins to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of State power, and politics turns into biopolitics.” As you may have observed, this quote is compatible with our central quotation mentioned at the beginning of this article. As can be seen from the two quotes, the “Foucauldian thesis” defined by Agamben describes a form of power that is modern, and the kind of life included in such a “power structure” is “natural life” (as compared to “bare life”).

On March 17th, 1976, Foucault used the phrase “bio-politics” for the first time during one of his lectures (which was later published under

⁴ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777. Quotation adapted for clarity by the present author.

the name *Society Must Be Defended*). He defines bio-politics as a new technique of power.⁵ As a historian of power, Foucault finds bio-politics to be a very modern form of politics. And its core feature is the exercise of "bio-power."

Foucault believes classic sovereign power to be a power that manifests itself through its "right" to decide on life and death⁶ and it is exercised especially when the "sovereign" is under threat. In the classical model of power, the law represents the will of sovereignty, and whoever disobeys the law is considered a violation of the sovereign's will and must be punished. Unlike this violent and repressive sovereign power, bio-power does not exercise itself through making the threat of death or express itself as the right to take life or to let live, but to "optimize and increase life."⁷ This indicates the divorce between "power" and "sovereignty"; for instance, in modernity, doctors and scientists do not derive their power from sovereignty.

As described In *The History of Sexuality*, bio-power has two forms: disciplinary power and biopolitical power. The former is an anatomo-politics of the human body and the latter a bio-politics of the population.⁸ Biopower is the power to manage and regulate the process of life. The two forms both rely on the structure of knowledge-power, as compared to the violence-based power of classic sovereignty. The fundamental difference between classic sovereign power and modern bio-power is the replacement of "laws" with "norms." Law is external repression and applies to the human body in its entirety, but norms can affect human bodies by the right to **define normality**.

Such a right to define is the fundamental nature of "bio-power." According to Aristotle, humans are political animals. For Foucault, however, the animality of humans becomes the center of politics. Subjects are objectified. Or, as Agamben quotes Foucault, "modern man is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being into ques-

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (London: Picador, 2003), 242.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I-An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 136.

⁷ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 143.

⁸ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 139.

tion.”⁹ Therefore, I think Agamben’s interpretation of the “Foucauldian thesis” is mostly in accordance with Foucault’s own theory.

What does the “Agambenian thesis” look like after its “correction” of the “Foucauldian thesis”? Has Agamben “corrected” Foucault? The “Agambenian thesis,” in the sense of a “corrected Foucauldian thesis,” can be seen at the end of *Homo Sacer I*: “The fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as an originary political element and as the threshold of articulation between nature and culture, zoe and bios.” In other words, the “Agambenian thesis” refers to the mechanism of modern “sovereign power” and the power of biopolitical character, and how it produces “bare life.”

The key connection between the two theses is “biopolitics.” Agamben describes the process of bio-politics: “the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power. It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power. In this sense, biopolitics is at least as old as the sovereign exception.”¹⁰ The key feature of “biopolitics” is the exercise of “sovereign power” on “bare life.” “Sovereign power” and “bare life” define each other mutually: “bare life” is the “natural life” that “sovereign power” has worked on and “sovereign power” is the kind of power that produces “bare life” since the dawn of politics (the process is achieved through exclusive inclusion). Therefore, the key to the Agambenian “correction” is actually “bio-power” and the correspondent “sovereign power.” It is worth mentioning that Agamben only uses the word “bio-power” once in *Homo Sacer I*, to describe the “power theory” of Foucault.

In *History of Sexuality*, “bio-power” is compared to “disciplinary power”¹¹ and “sovereign power.” The difference between “bio-power” and “disciplinary power” is that “bio-power” works at the level of the population while “disciplinary power” works on the level of individual bodies. The difference between “bio-power” and “sovereign power” is that the latter is classic “power of deduction” and “right of seizure,”¹²

⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 6.

¹⁰ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 6.

¹¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 139-145.

¹² Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 136.

while the former is a “positive influence” to “optimize” life.¹³ For Patton, “biopower required the development of **new mechanisms and new forms of knowledge** to identify its objects and to facilitate its exercise.”¹⁴ For Patton, “bio-power” has the power to define and decide. In modernity, who is holding the power to define and decide on the matter of biological life? Doctors and scientists, i.e., the representatives of knowledge-power.

In chapters *VP* and *Politicizing Death*, Agamben presents how doctors and scientists have penetrated the realm of “sovereign” decision-making (in the Foucauldian sense of the term “sovereign”) and gained the multi-polarized power to define life and death themselves. For example, in 1959, two physiologists created the concept of “overcoma”¹⁵ and, in 1968, a medical committee invented a new criterion of “definition of death” called “brain death.”¹⁶ In modernity, the right of life and death, i.e., “sovereign power” in the Foucauldian sense, belongs no longer exclusively to a “sovereign” but is transformed into knowledge power and distributed among experts, especially medical and population scientists. This “power” is by nature “Foucauldian sovereign power” over life and death, but it is incorporated in the modern mechanism of “knowledge power.”

If the phenomenon of “experts wielding power” is interpreted as the mechanism to improve the species, then this power is “Foucauldian bio-power.” If it is explained in terms of a “sovereignty,” then it is still the “Foucauldian sovereign-power.” But are we able to make such a distinction? By pointing out this ambiguity and attributing biological features to life-and-death-deciding sovereign power, Agamben has “completed” the Foucauldian thesis.

It is clear that the “Agambenian thesis” is an updated “Foucauldian sovereign power” with a biological character. Or, the Agambenian “sovereign power” is first the fundamental structure of political power, and second a classic sovereign power armed with the modern power of knowledge. This intrinsic connection between the “biopolitics” and “sovereign power,” between features and essence, is what Agamben de-

¹³ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 137.

¹⁴ Patton, “Agamben and Foucault,” 209.

¹⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 160.

¹⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 162.

scribes as “the point at which these two faces of power converge” (which “remains strangely unclear” in Foucault’s work, according to Agamben) and a “unitary theory of power.”¹⁷

3. Conclusion: More than Correction

In the Agambenian context, the sovereign is both outside and inside the law and provides the legitimacy of the law while remaining out of its control. It can apply the law by the suspension of it. Through the symmetric process of inclusion of exclusion, the sovereign power includes “bare life” in its dominance by excluding it from the protection of the law by declaring a “state of exception.” In such a process, the creation of bare life is the fundamental activity of sovereign power.¹⁸ Therefore, Agamben’s correction of Foucault is the “re-entry” of “sovereign power” into modernity, and also the revelation that biological life (bare life) has always been at the hands of sovereign power.

Agamben’s analysis of bio-politics reveals the dilemma of modern liberal democracy: it is powerless in front of the structural mechanism of “sovereign power” and its symmetric “bare life.” Agamben writes: “The sovereign and homo sacer present two symmetrical figures that have the same structure and are correlative: The sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and homo sacer is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns.”¹⁹ Because bare life is the fundamental production of the mechanism of politics described by Agamben, and sovereign power is highly scattered to the extent that it can be wielded by any “expert,” everyone is in danger of facing the temptation of becoming everyone else’s homo sacer or sovereign. With such an astonishing perspective on liberty, rights, modernity, and democracy, Agamben’s work has marked a paradigm shift in the study of political philosophy.

¹⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 5.

¹⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 181.

¹⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 84.

Kant's *First Critique* and the Ineffectiveness of Transcendental Arguments

Matthew Clemons
(Stony Brook University)

Abstract: In this essay, I show that transcendental arguments, which have their origins in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, are inherently vulnerable to the type of rebuttal common today in analytic philosophy: that whatever is doubted but is the condition for the possibility of something necessary need not actually be, but only be believed to be. I begin by exploring what transcendental arguments are and why they purportedly work. I then summarize the consensus opinion in analytic philosophy that they are ineffective. Finally, I situate them within the context of Kant's *First Critique* to show why they must be ineffective.

Keywords: Kant, Transcendental Arguments, Skepticism, A Priori, Appearance/Being, Analytic Philosophy

The topic of this essay is transcendental arguments, those arguments that attempt to prove that some contested thing must be actual or real because it is the condition for the possibility of something whose reality cannot be contested. I show that, given that this sort of argument has its origins in Kantian transcendental philosophy, it always suffers from something like Kant's contention that there is a rift between the phenomenal and the noumenal, or appearance and being. For this reason, it is vulnerable to the type of rebuttal common today in analytic philosophy that whatever is doubted but is the condition for the possibility of something necessary need not actually be, but only be believed to be. I begin by exploring what transcendental arguments are and why they work. I then summarize the now consensus opinion in analytic philosophy that they are ineffective. Finally, I situate them within the context of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* as a means of showing why they must be ineffective.

The term "transcendental argument" is thought to originate in J.L. Austin's essay "Are There A Priori Concepts,"¹ although certainly there

¹ J.L. Austen, "Are There a Priori Concepts?" in *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O.

are arguments that precede Austin's coinage that qualify as what we now refer to as transcendental arguments.² Transcendental arguments attempt to prove against a skeptic the legitimacy of some disputed thing x on the grounds that it is the condition for the possibility of some indisputable thing y . The x variable here is almost always some structurally foundational feature of experience that transcends subjectivity, e.g., the existence of other minds, the external world, or objectivity as such. The y variable is usually experience as such, language, etc. As Ralph C.S. Walker puts it, "roughly, transcendental arguments are arguments of the form 'There is experience; it is a condition of the possibility of experience that P ; therefore P .'" ³ While the variables in transcendental arguments are commonly interpreted as *mental* (y) and *non-mental* facts (x), this need not be the case. What is crucially important is that the y variable is or is taken to be apodictic. In post-Cartesian transcendental arguments, the apodictic variable usually is, broadly speaking, something "mental," so long as "mental" is interpreted broadly enough. The appeal of transcendental arguments is that, insofar as they package the dubitable with the indubitable they promise to deflate the skeptic's challenge all at once and to restore our faith in the disputed ontological truths.

Why do transcendental arguments work? The skeptic, to whom transcendental arguments respond, challenges the legitimacy of some knowledge claim. However innocuous or even preposterous the challenge to that initial knowledge claim may seem, it can always be further radicalized such that any attempt to justify or prove empirically the legitimacy of the original knowledge claim will fail. If I assert that the sun will rise tomorrow and the skeptic, seemingly absurdly, demands some sort of justification, I might offer as a reason that it always has. That it "always has," however, is an intra-mundane, empirical observation and can easily be countered with other possible or actual empirical instances

Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 32–54.

² Robert Stern, in his monograph on transcendental arguments, attributes the "term in its current sense" to Austin. See Robert Stern, *Transcendental Arguments and Skepticism: Answering the Question of Justification* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004).

³ Ralph C.S. Walker, "Kant and Transcendental Arguments," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006) p. 238.

in which the awaited event does not occur. The skeptic might eventually furnish several arguments that undermine the notion that there can be certainty about future events at all, e.g., that just because something has always happened does not mean that it always will, that the sun might finally give out tomorrow. If I say that the sun has certainly risen *today* or, better yet, that the sun is rising *right now*, the skeptic might target the faculties or capacities, i.e., memory and perception, by which I apprehend that the sun has or is coming up—perception can fail, as can memory, etc. While any of these arguments in isolation might seem absurd, and maybe they are in fact absurd, they have the effect of undermining *any attempt* at justifying how we know what we know.

While forms of skepticism can be distinguished from one another by their motive, they share this strategy in common.⁴ If skepticism is carried to its logical conclusion, it intentionally casts everything into doubt. Consider Descartes's demon, who undermines even the certainty of analytic propositions, or the brain-in-a-vat thought experiment, which hypothesizes that we are all brains in vats and have no actual experience of anything real. Importantly, then, while the strategy involves using a particular argument, the skeptic's challenge is meta-epistemological. It is not directed towards the legitimacy of the specific knowledge claim, but towards the legitimacy of knowledge *as such*.

Philosophically expressed, one of the pervasive features of the skeptic's objection is the insight that empirical criteria for empirical knowledge are unhelpful because, in order to know that the criteria themselves are reliable, we would have to presuppose them. Transcendental arguments attempt to exploit the objection by seizing on the extra-empirical, that which is prior to experience (*a priori*). The anti-

⁴ The Pyrrhonian skeptics, for instance, are quite different than the Protagoreans. Nevertheless, the compiled list of "ten modes of opposition," particular observations that the skeptic keeps at hand to deploy against knowledge claims with the goal of suspending judgment on all knowledge claims, is well-known. If none of the ten modes seems appropriate in a given situation, the Pyrrhonian has in reserve a trump-all argument: "it is possible that the argument opposing the one you have just propounded is really there in nature but is not yet apparent to us; so we should not yet assent to what is now thought to be a powerful argument." See Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, trans. J. Annas and J. Barnes. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), p. 8.

skeptic argues that the *a priori* is necessary for the objection to make any sense but that the skeptic takes it for granted insofar as whatever has been cast into doubt has this non-empirical as a condition for its possibility. In this way, the *a priori* is used to reestablish whatever has been called into question. Walker helpfully points out that the phrase “conditions for the possibility” mean *a priori* necessary conditions and thus “offer a way of answering the skeptic and providing justification for knowledge claims.”⁵ Descartes’s argument for the certainty of the *cogito* is helpful. I can imagine that I am deceived about everything that I think I know *except* that I am. For even if I am deceived about everything, I must *be* in order to be deceived, therefore I cannot be deceived about my being. Another way to state this is that my own self-experience is invulnerable to any empirical objection because any empirical objection is going to presuppose it, even the one that most radically attempts to cast a shadow of doubt over it.

For at least a time, transcendental arguments were pervasive in analytic philosophy. Nevertheless, since Barry Stroud’s 1968 article “Transcendental Arguments,”⁶ analytic philosophers have widely accepted that transcendental arguments fall short of establishing the necessary truth of whatever it is that the skeptic doubts. In the article itself, after closely analyzing two prominent transcendental arguments, Stroud comes to the conclusion that there is good reason to think that all transcendental arguments in themselves are not able to bridge the gap between the claim that some doubted *x* is necessary for some other apodictic *y* and the claim that *x* is the case. All transcendental arguments alike fail, per the consensus opinion, because the skeptic can always hesitate to accept the certainty beyond all doubt. For this reason, all transcendental arguments in general depend on what he calls the verification principle.⁷ The verification principle is that in-theory criterion by which I

⁵ Raph C.S. Walker, “Kant and Transcendental Arguments,” p. 239.

⁶ Barry Stroud, “Transcendental Arguments,” *Journal of Philosophy* 65 (1968): pp. 241–56.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 255. Stroud’s essay begins with a reading of Peter Strawson’s argument in *Individuals*. He renders the starting premise and conclusion of that argument as follows: “We think of the world as containing objective particulars in a single spatiotemporal system” and “objects continue to exist unperceived” (p. 245), and also emphasizes Strawson’s point that the skeptic’s

could verify that what must be the case actually is the case. It provides criteria independent of the argument for accepting that what must appear to be actually is. The issue with the necessity of invoking the verification principle is that, with it, transcendental arguments are redundant, and without it, transcendental arguments are ineffective. Robert Stern's analysis of the typical objections to transcendental arguments nicely captures both of these problems. He divides the objection into two stages. In the first stage, the anti-skeptic claims that some truth that the skeptic doubts is a condition for the possibility of something undeniable. As examples of something undeniable, Stern points to language and experience, whereas the doubted truth would be something like the assertion that there is an external world. At this point, the skeptic can claim that it is enough that we believe the doubted truth to be true, not that it actually be true, to which the anti-skeptic must respond with some version of the verification principle. The verification principle, according to Stern, asserts that "a proposition can only be meaningful or intelligible to us, if we are able to confirm or disconfirm it."⁸ The skeptic's objection, then, amounts to the claim that the notion of an external world can be necessary as a condition for the possibility of something undeniable without my being able to confirm its veracity. Without the verification principle, which bridges the gap between something as necessary and something as actual, the transcendental argument is ineffectual. In the second stage, the verification principle is invoked. The transcendental argument is now redundant because, as Stern puts it, the idea that some-

doubt of the conclusion only makes sense if the former is true. What Stroud, rejects, however, is that this conclusion follows from the premise. Even if the skeptic's doubt that the external world subsists only makes sense within the conceptual scheme, it cannot be deduced, as Strawson would have it, from the conceptual scheme that objects continue to exist unperceived. According to Stroud, all that has been established is that the skeptic needs some sort of satisfiable criterion on which to ground re-identification. Absent something more, the skeptic can always counter that in order for this to yield the conclusion that material objects continue to exist, you would need a premise that establishes that our criterion for re-identification is sufficient to prove that unobserved material objects persist. This criterion, Stroud calls the verification principle.

⁸ Stern, *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism*: p. 45.

thing is meaningful only if it is true has enough strength to take on the skeptic without any use of transcendental arguments—nevermind that verificationism on its own is unlikely to make any headway against the skeptic who would probably deny that a proposition must be true in order to be meaningful. The proponent of the transcendental argument might object that it is enough merely to believe, but then we run into the issue of how we can justifiably claim that some things are. Stern calls this the modal objection.⁹ With it, we are exactly where we started, trying to justify how we know what we know.

Transcendental arguments are often traced back historically to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and not only with regard to their form, but also with regard to their content. Kant's use of transcendental arguments is inseparable from his epistemological project as a whole. Not only do his transcendental arguments bear something of the critical stamp, contemporary transcendental arguments do as well. In fact, it is this epistemological context that leaves them vulnerable to Stroud's criticism. For that reason, I now give a brief overview of the project of the *First Critique* and situate Kant's use of transcendental arguments within that project. The goal of the *First Critique*, like most varieties of transcendental philosophy, is to justify knowledge. Kant's attempt is in one sense unique in that it seeks to delimit knowledge, at once affirming it as universal and necessary but limiting its domain. Put differently, to *critique* reason means for Kant to set limits on what reason can justifiably know as well as to affirm within those limits that reason *can* know. Kant's project, and thus his use of transcendental arguments in ultimately justifying knowledge, are formed with an eye to this extra-philosophical desire to delimit. As such, transcendental arguments retain something of the Kantian rift between the phenomenal and noumenal.

In their introduction to the Cambridge translation of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Paul Guyer and Allen Wood describe Kant's project as a "middle way" between a variety of competing philosophical positions, ("dogmatism, empiricism, skepticism, and indifferentism"), but above all "that of traditional metaphysics, especially its attempts to bolster a theistic view of the world with *a priori* rational arguments, and a skepticism that would undercut the claims of modern natural science along

⁹ Ibid.: p. 46.

with those of religious metaphysics.”¹⁰ The issue with traditional metaphysics is its presumptuousness in claiming knowledge about God and the freedom and immortality of the soul; the issue with skepticism is 1) its eschewing of all universal and necessary (a priori) knowledge and rejection of the certainty of modern science and 2) its undermining of the notion of human freedom, which is crucial to moral action. Kant’s “middle way” is to limit, but nevertheless affirm the a priori knowledge of metaphysics and to relocate belief in freedom and the immortality of the soul to practical reason as its necessary postulates. Thus, Kant can retain both the “certainty of modern science and the possibility of human freedom.”¹¹

In the *First Critique*, the investigation takes on the guise of a question, namely how synthetic a priori judgments are possible. Insofar as it becomes less important to describe how the mind knows than to justify within a certain scope the universality and necessity of knowledge, the question of the synthetic a priori is already tied up with the goal of limiting knowledge.¹² Synthetic judgments are those that “add to the concept of the subject a predicate that was not thought in it at all, and could not have been extracted from it through analysis.”¹³ A synthetic judgment goes beyond an analytic judgment (one that does not add a predicate not

¹⁰ Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, “Introduction”, in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), p. 20.

¹¹ Ibid.: 2. They continue: “Kant had to fight a war on several different fronts, in which he had to establish the unanswerability of many metaphysical questions against both dogmatists and empiricists but also defend parts of the positions he was attacking, such as the possibility of a priori cognition of the fundamental principles of natural science, against both empiricists and skeptics. And while he wanted to prove to the indifferentists that a science of metaphysics is important, he also wanted to embrace part of their position, since he thought that in regard to some insoluble metaphysical questions, indeed the most important of them, we can defend a kind of commonsense belief—in God, freedom and immortality—because our moral outlook has an inescapable stake in them.” (p. 3)

¹² See also Paul Ricoeur, “Kant and Husserl”, in *Husserl: An Analysis of his Phenomenology*, trans. Edward G. Ballard and Lester E. Embree (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1967).

¹³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*: A7/B11.

contained in the meaning of a subject) such as “bachelors are unmarried men” in adding, for instance, that Frank is a bachelor. In this example, we can see why, for Kant, all synthetic judgments are impure, i.e., based on experience, namely because experience supplies the grounds for synthesizing the extra-conceptual predicate and the subject.¹⁴ I know that *Frank* is a bachelor because I have experienced (I know) Frank. But if synthetic judgments are based on experience, and if experience yields no a priori knowledge, then it seems like the phrase “synthetic *a priori*” is oxymoronic. The problem of synthetic a priori knowledge is the problem of how we have universal and necessary knowledge about the world independent of experience. Why is it so important for Kant that synthetic a priori knowledge be possible? The sciences, metaphysics included, make use of synthetic judgments as principles.¹⁵ If the sciences rely on synthetic judgments, judgments that originate in experience, then they have no right to claim a priori knowledge. The problem is, however, that experience cannot yield *a priori* knowledge, for the a priori for Kant is by definition independent of experience.¹⁶

As is well-known, Kant overcomes the problem of the synthetic a priori with a philosophical move that he likens to the Copernican revolution in cosmology from geocentric to heliocentric models of the universe. Instead of assuming that our minds must conform to objects, as Kant claims all metaphysics up to that point had done, he asserts that it is actually objects that must conform to our minds.¹⁷ He then argues that we can have a priori knowledge of objects of experience because they necessarily appear in accordance with the structures of the mind. The intelligibility of experience is a result of synthesizing the content of sensibility, the impressions, with the form of the a priori categories of the understanding. On account of this synthesis, knowledge is synthetic. On account of the a priori categories of the understanding, it is a priori.

¹⁴ Ibid.: A7-10/B11-4.

¹⁵ Ibid.: B14-18.

¹⁶ Experience, according to Kant, “tells us, to be sure, what is, but never that it must necessarily be thus and not otherwise. For that very reason it gives us no true universality,” (A1) whereas a priori “cognitions” are those “universal cognitions, which at the same time have the character of inner necessity.” (A2)

¹⁷ Ibid.: Bxvi ff.

Why does this framing reflect Kant's desire to limit knowledge? As a priori, knowledge both retains the characteristics of universal and necessary that Kant does not want to forfeit to skepticism and is independent of experience such that Kant can limit the reach of the dogmatic metaphysicians. As synthetic, this universality and necessity of knowledge is nevertheless applicable to experience while at the same time being relativized to beings with the sorts of minds that we have. It is this sort of philosophical position that will turn out to be the Achilles' heel of transcendental arguments, namely that something might be universal and necessary, but only *for us*.

Kant identifies two cognitive capacities that work together to structure experience, sensibility and understanding.¹⁸ Sensibility, according to Kant, is the purely passive capacity to be affected by objects. As purely passive, sensibility merely receives unstructured impressions that have no inherent order or sequencing other than through the two a priori forms of sensible intuition, namely space and time. Understanding, which is itself not capable of receiving impressions, is responsible for providing the concepts by which the sensible material is structured in accordance with the sensible forms of intuition. Sensibility and understanding, then, are mutually dependent. As Kant famously puts it, "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."¹⁹ Still, whatever intelligibility the objects of appearance have is the work of the Understanding. The most glaring epistemological consequence is that space, time, and the concepts (logical categories) that enable experience *are not inherent in things*, but are necessary conditions for their appearance. This is reflective of the well-known Kantian rift between what appears, the phenomenal, and what is, the noumenal, the object as it is in-itself. This doctrine, Kant's own special brand of transcendental idealism, holds, according to Guyer and Wood that "it is only from the human standpoint that we can speak of space, time, and the spatiotemporality of the objects of experience, thus that we cognize these things not as they are in themselves, but only as they appear under the conditions of our sensibility."²⁰

It still remains to be shown what this has to do with transcendental arguments. The categories of the understanding to which objects must conform guarantee synthetic, a priori knowledge cannot be arrived at

¹⁸ Ibid.: A19/B33.

¹⁹ Ibid.: A51/B75.

²⁰ Guyer and Wood, "Introduction": p. 8.

through experience, so Kant needs some way of justifying how and what categories of the understanding are legitimate. Kant calls the explanation of how the categories relate to objects of experience the “Transcendental Deduction.” His argument is in the form of a transcendental argument. In a nutshell, Kant argues that there are two conditions that make possible experience of an object: that we have 1) an intuition and 2) a concept. In other words, without concepts, experience is not possible. Those categories of the Understanding without which experience would be impossible, then, are legitimate.²¹ Thus, what is uncertain, namely the legitimacy of the categories of the understanding (x) is justified through the fact that without them experience (y) would not be possible.

This gap between the phenomenal and noumenal opens up the space to question whether or not it is sufficient for, e.g., the categories of the understanding to work *for us* rather than to say anything about what actually is.²² This is further reflected in the fact that, for Kant, experience does not mean what we might assume, namely something like our conscious life and its flow.²³ Instead, it is derived from the natural sciences. That the gap between appearance and being leaves transcendental arguments vulnerable is reflective of the now consensus opinion

²¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*: A92ff./B125ff.

²² There is no consensus on how to reconcile the distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal and the argument for the actual existence of the external world in the “Refutation.” This suggestion is in line with Stern, who thinks that Kant’s opponent is the one who doubts, not just that we know the external world, but whether we must believe in it. This softens the claim of the “Refutation,” but invites the problem that it does not match what Kant says there. Margaret Wilson thinks that, rather than implying some break with the characterizations of Sensibility and the Understanding, what is peculiar about Kant’s project is that, “unlike traditional idealism, implies the subjectivity of space and time as forms of intuition without denying the real existence of the objects distinct from ourselves that are represented as being in space and time.” (p. 212) Nevertheless, she acknowledges the possibility of interpreting it this way. See Margaret Wilson, “Kant and the Refutation of Subjectivism”, in *Kant’s Theory of Knowledge*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1974), pp. 208–17.

²³ There are certainly other transcendental arguments in the *First Critique*, three to be exact: the Transcendental Deduction, which I have just discussed, the Second Analogy, which takes up the question of the legitimacy of causality, and the Refutation of Idealism, which has to do with the external world. Both the Second Analogy and the Refutation of Idealism are vulnerable to similar criticisms.

of analytic philosophers that transcendental arguments have failed and must fail to deliver on the promise of a full-stop refutation of skepticism.²⁴ For the transcendental argument, first, legitimizes the notion that there is a rift between appearance and being and, second, circumscribes itself within the domain of appearances. Within the realm of appearances, the skeptic might concede that something is necessary. Nevertheless, accepting the assumption that undergirds transcendental arguments, that does not mean that this necessity *be*.

²⁴ Upon examination, this space is available in Peter Strawson's arguments as well. In the introduction of his book *Individuals*, Strawson distinguishes between revisionary and descriptive metaphysics. The latter, of which his book is a "modest version," "aims to lay bare the most general features of our conceptual schema." (p. 9). Strawson characterizes our conceptual scheme as "how we think of the world" (p. 15), where this "how" seems for him to have a sense of necessity. The thinking of particulars in a spatiotemporal nexus, an example of how we think of the world, must then be characterized as a conceptual scheme. If it is merely a conceptual scheme, however, then it is possible that the skeptic accepts that it must be believed, but reserves judgment about its truth or reality. The objection is, in essence, that it seems enough merely to believe that such and such is the case, but that this does not therefore establish its truth. See Peter Strawson, *Individuals* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

Eating Ethically

Leonie Overbeek

(PhD Candidate, University of Sofia)

Abstract: This paper considers the implications of food and how, in the food chain, ethics is absent as life preys on death. The information from current research in biology and the metabolic actions of micro-organisms considered to be at the bottom of the food chain are considered. Additionally, from an ethical and ecological perspective, the arguments for and against eating animals, as opposed to eating only plants, are discussed. Finally, the way in which distance from the origins of food in modern society is considered.

Key Words: environmental ethics, veganism, factory farming, ecology, processed food, community gardens, pro-environmental eating

“Good food is the foundation of genuine happiness.”
Auguste Escoffier¹.

Not only is food the foundation of happiness, but it is the foundation of life. Nothing that is alive can stay alive without food, at least not for a prolonged period. Food, ultimately, is things that were once themselves alive. Even plants do not manufacture their nutrients solely from photosynthesis, since plants need the nutrients provided by decaying organic matter leaching into the soil². In jungles and forests, soil is enriched by fallen leaves, dead trees, dead insects, animal droppings, small animal corpses and the like. In oceans and waterways, algae grow and thrive in nutrient-rich areas which sometimes leads to algae blooms or red tides³. In short, plants cannot thrive in the absence of nutrients such as nitrogen, potassium, calcium and other elements that are released when corpses decay.

¹ The original French reads: “La bonne cuisine est la base du veritable bonheur.” https://www.azquotes.com/author/31091-Auguste_Escoffier .

² Robert E Pettit. Organic Matter, Humus, Humate, Humic Acid, Fulvic Acid and Humin: Their Importance in Soil Fertility and Plant Health. *CTI Research* 10 (2004): 1-7.

³ “It is generally accepted that a bloom is initiated as a result of the interplay between numerous environmental factors — physical (e.g., turbulence, light), chemical (e.g., nutrient availability) and biological (e.g., relief of grazing pressure).” Guy Schleyer and Assaf Vardi. *Current Biology* 30.19 (2020): R1116-R1118.

However, the fact that plants and algae are able to utilize water and sunlight to produce and grow cells laden with carbohydrates, sugars and proteins makes them the so-called “bottom of the food chain” providing needed nutrients to other life forms unable to photosynthesize. It is easy for humans who feel ethically challenged by eating sentient creatures such as birds, animals and fish to switch to a diet based on plants, since they, after all, are not sentient. They are unthinking bio-factories storing up energy that can then be assimilated by the more sentient species.

As Shakespeare would say, “Ay, there’s the rub.”⁴ The more research that is done on plant communities, the more evidence emerges that communication does take place among them⁵. If we think of life as something that metabolizes, grows and dies, then plants, moss, algae, insects and animals are all alive; if we grant that premise, what we eat is a corpse from which life departed, whether that corpse is a plant or an animal.

I use the word “corpse” deliberately to point to our ethical dilemma: we eat the newly dead. We eat, with varying degrees of pleasure, that which was alive and now is no longer alive. Whether we eat plants or animals, we eat dead things. Is it simple sophistry to claim that plants are *killed* to provide food? After all, plants don’t squeal at the butcher’s knife, so it is easy to dismiss their deaths. If you doubt that a plant is alive and is then killed by being harvested, however, leave some lettuce, tomatoes and carrots in your fridge for a few weeks and see the decay that takes place. For us as human beings, with our development of reason, and our empathy with those suffering emotional distress, this killing to live is also a dilemma.

In many instances, we can get around this dilemma generally by not associating the food with the corpse. Just consider how English speaks, not of dead pigs, but of pork. Sheep become lamb (even though, if we were honest, this should be more offensive since the lamb is a cuddly baby sheep), cows become beef, and birds become poultry. In

⁴ William Shakespeare. “Hamlet. Act 3, Scene 1.” *Shakespeare Complete Works*, ed. W.J. Craig. Oxford University Press, London. 1971. p 886.

⁵ “Plants perceive information regarding light, water, other nutrients, touch, herbivores, pathogens, mycorrhizae, and nitrogen-fixing bacteria. Plants also emit cues perceived by other plants, beneficial microbes, herbivores, enemies of herbivores, pollinators, and seed dispersers.” Richard Karban. “Plant communication.” *Annual Review of Ecology, Evolution, and Systematics* 52 (2021): 1-24.

this way, we objectify the animal into a consumable, since objects generally exist to be used. Of course, we do not do in regard to plants, since they have long been thought of as objects with no real life. So, no euphemisms for carrots, tomatoes, broccoli, peaches, plums and grapes. We simply eat fruit and vegetables.

At this point, I wish to diverge from the carnivore vs. vegetarian dichotomy. The fact is that humans are omnivores, able to eat and assimilate energy from both animal and vegetable. If we were ruminants, the strictest vegetarian group of animals, we would have multiple stomachs, able to break down the cellulose fibers of grass or leaves to extract their energy. If we were nut and seed eaters, we would have a gizzard in which small stones and muscular contractions break down the hard hulls to get to the digestible centers. Instead, like our cousins the apes, monkeys, bears, etc., we have teeth that can tear (for flesh) and grind (for plants and nuts) and thereby do a lot of pre-digestion of our food. In other words, we belong to a class of animals able to survive globally, and survive the elimination of any single foodstuff, since we can utilize any source of energy we find. Of course, ever since man's mastery of fire for cooking, we break down our food by processing it, rather than by simply grinding and digesting it.

Our ethical problem with food is perhaps best illustrated by the famous thought experiment that poses the trolley/train dilemma: You have a vehicle travelling on a fixed track, the brakes have failed, and there is a switch you can throw to make it veer to another track. However, on both tracks there are people—five on one, one on the other. Do you kill one person to save five? Either way, someone ends up dying. For food, the same applies – do you eat plants alone? or do you eat everything? Either way, something dies. For some reason, we are living in a universe operating on the principle that energy has to be assimilated at the cost of the death of other living beings. Death frees the locked nutrients that the organism has stored in cells and fat. How you proceed to kill your food, and what food you kill, are the two questions of the dilemma we face of either living by killing, or dying by not killing.

Can we continue to live, knowing that our lives depend on the death of other life? What is ethical about that? Should we become as

mindless as the antelope browsing on the acacia tree⁶, only to fall prey to the leopard tomorrow who feeds us to her cubs with nary a thought about the rightness or wrongness of the action? As human beings, we have, along with intellect and reason, developed a heightened sense of empathy in the face of suffering. This is one of the reasons why supermarkets no longer display the heads of animals in the meat aisle – it would remind people that the neatly-portioned steak or chop or ribs were once part of a living animal. The more urbanized and removed from death, even the deaths of our loved ones, we have become, the more this is true for us – we want packaged food, food that does not remind us of death. As a thought, this may well explain the popularity of snack foods. Nothing is further removed from either plant or animal than the over-salted, highly processed, brightly packaged snacks⁷.

We have also removed ourselves from the process of food and food preparation. There was a time when a housewife knew exactly where every morsel she placed on the table came from⁸. She had dug and planted the vegetable garden, she had raised and probably killed and plucked the chicken, she was a part of the circle of life where all life, including our own, would one day serve in death to feed the new growth, the new life. Moreover, she and her family appreciated each mouthful of food with gratitude, not just to the people who worked in the garden and reared the animals, but to the actual animals and vegetables, to the rains that fell to water the crops, and to the earth for bringing everyone through yet another day. Even more importantly, none of the food was wasted – it went to compost heaps or to the farmyard to feed the other animals.

⁶ The story of how acacia trees respond to over-grazing by, in turn, killing the antelope is a sobering read and can be found here: Yam P. “Acacia trees kill antelope in the Transvaal.” *Sci Am.* 1990 Dec;263(6):28. doi: 10.1038/scientificamerican1290-28a. PMID: 2270459.

⁷ According to a recent report from Grand View Research, the global market for snack foods is estimated to be worth \$1451billion, and when compared with the global market value for food in general of \$11324 billion, it is clear that a substantial portion of nutrition is derived from packaged and processed snacks rather than raw ingredients. <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/snacks-market>

⁸ Ann Vileisis. *Kitchen Literacy: How we lost knowledge of where food comes from and why we need to get it back.* Island Press, (2008)

In the debate between vegan and omnivore, Berry⁹ says that the food industry has a vested interest in obscuring the link between the origins of food and the eventual dish on the plate, whether it be the animal standing for most of its life in a square box in its own waste products until slaughter, or plants crowded into great fields of monocultures, dependent on being sprayed and fed by toxic chemicals before harvesting. Even though we have more sympathy for the animal, we cannot say the plant did not and does not suffer. Inevitably, we have to consider how and where suffering is inflicted – at the moment of death or in the life lived leading to that moment? For inflict it we must, and will in order to survive.

All other ethical approaches pale by comparison to this: to eat what is given to you by the death of another with gratitude for that sacrifice, and to know that one day, you too, will become a part of the cycle and yield your stored nutrients to the birth of new life. Fighting about whether we should adopt vegan lifestyles or continue as omnivores simply serves to distract us from the issue of waste and the irresponsible use of the resources we have.

⁹ Wendell Berry. "The pleasures of Eating." In Anderson, Slovic and O'Grady (eds) *Literature and the Environment*, 2nd Edition. Pearson, New York, (2012). pp 99 - 103

Exploring the Connections between Attention and Literature with Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch

Michela Dianetti
(University of Galway)

Abstract: In this paper, I explore the relationship between attention and literature and attempt to oppose the ‘attention economy’ with the moral value of ‘good’ literature. In a world where attention seems to have become a luxury, provided by expensive yoga retreats or weekend escapes in nature that we seek as a break from our self-inflating overachieving lives, and where education seems to progressively become a synonym for winning, achieving, and success, literature can still be valuable for our moral life. For it can show ‘the utter chanciness of human life and the fact of death’¹, and the ordinary existence of others which allows space for the valuable moral potential of attention.

Keywords: Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, ethics of attention, literature, moral values, beauty.

1. Attention today

In our times, in different areas of study, the danger of the ‘attention economy’ seems to have ignited a greater recognition of the role of attention as one of the fundamental faculties of the human being: the most valuable but also the most exploitable resource in our digital era. Timothy Wu, for instance, in his *Attention Merchants*, suggests that ‘the exploitation of human attention is in some deeper way the exploitation of our persons’². In a time when our attention is continuously fragmented, always captured by platforms based on profit (a process that is inevitably encouraged by current technology), it feels like we are always ‘train-

¹ Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi, New edition (London: Penguin, 1999), 233.

² Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* (New York: Alfred A Knopf Inc, 2016), 32.

ing our minds towards distraction'³.

For the philosophers I consider in this paper, Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, being distracted (together with other forms of inattention like fantasy and reverie⁴) implies failing to meet/see reality, while paying attention has something to do with giving up comforting fantasies that human beings constantly project onto reality⁵.

In today's individualistic and consuming society, it seems that those comforting fantasies have become the fabric of our everyday life (everything from the outside tries to arouse in us material desires, from advertisements to the distorted mirror of social media) and that our capacity to pay 'sustained attention'⁶ ('the capacity to maintain attention to an object over time'⁷) has become always more narrower.

This becomes a problem when we consider, as these authors did, that our Self-centred perspective is a limited perspective which constitutes the constellations of values at our disposal, for what we see, and the values we discover in the world, are the net in which our actions can unfold.

³ Silvia Caprioglio Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention: Engaging the Real with Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 10.

⁴ For a thorough analysis of forms of inattention see Silvia Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention*, 2022, 30.

⁵ Murdoch writes that 'Human beings need fantasies' (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 233) to cope with reality, echoing the verses of T. S. Eliot in the Four Quartets (a great admirer of Weil): 'Human kind cannot bear very much reality' (T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944)).

⁶ MacKay Moore Sohlberg and Catherine Mateer (McKay Moore Sohlberg and Catherine A. Mateer, *Introduction to Cognitive Rehabilitation: Theory and Practice*, First Edition (New York: The Guilford Press, 1989), 131), as Panizza reports, propose different types of attention: 'focused attention (the basic capacity to attend to stimuli); sustained attention (including vigilance and mental control or working memory; this is the capacity to maintain attention to an object over time); selective attention (the capacity to shut out irrelevant stimuli); alternating attention (the mental flexibility required to switch attention from one task or stimulus to another); and divided attention (the ability to attend to more than one task or object at the same time)' (Caprioglio Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention*, 21).

⁷ Caprioglio Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention*, 21.

2. Moral value of attention

Starting from Weil's 1941 'Essay on the Concept of Reading'⁸, I, following Murdoch, move from the premise that we as humans always 'read' the world as a text, and suggest that attention can help us navigate this never-ending reading and become able to read new and different meanings. In this essay, Weil uses Descartes' example of the blind person's stick to portray the idea of reading. Through the stick, the blind human being feels the world; she does not feel the pressure of the stick on her hand, but rather she feels reality directly through the point of the stick, while the sensations of the fingers do not even register. This is because we read the impact of the stick; we read, in fact, meanings.

For Weil, what we read affects what we believe and how we act: 'I believe what I read, my judgments are what I read, I act accordingly to what I read'⁹. These meanings are not thoughts but arise from the outside: 'from every corner taking possession of my soul and shaping it from one moment to the next in such a way that, to borrow a familiar English phrase, "my soul is no longer my own"'. Once my beliefs are shaped, my acting follows them. She explains:

If I read in a noise honor to be won, I run towards the noise; If I read danger and nothing else, I run far from the noise. In both cases, the necessity of acting the way I do, even if I regret it, is imposed on me in a clear and immediate way, as the noise, with the noise¹⁰.

In Weil and Murdoch's view, our perspectives on the world are 'something infinitely perfectible', for attention to reality is an 'endless task'¹¹. Panizza explains:

Reality is a complex concept which (...) takes up normative dimensions in both Weil and Murdoch. Its moral relevance is both that of being a standard to aim at (ever progressing knowledge and understanding), and that of being something outside ourselves,

⁸ Simone Weil, *Simone Weil: Late Philosophical Writings*, trans. Eric O. Springsted (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).

⁹ Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 25.

¹⁰ Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 25.

¹¹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 317.

which does not bend to our wishes and hopes, the opposite of self-absorption or fantasy'¹².

Both philosophers recognised that our minds are formed by attention and therefore that attention not only plays a fundamental role in how we “read” the world but also in how we act in it: how we pay attention, and what we pay attention to, shapes the moral quality of our consciousness.

Murdoch, inspired by Weil, observes that ‘as word-users we all exist in a literary atmosphere’¹³. We are always making distinctions, shaping the encountered world into a story, into order and pattern. For both philosophers, this constant storytelling is the fabric of our existence. Attention, instead, is the opposite of fantasy and its passivity. Its activity lies in the truth-seeking and this is what makes it morally relevant:

We attend because we want to find out. There is something we don’t know. Our attention is captured by something that is salient, that needs to be known. (...) Attentive engagement with reality, whatever its other aims or mood or contexts, seeks to discover something. Attention interrogates reality, it is stretched in the direction of—a ‘tension towards’—reality’¹⁴.

What prepares the moral agent for the choice, writes Murdoch, is their attention or inattention to reality (‘our ability to act well ‘when the time comes’ depends partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention’¹⁵). Grounding her argument on Plato, Freud, and Weil, she observes that in our lives, what we pay attention to and how we pay attention constitutes the background against which, in the moment of choice, we make decisions. We act according to what we see, and according to the constellation of concepts and values we are provided with: the action is not an effort of the will in the single moment of choice. This view portrays a picture of morality as a Platonic pilgrimage from self-illusions to a clearer vision of reality, and which defines goodness as a form of realism. To be good, for these authors, is ‘to see

¹² Caprioglio Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention*, 24.

¹³ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 6/7.

¹⁴ Caprioglio Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention*, 15.

¹⁵ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 345.

things as they really are'. In this view, the absolute value of reality and truth are crucial, for they allow the background of perfection against which moral improvement becomes possible¹⁶. Selfless attention, as Weil defines it, is the ideal of this kind of realism that involves giving space to an individual reality and waiting for it to unfold itself, as Weil defines it: 'Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object'¹⁷.

Human beings daydream all the time because of their difficulties in accepting 'the utter chanciness of human life and the fact of death', and the truth that 'all is vanity'. Vanity, selfish fears, and projections are what is present in mediocre art¹⁸. Instead, 'selfless' attention allows to realise 'that something other than oneself is real', and so 'the perception of individuals' in their 'separateness and differentness'¹⁹, which is the essence of morality. Ultimately, attention in this sense is what can make us realise 'that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one's own', and so it is what makes it harder to 'treat a person as a thing' (a danger that preoccupied Weil for her entire life).

It follows that whether we pay attention or not, implies the possibility for reality to emerge, to be accounted for. It is then also a matter of justice towards other human beings, animals, and things, for, as Weil observes, by focusing attention towards something or someone, we let

¹⁶ The characteristic of 'truth-seeking' is the fundamental trait of attention, and what makes it different from only looking or knowing. As Panizza explains: 'Both knowing and looking may be detached, attention is engaged. Knowing and looking may be superficial, attention is imaginative. Looking (but not knowing) may be distorting, attention is truth-directed. Attention is directed at reality and, specifically, at an individual reality: not 'people', not 'animals', not 'nature', but this person, this animal, this blade of grass' (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 2).

¹⁷ Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul LTD, 1951), 56.

¹⁸ She writes that 'novelist is potentially the greatest truth-teller of them all, but he is also an expert fantasy-monger. This is too cosy an art form not to be often degraded in the interests of the self-indulgent fantasy of both the writer and the reader' (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 233). The dangers of art which made Plato ban the artists from his Republic are explored by Murdoch in her essay 'The Fire and the Sun'.

¹⁹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 353.

them exist and restore a sense of their value and dignity. This trait makes of attention not only a descriptive and normative passive-activity, but also a creative one. It is creative, but selfless: a loving gaze that makes us realise that something other than ourselves exists.

Ultimately, this selfless gaze is the same prescribed to the “good” writer. As Weil writes:

The poet produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real. It is the same with the act of love. To know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do—that is enough, the rest follows of itself²⁰

Hence, for Murdoch, morals and art are deeply correlated as both have to do with ‘the discovery of reality’ through a type of realism grounded on attention²¹.

3. Attention & literature

When I say ‘literature’, I refer here to the type that Weil describes as ‘literature of the first order’ and that Murdoch calls ‘great literature’. Weil is clearly more ‘exclusive’ in what can be considered as literature of the first order²². Murdoch instead is more open²³ but still very critical

²⁰ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 119.

²¹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 215.

²² Weil explicitly wrote about Homer’s *The Iliad*, Aeschylus’ *Prometheus* and Sophocles’ *Antigone*, *Electra*, and *Philoctetes*, but her writings and especially her notebooks are full of references to the other authors she loved, among others: Shakespeare (above all Shakespearean works she loved *King Lear*), Cervantes, Racine (especially *Phèdre*), Paul Valéry, George Herbert, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Francis of Assisi, Villon, Mallarmé, Molière, Dante, Goethe, and others. On her idea of literature see her essay ‘Literature and Morals’ in *Late Philosophical Writings*.

²³ About what she means by ‘great literature’, Murdoch writes in her essay ‘The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited’: ‘The persons whom I have here in mind, and whom I have called the great novelists, are of course Scott, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Tolstoy, especially Tolstoy - one could add other names, but these suffice to make the point. I realise it is paradoxical to call, for instance, Scott an un-Romantic writer; but I do not mind the paradox so

of existentialism, romanticism, and of philosophical novels²⁴. What I draw from their similar views on literature, is that attention is the essence of good literature. I highlight three features: a) it is beauty in literature that can *attract* and sustain our attention; b) by fixing her attention upon reality, the writer can *show* our human condition; c) this type of literature is morally valuable for it *extends* our vocabulary.

a) Beauty *attracts* attention

Following Plato's lesson, both Weil and Murdoch indicate beauty²⁵ as

long as the meaning is clear. In calling these novelists the great ones I do not exclude other types of greatness - though it is part of my thesis that this is probably the greatest sort of greatness. It is true that we find in the nineteenth century other remarkable novelists (Dostoevsky, Melville, Emily Brontë, Hawthorne) to whom we would not want to deny a first place, and to whom the title 'Romantic', in my sense, could more readily be applied: writers who give the impression of externalising a personal conflict in a tightly conceived self-contained myth; and it would be perverse to argue that they are great in spite of their Romanticism' (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 272).

²⁴ Murdoch does not see her novels as 'philosophical novels'. In her view, for instance, Sartre's novels display 'the structure of his own thought' (Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (London: Vintage, 1999), 49), but in this he fails to be a great novelist, as his novels are not meant to try to represent 'something more' that philosophy cannot rationally explain. The perpetual analysis carried out by his characters gives the reader a sense of detachment and so a 'drying and emptying effect'. In the search for everyday life, Sartre's novels end up showing, for Murdoch, only neurosis and abstraction. Murdoch had at first welcomed Sartre's 'passionate desire to analyse' the details of human life, but she later comes to consider him as lacking 'an apprehension of the absurd irreducible uniqueness of people and their relations with each other' (Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, 146). His characters are worlds with no magic, she writes, and so they do not 'enchant', failing to portray the contingency and messiness of human life.

²⁵ Weil's view is more extreme on this than Murdoch's. For Weil, the beauty of creation is everywhere, it is us human beings who, with the logic of force, cover it and hide it. In reality, beauty is everywhere in creation, and it is thus a *metaxù*, a bridge which connects creation to transcendence (God). God is always absent from the world, but we can see Her signs through the beauty that attracts our attention.

‘the only spiritual thing which we love by instinct’²⁶ and which attracts unselfish attention. Murdoch describes it best in her famous example of the ‘kestrel moment’ as an occasion for what she calls a moment of ‘unselfing’²⁷. She writes:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. And of course this is something which we may also do deliberately: give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care²⁸.

Murdoch notices that contemplation of beauty in art requires the same quality of detachment needed for contemplation of beauty in nature and that the attention fixed on art and on nature is in both cases ‘rewarded by the enjoyment of beauty’. She observes that when we witness good or bad actions, instead, it is more difficult to pay the sustained attention that could bring moral change, for in morality what is missing is the component of aesthetic pleasure. The latter is felt only through our aesthetic encounter with the world (‘We are attracted to the real in the guise of the beautiful and the response to this attraction brings joy’²⁹), instead, writes Murdoch, ‘in the case of morality, although there are sometimes rewards, the idea of a reward is out of place’³⁰.

Murdoch, following Weil, observes that through beauty we can be attracted to art even if the content is something unpleasant³¹. For in-

²⁶ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 370.

²⁷ A concept for which she takes inspiration from Weil’s idea of *decréation*. For a thorough analysis of the difference between Weil’s and Murdoch’s perspectives on the role of the Self in attention see Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention*.

²⁸ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 369.

²⁹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 425.

³⁰ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 353.

³¹ Attention (or love) towards works of art like *King Lear*, which portrays something terrible, is happiness, says Murdoch (Gillian Dooley, ed., *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* (Columbia, SC: University South Carolina Press, 2003), 135).

stance, things we socially isolate, reject, or exclude because we fear them or because they disgust us, through art they can become the subjects of our gaze. Indeed, the experience of beauty in art does not follow the content of what is portrayed, for instance, in its positive harmonic elements, but for the modalities in which, for example the story, even an unpleasant story, is narrated. The artist allows the viewer (or the reader) the experience of beauty through her effort of unselfing and through paying attention. If on hand it is true, as Murdoch points out, that from beauty in nature to beauty in art we move to 'a more difficult region' (for 'Art is less accessible than nature'), on the other, it is 'also more edifying since it is actually a human product'³².

Nonetheless, there seems to be a difference between beauty which emerges in literature, and beauty in other forms of art. The beauty that emerges from the narration is not like the one that grabs hold of us in front of the kestrel, nor it is the same as the one we experience in front of a painting or a piece of music. Beauty through literature does not attract us immediately but requires a duration in time to manifest itself and so while it attracts it also asks for 'sustained attention', which is also engaged through a 'truth-seeking' quest (we want to know how the story ends) which, as I mentioned earlier, is a crucial characteristic of attention³³. I argue that literature has a privileged relation to sustained attention which, as I said at the beginning of this paper, is the one that in today's time we feel more difficult to achieve. 'Sustaining attention helps us not to skip forward, and to stay with what is there, even if it hurts'³⁴. Literature helps us to practice maintaining the grip, which is morally valuable because in life we tend to seek comfort and retreat into illusion when facing 'passages' of our life-story that we do not want to hear or see.

'The spectacle of the good', as Murdoch calls it, can certainly be seen when, for example, we witness a good human being and their actions. She does not deny that 'morality is quite largely a matter of ac-

³² Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 370.

³³ The 'truth-seeking', as Panizza explains, 'in the Platonic world that informs Murdoch's and Weil's thinking, is *eros*' (Caprioglio Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention*, 25). It does not mean that attention involves seeking something specific, rather it means that attention implies an openness towards the outward reality, and in the case of art, it is an openness towards the reality of the work of art.

³⁴ Caprioglio Panizza, 143.

tions' and that 'the practice of personal relations is the fundamental school of virtue'³⁵. However, what Murdoch tells us is that in witnessing a moral action the experience is perhaps 'more mixed and less efficacious' and 'tend to be less clear'³⁶. I believe the reason for this is that our Self, in front of actions, can easily get involved in self-centred projections, while because of the immediate 'unselfing' experience that we can have with beauty, art-beauty, while being 'not essential', it still 'provides work for the spirit'. Weil says that when we encounter beautiful things in the world, we are filled with the immediate desire for them to exist. There is a distance that beauty requires of us; a step back that allows attention³⁷. What Murdoch points out is that although art is 'a kind of treat'³⁸, it still 'remains available and vivid as an experience of how egoism can be purified by intelligent imagination'³⁹. By fixing her attention on ordinary reality, the artist allows the beauty of the world to emerge, and by witnessing that attention through the art-object, the viewer (or the reader) is asked in turn for the moral effort of sustained attention. Through this mechanism, art's role is that of 'an educator and revealer', as Murdoch writes, it 'teaches quiet attention'⁴⁰.

³⁵ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 453.

³⁶ 'The good artist is a vehicle of truth, he formulates ideas which would otherwise remain vague and focuses attention upon facts which can then no longer be ignored' (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 235).

³⁷ 'Beauty is, as Plato says, visibly transcendent' (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 453).

³⁸ Murdoch explains: 'It is, like Kant's Sublime, an extra. We can be saved without seeing the Alps or the Cairngorms, and without Titian and Mozart too. We have to make moral choices, we do not have to enjoy great art and doubtless many good people never do. But surely great art points in the direction of the good and is at least more valuable to the moralist as an auxiliary than dangerous as an enemy. How, when, whether bad art (of which of course there is a great deal) is morally damaging is, as we know, a deep question not easily answered. For great art to exist a general practice of art must exist; and even trivial art is a fairly harmless consolation, as Plato himself seems prepared to admit in the *Laws*' (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 453/54).

³⁹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 453.

⁴⁰ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 453.

b) The author *shows* the human condition

If most art is for Murdoch 'mere fiction and consolation which distorts reality'⁴¹, instead, the good writer is the one that, amid our time's lack of any belief in the value of reality and truth, attempts 'to invent new religious imagery (or twist old religious imagery)'⁴² by portraying the human condition without any consolation and at the same time encompassing it with total compassion. Murdoch writes:

Consider what we learn from contemplating the characters of Shakespeare or Tolstoy or the paintings of Velasquez or Titian. What is learnt here is something about the real quality of human nature, when it is envisaged, in the artist's just and compassionate vision, with a clarity which does not belong to the self-centred rush of ordinary life⁴³.

Both Weil and Murdoch describe this type of literature as the one in which the author's inspiration is impersonal⁴⁴, and in which the single events and the single individuals of the story are encompassed and put against a background that transcends them, without providing any com-

⁴¹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 86.

⁴² Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 226.

⁴³ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 353.

⁴⁴ Weil defines the 'impersonal' as a place 'made for God' at the centre of the human heart, a point of view where the ego no longer places a screen between the creator and creation. The impersonal, the seed where God can descend, exists only within the human being: 'God loves the perspective of creation which can be seen only from where I stand, and I obscure it' (Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks: Supernatural Knowledge* (Wipf and Stock, 2015), 72). The author's voice is an impersonal voice emerging from her standpoint on the world. As Weil writes: the poet de-creates, 'the poet imitates God. (...) The poet is a person; yet in moments when he reaches poetic perfection, he is shot through by an impersonal inspiration. It is in his mediocre moments that his inspiration is a personal one'. As for Murdoch: 'Of course great artists are 'personalities' and have special styles; even Shakespeare occasionally, though very occasionally, reveals a personal obsession. But the greatest art is 'impersonal' because it shows us the world, our world and not another one, with a clarity which startles and delights us simply because we are not used to looking at the real world at all' (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 352).

fort to their condition (a condition that reflects also ours, of us readers). ‘Of course great artists are ‘personalities’ and have special styles’, so they are rooted in their standpoint on the world (in their time and space). It is the inspiration to be impersonal, which means without the filter of personal fantasies of the narrating self which makes the poet able to represent compassionately the truth of human relationship with reality. For both Weil and Murdoch, an example of this is the author of *The Iliad* who does not take any side, and thus ‘one is barely aware that the poet is a Greek and not a Trojan’⁴⁵.

By engaging with good art and literature, we can get a glimpse of our existential condition, that is of beings always using fantasies to cope with reality:

We today have no great or essential difficulty in understanding plays written by Greeks in the fifth century BC. We make, in many respects though not in all, the same kinds of moral judgements as the Greeks did, and we recognise good or decent people in times and literatures remote from our own. Patroclus, Antigone, Cordelia, Mr Knightley, Alyosha. Patroclus’s invariable kindness. Cordelia’s truthfulness. (...) And this, when one reflects on it, is a remarkable testimony to the existence of a single durable human nature⁴⁶

That all is vanity and that we are subjected to utter chanciness becomes clear from within the narration of the characters’ moral journey. For Murdoch ‘Art is about the pilgrimage from appearance to reality (the subject of every good play and novel)’; Novels ‘expose vanity and inculcate humility. They are amazingly moral’⁴⁷.

c) The moral value of literature: it *extends* our vocabulary

Murdoch stresses the importance of narration in ethics as an auxiliary in gaining a better understanding of ourselves and of others. Therefore, a renewal in language, which is seen as more than a mere analytical tool,

⁴⁵ Simone Weil, *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*, trans. Mary McCarthy (Pennsylvania, 1956), 32.

⁴⁶ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 229.

⁴⁷ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Reprint edition (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 97.

can occur through an expansion of the vocabulary we use for our constant narrations.

Not all our new concepts come to us in the context of language; but the attempt to verbalise them may result not in frustration but in a renewal of language. This is par excellence the task of poetry. So there is give and take; words may determine a sense, or a fresh experience may renew words⁴⁸.

Indeed, if values are moral features of the world, what is needed for Murdoch is a deeper attention on ordinary life and a richer vocabulary to speak about those values:

We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being; it is through an enriching and deepening of concepts that moral progress takes place. Simone Weil said that morality was a matter of attention, not of will. We need a new vocabulary of attention⁴⁹

This role given to narration and story-telling, which results from the relevance she gives to the interior life of the mind, allows her to indicate literature, among other forms of art, as the richest source for morals, for 'if stories are told, virtue will be portrayed'⁵⁰. Novels especially provide a picture of 'the total vision of life'⁵¹ of the writer, and so her

⁴⁸ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 36.

⁴⁹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 293.

⁵⁰ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 233.

⁵¹ In her essay 'Vision and Choice in Morality', Murdoch writes: 'When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation. These things, which may be overtly and comprehensibly displayed or inwardly elaborated and guessed at, constitute what, making different points in the two metaphors, one may call the texture of a man's being or the nature of his personal vision' (Murdoch *Existentialists and Mystics*, 80/81).

“moral nature” or “moral being”⁵².

Literature is privileged among other forms of art because it is eminently about ‘moral beings’ in their relationships with each other. It is a proof of attention paid by the writer and at the same it portrays degrees of attention and inattention through the narration of the characters, and through this we are shown human beings, ourselves and the others, as always inherently moral beings. ‘Other people are, after all, the most interesting features of our world and in some way the most poignantly and mysteriously alien’⁵³, and literature is capable of letting us ‘see’ the others, in a Platonic sense. Indeed, literature not only includes aesthetic pleasures but also moral pleasures. As Murdoch explains: ‘In portraying characters the author displays most clearly his discernment, his truthfulness, his justice, or his lack of these qualities, and one of our enjoyments lies in considering and judging his judgements. The highest pleasures of literature and, one might say, of art generally, are in this sense moral pleasures’. It is the place of our ‘most fundamental insight’ for its being ‘a human product “about” human affairs in a direct sense’⁵⁴.

Art, better than philosophy, is able to ‘touch’ the most mysterious features of human existence (‘Perhaps art does it best after all’⁵⁵). Indeed, art contains, within the order given by form, the element of messiness and contingency (‘Even at its most exquisite art is incomplete’) ‘because of the muddle of human life and the ambiguity and playfulness of aesthetic form, art can at best only explain partly, only reveal almost: and of course any complex work contains impurities and accidents which we choose to ignore’⁵⁶.

‘Good’ literature, as Jan Zwicky observes, does not provide the reader with a ready-made enclosed story to be passively read, rather it gives multiple detailed inputs that the reader can imaginatively connect in infinite constellations of meanings encompassed in the one whole narrated story⁵⁷. It reproduces our condition in our lives. This type of literature

⁵² Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 81.

⁵³ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 257.

⁵⁴ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 370.

⁵⁵ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 500.

⁵⁶ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 460.

⁵⁷ Jan Zwicky, *The Experience of Meaning* (Montreal Kingston London Chicago: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019).

shows but does not tell. As Zwicky writes: ‘When we are being shown something, it is as though the mind holds its breath; attention is focused, the experience of time is suspended. We wait for all the pieces ‘to fall into place’; and when they do, insight flashes on the mind’s eye’.⁵⁸ In this sense, literature does not provide an enclosed analytical argument like philosophy would, but rather offers the possibility for an imaginative exploration. This trait marks its potential to inspire attention, for its being an object of attention (of the reader), exhibiting attention (of the writer), about possible degrees of attention and inattention (of the characters), and which, finally, can extend our vocabulary of attention. And the more our vocabulary about values extends, the more we can ‘read’ differently reality and pay attention. This primary connection between attention and literature is what makes of the latter ‘not a diversion or a side issue’ but, as Murdoch writes: ‘the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be seen’.⁵⁹

Conclusions

In Murdoch’s and Weil’s sense, the kind of teaching provided by literature is educational but non-didactic. It is not a lesson with content in the sense of ‘a message’, but rather it can inspire a new orientation of our gaze towards reality, for ‘art can reveal without explaining’⁶⁰ and extends our vocabulary on human situations.

As Weil observes in the first *Notebook*, literature displaces us from the centre of our self, by making us spectators of a narration that is about someone else, in their independence and in their needs and desires. It is an exercise of getting out our habitual standpoint and habitual thinking, and this ‘(...) is automatically to become more moral; to see the real is to see its independence and ergo its claims’.⁶¹

To conclude, Simone Weil in her 1942 ‘Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies’ suggested practising attention through certain physical labour in contact with nature, through school studies when intended as not finalised to self-complacency, self-aggrandising, or success

⁵⁸ Zwicky, *The Experience of Meaning*, 97.

⁵⁹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 372.

⁶⁰ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 458.

⁶¹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 425.

but for the sake of practising attention (like the study of ancient dead languages). These studies, like great art, writes Murdoch, can teach ‘how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self’⁶².

Ultimately, attention is worth practising towards anything in the world: ‘this exercise of *detachment* is difficult and valuable whether the thing contemplated is a human being or the root of a tree or the vibration of a colour or a sound’⁶³. However, considering the arts’ potential of being ‘a clue to morals’⁶⁴, and especially of literature for ‘words are where we live as human beings and as moral and spiritual agents’⁶⁵, it follows that perhaps literature can be, as Murdoch writes, the most educational thing we have against a distracted and self-indulgent society.

⁶² Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 353.

⁶³ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 353.

⁶⁴ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 202.

⁶⁵ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 242.

III. ANNOUNCEMENTS

Master's Program in Philosophy Taught in English at the University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski"

General Information

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" was founded in 1888 following the best patterns of European higher education. Sofia is the capital city of the Republic of Bulgaria, which is a member of the European Union (EU). Sofia University is the highest-ranking university in Bulgaria. The MA Program in Philosophy taught in English at the University of Sofia provides instruction in all major areas of Western Philosophy, but the Master's thesis can also be written on a topic from Eastern Philosophy. The program consists of 10 mandatory courses and 2 electives, so it leaves enough leeway for the student's own preferences. The degree is recognized worldwide including in the EU/EEA and Switzerland, the USA, Canada, Russia, Turkey, China, the Indian Sub-Continent, Latin America, and the Middle East.

Courses Offered

Philosophical Method, Truth and Meaning, Philosophy of Intercultural Relations, Social Philosophy, Critical Phenomenology, Continental Philosophy, Philosophy of Culture, Logic in the Continental Tradition, Theories of Truth, Existential Dialectics, Philosophy of Subjective Action, Logic from a Phenomenological Perspective.

Faculty Members

They feature successful teaching experience in this country and abroad and are well published in Bulgarian and English.

Duration of Studies

Two semesters of course attendance plus a third semester for writing the Master's thesis. There are also opportunities for distance learning.

Requirements

Bachelor's degree in any field of the humanities, social science, science, or professional disciplines. No tests or application fee are required (for citizens of EU/EEA and Switzerland applying for a state scholarship €16 fee is charged and an interview is held). No previous degree in philosophy is needed.

Tuition Fee

- 1) For citizens of the EU/EEA and Switzerland: €850 per school year.
- 2) For international students: €3850 per school year.

Financial Aid

- 1) EU/EEA and Swiss citizens are eligible for state scholarships carrying a 60% tuition waiver plus a monthly stipend beginning from the second semester.
- 2) American citizens are eligible for Fulbright Graduate Grants. For more information, see www.fulbright.bg. It is possible for American citizens to use sources of governmental financial assistance (please contact the Program Director for details).
- 3) Canadian students are eligible for financial aid in the form of governmental student loans from the province where they are permanent residents.
- 4) Turkish students are eligible for financial aid within the Turkish-Bulgarian Bilateral Cultural Agreement. For more information, contact the Turkish Ministry of Education..
- 5) Chinese students are eligible for financial aid within the Chinese-Bulgarian Bilateral Cultural Agreement. For more information, contact the Chinese Ministry of Education.

Application Deadlines

- To start in October: July 31.
To start in February: November 30 of the previous year.

Student Visa Matters

Sofia University in cooperation with the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science provides the necessary documents for student visa application to all eligible candidates, except those from the EU/EEA and Switzerland.

Cultural Life and Recreation

The city of Sofia is the most ancient European capital after Athens. The cost of living there is one of the lowest in Europe. As the capital of Bulgaria, Sofia features a rich cultural life. There are a number of concert halls, museums, dozens of art galleries, and many national and international cultural centers. The streets of Sofia are populated by cozy cafés and high-quality inexpensive restaurants offering Bulgarian, European, and international cuisine. Sofia is a favorable place for summer and winter sports including skiing on the nearby mountain of Vitosha. More about Sofia can be found at <http://www.sofia-life.com/culture/culture.php>. You can also follow Sofianite and Bulgarian news at <http://www.novinite.com/lastx.php>.

Contact Person

Dr. Alexander L. Gungov, Program Director

E-mail: agungov@phls.uni-sofia.bg

Phone: (+3592) 9308-414

(Bulgaria is within the Eastern European Time Zone)

Mailing address: Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University,
15 Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd., Sofia 1504, Bulgaria.

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Courses Offered

Modal Metaphysics, Mythologies of the Future: Ideology, Posthumanism, Anthropotechnics; Epistemology, Philosophy of Science, Social Philosophy, Philosophy of Projectivity, Art versus Market, Epistemology, Continental Philosophy, Language and Cultural Relativity, Philosophy of Culture, Time and History.

Requirements

Master’s degree in any field. No previous degree in philosophy is required.

Checklist

CV, two letters of recommendation, standardized tests scores are NOT required. No application fee (for citizens of EU/EEA and Switzerland a €51 fee is charged and an entrance exam is held).

Tuition Fee

1) For EU/EEA & Swiss students: in residence:

- one-time registration fee of €980
- extramural: €2,440 per school year.
- 2) For non- EU/EEA & Swiss students: in residence: €4,950 per school year.
- xtramural: 3,300 per school year.

Other Fees

Dissertation Defense Fee (non- EU/EEA & Swiss students): €2,480.

Duration of Studies

In residence: 3 years. Extramural: 4 years. There are opportunities for online studies.

Financial Aid

- 1) EU/EEA and Swiss citizens are eligible for state scholarships carrying a monthly stipend of BGN 750.
- 2) American citizens are eligible for Fulbright Graduate Grants. For more information, see www.fulbright.bg.
- 3) Canadian students are eligible for financial aid in the form of governmental student loans from the province where they are permanent residents.
- 4) Turkish students are eligible for financial aid within the Turkish-Bulgarian Bilateral Cultural Agreement. For more information, contact the Turkish Ministry of Education..
- 5) Chinese students are eligible for financial aid within the Chinese-Bulgarian Bilateral Cultural Agreement. For more information, contact the Chinese Ministry of Education.

Application Deadlines

To start in October: April 3.

To start in February: October 31.

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Contact Person

Dr. Alexander L. Gungov, Program Director

E-mail: agungov@phls.uni-sofia.bg

Phone: (+3592) 9308-414

(Bulgaria is within the Eastern European Time Zone)

Mailing address: Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University,
15 Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd., Sofia 1504, Bulgaria.

IV. INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mr. Matthew Clemons a PhD Student in Philosophy at Stony Brook University, USA.

Ms. Michela Dianetti is PhD Candidate at the School of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, College of Arts, University of Galway, Ireland.

Mr. Vincenzo Filetti is a PhD Candidate in Philosophy, University of Sofia, Bulgaria.

Dr. Evangelos Kalfopoulos is a Post-Doctoral Fellow, Sofia University, Bulgaria & University of Coimbra, Portugal.

Ms. Leonie Overbeek is a PhD Candidate in Philosophy, University of Sofia, Bulgaria.

Mr. Luigi Panella is a PhD Student at the University of Bergamo, Italy.

Ms. Inês Pinheiro is a Master's Student in Political Philosophy at the School of Social Sciences and Humanities of NOVA University Lisbon, Portugal.

Dr. Donald Phillip Verene is Professor Emeritus at Emory University, USA.

Ms. Yuting Wang is an MA Student at Radboud University, Netherlands.

