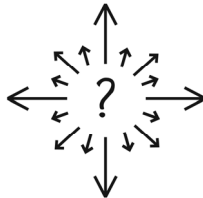


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I. HISTORY OF ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

The Tyrant and the Philosopher: Xenophon's *Hiero* and the Reconceiving of the Philosophical Life

Dustine Peone (Mercer University)

Abstract

In this paper, I wish to argue that Xenophon's *Hiero*, which is ostensibly a political treatise about the nature of tyranny, is in fact a Socratic dialogue about the relationship between the philosophical life and the political life. Xenophon uses this dialogue to revise the definition of philosophy given by Pythagoras of Samos and to establish a new concept of what it means to philosophize. At the same time, *pace* Plato, he demonstrates that the life of political power is not necessarily anathematic to the pursuit of philosophy.

Keywords: the philosophical life, the political life, the definition of philosophy, Xenophon, Pythagoras of Samos, Plato

Xenophon was one of the first teachers of humanity. Until the end of the eighteenth century, he was considered a philosopher of the first order, and his works a necessary part of a humane education. His admirers were once legion. Cicero seldom mentions his name without the highest praise, such as "What a man he was!"¹ Machiavelli and Montesquieu reference his writings to great effect. Nietzsche has Xenophon as the object of one of his most outlandish claims: "If all goes well, the time will come when, in order to advance themselves on the path of moral reason, men will rather take up [Xenophon's] *Memorabilia* of Socrates than the Bible."² However, his reputation waned in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Scholars continued to read him as a historian, but his philoso-

¹ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De divinatione*, trans. William Armistead Falconer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), I.xxv.52.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol. 7: *Human, All-Too-Human*, trans. Paul V. Cohn (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 241–42.

phical writings were seldom taken seriously. Next to his Socratic colleague Plato, Xenophon's work was found dull and simple. Even Xenophon's translator for the Loeb Classical Library edition, E. C. Marchant, fails to hide his distaste. Marchant writes, "[Xenophon's] mind is a series of labelled pigeon-holes, each hole filled with a commonplace thought remorselessly analysed. These elementary thoughts he produces again and again. . . . But as with his thoughts, so with his words: he too often irritates the reader by incessant repetition of the same pattern of sentence, of the same formula, and even of the same word. . . . His mind moves in a narrow circle of ideas."³ This contempt is extraordinary for the editor and translator of a volume to announce.

It is only in the past few decades that Xenophon's reputation has begun to ascend once more in the English-speaking world. The first intellectual to attempt this rehabilitation was Leo Strauss, whose 1948 book *On Tyranny* remains the most significant study of Xenophon's *Hiero*. Since then, interest in the dialogues of Xenophon has had its periods of systole and diastole. The current moment seems to be a period of systole. Cornell University Press has been steadily publishing new annotated translations of Xenophon's works into English, and Landmark has released editions of Xenophon's *Hellenika* and *Anabasis*. The last few years have seen the publication of several books on Xenophon that all follow a larger trend in scholarship, namely the attempt to restore Xenophon's status not just as a historian and belletrist, but as a first-rate philosopher, and in particular as a Socratic philosopher.⁴

My contribution to this general movement concerns an aspect of Xenophon's *Hiero* that has been thus far overlooked by scholars. The

³ E. C. Marchant, Introduction to *Xenophon in Seven Volumes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), 4:xvi–xvii.

⁴ See Thomas L. Pangle, *The Socratic Way of Life: Xenophon's Memorabilia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Pangle, *Socrates Founding Political Philosophy in Xenophon's Economist, Symposium, and Apology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); and Dustin Sebell, *Xenophon's Socratic Education: Reason, Religion, and the Limits of Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021). See also the review article of all three books: Gregory A. McBrayer, "Xenophon as Philosopher," *Review of Politics* 84 (2022): 445–56. Slightly older significant literature following this trend includes: Vivienne Gray, ed., *Xenophon: Oxford Readings in Classical Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Louis-André Dorion, *L'autre Socrate: Études sur les écrits Socratiques de Xénophon* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2013).

Hiero is noteworthy as the only dialogue written by a Socratic philosopher that features a conversation between a wise man and a tyrant. Such a conversation never occurs in the entire body of Plato's work; the political life is always discussed and corrected by the philosopher in the absence of the tyrant. Given Plato's frequent subject-matter—the *polis* and its rule—this absence is conspicuous. One wonders, how would the philosophical speech about the good life vary in the presence of an absolute prince? How did Plato himself speak in the presence of Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse? Was he forced to play the *eirôn* like the clever servants in the plays of Aristophanes? Plato never brings his philosopher into converse with a true tyrant, so we are left to speculate. I surmise that this omission is intentional, that it *is* Plato's statement about the possibility of meaningful discourse between wisdom and power. The tyrant will not tolerate such discourse because wisdom is a form of authority that rivals his own authority. Plato's Socrates engages with would-be tyrants and future tyrants—Critias and Charmides, for example—because they are still amassing the tools of power and are therefore amenable to education. Once, however, they hold supreme power, all other loci of authority threaten the maintenance of their own station and cannot be tolerated. The warning that Anytus gives Socrates in the *Meno* is Plato's broad prudential advice to all philosophers: "I think, Socrates, that you easily speak ill of people. I would advise you, if you will listen to me, to *be careful*. Perhaps also in another city, and certainly here, it is easier to injure people than to benefit them. I think you know that yourself."⁵

Xenophon, however, does essay a dialogue between wisdom and power. In doing so, he moves into territory uncharted by Plato and also casts doubt upon Plato's standpoint on the matter. In *Hiero*, the two interlocutors are Hiero, absolute tyrant of Syracuse, and the poet and "wise man" Simonides. The question that guides the first part of the *Hiero* is posed by the poet to the tyrant: "You used to be a private person and are now a tyrant; since you have experienced both, you are likely to know better than I how the tyrannical life and the private life are distinguished in the enjoyments and pains of human beings."⁶ Hiero

⁵ Plato, *Meno*, 94e (emphasis added). All citations of Plato are from *Complete Works of Plato*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

⁶ Xenophon, *Hiero, or the Skilled Tyrant*, trans. David K. O'Connor, in *Xenophon: The Shorter Writings*, ed. Gregory A. McBrayer (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 1.2.

runs through a litany of complaints and hardships that follow from the position of the tyrant, in an effort to demonstrate to Simonides that the life of the private person is preferable. It is the very first of these grievances that I wish to consider.

Hiero begins by asking Simonides to name the pleasures of private life. Simonides responds by distinguishing different categories of pleasures, the first being “things seen through the eyes.”⁷ It is with this category that Hiero begins his demonstration of the tyrant’s woes. He says,

First, when I reflect on the spectacles contemplated through sight, I find the tyrants get less. There are different spectacles worth contemplating in different places, and private persons can travel to each of them, and to whichever cities they want, for the sake of spectacles, and also to the common festivals, where the spectacles human beings believe are most worth contemplating are gathered together. But the tyrants have little to do with contemplating. For it is not safe for them to go where they will not be stronger than those who will be present, nor are their possessions at home so secure that they can turn them over to others to go on a trip. For it is to be feared that they might both be deprived of the rule and become powerless to take revenge on those who perpetrate the injustice.⁸

On the surface of things, it is bizarre that Hiero begins in this manner. There is much to complain about in the life of a tyrant. The tyrant, as Hiero will say, lives in perpetual fear of his subjects and even his own family. He is held in universal contempt for the injustice that he perpetrates. He is surrounded only by the worst men, and he knows no one that he can trust. These are existential dilemmas of the most tragic sort. It hardly seems worth beginning this litany of evils by lamenting that the tyrant is unable to enjoy the spectacle of the festivals. Why give this complaint priority of place in the argument? Is attending festivals even seen as a first-rate pleasure by private persons? Most persons attend the festival for some practical reason, either buying or selling or social networking. Those “spectacles” that one associates with festivals (athletic matches? animal shows? fire-eaters?) may be had on demand by the tyrant for private viewing. Hiero may summon the finest lion-tamers in the realm to put on a show at his home while he reposes on a comfortable outdoor couch eating grapes. It cannot be that tyranny poses an obstacle to witnessing such spectacles. Could it be that the festival *itself* is the spectacle that Hiero means?

⁷ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 1.4.

⁸ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 1.10.

I propose that this curious complaint has a much deeper significance than appears at first sight. The spectacle of the festival points the reader to another conversation between a wise man and a tyrant, Pythagoras of Samos and Leon of Phlius. We are told by Cicero and Iamblichus that it was in this conversation that Pythagoras gave the first definition of the word “philosopher.” The philosopher, according to Pythagoras, is the person who attends the festival “for the sake of the spectacle.” The tyrant who is kept from contemplating the spectacle of the festival is cut off not only from private life in general, but from the life of wisdom or philosophy in particular. The misfortune of Leon is that he can never become Pythagoras, and the misfortune of Hiero is that he can never become Simonides. In the sections that follow, I will (1) analyze the meaning of the encounter between Pythagoras and Leon; (2) reinterpret the lament of Hiero in light of this earlier encounter; and (3) argue that Xenophon intends this allusion to constitute a challenge—akin to that of Socrates—to the Pythagorean definition of philosophy.

Pythagoras in Phlius

The story of the confrontation between Pythagoras and Leon is similar in general details to that between Simonides and Hiero. Pythagoras and Simonides are both *xenoi*, strangers.⁹ Neither is a subject of the tyrant to whom he speaks, and each is radically free of the responsibilities of the subject and the demands of the city, whereas the tyrant is not. They are also both known to be “wise men.” Hiero expresses his surprise when Simonides begins their conversation by asking Hiero to teach him something, asking, “What sort of thing could it be that I could know better than you, who are so wise a man?”¹⁰ The wisdom of Simonides is not, however, the same as the wisdom of Pythagoras. Simonides never refers to himself as a “philosopher.”¹¹ He is a poet, and we know from Plato that there is (or rather, it is practical for us to say that there is) an “an-

⁹ Strauss is particularly sensitive to the significance of Simonides as a “stranger.” See Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1948), ch. 3a.

¹⁰ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 1.1.

¹¹ Others have pointed out that “philosophy” is not mentioned at all in the *Hiero*. See Pangle, *Founding Political Philosophy*, 201. I find this absence in itself meaningful since, as I shall argue, so much of the dialogue points toward a re-founding of philosophy.

cient quarrel” between poetry and philosophy.¹² These two disciplines are rival forms of wisdom, the one speaking through the image and the other through the concept. Philosophy can never completely supersede poetic wisdom because the poet is the master of language, and philosophy is condemned to express itself through language.

Because Simonides and Pythagoras are strangers, they are immediately suspect. Neither wise man had a spotless reputation. Simonides was the first poet to charge a fee for his recitations, and his greed was apocryphal. He is said to have told the wife of Hiero, when asked whether it was better to be wise or wealthy, “Why, rich, for I see the wise men spending their days at the rich men’s doors.”¹³ Pythagoras had no such stigma attached to his character, but he professed a radically new occupation, that of the “philosopher.” It is received tradition that Pythagoras was the first to use this term as a self-description.¹⁴ This label made Pythagoras doubly a stranger: an unknown person with an unknown mode of life and species of wisdom. Hiero says that the tyrant always fears wise men because they may “contrive something.”¹⁵ This “something” is indefinite; the tyrant cannot know what the wise man intends.

It is characteristic of tyrants that they desire all of the good things

¹² Plato, *Rep.*, 607b. The passage is: “Let this be our defense—now that we’ve returned to the topic of poetry—that, in view of its nature, we had reason to banish it from the city earlier, for our argument compelled us to do so. But in case we are charged with a certain harshness and lack of sophistication, let’s also tell poetry that there is an ancient quarrel between it and philosophy.”

¹³ Aristotle, *Rhet.*, II.16, 1391a9–12. All citations of Aristotle are from *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). On Simonides’ practice of charging for his verses, see *Rhet.*, III.2, 1405b24–28, and Cicero, *De oratore*, trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), II.lxxxvi.352–53.

¹⁴ Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras*, trans. Thomas Taylor (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1986), 28: “It is also said, that Pythagoras was the first who called himself a philosopher.”

¹⁵ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 5.1. Alexandre Kojève says that Hiero is correct to fear the wise man’s capacity for contrivance. “If [Simonides] was able to ‘maneuver’ Hiero as he pleased, there is no reason at all why he could not beat him and outmaneuver him in the domain of politics, and . . . replace him at the head of the government—if he should ever desire to do so.” Kojève, “Tyranny and Wisdom,” in *On Tyranny* (Leo Strauss), expanded edition, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 149.

of their domains. If a private individual possesses some good that the tyrant lacks, this is a point of inferiority that the prudent tyrant cannot tolerate. It is incumbent upon the skilled tyrant to remove or acquire all rival sources of power. We know from Machiavelli that the prince must eliminate his rivals completely, and that “whoever is the cause of someone’s becoming powerful is ruined.”¹⁶ This tyrannical way of thinking underlies the confrontation between Simonides and Hiero. Hiero summons Simonides in order to assess whether the wise stranger poses a threat. Likewise, when Pythagoras turns up in Phlius, Leon summons him in order to assess what ought to be made of a “philosopher.” Does the philosopher possess a quality or a good that the tyrant lacks, and if so, does it pose a potential threat to the tyrant’s maintenance of power?

The story of Pythagoras’ conversation with Leon is most fully preserved in Cicero’s *Tusculanae disputationes*, and a variant is related by Iamblichus in his *Vita Pythagorica*. Cicero says that he takes the story from Heraclides of Ponticus, “the pupil of Plato and a learned man of the first rank.”¹⁷ The story was already classical at the time of Heraclides, and was a part of philosophical lore well before the time of Socrates. All Greeks who used the term “philosopher” were consciously assuming the mantle of Pythagoras and placing themselves in a lineage with their first ancestor. To practice philosophy meant grappling with the idea of philosophy that Pythagoras laid out to Leon.

Cicero reports that after Pythagoras had demonstrated to Leon a mastery of eloquence that astonished the ruler, Leon asked Pythagoras to “name the art in which he put most reliance; but Pythagoras said that for his part he had no acquaintance with any art, but was a philosopher.” Leon presses this claim, asking “who philosophers were and in what way they differed from the rest of the world.”¹⁸ This is the shrewd tyrant assessing a new figure in the human comedy. The response of Pythagoras must be quoted in full:

[Pythagoras] replied that the life of man seemed to him to resemble the festival which was celebrated with most magnificent games before a concourse collected from the whole of Greece; for at this festival some

¹⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), III, 16.

¹⁷ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. J. E. King (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), V.iii.8.

¹⁸ Cicero, *Tusc. Disp.*, V.iii.8–9.

men whose bodies had been trained sought to win the glorious distinction of a crown, others were attracted by the prospect of making gain by buying or selling, whilst there was on the other hand a certain class, and that quite the best type of free-born, who looked neither for applause nor gain, but came for the sake of the spectacle and closely watched what was done and how it was done. So also we, as though we had come from some city to a kind of crowded festival, leaving in like fashion another life and nature of being, entered upon this life, and some were slaves of ambition, some of money; there were a special few who, counting all else as nothing, closely scanned the nature of things; these men gave themselves the name of lovers of wisdom (for that is the meaning of the word philosopher); and just as at the games the men of truest breeding looked on without any self-seeking, so in life the contemplation and discovery of nature far surpassed all other pursuits.¹⁹

Iamblichus does not mention the setting of Phlius or the conversation with Leon in his account of Pythagoras' teaching concerning the term "philosopher," but says much the same thing concerning the spectacle of the festival:

[Pythagoras] said that the entrance of men into the present life, resembled the progression of a crowd to some public spectacle. For there men of every description assemble with different views; one hastening to sell his wares for the sake of money and gain; but another that he may acquire renown by exhibiting the strength of his body; and there is also a third class of men, and these the most liberal, who assemble for the sake of surveying the places, the beautiful works of art, the specimens of valor, and the literary productions which are usually exhibited on such occasions. . . . But the most pure and unadulterated character, is that of the man who gives himself to the contemplation of the most beautiful things, and whom it is proper to call a philosopher.²⁰

This response to the inquiry of the tyrant is a masterstroke of eloquence and prudence. Pythagoras realizes that he must not appear to possess any art that would put him at variance with political authority. He therefore presents himself as a simple spectator of human existence, not in any regard an actor. The philosopher is not a knower, but a seeker after knowledge. He is not an active participant in any of the things with which political life is concerned, and his interest in these affairs is lim-

¹⁹ Cicero, *Tusc. Disp.*, V.iii.9.

²⁰ Iamblichus, *Life of Pyth.*, 28.

ited to bearing witness. This speech is an exemplar of wisdom speaking to power. It presents the philosopher as an innocent simpleton, rather than a spiritual guide. The philosopher alone has no business in the marketplace; he views the drama of the human world only from the eaves.

By way of contrast, Socrates is a different sort of philosopher. He is the gadfly of Athens, the corrupter of the children of the politicians. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates presents himself as a benefactor of the city and proposes that the "penalty" for his life ought to be free meals for life in the Prytaneum, as befits a patron.²¹ Socrates is condemned to death because he cannot keep from interfering. Pythagoras, on the other hand, being able to convince the mighty of his own innocence, flourishes and founds a school that spreads throughout Italy and Greece. We do not know what the immediate outcome was of Pythagoras' interview with Leon the tyrant, but we do know that Phlius became one of the foremost centers of the Pythagorean school, and that the city continued to be one of the largest Pythagorean communities in Europe into the fourth century BCE.²²

The definition that Pythagoras gives of the philosopher is not, however, merely a misdirection. It is a golden image, fit for a man with a golden thigh,²³ because it captures the very essence of the "lover of wisdom." The philosopher may *also* be a man of the world, but *qua* philosopher, he is a spectator. The things of the world pass before his eyes like a gallery of images, and his only desire is to know them. He attends the festival out of a sense of wonder, and wonder is the mainspring of philosophy for both Plato and Aristotle.²⁴ All of the other sorts of humans perform their business or their duties, and their focus is on one particular element of the festival. They all attend for some purpose or other—honors or profit or entertainment—and they could each name

²¹ Plato, *Apol.*, 36d–e.

²² See Charles H. Kahn, *Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans: A Brief History* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 48–49.

²³ Pythagoras was said to have a "golden thigh" as a mark of his divinity. He once showed his thigh to his disciple Abaris. Iamblichus, *Life of Pyth.*, 49.

²⁴ Aristotle: "It is owing to their wonder [*thaumazein*] that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize. . . . A man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant; therefore since they philosophized in order to escape from ignorance, evidently they were pursuing science in order to know, and not for any utilitarian end." *Meta.*, 982b12–22. Plato: "This is an experience which is characteristic of a philosopher, this wondering: this is where philosophy begins and nowhere else." *Theaet.*, 155d.

that purpose if called to account. The purpose one has for participating in the festival is the reflection of his or her social function. The philosopher alone is interested in the festival as a whole. More specifically, the festival as *spectacle*, as something to be seen. Philosophical speculation begins with the spectacle.²⁵ Here also is the social function of the philosopher: outsider, spectator, and non-participant. He has no part in any of the pleasures of those who engage in the doings of the festival, whatever esoteric pleasures he might know as compensation.

It must be noted that the Pythagoreans were not entirely private persons. Pythagoras' definition of philosophy must be taken in part as a bluff of prudence. It is to his honor that he has the shrewdness to avoid the envy of the tyrant Leon by presenting himself as an apolitical figure. Nevertheless, Pythagoras himself attained political rule in Croton, where his followers retained power for a period of eighty years. The Pythagoreans remained politically influential throughout southern Europe (including the city of Phlius) down to Xenophon's time. This does not, however, mean that the chief objects of the cult of Pythagoras were political. Their political authority was almost accidental.²⁶ It also does not undermine Pythagoras' definition of philosophy, which does not explicitly condemn political engagement.

Hiero's Lament

Returning to the *Hiero*, we must postulate that both Hiero and Simonides have the confrontation between Pythagoras and Leon in mind as the classical precedent for their own encounter. Hiero desires, like Leon, to hear wonders of eloquence from his interlocutor. Simonides, though, has learned the lesson of prudence from Pythagoras. He knows that it is a dangerous business presenting one's goods before an avaricious tyrant. Simonides upsets the will of Hiero, while at the same time flattering the

²⁵ Werner Jaeger points out, "The comparison depends on the ambiguity of the word θεωρεῖν, which means both watching a spectacle and contemplation and research in the 'theoretical' sense." *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development*, trans. Richard Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), 432.

²⁶ Frederick Copleston writes, "The view has been held that the Pythagorean communities were *political* communities, a view, however, that cannot be maintained, at least in the sense that they were essentially political communities—which they certainly were not." *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 1: *Greece and Rome* (New York: Image, 1962), 30.

king, when he immediately asks Hiero to teach him what he does not know (the difference between the pleasures of the tyrant and the private man). This puts the onus of instruction on Hiero, while Simonides remains in a position of humility.

Whatever his reason, Hiero wishes to demonstrate to Simonides that the private life is preferable to the tyrannical life. Hiero does not, however, forget that he is speaking to a “wise man.” Not being a wise man himself, he takes it that the *raison d'être* of every wise man is the *raison d'être* of the philosopher: namely, delight in the spectacle of the festival. He does not consider that the poet is a different sort of wise man than the philosopher. Vico tells us that the earliest poets, “without power of ratiocination, were all robust sense and vigorous imagination.”²⁷ The poet’s imagination is tied to robust sense, and therefore rooted in the body. The poet *does* take pleasure in those corporeal things to which the philosopher is indifferent. Simonides himself presses Hiero regarding not the pleasures of the eyes, but the pleasures of the animal body and of the purse. Concerning food, he insists, “But, by Zeus, for so long as the soul is eager, so long do those nourished by expensive provisions have much more pleasure than those served inexpensive ones.” Concerning sex, he says, “Perhaps it turns out that only the enjoyments of sex produce the desires in you to be tyrants. For in this, it is open to you to have intercourse with whatever you see that is most beautiful.”²⁸ Simonides presents himself in the early part of their conversation as an avowed hedonist.²⁹

We must consider, though, not the poet’s position vis-à-vis the spectacle of the festival, but the tyrant’s. Apart from what the speakers in the dialogue may wish to convey to one another, Xenophon is the prime mover of this dialogue, and more significant is what he wishes to convey to his readers. He begins the conversation with a reference to another conversation, thereby situating this dialogue in the context of an ongoing, never-ending conversation between authority and wisdom. He calls the reader’s attention at once to Pythagoras, the first “philosopher.”

What does Xenophon mean to suggest by beginning his tyrant’s lament with a reference to Pythagoras? This maneuver clearly shifts the

²⁷ Giambattista Vico, *New Science*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), §375.

²⁸ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 1.20, 1.26.

²⁹ Strauss makes a similar observation. See *On Tyranny*, 31 and passim.

terms of the investigation somewhat. Simonides asks about the difference between the tyrant and the private person. Hiero focuses from the start not on private life in general, but the private life *of the philosopher* as his point of contrast. The philosopher is perhaps the *most* private person in the city. He has no business with others, and therefore no need of others. Civic ties arise through the need human beings have of one another. Whatever obligations we feel toward the city and to our fellow-citizens are rooted in the recognition of benefits received from civic life. The Pythagorean philosopher does not benefit from civic life. The festival and the marketplace, those primary arenas of the social sphere, are for him a spectacle only, or a *speculum*, a mirror of human nature. Pythagoras is homeless, a perpetual stranger and traveler. He does not choose this life for the same reason as the sophists (or Simonides), who move from city to city in order to profit from the sale of wisdom; he chooses it because every city is for him a new spectacle, and the more that can be seen, the greater his wisdom grows.

The tyrant, on the other hand, is the least free person in the city. This is a trope common throughout Socratic philosophy. Plato calls the tyrant “really a slave,” and says that of all persons in the city, the tyrant is “in the greatest need of most things and truly poor.”³⁰ Hiero himself shares this grim outlook. He tells Simonides that tyrants require much more than others, and receive never enough. The labor of the tyrant is entirely for the sake of the city, of which he is a lover. The city is the sole object of the tyrant’s power, and its prosperity is his personal prosperity. However, the tragedy of the tyrant is that “tyranny forces tyrants to run down even their own fatherlands,” for the virtue of the city is a threat to tyrannical authority.³¹ The tyrant is in bondage not just to the city on which he depends, but to the nature of tyranny itself. From this, there is no escape back to private life, because as a private citizen the tyrant would never be able to atone for the injustice his position compelled. “For how,” Hiero asks, “could a tyrant ever have the capacity to pay back the money to all from whom he has stolen, or suffer a return in imprisonment for all he imprisoned; and how for all he killed could he hand over enough souls to die in return?”³² Tyranny is a form of condemnation, from which the only escape may be suicide: “Indeed, Simon-

³⁰ Plato, *Rep.* IX, 579d–e. Plato’s entire argument is at 571a–580a.

³¹ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 5.3.

³² Xenophon, *Hiero*, 7.12.

ides, if it profits anyone to hang himself, know that I find it profits the tyrant most.”³³

Against this extreme view of the bondage of the tyrant stands the figure of the philosopher, the wise man. The tyrant cannot know of what philosophical wisdom consists, for he is not himself a wise man. Hiero knows from hearsay what kind of man Pythagoras was, and what kind of life he led: he was an observer of spectacles. He was free to watch *la comédie humaine* as it played out before him, and to move from city to city unknown and unburdened. “All the world’s a stage / And all the men and women merely players,” says Shakespeare.³⁴ “All the world” is the domain of the philosopher, the true cosmopolitan. The freest man is also the least tyrannical, because he has no interest in this or that. To keep to our ocular metaphor, the Pythagorean philosopher sees the most and remains himself unseen. The things of the world pass before his gaze, one after another, but he is the subject of no one’s gaze. The many attend the games at Olympia to see feats of strength and valor. No one at the festival has come to behold the philosopher, and one never hears the common men crying out with Epictetus, “*Ecce philosophum!*”³⁵ The tyrant, by contrast, is both the most visible man in the city and the one who sees least because everyone hides what is of value from the tyrant. This lack of seeing is the source of his perpetual fear of the wise and the just. The tyrant can never be sure that good men are not “contriving something.” He sees only the surface of things, the veneer that everyone presents when faced with authority. Everyone, though, sees the tyrant, whose world is a hellish panopticon.

It is not just his freedom and invisibility for which the tyrant envies the philosopher. Hiero also has a genuine desire for the wisdom of the philosopher. This may be a characteristic of Hiero in particular, because he was once a private man, or it may be characteristic of all tyrants. Xenophon gives no evidence for one reading or the other. However that may be, Hiero summons Simonides because he would be instructed in the ways of wisdom. Apart from this dialogue, we have further historical evi-

³³ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 7.13.

³⁴ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. John Jowett et al (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), II.vii.139–40.

³⁵ Epictetus, *Dissertationes*, ed. and trans. Fred. Dübner (Paris: Ambrosio Firmin-Didot, 1877), IV, 8.13.

dence that this is the case. The encounter between Hiero and Simonides seems to have been a real event, unlike some of the encounters that occur in the Socratic dialogues (for example, the *Parmenides*). Xenophon invents the contents of their discussion, but he does not invent the situation or the setting. Cicero refers in several places to the relationship between the tyrant and the poet, which must have been a traditionally received story at the time he was studying in Greece. In *De natura Deorum*, Cicero writes, “Inquire of me as to the being and nature of god, and I shall follow the example of Simonides, who having the same question put to him by the great Hiero, requested a day’s grace for consideration; next day, when Hiero repeated the question, he asked for two days, and so went on several times multiplying the number of days by two.” Hiero asked why Simonides did this, and the poet responded, “Because the longer I deliberate the more obscure the matter seems to me.”³⁶ By Cicero’s authority, the course between Hiero and Simonides was not the matter of a single afternoon, but an ongoing exchange. Hiero continued to invite Simonides to discourse with him, and desired to know from a wise man about the highest of things. The person who desires to know the truth about the gods is not necessarily a philosopher, but aspires in that direction.

Xenophon’s allusion to the story of Pythagoras, located as it is at the very start of the *Hiero*, makes clear that the two ways of life that are at issue are *not* the tyrannical life and the merely private life. The tyrant does not measure himself against shoemakers or merchants or the discus throwers competing in the Olympian games, nor even the farmer, who is a sort of ideal figure of private life in the other dialogues in the *Corpus Xenophonticum*.³⁷ None of these persons attends the common festivals for the sake of *seeing*, but for the sake of doing and profiting. Hiero measures himself, in his own mind, against one type of private person. The tyrannical life is placed on a scale with its polar opposite, the philosophical life. Hiero lets us know at once that the philosopher is the standard by which he evaluates his own happiness.

³⁶ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De natura Deorum*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), I.xxii.60.

³⁷ See especially Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, trans. E. C. Marchant, in *Xenophon in Seven Volumes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), vol. 4. Xenophon writes, “Helpful, pleasant, honourable, dear to gods and men in the highest degree, [the art of farming] is also in the highest degree easy to learn. Noble qualities surely!” (XV.4).

Correcting Pythagoras and Rewriting the Origin of Philosophy

It is not enough to simply state that Xenophon alludes to Pythagoras, and that he means to propose the philosophical life as an alternative to the life of the tyrant. This contradistinction is a commonplace amongst Greek philosophers. If that is all that Xenophon means to do, then we might be forced to concede with E. C. Marchant that Xenophon's mind moves in only a narrow circle of ideas. Xenophon intends more than this. In alluding to Pythagoras, he does not simply accept what his predecessor says, but he challenges it. There is a sense in which the *Hiero* can be said to offer a correction to Pythagoras' definition of philosophy.

The same endeavor to rewrite the Pythagorean definition of philosophy is tacit in Plato's *Phaedo*. I have been silent about this dialogue until now, but the classicist will have already recalled that the *Phaedo* marks the second significant role that the city of Phlius plays in the history of philosophy. In the time of Socrates, Phlius remained a stronghold of Pythagorean thought and the seat of one of the largest Pythagorean communities. The *Phaedo* is the story of the death of Socrates, related after the fact by Phaedo, in Phlius, to a group of Pythagoreans. These Phlisians question Phaedo for news from Athens, because "hardly anyone from Phlius visits Athens nowadays, nor has any stranger come from Athens for some time who could give us a clear account of what happened, except that he drank the poison and died, but nothing more."³⁸ The silence between the two cities is likely the result of the political tension between Athens and the Peloponnese. It is noteworthy that the Pythagoreans in Phlius know and honor Socrates as a philosopher and wish to hear about his final teaching. Further, two of Socrates' interlocutors, Simmias and Cebes, are from Thebes, which had another major settlement of Pythagoreans, and both were associates of the leading Theban Pythagorean, Philolaus.³⁹

The argument of the *Phaedo* concerns the immortality of the soul, which was one of the central dogmas of the Pythagorean philosophy. Pythagoras taught that the soul underwent metempsychosis after the death of the body, and was repeatedly reincarnated. Porphyry writes, "First he declares that the soul is immortal; then that it changes into other kinds of

³⁸ Plato, *Phd.*, 57a–b.

³⁹ Plato, *Phd.*, 61d–e. See also John M. Cooper's introduction to *Phd.* in *Collected Works*, 49.

animals; in addition that things that happen recur at certain intervals, and nothing is absolutely new. . . . Pythagoras seems to have been the first to introduce these opinions into Greece.”⁴⁰ This is another philosophical field in which Pythagoras may be credited as a founder. Pythagoras himself claimed to have already passed through many phases of reincarnation. Diogenes Laertius reports (on the authority of Heraclides), “After Euphorbus died, [Pythagoras] said that his soul had passed into Hermotimus. . . . Then he said that he had become Pyrrhus, a fisherman of Delos; and that he still recollected everything, how he had been formerly Aethalides, then Euphorbus, then Hermotimus, and then Pyrrhus. And when Pyrrhus died, he became Pythagoras.”⁴¹

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates takes up the Pythagorean doctrine of the immortality of the soul as a theme. If there is any doubt that he is self-consciously engaging with the ideas of the Pythagoreans, this is dispelled when he tells Simmias and Cebes that what he has to say is essentially the same as the teaching of Philolaus.⁴² Socrates’ four arguments are commonly known as the cyclical argument; the argument from recollection; the affinity argument; and the argument from the Form of life. Each has been subject to a thousand and one critical responses, and it is not our purpose to examine them in detail. It must be mentioned, however, that having gone through these demonstrations of the soul’s immortality, Socrates admits, “No sensible man would insist that these things are as I have described them, but I think it is fitting for a man to risk the belief—for the risk is a noble one—that this, or something like this, is true about our souls and their dwelling places, since the soul is evidently immortal, and a man should repeat this to himself as if it were an incantation.”⁴³ The Pythagorean dogma is taken by Socrates as a likely story, edifying and noble but far from certain. Socrates teaches the Pythagoreans present that their doctrine has the moral and logical status of an “as if” rather than a first principle.

The key passage of the dialogue does not, however, concern im-

⁴⁰ Quoted in Richard D. McKirahan, Jr., *Philosophy Before Socrates: An Introduction with Texts and Commentary* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 84 (quotation 9.10).

⁴¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, trans. C. D. Yonge (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853), 340.

⁴² Plato, *Phd.*, 61d.

⁴³ Plato, *Phd.*, 114d.

mortality. Having used this theme to situate himself squarely within the universe of Pythagorean discourse, Socrates essays a redefinition of philosophy, thereby seizing the club of Hercules from Pythagoras. The Socratic definition of philosophy is not bearing witness to the spectacle of the festival. The new definition that Socrates gives of philosophy is learning to die. He says, “Those who practice philosophy in the right way are in training for dying [*hoi orthos philosophountes apothneskineskein meletosi*] and they fear death least of all men.”⁴⁴ Dying is not, of course, a craft that one perfects through practice like shoemaking or cookery. Learning to die entails learning to live rightly. The best death is the death of a man who has lived and done as he ought and as was fitting. The person who achieves this may die easily, like Socrates himself, with a joke on his lips. Philosophy is therefore not simply a matter of seeing, but of *doing* and *being*. With this definition, Socrates suggests a new basis for philosophy and therefore a new founding. He announces this second founding to the Pythagoreans schooled in the first founding, both those of Thebes (through Simmias and Cebes), and those of Phlius (through Phaedo).⁴⁵

Xenophon, like Plato, intends to shine a new light on the practice of philosophy, though with greater restraint than the *Phaedo*. The *Hiero* is closer to a corrective or expansion of the Pythagorean doctrine than a radical reinvention. This is suggested when Simonides returns at the end of the dialogue to the issue of the festival.

Following the breakdown of Hiero, in which the tyrant contemplates suicide, the roles of the interlocutors are reversed and achieve their natural order. The wise Simonides becomes the teacher, demonstrating his wisdom for the first time, and Hiero the pupil. The tyrant lays down his authority and wisdom is able now to speak. Surprisingly, Simonides does not castigate the tyrannical life, but offers a pragmatic program for ameliorating its evils. He says, “I can, I believe, teach you how ruling does not at all prevent being loved, but even gets more than living privately.”⁴⁶ He suggests that Hiero may do well by doing good. A benevolent tyrant, who works for the good of the people, who dis-

⁴⁴ Plato, *Phd.*, 67e. Among those luminaries who accepted the Socratic definition of philosophy as the true definition are Cicero and Montaigne.

⁴⁵ See Dustin Peone, *Making Philosophy Laugh: Humor, Irony, and Folly in Philosophical Thought* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2023), ch. 1.

⁴⁶ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 8.1.

penses gifts and rewards personally but delegates punishments to others, who honors commerce and uses his personal guard to enforce justice, who spares no expense to improve the city rather than aggrandizing himself—such a tyrant wins the love, honor, and respect both of other cities and of his own subjects. Simonides says, “If you make the city you lead the most happy, [you will] be victorious in the most beautiful and magnificent contest among human beings.”⁴⁷ The portrait of the tyrant sketched by Simonides is not necessarily that of a just man; he appeals to the desire of Hiero for love and honor rather than to his innate sense of justice or right.⁴⁸ All the same, it is a portrait not of an oppressive despot, but of a benevolent father of a grateful people. It must be kept in mind that the Greek τύραννος does not necessarily mean an oppressive autocrat, as the word “tyrant” does in modern usage. The Greek “tyrant” was any monarch who ruled without law.⁴⁹ The king who rules without law is most often oppressive, but may in theory be benevolent.

Having shown Hiero the benefits of ruling with virtue, Simonides returns at the end of his speech to Hiero’s complaint concerning the spectacle of the festival. He says, “And because you would be safe, you could, if you wished, travel somewhere to contemplate [the spectacles], or do this while remaining here. For there would always be a festival gathered around you of those who wish to display something, whether wise or beautiful or good, and of those who desire to serve you. Everyone in attendance would be your ally, everyone absent would desire to serve you.”⁵⁰ There are several aspects of this passage that merit scrutiny.

First, we find that in his return to the topic, Simonides emphasizes that the particular objects valued by the spectator of the festival are the True, the Beautiful, and the Good, the three highest things and the classical objects of philosophical speculation. These are what St. Thomas would much later call the “transcendental predicates” of God. This sheds light on how Xenophon—and probably the Greeks in general—

⁴⁷ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 11.7.

⁴⁸ In Plato’s language, this is an appeal to a silver soul, not a gold soul. *Rep.* III, 415a–c.

⁴⁹ Rousseau mentions the *Hiero* as evidence that “the Greek authors used the word tyrant in another sense [than the pejorative sense].” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), III.x, note. Aristotle distinguishes the oppressive from the (apparently) benevolent tyrant in *Pol.* V.xi.

⁵⁰ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 11.10.

understood Pythagoras' encomium of the "festival." The spectacle pursued by the philosophic life is not the ugliness and folly of the back stalls and pig races. The eye of the philosopher does not promiscuously range where it ought not. Rather, the philosopher gazes upon the festival in order to discover the finest things: truth, beauty and goodness.

Second, Simonides claims that the spectacle of the festival is open not just to the private person, but to the tyrant as well. The contrast that is posited at the beginning of the dialogue between the tyrannical and the private, philosophical life is annulled. The gap between the two lives is shown to be traversable. This is to say that pursuit of the philosophical life is an open possibility for the tyrant. If this is so, then it is likewise an open possibility for politicians in *poleis* with non-tyrannical forms of government. The lover of wisdom need not be a purely private person, and need not be invisible. This means that the "philosopher king" is not just a phantasm within an ideal city. The tyrant may philosophize even in the imperfect cities of this world.

Third, if it is possible for politicians to learn to philosophize, then it is best that they do so. This is the crux of the teaching that Simonides offers to Hiero. Hiero is neither loved nor honored by his subjects because he fails to practice justice.⁵¹ His life is without beauty or truth because he fails to pursue goodness. Because his subjects fear him and hate him, they present him with only the semblance of truth and beauty when they have to deal with him. Hiero is acutely aware of this disparity between truth and appearance, and it is at the root of his inability to trust those around him.⁵² Simonides offers the possibility of a new way of life, which pursues the three objects of goodness, truth, and beauty. In practicing the good—namely, what benefits the city as a whole—the tyrant may (in theory) win love and fidelity. With these, he will have access to the beautiful and the true. It is to the tyrant's benefit to learn to philosophize, because only by so doing may he attain the happiness he so desires. The failure to live a philosophical life leads the tyrant only to thoughts of the noose.

⁵¹ Hiero correctly says, "I judge being loved to be so great a good that I hold goods really come automatically to one who is loved, from both gods and human beings. And it is of just this sort of possession that tyrants get less than anyone." Xenophon, *Hiero*, 3.5–6.

⁵² "It is more difficult to find one trustworthy person than very many workers for whatever work you want." Xenophon, *Hiero*, 6.11.

Socrates, as he is presented by both Plato and Xenophon, never abandons the hope that politicians and statesmen may learn to become philosophers also. The “philosopher kings” of the *Republic* are the ideal, probably impossible fusion of the two types of life.⁵³ The disciples of Socrates were for the most part the aristocratic youth who were bound to one day rule Athens. Socrates’ influence with these young men ultimately vexed enough powerful citizens that it led to his trial and death. It is debatable whether Socrates succeeded with any of his politically-inclined students in inculcating a true love of philosophy, and both Plato and Xenophon generally suggest that he did not. Xenophon writes of these politically ambitious followers in his *Memorabilia*, “So soon, then, as they presumed themselves to be the superiors of the politicians, they no longer came near Socrates. For apart from their general want of sympathy with him, they resented being cross-examined about their errors when they came. Politics had brought them to Socrates, and for politics they left him.”⁵⁴ It seems that these young men learned dialectics from Socrates while lacking the true love of wisdom. Nevertheless, Socrates never gives up on the project, and this appears to be the same project Simonides has in mind in his discourse with Hiero. It is fitting that the *Hiero* ends with the silence of the tyrant, and we do not know what results come of Simonides’ exhortation.

Fourth, Xenophon suggests that it is in fact *easier* for the tyrant to bear witness to the spectacle of the festival than for a private person to do so. The festival, he says, gathers around the benevolent tyrant. The ruler need not go out of his way to seek out the spectacle of *la comédie humaine*. Instead, it follows him wherever he goes. His position in the city is privileged, and to continue the metaphor of the festival, we may speak of him having a raised dais upon which he has a more expansive view of things than others. Because the city is his patrimony, he is authorized to look into all affairs. This requires, however, that he be a benevolent ruler who has won the love of his people. The lover wishes above all to be seen by the beloved. If the tyrant is beloved by all, then all present themselves to his view and pass their finest possessions and virtues before his gaze. The spectacle that the private philosopher must seek out, the ruler receives as an offering. This is true not just of the

⁵³ Plato, *Rep.*, V–VI.

⁵⁴ Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, trans. E. C. Marchant, in *Xenophon in Seven Volumes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), vol. 4, I.ii.47.

subjects of the ruler, but of other cities also, which, loving and admiring their just and happy neighbor, likewise allow him to behold their finest things. The philosophical tyrant is able to benefit from the natural cupidity of the human condition. The tyrant, then, has the potential to become a greater philosopher than the private person.

In what way is all of this meant as a corrective of Pythagoras? The shortcoming of the Pythagorean definition of philosophy is that it creates a dichotomy between the philosophical and the political life. Pythagoras presents himself as a radically private person, and his image of the philosopher is the image of an outsider. For the Socratic philosophers, on the other hand, this dichotomy is invalid. In the *Hiero*, Xenophon reinforces the idea that philosophical thinking is rooted in the spectacle of the festival. However, he expands this idea to be more inclusive. He allows philosophy to be a possibility (even if never fully actualized) for the political person as well as the private person. He invites the tyrant into the practice. Moreover, Xenophon binds together the love of the spectacle with the love of the city, which is a connection that Pythagoras avoids. The Pythagorean philosopher, a perpetual stranger, lacks the element of patriotism.

Conclusion

We have now reached an understanding concerning Hiero's lament about being unable to witness the spectacle of the festival. Taken out of its historical context, this is a baffling article of sorrow. Only when understood as a direct reflection of the conversation between Pythagoras and Leon does its significance become clear. At stake is the very idea of philosophy and the character of the philosopher. Xenophon, like Plato in the *Phaedo*, has in mind a new definition of philosophy and a re-founding of the tradition on principles that bring the philosophical and the political life closer together. The teaching of the *Hiero* reaffirms the image of the festival as the proper object of philosophical speculation. However, it proceeds to offer this image as something desirable not just for private persons and unknown strangers, but for gentlemen and even monarchs as well. This maneuver actually shows that the tyrant is correct to suspect the philosopher, because the philosopher does in fact possess a good that it would be good and beneficial for the tyrant to have. As to the effect of this argument on its listener, I can only repeat that at the end of the dialogue Hiero remains silent.

II. BOOK REVIEWS

Димитър Божков „История и еманципация. Клио из пасажите на модерността“, София, Университетско издателство Св. Климент Охридски,” 2022. (Dimitar Bozhkov, *History and Emancipation: Clio through the Passages of Modernity*, Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2022, 213 pp., ISBN 9789540754055)

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Dimitar Bozhkov's *History and Emancipation: Clio through the Passages of Modernity* constitutes a pioneering contribution to Bulgarian scholarship on Walter Benjamin. The book aims to show that the problem of history is key to understanding both modernity and the temporal mode of the present through the concept of emancipation as well as its political and critical aspects. The primary focus is *The Book of Passages* from *The Arcades Project* and the “critical philosophy of history”¹ that Bozhkov claims it develops. However, *History and Emancipation* surpasses its initial goal, providing a synoptic view of Benjamin's larger textual corpus and supplying a hermeneutic framework for understanding his work as a whole. Employing a procedure reminiscent of Benjamin, Bozhkov begins with earlier texts such as *Toward the Critique of Violence* and *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, tracing their development through to the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. This approach allows Bozhkov to bring what he calls the “crystal of the total event”² of Benjamin's thought into appearance, revealing

¹ Димитър Божков, *История и еманципация. Клио из пасажите на модерността* (София: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2022), 14.

² Ibid., 102.

and utilizing Benjamin's own methodology.

One of Benjamin's core ideas is that the singular phenomena of the past must be saved from oblivion. This can be achieved by examining the specific series of constellations of opposites that shape them, and which become the sources of the tensions that ultimately make a totality out of the singular. This totality is an open one; it preserves its possibilities within itself. In it, the phenomenon's future, past, and present are not visible as complete totalities, being perceived instead as exceptional and eventful moments. Grasping these moments should be the goal of a philosophy of history. As this book shows, although it doesn't explicitly state this as a program, this can also be a way of reading the history of philosophy, as it treats Benjamin's heritage and its remnants in the same way that Benjamin's ideal historian treats the debris of the past. Moreover, Bozhkov's book should be regarded as the first part of a diptych, one that opens the way and is intrinsically connected to his second book, *The Marxism in Messianism*.³ In tandem, they serve Clio well: where *History and Emancipation* is a scroll—tracing the genealogy of the concept of history in the nineteenth century and its relationship with tragedy—*Marxism in Messianism* is certainly a trumpet in its preoccupation with the event, as conceived in the Jewish messianic tradition, and its connections to Marxism.

History and Emancipation comprises five chapters. After an introduction to the cultural history of modernity, using the figure of the postponed time of the apocalypse, the second chapter plunges deep into the relationship between sovereignty and tragedy, examining the philosophical "dialogue" between Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt. The chapter shows how the relationship between politics and theology can be understood through the category of the tragic. Bozhkov examines the way in which Benjamin's engagement with the emancipatory potential of the past intersects with Schmitt's concepts of political authority and decision-making. As Bozhkov demonstrates, both thinkers view the tragic as a space for navigating the exception. Schmitt's sovereign, defined as the one who decides the state of exception, represents the ultimate figure of control, yet one whose authority is inherently tied to law and thereby to its enforcement through mythological violence. Conversely, Benjamin critiques this model, presenting a messianic alternative that rejects mythic

³ Димитър Божков, *Марксизмът в месианизма* (София: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2023).

violence and embraces redemptive potential through the concept of bare life. In Benjamin's framework, the tragic becomes a medium for thinking eschatological possibilities. Bozhkov's exploration is further enriched by his interpretation of *Trauerspiel*, which Benjamin analyzed as emblematic of baroque theology. The sovereign in the *Trauerspiel* is caught in an apocalyptic world from which divine transcendence is absent, leaving him in a state of perpetual impotence.

Bozhkov reveals how this critique resonates with Benjamin's broader epistemology, whose historical task involves arranging fragmented phenomena to uncover their redemptive potential. Benjamin's theory of knowledge is treated as a curious mix of Kant, Leibniz, and Plato. As Bozhkov shows, in order to create an epistemology composed of phenomena, concepts, and ideas, Benjamin takes from Kant the concept of experience, viewing it through a dual lens—both religious and historical. From Leibniz, he adopts the notion of the monad, while from Plato he draws the concept of the idea. Concepts are a menacing mediator for phenomena, regarded as the cause of their loss but also as enabling their transformation. For phenomena to be redeemed, they must become ideas—not lying in experience or reason, but in contemplation. The goal is for the single phenomenon to manifest itself in its totality through its characteristic constellations of opposites.

The concept of the “crystal of the total event,” introduced in the third chapter, may be regarded as the heart of Bozhkov's interpretation of Benjamin's philosophy of history. Benjamin regards historical phenomena as fractured yet total, holding within themselves the potential for redemption. The metaphor of the crystal can thus be used as a methodological tool for understanding Benjamin's historiography, which seeks to preserve the singularity of historical phenomena through specific tensional dialectics. Bozhkov's analysis of *The Arcades Project* exemplifies how this methodology operates. Figures like the *flâneur*, the prostitute, and the collector are not merely products of commodification but also embody modernity's latent utopian possibilities. These figures form constellations that resist closure, allowing for a reinterpretation of modern experience. The Parisian arcades themselves, as sites of both alienation and imagination, become central to this critique.

In chapter four, Bozhkov extends his discussion to the urban spaces of modernity, particularly the arcades, which Benjamin viewed as emblematic of the nineteenth century's mythic imagination. Bozhkov

explores their allegorical potentialities, contrasting them with the symbol's tendency to impose closure. Allegory, for Benjamin, becomes a way of confronting modernity's catastrophic dimensions while retaining the potential for redemption. Bozhkov aligns this allegorical mode with Benjamin's historiographical method, where fragments of the past are salvaged not as static facts but as dynamic images capable of illuminating the present.

The book's treatment of the image, discussed in detail in the third chapter, reinforces this theme. The historical image, as opposed to the historical concept, offers a medium for redemption by revealing the temporal layers of phenomena. These images crystallize the tensions of their epoch and encapsulate both catastrophe and possibility. Through this lens, the historian becomes a redemptive figure tasked with uncovering the hidden emancipatory potential within the fragments of the past.

History and Emancipation is both an intellectual tribute to Walter Benjamin and an original contribution to the history of philosophy, the philosophy of history, and political theology. Bozhkov's analysis of Benjamin's corpus not only clarifies the complex interplay of sovereignty, tragedy, and historical redemption, but also offers a compelling model for critical historiography. The book illuminates the transformative potential of Benjamin's methodology while situating it firmly within the broader intellectual currents of modernity. In conclusion, Dimitar Bozhkov's *History and Emancipation* offers an innovative approach and critical insights, opening new possibilities for reading and understanding the relationship between history, emancipation, and the enduring enigmas of modernity.⁴

⁴ Support for this research is provided by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science under the National Program "Young Scientists and Postdoctoral Fellows – 2."

Alessandra Aloisi, *The Power of Distraction: Diversion and Reverie from Montaigne to Proust*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. 2023, 202 pp., ISBN 9781350342958

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Its packaging notwithstanding, Alessandra Aloisi's *The Power of Distraction: Diversion and Reverie from Montaigne to Proust* is far more than just another book of French Studies. Indeed, it would be a mistake to turn to it only for new interpretations of the role of distraction in the modern French literary canon – though those insights are certainly present. This is, first of all, a book of philosophy or theory (or philosophy and literature, if this was considered a real discipline). Aloisi's theoretical claims are bold: they are both profoundly philosophical and acutely relevant to contemporary thought. Aloisi's main argument can be summarized as follows: our contemporary world, still deeply shaped by Christian-Augustinian traditions (Aloisi is also an Augustine scholar) is obsessed with attention spans and disorders. Consequently, it banishes – as it has always done – distraction from society as the metaphysical and moral negative of attention. Yet, as Aloisi asserts, distraction is “by no means the negative or the opposite of attention.”¹ It is instead a “power,” an ability, an ethical, rather than moral, capacity more profound than attention and intrinsic to humans, animals, and who knows what else.

In Agambenian terms, Aloisi wishes to make the “attention-distraction” dichotomy inoperative by showing that distraction is not the opposite of attention but rather its impotentiality. Distraction does not occur when we are not attending to something but when our attention has become inoperative, which is to say, when our attention is present but not focused on anything in particular. Rather, it diffuses over everything. Distraction – Aloisi concludes – is a different kind of attention: it

¹ Alessandra Aloisi, *The Power of Distraction: Diversion and Reverie from Montaigne to Proust* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 7.

is a “diffuse, poly-vocal, and multidirectional”² kind of attention.

Aliosi unfolds this argument by distractedly, but never disgracefully, exploring the French literary tradition and beyond, vaguely following the role of the metaphysical power of distraction in three ideas. First, she explores the concept of *divertissement* from Montaigne through Pascal to Leopardi. These simple “amusements,” which for the Augustinian Pascal were nothing other than this-worldly distractions from what should be our proper object of attention—namely, God—are revealed to be a natural tendency intrinsic to humans (and the rest of nature). For Aloisi, these distractions provide fleeting pleasures that enable humans to forget their inborn desire for endless pleasure, the real cause of their original boredom.

Second, she investigates what she calls “the power of flies.” This is another expression for the power of all those little sensations that can or are supposed to distract us but that, even in Augustine and Pascal, end up leading us to a revelation, which is none other than our own life. Through Aloisi’s subtle analysis of Proust’s works, we discover that what he calls “involuntary memory” has more to do with distraction than with memory: what we are allowed to experience through involuntary memory is our real life—all those little sensations we were not paying attention to. In this sense, distraction preserves for us this original life that we believed was completely lost.

Finally, the last idea Aloisi considers is that of *reverie*, namely that specific kind of mental wandering that characterizes those who are distracted. Indeed, *reverie*, like *rêve* in French, “is said to derive from the Latin *exvagus*, composed of *ex* (outside) and *vagus* (vagabonding, wandering about).”³ Moving between Flaubert, Rousseau, Leopardi, and Bergson, *reverie*, understood as a distracted mental wandering outside of oneself into the world, becomes a full-fledged power always available to the mind, an inexhaustible reserve of pleasure that no one can take away from us. Here, distraction emerges as politically significant too: the distracted person, half-mad and half-idle, escapes societal norms, which are nothing other than the requirements put on everyone’s “ecology of attention,” to use Yves Citton’s formula.

The book concludes with Bergson’s account of laughter as the means whereby society strengthens its grip on and punishes the people

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 96.

who, because of their distraction, have done something they should not have done. The most famous example is the philosopher who, distracted by looking at the stars, fell into a well. However, laughter can also become a way to identify with the distracted person: suddenly, we do not laugh at them but with them, “at the senselessness of the codes they have unwittingly broken.”⁴ Thus, distraction, while often being thought of as the enemy of all *civilization*, is *simultaneously* the power at the basis of all *culture* and *thought*.

⁴ Ibid., 138.

III. ASPIRATION CORNER

Peter Wessel Zapffe: The Ontological Tragedy of Human Being

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Abstract: The hermeneutics of Peter Wessel Zapffe's tale *The Last Messiah* depicts the difficult condition of human life, which finds itself living as an unwelcome guest in the world. Nature has armed the human being with a sharp sword without a hilt: consciousness. This has allowed humans to survive in the environment but is also a weapon that turns against the human species itself. Self-awareness and awareness of the world do not satisfy the metaphysical interest that humans harbor, on the contrary, it completely empties it, thus annihilating the existence of human beings as well. Through the narrative of a hunting scene and an encounter between the hunter and non-human animals, Zapffe manages to describe, in a few pages, the nature of our species, the reasons for its suffering, its defense mechanisms, and the only possible hope for salvation.

Keywords: Zapffe; Human Predicament; Tragic; Antinatalism; Consciousness; Meaningless.

Introduction

Peter Wessel Zapffe is a unique thinker whose philosophy is placed between moral reflection and metaphysics. From a moral standpoint, he is notable, among other things, for his sensitivity to ecological issues and his Antinatalism as a way to preserve nature from man. Elsewhere¹, I have emphasized Zapffe's crucial role in bridging the gap between ancient Proto-antinatalism and Contemporary Antinatalism, due to his exploration of the harmful yet salvific nature of *knowledge*.

¹ Although Italian language is not available to all scholars, I would like to remind to my papers: Sarah Dierna, *Contemporary Antinatalism*; "Mediterranean Dialogues", (62) July-August 2023: 473-383. See also Alberto Giovanni Biuso & Sarah Dierna, *Antinatalism: History and Meaning of a Radical Philosophy*; "Mediterranean Dialogues" (64), November-December 2023: 56-75.

Zapffe's writing is highly complex and demanding, but it compensates the reader with a deep reflection on what does it mean to be a human being². Unfortunately, much of his philosophical work is available in Zapffe's native language, that is Norwegian, only few essays have been translated into English³, limiting their accessibility to a wider audience. In this article, I shall focus on the archaic story *The Last Messiah*⁴ where, through the narrative of a hunting scene and an encounter between the hunter and non-human animals, Zapffe manages to describe, in a few pages, the nature of our species, the reasons for its suffering, its defense mechanisms, and the only possible hope for salvation.

However, I will also draw on other Zapffe's works, including *Firewall, Norway*, a fictional dialogue between Jørgen, a mountaineer, and an editor. This dialogue presents a confrontation with the radical positions of the interviewee, and highlights the necessity, urgency, and reasons for supporting an antinatalist campaign.

The verses from his poems *Lullaby* and *Epilogue* are also significant. They convey compassion for young life that is yet to embark on its journey of self-affirmation in the world, but also the lucidity of the end which comes up in the maturity. In other words, the tragic truth of existence.

Both the poems and the imaginary interview, along with the 1933 short story, are available in English translation edited by Peter Reed and David Rothenberg. Although these works represent only a part of Zapffe's production⁵, I hope they can show the philosophical core of Zap-

² Zapffe did not immediately study philosophy. Indeed, he had to undertake legal studies because of his father's wishes. An anecdote tells that when he had to discuss his law degree thesis, he expressed himself in verses and rhymes.

³ Zapffe's main work *Om det Tragiske* has finally been translated in English by Ryan L. Showler. See Peter Wessel Zapffe, *On the Tragic*, Peter Lang, New York, Berlin, Bruxelles, Chennai, Lausanne, Oxford, 2024.

⁴ Peter Wessel Zapffe, *The Last Messiah*; Peter Reed and David Rothenberg (edited by), *Wisdom in the Open Air: The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology*, translated in English by S. Kvaløy with P. Reed, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota 1992.

⁵ Two other short essays are also available in English: the first is *Parting with Gausta*, in which the central issue is the need to preserve Nature from any form of culture and to leave it undisturbed. Gausta is a mountain violated by humans who have built cities, roads, and man-made elements in it that make its beauty fade; I quote the last words of this lay prayer/greeting: «Because you were beautiful, you had to die». See P. Wessel Zapffe, *Parting with Gausta*, "Open Air Philosophy": 1-2.

ffe's thought clarifying the role of Man in nature and its harmful condition in being into the world.

Nature and the Appearance of Man

The *Last Messiah* (*Den sidste Messias*) is a short story published in 1933. Here Zapffe describes the human condition and its nature, its behaviors, its lies, its death, and the only possible hope of salvation. Written in archaic Norwegian, the story is divided into five brief sections. Before delving into the content of each section, I would like to briefly summarize the plot.

The story opens with a hunter awakening and *seeing* himself for the first time by intuiting his real condition as a part of nature. This experience exacerbates the internal conflict between *his perception* of the world and *the reality of the world* that does not correspond to this perception. This contrast is manifested in the hunting scene in which the hunter is engaged; non-human animals are prey but are also brothers who suffer like him (*Brotherhood*).

In the second part, Zapffe denounces nature's error in aiming too high and generating a highly dangerous species, placing in its hand a powerful weapon: *consciousness*. This has made Homo sapiens master of the external world and of all that exists. Consciousness is like a double-edged sword that strikes the external world, but also the existence of the species of which it is an attribute. Humans remain a guest of creation, a fragile entity that feel the inconsistency of everything, feels the anguish of life, and know the *truth* of the cosmos, namely its lack of purpose and justice, the inevitable end of all things, the pain of existence at the expense of something else, the senselessness of a world that is in itself pure energy. A condition of lucidity and pain that should have led a species like ours to *extinction*, as happened to other animals due to the excessive development of their organs.

In the third part, the author explains why the human animal has not

The second essay presents a commented translation of §106 of *Om det Tragiske*, in which the philosopher discusses the *Book of Job*, presenting God as a traitor and Job as the victor. See K.J. Dell and A. Schytte Blix, *The Norwegian Philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe (1899-1990) and the Book of Job*; "The Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters", Skrifter nr. 1-2022: 5-25.

yet become extinct. Zapffe introduces the four mechanisms by which he has reduced the content of consciousness and diminished the impact of truth in his life. The study of these mechanisms also considers contemporary knowledge, such as psychoanalysis, and examines in practice certain elements of daily life that have been created to suppress certain types of truth.

The fourth part returns to considering some aspects discussed in the second section and moves towards conclusions. Here, Zapffe argues that it has never been an era in human history devoid of anguish, but he recognizes that primitive peoples were much closer to biological unity, while modernity has neglected these elements and favored the development of technological devices, which have separated humans from their home making them disrespectful inhabitants of nature. The author also insists on the partiality of the defense mechanisms for the survival of the species; the deliberate suppression of consciousness may save the human race for a certain period *delaying* its extinction, but it never *excludes* it altogether. Humans cannot escape their destiny.

The fifth section prepares for the arrival of the last Messiah, whose coming is prophesied by the individual who has managed to grasp the cosmic meaning of the world, the web of pain that sustains it, and to follow its threads to the margins of life. This individual finally brings the good news of annihilation and a message of salvation for humanity, which, however, is not yet ready to accept all this and save itself. Thus, it responds by attacking the prophet of the future and leaving humanity nailed to its cross.

The peculiarity of the story lies in narrating an *evolutionary-biological* history of the human organism, which is observed in its biological nature; existential tragedy is traced back to nature and its developments. The notion of the *tragic*, which is at the core of Zapffe's thought, is very close to Camus's notion of *Absurd*, but the two concepts remain distinct and not overlapping. While the absurd is not in the world and not in the self but in the co-occurrence of the world along with the self, the tragic is biologically inscribed in the self that inhabits the world, thus manifesting itself in the dynamic of co-occurrence but the driving force of this feeling belongs intrinsically to human nature. The discourse will be clarified further by examining all the biological and existential variables of this nature.

Ontological Tragedy of Human Being

As mentioned before, the story, set in a long gone past, begins with the curious scene of a man who wakes up: «One night in times long since vanished, man awoke and saw himself». In the moment the hunter opens his eyes, he sees himself «naked under the cosmos, homeless in his own body»; at that moment «everything opened up before his searching thoughts, wonder upon wonder, terror upon terror, all blossomed in his mind»⁶.

The awakening and the ability to see oneself create a space of *revelation*. Awakening happens within being, and the existential sleep in which humanity is evidently dormant is itself an *internal state* of being; but awakening also happens, in a truly original way, as a sort of *external state* at the boundary with non-being, where sleep is the place of nothingness from which the human is pulled out in coming into the world. The first is an *epistemological awakening*, the second an *ontological awakening*.

As an ontological awakening, opening one's eyes is nothing more than the act of coming into the world of a new being who is born naked, without the home of the mother's womb, only with his own body and sensations. This original genesis is better understood in a 1983 work, namely *Epilogue*. In it, Zapffe addresses the central subject of the 1933 story. In the poem, humanity is born from matter, generated by flames (the Heraclitan principle):

In the heart's hollow, in the mind's bitter order,
in secret closets and the shelter of night
is the incomprehensible world of All,
and the mistgloom dawn of time—
billions of years pressed together
to one second of mutatoric light,
where mankind sprang out of smelting flames
and saw itself as an appalling sight⁷.

From the «in-comprehensible world of All» - in the literal sense of that which is not comprehended -, from the passage of time, from the light

⁶ *The Last Messiah* §1: 41.

⁷ Peter Wessel Zapffe, *Epilogue*; Peter Reed and David Rothenberg (edited by), *Wisdom in the Open Air: The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology*, translated in English by Sigmund Kvaløy with Peter Reed, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota 1992: 59.

that is both mass and energy (as Einstein's rule suggests), humanity springs forth and repeats the same scene with which the story (1933) opens: it sees itself («[mankind] saw itself»). This visual and theoretical experience is therefore immediately subsequent to the cooling of the flames, and *originally* belongs to our species, which is shaped as conscious matter. In other words, the author emphasizes the natural, biological, and constitutive dimension of consciousness; thus awakening may be considered an embryonic event.

The same dichotomy of sleep and awakening, being and non-being, is at the heart of *Lullaby*, first published in Zapffe: *Utvalg og innledning (Selections and introduction)* (Pax Forlag, Oslo 1969)⁸. It is a lullaby, a song sung in order to keep a child asleep a little longer before slipping into the jaws of existence. The child is presented as a small guest who comes from foreign shores and is called by love to become a seed, a child, an adult, a piece of conscious matter. Peter Reed and Sigmund Kvaløy read this poem as a wish or hope that the child may preserve himself as long as possible in childhood, ignorant of the tragedy of existence, in the age that Giacomo Leopardi defined that of imagination.

In *The last Messiah* as well as in *Lullaby*, the existential journey along the river of life begins as children: «From the moment the child embarks on his journey down the river of life, the roar of death's waterfall fills the valley, always nearer and nearer; it gnaws, gnaws at the child's happiness»⁹: «Go then in the mighty stream/ here my eyes are plunging»¹⁰.

The sleeping child under the covers is therefore an embryonic creature, a «little seed»¹¹. As Zapffe writes: «still you are not ours/ – you belong to them out there –,» an expression that admits both interpretations mentioned above regarding awakening: an ontological act and an epistemological act. Immaturity of years represents in this case existential goodness; the goodness of the first peoples and the first epochs of history in which, despite the inescapable condition of their nature, humans had not broken ties with matter. In the fourth part of the story, Zapffe notes

⁸ Peter Wessel Zapffe, *Lullaby*; Peter Reed and David Rothenberg (edited by), *Wisdom in the Open Air: The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology*, translated in English by Sigmund Kvaløy with Peter Reed, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota 1992.

⁹ *The Last Messiah*: §2: 42.

¹⁰ *Lullaby*: 63.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

that although primitive peoples were overwhelmed by the same existential spasms that made their lives difficult and tragic, they had not moved too far from biological unity compared to modern and unnatural populations, which have instead created a fracture and increased this distance. While the traits that ensured the survival of the older populations consisted in «the proper use of our bodies' strengths and the biologically useful part of our souls. And these traits must operate under stringent conditions – the limitations of our senses, the frailty of our bodies, and the energy-demanding task of keeping our bodies in one piece and our need for affection satisfied», the development of modern civilizations has neglected «[the] conditions, the narrow range of possibilities for happiness, [...] growing civilization, its technology, and its standardization». The consequence of this distance has made «[the] large part of our best biological talents [...] superfluous in the modern, complicated technological game we play with the environment, we are victims of increasing spiritual unemployment»¹². The culmination of such technological development and such an excess of spirit has led to a *separation* between the human and the whole, has fractured the initial *biological unity* with the result of no longer recognizing this unity with nature, which nevertheless remains: «[what] gives us the opportunity to practice these activities»¹³.

Humanity may be conceived as «a mighty Bomb is he/ of chromosomic-isotopic strength,/ and the fuse fizzles the whole time he/ in play and love, in war and work,/ will always be tilling his own soul going from gnome to dizzy phantom/ He draws himself up and bears his head high,/ and claims all wins as his own,/ believing all his profits are pure»¹⁴.

Humans would in fact have managed to impose a hierarchy within their kingdom through the technical availability that nature has granted them; the hunter takes the bow that Zapffe describes as «fruit of the union between the soul and the hand»¹⁵ to strike the prey of his meal. Technique therefore represents a 'natural' device that arises as a product of two capacities, the spirit (knowledge) and the hand, both entirely biological, which also make the result of their combination, the technique, equally natural. The revealing experience that the hunter undergoes leads him to conceive «the globe's burly belly/ is a pregnant mother from/ which trees

¹² *The Last Messiah* §4: 50.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Epilogue*: 60.

¹⁵ *The Last Messiah* §1: 40.

and birds, fish and seals come/ and He with them»¹⁶. In fact, when he goes to the usual watering hole, we repeat it, the hunter no longer sees the prey before his eyes, but an organism similar to himself: «When the animals came to their waterhole, where he out of habit waited for them, he no longer knew the spring of the tiger in his blood, but a great psalm to the brotherhood of suffering shared by all that lives»¹⁷.

The revelation leaves the hunter homeless and without the comforting place of his own truths. Homeless means without any substructure he has elaborated before. So truth subtracts and does not add, for this reason the hunter finds himself naked, exactly as he was generated, exactly as at the beginning of his story.

Zapffe's narrative continues and deepens the author's materialist, anthropocentric, and tragic ontology. In itself considered, «the universe we find ourselves in is purely material – matter and energy petering out into oblivion by the ticking of the entropic clock». The hypothesis of a creator external to creation is therefore excluded, and reality is reduced to *pure matter* in the becoming of which *Homo sapiens* has also arrived. His presence, however, marks «a break in the very unity of life, a biological paradox, a monstrosity, an absurdity, a hypertrophy of the most catastrophic kind»¹⁸. While the indifferent nature of Leopardi or the φύσις of the Greeks simply includes humans among its entities, Zapffe has a different vision in which the initial error was committed precisely by nature, that is 'responsible' for having armed a species, making it omnipotent and dangerous not only for the external world but also for itself.

The first element to be emphasized is precisely this. For pagan thinkers, humans are not a mistake but an entity like the others that the whole can tolerate; regardless of the human attitude towards the whole, he himself remains something that exists like the others, not the end of creation but not even a mistake of nature. In Zapffe's conception nature made a mistake when it generated the human species: «Nature had aimed too high, and outdone itself. A species had been too heavily armed»¹⁹. It has granted it as a tool of defense and survival consciousness, awareness of itself and the world, which modern philosophy has used to claim the primacy of the human animal over others, as well as the triumph of Subjec-

¹⁶ *Epilogue*: 60.

¹⁷ *The Last Messiah* §1: 41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* §2: 41.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

tivism that then reached its peak with Idealism. The tragedy does not depend on consciousness, which in itself is a functional device, but on the never-satisfied need to find a meaning and significance in reality, stifled precisely by the consciousness that instead shows him reality in all its harshness and truth. Let us see, therefore, what the functionality of consciousness consists in and why it makes *Homo sapiens* a tragic animal.

As an organism, humans share biological, social, and autotelic interests with other animals. Biological interest is linked to the need for food and nourishment, social interest to the need to form relationships, and autotelic interest concerns activities that are carried out for the pleasure of doing them, even if they have no utility. Humans, however, have a fourth interest. A *metaphysical interest* that recalls our need for justice, morality, for cosmic meaning to the things that happen and to life as a whole. Zapffe explains the quadruple nature of these needs by taking the example of wine: wine is a drink and therefore a source of nourishment in some way, but it is also an element of conviviality, its autotelic value depends on taste as an intrinsic pleasure of its consumption; in Christianity, however, wine also has a symbolic meaning, in the moment of the Eucharist it becomes the blood of Christ. Metaphysical interest is a heteronomous interest that strives to look at life from the outside to give it a meaning, to understand what its purpose is, its ultimate goal.

Despite the need to satisfy this interest, humans are first and foremost a biological organism; for all that he has wanted to tell himself stories and fantasized about his future, he remains subject to the inviolable laws of nature. To the triumph of time. Knowledge manifests to a 'metaphysical consciousness' that beyond any meaning there is no meaning, beyond any justice the world is profoundly unjust, beyond any morality reality does not contemplate any moral order.

There is only matter and its entropy. Zapffe compares the movement of this matter to the two phases of pulmonary respiration: «When it exhales, delicate and graceful life teems out of its pores, and all the creatures stretch out their arms to the sun; but when it takes in its breath, a rustle of fragile spirits breaking sweeps through the multitudes, and their corpses lash the ground like showers of hail»²⁰. The movement of inspiration and expiration does not only concern the present but all epochs of human and world history. Consciousness therefore makes manifest not only the

²⁰ Ibid. §2: 42.

movement but also its repetition, which continually returns to fill the earth with new living beings and to make the wombs of mothers always pregnant. In this continuous game, the same identical laws of the ancients hold true: the coming of every new organism and its departure is nothing more than matter becoming and transforming. In the story, we read: «He carries a meal inside himself, yesterday it was an animal running freely about by its own will, now he is absorbing it, making it a part of himself; where does he begin and where does he end? Things blend into each other in sequences of cause and effect, and everything he tries to seize and hold dissolves before his probing thoughts. Soon he sees mechanics behind everything, even behind that which he used to hold dear»²¹.

It is above all the *experience of dying* that leads humans to intuit the *absence* of any meaning. Death, in fact, brutally and arbitrarily interrupts existence, depriving life of any sense or purpose.

The first part of the story ends in a surprising way. The animals return to the watering hole but «when they found him again by the rising of the new moon, he sat dead by the waterhole»²². The hunter dies and does so before his prey. Seeing oneself, understanding the principles of nature and submitting to them means being destined, like any other organism, to the law of time, to the inevitable end that awaits all that exists. The moon, which seems only an accessory notion, holds an important meaning. Zapffe announces the advance of death referring to the moon also in the 1983 poem. Here the author contrasts the knowledge of the cosmos that humans claim to have reached with the meagerness of their knowledge («he knows hardly a thing,»²³). The triumphant return from the moon is also the truth of the end: «though your machine was/ impressive, / that Someone awaited you back home»²⁴. *Death awaits him*.

Even one's own finitude is part of the cosmic design of the world, something that the human organism has preferred to remove and does not want to talk about. Even when admitting it, each individual always attributes it to others and never to oneself: «I protest with a veritable NO!» but «yet time races on and the day shall come when no one who knows them recalls me»²⁵. Time/nature always triumphs.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid. §1: 41.

²³ *Epilogue*: 60.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid. 61-62.

To appease this irresolvable struggle of the oneself with itself and with the world, which would otherwise lead humanity to extinction, *Homo sapiens* has decided to renounce one of the two elements that characterize its existence; it has renounced not the metaphysical interest that it instead maintains and in the light of which only it can continue to observe the time it inhabits, but the result of *consciousness*.

It should be evident that in a matter devoid of meaning, the tragic does not exist; the dissonance with reality depends on the type of order and justice that the human species is willing to accept. The only form of morality and justice that the world possesses is the equity with which it grants the end to all that first began to exist. If one accepts that life and death are merely two natural processes, then the metaphysical horror will dissolve and what we have called tragic «would then be simplified, reduced, to nothing more than the physical end of existence, making the phenomenon of tragedy extensively extrapolable to all forms of life on Earth»²⁶. The tragic then becomes the friction of man in the cosmos, what makes him unsuited to the environment that he nevertheless wants to inhabit for as long as possible. Zapffe renders this gap with an image: it is as if humanity were a vase in which, however, an oak tree has been planted. As I anticipated, humans have nevertheless managed to resist the powerful roots of a centuries-old tree like the oak and thus survive. They have done so at the expense of knowledge. In this way they sometimes make themselves, and for a moment, happy, but at the cost of always remaining ignorant of the truth.

Consciousness Suspended between Ruin and Renewal

Having highlighted the tragic nature of the human condition, which lives on the border between knowledge of nature and metaphysical interest continuously stifled by the harshness of reality, it has been said that humanity has taken a position by resolving the cognitive dissonance and renouncing, more or less voluntarily and artificially, the result of knowledge rather than its expectations. To understand how this happens, we must follow the narrative sequence of the story.

Always in the second part of the text, after discussing the characteristics of nature in general and human nature in particular, Zapffe clarifies the functionality of consciousness. It is compared to a double-edged sword without a

²⁶ A.M. Proszewska, «Investigating the origins of Peter Wessel Zapffe's notion of tragedy in Aristotle's *Poetics*: the case of *mimesis*», in Degruyter, *ejss* 50(2), 2020: 290.

hilt: «Its weapon was like a sword without hilt or cross guard, a two-edged blade that could cleave through anything; but whoever used the sword had to grip it by its blade and turn one of its edges against himself»; a weapon that, however, «made it not only omnipotent over the outer world, but equally dangerous for itself»²⁷. Turned outward, the sword is a useful and effective tool of defense granted by nature so that humans can adapt and survive; it is a tool of knowledge that has allowed humans to use their intelligence to ensure technical and scientific development improving their living conditions. It remains a sword without hilt so it helps to defend, but on the other hand it strikes. It thus becomes an instrument of violence and nature suffers a considerable damage because of it. Humans have made the cogito an element of superiority, and of themselves pioneers - to use Zapffe's words - of the spirit. Cogito has subjected nature to his purposes, has privileged the spirit at the expense of biological unity, and has elevated himself above all organisms. His action is destroying the planet and in it Norway.

Firewall, Norway, appears in the title as a greeting to a land that no longer belongs to him, which has been hospitable to our species but has been disfigured. The human who treads on it - and does not live beside it, to recall the verse quoted before - recognizes it only as a means and as a resource that provides and guarantees him a stable development, an effective response to the demand of an immeasurably growing population.

Turned inward, this sword wounds the conscious organisms themselves. Holding a sword without a hilt means *defending oneself* but inevitably also *hurting oneself* by holding it. Consciousness is in fact a revealer of the truth; it is the place where nature communicates its essence, its laws, its necessity. The space in which what happens imprints a stimulus, an excitement, and becomes a conscious happening. From a biological and evolutionary point of view, intellectual and mnemonic faculties have favored the survival of Homo sapiens.

Zapffe's reflection seems to echo Nietzschean thought, particularly the brief but significant book *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn* (*On Truth and Lies in a NonMoral Sense*). Here, Nietzsche dethrones humanity from the idealist and scientific throne by depriving the intelligent animal of the belief in possessing the truth, and by denying such a status even to the knowledge that, more than any other, claims to elaborate truth: scientific knowledge. The hu-

²⁷ *The Last Messiah* §2: 41.

man animal is an animal endowed with knowledge, but this attribute does not confer any privilege on it; it is a function - exactly as for the Norwegian philosopher - granted to the human being and oriented towards vital success.

While Nietzsche, however, highlights the anthropomorphic nature of truth, describing it as illusions that have forgotten their illusory nature; fictions that allude not to the objective perception of things but to their function with respect to the subject who questions them, Zapffe attributes the same fictional, functional, and truthful character not to the result of consciousness, but to its suppression. If Nietzsche's truth, in short, is a shared lie, Zapffe's truth is the authentic knowledge of the world annihilated, repressed, and forgotten by an inauthentic and fictitious knowledge which, however, guarantees the survival of human animals.

In seeing himself without protective lenses, the human falls into a feeling of cosmic panic:

«The species, in this light, seems predestined to destruction, since any effort to preserve and continue life is crippled when one's undivided attention and energy is required to stave off the catastrophic pressure of one's inner being. That a species thus becomes unfit for life by reason of an overdevelopment of a single faculty is a tragedy that has befallen not only man. Some contend, for example, that a certain species of deer once walked the earth but was rendered extinct by a set of antlers that had become far too large. Mutations, after all, are blind, thrown into life without a thought to their viability in the environment. When one is depressed and anxious, the human mind is like such antlers, which in all their magnificent glory, crush their bearer slowly to the ground»²⁸.

The verse is more effective in saying that «the Throne is transformed to Scaffold»²⁹. In this element consists the further tragic element of existence. To survive, one must renounce one's essence; to pursue it means to bring one's existence to an end. It means that the ultimate purpose of life is the annihilation of life itself in a struggle between two opposites: the instinct to live and the instinct to die. A fate similar to that of the *Cervus Giganticus*, which, due to the excessive size of its antlers, which in zoology are called precisely 'scaffolding', became extinct early; it

²⁸ Ibid. §2: 43.

²⁹ *Epilogue*: 61.

could have eliminated the outermost branches so as to survive a little longer but in doing so it would have renounced its essence: «what it won in continued existence it would have lost in meaning, in existential pride»³⁰. Unlike deer, the human animal has not yet become extinct. «Why,» Zapffe asks, «are there so few individuals who succumb to the pressure of life because their acuity reveals to them more than they can bear?»³¹. The philosopher's answer is the same as that given in the first part of the work: the play of consciousness and unconsciousness, the artificial reduction of the true knowledge of the world; «Man saves himself, and continues. Ironically, man's survival is made possible by a more or less conscious suppression of his hazardous surplus of consciousness»³². And all this not in order to realize some hope but to renew and reiterate the same path of pain, suffering, and loss.

The human being, who, like the deer, has been armed beyond measure, has not instead pursued his essence to the end. He has preferred to reduce the scope of consciousness in order to save himself so as not to become extinct and continue to exist. Consciousness therefore takes on a fictional and deceitful character just as the philosopher of Röcken had established³³. «This suppression is, for all intents and purposes, continuous; it goes on as long as we are awake and active and becomes a condition for social adjustment and what is popularly called "healthy" and "normal" behavior»³⁴. To respond, withstand, and resist the glare of reality, every aspect of our life is filtered by suppression mechanisms. These mechanisms are very different from each other and

³⁰ *The Last Messiah* §3: 43.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. §3: 43-44.

³³ As for the functional and fictional role of consciousness, Nietzsche wrote: «It is remarkable that this was brought about by the intellect, which was certainly allotted to these most unfortunate, delicate, and ephemeral beings merely as a device for detaining them a minute within existence. [...] The pride connected with knowing and sensing lies like a blinding fog over the eyes and senses of men, thus deceiving them concerning the value of existence. [...] Deception is the most general effect of such pride, but even its most particular effects contain within themselves something of the same deceitful character», F. Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*; quoted from Daniel Breazeale (edited by): *Philosophy and Truth. Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the early 1870's*. Humanities Press, New Jersey 1990: 79-80.

³⁴ *The Last Messiah* §3: 43.

belong so constitutively to *Homo sapiens* that they have become unconscious and what they filter therefore appears natural and not deformed, what one wants it to be and not what it really is. Although they are innumerable, Zapffe groups them into four different types: *isolation*, *attachment*, *diversion*, and *sublimation*. The remaining part of the third section of the story is dedicated to a careful analysis of each of these ways of clouding consciousness.

These four mechanisms are simple and mostly unconscious now, they act in everyday life and allow life to navigate on less turbulent waters. However, their intervention is more essential and drastic in removal of the thought that, if brought to light, would lead the human being to grasp the meaninglessness of life. I am referring to the thought of death. The studies of the Canadian anthropologist Ernest Becker, whose intuition about humanity and the role of consciousness continues with the theses of Zapffe and *Terror Management Theory*, show how the fear of dying decisively conditions the lives of human beings. Whether it happens through religious faith or through secular and transhumanist faith, it does not matter: the important thing is not to die, to continue, to be there, and to remain in existence for as long as possible.

The fear of death is ever-present and timeless - even in the events of our contemporary world - from the moment when organic matter emerged from inorganic matter and, within organic matter, a self-aware form appeared that began to separate itself from nature and to think of itself as a separate entity, with its own laws of growth and development, distinct from those that apply to any other organism. And yet, finitude is inscribed in the very nature of things, where «everything is engaged in a disordered fantasia of carnage. Everything tears away at everything else . . . forever. Yet all this commotion in nothingness goes unnoticed by nearly everything involved in it. In the world of nature, as an instance, nothing knows of its embroilment in a festival of massacres. Only [...] self-conscious Nothing can know what is going on and be shaken by the tremors of chaos at feast»³⁵.

Despite knowledge of death, human beings are unable to know either the How or the When of their own. Prometheus' gift is the only condition that has allowed our species to avoid immediate extinction and to continue its journey towards a predetermined end.

³⁵ Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy against the Human Race*, Hippocampus Press, New York 2011: 14.

After describing the main manifestations of the defense mechanisms, Zapffe reflects on death. Despite everything, «death always offers a way out»³⁶. It presents itself as a way out, an escape from existence, and not simply its end. The closing of the epilogue is truly powerful in communicating this form of freedom:

And painmarkers flame to the pyre
when, spit living to the needle of Now,
he casts his wisdom's fraying net—
and all he finds on its empty bottom
is, in the final stand of the spirit,
the single Gnosis as borne by the Dead,
that only the embracing of NOTHINGNESS frees us.
And we are afraid that our children shall suffer
so we cease our propagation in time.
It is the last solid counsel we know
against Heaven's faithless love³⁷.

The Gnosis that arises from the dead, the knowledge that true liberation is only achieved at the end, while everything humans pursue is merely a temporary relief, a painkiller that does not mend the wound. If this is true, then the human organism, rather than being a victim of nature, is a wound inflicted upon nature. Only its extinction can heal it. As previously mentioned, the fourth and fifth parts of the story provide an overview of this species that has pioneered the spirit and, in doing so, has shattered the world and preserved itself, along with its existential anguish. «If we follow this train of thought through to the bitter end, the conclusion is inescapable: As long as humankind blunders along under the dire misconception that we are biologically preordained to conquer the earth, no alleviation of our angst for life is possible. As the number of people on the earth grows, the spiritual atmosphere will become tighter, and defense mechanisms will have to become ever more brutal. And we will continue to dream of salvation, redemption, and a new Messiah»³⁸.

Illusion, deception, and suppression help the biological organism to survive, to save itself, to delay its extinction, but never to avoid it. Illusion, deception, and suppression perpetuate human life because, inca-

³⁶ *The Last Messiah* §3: 48.

³⁷ *Epilogue*: 62.

³⁸ *The Last Messiah* §5: 51.

pable of truly knowing, humans remain a sleeper, a dreamer before whom «a world which is of joy unfolds, / Spring comes into meadows» and whose vision becomes generative: «Little seed in dreamers' mold»³⁹. The suppression of consciousness thus guarantees life but has led Homo sapiens to fabricate tales about their nature, to consider themselves the center of creation, and to feel destined to dominate the Earth. Anthropocentrism arises from ignorance of one's true nature, from the separation that humans have claimed from their origins, their biological, organic, and finite essence. The consciousness that humanity has weakened, preferring to satisfy its metaphysical interests, causes suffering, strips humans of their firm footing, and thus precipitates them into a state of existential loss and exile, but at the same time redeems them by offering a possibility of salvation.

The Last Messiah

In the fourth part of *The Last Messiah*, the author reflects on so-called primitive populations – in the literal sense of the term, those who came before – to highlight that, despite the common fate of existence, these people inhabited the planet in a very different way from modern populations. While the former remained pioneers of the tragic, the latter distanced themselves and deluded themselves to such an extent that they managed to elude the possibility of the tragic from their lives or to consider it surmountable. The biological unity to which primitive humans remain closer is not to be understood as a typically 'animal' and underdeveloped behavior; culture always remains an expression of human nature. The mechanisms previously considered therefore remain natural, as they are themselves natural forms, cognitive and behavioral strategies. The unnaturalness of modern humans does not derive from having engaged these mechanisms but rather from having flouted them in favor of new and more violent strategies – excessive culture, technological development, standardization – destructive both for humanity themselves and for the entire planet.

Subjectivism, in the forms of rationalism and idealism, is the triumph of the spirit that has renounced nature without which even the possibility of the cogito does not exist. Culture is, in fact, primarily the specific nature of the human being, but in order for it to remain so, that is, something natural,

³⁹ *Lullaby*: 63.

it must act within limits and in respect of the whole. Rationalism, like idealism, the unbridled race towards technological development, are just some of the symptoms of this «global fever of life»⁴⁰. This fever is not only oriented towards the vital success of a generation but also towards the biological continuation of the species over time. The number of inhabitants invading the planet is growing desperately, but this exponential increase does not at all mark the victory of the spirit, but rather will make the first laws manifest again, that is, the laws of nature to guarantee survival, thus resorting to even brutal behaviors to secure some resources; the planet will become inhospitable as it was at the beginning when man made his entrance into it: «Now in vain he extends his arms and prays to be united with that which created him. Nature no longer answers, it made a miracle with man but has refused to acknowledge him since»⁴¹.

In the fictional and original 1958 interview (*Firewall, Norway*), the interlocutor poses a series of questions to Jørgen that would seek to justify human action even when the consequences of their actions are unpleasant, but Jørgen is unwilling to yield to any of these justifications. Instead, he uncovers the deception of progress and development, defining the race of the former and the promise of the latter as «pure panic, an itching of the soul that has to be scratched and clawed at until every stone and every little hill in the country is covered with incurable eczema»⁴². Behind the appearance of wanting to meet the needs and demands of population growth, there is, in truth, the need and the desire on the part of some to want to increase their own gain, their own prestige and power, in an expression of wanting to increase and enhance that fever of life. The growing need is not met by improving the system of production and investment; nor is the hypothesis of colonizing new planets appealing, as it would simply mean repeating the same problems and reiterating the same response mechanisms elsewhere; whether on Earth or on Mars, «we will continue to dream of salvation, redemption, and a new Messiah». Only after «many saviors have been nailed to trees and stoned to death in the marketplace,

⁴⁰ *The Last Messiah* §4: 51.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* §2: 41.

⁴² Peter Wessel Zapffe, *Firewall, Norway*; Peter Reed and David Rothenberg (edited by), *Wisdom in the Open Air: The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology*, translated in English by S. Kvaløy with P. Reed, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota 1992: 55.

then the last Messiah will appear»⁴³. Here, Zapffe's reference to the awaited Messiah is subtle in confirming his conception of the religious phenomenon as a wholly human phenomenon, as such fictional and consolatory, which humanity needs to exclude itself from Nature, which remains the mother, the womb, the cradle, the tomb.

The conclusion of the story is truly fascinating. It announces the coming of a man who, before all others, will have had the strength and courage to lay bare his own soul, to observe himself in his nakedness, that is, in his natural dimension; a man who «has grasped life in its cosmic context, and whose agony is the agony of the world»⁴⁴. His voice casts a *shroud* over the world, revealing to them a message of salvation: «The life on many worlds is like a rushing river, but the life on this world is like a stagnant puddle and a backwater. The mark of annihilation is written on thy brow. How long will ye mill about on the edge? But there is one victory and one crown, and one salvation and one answer: Know thy selves; be unfruitful and let there be peace on Earth after thy passing»⁴⁵.

However, this message is not welcomed by the population, who respond by attacking this man, the last Messiah, who has descended from the father near that pool of water; the same where the hunter meets the other animals and recognizes them as brothers, the same where at the rising of the new moon he encounters death. One might think that the hunter, who indeed finds himself naked in the cosmos, is the same Messiah sent by the father to die for us. It is especially the midwives and obstetricians who attack the savior, a significant presence to express humanity's attachment to life.

The words of the last Messiah carry a message of salvation. If life was previously described as the flow of a raging river, now the Messiah instead announces its insignificance because it is nothing but a puddle, a stagnant pool. Its end is inscribed in it, and the course that leads to it is not the smooth itinerary of a river that reaches its delta or estuary, but rather dirty water that remains there emitting its bad smell.

Zapffe's story, however, has a happy ending. There is a victory, a salvation, and an answer. And the answer is the same that is found in Genesis but reversed: be sterile (do not be fruitful). It is in truth more precise and more complete and must be taken in its entirety. The Messiah's first mes-

⁴³ *The Last Messiah* §5: 51.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* §5: 52.

sage, his first recommendation, is another: «*Know thy selves*». This is a truly original teaching: know yourselves and therefore be sterile.

After this note, the Messiah continues and concludes by stating: «Let there be peace on Earth after thy passing; let the Earth find peace after your passing»⁴⁶. This ending is important because it suggests that Zapffe's antinatalism is not only anthropocentric in the literal sense of the term of putting at the center and having the interest of preserving humanity from the inextinguishable pain of existence but rather, and more decisively, anthropo-de-centric. Zapffe's interest is in preserving the Earth, his Norway, and its mountains. The whole and not a part of it. Such a position emerges more explicitly in the fictional interview to which I have already alluded. In the exchange of remarks, Jørgen responds to the director, who asks him what would be a way to make the Norwegian mountains accessible to the greatest possible number of people, that the goal should be exactly the opposite, that is, to close and not allow these people access to the few mountainous areas still untouched by human elements.

His examination targets what is intended to be passed off as growth, development, or progress, showing the true face of progress: destruction. What most angers Jørgen is that «nobody complains. Nobody wants to be a wet blanket at the celebration of Progress»⁴⁷ (because he hopes that the overwhelming wave of progress includes not only the possibility of living better and being able to keep pain at bay – forgetting that pain is like a nucleotide sequence, something that is inscribed in the bios – but also of reaching and realizing one's immortality. Zapffe considers a series of particular examples in order to demonstrate how what is intended to be presented as progress and aid for the growth of less developed villages is in reality a project aimed at enriching the pockets of a few subjects only. Beyond these examples, what truly concerns the author is that everything that harms even humanity is desired by humanity itself: «We are in the grip of development Neanderthals. It is embarrassing they are descended from humans, these lummoxes with blunt, sterile minds. They are not really alive, they can only keep going on economic stimulants. We're being replaced by people who don't deserve a healthy Earth. People for whom the only important thing is how big their paychecks are»⁴⁸).

After revealing the flip side of the coin of progress and defining its

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *Firewell, Norway*: 54.

⁴⁸ Ibid.: 54-55.

true nature, after having established what happiness consists of for humans and having clarified instead how true happiness comes through the full possession of oneself, as an ability, effort, and commitment «to be happy in themselves»⁴⁹, Zapffe expresses the urgency of an antinatalist practice. The happiness that comes from oneself connects with the Messiah's admonition to know oneself. Only in this space is it possible to know what one is and to live in the quiet of one who accepts one's nature and one's limits without opposing them in every way. Instead, progress has substituted for this inner stability a constant tension and projection towards the future, has postponed the arrival at a promised land – to recall the metaphor of the story – instead of understanding that one is nomadic, of accepting and blessing this nomadism.

Zapffe's words suggest that his antinatalism has multiple sources. On the one hand, there is care for the human condition in its own being into the world, on the other hand, there is care for Norway, for nature, and for Being. If humanity had been able to coexist with other beings and together with them in the whole, its nature would still have been painful and difficult, conscious but despite everything – precisely because it is conscious – serene. It should be clear that the antinatalism of the Norwegian thinker becomes necessary to save nature and, in it and with it, humanity that already exists. If before it was a hypothesis, now the day is imminent when we must stop reproducing uncontrollably. If before it was a hypothesis, now the day is imminent when we must stop having children. If before it was a misanthropic hypothesis, now the day is imminent when it must be accepted as a philanthropic strategy. Zapffe's antinatalism, in the words of the last Messiah as in those of Jørgen, is the only possible salvation for humanity, for non-human animality, and for the whole. Its occurrence only anticipates an end that is certain in any case.

The hermeneutics of Zapffe's story allows us to finally relocate the human being in the universal biological to which he belongs. Nature as the *cosmic womb* that generates him, and the tomb that puts him back to sleep in the *cradle of nothingness*.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

From Aristotle to Heidegger: Metaphysics Cannot Die

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Abstract: One could argue that the aim of this article is an existential ontologization of metaphysics, if «metaphysical» is what exists beyond the boundaries of possible experience. This is pursued through a reflection on the reasons which may have led Aristotle to claim, in *Metaphysics Lambda*, that the *πρῶτον κινῶν ἀκίνητον* («unmoved mover») is marked by some specific traits, the crucial of which consists in its being an eternal «νόησις» («thinking»). In the article, also Aristotle's «χωριστός» («separate») gains a possible meaning, which reveals itself in its difference from metaphysical being.

Keywords: metaphysics, unmoved mover, existential, belief, phenomenon.

1. A possible meaning and a possible reason of unmoved mover's metaphysicality

In this paragraph, I would like to present two possible central threads of almost all the features Aristotle ascribes to the unmoved mover, differentiating them from the ones that could appear, at first glance, from the reading of *Physics* or of *Metaphysics*¹. According to this first-glance reading, central threads determining Aristotle's thesis of the unmoved mover being thinking (νόesis), and thinking of itself, can be respectively found in the Aristotelian doctrine of the impossibility, for a finite-size entity, to be the cause of the eternal rotation of cosmos (in fact, since an infinite-size entity does not exist for Aristotle, this cause needs to be a

¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics Lambda*. Translated with an introduction and commentary by L. Judson. OUP, Oxford 2019. Since Aristotle's fuller doctrine of the unmoved mover, even if concise, is explained in this book of *Metaphysics*, instead of in the eighth of *Physics*, I shall refer to *Metaphysics Lambda* in this article. As for the historical hypotheses on when this book was written, and on its possible later inclusion in *Metaphysics*, cf. G. Reale, *Il concetto di «filosofia prima» e l'unità della metafisica di Aristotele*, Vita e pensiero, Milan 1961, chapter 7.

thinking entity), and in the Aristotelian claim that the

«most worthy of honour» of all entities can only think the most worthy of honour of all entities, that is, itself². Let us now turn to other possible central threads.

The unmoved mover is no immediate phenomenon, if «immediateness» means the mode of presence, for instance, of these characters in the present page, as well as of what now lies in their background, such as the table I see and on which I am writing. Instead, the unmoved mover is now present as the Eiffel Tower is, given that I am at this moment in Milan. One could say the unmoved mover is, and at the same time *is not*, present. To a certain extent, it is therefore similar to the object of a desire. In effect, I can desire the Eiffel Tower to be in front of me, not thanks to my faculty of *imagining* it, if this means creating a mental object called «the Eiffel Tower». This mental object would in fact be present as well as these characters on the page, and as all the other mental objects I could imagine, such as lines, triangles etc. I can desire the Eiffel Tower to be in front of me, because it is, and at the same time it is *not*, present³.

This ambiguous mode of «presence-absence» may be considered as the unmoved mover's mode of presence, as the possible meaning of its being «separate» (*choristós*)⁴. However, what if we ask «separate»⁵.

² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072b-1073a.

³ I refer here to Severino's distinction between the «phenomenologically-immediate» and what, even being «present», nonetheless is not «phenomenologically-immediate» (E. Severino, *La struttura originaria*, Adelphi, Milan 2007, chapter 2, pp. 143-172, and 248-251).

⁴ «Χωριστός» is usually translated with «separate» (also by Judson). St. Thomas Aquinas already used, in his commentary, «separatum» (cf. *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*, ed. M. R. Cathala, R. M. Spiazzi, 3^a ed., Marietti, Turin 1977). However, G. Reale explains that «choristós» has at least two meanings, since Aristotle would both say that a substance can be «separated» from its accidents, thus existing without them, and that there exist somewhat such an entity is separate from? Or should we ask from *whom* is it separate? What here is «separate» does not seem to be the object (the unmoved mover), or does not seem to be *only* the object, since this is marked by its separateness because of its modality of presence: «metaphysics», understood (for the moment) as «separateness», seems therefore to be a manner of being *human*. It seems that he or she who is «separate» is the human being him- or herself, and that only for this reason the object from which one is separate, such as the unmoved mover, is as-

In any case, while I can verify as well as falsify the existence of the Eiffel Tower at a certain time thanks to its being, in principle, a possible immediate phenomenon (as I have seen, for instance, the Eiffel Tower during my past holiday in Paris), I cannot verify nor falsify the existence of the unmoved mover in any way: it is such that it cannot ever be an immediate phenomenon. Thus, I can only convince myself that the unmoved mover, thinking of itself, exists, without immediate phenomena being able to confirm or to contradict my thought. Why is this so? What does it mean to falsify a conviction?

Let us try to answer this question with an example. If Parmenides has actually claimed that immediate phenomena always display an absolute rest, and if now my hands, which I see on the keyboard, move, then this does not imply Parmenides' words being meaningless, but rather that his thesis is an *erroneous* one. Somehow, his words need to be meaningful, precisely so that they can convey an erroneous perspective. To distinguish such an erroneous perspective from the correct ones about immediate phenomena, we could define it as a *conviction*, which nonetheless is not innocent, because it insists on phenomena showing what they manifestly do not show⁶.

Instead, Aristotle's affirmation of the existence of an unmoved mover (or of many unmoved movers) is not contradicted by immediate phenomena since it does not insist on them saying what they do not say, so to speak. It aims rather to claim something that transcends phenomena. If anything, his thesis is then a *falsifiable* one. Such an assertion leads us

cribed the adjective «separate» substances (cf. G. Reale, *Introduzione, traduzione e commentario della Metafisica di Aristotele*. Bompiani, Milan 2009, p. 1254). This second meaning is the one to which I am referring in this article. (For other translations of Aristotle's «choristós» with «separate», cf. for instance Aristotle, *Fisica*. Translated with an introduction by R. Radice, Bompiani, Milan 2014, as well as Aristotle, *Fisica, Gamma*. Translated, with an introduction and commentary by M. Ugaglia, Carocci, Rome 2012). On the concept of «choristós», cf. also D. Morrison: «Χωριστός in Aristotle», in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, Vol. 89 (1985), pp. 89-105.

⁵ We refer here implicitly to a Heideggerian perspective, which we will try to develop in this article.

⁶ This could be the meaning of Aristotle's claims about Parmenides' «μάνια» (insanities). Cf. for example Aristotle, *Sulla generazione e la corruzione*, ARACNE, Rome 2008, translated with an introduction by G. Giardina, 325 a, p 162.

to the question: is the unmoved mover something metaphysical or something «choristós» (separate)? Does being choristós mean being

«metaphysical»? Or is the choristós being not able to reach the metaphysical «rank»? If not, on what grounds should one argue that a choristós entity is, in addition, metaphysical? In conclusion, what does being «metaphysical» here mean?

The reason for the metaphysicality of the unmoved mover seems to be its *eternity*, and

«metaphysicality» seems here to mean that the unmoved mover *as* an eternal entity cannot be an immediate phenomenon, at least for human beings. «Metaphysicality» is therefore the necessity of something being separate from us, or better the necessity of us being separate from something, without any possible encounter. In effect, this appears different from something being separate from us just because it is so, thus remaining, at any rate, the possibility of an encounter, as it happens to those who have never seen the pyramids, for instance⁷.

Why is the eternal metaphysical, however? What necessitates this connection? For us, as humans, things flow. Before I started writing on my computer, before this writing became an immediate phenomenon, my breakfast meal has been one, and soon some other immediate phenomenon shall cease and another will appear. Let us now pretend that the unmoved mover became, at this very moment, an immediate phenomenon, and let us furthermore pretend that it remained such for all eternity. Would its eternity have the mode of presence of an immediate phenomenon?

It seems that precisely because the unmoved mover would *begin* to be such a phenomenon, then its eternity *a parte ante*, its having always been, would *not* be an immediate phenomenon. For this reason, its overall eternity itself, so it seems, could not be manifest. Such an eternity could only be the object of a *conviction*, since until now no other thinking, except for our own thinking, has shown itself to us (not even the other human beings' thinking, although our lives are essentially defined by relating to it). Therefore, if we understand eternity, as such, as the ne-

⁷ On the different meanings of «eternity» in the Ancient Thought, and therefore on the «eternity» of the unmoved mover, cf. E. Berti, "Time and Eternity", in *Nuovi studi aristotelici, II, Fisica, antropologia e metafisica*. Morcelliana, Brescia 2005, pp. 95-113.

cessity of what has always been *and* will forever exist, then, even if the unmoved mover became an immediate phenomenon from now on, its eternity would always be an enigma. This «unverifiableness» of unmoved mover's eternity is what we have called, in this context, its «metaphysicality».

One might raise an objection: have we not spoken of a falsifiableness of Aristotle's assertion of the existence of the unmoved mover? In effect, if it were something situated at the very edge of the last celestial sphere⁸, and if such a sphere existed, we could examine it in order to verify the existence of the unmoved mover. Then, if we found no such an entity, we would thence falsify Aristotle's assertion, not only regarding the eternity of the unmoved mover, but in regard to its existence itself, at least as Aristotle depicts it in his *Physics*. Moreover, even if it existed on the celestial sphere, we could nonetheless witness its destruction over time, which surely would not be certain, but still possible. So far, we can say we could not accomplish the task of verifying the eternity of such an unmoved mover, but we could falsify it instead.

However, the unmoved mover does not seem to be able to be situated on a sphere, since it is pure «thinking of thinking»⁹. Just as we are not able to ascertain nor to contradict that the human bodies, which we see as immediate phenomena, conceal an experience, a «thinking» of the world or not, we are not able to ascertain the existence of a divine «thinking of thinking». In any case, while the metaphysicality of the unmoved mover (now conceived of as a divine thinking of itself) would be necessitated by its eternity, or better by the impossibility for the temporal structure of our experience to witness eternity, the «separateness» of the unmoved mover seems to be necessitated by other reasons. Let us now turn to this theme.

If we understand the unmoved mover simply as a thinking which is not mine, its separateness seems to be necessitated by the fact we cannot read other people's mind. In fact, if we began from tomorrow to read others' minds, the existence (or the non-existence) of the unmoved mover would not be «separate» anymore, as we could verify (or falsify) it¹⁰. Let us ask ourselves if tomorrow we could cease to temporally experience things and start experiencing the eternity of all entities instead. If this happened,

⁸ Aristotle, *Physics*, 267 b.

⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072 b.

¹⁰ On this theme, cf. E. Severino, *La struttura originaria*, pp. 126-128.

we would *begin* to experience things non-temporally: the temporal structure would still work in our beginning. This is why what we have called «separateness», with regard to the existence of the unmoved mover, does not coincide with «metaphysicality»: separateness seems in effect to be engendered by our not being able to read others' minds, which is a lack – one could argue – marked by contingency: nothing impedes us from waking up tomorrow and finding ourselves possessing this capacity. Instead, the possibility to loosen our bond with the temporal structure of experience confirms the temporal structure of experience¹¹.

We are now able to claim something about the central threads of the metaphysical doctrine expressed in *Metaphysics Lambda*. It seems that Aristotle thinks of the unmoved mover not only such that it is necessarily «present-absent», inasmuch as it is eternal, but also such that it is separate from us, insofar as it is another thinking, another mind. Aristotle seems therefore to conceive of such an entity in order to render it «choristós» in many respects, meaning with this term that something is *distant* from us, regardless of its further being metaphysical or simply separate from us. This sense of «distance» appears to contribute both to the sense of «separateness» and of «metaphysicality». However, a question remains to be answered: why does Aristotle conceive of the unmoved mover as thinking *of itself*, given that we are not aiming to ground this trait in its being «the most worthy of honour» of all things?

If someone were an eternal consciousness, an eternal thinking, nevertheless without being the eternal thinking of himself, his eternity would strangely be *to himself* an enigma. If an eternal god were not able to see himself being eternal, then he could only be *convinced* of his own eternity, which seems to be really weird. Moreover, in such a case he could even doubt his eternity. Instead, in order to be aware of it, he should grasp himself as eternal, that is, grasp himself *as an eternal immediate phenomenon*. A second consideration on the central threads we have spoken of could thence be that the unmoved mover is by Aris-

¹¹ We therefore aim here to distinguish a possible meaning of «metaphysicality» as the contingent circumstance of us not being able to verify or falsify something (for instance, if tomorrow will be a sunny day), from «metaphysicality» as the *impossibility* to verify something (for example the eternity of an entity), to falsify something, or both to verify and falsify it. In this context, we will speak of «metaphysicality» only when there will be a necessity (or an impossibility) to be indicated, while we shall speak of «separateness» in the other cases.

total thought of in order to render it a metaphysical (and separate) entity, but at least not for itself. This could be the reason of Aristotle's conceiving of it as a «thinking of thinking».

In conclusion, such threads, which here we have tried to deepen, according to which the

«metaphysics of the unmoved mover» is a manner of being human, and of being, as humans, in a metaphysical relation to this object, could be seen as an «existentialisation» of this aspect of Aristotle's metaphysical doctrine. According to this view, we as human beings can only *metaphysically* relate to the unmoved mover, which therefore represents, in this sense, a part of Aristotle's «metaphysics»¹².

Toward the metaphysicality of existence

If Aristotle believed in the existence of an eternal unmoved mover, it would nonetheless be difficult to argue that everyone believes in it, as well as it would be difficult, generally speaking, to argue that everyone believes in the existence of an eternal entity. For this reason, it seems we cannot speak of a «metaphysicality of human existence» itself, i.e. of a metaphysical relating which would define our life. Or does our existence conceal some metaphysical zones, so to speak, which are essential to it?

I am now in my room, writing on my computer. Let us suppose I move to go to the living room, as I know there is a painting in it which I particularly like¹³. One could say that, when I reach the living room and see the painting, my expectation of finding it in its place is confirmed. Would be such a view, nevertheless, an overall view? What was the content of my expectation? In effect, I had two expectations, one of which was that the picture was laying in the sitting room while I still was in my room (being maybe rather a «conviction» than an «expectation»). The other one, which has then been confirmed, was the expectation of find-

¹² On the recent debate on which science studies the unmoved mover, cf. Helen S. Lang, «The Structure and Subject of Metaphysics Λ», in «*Phronesis*» 38(1993), pp. 257-280. As for the type of causality which needs to be ascribed to the unmoved mover, cf. E. Berti, «Unmoved mover(s) as efficient cause(s) in Metaphysics Λ 6», in *Nuovi studi aristotelici, II, Fisica, antropologia e metafisica*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2005, pp. 427-451.

¹³ A similar example, to which in this context we aim to refer, is used by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. (Cf. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie. Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1985 sect. 44, subsect. A).

ing the painting in the living room. Thence, the first so-called expectation has *not* been confirmed, and it seems instead to be an unverifiable one, an unverifiable conviction, since when I was in my room, I simply could not verify (nor falsify) if the picture was still in the living room.

Even my belief, according to which the picture I see in the sitting room is the same picture which has always been there, does not seem to be verifiable (nor falsifiable) on the basis of immediate phenomena. Since the painting has been in my sitting room while I was elsewhere, and has consequently not been an immediate phenomenon, then I will never be able to verify or falsify such a fact. Should we not therefore speak of a «*metaphysicality*» of this fact? Should we not extend such a metaphysicality, understood as the necessity of both the unverifiableness and unfalsifiableness of a given circumstance, to all those things we now find ourselves *believing* in? Furthermore, should we not ascribe metaphysicality to all past entities and facts which have not been immediate phenomena, at least for us, and which therefore have the destiny of never showing themselves?

To claim such a thesis does not seem to imply, in effect, to erase our thinking of that painting in the sitting room as being the same painting which yesterday was there. We almost all live thinking so, and the metaphysicality of things does not imply that we do not relate to entities which we recognize as metaphysical. This thinking, however, seems not to be grounded on immediate phenomena, but on our conviction. Otherwise, we should assert we actually were in the living room and could thus experience the picture as an immediate phenomenon, alongside with its having remained in the sitting room throughout the whole time. Then, if in the past there was something which was not an immediate phenomenon, which did not show itself to us but was rather the object of a belief, it appears to be necessary that it has become a metaphysical entity.

In this case, one could ask: when have we not *believed* in the existence of something, with all its traits, without being able to *witness* it as an immediate phenomenon? Is there a time in which no object was experienced in an indirect modality? It seems that we are always accompanied in our lives by some objects of belief. In this sense, one could argue that «metaphysics cannot die». Nonetheless, this is just a perspective I aim here to suggest, but that would require to be developed elsewhere.

Highlighting the DSM-V's Omission of Client Context¹

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Abstract: The *DSM-V* supports a medical culture that can be argued to undermine the importance of context for understanding problems of living. This paper will look at three components in relation to *DSM-V*'s biological model to show how they exacerbate the promotion of medication treatment using the examples of obsessive compulsive disorder, social phobias, anorexia, and the therapy experience of U.S. military troops. First, it will look at the *DSM-V*'s categorical approach to diagnosis in juxtaposition to a dimensional/holistic approach, framing the former as an exacerbator of medical solutions to problems of living. Second, it will show that the abstraction required for the categorization inherent in the *DSM-V* does not rely on etiology, rather descriptions which lead to the discrete groupings of disorders for medical matchmaking. Finally, this paper will inform of the repercussions the *DSM-V*'s categorization and abstraction has on the interpretation of culture in relation to problems of living and why its stigmatization of such problems is an interpretation that contributes to the medicalization of treatment rather than a culture of commitment that incorporates holistic support.

Keywords: biological psychiatry, categorical diagnosis, dimensional diagnosis, DSM-V, holism.

DSM-V Categorization

Within the domain of mental disorders, both categorical and dimensional views provide advantages to diagnosis, as they can be necessary

¹ A version of this paper was presented at: "19th Days of Applied Psychology Conference, Transformative Processes in Society, Environment, Organization, and Mental Health Practice", September 29 – 30 2023: University of Niš, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Psychology.

for a taxonomy that is comprehensive.² Another dichotomy worth mentioning is the one between biology and psychology, as some experts view them as not only different levels of analysis on mental disorders, but also as distinct mechanisms of causation, with the former linking to categorical approaches and the latter to dimensional.³ Throughout its history the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (henceforth: *DSM*) aimed for standardization of medical regulation in the 1980 *DSM-III*⁴ which was a more theoretical, objective and descriptive system for nosology than previous editions.⁵ This has evolved into today's *DSM-V* published 2013 and *DSM-V-TR* (Text Revision) published 2022,⁶ both of which when addressing the severity of disorders, favour hierarchal diagnostic rules and exclusions. This leads to the notion that neither give adequate coverage for symptom presentations that are clinically significant, nor for those not meeting criteria for diagnostic categories.⁷ Categories can be considered useful to the extent they form successful theories and laws, so stating what diagnostic concepts help progress in evidence-based practice, is to gamble on what categories form the components of successful theory for practice.⁸

The *DSM-V* can be considered limited in its approach to diagnosis

² John Helzer et al., "Should There Be Both Categorical and Dimensional Criteria for the Substance Use Disorders in DSM-V?", *Addiction* 101 (September 2006), 17–22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1360-0443.2006.01587.x>, 17.

³ Paul Bloom, *Descartes' Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human*. London: Arrow (2004), 40.

⁴ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-III* (1980), Washington: American Psychiatric Association.

⁵ Timothy A. Brown and David H. Barlow, "Dimensional versus Categorical Classification of Mental Disorders in the Fifth Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders and Beyond: Comment on the Special Section." *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 114 (4) (2005), 551–56. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-843x.114.4.551>, 555.

⁶ The *DSM-V-TR* included review groups that involved sex, gender, culture, and suicide. It also aimed to address potential misdiagnoses. These features of the *DSM-V-TR* inform of its attempt to address some of the issues highlighted in this paper on the limitations of the *DSM*'s purpose and evolution.

⁷ Brown and Barlow, "Dimensional versus Categorical Classification of Mental Disorders", 552.

⁸ Jerome C. Wakefield, "The DSM-5 debate over the bereavement exclusion: psychiatric diagnosis and the future of empirically supported treatment." *Clinical psychology review* vol. 33,7 (2013), 825–45. doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2013.03.007, 826.

due to acting as a descriptive tertiary sector instrument that seeks medical responses categorically through biological and genetic interpretations, rather than consider potential human-centred services as tools for secondary or primary prevention of mental disorders.⁹ The *DSM-V*'s academic and professional content contributors recognize that its categorical approach to diagnosis can be too 'black or white' in its proceedings, by admitting that it does not for example consider zones of rarity between the diagnoses of mental disorders, nor does it recognize the requirement of intermediate categories.¹⁰ The categorical approach lacks treatment specificity for many diagnostic categories; however, the *DSM* does not claim that medication is ever ineffective for treatment due to such discrepancies.¹¹ A primary example of this discrepancy is that the *DSM* rationale has historically never solved the problem of the overlap between bipolar and unipolar depression, nor between schizoaffective disorder and bipolar disorder.¹² Due to such overlap, the categorical criteria for psychotic disorders for the *DSM* has historically been inaccurate in terms of encapsulating the variability of symptom profiling, treatment response, and social outcome and function.¹³

The *DSM-V* can be perceived to rely too heavily on medication by ignoring the variability inherent in problems of living due to mental disorders because it ignores the variable characteristics of an individual, like symptom severity, intensity, quantity of symptoms, duration, and type.¹⁴ This means that by disregarding such variations, the *DSM-V* can categorize individuals to a greater extent in order to reduce them to abstract concepts that are to match with the correct medication that the

⁹ Brown and Barlow, "Dimensional versus Categorical Classification of Mental Disorders", 553.

¹⁰ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* 5th ed. (2013), American Psychiatric Association, 733.

¹¹ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 733.

¹² Eduard Vieta and Marc Valentí. "Mixed states in DSM-5: implications for clinical care, education, and research." *Journal of affective disorders* vol. 148,1 (2013), 28-36, doi:10.1016/j.jad.2013.03.007, 187.

¹³ Stephan Heckers et al., "Structure of the psychotic disorders classification in DSM-5." *Schizophrenia research* vol. 150, 1 (2013), 11-14, doi:10.1016/j.schres.2013.04.039.

¹⁴ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 733.

category of the person dictates. The extent of such biological categorization is seen in diagnostic disagreements within and between many categories in the *DSM-V*. Obsessive compulsive disorder and social phobias, for example, do not commonly involve boundary issues between themselves and other diagnoses, when if present, would decrease the monopoly of medication on their treatment; such boundary disagreements are due to issues in the definition and application of categorical thresholds on the duration, number, and severity of symptoms.¹⁵ For the *DSM-V*, this dependence on medical treatment can be found in its bi-categorical levels that allow for cross-cutting measures, as Level 1 involves thirteen questions that occur within a brief survey of different symptom domains for adults and twelve for children and adolescents that are consequentially matched up with the appropriate medical response; whereas Level 2 involves questions that provide in-depth assessment within certain categorical domains.¹⁶ Such rigid categorical approaches for diagnosis can be considered descriptors that are symptom-based and polythetic, clustering together according to clinical consensus.¹⁷

The categorical model of treatment prediction in the *DSM-V* limits itself to medication as the solution to mental health challenges. This can have dire consequences for treatment knowledge. We can sum up Sturme's view on this, as:

- First: its use of Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) compare treatments with other procedures meaning it fails to include the impact of diagnosis via treatment interaction.
- Second: the model of predicting treatment involves responses to treatment effects that are always varied, as most participants can display improvement without any practical implications for a particular person, due to the average client being reduced to an abstract concept.
- Third: clinicians work with patients who have already proceeded through standard diagnosis treatment without providing meaningful responses

¹⁵ Brown and Barlow, "Dimensional versus Categorical Classification of Mental Disorders", 551.

¹⁶ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 733.

¹⁷ John E. Helzer et al., "Should There Be Both Categorical and Dimensional Criteria", 18.

- Fourth, many patients match diagnostic criteria for numerous diagnoses¹⁸

The *DSM-V*'s promotion of the abstract view on behavioural symptoms leads to more biological (physical and chemical) than psychological (social and personal) diagnostics. Such dependence means medication is considered more effective for symptoms because symptoms are nosologically described abstractly in terms of biology whereas alternatively, for the contextual concrete approach, it is done in terms of symptoms that are considered psychologically. The latter entails symptoms that are within a person in an instantiated manner, such as supported by the *Casebook for DSM-V* (1st Edition, 2016) and the *DSM-V-TR*, that have highlighted the importance of context and culture to a greater extent than the *DSM-V* and its previous versions. The former specifies behaviours by referencing individuals with the details of each case being taken from the context of the individual's life, whereas the *DSMs* describe behaviour by referring to categories or groups of individuals across contexts that are generalized.¹⁹ Such generalizing by the *DSMs* serves the purpose of matching symptoms to medications, as symptoms are abstracted under biological terms and labelled as descriptors for an individual's biological composition. The consequences of such labelling can be highlighted as the *DSM-V*'s apparent failure at capturing individual difference between disorder severity and clinical features, as they are subsumed by other disorders or such features appear below conventional thresholds within any of the *DSMs*.²⁰

The *DSM-V* in particular embraces categorical disorders that are to be treated, and this means it involves a formulation limited to abstract intellectualization and medication that is culturally neutral and perhaps even dehumanizing.²¹ Current research shows that the different ways humans present disorders might provide differences in the causal attrib-

¹⁸ Peter Sturmey, *Clinical Case Formulation: Varieties of Approaches*, (Chichester, UK Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons: 2009), 4-5.

¹⁹ Nancy S. Kim et al., "The influence of framing on clinicians' judgments of the biological basis of behaviors", *Journal of experimental psychology, Applied* vol. 22,1 (2016), 39-47, doi:10.1037/xap0000070, 39.

²⁰ Brown and Barlow, "Dimensional versus Categorical Classification of Mental Disorders", 551.

²¹ Tracy Eells, *History and Current Status of Psychotherapy Case Formulation*. In *Handbook of Psychotherapy Case Formulation*, edited by Tracey Eells, (New York, Guilford Press, 2007), 14.

utes of symptoms.²² The *DSM-V*'s abstractness inherent in its diagnoses, however, seen in its inter-individual frames of reference that compare individuals or samples with others, determines these subjects' existential standings as objects of diagnosis for medical responses.²³ The *DSM-V* diagnoses do not predict optimum human service engagement and thus do not support a holistic culture of commitment for individuals to consider. The *DSM-V* diagnoses are limited to framing lack of normal functioning and distress as problems of living, ignoring context and motivational commitment that could form the basis for commitment purposes.²⁴ The *DSMs* instead promote over- and under-pathologizing that can be viewed as synonymous with over- and under-categorization. Such 'black and white' diagnosis is based on a client's 'differentness' juxtaposed to concrete symptom co-existence and conflict that is intrapsychic. The former interprets the symptoms not the individual person in a holistic manner, and so the symptoms abstractly form the 'differentness'.²⁵

DSM-V Medical Matchmaking

Due to the difficulty of matching treatments to problems of living, biological psychiatric diagnosis is employed to predict treatment, and this can be stressed to reveal what underlies the problem of the *DSM-V*'s categorical-biological approach, as it aims to treat effects (symptoms) that are abstracted for relevance, rather than consider underlying causes in the etiological sense. Although it may be important that both psychological and pharmacological (biological) treatments depend on diagnosis, it does not need to limit itself to a categorical style as found in the *DSM-V*.²⁶ We can see that the *DSM-V*'s limitation to categorization supports an abstract biological and psychiatric perspective. It considers cross-cutting symptom measurements modelled on medicine's review of symptoms to serve as approaches to review psychopathological do-

²² Kim, "The influence of framing on clinicians' judgments", 43.

²³ Jaan Valsiner, *The Individual Subject and Scientific Psychology*, New York, (Springer Science & Business Media, 2013), 23.

²⁴ Jennifer M. Primack et al., "Mental Health Treatment Utilization in OIF/OEF National Guard and Reserve Troops with and without DSM Diagnoses." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 87 (2) (2017), 157–65. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000226>, 161.

²⁵ Paul Everett Meehl, "Why I Do Not Attend Case Conferences". In *Psychodiagnosis*, (Minnesota, U of Minnesota Press, 1973).

²⁶ Sturmey, *Clinical Case Formulation*, 4.

mains. These ‘black and white’ reviews are then considered responsible for detecting difficulties in human day-to-day living in turn considering that it is imperative that these reviews are kept in mind for the detection of changes in organ systems that facilitate treatment and diagnosis.²⁷

The biological foundation of this approach is why medication is considered the best treatment, as problems of living are considered essentially biological problems that medicine can solve after such problems are reduced to concepts and thus abstracted for comprehension. Such abstract categorization does not base itself on etiology (causation), the latter of which being context dependent (i.e. environment, relationships, society etc). Categorization consequently increases the possibility of an individual who meets criteria for a diagnosis in the *DSM-V* to meet the criteria for other diagnoses, framing the *DSM-V*’s taxonomy as lacking in the prevention of the aggregation of psychopathology’s breadth into disorders that are discrete rather than concrete.²⁸

The origin of this discrepancy can stem from Emil Kraepelin’s work, which initiated the combination of a variety of discrete symptoms: hebephrenia, catatonia and paranoia, into categorizing them into one disease category of dementia praecox.²⁹ In 1980, description orientation was then given prominence over etiology via the *DSM-III*, as etiology was confined to the background.³⁰ The *DSM-V*’s focus on description can provoke the need to involve more etiology for a potential revolution in nosology.³¹ Psychopathologists could thus adhere to both etiological and descriptive nosology.³² This is why it is important to compare categorical and dimensional approaches. The former’s syndrome and medical based views on mental health disorders and problems of living are divided qualitatively between normal/abnormal functioning and between

²⁷ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 733.

²⁸ Helzer et al., “Should There Be Both Categorical and Dimensional Criteria”, 18.

²⁹ Zubin, Joseph, and Bonnie Spring, “Vulnerability: A New View of Schizophrenia.” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 86 (2) (1977), 103–26, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-843X.86.2.103>, 104.

³⁰ Eells, “History and Current Status of Psychotherapy Case Formulation”, 9.

³¹ Brown and Barlow, “Dimensional versus Categorical Classification of Mental Disorders”, 555.

³² Avram H. Mack et al., “A brief history of psychiatric classification. From the ancients to DSM-IV”, *The Psychiatric clinics of North America* vol. 17, 3 (1994), 515–23, 9.

disorders; whereas dimensional psychopathological models reveal the *DSM-V*'s value itself of categorical approaches.³³ This categorical preference views diseases as pathological entities that only medicine can rectify, as it adheres to four notions. These can be taken as a) disease has predictable courses, causes, and outcomes, b) symptoms are mere expressions of some underlying pathogenic processes and structures, c) the primary province for medicine is disease not necessarily health, and d) disease is a phenomenon not based on social or cultural attributes.³⁴

Why the *DSM-V* is essentially categorical and abstract, in terms of the above, is its approach to supporting medical treatment based on a philosophy that Kohut had described as assuming symptoms, signs, and traits that are clustered together to form a whole that is considered greater than the sum of its apparent parts.³⁵ The diagnoses that occur via the *DSM-V* is limited by merely serving as conventions to manage psychopathology into discrete groups that hold meaning; hence when symptoms are relevant from various groups, both diagnostic labels are applied and subsequent attempts are made to declare which diagnosis from the batch of groups is considered primary; hence highlighting the imperfect science involved in the categorical groupings and overlap.³⁶

The *DSMs*' biological categorizing model, unlike multi-perspective biological models such as psychological and dimensional ones, does not examine systemic and individual perspectives to provide context, nor does it consider varieties of orientations that would consider relevant the psychological, biological and social variables.³⁷ This in turn ignores the culture in which they live and adheres to a genetic and in turn biological-medical approach.³⁸ This approach implies that there is something lacking or mechanically out of order with an individual suffering a mental health disorder, in turn considering that culture cannot have any sort of impact on the maintenance of this problem of living; hence medication is exacerbated as being considered the most appropriate solution.

³³ Eells, "History and Current Status of Psychotherapy Case Formulation", 9.

³⁴ Eells, "History and Current Status of Psychotherapy Case Formulation", 9.

³⁵ Eells, "History and Current Status of Psychotherapy Case Formulation", 10.

³⁶ Helzer et al., "Should There Be Both Categorical and Dimensional Criteria", 20.

³⁷ Priyanthi Weerasekera, "A Formulation of the Case of Antoinette: A Multiperspective Approach" (2009). In *Clinical Case Formulation*, P. Sturmey (Ed.), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470747513.ch11>, 145.

³⁸ Weerasekera, "A Formulation of the Case of Antionette", 148.

DSM-V Interpretation of Culture

Among some of the revisions in the 2022 *DSM-V-TR*, besides the addition of ‘Prolonged Grief Disorder’, there is evidence of concerted efforts to address the impact of cultural context on diagnosis in comparison to the *DSM-V*. Attention has been given to the risk of potential misdiagnoses in terms of evaluation of individuals from ethno-racial groups that are socially oppressed.³⁹ Individuals from specific challenging communities are thus considered to not have the impact of living in such an environment ignored, but also the social structures that can be interpreted to increase racial discrimination are not having their impact omitted in the process of diagnosis. This has led to expert reviews on the consideration of context and terminology in the *DSM-V-TR*, particularly in the update of Section 3’s Chapter: “Culture and Psychiatric Diagnosis”, where culture and social context has been integrated in the inclusion of more consideration of risk factors for specific ethnic communities; hence considering the impact of race, culture, and racism for diagnosis to prevent potential misdiagnoses (e.g. African Americans being misdiagnosed with schizophrenia and addressing gender dysphoria).⁴⁰

Prior to the *DSM-V-TR*, the *DSM*’s theoretical basis created a culture based on a biological medical model where illness is taken to be the product of organs that are diseased and of processes that are pathological, as disease is taken as an abstract reductionist concept to be rectified.⁴¹ This can be said to have derived from the historic ‘De Sedibus Approach’ to disorders derived from Morgagni, in which an index is used to search for a patient’s symptoms to be cross-referenced with pathological processes; akin to the assumption that symptoms reflect the psychopathological structures and processes that underlie the disorder.⁴² The *DSM-V* in turn exacerbates the need for medicinal solutions in its stigmatization around mental health disorders and the problems of living associated with them. This then increases the need for solutions which medicine can provide.

³⁹ American Psychiatric Association, 2022, <https://www.psychiatry.org/getmedia/f4057bcd-c345-4d81-a4ce-02c5eb29454b/APA-DSM5TR-AttentiontoCultureRacismandDiscrimination.pdf>. Accessed 12 May 2025.

⁴⁰ Mark Moran, “Impact of Culture, Race, Social Determinants Reflected Throughout New DSM-5-TR”, *Psychiatric News*, PN, 57, no. 3 (March 2022), doi:10.1176/appi.pn.2022.03.3.20.

⁴¹ Eells, “History and Current Status of Psychotherapy Case Formulation”, 8.

⁴² Eells, “History and Current Status of Psychotherapy Case Formulation”, 8.

We saw above that the *DSM-V* labels a person as having a personality disorder who is to be treated medically, as the person is reduced to an abstract individual who is in possession of a personality disorder, and the stigma surrounding this in society increases feelings for the person of being defective, leading to potential demoralization.⁴³ For U.S. military personnel for example, the hostile environments where they were stationed is considered responsible for their health disorders, however, the response by practitioners following the *DSM-V* is to provide more medicine, and this is due to its categorization of mental health.⁴⁴ The categorical approach aims to target the correct medication to fix the mental disorder as a biological issue rather than look at the context.

The effect categorization and the stigma it provokes can be seen in the example of such U.S. military personnel where 45% of troops that maintained one *DSM* diagnosis and who accessed their prescribed treatment, reported less than three contacts with their treatment provider in one year.⁴⁵ This example is relevant because troops who serve in combat are arguably more in need of mental health treatment, yet stigma among other factors holds them back from seeking diligent treatment as they do not want to accept the abnormality that the *DSM-V* labels them with. Clinical experience can show that some individuals and their respective families are reluctant to use medication as there are concerns of stigma, low self-esteem, and identity, which may lead to non-adherence to medication and even to lack of help seeking in the first place.⁴⁶

The *DSM-V* does not consider these contextual factors that conversely are found in the 'The Health Belief Model Framework for Antipsychotic Adherence' for example. Within such a framework derived from the 1950's, the contextual factors of culture, socioeconomic status, and previous experience are taken account of holistically, along with the factors of the individual's insight of recognizing the need for the treatment or believing the benefits of treatment as outweighing risks.⁴⁷ Ad-

⁴³ Eells, "History and Current Status of Psychotherapy Case Formulation", 10.

⁴⁴ Primack et al., "Mental Health Treatment Utilization in OIF/OEF National Guard and Reserve Troops", 157.

⁴⁵ Primack et al., "Mental Health Treatment Utilization in OIF/OEF National Guard and Reserve Troops", 163.

⁴⁶ Amal Abdel-Baki et al., "Pharmacotherapy challenges in patients with first-episode psychosis" *Journal of affective disorders* vol. 138 Suppl (2012), S3-14, doi:10.1016/j.jad.2012.02.029, 4.

⁴⁷ Amal Abdel-Baki et al., "Pharmacotherapy challenges in patients, 6.

addressing the neglect of the benefits that a holistic culture of treatment can provide for individuals, such as psychoeducation, motivational work, and commitment, should be taken into consideration for the treatment of any *DSM-V* diagnosis. In early psychosis for example, non-adherence is commonly due to the extent that young patients aim to manage without medication once improvement occurs.⁴⁸ Rather than consider non-adherence as part of the contextual problem with individuals who suffer from problems of living, the *DSM-V* takes a micro-biological approach that focuses on symptoms and their medical cures.

Psychopathological conceptions have been known to be socially constructed, reflecting views that are derived culturally and held consensually in terms of what is abnormal and normal.⁴⁹ The *DSM-V* needs to be viewed as also holding a paradigm or worldview, thus one that could be shifted by embracing dimensional approaches to the diagnosis of psychotic disorders.⁵⁰ *The Cultural Formulation Interview* (CFI) in the *DSM-V*, though with the potential to embrace dimensional and macro-holistic approaches, merely asks for systematic assessment of the categories of the *DSM-V*, as it assesses the following in relation to culture: A) cultural identity, B) cultural conceptualizations of distress, C) psychosocial stressors and cultural features of vulnerability and resilience, D) cultural features of the relationship between individual and clinician, and E) overall cultural assessment.⁵¹ Culture is only seen as providing negative contributions, as the *DSM-V* categorizes within its taxonomies: cultural identities such as race, ethnicity, or cultural reference groups that can influence their relationships with other people, their access to resources, and their developmental and current life challenges and conflicts. The type of involvement the individual partakes in with the host majority culture should be taken into account separately, as preferences and language capabilities are relevant in order to identify difficulties with accessing care, social integration, and the need for language interpretation; not to mention the importance of religion, socioeconomics, place of birth, migrant status, gender, and sexual orientations.⁵²

⁴⁸ Amal Abdel-Baki et al., "Pharmacotherapy challenges in patients, 9.

⁴⁹ Eells, "History and Current Status of Psychotherapy Case Formulation", 11.

⁵⁰ George F. Parker, "DSM-5 and psychotic and mood disorders." *The journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* vol. 42,2 (2014), 182-90, p. 183.

⁵¹ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 749-750.

⁵² American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 733-734.

Conclusion

The culture that the *DSM-V* promotes should aim to be more holistic and committal by including more dimensionality. Psychoeducation, with its involvement of awareness, problem detection, adherence compliance, avoidance of substances, habit regulation and stress management, is indubitably important for ensuring that treatment of problems of living is constant.⁵³ There is hope for more dimensionality entrenching itself in the *DSM-V*, as though it is a categorical system, it can be viewed as aiming to encapsulate dimensional structures that underlie psychosis, for example.⁵⁴

The reactionary spirit of the *DSM-V* can be considered attenuated in the *DSM-V-TR* as the ‘black and white’ categorization of the *Manual* is challenged through the inclusion of more appreciation of context, diversity, and culture. Any shift for the *DSM* to embrace more dimensionality should not be revolutionary but evolutionary, however.⁵⁵ Despite these efforts, it can be framed as appearing to add an extra layer of abstract categorization as a solution to the already inherent categorization to diagnosis it has adopted. Recognizing social backgrounds can be a step forward in increasing context appreciation and recognizing the challenges that confront a culture of commitment when it comes to care planning; however, categorizing an individual under one culture does not necessarily reflect an appreciation of their unique life narrative that is created in a dimensional context that cannot necessarily be described categorically. Such narrative appreciation requires a respect for the concrete individual person that is psychologically brought to the diagnostic process; an appreciation that values etiology and is less naïve than the *DSM-V* rationale, by respecting context dependent questions rather than abstract categorical answers.

⁵³ Maria Reinares, María, José Sánchez-Moreno, and Konstantinos N. Fountoulakis, “Psychosocial Interventions in Bipolar Disorder: What, for Whom, and When.” *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 156, (2014), 46–55. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2013.12.017>, 48.

⁵⁴ Heckers et al., “Structure of the psychotic disorders classification in DSM-5”.

⁵⁵ Helzer et al., “Should There Be Both Categorical and Dimensional Criteria”, 21.

The Evolution of Ideology in Marxist Theory

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Abstract: This essay examines the usage of the notion of ideology first in its original formulation by Karl Marx in *The German Ideology* and later in the further developments made by Marxist theorists Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser. The evolution of the notion of ideology is examined critically, analyzing the change in usage that occurred during the 20th century. The fundamental change is two-fold, first hegemony is substituted for ideology by Gramsci, thus focusing on strategic and practical matters, and secondly ideology is crucially modified by Althusser, completely overturning the previous connotations of the notion in its initial usage by Marx.

Keywords: ideology, dialectic, praxis, Gramsci, Althusser, Marxism

Introduction

If one examines the current state of Marxist philosophical discourse, one would immediately notice the prevalence of a certain notion – that of ideology. To explain the enduring relevance of this pertinent notion, we have to examine its origins in Marxist theory. The first significant aspect in the development of the notion of ideology appears in *The German Ideology*, precisely the analogy between ideology and the *camera obscura* device. Like the inverted image on the retina of a *camera obscura*, ideology inverts people's view of their relationships¹. From this characterization arises the necessity that theory should seek to unravel the illusions of ideology, therefore distancing Marxist theory from the established schools of philosophy at the time.

The Origin of Ideology

This leads us to the development of the notion of ideology in Marxist theory, that is, to false consciousness. The comprehension of the possibility of false consciousness is necessarily tied to the materialist under-

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 42.

standing of history. Labor ontology, at the nexus of historical materialism, states that humans enter into transformative relationships with nature in order to reproduce their basic existence. From this initial process follows the development of the productive forces, the relations of production and the division of labor. As a result of these processes, people form different moral, religious or metaphysical conceptions of the world, and precisely these forms of consciousness are ideological because they obscure the material processes within which they flourish. This is where the base-superstructure dialectic comes in, with ideology occupying a central position in maintaining the coherence of the base.

Significant for the project of dissipating ideology is the fact that the content of an ideology is historically determined:

“The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it.”²

Following the relation between the ruling class of a given epoch and the ideology they propagate; it should be noted that ideology by necessity must assume a universalist character, meaning that the perspective of the ruling class must be imposed on the subaltern. Given the ostensibly universalist character of an emergent ideology, two significant questions pertaining to individual agency arise:

1. Having indicated the source of ideology, what are the mechanisms of the development and proliferation of ideology?
2. How is it possible for the individual to overcome ideology?

To answer these two questions, we must turn, respectively, to Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony and Althusser's concept of ideological apparatus.

Returning to Marx, in the *Theses on Feuerbach* we may find a basis for a further consideration on the second question. Specifically, the third thesis, which states that people are not only products of circumstances, but that people actually change their circumstances, and that the educator must also educate³. With the movement of the dialectic, the individual becomes aware of the changing circumstances and of his activ-

² Ibid., 67

³ Ibid., 569-570.

ity, and this is the first step in the constitution of revolutionary practice aimed at overturning social relations by changing the mode of production. We can assume that revolutionary practice would contain methods that would help the individual to unravel ideological illusions.

However, the formulation of the notion of ideology in *The German Ideology* remains at a somewhat abstract level. Since German philosophy is specifically considered, its attributes are ascribed to ideology in general in the analysis. Universalism, which was indeed a segment of liberal ideology at the time the text was written, is absent from subsequent ideological formations. For example, fascism as an ideology glorifies the private, whether in the form of race, nation or ethnicity. The philosophy underlying the political movement was certainly idealistic, but instead of appeals to rationality there was the construction of a heroic myth taken from the irrational voluntarism of Georges Sorel⁴.

It is worth noting, however, that *The German Ideology* is a text with a polemical purpose, written at a specific historical moment, with a specific task - not to produce a general theory of ideology, but to articulate the mistakes made in the philosophical speculations of the Young Hegelians, correcting and directing thought to a field of theoretical practice. Here I do not mean theoretical practice as already conceptualized by Marxists such as Adorno or Althusser, but the development of a theory that is aimed at the realization of the specific goals set by the historical specificity. It is not just a matter of philosophical criticism, but also of going beyond and setting the framework of modern philosophy in order to map the actual social issues of the time. Coming within the framework of the German idealist tradition, the Young Hegelians could only try to banish the phantom of religion that appeared to them as guilty of the order of things, or they could reverse speculative thinking, arriving at man as an abstraction in a static philosophical anthropology. This formulation of the ideology is at odds with that developed by Friedrich Engels in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, and to summarize his position on the matter I will focus on three main points from the text.

The first refers to the historical need of the growing French bourgeoisie to construct its own ideology suited to its class position, beyond the already existing - religion and theology. The second, relating to the

⁴ Irving Horowitz, *Radicalism and the Revolt Against Reason*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 79.

criticism of a philosophy of history that masks the material forces at work in history by importing content from philosophical ideology. The third point, and the most important, concerns the state, among whose functions the first ideological power over man manifests itself⁵.

The presentation of all spheres of theoretical activity as ideological, in their capacity to conceal the primacy of material conditions over human reproduction, hypostasize the concept ideology as a fundamental, immutable part of human societies, which ultimately undermines the development of social analysis. It is necessary for a distinction to be made between religious and ideological consciousness, the ideological being similar in content to the former, but completely emptied of content pertaining to the divine. Also, the institutional constitution of the ideological consciousness onto the subject is radically different from the religious one, and not only because of the difference in the historical circumstances of the emergence of a given consciousness. It can be said that the religious consciousness can also be absorbed by the ideological one, for example in the image of Jesus Christ - in different nations, the facial features and other characteristics are depicted according to a generalized version of the phenotype of the given people.

Regarding the question of ideological power, here we find a development of the abstract concept of ideology as false consciousness and an outline of later theories, referring to the analysis of the mechanisms of reproduction and flourishing of ideology in Gramsci and later Althusser.

The illusory unity appearing as the image of the state is as much an ideological force as it is an ensemble of tools and practices of the ruling class. The second ideological force, therefore, is law, which sanctions economic facts, legitimizing the order of things through their transformation into law. Religion and philosophy are defined as the highest ideologies, because they are separated the most from the material, economic basis.

Despite their quality as the most remote from the material base, philosophy and religion can hardly be said to be the leading or highest forms of ideology today. In an extensive survey of the field of modern philosophy, one can only ask whether its poverty is not due to the fact that it has ceased to be a leading ideology. The reductionist view, which treats philosophy as an ideology, ignores the fact that without the foun-

⁵ Friedrich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), 53.

dation laid by speculative thinking, there would be no dialectical method and materialist analysis at all. This is due to the formulation of the concept of ideology as an illusory consciousness that posits abstract ideas as the driving force underlying human activity instead of material conditions. As a criterion for determining certain spheres of human activity as ideological, it is their quality to distort human consciousness from understanding the material conditions that condition it.

If we turn our attention to the preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, we find a development of the notion of ideology with the conceptualization of *ideological forms*—the legal, religious, political, artistic, and philosophical forms of thought through which the individual can realize the nature of class conflict and to address it.⁶

The ideological form develops the notion of "ideology" by concretizing ideology as a sphere of human activity in which the conflict between the potential for realization of the of class society and the reproduction of consciousness takes place, concealing this social fact. Together with the explanation of ideological power, which further concretizes the problem of ideology by directing it already to the state organs that reproduce ideology, we reach the absolute limit to which Marx and Engels reach in their conceptualization of ideology.

The aporia of ideology, as a notion initially, is that as the question is posed, an idealistic problematic is juxtaposed with a materialistic method. Materialist analysis can only consider the effects of an ideology and the institutionalized practices of producing the ideology. The relationship between the content of an ideology and its perception by the individual are processes that can only be speculated upon, abandoning materialist analysis in favor of psychoanalysis or psychologism. Ultimately, human activity is driven by the material conditions in which it is practiced, not by abstract ideas, or at least that is the materialist position.

The orientation towards the analysis of the relation between the commodity and the worker (or the consumer as an end) is commendable precisely because it overcomes the shortcomings caused by the dependence on the notion of ideology. The only question remains, what should be done with the notion of ideology.

⁶ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1904), 12.

The Gramscian Turn

For Gramsci ideology is of secondary importance and when using the term in various fragments, he refers to ideology as a critical, sometimes positive or neutral term. He himself reflects these different ways of using the term in political discourse, defining it as a mistake that the notion of "ideology" is used both for the superstructure that is necessary for the functioning of a particular structure and the arbitrary reflections of particular individuals.

Through this essay, we can assume that Gramsci considers the question of ideology to be primarily about material forces that produce given conceptions of the world to legitimize the status quo and produce the consciousness necessary for the reproduction of production and social relations.

As for the misunderstanding of ideology that Gramsci points out, it is due to a three-step process:

1. Ideology is identified as different from the base, and it is argued that it is not ideology that changes the base, but vice versa.

2. It is argued that a political action is "ideological", that it is insufficient in its potential to change the base, even though it is aimed at this direction and is therefore said to be worthless.

3. It comes to the claim that any ideology is a "pure" phenomenon and therefore useless and unnecessary⁷.

For Gramsci ideology is meaningful only as a value neutral notion. It is not necessarily related to false consciousness but to Sorel's notion of the myth, as something which is necessary to provoke an individual towards political praxis. Following Sorel, for Gramsci there are organic ideologies, which are formed as a result of the lived experience of a given class and arbitrary ideologies, which are formed out of the whims of an individual. For the possibility of political praxis in general, ideologies are an unreplaceable necessity, which guides individuals to form masses, helping them achieve strategic victories in their struggles.

Gramsci considered ideology an abstract field of inquiry, as opposed to the concrete analysis of the methods and apparatuses operating in civil society, which are administered by the organic intellectuals of a class. These methods and apparatuses determine the thought content of

⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 199.

the ideology in relation to the needs of the class they represent. In Gramsci's scheme of the integral state, which contains at once the coercive and hegemonic apparatuses immanent to the organization of the respective state and civil society, the secondary nature of ideology is due to the fact that ideology is not itself a driving force, but a moment of the consolidation of hegemony. In the process of the formation of a hegemony, ideology plays the role of a persuasive and driving force, the content of which is created by the organic intellectuals of a given class. It is aimed at the cultivation of political consciousness among the representatives of the given class, motivating them to organize them into a historical bloc which, at its creation, will pose a serious threat to the reproduction of life in the integral state. Hegemony also aims at the assimilation of the traditional intellectuals - representatives of the class that was dominant in a previous historical moment. Because of their social function, which is not directly related to the reproduction of production relations, these traditional intellectuals are alienated from the current mode of production.

Althusser's Contribution

In order to be able to articulate a Marxist theory of the state, which, according to Althusser, was lacking in Marx, Althusser introduced two key concepts – *the repressive state apparatus* (RSA) and *the ideological state apparatus* (ISA).

The repressive state apparatuses are the government, the administration, the army, the police, the courts and the prison⁸. The criterion for the distinction is that repressive state apparatuses function through violence (as repression, e.g. administrative repression, can take a non-physical form of violence). While ideological state apparatuses, according to Althusser, are religious, educational, family, legal, political, trade union, communicative and cultural⁹.

They function through ideology and reside in the private sphere. However, in extreme circumstances the ISA may repress in a covert manner, such as schools and churches using methods of punishment, persecution, selection, not only to discipline the "shepherds" but also the

⁸ Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, (London:Verso Books, 2014), 239.

⁹ Ibid., 248.

flock. As the ruling class holds the political power in a given society, it also controls the repressive state apparatuses. Therefore, this class also spreads its ideology through the ISA, thus seemingly constructing the image of a neutral civil society. After explicating the mechanism that propagates ideology, Althusser turns to correcting the errors that found in Marx's theory of ideology. The main mistake, according to Althusser, is that for Marx ideology is formulated in a purely positivist context, that is, it is an illusion, a dream, a poverty of thought. Ideology is therefore an imaginary bricolage that has no material form or history. In an attempt to deepen Marx's elaboration, Althusser formulated two theses to explicate the structure and functioning of ideology.

The first thesis is that ideology represents the imagined relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence¹⁰. Ideology is the illusory attitude by which people understand their real conditions, and it is precisely the illusory nature of this attitude that underlines any ideological distortion. Therefore, the object represented in ideology is not the system of real relations which determine the existence of individuals, but the illusory relation of these individuals to the real relations through which they live. With this development, the problem to be addressed by the theory of ideology is no longer the original source or reason for the existence of ideology, but why individuals' perception of their real attitudes is illusory.

The second thesis that Althusser develops is that ideology has a material reality. If an individual believes in a religious system, his belief derives from the ideas of the individual in question, that is, from him as a subject with a consciousness that contains the ideas of his belief¹¹. The ideological belief thus appears in the individual's mind as an irreducible part of his identity and thus recognizes himself in the ideology he has unwillingly adopted. A logical 'conceptual' arrangement is created in the individual's mind, by the flow of the process in which the individual recognizes the ideas in his mind as ideas in which he believes. As a consequence of this ideological individuation, the individual is now compelled to act in a certain manner in accordance with the tenets of his ideology.

By introducing this second thesis, Althusser overcomes the idealist problematic of ideas that has been central to the theory of ideology to date and introduces the materialist analysis of the concrete practices that

¹⁰ Ibid., 258.

¹¹ Ibid., 261

derive from a given ideology. Also, with the introduction of ISA, one can look at how an institution propagates a given ideology.

In character, Althusser's concept of ISA is not fundamentally different from Gramsci's concept of ideology. Althusser's critique of hegemony, that it creates an illusory autonomy of politics and thereby neutralizes politics in general, can be applied here. The difference is that with Althusser, every social relation becomes ideological. This generalization of the ideological, risks obscuring the nuance of the relationship between social institutions and the material conditions in which they exist. As an example, instead of presenting the family as an ideological apparatus, when analyzing the real relationship of the family and the relations of production, it will be revealed that capitalist society, with the tendency of social atomization and division of labor, destroys the family as an institution, or at least in its traditional form.

Althusser's Critique of Gramsci

One of Althusser's main theoretical projects was to expound the logic of Capital. According to him, the aim of Marxist philosophy was to extract this logic into a coherent form, contained in practical form throughout Marx's work, as a model of conceptual rigor and a tendency towards systematicity, removing the idealistic sediment from Hegel. With the unpublished manuscript *Marx in his Limits*, Althusser completely abandoned this theoretical project, already criticizing Marx for the fact that Capital is essentially a Hegelian work, but also criticizing how Marx develops the concept of ideology and the way in which Gramsci continues this work. The main criticism of Marx regarding his position on the notion of ideology is that he continues the tradition of classical philosophy by considering the problem of ideology as a problem related to the form of consciousness, that is, to the "object" of consciousness¹². For Althusser, the fundamental problem of Marx's conception of ideology is the overreliance on ideas, ignoring the material side of ideology, meaning that the fundamental problem of ideology can be solved with the intellectual absorption of "correct" ideas, replacing the ones producing false consciousness. Therefore, for Althusser, Marx never manages to consider the material existence of ideologies and their

¹² Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987*, (London: Verso, 2006), 135.

material influence on the class struggle. After criticizing Marx, Althusser turns to Gramsci, seeking to prove his inability to articulate the material influence of ideologies by introducing the concept of hegemony. I should mention here that initially, in his earlier works, Althusser was enthusiastic about Gramsci's contribution, declaring him to be a significant theorist who continued the work of Marx and Engels. In the 1970s, however, Gramsci was elevated as the leading theorist of the reformist Eurocommunist parties¹³, which led Althusser to rethink his contribution. Althusser criticizes Gramsci on two lines. Firstly, for regressing from Machiavelli's position in his analysis of power. Secondly, the criticism relevant to the analysis of Gramsci's ideology is found in the manuscript *Marx in his Limits*. Althusser begins his criticism by pointing out that Gramsci uses the concept of hegemony imprecisely and in very different contexts. The main shortcomings that Althusser finds in the explication of hegemony are two. The first is that the concept of hegemony is based on the Hegelian understanding of the state, in which the state appears as the main educator that drives human development¹⁴. Therefore, the problematic raised by the introduction of the concept of hegemony remains solely at the level of culture. That is, the goal of hegemony is to uplift the average man to an enlightened citizen. Within the framework of political organization, Gramsci argues that a given political party, before reaching political power, must develop its hegemony, after which the transition to a regulated society will be possible, where the end of history is realized and only individuals remain to improve themselves in free association. The second and more decisive flaw, according to Althusser, is the autonomy of politics, which Althusser sees as an inevitable consequence of the theory of hegemony. This autonomy is generated by the sublimation of the state and civil society in hegemony. Because of this unity, for Gramsci every social question becomes political, with hegemony occupying the supreme place in politics. This necessarily leads to an identification of politics with culture and thus every cultural matter becomes a political question, thus nullifying the primacy of politics. With this position Gramsci abolishes the distinction between base and superstructure, therefore eliminating the possibility of thinking about

¹³ Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), 150.

¹⁴ Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987*, (London: Verso, 2006), 146.

political action at all. Because of these two fundamental errors of Gramsci, Althusser states that through the concept of hegemony one cannot think about the material reality of ideology, in an attempt to distance Gramsci from his conception of the ideological state apparatus.

Conclusion

Both Gramsci and Althusser meaningfully expound on the notion of ideology, adapting it towards the challenges presented by the post-Fordism development in the West. The notion of hegemony first used in Gramsci's notebooks after his imprisonment by the fascist Italian state, further concretizes the problematic initially posed by the notion of ideology. Ideology appears as a secondary characteristic of hegemony, depriving it of the central stage it previously assumed. What remains is a question of strategy and tactics with ideological discourse being relegated to the background.

Althusser's contribution to Marxist theory however, re-centers ideology as the key Marxist notion. To accomplish such a theoretical feat Althusser has to fundamentally alter the content of ideology, however, and thus ideology now has to be regarded as a material force. Furthermore, ideology now is posited as an integral part of the human condition, implying that ideology has always existed in some form in human society. The Enlightenment character of the original notion of ideology, as used by Marx, is now shattered. Further advancements in Marxist theory made by Slavoj Žižek (a follower of Althusser) expand the usage of ideology by involving Lacanian psychoanalysis, furthering the irrationalism first expounded by Althusser.

The Sierra Leonean Youth: Hope is the currency of the Future

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the concept of hope as a foundational element of human aspiration, framing it as the "currency of the future" for Sierra Leonean youth. Drawing on the philosophical traditions of Gabriel Marcel, Ernst Bloch, and African communal thought, it interrogates the interplay between "youth-ness," agency, and societal transformation within the context of Sierra Leone's post-conflict reality. The analysis juxtaposes the empowering potential of hope with its limitations when detached from structural and institutional support. By exploring the intersections of existential freedom, collective responsibility, and temporal orientation, the paper reveals how hope can serve as both a mechanism for resilience and a tool of pacification. Through a nuanced critique of current policies and the saviour mentality perpetuated by external interventions, the paper calls for actionable frameworks that anchor hope in agency and communal progress, positioning youth as active architects of Sierra Leone's future.

Keywords: Hope, Youth-ness, Sierra Leone, Agency, Empowerment, Policy Development, Resilience.

"Hope is a weaker form of confidence." - Rene Descartes.

Introduction

This paper explores the notion of hope as the 'currency of the future' for Sierra Leonean youth. It argues that while hope plays a critical role in shaping the aspirations and agency of young people in Sierra Leone, it must be understood within the broader socio-political and historical context of the country. The paper examines how 'youth-ness' is conceptualized both philosophically and culturally in Sierra Leone, and how this intersects with the concept of hope. By critically assessing current youth policies and their impact, this paper seeks to propose a nuanced understanding of the potential and limitations of hope as a driving force for youth empowerment in Sierra Leone.

The concept of youth occupies a significant place in philosophical discourse, given its implications for the future of societies and its embodiment of potentiality and change. In the context of Sierra Leone, a nation grappling with the legacies of civil war, economic instability, and political challenges, the youth population represents both the promise of renewal and the reservoir of hope necessary for transformative progress. This paper explores the philosophical dimensions of "youth-ness" in Sierra Leone, focusing on the proposition that hope serves as the currency of the future for the nation's youth. Through a nuanced analysis of the intersections between hope, youth, and societal development, this paper aims to articulate a vision of youth-ness that is both philosophically robust and contextually grounded.

While Sierra Leone's youth look to "hope without", a hope from outside them and their nation to solve their social, economic and political problems, their current challenges do not offer them the confidence to think of a "hope within"; hope within them or within the country to bring them to the future they want.

Hope as a currency to the future is an illusion; it is a theatre of changing rules and not substance. A real semblance where things change on the surface but not underneath. The top of the issues get hot, even sizzling, but very cold at the bottom, making deep, long term change difficult to manifest.

Conceptualizing Youth-ness

Youth-ness, a term that captures the essence of being young, is a complex and multifaceted concept. In this paper, youth-ness is explored through both Western philosophical perspectives and the specific cultural context of Sierra Leone. Aristotle's notion of potentiality, Sartre's concept of existential freedom, and Heidegger's idea of 'being-toward-death' provide a theoretical framework to understand youth-ness as a period of potential and possibility. However, in the context of Sierra Leone, youth-ness also carries specific socio-cultural meanings, shaped by historical events such as the civil war and ongoing economic challenges. For example, Munyaradzi Mawere emphasises that African youth face unique challenges and prospects shaped by their societal context, linking youth potential to the broader development agenda. This section argues that youth-ness in Sierra Leone cannot be fully understood without considering these cultural and historical factors.

This is not to define youth but rather the concept of "Youth-ness";

it is a state of “being” to be put simply. Youth-ness can be understood as a state of being that transcends mere biological age (defining youth), encompassing a dynamic interplay of identity, potentiality, and temporality. Youth-ness is often associated with notions of becoming, growth, and transformation. Aristotle's teleological framework, for instance, views youth as a stage of development directed towards the actualisation of one's potential¹. Similarly, existentialist thinkers like Sartre and Heidegger emphasise the forward-looking aspect of youth, which posits a future realm of possibilities that shape present actions and choices^{2, 3}.

In Sierra Leone, youth-ness is particularly significant given the country's demographic structure: approximately 60% of the population is under the age of 35⁴. This demographic reality positions the youth not only as beneficiaries of developmental policies but as active agents in the creation of the nation's future. Therefore, understanding youth-ness in Sierra Leone requires an engagement with both philosophical theories of potentiality and the specific socio-political context of the country.

In essence, youth-ness in Sierra Leone encompasses more than mere biological age—it reflects a dynamic interplay of identity, potentiality, and temporality. Mawere argues that African philosophical traditions often frame youth-ness as a communal phase, where individuals acquire knowledge through mentorship and prepare for future leadership roles. This differs from Western individualistic notions and aligns more with the collective experiences outlined in *African Youth in Contemporary Society*.

¹ See Kraut, R. 2022. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman Fall. Accessed August 2024.

² Sartre, Jean-Paul, “*Existentialism is a Humanism*”. Edited by John Kulka. Yale University Press (2007), 23, 36

³ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. United Kingdom: Basil Blackwell (1962). Heidegger's view of temporality suggests that the essence of human existence is rooted in projecting oneself into future possibilities. For youth, this projection might be particularly vivid, as it represents a stage of life filled with potential and decision-making that shapes one's destiny.

⁴ The youth policy of Sierra Leone and all the West African region (ECOWAS) defines youth as people in the age bracket 15-35 year. Other definitions such as the United Nations 15-29 years and EU set its cut-off at 25 years. Given the circumstances of the West African region (coups, wars, and other instabilities), I believe 15 to 29 years is a reasonable categorisation for youth; with 25-29 being further categorised as young adults.

Additionally, “youth-ness” involves responsibilities tied to cultural roles and expectations. In agricultural contexts, youth are seen as vital contributors to communal food security, learning farming techniques through generational mentorship⁵. This highlights the contrast between communal versus individualistic learning processes found in African and Western philosophies respectively.

Youth-ness As A Non-Biological Or Age Metric

From a philosophical perspective, defining "youth" and "youth-ness" across sectors like agriculture, business, and health requires examining how each field frames youth in terms of its expectations, responsibilities, and values, as well as the role of youth in society. This definition can vary significantly depending on cultural, social, and sectoral contexts. Below is a breakdown of these ideas, integrating insights from various sources, including philosophical and anthropological reflections on the concept of youth.

Agriculture:

In many traditional societies, youth in agriculture represents a phase of physical vigour, essential for labour-intensive work. The concept of "youth-ness" in agriculture is often tied to the capacity for hard, physical labour, resilience, and innovation in farming techniques. The philosophical dimension comes from how rural societies emphasize the transition from youthful dependence to adult autonomy, where youth are trained in agriculture as part of a communal responsibility. Philosophically, African traditions highlight communal knowledge transmission, where agricultural expertise is shared across generations. Youth in agriculture thus represents both physical vitality and the ability to bear the communal weight of food production and survival.

Agricultural Youth in Philosophy:

This understanding is grounded in African communal traditions, where the youth are seen as apprentices under the guidance of elders, slowly acquiring the knowledge to sustain the community. Unlike Western individualism, where success might be personal, agricultural youth

⁵ Richards, Paul. *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth & Resources in Sierra Leone*. Oxford: The International African Institute and James Currey, 1996. Richards in his work highlights some of these concepts of framing “youth-ness”, focusing on the impact of state decline on youth and how they are drawn into insurgencies. The issue of “mentorship” is exhibited in the how they are drawn into insurgencies – the grooming and the preparing.

in many African societies signifies a communal role, as demonstrated in collective farming practices.

Business:

In business, "youth-ness" often signifies innovation, energy, and adaptability. Young people are seen as key drivers of economic growth through entrepreneurship and risk-taking. Philosophically, youth in business represents a phase of dynamic potential, where individuals can challenge the status quo and bring in fresh perspectives. Here, youth is not just about age but about mindset—a readiness to embrace change and new technologies, particularly in the era of digital transformation.

Philosophical Lens in Business:

From a broader philosophical view, youth in business reflects ideas from existentialism and pragmatism, where identity and success are shaped by actions and decisions. Business youth are often seen as agents of change, possessing a fluid identity shaped by the rapid pace of technology and market shifts. The youth are the metaphorical embodiment of Nietzschean "will power," striving to transform their environment⁶.

Health:

In the health sector, youth is typically framed around physical development, resilience, and peak biological function. However, philosophical discussions around health and youth also encompass the ethical dimensions of care, responsibility, and access to healthcare. Youth in health is often seen through the lens of potential—both in terms of physical capabilities and the long-term health outcomes of early intervention.

Youth and Health in Philosophy:

The conceptualization of youth in health can be linked to bioethics, where youth is seen as a critical period for developing lifelong habits. Philosophically, this involves debates around bodily autonomy, access to healthcare, and societal obligations to provide for the well-being of the young. African traditions, for example, consider health as a communal affair, with elders guiding youth on health practices. In contrast, Western models often emphasize individual responsibility, highlighting a binary that Prof. Gibril Sesay⁷ discusses when contrasting Western individuation with African communal values by the African cultural-

⁶ Ansah, Afia A., *"Youth Development and Empowerment in Africa: Policy and Practice"*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

⁷ Tsike-Sossah, Simon. Field notes: conversations with Prof Gibril Sesay during data collection exercise. (April 15, 2024)

socialist Julius in his seminal work, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*.

Other Sectors (Education, Politics):

In education, youth is tied to learning and growth, a period for acquiring knowledge and skills necessary for future roles in society. Politically, youth are often seen as both the future of the nation and a vulnerable group requiring policies for inclusion and protection.

Philosophical Context in Education and Politics:

Philosophically, education in youth is linked to both Plato's theory of development (where youth is a time to shape the soul) and contemporary human rights discourses that focus on the right to education and political participation. Politically, youth represents both promise and challenge—a group that can either stabilise or disrupt societal norms depending on how they are included in decision-making. African youth are sometimes perceived through the lens of "intergenerational responsibility," where elders guide them into leadership roles gradually.

Hope: A Futures Medicine

Philosophers like Ernst Bloch and Gabriel Marcel emphasise that hope is essential for human flourishing. This transformative view of hope extends to African youth, who, as Mawere⁸ argues, are key agents of social change. In sectors like business and health, youth are positioned as bearers of innovative ideas, often navigating between traditional roles and modern expectations. Mawere points out that hope in African societies is not merely individualistic but deeply intertwined with collective welfare and future aspirations.⁹

In agriculture, for example, hope manifests through resilience and innovation as young people adapt to changing environmental conditions while sustaining their communities. Similarly, in business, hope drives entrepreneurial youth to challenge the status quo, as Richards discusses in his analysis of post-conflict Sierra Leone, where youth are crucial to rebuilding the economy through new ventures¹⁰. Bloch's theory of hope, as an active engagement with possibility, resonates here by highlighting youth-ness as a period where transformative actions can shape societal progress¹¹.

⁸ Mawere, Munyaradzi. *African Youth in Contemporary Society: Challenges, Prospects, and Potentials*. Bamenda: Langaa RPCIG, 2017, 484-486.

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ See Richards work on *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth & Resources in Sierra Leone*. (1996)

¹¹ Bloch, Ernst. 1986. *The Principle of Hope*. MIT Press

Transformative actions and concept of Hope as medicine is that it is not to cure the problems of today *for* today, but *for* the future. Hope waits on action, usually an action of the tomorrow; of future... Hope allows you to take on the pain of the present in anticipation that there will be less pain tomorrow. While Bloch breathes and emphasises a positive hope, its use in everyday lives of young people is to placate them (the youth) that they have other opportunities or that their time has not yet arrived. Hope is used to drive young people to be patient and await their illusive turn.

Gabriel Marcel states, “[t]he person who hopes does not accept the current situation as final; however, neither does she imagine or anticipate the circumstance that would deliver her from her plight, rather she merely hopes for deliverance.”¹² This emphasises Descartes view that “Hope is a weaker form of confidence”, it gives you the courage to anticipate facing the future but not the present. Together, Descartes and Marcel put youth in a state where they are hopeless not for lack of Being¹³, forward looking or as Bloch said, “better future”. This is the case of the Sierra Leonean youth; their hope is based on being hopeless AND powerless. When you are “with power” hope is a tool for progression and without power, it is hopelessness; an inability to dig oneself from their abys of nothingness.

Martha Nussbaum¹⁴ posits that Politicians and policy makers work to ease tension and calm things by giving Hope. This is the best hand they can play, she says, while further arguing that fear sinks, while hope expands and uplifts, hence its illusive capacity¹⁵.

In African philosophical tradition (as with all things), hope is often intertwined with communal values and the collective pursuit of well-being. For instance, the concept of “Ubuntu” underscores the interconnectedness of individuals and the shared responsibility for mutual flourishing¹⁶. In this sense, hope, in the African context is both a personal and communal endeavour oriented towards the betterment of society as a whole. However, in

¹² Treanor, Brian, and Brendan Sweetman. ‘Gabriel (-Honoré) Marcel.’ Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Accessed August 18, 2024. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/marcel/>.

¹³ Their essences taken from them – unemployment, rights, and opportunities

¹⁴ Nussbaum, Martha C., *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis*. (Oxford University Press, 2018) 13.

¹⁵ My interpretation and conclusion.

¹⁶ Mbiti, John S. 1990. *African Religions & Philosophy*. United Kingdom: Pearson Education.

conversations with Sierra Leonean youth, the concept of hope is for an outsider, a saviour who will come from without to save Sierra Leone. The saviour concept is deeply rooted in military interventions of the military wing of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), ECOMOG (Economic Community of West Africa States Monitoring Group) and the British Special Forces. Now, the saviour mentality has shifted from military to “development partners and aid agencies”¹⁷.

The Sierra Leonean Context

As Mawere and Richards both observe, Sierra Leone’s youth face distinct challenges shaped by the country’s history of civil conflict and political instability. Mawere argues that African youth, while burdened by these historical realities, hold immense potential for societal transformation. This aligns with Walter Rodney’s seminal critique of the role of external forces in under-developing African societies, particularly with respect to agriculture and (youth) labour¹⁸.

Sierra Leone’s history of civil conflict, economic challenges, and political instability has profoundly shaped the lived experiences of its youth. The civil war (1991-2002), according to Richards, left a deep scar on the nation, with many young people either directly involved in the conflict or severely affected by its aftermath. The post-war period has been characterized by efforts towards reconstruction, reconciliation, and development, yet significant challenges remain, including high unemployment rates, limited educational opportunities, and political marginalisation of the youth¹⁹.

In this context, hope emerges as a critical resource for the Sierra Leonean youth. It is the driving force that sustains their aspirations and motivates their engagement in societal transformation. However, hope is not an abstract ideal; it must be nurtured and supported through concrete policies and practices that address the structural barriers faced by the youth.

¹⁷ In 2023 elections and the electoral reforms negotiations call on “development” partners to re-run the elections and called on the formation of a “stabilization force” from ECOWAS.

¹⁸ Rodney, Walter. 1974. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press.

¹⁹ World Bank. 'Sierra Leone Youth Employment.' Accessed 2020. <https://www.worldbank.org/> <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/400641619674751559/pdf/Post-Review-Youth-Employment-Policy-Brief.pdf>

Youth-ness and Hope: Intersections and Implications

The intersection of youth-ness and hope is complex and multifaceted. This section explores several key areas where these concepts intersect: Temporal Orientation, Agency and Empowerment, and Social Capital. Temporal Orientation examines how Sierra Leonean youth perceive their futures, often balancing hope for progress with the realities of their socio-economic environment. Agency and Empowerment considers how hope can either enhance or diminish young people's sense of control over their lives. In a context where economic opportunities are scarce, the empowerment discourse can sometimes reduce to a simplistic equation of financial independence with empowerment. Finally, Social Capital explores how the networks and relationships that youth build are influenced by their hopes and aspirations, and how these in turn affect their ability to navigate societal structures. This section also critically examines gender dynamics, exploring how the experiences of young women in Sierra Leone differ from those of young men.

The relationship between youth-ness and hope in Sierra Leone can be conceptualized through several key intersections:

Temporal Orientation:

Youth-ness is inherently future-oriented, embodying a sense of becoming and potentiality. Hope reinforces this orientation by providing a framework within which young people can envision and work towards a better future. This temporal alignment between youth-ness and hope underscores the importance of forward-looking policies that prioritize long-term development over short-term gains.

Agency and Empowerment:

Hope empowers young people by affirming their capacity to effect change. In a society where structural barriers often impede the aspirations of the youth, fostering a sense of hope can enhance their agency and participation in socio-political processes. Empowerment through hope thus becomes a critical strategy for harnessing the potential of Sierra Leone's youth.

However, in Sierra Leone, the concept of agency is placed in the bosom of patriarchy or facilitated by it. Men are in charge of everything, especially old men; women are left out and young men and women have limited opportunities to be part of the processes that "empowerment" bestows on them.

Post-war, one of the most funded projects in Sierra Leone is human

rights and advocacy programmes. However, as an active participant in this dialogue, “empowerment” has been reduced to money and not the higher concept of fairness, justice, equity, equality and all those higher level issues that the concept of “empowerment” encapsulates.

Tsike-Sossah²⁰ makes the case for the ideal partnership between youth and adults being the continuous *Youth-Adult Engagement Approach*. He argues that “[h]owever, to produce or reach “full participation” is a product of symbiotic relationship between active and supportive adults and active youth (this relationship is marked by the double arrows – see figure 1 below). Active youth are young people working to improve themselves to become politically active, by seeking the support of adults and or are willing to work with adults. It is the thinking of the writer that this relationship if nurtured will lead to an “Effective youth Political Participation and Development” which in itself will promote (an) “active youth” and “Active and Supportive Adults”.”

He shows this with the figure 1 below:

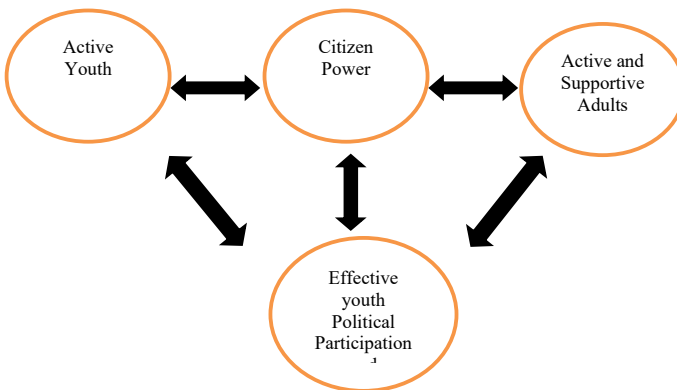


Figure 1: Continuous Youth-Adult Engagement Approach.
Adopted from Tsike-Sossah (2012).

PJ - (not full name), a Key Informant Interviewee (KII), makes references that this form of engagement does not exist and entrances to par-

²⁰ Tsike-Sossah, Simon Eyram. *Youth and Local Governance: Bringing Youth to Decision Making in Sierra Leone*. Hamburg, Germany: (LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing. 2012) n.p

icipation and exhibiting youth-ness are limited. In a focus group discussion at the University of Sierra Leone, first year students in Social work unanimously stated they prefer living in their current situation as dead people than standing up to power and dying. If this is not a state of hopelessness and powerlessness, then it is hard to find any other frames.

Resilience and Adaptation

The challenges faced by the Sierra Leonean youth necessitate a resilient and adaptive mindset. Hope, as an active engagement with possibilities, cultivates resilience by encouraging young people to persevere in the face of adversity. This resilience is essential for navigating the uncertainties and complexities of the post-conflict environment.

Sierra Leone has faced difficult times during the 11 year war, and 21 years post war, she had faced economic difficulties, Ebola, mudslides and together with the rest of the world faced COVID. Resilience and adaptation is not new to her; however, Sierra Leone has been resilient and adaptive to the point where she has become sanitised, and the words *resilience and adaptation* have long lost its meaning. Resilience and adaptation only mean “anyway to keep living” and translates into innovation that does not solve community problems but rather personal ones. It has led to increased corruption and grand theft, extortion, increased criminality and drug use (to dull the effects of helplessness and powerlessness).

Collective Responsibility

The communal dimension of hope in the African context emphasizes the shared responsibility for nurturing the well-being of the youth. This collective approach aligns with the principles of Ubuntu and highlights the role of community, family, and societal institutions in supporting the aspirations of young people. Policies that foster community engagement and support systems are thus integral to sustaining hope among the youth.

Since the last presidential election of 2023, the political landscape has become deeply divided and volatile. The ubuntu ideals of community and oneness is diminishing fast, the nuclear and individual is on the rise, raising insecurity, poverty and other social and governance ills. The government is struggling to hold the country with 3 attempted coups in the last 4 years. Building a Sierra Leone for all is becoming an illusion.

Policy Implications

Given the challenges and opportunities identified, it is crucial to develop policies that are both effective and contextually relevant. This section offers specific recommendations for policy reforms that could better address the needs of Sierra Leonean youth. For instance, in the area of education, there is a need for curriculum reform that focuses not only on academic knowledge but also on practical skills that align with the job market. In terms of employment, policies should encourage entrepreneurship through access to credit and business training, while also creating more formal employment opportunities. The feasibility of these recommendations we discuss, acknowledging potential challenges such as limited resources and political instability. However, the paper argues that with careful planning and commitment, these challenges can be overcome.

Translating the philosophical insights on youth-ness and hope into practical policy measures involves a multi-faceted approach:

1. **Education and Skills Development:** Access to quality education and vocational training is crucial for equipping the youth with the skills necessary for meaningful participation in the economy and society. Investment in education not only enhances individual potential but also fosters a collective sense of hope and possibility.

2. **Economic Opportunities:** Addressing youth unemployment through targeted economic policies, such as entrepreneurship programs and youth-friendly business environments, can create pathways for economic empowerment. Providing young people with opportunities to contribute to and benefit from economic growth is essential for sustaining hope.

3. **Political Inclusion:** Ensuring the political representation and participation of young people in decision-making processes is vital for fostering a sense of ownership and agency. Policies that promote youth leadership and civic engagement can enhance their role as active agents of change.

4. **Mental Health and Well-being:** Addressing the psychological impact of past traumas and current challenges is essential for nurturing hope. Mental health support services, community-based counselling, and programmes that promote resilience and coping skills are critical components of a holistic approach to youth development.

5. **Community Engagement:** Strengthening community structures and fostering a culture of collective responsibility can enhance the supportive environment necessary for youth development. Programs that

promote intergenerational dialogue, mentorship, and community-based initiatives can reinforce the communal dimension of hope.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the role of hope as a 'currency of the future' for Sierra Leonean youth, arguing that while hope is essential, it must be understood within a broader context. The analysis has shown that youth-ness in Sierra Leone is shaped by both historical and socio-cultural factors, and that hope can be both empowering and disempowering depending on these contexts. The paper concludes by reaffirming the potential of Sierra Leonean youth and the importance of policies that support their aspirations. Future research could explore more deeply the specific ways in which hope interacts with other social forces, such as migration, global economic trends, and technological change, to influence the lives of young people in Sierra Leone.

In the current situation of Sierra Leone, its youth are lost, hopeless and powerless. It leaves the youth of Sierra Leone vulnerable, losing its cultural, social and political capital and looking to others to step in and step up to keep her up and alive.

However, the Sierra Leonean youth embody a profound potential for societal transformation, rooted in their dynamic state of youth-ness and sustained by a resilient sense of hope. Philosophically, hope as the currency of the future underscores the active engagement with possibilities and the collective pursuit of a better future. By fostering hope through targeted policies and practices that address the structural barriers faced by the youth, Sierra Leone can harness the transformative power of its young population. In doing so, the nation not only invests in its future but also reaffirms the intrinsic value of youth-ness as a driver of progress and renewal.

Constructing Connection: The Soul Bridge as a Transformative Contribution to the Philosophy of Empathy

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Abstract: I explore how the boundaries of understanding can be transcended by synthesizing Wittgenstein's relational view of language, Cavell's concept of acknowledgment, and Nussbaum's theory of emotions. I reconceive empathy as a dynamic, multidimensional practice that emerges at the intersection of linguistic, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions. Engaging directly with skepticism and cultural variability, I frame empathy not as a quest for certainty but as a participatory process grounded in shared human experience. Using Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* as a case study, I examine how aesthetic media illuminate and navigate relational complexities. The film's portrayal of fragile intimacy and cultural dislocation reveals the profound ways art can mediate understanding. By integrating Wittgenstein's insights into language, Cavell's focus on ethical vulnerability, and Nussbaum's view of emotions as value-laden responses, I present empathy as a practice of openness, reflexivity, and ethical engagement, with aesthetic media as vital tools for fostering human connection.

Keywords: Empathy, relational understanding, aesthetic media, Wittgenstein, Cavell, Nussbaum,

I. Introduction

In a dimly lit hotel suite in Tokyo, Bob and Charlotte sit side by side, enveloped in melancholic intimacy. After days spent wandering silently, each grappling with personal crises, they share a moment that transcends ordinary understanding. Bob's tender gaze and cautious movements embody a closeness forged through mutual vulnerability.

In Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*, this fleeting instance poignantly captures the elusive nature of human connection. Bob's inaudible whisper becomes a powerful symbol of intimacy and distance, highlighting the inherent limits of understanding another's experience.

Coppola invites us to confront these boundaries: Can we bridge the empathic distance that separates us, or is understanding merely an imaginative projection?

This tension between connection and isolation anchors the inquiry I will explore: Can we overcome the barriers of individual subjectivity to truly understand others, and how might art illuminate this endeavor? Rather than framing this as a strict dichotomy, I investigate the extent to which genuine understanding is possible, acknowledging both its possibilities and limitations. By uniting Wittgenstein's relational view of language, Cavell's philosophy of acknowledgment, and Nussbaum's cognitive-evaluative theory of emotions, I propose a framework reimagining empathy as a dynamic, ethical, and relational process grounded in shared human experiences and aesthetic engagement.

This essay unfolds in three parts. First, I explore the theoretical foundations of relational understanding to construct a multidimensional concept of empathy. Next, I address challenges inherent in empathetic engagement, including skepticism, cultural differences, and power imbalances. Finally, I examine how aesthetic media, particularly film, embody and navigate these complexities. Using *Lost in Translation* as a case study, I illustrate this framework's practical relevance in fostering genuine human connection.

By bridging theoretical concepts with lived experiences, I aim to show how empathy can be cultivated as a practice of openness, reflection, and ethical engagement. This exploration challenges us to translate the profound connections depicted in art into everyday life, illuminating how empathy, as both a philosophical concept and a lived practice, can deepen our interactions and enrich an increasingly interconnected world.

II. Foundations of Relational Understanding

At its core, my concept relies on empathy as a transformative mechanism for bridging the divide between individuals and fostering meaningful connection. However, empathy is a multifaceted phenomenon, far from being a simple or universally understood concept. Defined as the capacity to both emotionally resonate with and cognitively understand the experiences of others, empathy encompasses psychological, social, and cultural dimensions. It unfolds as a dynamic process that demands not only emotional attunement but also reflective engagement with the expressions, contexts, and frameworks shaping human interaction.

Empathy plays a significant role in the works of Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Nussbaum, though none of them provide a precise or systematic definition of the concept. For their respective projects, this lack of a sharp definition poses no issue, as empathy operates implicitly within their reflections on language, acknowledgment, and emotions. For my project, however, empathy forms the foundation of the Soul Bridge, making a more focused examination essential. In this essay, I will therefore begin with the following working definition: empathy is an active, relational process that transcends mere emotional resonance or cognitive inference, emphasizing its dialogical and ethical dimensions as crucial to fostering meaningful human connection.

Although the term "soul" carries significant historical and philosophical weight, I use it metaphorically, drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea that "the human body is the best picture of the human soul"¹. I conceptualize the soul not as a metaphysical entity but as the visible, embodied expressions of human life that facilitate mutual attunement and understanding. This relational interpretation is further informed by Cavell's concept of acknowledgment, framing the soul as a shared space of ethical engagement and interpersonal connection. He writes: "Our relation to the other is not one of knowing, but one of acknowledgment. Acknowledgment is not a form of knowledge; it is a confession of the presence of the other as a being with a soul, whose expressions are the visible manifestations of an inner life we share."²

Thus, within the framework of the Soul Bridge, the "soul" serves as a central metaphor for the relational practices that underpin empathy and understanding. By introducing the concept of a 'bridge,' I emphasize the active process of connecting across the boundaries of individual subjectivity. The 'Soul Bridge' metaphor uniquely underscores the dynamic and participatory nature of constructing understanding, setting it apart from static empathy models rooted in mere emotional resonance or cognitive deduction. This metaphor illustrates how empathy functions as a conduit, allowing us to traverse the gaps between ourselves and others, uniting fragmented perspectives through relational engagement.

Yet, this very endeavor to bridge interpersonal divides brings us face to face with a profound philosophical challenge: skepticism about

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), §281.

² Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 329–330.

understanding others. How can we trust our interpretations of another person's expressions? Is empathy merely an imaginative projection? This skepticism, though pervasive, overlooks the relational and embodied nature of human connection.

To address this challenge, I turn to Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, where he dismantles the notion that mental states are private, inaccessible entities. He argues that language is inherently public, and its meanings emerge through communal use. As he articulates: "An 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria".³ This assertion emphasizes that our mental states are not hidden away but are expressed through our behaviors, gestures, and language within shared forms of life. Our expressions do not merely hint at hidden inner states; they are the very manifestations of those states within our communal existence.

Building upon this idea, Wittgenstein extends his critique through his exploration of the private language argument.⁴ He illustrates how words like "sadness" or "relief" derive their meanings not from isolated mental associations but from their use within the shared activities of human life. This relational view is further enriched by Austin's concept of speech acts, which highlights how utterances do not merely describe reality but actively shape relational dynamics.⁵ Language operates as a public phenomenon—woven into the social practices and forms of life that we share. For example, the word "pain" is intelligible because we encounter it in communal contexts: offering comfort, empathizing, or witnessing another's suffering.⁶ This perspective reinforces the idea that understanding others is rooted in our shared language and interactions, effectively countering the skepticism that views empathy as mere imaginative projection.

Indeed, it is precisely this communal and public character of language that becomes crucial for addressing skepticism about other minds. Rather than relying on inferences about hidden mental states, understanding others involves attending to the embodied forms of expression that emerge within our shared life. Gallagher's phenomenological insights further highlight how intersubjectivity and understanding are

³ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §580.

⁴ Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §580.

⁵ Cf. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

⁶ Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§244–246.

deeply rooted in embodied interactions.⁷ Wittgenstein's embodied notion of the soul frames understanding as a visible, relational activity grounded in our common humanity.

Elaborating on this concept, Wittgenstein emphasizes that our mental states are expressed through our actions, gestures, and language within the context of communal activities. He introduces the idea of "language games" to illustrate how meaning arises from the practical use of language within specific forms of life. For Wittgenstein, words like "pain," "joy," or "fear" gain their significance not from private introspection but from their application in shared human experiences.

By rejecting the notion of a private language—a language intelligible to only a single individual—Wittgenstein underscores that understanding is inherently social. When someone expresses pain through a grimace or a cry, we do not deduce their suffering by hypothesizing about an inaccessible inner state; rather, we recognize their expression as part of the communal language of human behavior. Our ability to comprehend these expressions is grounded in the common practices and forms of life in which we participate.

This relational view counters skepticism by showing that understanding others does not require us to penetrate an impenetrable private realm. Diamond's interpretation of Wittgenstein underscores the ethical dimensions of this relational view, emphasizing shared humanity as a foundation for understanding.⁸ Instead, it invites us to engage with the outward, embodied expressions that are publicly accessible and woven into the fabric of our social interactions. The "soul," in Wittgenstein's metaphor, is not a hidden essence but the sum of these visible expressions that manifest in our daily lives.

Therefore, Wittgenstein's concept illuminates how our common humanity and shared linguistic practices enable genuine understanding and empathy. By focusing on the observable and interactive aspects of human life, we can bridge the gaps between individuals without resorting to speculative inferences about hidden mental states. This approach redefines understanding as an active, participatory process rooted in the shared realities of human existence.

⁷ Cf. Shaun Gallagher, "Phenomenology and Intersubjectivity," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 19, no. 10–11 (2012): 163–184.

⁸ Cf. Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

Building upon Wittgenstein's relational view, I align with Stanley Cavell's extension of these concepts through his introduction of the notion of acknowledgment. In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell distinguishes acknowledgment from mere knowledge. While knowledge implies a detached, abstract certainty about another's state of mind, acknowledgment involves a direct, ethical engagement with the reality of another person's experience. Acknowledging someone means not just knowing they are in pain but responding to their pain as real and significant within our shared world.⁹

Cavell presents acknowledgment as a dynamic and relational act, deeply embedded in shared human practices. When someone expresses grief, our response—whether through words, a gesture, or silent presence—is not dependent on achieving absolute certainty about the specifics of their inner experience. Instead, it is grounded in communal practices of offering comfort and recognizing the fundamental human need for connection. In reframing the question from "Can I know what they are feeling?" to "How can I respond to what they are expressing?", acknowledgment emphasizes vulnerability and openness, and the willingness to treat the other's expressions as meaningful within a shared context. For Cavell, acknowledgment is more than passive recognition; it is an active, reciprocal engagement affirming the relational nature of understanding. Instead of overcoming skepticism through certainty, acknowledgment invites us to address others as fellow participants in our shared linguistic and social world, where understanding emerges through interaction and mutual responsiveness.¹⁰

Extending these philosophical insights into the realm of aesthetics, Cavell offers a compelling perspective on engaging with skepticism through his reflections on the ontology of film. In *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, he underscores film's unique capacity to illuminate emotional and moral dimensions of human experience that often escape linguistic articulation. Through its immersive and sensory nature, film draws viewers into others' perspectives, offering a visceral encounter with their worlds. Cavell's view of film as a philosophical medium places his work within a lineage of aesthetic thought—from Aristotle's conception of tragedy as a catalyst for ethical reflection to Walter

⁹ Cf. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 329–330.

¹⁰ Cf. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 369–370.

Benjamin's analysis of how film reshapes our perception of reality.¹¹ These thinkers, like Cavell, recognize art's enduring role in articulating and deepening our understanding of human experience, with film emerging as the quintessential modern medium through which such philosophical inquiries find renewed expression. Cavell argues that film's distinctive power lies in its capacity to present the world "as it is," providing audiences with a sense of immediacy and presence. Unlike literature, which relies on verbal description, film employs a combination of visual and auditory elements to evoke emotions directly. This photographic realism immerses viewers in the lived experiences of others, enabling them to see and feel in ways that transcend linguistic representation. As Cavell writes, film presents us with "the world viewed anew"¹²

This ability to "show" rather than "tell" makes film a uniquely effective medium for fostering empathy. Through expressions, body language, and ambient sounds, film conveys emotions and moral complexities that often remain unspoken in other forms of art. Cavell emphasizes that engaging with film is not a passive experience; it requires audiences to actively interpret its visual and auditory language, discerning the moral and emotional truths embedded within its narratives. This active engagement mirrors the process of acknowledgment, demanding attention, imagination, and a willingness to be moved by another's perspective. Beyond its sensory immediacy, film challenges viewers to confront their assumptions and biases, prompting ethical reflection. It compels us to ask: How do we respond to those who are different from us? How do we acknowledge their humanity without erasing their distinctiveness?

By integrating his exploration of skepticism into the realm of cinema, Cavell illustrates how film serves as a medium through which we confront the world and others. While *The Claim of Reason* delves into philosophical skepticism and the conditions of acknowledging others in interpersonal contexts, *The World Viewed* broadens this perspective by demonstrating how film uniquely captures and presents reality, creating opportunities for viewers to encounter and reflect upon the human con-

¹¹ Cf. David LaRocca, *The Thought of Stanley Cavell and Cinema: Turning Anew to the Ontology of Film* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013). LaRocca expands on Cavell's reflections by exploring how contemporary cinema continues to engage audiences with ethical and emotional questions.

¹² Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 24.

dition. Together, these works form a comprehensive view of acknowledgment that bridges philosophical inquiry with aesthetic experience, emphasizing how we engage with the world and others both directly and through mediated forms.

Deepening Cavell's ideas further, it becomes evident that for him, film is not merely a representation of reality but an avenue for experiencing the world in a renewed way. Film has the capacity to present the ordinary with fresh significance, allowing us to perceive aspects of our shared existence that might otherwise remain unnoticed. This aligns seamlessly with his concept of acknowledgment, as film invites us to engage with the expressions and experiences of others, fostering understanding rooted in our common humanity.

Cavell sees film as a means of addressing skepticism not by providing definitive answers but by immersing us in the lived realities of others. Through this immersion, film reinforces the relational nature of understanding, demonstrating that our connections with others are established through shared experiences rather than abstract knowledge. By connecting his philosophical exploration of acknowledgment with his reflections on film, Cavell shows that our engagement with others is both a philosophical and aesthetic endeavor.

Thus, the medium of film becomes a practical illustration of how acknowledgment operates. It reveals that understanding emerges not from seeking epistemic certainty but from active, empathetic engagement with the world as presented through the experiences of others. This synthesis of philosophy and aesthetics enriches our comprehension of empathy and underscores the significance of the Soul Bridge as a framework for fostering meaningful human connections.

Building upon Wittgenstein's and Cavell's shared perspectives, I aim to dismantle the notion that understanding others depends on penetrating the supposed privacy of their inner states. Instead, they argue that mutual understanding arises through shared practices and the public character of language. For example, when someone cries, their tears are not opaque signs requiring interpretation, but intelligible expressions embedded in the shared human experiences of sadness, loss, or frustration. Our ability to grasp these expressions depends on the forms of life we inhabit together, which provide the context for interpreting and responding to others.

Building on Wittgenstein's mid-20th-century insights into the public nature of language, which challenged the ideal of private, *a priori*

knowledge, I aim to reframe understanding as a relational activity rooted in shared expressions. Cavell, writing in the American philosophical tradition of the 1960s and 70s, extends this foundation by adding an essential ethical dimension through his concept of acknowledgment. His work reflects a postwar philosophical sensibility where existential concerns, as seen in thinkers like Sartre, converged with the linguistic turn of analytic philosophy, highlighting the relational vulnerability of human understanding. Furthermore, his film-philosophical reflections enrich this perspective by demonstrating how cinema uniquely engages viewers with the visible, embodied dimensions of human experience. Film, as a public art form, reveals the ordinary in extraordinary ways, inviting viewers to recognize others' expressions not as private mysteries but as part of a shared world.

By integrating these philosophical insights, my project reconceptualizes empathy as a practical and relational engagement with the visible and shared aspects of human existence. Rejecting the need for inferential certainty, I position language, acknowledgment, and aesthetic experience as essential tools for navigating the complexities of human connection, presenting understanding not as an abstract ideal but as a lived, embodied, and shared endeavor.

But does the interplay of language, shared practices, and film alone suffice to fully bridge the distance between individuals? Can the structures of mutual understanding truly endure without the affective foundation that imparts depth and meaning? To address these questions, I must turn to emotions—the vital medium that animates and sustains human connection. Emotions, residing at the heart of our evaluative and relational existence, provide the resonance necessary to apprehend the significance of another's experience.

At this juncture, Martha Nussbaum's insights become invaluable. She redefines emotions as "intelligent responses to the perception of value",¹³ thereby framing them as cognitive and evaluative phenomena rather than irrational or chaotic impulses. According to Nussbaum, emotions are deeply rooted in our judgments about what matters to us, shaped by our beliefs, cultural backgrounds, and personal commitments. They reveal our underlying values, often articulating what we cannot express explicitly, and invite others to engage with the profundity of our inner world.

¹³ Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

For instance, grief reflects the belief that something irreplaceable has been lost, while fear arises from the judgment that something we cherish is under threat. This cognitive-evaluative perspective underscores the relational nature of emotions—they do not exist in isolation but are intimately connected to how we perceive and interact with others.

In her essay "The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*", Nussbaum applies her theory of emotions to the philosophical analysis of literature, illuminating how emotional resonance within the novel enhances our understanding of others. Through a meticulous examination of Woolf's portrayal of characters' inner lives, she demonstrates how the intricate depiction of emotions deepens our grasp of interpersonal understanding. Nussbaum argues that Woolf's narrative techniques—such as stream of consciousness and shifting perspectives—provide profound insights into the nature of empathy and the challenges of knowing other minds. By weaving together literary form and philosophical inquiry, Nussbaum extends the approaches of Wittgenstein and Cavell to skepticism about other minds. She showcases how emotions furnish the necessary depth for bridging the chasm between individuals, reinforcing the relational and evaluative nature of understanding. In this sense, Nussbaum's work reveals how emotions function as a bridge, enabling us to interpret and resonate with the concerns and values of others.

Drawing directly from Nussbaum's insights, I place emotional resonance at the core of my project. Her view of emotions as structured, meaningful, and inherently relational offers a framework that is both intellectually rigorous and deeply felt. By emphasizing the centrality of emotions in human connection, I aim to demonstrate how the affective dimension is essential for fully engaging with others. Emotions provide the depth that language and shared practices alone may lack, enabling us to traverse the distances between individual subjectivities. By integrating Nussbaum's cognitive-evaluative theory of emotions, my approach underscores that empathy is not merely a cognitive or linguistic endeavor but a profoundly emotional one that necessitates engaging with the values and judgments that animate our lives.

Building upon the philosophical foundations established earlier, I argue for a concept of empathy as a multifaceted process that involves active engagement with others' evaluative judgments and embodied expressions within their specific contexts. This approach integrates cognitive

understanding, affective resonance, and ethical responsiveness, aligning with Wittgenstein's emphasis on shared practices, Cavell's notion of acknowledgment, and Nussbaum's cognitive-evaluative theory of emotions.

Empathy is positioned here as a dynamic interplay between linguistic practices, emotional attunement, and aesthetic experiences. Rather than arising from inferential certainty, genuine understanding emerges through participatory engagement with the visible expressions of human life. This framing presents empathy as both an intellectual and emotional endeavor, facilitated by our shared forms of life and the immersive power of aesthetic media.

Central to this concept is the transformation of empathy into a relational practice that actively connects us with others through three key dimensions: shared linguistic practices, emotional resonance, and aesthetic experience. Drawing from Wittgenstein, meaning arises within communal activities, making empathy inherently relational as we use language to forge connections. Building on Nussbaum, emotions are understood as structured responses to what we value, acting as bridges to others' inner lives and allowing us to resonate with their concerns. Inspired by Cavell, aesthetic media like film reveal the relational and emotional dynamics underpinning human connection, affirming the reality of others' experiences. By integrating these elements, I propose a multi-dimensional process at the intersection of language, emotion, and aesthetics. This approach reframes understanding as a lived, embodied, and participatory endeavor, offering a comprehensive framework for overcoming skepticism and fostering deeper human connections.

However, this framework must also address significant criticisms. Potential cultural biases may affect shared understanding, ethical dilemmas can arise from differing moral frameworks, and conceptual limitations regarding the universality of aesthetic experiences pose challenges. Cultural differences influence linguistic practices and emotional expressions, leading to possible misunderstandings. Johnson's critique of cultural appropriation illustrates how failing to engage with cultural specificity can result in misrepresentation and ethical challenges.¹⁴ Ethical challenges emerge when acknowledging others whose values conflict with our own. Moreover, reliance on aesthetic media like film raises questions about accessibility and varying interpretations across diverse audiences.

¹⁴ Cf. M. Johnson, "Cultural Appropriation and the Arts," *Philosophical Studies* 172, no. 5 (2015): 1243–1259.

These critiques necessitate a closer examination of the framework's assumptions and practical applications. In the following sections, I will delve deeper into these strengths and challenges, aiming to refine the concept and address potential limitations. Through critical engagement with these issues, the goal is to enhance our understanding of empathy as a transformative and relational practice capable of bridging distances between individuals in a complex, multicultural world.

III. Fragile Connections: Navigating Limits and Possibilities

While empathy serves as a cornerstone of human connection, its inherent complexity presents profound challenges that cannot be ignored. Empathy is a fragile and multifaceted phenomenon, shaped not only by shared practices but also by cultural, emotional, and epistemic uncertainties that can lead to misalignment and misunderstanding. This existential tension is intrinsic to empathy itself and resists simple resolution, necessitating deeper and more focused investigations than can be undertaken here. Nevertheless, I will briefly acknowledge this complexity and focus on two critical challenges that are central to refining and advancing the conceptual framework of my project—the Soul Bridge.

The first challenge is epistemic skepticism, which questions whether shared expressions, linguistic practices, aesthetic experiences, and gestures can genuinely grant us access to another's inner life. This skepticism raises doubts about the possibility of true understanding, suggesting that our attempts at empathy may be limited to projections of our own perspectives onto others. The second challenge pertains to the cultural and societal dimensions of empathy, highlighting its vulnerability to power asymmetries and its dependence on culturally specific frameworks. Cultural differences and social hierarchies can obstruct mutual understanding, leading to misinterpretations or reinforcing existing inequalities.

In addressing these challenges, the Soul Bridge concept seeks not merely to acknowledge the limitations inherent in empathy but to transform them into opportunities for deeper relational engagement. By integrating the philosophies of Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Nussbaum, the Soul Bridge offers a nuanced framework that embraces the fragility of empathy as a catalyst for ethical responsiveness and mutual understanding. It recognizes that while we may never fully access another's inner world, we can engage meaningfully with their expressions through shared practices and acknowledgment.

Furthermore, by incorporating aesthetic media—particularly film—the Soul Bridge leverages the unique capacity of artistic expression to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers. Film, as a universal language of visual and emotional storytelling, facilitates encounters with others that are both emotionally resonant and ethically significant. It allows us to witness and engage with experiences that might otherwise remain inaccessible, thus bridging gaps created by skepticism and cultural variability.

In the subsequent analysis, I will demonstrate how the Soul Bridge operates in practice by examining a specific film example. This exploration will illustrate how aesthetic media can embody and navigate the complexities of empathy, addressing the challenges of epistemic skepticism and cultural diversity. Through this examination, I aim to show that the Soul Bridge not only addresses the theoretical limitations of empathy but also provides practical tools for fostering genuine human connection in an increasingly pluralistic and interconnected world.

Building upon the complexities outlined, the first critical challenge to address is epistemic skepticism—the profound question of whether shared expressions, linguistic practices, aesthetic experiences, and gestures can genuinely grant us access to another's inner life. At the heart of this challenge lies what Stanley Cavell terms the "truth of skepticism." This truth acknowledges that we can never fully penetrate the inner lives of others—a recognition that does not diminish human connection but rather defines its conditions. Cavell asserts, "If skepticism is to be overcome, it will not be by removing the causes of skepticism, but by accepting them, or finding the way to live with them".¹⁵ By embracing skepticism as an inherent aspect of human interaction, I reframe it not as a problem to be solved but as a reality to engage with thoughtfully. This acceptance underscores the inherent privacy of subjective experience and reminds us that no expression—linguistic, gestural, or emotional—can fully disclose another's inner world. Understanding, therefore, is not an achievement of certainty but a fragile process that must grapple with ambiguity and incompleteness.

This fragility becomes evident in the ambiguity of expressions. Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, emphasizes that the meaning of expressions does not reside in private mental states

¹⁵ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 46.

but emerges from their use within shared contexts. He writes, "An 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria".¹⁶ This insight reveals the interpretative nature of understanding: a smile, a gesture, or a phrase like "I'm fine" gains meaning through communal practices yet remains open to misinterpretation. Expressions are never self-evident; they require contextual grounding, and even within shared contexts, they can conceal as much as they reveal.

Cavell's reflections in *The World Viewed* deepen this understanding of expression and skepticism, particularly as he explores the role of media like film in mediating our encounters with others. He observes, "The human face is a sign we interpret, and not a sign we cease interpreting once its expression is identified. It is the presence of a world, as the world is the presence of others".¹⁷ This observation reinforces the idea that understanding others is an ongoing, interpretative process. The face, emblematic of subjectivity, becomes a site of both revelation and concealment, where interpretation never exhausts the potential meanings present in expressions. For Cavell, such ambiguity is central to skepticism—not as a defect to be eradicated but as a condition to be navigated.

This inherent ambiguity underscores the fragility of empathy. Misinterpretations and projections are not anomalies but inherent risks, reminding us that our engagement with others' expressions is invariably shaped by our own biases, histories, and assumptions. Cavell's insight that understanding others is not a matter of knowing but of acknowledging highlights the relational vulnerability at the heart of this process. He writes, "Acknowledgment 'goes beyond' knowledge, not in the order, or as a feat, of cognition, but in the call upon me to express the knowledge at its core, to recognize what I know, to do something in the light of it, apart from which this knowledge remains without expression, hence perhaps without possession".¹⁸

In this context, acknowledgment emerges as an active, ethical practice rather than a passive cognitive state. Cavell's insistence that acknowledgment requires *doing something*—acting in light of what is known—underscores the inherently precarious and relational nature of this engagement. Acknowledgment demands more than understanding; it calls

¹⁶ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §580.

¹⁷ Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 22.

¹⁸ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 428.

for a readiness to expose oneself to the risks of vulnerability, misunderstanding, and rejection, emphasizing the profound moral responsibility embedded in interpersonal connections. In this sense, acknowledgment becomes a transformative ethical act—one that transcends mere knowledge or certainty and invites us to meet the other as a subject.

Thus, while the ambiguity inherent in empathy reveals its fragility, it also underscores its necessity. Cavell's concept of acknowledgment offers a way to navigate this tension, transforming the risks of misinterpretation into opportunities for deeper connection. By confronting the relational vulnerability inherent in our engagement with others, we embrace the ethical responsibility of acknowledgment and open pathways to genuine understanding—an understanding that is fragile yet profoundly human.

Moreover, the fragility of understanding intersects with broader challenges, such as selective empathy. Biases, cultural conditioning, and social hierarchies determine whose expressions are deemed intelligible or significant. Gestures or emotions rooted in one cultural framework may be dismissed or misunderstood in another, complicating the empathetic process. These dynamics expose how the limits of understanding are deeply entangled with power structures and cultural variabilities, linking this challenge to the next aspect I must consider.

As a result, the second critical challenge arises from the cultural and societal dimensions of empathy, which highlight its vulnerability to power asymmetries and dependence on culturally specific frameworks. While shared practices and acknowledgment address the epistemic limits of understanding, they are profoundly shaped by the cultural and social contexts in which they occur. Language and gestures do not operate in isolation; they are embedded within power structures and contingent frameworks that influence whose expressions are heard, validated, or marginalized.

This reality raises an urgent question: How can we navigate these dynamics to foster meaningful and equitable connections? Martha Nussbaum emphasizes that emotions are "laden with culturally specific frameworks of meaning," with their expressions and interpretations deeply intertwined with cultural contexts. For instance, grief may manifest as public wailing in one culture, symbolizing communal solidarity, while in another, it might take the form of private mourning, reflecting individual restraint. These variations are not superficial differences but reflect funda-

mentally distinct worldviews, making the act of building bridges across cultural boundaries nuanced and, at times, profoundly challenging.

Moreover, this cultural variability extends to nonverbal communication. Gestures, facial expressions, and even silence carry diverse meanings depending on cultural context. A smile, for example, might convey joy, politeness, embarrassment, or discomfort, depending on the situation and cultural norms. The risk of misinterpreting such expressions is significant, especially when cultural knowledge is lacking. These misunderstandings can impede genuine connection and inadvertently reinforce stereotypes or biases, resulting in empathy that is superficial or even detrimental. To illustrate these challenges, consider the phenomenon of cultural appropriation, where elements of a marginalized culture are adopted by members of a dominant culture without proper understanding or respect. This often leads to misrepresentation and reinforces power imbalances, as the dominant culture commodifies aspects of another culture without engaging with their significance or context. For example, the adoption of Indigenous headdresses as fashion accessories at music festivals disregards their sacred meaning, leading to feelings of disrespect and exploitation among Indigenous communities.¹⁹ In such cases, empathy fails when there is a lack of genuine engagement with the cultural meanings behind expressions, highlighting the necessity for the kind of reflexivity and openness that the Soul Bridge framework advocates.

Beyond cultural variability, power dynamics introduce another layer of complexity. In contexts of inequality, empathy often places disproportionate demands on marginalized groups. Smith's analysis of emotional labor highlights the toll of these demands on marginalized groups, emphasizing the need for equitable empathetic practices.²⁰ This phenomenon, sometimes described as "emotional labor" or "emotional extraction," occurs when individuals from less privileged positions are expected to explain their experiences or educate others about systemic injustices. For example, in discussions of racism or sexism, marginalized individuals frequently bear the emotional burden of articulating their pain in ways that are palatable to those in positions of privilege.

¹⁹ Cf. M. Johnson, "Cultural Appropriation and the Arts," *Philosophical Studies* 172, no. 5 (2015): 1243–1259.

²⁰ Cf. L. Smith, "Emotional Labor and Social Justice: The Burden of Education in Activism," *Social Movement Studies* 19, no. 6 (2020): 657–673.

These dynamic risks transforming empathy into an act of consumption rather than genuine connection, exhausting those who are called upon to explain while reinforcing existing hierarchies. For example, individuals in the Black Lives Matter movement often bear the emotional burden of educating others about systemic racism. Activists find themselves explaining their experiences to those who haven't faced such challenges, which can be emotionally exhausting.²¹ This underscores the Soul Bridge's emphasis on avoiding extractive empathy. By promoting practices that amplify marginalized voices without undue demands, the framework seeks to foster more equitable engagement.

These dynamics reveal how the limits of understanding are deeply entwined with power structures and cultural variabilities. The interplay of cultural differences and societal inequalities complicates the empathetic process, challenging us to consider how empathy can be practiced in ways that are both meaningful and just. Recognizing these complexities is essential for refining our approach to empathy, ensuring that it does not inadvertently perpetuate misunderstanding or oppression but instead fosters authentic engagement and mutual respect.

These dynamics highlight a fundamental truth: cultural and social contexts, much like individual subjectivity, do not provide direct access to the meanings behind others' expressions. Just as we cannot fully know another's inner life, we cannot assume that cultural or societal frameworks will entirely explain their expressions. However, Cavell's concept of acknowledgment offers a promising way forward. Rather than demanding certainty or proof, acknowledgment invites us to engage with others' expressions as they present themselves, responding with openness and care. This approach accepts the limitations inherent in human connection while emphasizing the ethical responsibility to engage relationally, even in the face of uncertainty.

To address these challenges, I argue that a nuanced approach is required—one that embraces complexity and ethical responsibility. Drawing on Nussbaum's reflections, I propose that cultural diversity should not be viewed as an obstacle but as a resource for deeper understanding. This perspective shifts the focus from achieving uniformity to fostering openness, allowing unique meanings to emerge within relational contexts. Practices such as active listening, observation, and inquiry become

²¹ Cf. Smith, "Emotional Labor and Social Justice,".

essential for setting aside stereotypes and preconceptions about emotional expressions. Equally important is addressing power dynamics. Inspired by Cavell's concept of acknowledgment, my approach emphasizes amplifying marginalized voices while avoiding extractive forms of empathy that place the burden of explanation on those already disadvantaged. Reflexivity becomes critical, requiring individuals to examine how their cultural and social positions shape their interpretations and to remain open to revising their assumptions considering new perspectives.

Aesthetic media play a pivotal role in navigating these dynamics. By capturing the subtleties of human expression—its ambiguities, emotional depths, and contextual layers—art, film, and other creative mediums provide unique opportunities to expand upon these principles. Unlike linguistic or emotional resonance alone, aesthetic media can transcend cultural boundaries without erasing their specificity, offering a shared imaginative space where diverse perspectives can encounter one another. Films, for instance, often depict culturally distinct emotional practices, inviting viewers to engage with expressions that may initially seem unfamiliar or opaque. These encounters foster sensitivity to cultural nuance while resisting reductive interpretations, creating environments where both shared humanity and cultural particularity can coexist.

By integrating these insights, I develop a unified framework that addresses the intertwined challenges of skepticism and intercultural understanding. While skepticism reveals the epistemic gap inherent in understanding others, cultural and social variability magnifies this complexity. I reframe these challenges as opportunities for dynamic relational engagement, weaving language, emotion, and aesthetics into a cohesive model. Aesthetic media, often overlooked in such discussions, emerge as vital tools for fostering connection across divides, creating spaces where relational and imaginative engagement can flourish.

By situating empathy as a multidimensional practice rooted in the complexities of lived experience, I embrace the fragility of human connection as a source of strength. Uncertainty and cultural difference are not obstacles to be overcome but conditions for creative engagement. This approach not only synthesizes the contributions of Cavell, Wittgenstein, and Nussbaum but also advances a transformative model for understanding and bridging divides in an increasingly pluralistic world. One might argue that the Soul Bridge framework idealizes empathy by assuming individuals are willing and able to engage meaningfully across profound

differences. Critics may contend that ingrained biases or systemic inequalities impede empathetic engagement, rendering the framework overly optimistic. In response, it's important to acknowledge that the Soul Bridge doesn't presume an effortless or universal capacity for empathy. Instead, it recognizes the complexities and advocates for intentional practices of reflexivity, active listening, and openness to navigate these challenges. The framework isn't a prescriptive solution but a guiding approach encouraging continual effort toward understanding and connection.

IV. Applicability of the Concept through Aesthetic Media: *Lost in Translation*

Having examined the complexities of empathy and the challenges posed by epistemic skepticism and cultural variability, I now turn to explore how these theoretical insights manifest in practice. Specifically, I aim to demonstrate how aesthetic media, particularly film, can embody and navigate the intricacies of human connection, transforming abstract principles into vivid, lived experiences. By immersing us in the emotional and moral worlds of others, art holds the potential to bridge the chasm between self and other, offering a unique avenue for engaging with the visible expressions of shared life.

Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* provides an evocative exploration of human connection, skepticism, and acknowledgment, encapsulating the tensions inherent in empathetic engagement. The film follows Bob and Charlotte, two strangers adrift in the bustling yet alienating landscape of Tokyo. Their shared silences, fleeting glances, and whispered words embody the fragile interplay of intimacy and distance, illustrating how connection can emerge even amidst profound separateness.

Lost in Translation also illustrates how aesthetic media can foster empathy by immersing viewers in culturally distinct contexts. Tokyo's vibrant yet unfamiliar environment challenges both the characters and the audience to navigate difference and dislocation. This mirrors the emphasis on embracing cultural specificity as a resource for deeper understanding. Rather than erasing the characters' separateness, the film uses this cultural backdrop to highlight the possibilities and limits of connection. Through its refusal to simplify or universalize, the film invites viewers to engage with the complexities of relational understanding.

The final scene, where Bob whispers inaudible words to Charlotte, epitomizes the philosophical principles of skepticism and acknowledg-

ment. This moment resists closure, leaving the audience excluded from the specifics of their exchange. Echoing Wittgenstein's insight that understanding is not about penetrating hidden mental states but engaging with outward expressions, the inaudible whisper emphasizes the necessity of accepting the limits of shared experience. Rather than dissolving the boundaries of individuality, it invites us to acknowledge the other's subjectivity without the illusion of complete understanding. This aligns with Cavell's perspective that skepticism is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be navigated—a reality that defines the contours of meaningful engagement.

By integrating Cavell's film-philosophical insights and Wittgenstein's emphasis on shared practices, *Lost in Translation* exemplifies how aesthetic media can operationalize these theoretical concepts. The inaudible whisper and the interplay of intimacy and distance serve as powerful symbols of how acknowledgment functions in both ethical and aesthetic dimensions. Film, through its sensory immediacy and capacity for ambiguity, becomes a medium where the principles of empathy and acknowledgment can be vividly experienced and critically examined. Mulhall further elaborates on this by positioning film as a unique philosophical medium capable of examining relational and ethical complexities.²²

Coppola's cinematic techniques profoundly illuminate the fragility and transformative potential of empathy. Through close-up shots of Bob and Charlotte's faces, the film captures their emotional expressiveness while preserving an enigmatic opacity, exemplifying Cavell's assertion that "the human face is a sign we interpret, and not a sign we cease interpreting once its expression is identified."²³ Historically, art—particularly film—has served as a philosophical medium, rendering complex ideas experientially accessible. Aristotle's theory of tragedy, for example, framed dramatic art as a vehicle for ethical and emotional reflection through catharsis, while Walter Benjamin later explored how the mechanical reproducibility of film reshapes our perception of reality, inviting audiences into new modes of engagement. Film thus transcends its role as a narrative medium, offering a unique capacity to materialize philosophical concepts—such as empathy, acknowledgment, and subjectivity—through visual and emotional immediacy. In *Lost in Translation*, Coppola harnesses these capabilities to navigate the intricate balance be-

²² Cf. Stephen Mulhall, *On Film* (London: Routledge, 2008).

²³ Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 22.

tween intimacy and distance, demonstrating how aesthetic media can deepen relational and ethical understanding. Cavell's reflections on film, particularly in *The World Viewed*, build upon a historical tradition of aesthetic theory tracing back to figures like Lessing and Benjamin, who explored how visual media shape our perceptions of reality and others. By situating film as a philosophical medium, Cavell reimagines the long-standing philosophical question of representation in a modern, cinematic context. The film's visual and auditory landscapes—the ambient hum of Tokyo's streets, the soft, understated lighting—create an atmosphere that enhances the sense of connection while preserving the characters' inner worlds as ultimately inaccessible.

The recurring setting of the hotel bar serves as a metaphorical space of shared recognition, contrasting with the chaotic city outside. Within this liminal space, Bob and Charlotte's relationship evolves through gestures and silences rather than explicit dialogue, exemplifying how acknowledgment operates on both ethical and epistemological levels. Their interactions highlight that understanding arises not from certainty but from relational practices that engage with the visible expressions of another's experience.

Despite sharing a common language, Bob and Charlotte often find words insufficient to convey their complex emotions. Their conversations are marked by pauses and unfinished sentences, suggesting the limitations of language in expressing inner experiences. This resonates with Wittgenstein's view that meaning emerges from use within shared forms of life, emphasizing that understanding can develop through shared contexts and practices even when verbal communication falters. The characters' mutual sense of alienation in a foreign culture underscores the importance of non-verbal cues and shared experiences in forging connections.

Drawing on Nussbaum's cognitive-evaluative theory of emotions, the film delves into the characters' internal landscapes, revealing how their feelings reflect deeper judgments about purpose, relationships, and identity. Charlotte's existential uncertainty and Bob's midlife disillusionment are structured responses to what they value, inviting viewers to resonate with their concerns. This emotional engagement fosters a form of empathy grounded in shared human experiences, allowing the audience to reflect on their own values and emotions.

The film also engages with cultural variability and the challenges it

poses to empathetic understanding. Bob and Charlotte navigate a foreign culture that is both captivating and confounding, highlighting the complexities of interpreting expressions within different cultural frameworks. Their interactions with Japanese characters often result in miscommunications and misunderstandings, emphasizing the limitations of assuming shared meanings. This underscores the necessity of approaching others with openness and reflexivity, recognizing that cultural differences can both hinder and enrich the empathetic process.

By immersing viewers in culturally distinct contexts, *Lost in Translation* mirrors the emphasis on embracing cultural specificity for deeper understanding. Tokyo's vibrant yet unfamiliar environment challenges both characters and audience to navigate difference and dislocation, highlighting the possibilities and limits of connection. The film invites viewers to engage with the complexities of relational understanding by refusing to simplify or universalize. Beyond film, the Soul Bridge principles can be applied in education to foster empathy among diverse students. Incorporating literature and films from various cultures into curricula exposes students to different perspectives, encouraging engagement with experiences unlike their own.²⁴ Structured dialogues and reflective exercises further facilitate understanding and reduce biases. In social justice initiatives, the framework can guide activists and organizations to create platforms prioritizing marginalized voices. Ensuring these voices lead the narrative and promoting active, respectful listening among allies helps cultivate more inclusive and empathetic movements.

Moreover, the film invites critical reflection on power dynamics related to cultural privilege and outsider status. While Bob and Charlotte experience a sense of alienation, they also move through Tokyo with a degree of freedom and detachment not necessarily available to locals. This complexity adds layers to the empathetic process, illustrating how power relations can influence connections and emphasizing the importance of addressing these dynamics within empathetic engagement.

In sum, aesthetic media like *Lost in Translation* do not merely depict empathy—they enact it, providing spaces where viewers can encounter the fragility and depth of human connection. By resisting the closure of certainty, films encourage engagement with the boundaries of individuality and the shared practices that sustain understanding.

²⁴ Cf. Maria Garcia and John Willis, *Ethics in Contemporary Cinema: Perspectives and Reflections* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

Through these experiences, empathy emerges not only as a theoretical framework but as a lived practice that bridges the gaps between self and other, fostering both connection and reflection.

Through the analysis of *Lost in Translation*, I aim to demonstrate how aesthetic media can embody and navigate the complexities of empathy, addressing the intertwined challenges of epistemic skepticism and cultural diversity. The film exemplifies how relational practices, emotional resonance, and aesthetic experience converge to foster meaningful human connection. It reinforces the idea that uncertainty and cultural difference are not obstacles to be overcome but conditions for creative engagement, aligning with the transformative model of empathy proposed in my framework.

By situating empathy as a multidimensional practice rooted in the lived experiences of individuals, this approach embraces the fragility of human connection as a source of strength. It synthesizes the contributions of Cavell, Wittgenstein, and Nussbaum, advancing a nuanced understanding of empathy that is both practically applicable and theoretically robust. In an increasingly pluralistic and interconnected world, such a model offers valuable insights into how we might bridge divides and foster authentic engagement across the boundaries that so often separate us.

V. Conclusion: Revisiting the Challenges of Empathy and the Path Forward

Empathy, as both a philosophical concept and a lived experience, encapsulates the fragility and transformative potential of human connection. This essay has presented the metaphor of the Soul Bridge, synthesizing Wittgenstein's relational view of language, Cavell's acknowledgment, and Nussbaum's cognitive-evaluative theory of emotions, to redefine empathy as a multidimensional practice grounded in shared experiences and ethical engagement.

By reframing epistemic skepticism as a condition for relational engagement and cultural differences as catalysts for connection, the Soul Bridge offers a framework that bridges divides while embracing the complexities of understanding. Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* exemplifies how aesthetic media navigate the intricate balance of intimacy and distance, revealing the profound capacity of art to evoke understanding where language may falter.

Through the interplay of language, emotion, and aesthetics, empathy transcends abstraction to become a transformative practice. It challenges us to navigate fragility with openness and to engage with others not despite our differences, but through them. In a pluralistic world, the Soul Bridge serves as both a philosophical model and a practical guide, inviting us to reimagine empathy as a dynamic force that transforms vulnerability into the foundation of meaningful connection.

IV. 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

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Doctoral 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 PhD Program in Philosophy taught in English at the University of Sofia provides instruction in all major areas of Western Philosophy, but the PhD thesis can also be written on a topic from Eastern Philosophy. The program consists of 6 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. This Program has been ranked as the third best worldwide for 2024, Best Philosophy Online PHD Programs for 2024/2025 - OnlinePhD.org.

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.
extramural: €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.

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 outside the EU/EEA and Switzerland.

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V. INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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