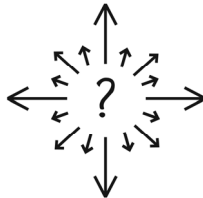


Sofia Philosophical Review

Alexander L. Gungov, University of Sofia, Editor-in-Chief
Karim Mamdani, Toronto, Canada, Senior Book Review Editor
Jonathan Bruce, USA, Aspiration Corner Editor
Tomas Pewton, University of Sofia, Asst. Book Review Editor
Joseph Milburn, University of Sofia, Aspiration Corner Editor

Vol. XVIII, no. 2
2025



This issue is printed with the kind support of the PhD Program in Philosophy Taught in English at the University of Sofia.



Sofia Philosophical Review is a peer reviewed journal indexed by The Philosopher's Index, EBSCO, and the MLA International Bibliography.

Sofia Philosophical Review accepts non-ideological papers in most of the major areas of philosophy and its history: social, political, and moral philosophy, as well as metaphysics and ontology from a continental perspective, continental philosophy in general, and philosophy of medicine. Please send an electronic version of the manuscript accompanied with a 100 word abstract to:

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

Website: www.sphr-bg.org

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

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

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

ISSN 1313-275X

© Aglika Gungova, cover design

International Editorial Board

Ulrich Arnswald, University of Innsbruck, Austria and University of Kaiserslautern-Landau, Germany

Felix Azhimov, The Higher School of Economics, Russian Federation

Jeffrey Andrew Barash, The University of Picardie Jules Verne, France

Raymond Barfield, Mission Hospital-Asheville, North Carolina, USA

Thora Ilin Bayer, Xavier University of Louisiana, USA

Costica Bradatan, Texas Tech University, USA and University of Queensland, Australia

Kenneth Bryson, Cape Breton University, Canada

Paola-Ludovica Coriando, University of Innsbruck, Austria

Peter Costello, Providence College, USA

Kadir Çüçen, Bursa Uludağ University, Türkiye

Vladimir Diev, Novosibirsk State University, Russian Federation

Zoran Dimic, University of Niš, Serbia

Nina Dmitrieva, Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University and Moscow State Pedagogical University, Russian Federation

Manuel Knoll, Istanbul Şehir University, Türkiye and Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Germany

Grigoriy Arturovich Klyucharev, National Research University, MPEI and Institute of Sociology, RAN, Russian Federation

Friedrich C. Luft, Experimental and Medical Research Center, Berlin, Germany

Claude Mangion, University of Malta, Malta

Yulia Vladimirovna Sokolova, National Research University, MPEI, Russian Federation

David Låg Tomasi, Vermon Academy of Art and Sciences, USA

Donald Phillip Verene, Emory University, USA

Shunning Wang, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, China

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. IMMANUEL KANT’S RECENT ANNIVERSARY	7
Kant’s Influence on Levinas’ Conception of Time Maria Dimitrova (University of Sofia)	7
The Thing-in-Itself Todor Polimenov (University of Sofia)	18
Overcoming the Illusions of Piety through Rational and Phenomenological Religiosity Alexander Gungov (University of Sofia)	32
II. BOOK REVIEWS.....	43
Dustin Peone, ed., <i>Essays in Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy: Considering the Views of Donald Phillip Verene</i> . Reddick, FL: Felice Mosca, 2025. 230 pp. \$24.99. ISBN: 979-8-9991676-0-6 Nataliya Atanasova (University of Sofia)	43
Kaveh Boveiri, <i>Marxian Totality: Inverting Hegel to Expound Worldly Matters</i> . Leiden: Brill (Historical Materialism Book Series, Volume 322), 2024. ISBN:978-90-04-70397-1 Aleksandar Todorovski (University of Sofia)	49
III. ASPIRATION CORNER.....	55
Anticipating Degrowth: Reading Luxemburg and Benjamin Towards an Alternative Politics of Democracy Lukasz Chrynowicz (University of Sofia)	55
Genealogy of the Instant: Plato’s ἐξάιφνης, Paul’s καιρός, and the Emergence of Kairological Time Severina Stankeva (University of Sofia)	75
The Dialectic and Its Undoing: Lukács, Benjamin, and Nietzsche on Capitalist Ideology Maria Chatzopoulou (University of Sofia)	91
Seriously Funny: <i>Disco Elysium</i> and the Aesthetics of the Metamodern Condition Severina Stankeva (University of Sofia)	111

On the Necessity of Integrative Approaches in Developmental Psycholinguistics: An Anti-Radical Synthesis Janos Rosenberg (University of Sofia)	120
In Defense of Agency: Free Will, the Self, and Participatory Metaphysics Daniel Tarpy (University of Sofia).....	135
Spectacles of Power: Cultural Representations and Structural Myth in the History of Hawai'i Jaclynn Joseph (University of Sofia)	159
Measuring Ethical Expectations: The Most Accurate Way to Assess the Culture of Integrity Muhamet Kqiku (University of Sofia).....	173
Augmenting Education: Philosophical Reflections on AI, Knowledge, and the Human Condition in High Schools Vincenzo Filetti (Liceo T. Gargallo)	180
Kurzweil and the Coming Brain Drain John Hawkins (University of Sofia)	187
IV. ANNOUNCEMENTS	207
Master's Program in Philosophy Taught in English at the University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski"	207
Doctoral Program in Philosophy Taught in English at the University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski"	210
V. INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHORS	213

I. IMMANUEL KANT'S RECENT ANNIVERSARY

Kant's Influence on Levinas' Conception of Time

Maria Dimitrova (University of Sofia)

Abstract: Levinas' philosophy is an attempt to overcome Heidegger's reduction of the question of time to the ontological problem. Reducing everything to the event of existence Heidegger perhaps neglects another and perhaps more original meaning, namely, the moral one. There seems to be something like moral intelligence. Levinas returns to Kant, to practical reason and the universality of the imperative, but interprets them and time differently. Temporalization might first be diachrony, both presupposing and transcending any totality and form obtained by synchronization.

Keywords: Kant, Levinas, Heidegger, time, morality, ontology

Throughout his philosophical path, Levinas develops his position on time. He continues the critique of onto-theo-logy. That criticism is the focus of Heidegger's interests and traces its origin to Kant, who refused to deduce time from God's eternity. Levinas, after Heidegger, returned to Kant to prioritize moral philosophy, albeit by incorporating time into it.

1. The return of Levinas after Heidegger to Kant

For Heidegger, the most important characteristic of Western metaphysics is that it is onto-theo-logy. He discovered this term in Kant. Its onto-theo-logical character is expressed in the understanding of being as the basis of everything that exists, as the foundation of the sum of all existents, with the status of the supreme Being, identified with God. Metaphysics, which conceptualizes the foundation, becomes an onto-theo-logical construct. According to Heidegger, this trend dates back to Aristotle. Heidegger re-reads metaphysics in order to discover what remained unthought and unsaid in it. He concludes that it is necessary to completely deconstruct it.

Heidegger opposes Hegel's way of doing this. For Hegel, philoso-

phy itself is progress in which the central concept is *Aufhebung*, where the formal definitions of time, namely past, present and future, are filled with ever more new content by denying, preserving, and creating a richer totality than the previous one. Hegel was perhaps the first philosopher to attempt to overcome Kant's formalism of reason with his dialectical method.

Heidegger also insisted on deformatization, like Hegel and many other philosophers after Kant. However, his is not a progressive development by *Aufhebung*, but a returning, rediscovering, rearranging, rethinking, and capturing of hidden opportunities. The respect for totality, present from ancient Greek philosophy to that of Hegel, was preserved in Heidegger. *Dasein*, being-in-the-world-with-others, is understood and thought in its own wholeness. The whole also has great authority in Kant's philosophy. With Levinas, however, the idea of the whole is associated with the synchronization of time and acquires a new meaning inferior to the idea of infinity.

For Levinas, infinity is not a goal of development, as in Hegel's teleology, nor derived from the finitude of human existence, as Heidegger explains. In those cases, infinity has become a finitude since it has been given limits. Levinas insists that infinity itself is beyond any idea that we can form about it and of which it would be a referent. Every definition is both a limitation and a negation, a setting of limits, but only finite things can be determined through limitations and exclusion. Infinity is rather the transcendence of boundaries and cannot be closed, totalized, or surrounded by something, even nothingness. Transcendence is not a negation for Levinas. For him, in the transcendence of any and all qualities and dimensions, as well as of any and all ideas, including our idea of God, is the unceasing superiority of Infinity over the finite.

Levinas, in turn, took the approach of deformatization. Transcendence, or going beyond (where beyond is otherwise than being), consists in deformatizing each form, for example, of time as an *a priori* form of all sensory data, as a de-balancing of any synthesis, including between intuition and categories, of the union of subject and predicate or of the unity of parts in the whole. Infinity is always beyond – beyond totality, beyond knowledge, beyond being. Like Kant, Levinas again raises the problem of reason and infinity, which for philosophy is emblematic, but he is not satisfied with the traditional binding of reason to the Totality, the Whole, or the One, which has dominated philosophy since Greek antiquity.

While Heidegger posits Being as the source of all meaning, Levinas asserts that there is a philosophical tradition going back to Plato and Plotinus in which the world of ideas is prior to and beyond being. Ideas are taken as primary and irreducible to the experience concerning the sensible world. Kant also speaks of the ideas of reason and of the intellectual world, which is not ontological, because it exceeds what is given (for him, the given is the prototype of what exists). For Kant, this is another world created by the moral imperative. Practical reason in Kant's system, which has a regulative function, precedes and orients the volitional performances of actions, as well as the knowledge and speculation of pure theoretical reason. For Levinas, like Kant, ethics is the first philosophy – it takes precedence over knowledge and all kinds of activity, but not because of its legislative function.

Levinas radicalized the idea of the priority of the ethical. However, for Kant, practical reason is still bound to the world, not the natural but the intellectual world, and this very worldliness is, for Levinas, Kant's compromise made towards ontology. Levinas greatly appreciates the importance that Kant attaches to thinking that dares to deviate from what is given. Kant recognizes the existence of another type of thinking that is no longer a synthesis of representations and categories but nevertheless generates rational ideas. These transcendental ideas that reason inevitably reaches are not limited by time, which for Kant is an *a priori* form of sensory diversity. In the "Transcendental Dialectic", he discovers that thinking, without falling into arbitrariness and in order to satisfy the needs of reason itself, starts from being but does not return to it and goes beyond, thinking of God, the whole of the world, and the immortality of the soul. With these ideas, reason seeks to achieve the unity or totality of experience. However, infinity intervenes, and, according to Kant, the human mind, reaching the infinite, gets involved in insoluble contradictions. Transcendental ideas, theological, psychological, and cosmological, to which no intuition corresponds, can lead to an unpermitted, illegitimate, or dialectical use of reason. It is not the ideas themselves but their abuse that engenders deceptive conceptions. Nonetheless, thinking beyond the boundaries of concrete experience is not necessarily negative but rather can contribute to the use of reason. Kant believes that transcendental ideas are given by the nature of the mind, and it is not possible that reason itself as a supreme tribunal of all the rights and prerequisites of our speculation contains illusions, phantasmagoria,

and errors. For him, the purpose of ideas corresponds to our type of mind, and therefore this purpose is good. In short, the use of these ideas is not constitutive, but regulative, and they do not aim to know what exists. Kant, however, admits some object of transcendental thinking, which is the whole of every possible experience. The three transcendental ideas, the rules which the intellect follows, lead to the systematic unity of knowledge. Transcendental ideas do not oppose experiential knowledge but rather unite it; however, much more important is their regulatory function in morality.

According to Levinas, after the establishment of morality as a separate world, albeit only intelligible, Kant makes another compromise with onto-theo-logy, which concerns the idea of God. Kant believes that the existence of God as an object of the theological idea must be admitted. This object is only conceived without being given, without a corresponding appearance, so that its existence cannot in principle be proved or disproved. Kant calls the idea of God, the totality of all possible predicates of reality, a transcendental ideal. Everything must be determined according to this ideal, which begins the causal series and coincides with the idea of God as the creator of everything that exists. But this ideal is imposed on thinking, not because there is a need for a single original cause in the succession of all finite causes, but because of the individuality and determination of anything as entitled to be something in itself. God is conceived as a necessary constituent in Kant's philosophical system so as to be a moral condition for the existence of the highest good. Nonetheless, Kant completely agrees with the Western tradition that the totality of being is itself a being. This is Kant's second compromise with onto-theo-logy. Levinas criticizes him on this point but judges the preservation of the transcendental ideal in morality a great achievement. For Levinas, however, God transcends any concept and cannot be perceived, imagined, or thought and so reduced to an entity, an individual, or an ideal.

The God of onto-theo-logy is dead not only for Nietzsche and Heidegger, but also for Levinas. However, Emmanuel Levinas himself is a religious philosopher and promotes a different understanding of God, i.e. of Infinity, more precisely of God's relationship with the world, man, language, and time. Levinas repeatedly asserts that he should not be considered an irrationalist. Religion and ethics are not irrational in Kant's or Levinas' philosophies. Levinas' humanism makes him wonder

if man is only interested in being and knowledge. Are humans not also beyond being, and can we not speak, as in Kant's case, of two different kinds of rationality, one of knowledge and the other of morality? These are questions addressed by Levinas not only to Kant, but to the entire philosophical tradition that has come down to us.

2. From thinking to conversation

Levinas agrees that the appearances of things fill thinking, but they are also spoken, said, reported. For this intrigue of the conversation, the other, the interlocutor, is needed. In Kant's *Critiques*, language and conversation are not thematized because, as Levinas says, if we are all of the same mind, what is there to talk about? According to Kant, the subject is solitary like any other and this is the Self that thinks and acts autonomously. The Self is simply multiplied when it comes to others, because everyone is I for himself. The Kantian subject is monological. The whole drama of his existence unfolds as an theoretical and practical activity of his various abilities. With Heidegger, *Dasein*'s structures are still the same for everyone, but each individual *Dasein* is its own and singular being together with others in the world. Because of our singularity and our existence with each other, Heidegger assigns a large role to language. However, in Heidegger's philosophy, speaking is first of all a response/pronunciation of the call of Being and only secondarily people's speech. For Heidegger, Being itself is Transcendence, which is revealed only through human language. For Levinas, however, a direct response to Transcendence, which is not Being but God's Infinity, is impossible. Each individual is a subject in relationship with God, but this connection is indirect, possible only through my responsibility for the other person, only with whom I can talk and establish contact. God is absolutely the Other and beyond all measure compared to us as finite beings.

Levinas agrees with Heidegger that what has already been said or is being said constitutes the informative side of any conversation and can be completely cliché. It articulates always events and aspects of being. Then language and speech, depersonalized, are without any direction and could become even faceless idle chatter. But apart from the meaning of the said, another question arises: Is there not another significance which relates to the saying? Perhaps there is an intelligibility not only of reason, but an intelligibility of the attitude towards the other, who for Levinas is the interlocutor. When meeting someone, I have al-

ready begun to respond to her presence even before becoming aware of her and the meeting. The encounter itself is God's finger in human destiny. Levinas insists that my responsibility is there even before any knowledge or volitional decision. The original meaning is not found in the silence of Being, nor is it contained in the language reduced to what is said. In the articulation of what exists, i.e. in the communication of any contents, language expresses only the ontological meanings of words and phrases. However, in communication itself, which for Levinas is the intrigue of responsibility, in the very giving of the word to one's neighbor, another meaning is found that precedes and regulates the meanings relating to existence and non-existence. At this primordial level where the question of the saying itself is raised and decided if it can at all be abstracted from what is said, the moral meaning, the meaning of meaning, not the meaning of being and nothingness, is determined. Saying is a relationship between the other and me that cannot be understood on the basis of rationality related to the foundation; it is not a response to being but expresses rationality inherent in "beyond being". The temporality of time is one's connection with Infinity, which is never direct but is realized through one's face-to-face encounter with the other. Time unfolds as stepping into the trace of God, Who "comes to mind" in my encounter with the other and for Whom my responsibility bears witness. This attitude, or rather this closeness created by responsibility for the other, is moral, even when I try to ignore or destroy it.

The other concerns me not in an indicative, but in an imperative, says Levinas. With both her presence and her absence, the other commands everything I think, say, do, experience, and even what I am. Levinas' imperative is different than Kant's. According to Kant, the universal moral law requires that I should not treat the other as a means to my ends, but always as an end in itself. For Levinas, however, it is not about the law, but about God's commandment "Thou shalt not kill!"; Kant's humanism, although it enacts respect and non-instrumental treatment of humans, is insufficient to understand humanity and humanism. For Kant, everyone is equal in terms of autonomy, but from Levinas' perspective, with such equality, intersubjectivity is impossible. Intersubjectivity as face-to-face encounter is the prerequisite for the unfolding of every conversation and every interaction and presupposes diversity and inequality. Equality, a concept originating in Greece as Levinas notes, has been taken for granted, but common conceptualiza-

tion and self-understandability perhaps are an obstacle to an authentic encounter with the other. My indifference to her and my preliminary equating her with myself according to the principle of "autonomy for everyone" is tantamount to indifference and moral murder. In a face-to-face encounter, it is not about the primacy of autonomy but rather the heteronomous order of the other to answer. It is unspoken, tacit, but heard by me when I meet her face. It empowers me to make decisions. Only by following the command can I independently choose how to answer, but the intrigue between the other and me is already present, and responsibility has fallen on my shoulders. It is not commitment and intentionality coming from my side. Inequality here is not a political relationship of domination and submission but rather ethical, a responsibility for the other in which the moral constitution of my subjectness consists. For Levinas, the concepts of heteronomy and autonomy have a different content compared to Kant's. The presence of the other is heteronomous and *a priori* because only after hearing and obeying the silent command "Thou shalt not kill!", I can determine my answers autonomously and *a posteriori*.

The face of the Other in the meeting is already an appeal to me and awaits a response. This relationship is not symmetrical and reciprocal, which means at least that the path from the other to me and the path from me to the other are different and irreducible. The other is high-ranking because God commands me through her, while I am called, chosen to answer. I cannot escape but respond because even disrespect or indifference is already a response loaded with moral significance. And I can't stop answering because the change and liveliness of the Face facing me requires incessant attention. This is the true otherness of the other. It cannot be fixed as an identity but rather represents the transcending of my idea of her and going beyond. As Buber pointed out, if the interlocutor is "you", this pronoun is in the second person in contrast to its anchoring and closing in my ideas and thoughts, in definitions and indicative descriptions that use third-person pronouns such as he, she, it, and they. According to Levinas, even as "you", the other is not some immutable and definable entity but is this incessant entry into my world, as well as the exit from it. The other and Kant's thing in itself can be compared in that the other exists in itself and appears phenomenally in my knowledge, but the difference emerges in that the other is an interlocutor, which cannot be anything, but only the Face. Unlike reason,

whose meanings are shared, general, and common, the other has her own subjectivity with her own perceptions of things, which are inaccessible to me. From there, she calls me to answer and withdraws after my answers, while I am accordingly constantly responsible. Certainly, neither the other nor my I coincide with Kantian noumena and transcendental subjects.

3. The Question of Time

For Levinas, it is not freedom that precedes responsibility, but vice versa, responsibility precedes freedom. I always have one more responsibility than the other, and that is my responsibility for her, while her responsibility for me is her own business (although I am responsible even for it). No *Da-sein* whether as a pro-noun or as an *aletheia* of existence fully corresponds to the Face. Beyond the form and plasticity of its materiality, to which it is not reducible, there is an incessant liveliness of expression and of speech, an incessant transcendence. The Face is ambivalence itself: it is part of the being as an appearance in the midst of phenomena, but it refers to the beyond being in its moral meaning as an epiphany. With the other, more precisely with my address to the Face in response to her heteronomous appeal to me, a moral connection is established and through it the ambivalence and irreversibility of time itself is created: every moment is the same and is different and unique. My responsibility is never-ending like the otherness of the other. The other is repeatedly otherness, alterity. The passage of time cannot be stopped or be reversed no matter how hard one tries or imagines one can. This is also the case in interpersonal encounters, where Levinas emphasizes that time is the connection not only with what passes, but indirectly with what never passes. The temporality of time is my connection with Infinity, which is never direct but rather is realized through my face-to-face meeting with the other.

Infinity itself cannot be the end of any relationship and cannot be included as one of the terms in some connection. Infinity is revealed without appearing, without showing itself as infinity in human relations, because it always exceeds them - at every moment it is beyond the establishment of closeness with the other and cannot be grasped. As Levinas says, God is present in our relationships when He is absent, leaving everything in the hands of men and not directly interfering in the human tragicomedy. God is not here in the world or anywhere else, cannot be

caught in the present, in actualization, and he is not located anywhere at all and cannot be known. As for Kant, His existence cannot be proven or disproven.

According to Kant, God and the immortality of the soul are necessary only for the mind in order to be able to think about the co-ordination of happiness and virtue. Levinas reminds us that the root of the word *religion* in Latin means to bind inseparably. Usually it is about the relationship between man and God that is inseparable bond but it is mediated by the other human. This bond is, for Levinas, time, which is neither linear nor dialectical; it depends on Infinity's non-in-difference to people. God is glorified through one's care for the other. He sends His commandments to each of us individually. He has appointed me as "my brother's keeper" and called me to be responsible for the other. Through my responsibility for the other, I respond to God indirectly through the closeness established with the first coming. That is why the other is the neighbor. The relationship is asymmetrical and non-reciprocal, selfless and without compensation: an unceasing attention to the otherness of the other, for whom I worry. The Levinasian other is an abstract absolute not because she is omnipotent but rather because she is mortal. Morally, she comes first, and for me she is the primary source of everything that happens. My sovereign self, my autonomy, my intentionality, or my expansion, taken as spontaneous and natural, are called into question. As a moral human (although this is a tautology because moral and human coincide), my Self is not in the nominative but rather the accusative case. My subjectivity is determined by the possibility of questioning my justice in order to protect the right of the other and make room for her (under the sun).

Time, insofar as it is a connection between the beginning and the end, the time of existence, is measurable and synchronized, finite. Being in the middle, we recall or reconstruct the forgotten or unremembered beginning, and we anticipate or project the unreached end that is approaching. The time of beyond being, however, is no longer synchrony, but diachrony itself. For Kant, the supernatural world established by the moral imperative is timeless. Levinas reinforces this point: beyond being not only is the time of ends over, but there is also no supersensible world of ideas and transcendental subjects. Diachrony coincides with the transcendence of all moments in the duration of time, no matter how stretched and long they may be. It is openness itself, de-totalization and

de-formalization of synchronous time. For Kant, time is *a priori* form that is preliminary to any experience although only in possibility but is actualized and further participates in all possible experience. For Levinas, it is not experience that is the source of meaning but rather questioning it. This is not a new, already ethical experience, different from the cognitive experience; “It is rather a question of challenging EXPERIENCE as a source of meaning, of the limit of transcendental apperception, of the end of synchrony and its reversible terms”¹.

According to Levinas, what is said, turned to the world, in language immobilizes and freezes meanings, while saying puts them back into circulation. In this way, another meaning has already been generated and placed in a different context – a meaning, because something unsaid has to be said. Once said, however, it will again be questioned and transcended by new saying. Saying always goes beyond what is said even when repeating because it revises, transforms, cancels, or re-says it in the course of the conversation. The existent and the existence through the meanings in what is said receive form, wholeness, and completeness and have a principle, an *arche*, while the saying, which goes beyond being, breaks every form and makes a breakthrough in every totality, being itself an-archic. Diachrony is precisely anarchic – before and beyond the principle, out of range of any *arche*, without beginning.

Kant decrees that I am free in my respect for the moral law, although I theoretically belong to the world of necessity. According to Kant, there is a world that is intelligible and accessible thanks to hope. There is motivation for actions as a result of hope, and it carries some meaning. In existence determined by death, in this epic of being, there are things that are not in the dimension of being. There are meanings irreducible to the given. This hope cannot be theoretically confirmed as another truth, but in practice it is the reasonable freedom of taking actions accounting for the imperative and doing them for the sake of it. Levinas explains that “this hope happens in time, and in time it goes beyond time”². It is as if in existence, which according to Heidegger is being towards death, the hope that is against death is wedged.

In the ever of hope there is a different temporality that is not identical with that of being and non-being, although death and its annihila-

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1972), 14

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Dieu, la mort et le temps* (Paris: Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1993), 72

tion are irremovable. Levinas uses rarely the word hope in order to pay tribute to Kant in denoting this intrigue, different from the epic of being. Often instead of "hope", "desire for the other" is used. But this is not a hope in the usual sense of the word, which coincides with the expectation that something will happen in time. It is another kind of hope that resists all knowledge, comprehension, understanding, and foreboding and is an openness to infinity, where time and death themselves take on a different meaning. The reconciliation of happiness and virtue needs a "beyond" regardless of the ontological adventure and against everything that ontology teaches us. Hope has to do with the immeasurable because it paradoxically contains, as well as the idea, more than it can contain. This contrasts with knowledge, which in principle corresponds to what is known since knowledge adheres to measure. However, in the moral closeness with the other, which does not depend on separation and remoteness in measurable time and space, the transcendence inherent in hope is revealed as beyond knowledge and beyond "being and non-being". The beyond is the diachrony that transcends the totalization, primitiveness, and imperialism of the Ego, as well as the synchronization of its time. This imperialist Ego wants to be the image and likeness of God and to be the master of time, but it lives like a coward, clinging to its allotted finite time and trembling before death. Diachrony is liberation from my time. Levinas returns after Heidegger to Kant and hope not because it strives for God and the immortality of the soul as its ends (although unattainable) but because it is contained in the responsibility for the Other. The desire for the other, that is, the responsibility to and for her, the hope, leads us along the trace of that for which there is no end and purpose – the Infinity of God.

The Thing-in-Itself*

Todor Polimenov (University of Sofia)

*Verflucht voraus die hohe Meinung,
Womit der Geist sich selbst umfängt!
Verflucht das Blenden der Erscheinung,
Die sich an unsere Sinne drängt!*

Goethe, *Faust I*, V. 1591–1594.

The 300th anniversary of Kant's birth is a good occasion to recall Kant's contributions to philosophy and the spiritual life of mankind. There are only a few thinkers who have exerted as much influence on our understanding of man as Kant has. So, it is not accidental that it is on this day, on the very date of Kant's birthday, that throughout the world, and especially in Germany, Kant's jubilee is celebrated by numerous speeches, lectures, and conferences. I would like to adopt a somewhat uncommon position by adding a few critical notes to that choir of praises. I suppose that Kant himself, who, as we know, fought dogmatism in philosophy, would have valued positively a critical view on his philosophy.

I would like to say, at the very beginning of this talk, that I am guided by the conviction that no one – even Kant – is infallible. Even the most profound of thinkers, who seem to have thoroughly thought through everything, are not immune to falling into misconceptions. This is evidenced by, e.g., Aristotle's views on women or Thomas Aquinas's ones on demon-pact practitioners (later termed "witches"), as well as Kant's own views on Indians and Africans. We can add further instances here, such as Marx's racism (towards Africans, the Chinese, the Slavs, especially the Poles, and the Jews) or Heidegger's conviction of the superiority of the German spirit over those of other nations. Thus, my paper would be more of a critical kind. I will take the jubilee as an occasion to draw attention to a problematic symptom in philosophy's development, which, I think, also appears in Kant's theoretical philosophy

* The present paper is the English translation of a text that I delivered in Bulgarian on April 24, 2024, at the conference dedicated to the 300th anniversary of Kant's birth at Sofia University.

and particularly distinctly in his conception of “the thing-in-itself”.

Let me say it right from the start: what I have in mind is the underestimation of practice – of practice both in the narrower sense of concretely practising the activities of thinking and speaking, and in the wider sense of the originary immersion of human beings in life and in the practical tasks and questions related to it. It is my conviction that therein lies the source of human thinking and human rationality as mediated by language and community, where practice takes place and succeeds or fails. It seems to me that something like haughtiness, or even arrogance, towards human practice can be observed throughout the history of philosophy. A possible explanation for that is the social fact that, approximately up until 200 years ago, those who had the opportunity to do philosophy were, with few exceptions, members of the privileged social strata, where the “practice” of physical survival had no special role. Clearly, such social circumstances have their explanatory potential, and one should surely also find in them the explanation of why there are *de facto* no women in the history of philosophy. An empirically refutable misconception is the notion that the development of philosophy follows some kind of pure logic and consists of (only) a sequence of arguments (of questions, of answers that raise further questions, and so on). Of course, not all philosophers neglected practice. Instances of philosophers who were guided by it and tried to understand rather than overcome it are Aristotle and the later Wittgenstein. Kant occupies an intermediate place. While I do acknowledge this, in the present text, I would like to show that at the core of Kant's theoretical philosophy – in what motivates him to compare it to a “Copernican Turn”, and, most of all, in the distinction between “appearance” and “the thing-in-itself” that lies at the basis of his own turn – there is a disregard of practice.

Before I do that, though, I would like to give two short examples from the dawn of philosophy that are marked by the aforementioned dismissive attitude toward practice and to what we can call, with George Edward Moore, “common sense” (the concept is, of course, much older). The first example is Parmenides. Parmenides proceeds from the distinction between proper being and apparent being. Guided by the question of what the distinctive features that ought to characterize proper being are, he compiles a set of marks that play the role – namely, “not coming into existence” and “not going out of existence”, “indivisible” and “homogeneous”, “unchanging” and “motionless”, and so on. What is indicative here is that these marks could not be, without accept-

ing certain restrictions, exemplified by any of the objects of our everyday experience, or, in other words, by our practice. And since, according to Parmenides, there can be true knowledge only of proper being, we can speak of “truth” only in the case of thinking about the relation between proper being and the set of its marks, while everything else and, in particular, everything we believe we know about the real world, where there is time, change, actions and impacts, causes and effects, is denounced as “the opinion of mortals”.

Here, I would like to point out that early natural philosophers, as early as Thales, also distinguished between what nature is in its essence or at its basis – so to say, ‘in itself’ (e.g., ‘water’) – and what it appears to us, namely, its manifestations in the other elements and their configurations in the real world. Even though early natural philosophers distinguish between “essence” and “appearance”, they do not draw the conclusion that we *do not know* anything about the behaviour of the rest of the elements and the objects they constitute, having only “opinions” (in Parmenides’ terminology) about them. Parmenides’ final position is untenable. It goes so far against the everyday use of words such as “truth”, “knowledge”, “reality”, “appearance”, and so on – and we, I would like to stress, understand all these words precisely because they play a certain role in the everyday practice of communication – that it is no surprise that Parmenides’ view was supported only by his direct disciples.

Now for the second example. It is also paradigmatic and has turned out to be much more durable than Parmenides’ speculations. What I have in mind is Plato’s allegory of the cave and the act of climbing out of it as a way of philosophical knowledge. Since the allegory is so well-known, I will limit myself to a few key points. Most probably, the Cave is a representation of the empirical world, while nature outside of it is a representation of the World of Ideas. The escape from the Cave is obviously thought of as a kind of “being born” (with all the accompanying labour pains and the stress from the birth itself). After the birth, the world in the Cave becomes alien to the newborn. There are three elements within the Cave: 1. shadows cast on the inner wall of the Cave (that is, on its back wall), 2. man-made objects carried above a low wall along the path leading out of the Cave, and 3. a fire burning behind that intermediate partition, producing the shadows of the objects before the chained prisoners. Outside the Cave, there are also three: 1. reflections in the water, 2. natural objects, and 3. the Sun. Probably, the shadows in the Cave symbolize human prejudice about natural things; the artefacts car-

ried in – the suggestions of poets and sophists concerning natural things; and the fire in the Cave – the physical Sun. In their turn, reflections in the water probably symbolize mathematical objects; natural things in themselves (trees, stars) – other “ideas”; and the Sun – the Idea of the Good.¹

What seems to me important for the topic at hand is the replacement of reality. It is legitimized by the suggestion that what we have here is a journey to a deeper or more authentic reality than the one that constitutes the world of our practice. The everyday world is understood as a sense-perceivable given, where everything changes and nothing is stable – something like a Heraclitean river in which no one can step twice. Beyond that stream of phenomena, beyond the endless variety of successive sense data (appearances), there can be seen – with the help of philosophical reflection – an ideal world of essences and existential structures that, according to Plato, have a temporal, ontological, and epistemic priority over the world of appearances, which means, in the end, priority over the world of everyday practice.

If we make the leap from here directly to Kant, we will notice that, for him, the relation between appearance and essence, at least at first sight, has diametrically shifted. For Kant, it is appearances that turn out to be the properly existing or, at least, the properly knowable, while the things behind those appearances, traditional essences and natures of objects, are something that ought to be given up as a product of naïve naturalism. Upon closer scrutiny, however, one can see that the appearances in question are not the objects of everyday experience, which I contrasted above with Parmenides’ and Plato’s philosophical essences, but rather representations in our minds. With this clarification in place, we can nevertheless state that, unlike Parmenides and Plato, Kant insists that, at least in the domain of theoretical philosophy – where we speak of *existence*, *knowledge*, and *truth* – there has to be a transition from (the study of) things in themselves to (the study of) appearances. In practical philosophy, where we speak of *freedom*, *responsibility*, *duty*, and similar topics, the situation, as it later turns out, is more complicated.

The groundwork for Kant’s position had, of course, been laid by the so-called “subjective turn” initiated by Descartes. Kant himself, however, regards the true shift in perspective as being connected with his own philosophy. From his point of view, Descartes was not consistent enough.

¹ Cf. Pierfrancesco Basile, *Antike Philosophie* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021), 76.

Despite his methodic doubt and the centering of philosophy on the “I think” formula, Descartes divides reality into two substances – mental and physical – and, with respect to the physical substance, he retains a distinctive form of realism. In contrast, Kant is convinced that he has shown that the whole of reality in space and time together with its governing causality is a construct, whose formal dimensions are given by human capacities to represent and think something structured. Thus, the only reality accessible to the cognitive subject turns out to be, it seems, the domain of appearances as pre-structured by the forms of space and time, and by the category of causality — both dimensions of the mind (*Gemüt*).

In a sense, this position is exactly the opposite to Plato’s. Kant’s reasoning, however, in my opinion, follows the same figure of thought. Firstly, we have a naïve mind that illegitimately takes certain givens to be primary existents. For Plato, these are sense-perceivable objects (manifestations of hidden essences), for Kant, these are things-in-themselves (the reals in the human-independent world). For both of them, these are empirical “individualities” (individuals, individual properties, events) – in the former case, in so far as they are perceived by the senses, in the latter case, in so far as they are viewed as independent. However, what matters is that in both cases it is assumed that something is not right with these kind of things – at least from a philosophical point of view – and that, therefore, they should be “overcome”: we have to go “over” or “behind”, or “under”, or “before” them. The philosophical appeal thus requires us to overcome or abandon them by redirecting our mental sights to genuinely existing things. For Plato, these are the *Ideas*, i.e., certain existential structures behind appearing objects (that become accessible through pure thought). For Kant, these are, conversely, the *Erscheinungen* – appearances themselves (as representations in a single consciousness); although seemingly caused by human-independent “entities”, they are the only accessible objects of our knowledge. Things-in-themselves (*die Dinge an sich*²), on the contrary, remain unknowable in

² The expression “an sich” (in “Ding an sich”) is a translation of the Latin “per se”, which, in its turn, translates the Greek “καθ’αυτό”, originating from Aristotle’s distinction between substantial (“καθ’αυτό”) and accidental (“κατὰ συμβεβηκός”, “per accidens”) properties as well as from Plato’s reference to “the *F* itself” (“the idea of *F*” or “the *F* in itself”, “αὐτὸ καθ’αυτό”), where “*F*” is a general term, opposed to the “many *F*s”, i.e., to the many concrete *F*s, that stand in a relation of “participation” to “the *F* itself”.

principle. Kant's position on the primary givenness of appearances is later further developed in Husserl's phenomenology, with its rallying cry "Back to the things themselves" ("*zurück zu den Sachen selbst*"), where what is meant by things themselves, by primary existing, are precisely phenomena of consciousness.

Kant compares his own position with the "Copernican Turn", i.e., with the replacement of the geocentric model of the world with the heliocentric model. One might think that what this is about is only a *shift in perspective*. We can "see" the movement of the Sun in the sky during the day and of stars during the night *as* a rotation of the Sun and stars around the Earth (so that then the Earth would occupy the central and fixed position in the cosmos) or *as* a rotation of the Earth itself around its axis with respect to the stationary Sun and stars (and, if we include in the picture not only the explanation of the alternation of days and nights, but also that of the succession of the seasons, we could construct the image of the rotation of the Earth – and of several other planets – around the Sun, which is, in its turn, in the centre of the cosmos framed by the sphere of fixed stars). The Copernican Turn, however, does not mean simply "shift of perspective". The new model has a significantly greater explanatory potential than the old one. Phenomena (events, facts) that have previously received complicated explanations and have led to insoluble problems become simply and plausibly explicable in the framework of the new model. The two models, therefore, have above all different *consequences*.

It is these consequences that are most important for Kant. They concern his new and original treatment of the fundamental philosophical questions about the world, the soul, and God, as well as their epistemological status. I cannot discuss them in detail here. With regard to the Copernican Turn, however, I would like to point out a peculiarity noted by Heine in his *History of religion and philosophy in Germany*. For Heine, too, the notion of the Copernican Turn is not limited merely to the idea of a shift in perspective. Heine does not stop there. He offers an interpretation of the symbolism of this notion.³ The Sun and its light, in Kant's reference to the model, stand for, as it seems, reason, whereas the Earth stands for the objects of the empirical world. According to that imagery, while our mind, before the Turn, revolved around the objects of the external world, seeking to

³ Heinrich Heine, *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*. Zit. nach der Neuausgabe in: H. Heine: *Säkularausgabe (Werke, Briefwechsel, Lebenszeugnisse)*. Bd. 8. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1972, 198.

illuminate them, after the Turn, it became clear that the mind is precisely the Sun or the light around which the entire external reality circles. Thus, Kant's Transcendental Turn assigns to humanity exactly the opposite position to that established by the Copernican Turn. While Copernicus deprives humans of their central position in the cosmos, Kant restores it to them – at least from an epistemological perspective.

Curiously, texts that argue against the “common sense” of everyday thinking in favour of philosophically climbing out of its “cave” often present as examples of misconceptions several indicative cases⁴: (i) people believed that the Earth was flat, whereas it is actually round; (ii) people believed that the Sun travels through the sky, whereas actually the Earth rotates around it (the transition here would correspond to Copernicus's “Copernican Turn”); (iii) people (naively) believed that we know the world as it is in itself, whereas actually our knowledge of it – as modern philosophy has shown – is mediated by our cognitive abilities, so that the world is always given to us in the framework and according to the measure of their horizon (the consistent turn here would correspond precisely to Kant's “Copernican Turn” and to the redirection of perspective – with respect to the object of knowledge – from the things in themselves to appearances).

The present text is concerned with (iii). With regard to (i) and (ii), I would make the following observations. In our everyday practice, it is natural to assume that the ground on which we tread – on which we walk, sit or lie, on which we build houses and roads – is, more or less, flat. The assumption of this “flatness” is perfectly reasonable in everyday contexts. A problem emerges not when we are guided by it in concrete, limited situations, but when we *generalize* and turn it into a philosophical theory of the Earth as a whole. The same applies to (ii). In our daily life, it is entirely natural to say things such as (a) “The Sun moves across the sky from east to west”, (b) “The Sun shines brightest when it reaches the middle of the sky”, or (c) “The Sun has hidden behind a cloud”. The problem does not lie in these statements as part of our practice (because by using them we communicate unproblematically with each other), but in their philosophical detachment (“abstraction”) from practice and their transformation into a “general theory” of the Sun's motion. The transitions in (i) and (ii) are not so much tran-

⁴ Rafael Ferber, *Philosophische Grundbegriffe 1 (Philosophie, Sprache, Erkenntnis, Wahrheit, Sein, Gut). Eine Einführung*. München: Beck, 1994/2008, Ch. I, § 3.

sitions from an (unsuccessful) practice to a (successful) theory, but rather a replacement of a falsified theory (of the shape of the Earth in general in (i) or the basic relation between the Earth and the Sun in (ii) with a new theory that is based on significantly more data than the old one, and, in particular, data that in supporting it refute the old theory. On the other hand, it would be quite pointless if a philosopher decides to correct us, when she hears us speak with sentences such as (a), (b), and (c), and objects: “No, no, the Sun does not move across the sky. This is an illusion. It is the Earth that rotates around the Sun”. I do not want to deny the need for such qualifications. In certain situations, they are useful (e.g., for a child just beginning to learn about the planetary system). In our usual practice, however, these qualifications are unnecessary. It was already observed by Aristotle that in matters of practice – as well as those of ethics, of the theory of action, etc. – it is not necessary, and is actually impossible, to follow the ideal of mathematical accuracy.⁵ For people to understand one another, it would suffice to say, e.g., “The midday Sun shines brightest” – although the star itself that we call “the Sun” is neither a “morning”, nor a “midday”, nor an “evening” star. The criterion for the accuracy of speaking should be mutual understanding. Only when we notice that we do not understand each other do we need to undertake linguistic clarifications. It is symptomatic here that we usually cease to understand one another precisely when we begin to speak the language of philosophy (metaphysics). While reaching a consensus is easy in everyday practice, it becomes much harder when philosophical questions are involved.

Kant’s “Copernican Turn” consists in the view that the conditions making experience possible are at the same time the conditions that make possible the objects of experience themselves.⁶ What is new in his position is, above all, the assignment of the representations of space and time to the pre-experiential cognitive forms through which the cognitive subject per-

⁵ Cf. “It is the mark of an educated mind to expect that amount of exactness in each kind which the nature of the particular subject admits”, *Nicomachean Ethics* (EN) I, Ch. 1, 1094^b 23–25.

⁶ Kant draws the comparison with Copernicus in the “Preface to the Second Edition” of the *Critique of Pure Reason* with the following words: “Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects [alle unsere Erkenntnis müsse sich nach den Gegenständen richten]. But [... we must] make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge [die Gegenstände müssen sich nach unserem Erkenntnis richten]”. Kant 1781/1787: B XVI; q. in Engl. trans. N. K. Smith, 1929.

ceives the object of experience, and of the concept of causality (as a “category of understanding”) to the pre-experiential cognitive structures, through which the subject thinks about perceived objects. These pre-experiential forms and structures, which predetermine the way in which we know reality, constitute the conditions of the possibility of experience. Kant’s thesis of the identity of the conditions of the possibility of experience and the conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience seems rather strong if we think of the relation between experience and its objects as a relation between a whole and its parts. Whereas the whole cannot exist without its parts (one of the principles of mereology), parts can very well exist by themselves, separately, without forming the whole. If the parts of a wall are bricks, the wall would not exist if those bricks did not exist. If the parts of a brick are certain atoms, this brick would not exist if the atoms in question did not exist (“the part of a part is a part of the whole” is another mereological principle). Nothing, however, prevents the bricks from existing while the wall does not. This was actually the case before the wall was built (as it will be the case if the wall is dismantled). And yet again: when included in its constitution, the parts of a whole obviously have to satisfy the conditions of its formation. Thus, in order to become knowable – to become objects of experience – the things in themselves have to be “transformed” into appearances in accordance with the forms of space and time, the category of causality, and the rest of the categories of thought. So, as parts of experience, as something knowable, objects are, according to this view, appearances; whereas the thing whose presence appearances manifest is itself beyond experience – something that remains inaccessible within experiential knowledge, something that remains hidden from us. It is this thing exactly that Kant calls the “thing-in-itself”.

For Heine,⁷ the distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves lies at the core of Kant’s philosophy. Appearances are the only knowable, whereas things-in-themselves guarantee that this knowable has its source in reality. Thus, with the conception of things-in-themselves, Kant tries to retain a certain form of realism, albeit a restricted one. The *existence* of things-in-themselves is a guarantee of the reality of the external world. We know *that* they are (exist), although we do not know *what* they are (we do not know their nature). At the same time, through his account of a priori structures, Kant shows how sci-

⁷ Ibid.

ences of the a priori, such as mathematics and logic – which are “formal” or “structural” sciences in that they concern only possible rather than actual objects of experience – are possible, as well as in what way traditional metaphysics is not possible as a science, since it lacks a subject matter of its own – all knowable entities are appearances, so that questions like those about the spatio-temporal limits of the world, the immortality of the soul, or the existence of God cannot receive answers with the status of knowledge.

Even some of Kant's contemporaries noticed that the concept of the thing-in-itself, as Kant employs it, is self-contradictory. Jacobi was probably the first to notice this, in 1787.⁸ Kant's reason for holding that, although we do not know what the thing-in-itself is, we must nevertheless assume that it exists, is that something – namely, a thing-in-itself, as Kant puts it – “affects” our sensibility and therein, in the capacity of its representatives, appearances emerge. This assumption, it seems, should be accepted as an explanation of the indisputable passivity (or receptivity) of perceiving subjects with respect to what they perceive – in contrast, e.g., to the spontaneity that characterizes acts of thought. But what kind of relation is this “affecting”? It is a relation of causality. In “ X affects Y ”, X stands in a certain causal relation to Y – namely, it causes or effects a certain change in Y . According to Kant's theory, however, the category of causality applies only to the domain of appearances. This means that, if we regard things-in-themselves as affecting our sensibility, we *eo ipso* turn them into appearances. At that very moment, however, they cease to be things-in-themselves.

In recent interpretations, the problems surrounding Kant's thesis of the in-principle unknowability of things-in-themselves have led to attempts to show that the distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves is not absolute and that what is at issue here is not a difference between two kinds of entities (objects) but rather two different aspects of the same thing. It is one and the same object which, insofar as it is independent of our knowledge, is a thing-in-itself, and which becomes an appearance when it enters the scope of knowledge. This interpretation, of course, is incompatible with Kant's thesis of the unknowability

⁸ Cf. Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, “Ueber den transcendentalen Idealismus”, [Beilage] in: F. H. Jacobi: *David Hume über den Glauben oder Idealismus und Realismus*. Auf der Grundlage der Ausgabe v. W. Jaeschke u. I.-M. Piske hg. v. O. Koch: Hamburg: Meiner, 1787/2019, 108 ff.

of things-in-themselves. What is more, a major problem for Kant's overall theory would then systematically arise from the fact that, if this were so, knowledge would no longer be restricted to the realm of appearances (which would otherwise be a quite plausible view) – unless the distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves were merely a *façon de parler*, amounting to the trivial statement that the objects we know something about are always appearances, i.e., “objects which we know something about”, as opposed to objects that we have not (yet) known and which, only in *this* sense, are things-in-themselves. All this would call into question foundational elements within Kant's philosophy, such as the claim that time and space are a priori forms of sensibility, and thus also his theory of the synthetic a priori (which, in its turn, is crucial to Kant's criticism of metaphysics and to the guiding question of his theoretical philosophy of whether metaphysics can be a science at all).

Let me go back now to my own thesis about the underestimation of practice. If Kant had not been willing to ignore the *practice* of thinking and speaking for the sake of a *theory* and had, in his analysis, stayed closer to observing the way we *de facto* think and speak of concrete objects, he would most likely not have arrived at the thesis that by knowing reality, we know only appearances, nor would he have regarded the view that things-in-themselves were the real objects of knowledge as the result of naïve and non-critical thinking.

To illustrate, I would like to present an argument from Frege's “On Sense and Reference” (“Über Sinn und Bedeutung”). Frege introduces this argument as part of his criticism of psychologism. He uses the following statement as an example

($\mathfrak{M}$) The Moon is smaller than the Earth.

He then asks what we refer to by using the words “the Moon” in this sentence.⁹ The answer seems clear: the expression “the Moon” designates a celestial body. It is this body that, according to ($\mathfrak{M}$), is claimed to stand in a certain relation to the Earth. Frege emphasizes: with ($\mathfrak{M}$) we do not speak about an appearance in our mind, that is, about our representation of the Moon. In ($\mathfrak{M}$), we do not assert of one of our representations that it

⁹ Cf. Gottlob Frege, “Über Sinn und Bedeutung”, in: *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*, [Neue Folge] Bd. 100, 1892, 31 ff.

has the property of *being smaller than the Earth*. (As we know, the concept of “representation” (Ger., *Vorstellung*), according to Kant, is a generic concept encompassing both “intuition” (*Anschaung*) and “concept” (*Begriff*).¹⁰) Frege’s argument runs as follows: if we wanted to ascribe a property not to the Moon but to our representation of it, then we would simply have used the phrase “our representation of the Moon” (as a logical subject of the corresponding statement). In that case, we would indeed be referring to one of our representations. This phrase is the linguistic expression whose referent is our representation of the Moon. By contrast, the phrase “the Moon” itself, when it appears in sentences, denotes a particular celestial body. Hence, the assumption that in (M) we are saying something about *our representation* of the Moon is merely a distortion of the meaning of (M).

Insisting that the reference of the phrase “the Moon” is a representation is, in effect, pointless. Do we utter (M) in order to state that a *representation* is smaller than the Earth? If that were the case, how could we possibly compare a representation – something mental, that is, something belonging to the inner psychological world of human beings – with the Earth, something extra-mental, that is, something belonging to the external physical world? Or do we perhaps mean, by uttering (M), that our representation of the Moon is smaller than another of our representations, namely that of the Earth? Is the representation of the Moon smaller than the representation of the Earth? And how could we apply the two-place predicate “smaller than” to representations? What would the relevant criteria be? Can the relation *smaller than* hold between mental – that is, non-spatial – items at all?

Furthermore, if everything knowable is a representation, would not the relation *smaller than* itself be a representation too? Then (M) would express the thought that the representation of the Moon and the representation of the Earth stand in a special relation between representations – a relation that would itself have to be depicted by a further (so to speak, formal) representation, which, in turn, would have to correspond in some way to the (material) representation of something being smaller than something else. Yet even if we assume that the content of (M) consists solely of representations, it still remains doubtful whether the con-

¹⁰ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Nach der ersten und zweiten Original-Ausgabe hg. v. R. Schmidt. Hamburg: Meiner, 1781/1787, 1993, A320/B376 ff.

tent of the representation of the *predicated* relation is that one representation is smaller than another, or rather that something which is not a representation at all is smaller than another thing which is likewise not a representation.

Frege resolves these issues by appealing to our intention (*Absicht*) when using the singular term “the Moon” in ($\mathfrak{M}$). Our intention *is* to speak of a celestial body, and that is independent of the fact that one may in certain cases be mistaken and find that the intention remains unfulfilled. Dagfinn Føllesdal¹¹ and Michael Dummett¹² rightly note that the idea here is the same as in Brentano, when he questions the assumption that the objects of intentional acts are mental items (representations). In a letter to Oskar Kraus dated 17 September 1909, Brentano writes that it is “utterly paradoxical” (*im höchsten Grade paradox*) to assume that someone who promises to marry a woman (and this woman is therefore the object of his intentional act of promising and thus, it seems, something mental) would keep his word by marrying a real human being.¹³ His *intention*, from the very beginning, has been to marry a real human being, and it has therefore concerned something that is not a representation (and the promisor could hardly marry a representation, since a wedding is an event that takes place in external reality, whereas representations are parts of the promisor’s psychological experiences).¹⁴

¹¹ Dagfinn Føllesdal, “Brentano and Husserl on Intentional Objects and Perception”, in: H. L. Dreyfus (ed.): *Husserl, Intentionality, and Cognitive Science*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1978/1982, 32.

¹² Michael Dummett, *Ursprünge der analytischen Philosophie*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988, 40.

¹³ Franz Brentano, Brief an Oskar Kraus vom 17.09.1909, abgedr. in (Karaus’ Einleitung zu): F. Brenatano: *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*. Bd. 1. Hamburg: Meiner, 1924 (Nachdruck 1973), 1909, XLIX.

¹⁴ Curiously, when Heine describes the satirical criticism of Fichte’s theory of the “I” – according to which the “I” creates the objects of its accessible reality – he ends with a similar example involving a wife (in this case, Fichte’s own wife): “It is a peculiar circumstance that the Fichtean philosophy was destined to suffer all manner of satire. [...] The great majority believed that Fichte’s ‘I’ was the ‘I’ of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and that this individual ‘I’ denied the existence of all other existences. ‘What impertinence!’ exclaimed the good people, ‘this man does not believe that we exist, we who are much bigger than he and who, as mayors and office-bearers, are actually his superiors!’ The ladies asked, ‘Does he not even believe in the existence of his own wife?’ ‘No! And Madame Fichte allows this?’” (Ibid., Heine 1834/1972: 205 ff.)

With ($\mathfrak{M}$) we speak about a “thing in itself”, namely a celestial body completely independent of us. But that is not all. If ($\mathfrak{M}$) is *true* (i.e., if it is made true by the external world), then we will learn something about this thing in itself from it. We will come to know one of its properties, namely the property of *being smaller than the Earth*, or – if we prefer – we will come to know a relation in which it stands to another thing in itself, namely the Earth. The claim that the Moon and the Earth are our representations or appearances in our mind is a theory. So too is the claim that we know only appearances and not things in themselves. Practice, however, shows something different: we speak about things we can safely call “things in themselves”, and we *know* them when we speak truly about them. We know many things about the Moon, for example. Some of these things are essential to it – such as being a natural satellite of the Earth – while others are inessential, such as having been visited by humans. Of course, there are also many things we do not know about the Moon – for instance, whether it has gold deposits or whether it has been visited by other rational beings. But neither are the things we know about it merely “appearances in our mind”, nor are the things we do not know the hidden “essences” of inaccessible or unknowable entities.

Overcoming the Illusions of Piety through Rational and Phenomenological Religiosity

Alexander Gungov (University of Sofia)

Abstract: In his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant describes and criticizes two illusions of piety: the illusion of superstition and the illusion of self-deception. According to him, both illusions essentially hinder the pious life prescribed by historical religions, dooming piety in its true form as impossible there. For Kant, true religiosity coincides with authentic morality, realized by free will with a view to practical reason. The illusory nature of religious experience can also be discussed from the perspective of Husserl's phenomenology. There, illusory nature would arise if religious dogma and rituality were perceived as religious experience. The founder of phenomenology argues that authentic religious experience is possible, possessing all the attributes required by the concept of "experience." In addition to distinguishing between apparent and genuine religiosity, both authors agree that within the latter, they accept the possibility of "becoming like God."

Keywords: superstition, illusion, self-deception, religious experience, *eidos*

The illusory application of theoretical reason in Kant is well known, when to the ideas of reason are attributed a constitutive application, leading to the well-known dialectical antinomies. The revision of constitutive application and its replacement with a regulative one avoids the illusory status of two realities commonly understood as belonging to religion—the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. The idea of the existence of God, considered in its aspect of "perfection", represents the "ideal of reason", with which rational theoretical cognition complies, but which is very easily "objectified", "hypostatized", and "personified."¹ This is how the personal God arises, which, as an object

¹ Kant, I., *Religion within the Limits of Reason Itself*, transl. from German by Valentin Kanavrov (Sofia: Open Society Foundation Press, 1997), 187-188 [in Bulgarian].

of cognition, is an illusory misunderstanding, precisely because of the attribution of a constitutive function to the ideal of reason. Regardless of this, in practical application, “the existence of God” is not only permissible but even imperative, although not as a theoretical entity with the corresponding implications, but only as a postulate of practical reason. Similarly, the immortality of the soul also acquires the status of a postulate of practical reason, with both postulates thereby acquiring philosophical legitimacy and beginning to play a primary role in Kant’s moral philosophy.² Therefore, it is even justified to argue that “Kant’s philosophy is semantically and logically possible only with the presupposition of the existence of God, because He is equally necessary as a “transcendental ideal” and “regulatory principle.””³ As for the place of God and the immortality of the soul in “historical religion”, Kant considers them to be entirely acceptable components, which are essentially a reflection of the postulates of practical reason, just as historical religion itself is a reflection or, more precisely, a misunderstanding of the only true moral religion.

It is precisely within the bosom of historical religion that the illusions of piety arise, which Kant describes, explains, and shows how they should be overcome so that historical religion, although a pale reflection of true moral religion, can still contribute to the genuine good way of life, which is the moral life. These illusions boil down to two main types: illusions of superstition and illusions of self-deception. The first type is due to the misconception that only by performing church rituals, without good moral actions, can one obtain the favor of the supreme being, leading to the forgiveness of sins, as well as grace and salvation. In the second type of illusion, the believer imagines, completely unfoundedly, that it is possible to influence supernatural beings by natural means, without taking into account that the former cannot influence the latter at all.⁴ Unlike Kant, Edmund Husserl does not use the term “illusions of piety”, but by drawing a distinction between religiosity based on phenomenologically understood experience and religiosity following

² Kanavrov, V., “How is the Religious a Priori Possible?” Stefanov, I., editor, *Humanism, Culture, Religion* (Sofia: Lik, 1997), 83-85 [in Bulgarian].

³ Angelov, Tsv., “The Ethical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant as a Transcendental Correlation of Morality, Reason and Faith,” *Ethical Studies*, year VII, issue 7, no. 2, December 2022, 112.

⁴ Kant, I., *Religion within the limits of reason itself*, 151.

religious dogmas and traditional prescriptions, the founder of contemporary phenomenology also distinguishes between “real” and “apparent” religiosity.⁵

The general issue of religious illusion is interpreted by the two philosophers from different philosophical premises and in different ways. For Kant, the sensory-categorical character of natural reality is paramount, which is why the ideas of reason—the existence of God and the immortality of the soul—as well as objects derived from them, such as grace, miracles, and religious mysteries, could not be perceived and therefore cannot be related to experience.⁶ Furthermore, the aforementioned ideas and their consequences do not obey the network of categories of understanding—first and foremost the category of causality—and therefore cannot have any place in the natural world and are thus transcendent in the full sense of the word. Husserl also accepts the transcendence of God, but, approaching it through phenomenological methodology, he takes the position that the transcendence of God is not complete otherworldliness. For Husserl, the transcendence of God must be subjected to phenomenological reduction, similar to the reduction of the transcendence of the world to consciousness.⁷ But it is precisely after reduction that God can and does become a full-fledged element of phenomenological experience, which is why it now makes sense to discuss the evidence and completeness of religious experience⁸—characteristics that are not illusory or, at least, are not illusory as a rule. Any illusory aspect in phenomenology on this issue would arise from uncritically mixing the dogmatic-traditionalist conception of God with a phenomenological understanding of religious experience.

The special status of religion in Kant, and to some extent the illusions of piety, are also predetermined by the denial of intellectual intuition as a theoretical-cognitive ability foreign to the finite intellect. It is noteworthy that intellectual intuition is not completely excluded in Kant’s system, since it is nevertheless admitted as inherent in a hypothetical infinite intellect, whose thinking and contemplation would coincide, and this two-way action would obviously give rise to a reality that is simultaneously a process of thinking and contemplation. In finite cog-

⁵ Bello, A.A., *Husserl Sul problema di Dio* (Roma: Edizioni Studium, 1985).

⁶ Kant, I., *Religion within the limits of reason itself*, 121–129.

⁷ Bello, A.A., *Husserl Sul problema di Dio*, 63.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28–29, 121.

nition (such as ours), intuition is sensory, and thinking is discursive. The combination of sensible intuition and discursive thinking gives rise to experience and reveals to us the realm of nature.

It is worth noting that, unlike the previous tradition, Kant endows intellectual intuition with a special contemplative “capacity for generation” that is lacking in his predecessors from Descartes to Leibniz, including Spinoza, where intellectual contemplation is said to grasp an already formed reality. The active intuition inherent in Kant’s hypothetical archetypal infinite intellect, somewhat unexpectedly, almost coincides with Giambattista Vico’s principle *verum factum convertuntur*—“The true and the made are convertible.” For Vico, this is an expression of the principle of truth, through which he criticizes the Cartesian principle of self-consciousness, which possesses only “certainty” but is hopelessly deprived of truth. Truth invariably presupposes knowledge of how the object of cognition can or should be made: the truth about a given watch is accessible to the watchmaker because he knows how to make a watch; the truth of mathematics is accessible to the mathematician because mathematics is nothing but the product of mathematicians. From this, however, it can be assumed that the truth of nature cannot be accessible to the nature lover or naturalist, simply because the creator of nature is God—and this is precisely what Vico asserts.

Unlike Friedrich Schelling, for whom intellectual intuition is a prerequisite for cognition of divine reality, neither does Kant consider it a similar requirement, whereby its absence automatically prevents such cognition, nor does Vico claim that the principle of *verum factum* is a necessary condition for the cognition of God. For Kant, however, the lack of intellectual intuition excludes the “reserve option” for cognition, since the idea of God cannot be perceived by the senses and, therefore, God cannot be known in the same way that natural objects are known. For Vico, however, cognition that transcends the human world in the narrow sense of the word is possible. This refers to knowledge of the role of divine providence in history through the application of the *verum factum* principle in combination with metaphysical knowledge acquired in a manner close to Cartesian (despite Vico’s constant criticism of Descartes) intellectual intuition. But the course of history in Vico’s understanding is a manifestation of divine providence in the human world, which is undoubtedly an overcoming of the absolute transcendence of God attributed to Him by Kant with regard to pure reason.

Husserl also does not impose any condition for special intuitive cognition belonging to the consciousness constituting the experience of divine reality. However, as a true Cartesian, Husserl accepts the coincidence of truth and certainty as a fundamental requirement of phenomenology. Therefore, the German phenomenologist fully shares the possibility that religious experience possesses the intuitive fullness of religious consciousness, accompanied by true evidence. It is precisely fulfilled intention, as opposed to empty intention, which is only a signification and not the object as it is in its entirety, that determines for the Freiburg philosopher the main difference between genuine religiosity and traditionalist-dogmatic religiosity, which relies on empty (but not automatically “untrue”) significations.⁹ The latter is more of a formal adherence to ritual rules for the sake of the rules themselves and could be seen as similar to Kant’s “ritual religiosity”, imbued with illusory superstition, but without receiving similar evaluative characteristics from Husserl.

Intellectual intuition within phenomenology is by no means some kind of exceptional cognition of the supernatural; it is simply cognition of another type of transcendence, different from the transcendence of the world. This is cognition in the sphere of religious experience, which should be constituted according to the same principles as any other sensory or intellectual experience. Afterwards, categorical cognition is constituted above it, and finally it would be possible to reach eidetic intuition. But neither primary religious experience, nor categorical cognition, nor eidetic intuition claim to be knowledge of God Himself, or even real steps towards ascending to God Himself; they are only genuine, i.e., true, phenomenological experiences of the constitution of God in consciousness.¹⁰ It must be acknowledged that Husserl admits the existence of illusory evidence, but at the same time he offers ways and guarantees for overcoming illusions, relying on the original teleology of the transcendental Ego.

The aforementioned cognitive and ontological principles of Kant’s theoretical philosophy serve as a completely consistent basis for a specific interpretation of historical religions with their illusions, as well as for the critical overcoming of this type of religiosity and liberation from semblances inherent in them through authentic moral religion. These foundations consistently lead to the interpretation of the god worshipped in historical religions as completely transcendent. With regard to such a

⁹ Ibid., 28-29, 121.

¹⁰ Ibid., 123.

god, not only is the incarnation of the Son and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church community rejected, but also the possibility of any—even indirect—type of communication with divine reality. Kant finds the only orientation towards such a god through the art of *topoi*, using the *topos* “of the perfect and the less perfect”, resembling Aristotle’s *topos* “of the great and the small”: this *topos* roughly states that “what is inherent in the perfect being as the highest goal—the moral life—should also be inherent as the highest goal in the less perfect one.”

Another consequence of Kant’s theoretical position is that miracles are impossible in the strictly deterministic order of nature, and the acceptance of mysteries is meaningless because that which cannot be cognized is obviously outside the order of nature and cannot in turn influence the natural world in any way. A single mystery is possible in the moral world—the origin of freedom—but it is permissible there because morality differs from nature both in its reality and in the manner in which it is cognized. By the same logic of the “completely transcendent”, divine grace is also discussed, which, due to its complete transcendence, could neither be prayed for nor experienced. The religious community, as a natural community, is also blocked from the transcendent supernatural and is subject to natural laws, but it still has the privilege of transitioning into a moral community with supersensory but, of course, not supernatural, dimensions.

The violation of the insurmountable boundaries between this world and the world beyond, between the natural and the supernatural, leads within the framework of critical transcendentalism to the two aforementioned illusions of piety: that of self-deception and that of superstition. The illusion of self-deception can be seen as the primary illusion, leading to delusions in the religious sphere, taking the form of “methodical madness”, while the illusion of superstition can be seen as its consequence, preventing the realization of true moral religiosity and its corresponding practice. Self-deception manifests itself in two forms: fetishism—belief in the possibility of supernatural realities being influenced by natural means, e.g., begging for grace, as well as the practice of magic; this type of illusory belief is complemented by another illusion, directed in the opposite direction—belief in the possibility of the supernatural influencing the natural, such as when one relies on grace to bring about healing. Superstition, on the other hand, resides in the delusion that observing certain rituals and professing certain dogmatic beliefs as

such, rather than through leading a good, i.e., moral life, will lead to the favor of the supreme being—God.¹¹

Both illusions give rise to a false piety, expressed in superstitious worship of God, which hinders true moral piety. The latter would be justified as genuine worship of God, if such worship were necessary at all. From this perspective, it would be self-deception to believe that prayer, for example, could be a means of divine grace, influence the forgiveness of sins, have any bearing on the salvation of the souls of the dead, or strengthen the health of the infirm. From the point of view of true moral religion, prayer can be a meaningful activity only if it serves to revive and maintain a godly moral way of life through images of the imagination, regulated by the postulates of pure reason and limited by the categories of the understanding. Similarly, it would be wrong to expect grace from church attendance—its proper function would be to provide a sensory representation of the community of believers, through which they encourage one another to lead a moral life. The same applies to baptism, which could only metaphorically be considered an automatic forgiveness of sins accumulated up to that point, or a condition for the forgiveness of future sins. Baptism is nothing more than an initiation into a community of morally pious people, within which moral religion is practiced. Finally, the Eucharist, as the fullness of communion with God, must be rethought in terms of an attitude of brotherly love that helps fulfill moral duty.¹²

The illusory worship of God leads to moral distortions, the most serious of which are piety, philistinism, and priestliness. Piety preached by historical religion cannot be considered true piety because it is contempt for oneself, through which one seeks favor. Hypocritical philistinism, representing a slavish state of mind, also contradicts the idea of a higher moral essence, which God undoubtedly is. By priestliness, Kant means “mediation in communication with God, leading to the loss of the believer’s free will and a willingness to blindly follow the priest’s instructions.” All three illusory distortions are overcome from the standpoint of moral virtue. Confidence in one’s own dignity, based on reason, takes the place of humiliating piety. Reconciliation based on the principle of non-contradiction—what has already been done cannot be undone—is a truly moral approach that should replace philistine repen-

¹¹ Kant, I., *Religion within the Limits of Reason Itself*, 153–155.

¹² Ibid., 168–170.

tance, and spiritual (moral) guidance is the only acceptable form of mediation between the believer and God.¹³

The moral disposition of the believer, which is a necessary and sufficient condition for true moral religion and its practice, is characterized by a special kind of practical cognition. Unlike theoretical cognition, which is achieved through the interaction of the categories of understanding and sensory perceptions mediated by the schemata of the faculty of judgment, the categories of the will cognize without perceptions and at the same time create the reality of the will's goal-setting. This is how real infinite practical intellect manifests itself and is realized, surpassing theoretical infinite intellect, which can only be assumed as hypothetical (Kant 1974, p. 107).¹⁴ In this way, the activity of practical intellect based on free will confers a sacred status on moral actions.¹⁵

By allowing for a meaningful phenomenological approach to the idea of God, as well as to divine reality, Husserl offers a particularly intersubjective derivation of God, which includes central phenomenological concepts such as the transcendental Ego, *eidōs*, transcendental community, and teleology. In this way, we are actually presented with a variation on the teleological proof of God's existence. This phenomenological derivation of God begins with the *eidōs* of the transcendental Ego, which immediately and necessarily presupposes the *eidōs* of transcendental community. Furthermore, the *eidōs* of the transcendental Ego includes within itself the existence of the Ego itself. Bearing in mind that its leading and unchanging characteristic is primordial teleology, this characteristic is inseparable from the teleology of transcendental community, as well as from the teleology of the world. Hence, it follows that the intersubjective teleology of the world points to the existence of God as its source.¹⁶ Such a teleological demonstration is also supported by the conceivability of God from the position of intersubjective empathy, manifested in the view of the simultaneous constitution of the world from an infinite number of positions.¹⁷

¹³ Ibid., 170–174.

¹⁴ Kant, I., *Critique of Practical Reason*, transl. from German Tseko Torbov (Sofia: BAN Press, 1974), 107 [in Bulgarian].

¹⁵ Kant, I., *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, transl. from German Valentina Topuzova (Sofia: Science and Art Press, 1974), 100 [in Bulgarian].

¹⁶ Bello, A.A., 1985. *Husserl Sul problema di Dio*, 98–101.

¹⁷ Ibid., 70.

Husserl directs his reflections on God in a direction that is even closer to Kant's moral religion. This is the possibility of achieving divine status in the life of the intersubjective community. He draws attention to the peculiarity that the individual will contains the idea of infinite perfection. Within the framework of the intersubjective will, this ideal is reformulated as a striving for infinite perfection of the community itself. The quintessence of this striving is the expression of the will for a true self, for a true community, for true humanity, i.e., for life in eternal and infinite truth.¹⁸

In the actions of the will, both in Kant's practical philosophy and in Husserl's intersubjective phenomenology, there is a tendency to liken God according to the concept of deification or *theosis*, but without expecting assistance through grace or *kenosis* in this process. In both these cases, reliance is placed solely on the infinite potential of the self, either in the bosom of practical reason or in the bosom of the intersubjective community. For Kant, the possibility and guarantee of becoming like God comes from the infinite activity of human free will, following the ideal of divine free will, the latter being valued as sacred because of its inability to desire evil.¹⁹ It is important to emphasize that likening God is the realization of the moral essence of practical reason, not the application of religious principles. Therefore, it seems to me that the assertion regarding the necessity of "(religion) intentionally defining the ultimate intelligible and transnaturalistic goal of morality, with a view to the very rule of morality, namely autonomy and freedom, possible only in a transnaturalistic plan, resp. in an intelligible context"²⁰ is far from Kant's philosophy of religion, where morality takes the place of religion. In this line of thought, it is acceptable to consider that "the categorical imperative contains the possibility of viewing moral obligations as commandments of God,"²¹ but it should be emphasized and kept in mind that this is not about a god to whom we submit or a god to whom we try to ascend, but only about a god into whom we transform ourselves by

¹⁸ Ibid., 92-93, 96

¹⁹ Kant, I., *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 100.

²⁰ Angelov, Tsv., "The Religion of Reason and the Transcendental Ideal in Immanuel Kant's Philosophy," *Ethical Studies*, year VI, issue 6, no. 2, December 2021, 190.

²¹ Angelov, Tsv., "Ethico-Theological Dimensions of Kant's Practical Philosophy," *Harmony in Difference: Proceedings* (Sofia: Za Bukvite Academic Publishing House, 2023), 176.

realizing our moral essence and impulse. Husserl observes a similar striving for complete cognitive truth and infinite moral perfection on the part of the intersubjective community, which is nevertheless a milder version of Kant's almost explicit declaration of *theosis* without *kenosis* and without the need for grace. This more restrained version of *theosis* is mainly due to phenomenology's clear thesis that the infinite, the eternal, and the perfect are final idealizations which cannot be grasped in intuitive completeness and in their corresponding true evidence.

II. BOOK REVIEWS

Dustin Peone, ed., *Essays in Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy: Considering the Views of Donald Phillip Verene*. Reddick, FL: Felice Mosca, 2025. 230 pp. \$24.99. ISBN: 979-8-9991676-0-6.

Nataliya Atanasova (University of Sofia)

*Thinking holds to the coming
of what has been, and is remembrance.¹*

What is the point of returning to a book once read, of watching a film already seen, of listening again to a song it was once impossible to stop humming, or of calling a friend we have not heard from in years?

There is an atmosphere of the past, so thick that one could cut it with a knife – smell the odor, see the hue, and hear the words re-echoed and reverberating as one recollects and conjoins with oneself in the past. A melancholy emerges from this brief homecoming, as one compares it with the place one currently inhabits in time. It is a profound confrontation with the self that has already changed with the passage of time, yet it also opens a path back to the original locus from which everything first arose (*augere*).

Picture a gathering around a dinner table with old schoolmates: the shared life stories which started together split because everyone needed to grow and follow their own path, but there is a remembering and a backward look, once in a while, when the need to return to who one was rises up. *Essays in Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy: Considering the Views of Donald Phillip Verene* evokes precisely this sensation. A beautiful symposium of thirteen people, twelve of whom had shared the experience of crossing paths at a crucial point in their humanistic education with Professor Donald Phillip Verene.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 10.

This volume speaks of and to the humanity behind the art of loving wisdom, loving one's teacher as a guide and conductor – the author of a worldview that is then appropriated and molded personally by each of the gathered selves. The educator (*ex-ducere*) is the one who leads according to the sense of what it is to be alive and be with others while trying to make sense of the world. Here, in fact, the inexhaustible task is to make philosophy coincide with making a life, for there are as many ways of doing philosophy as there are ways of making a life. The researcher is not a “founder” precisely because the task of finding truth is as vast and infinite as discovering the beautiful; and, in fact, in Hegel's speculative framework, becoming is always a moment of synthesis, which in turn forms a new thesis, subsequently elevated to a higher synthesis. It is a progression, an ascent from the ground.

Verene's former students retrospectively trace their teacher's principles, which they preserved to transmit them to the curious in a way that precisely embodies the act of maintaining a tradition – one that etymologically demands that something be passed on within a close circle of people in order to preserve that which has been received. As the text reminds us, “Education is an initiation into tradition.”²

Each essay unfolds an autobiographical reflection, with confessions that examine what the authors took from their teacher and preserved, eventually transforming it so as to adapt it in a way that allowed them to reflect precisely and create a lifestyle. As Professor Verene pointed out to his former students, now educators themselves, philosophy should be directed toward creating a lifestyle. Making philosophy thus coincides with the art of making a life, in this symposium, where every word displays its roots in Verene's fertile soil. The challenges of “doctoring” (*docere*) emerge and are transformed into the art of the teacher's eloquence, as Raymond Barfield's essay reveals.³ The humane doctor, in every sense of the word, must indeed reflect, for as Travis Foster later notes, “eloquence begins in wonder and ends in inspiration”, and this eloquence is then mirrored “in the soul of the listener.”⁴ After finishing this book, I believe the reader should seriously consider the importance of similarly finding a guide – or perhaps four guides, as

² Dustin Peone, ed. *Essays in Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy: Considering the Views of Donald Philip Verene* (Reddick, FL: Felice Mosca, 2025), 188.

³ *Ibid.*, 12–13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

Verene himself did – in order to craft a meaningful life.⁵ The goal is to enable these guides, as authors of oneself, to converse with one another in order to continuously evolve and transform in one's own time, without allowing ideas to stagnate – perhaps in the way that Joyce conversed with Vico through his writings, merging philosophy, literature, and autobiography into a whole.

As one contributor explains, “Here’s a common way that tradition works. You encounter something that enchants you, that speaks to your inmost potentialities.”⁶ The process involves “imitating your masters and then go[ing] your own way.”⁷ Self-understanding prepares the ground for making philosophy, which always grows on fertile soil – watered, enriched, cultivated, and tended by a community to lighten the endeavor, undertaken in the pleasure of togetherness. This volume stresses that “self-knowledge [is] the necessary foundation of any other worthwhile knowledge”⁸, making this form of understanding paramount in the philosophical process.

Since every cultivation needs to be carried out in leisure and with taste – for in the end you are what you have been nurtured with, provided the waters do not come from Lethe – this becomes a transformative process, both retrospective and rooted in the present, truly embodying Verene’s principle of “two thinks at a time.” Philosophy emerges as a way of life, revolving around that which endures, persists, and leaves a permanent trace in one’s path.

The book is indeed a conversation between its contributors and itself; in another part, the leading figure of Verene is addressed, culminating in a meditation on how one became precisely who they are by addressing some of the musings and discoveries intimately connected to their professor – the one who, in a sense, authored them. Indeed, the author is the one who makes growth possible and prepares for its dissemination, as “[a] gardener ... grows in the character of others.”⁹

A teacher truly cultivates, disseminates, curates, and preserves for difficult times. So, re-reading a book, calling a friend – these are acts that involve finding imaginary universals intact, returning momentarily

⁵ Ibid., 217.

⁶ Ibid., 189.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 122.

⁹ Ibid., 48.

to the past from the perspective and standpoint of the now. The history of philosophy here grows tightly entwined with personal stories of growth and evolution in the fabric of intimate lives, steadfastly maintaining one of the modalities that Verene inherited from Joyce, which it is right to repeat: “two thinks at once.”

This book is fundamentally about time, although it treats time in a way different from existentialism. Here, time is not a limit but a gift. It grants space for thought to grow, like Verene’s fountain pen, which must be refilled. Between one filling and the next, thought settles; if it endures, it leaves a trace, ready to spread and take root elsewhere.

The art of arranging words in a certain way moves an audience and transforms people – creating images and pointing to all possible imaginative universals. Storytelling is birthed in a collectivity, through gatherings, and forms communities that share the same identity. It gives meaning to collective and singular lives and tries to find this meaning for them, however unrealizable the task may be.

Philosophy must thus always engage us in a reflection to carry out a systematic review of culture¹⁰ – everything cultivated, everything that must be gathered from the soil and shaped through self-determination. Such cultivation and self-formation represent humanity’s path to self-emancipation, as Thora Ilin Bayer suggests. This is because, though the eloquent speech of the gardener-teacher instills an atmosphere that enables the good and beauty to spread,¹¹ this cultivation must also be practiced with irony and love. Through this disciplined practice, philosophical consciousness can be grasped and gathered (*con-capio*), revealed in a kind of poetic wisdom, in which the educator’s craft is simultaneously rigorous and playful, bringing forth what is essential while remaining open to unexpected revelations that can emerge in a genuine philosophical encounter. And in this sense, education requires that the essential be extracted, drawn out, and carefully tended. Hence, such a moment becomes a sublime instant in shared experience, in which everything is “intended to be passed along.”¹² As the intellect and soul ascend toward *theoria*, the divine can be contemplated and “the sublime is the epiphany.”¹³ Through this careful cultivation of both technique and wisdom,

¹⁰ Ibid., 36.

¹¹ Ibid., 48–51.

¹² Ibid., 47.

¹³ Ibid., 225.

philosophy becomes not merely an intellectual exercise but a living practice that transforms both teacher and student in the shared experience of wonder and inspiration.

One of the theses in this volume is that the human being is destined to always become and be the locus of transformation.¹⁴ We are moved by beautiful speech and stories in which we reflect on ourselves and discover the symbolic forms of our own life and its traces. Life, consciousness, and self-narration make *Leben* coincide with *Geist*. As we sit in the company of all the authors in this symposium, we get to know them through their work, savor their wisdom, learn to appreciate it, and nourish our souls with their stories, which collude in a greater philosophy. And if “taste is a form of self-knowledge”¹⁵, we learn to know ourselves by opening ourselves to the history of philosophy, forming the style of the lives we lead.

In Heidegger, telos is the final turn in molding a chalice – a vessel that carries and preserves a substance that quenches, nurtures or bedews its ambient surroundings.¹⁶ Being inevitably performs a turn at some point in life, retrospectively bringing the thread of the past into the present, tracing oneself and one’s origins, comparing past and present in a dialectical unfolding. This turn determines us as what we were meant to become. As Vico observed, “[t]he true is the made”¹⁷, and in this very act of making, we also author ourselves

Every author in this sublime symposium reflects on education, tradition, experience, the love of wisdom. They are united by their teacher – Verene, who writes both philosophy and Italian recipes with the Montblanc pen he never relinquishes, preserving and disseminating the true, the good, and the beautiful, nurturing the mind and soul. Philosophy as a map of life leads necessarily to sociability and togetherness,¹⁸ reminding us of the communal nature of wisdom. As Heidegger puts it, “It is proper to every gathering that the gatherers assemble to coordinate their efforts to the sheltering; only when they have gathered together

¹⁴ Ibid., 21, 34, 64, 161.

¹⁵ Ibid., 193.

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Basic Writings: Revised and Expanded Edition*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper-Collins, 1993), 315.

¹⁷ Peone, 65.

¹⁸ Ibid., 191.

with that end in view do they begin to gather.”¹⁹ *Essays in Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy* traces influences, constellations, and confluences – inviting the use of both spontaneity and prudence as tools of philosophical reasoning, rather than surrendering to the mechanistic automatization of thought. It reminds us that the truest guides are those who lead us to become authors of ourselves, crafting the symbolic forms that shape the paths of our own and others’ lives.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, “Logos (Heraclitus, Fragment B 50),” in *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 60.

Kaveh Boveiri, *Marxian Totality: Inverting Hegel to Expound Worldly Matters*. Leiden: Brill (Historical Materialism Book Series, Volume 322), 2024. ISBN:978-90-04-70397-1

Aleksandar Todorovski (University of Sofia)

Marxian Totality: Inverting Hegel to Expound Worldly Matters, published in 2024 by Brill as part of its Historical Materialism series, constitutes a critical intervention in contemporary historical materialist thought, representing the first book-length monograph to interrogate the concept of totality from the *dual* perspective of philosophical and socio-political ontology. This extensive treatise draws upon a vast array of classical and contemporary philosophical texts to elucidate the distinctive phenomenological and dialectical features of Marxian totality, with a resolute focus on its methodological architectonics. The author's philosophical journey, which began amid the 1979 Iranian Revolution and was refined in protracted engagements with eminent thinkers like Yvon Gauthier and Frieder Otto Wolf, brings an existential hermeneutic depth to his work. Dedicated to Danny Goldstick and bolstered by the unwavering support of his partner Niloo in periods of somatic adversity, the monograph seamlessly intertwines rigorous ontological analysis with a poignant autobiographical phenomenology. Throughout, the writing resonates profoundly with contemporaneous existential crises, such as economic alienation, ecological estrangement, and geopolitical antagonisms, positioning it as an untimely yet prescient contribution to the dialectical tradition.

The text articulates its inquiry through four fundamental moments, each embodying a dialectical progression in the exposition of totality. The initial moment critiques undialectical conceptions, unmasking their epistemological inadequacies. The second proffers a critical hermeneutics of Hegelian totality, centered on the *Science of Logic* as the paradigmatic site of idealistic dialectics. The third dissects the ontological shortcomings of two canonical Marxist interpretations: Georg Lukács's *reified holism* and Karel Kosík's *dialectics of the concrete*. The fourth

moment, culminating in the book's penultimate section, undertakes a genetic-phenomenological tracing of the developmental ontology of Marxian totality across Marx's opus. The concluding chapter extrapolates the methodological implications for praxis. Augmented by a prologue, epilogue, and appendices furnishing textual exegeses, this architectonic reflects the ambition to sublate fragmented Marxist epistemologies into a cohesive *dialectical ontology*, thereby bridging speculative philosophy and sociopolitical emancipation.

The Prologue inaugurates the inquiry by invoking Marx's enduring ontological primacy, as evidenced by his preeminence in citation indices (Arts & Humanities Citation Index, 1993–2000) and the aporetic fragmentation afflicting contemporary leftist praxis, manifest in schisms over Brexit, the 2017 US elections, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, a dialectic of imperialism. Marx's project was not a prescriptive teleology but a *totalizing theorization* of capitalist ontology, a task Boveiri furthers in this phenomenological reconstruction. The book is divided into three parts: Part I (Chapters 1–4) establishes the theoretical scaffolding through negative dialectics; Part II (Chapter 5) presents a genetic ontology of totality's evolution; Part III (Chapter 6) resolves methodological antinomies.

The central thesis revolves around the dialectical inversion of Hegel's idealistic ontology, transmuting it into a materialist phenomenology that grounds totality in the concrete contradictions of historical being. Contra Hegel's *Science of Logic*, wherein the Absolute Idea enacts a closed, teleological sublation of contradictions within an idealistic totality, Marx effectuates an ontological reversal: ***totality becomes a processual category, dialectically mediated by the material relations of production, class antagonism, and commodity fetishism as reified forms of social being.*** This inversion is not simply a negation but a preservative sublation, wherein Hegelian logical categories are repurposed to disclose the alienated essence of capitalist ontology. Methodological consistency pervades Marx's oeuvre, obviating any epistemological rupture between the early anthropological humanism and the mature political economy. By tracing this ontological genesis, Boveiri undertakes to forge a unified epistemological foundation for Marxist praxis, subtly alluding to its applicability to neoliberal reification and ecological alienation, themes that resonate with our existential horizon of total planetary crisis. This thesis thus positions the monograph as a phenomenological

reclamation of Marx's method, synthesizing speculative dialectics with the exigencies of historical materialism.

The inaugural moment, delineated in Chapter 1, deconstructs undialectical conceptions of totality, exposing their ontological fallacies. We find criticism of the atomist-rationalist paradigm, exemplified by Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, for its reductionist epistemology, wherein reality is atomized into discrete facts, privileging parts over holistic mediation. Similarly, the organicist and organicist-dynamic ontologies of Friedrich Schelling and Othmar Spann are unmasked as hypostatizing the whole, engendering a static, ahistorical totality that elides dialectical negation. This negative dialectic clears the phenomenological field for a Marxist ontology, wherein totality emerges as a self-mediating, evolving structure.

The second moment, Chapter 2's exegesis of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, dissects Hegel's triadic ontology, from the Doctrine of Being's indeterminate immediacy through Essence's reflective mediation to the Notion's conceptual self-determination, revealing the idealistic closure of the Hegelian totality. The Absolute Idea, as the consummate sublation of contradictions, precludes genuine historical openness, confining praxis to a retrospective phenomenology (the Owl of Minerva). Here, we find a critique that underscores how this ontological enclosure necessitates Marx's materialist inversion, transforming speculative dialectics into a revolutionary epistemology.

The third moment, encompassing Chapters 3 and 4, proffers a sophisticated critique of post-Hegelian Marxist ontologies. Lukács's conception in *History and Class Consciousness* is indicted for its reified holism, wherein the proletarian standpoint hypostatizes the whole against its parts, verging on an organicist essentialism that undermines dialectical negation.

Kosík's *Dialectics of the Concrete*, while lauded for its phenomenological integration of praxis, labor, and historicity, distinguishing concrete totality from pseudo-concrete appearances, is faulted for its lexical ambiguities (*Objekt-Gegenstand*) and neglect of Marx's textual ontogenesis. This analysis exemplifies a dialectical phenomenology, sublating the insights of these predecessors while exposing their epistemic lacunae.

The fourth moment, Chapter 5, constitutes the ontological apex, enacting a genetic-phenomenological reconstruction of Marxian totality.

Nascent dialectical motifs are discerned, commencing with Marx's 1837 "Letter to His Father" and his epigram on Hegel: methodological logic, praxis in epistemology, and mathematical dialectics, prefiguring mature ontology. *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* reveal totality as the phenomenological inversion of alienated labor. *The German Ideology* and *Theses on Feuerbach* give a prototype of its materialist genesis, emphasizing sensuous praxis over contemplative epistemology. The *Grundrisse*'s oscillatory dialectics between the chapters on money and capital manifest totality's categorial movement. *Capital* consummates this ontology through systematic sublation, from the abstract immediacy of commodity fetishism to the concrete mediation of surplus value.

Chapter 6 extrapolates the methodological implications, repudiating an epistemological rupture between *Grundrisse* (method of inquiry) and *Capital* (method of exposition), positing them as dialectical moments within a unified investigative ontology. This synthesis aligns with the ecological dialectics of our time, where capitalist totality engenders planetary estrangement.

Notwithstanding its ontological profundity, the monograph's phenomenological abstraction imposes certain epistemic constraints. Its preponderant reliance on textual hermeneutics, while exegetically impeccable, eschews empirical concretization, lacking phenomenological reductions of totality to historical instantiations, such as the value form contradictions of the 2008 financial crisis or the alienated labor of the "gig economy."

This speculative emphasis may attenuate the book's efficacy as praxis, confining it to an esoteric epistemology accessible primarily to philosophical adepts.

Engagement with contemporaneous Marxist ontologies is somewhat parochial. Conspicuous absences include David Harvey's spatio-temporal dialectics of neoliberal accumulation or Nancy Fraser's intersectional phenomenology of social reproduction, which could enrich Boveiri's totalizing framework. The dense prose, laden with Hegelian terminology (*Aufhebung*, *determinate negation*), presupposes advanced familiarity with phenomenology, potentially alienating philosophical neophytes, despite the appendices' clarifications. The ecological implication of the Prologue, while ontologically promising, remains underdeveloped, forgoing a fuller dialectical analysis of nature's commodification as a capitalist externality, a significant missed opportunity given re-

cent history's anthropogenic crises.

Moreover, Kosík's critique, though hermeneutically acute, occasionally recapitulates existing analyses rather than offering novel ontological insights, and the text's prolixity may overwhelm without sufficient epistemic scaffolding. These aporias suggest avenues for subsequent phenomenological extensions, particularly in applied dialectical ontology.

As the inaugural monograph on Marxian totality from an ontological-sociopolitical nexus, *Marxian Totality: Inverting Hegel to Expound Worldly Matters* is ontogenetically pioneering. The dialectical inversion of Hegel revitalizes Marxist epistemology, sublating idealistic speculation into materialist phenomenology and challenging orthodox reifications (base-superstructure determinism) as well as poststructuralist deconstructions (Derrida's *différance*, which undermines totalizing coherence).

The *Grundrisse-Capital* synthesis augments hermeneutical ontologies, converging with Guido Starosta's evolutionary subjectivity in *Marx's Capital, Method and Revolutionary Subjectivity* (2016) and Michael Heinrich's categorial dialectics in *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital* (2012).

By framing totality as a hermeneutic tool for dissecting interconnected antinomies, Boteivi proffers an epistemic lens for contemporary existential dialectics: economic precarity as alienated being, ecological catastrophe as nature's negated otherness. The monograph's existential dimension, manifest in the acknowledgments of mentors and somatic struggles, lends it a phenomenological authenticity, humanizing speculative dialectics. Its emplacement within the Historical Materialism series affirms its role in propelling avant-garde Marxist ontology, likely catalyzing further inquiries into dialectical phenomenology and its socio-political teleology.

Marxian Totality: Inverting Hegel to Expound Worldly Matters is a significant contribution to the historical materialist literature on totality, performing a phenomenological inversion of Hegelian dialectics to reveal the material ontology of totality. Its strengths – exegetical precision, methodological integration, and contemporary relevance – are balanced by its abstract epistemology, limited scope, and dense hermeneutics. Boveiri's genealogical tracing of the ontology of totality and its practical implications provides a solid epistemic foundation for future research, while his autobiographical phenomenology deepens its exis-

tential significance. Essential for advanced philosophers exploring dialectical ontology, epistemology, and phenomenology, the book encourages extensions into applied dialectics, especially concerning the global contradictions of our era. It establishes a key position in the Historical Materialism series, and I confidently believe it heralds a renaissance in Marxist ontological thought.

III. ASPIRATION CORNER

Anticipating Degrowth: Reading Luxemburg and Benjamin Towards an Alternative Politics of Democracy

Lukasz Chrynowicz (University of Sofia)

Abstract: This article engages with the political writings of Rosa Luxemburg and Walter Benjamin to explore how their thought unsettles dominant conceptions of democracy and revolution. Rather than offering fixed models, both thinkers focus on the role of spontaneity, revolution, and collective agency in political life. Luxemburg's critique of centralized socialism and Benjamin's rejection of linear historical progress converge in a shared resistance to administrative politics. By placing their ideas in dialogue with contemporary debates on degrowth and democratic form, the article argues for a reimagining of political agency in an age marked by ecological and institutional crisis.

Keywords: Luxemburg, Benjamin, democracy, revolution, spontaneity, degrowth

I. Introduction

In recent years, degrowth has emerged not merely as an ecological critique of capitalist expansion, but as a broader questioning of the political imagination structured by growth. Against this setting, the writings of Rosa Luxemburg and Walter Benjamin offer productive ground for a rethinking of democratic politics in ways that anticipate—rather than prescribe—alternatives to dominant models of development.

Although separated by different contexts and intellectual traditions, Luxemburg and Benjamin share a deep concern with the conditions under which meaningful political agency becomes possible. Luxemburg's defense of democratic spontaneity, expressed most forcefully in her critique of Leninist centralism, resonates with Benjamin's insistence that history is not a continuum to be administered but a rupture to be seized. Both resist the notion that emancipation arrives through managerial

planning or historical inevitability. Instead, they direct us toward a politics rooted in contingency, memory, and collective action.

The author reads their writings not as historical artifacts nor as sources for ideological synthesis, but as sites of political imagination that remain untimely, interrupting the present by refusing its dominant assumptions. By placing Luxemburg and Benjamin into a shared critical frame, the article asks how their political thought may contribute to a democratic orientation beyond the imperatives of growth and control. Such a re-reading does not propose a ready-made model but seeks to illuminate concepts and sensibilities that might inform an alternative democratic politics in an age of limits. This article employs a comparative textual analysis of selected writings by Rosa Luxemburg and Walter Benjamin, focusing on their conceptualizations of democracy, revolution, and historical activity. Through this approach, it seeks to explain how their thought may inform alternative democratic politics in an age of ecological and political limits. To understand the political urgency and conceptual nuance of their writings, it is worth briefly revisiting the biographical positions from which both Luxemburg and Benjamin were thinking.

The concept of degrowth, as a critique of the imperative of economic expansion, aligns with Luxemburg's and Benjamin's resistance to linear historical progress and instrumental politics. Luxemburg's emphasis on democratic spontaneity and Benjamin's notion of ruptured temporality challenge the foundational assumptions of capitalist modernity. In this light, degrowth is not merely an economic proposal but a political reorientation—one that privileges collective agency, historical memory, and non-accumulative forms of life. Their writings offer a framework for imagining democracy not as a managerial system of distribution, but as a space for radical interruption and redefinition of social priorities.

She was uncompromising in her critique both of capitalism and of bureaucratic authoritarian socialism. For this reason, and in part also due to her tragic death, her legacy has been appropriated (and distorted) by both Western Marxists keen to chart an alternative path to state socialism, and socialist states attracted to her theory of capitalist crisis and her radical critique of social democracy.¹ These competing appropriations often strip Luxemburg's writing of its tension: her insistence that de-

¹ Lea Ypi, "Rosa Luxemburg," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2023 Edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2023), accessed August 25, 2025, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/luxemburg/>.

mocracy is inseparable from struggle, that political form cannot be engineered from above, that even the strike resists capture. To revisit her work today is not to memorialize but to disturb—to recover a kind of thinking that unsettles both liberal and revolutionary certainty. In this sense, Luxemburg’s thought offers a vital resource for contemporary movements that seek to reclaim democracy from technocratic management and elite control. Her emphasis on spontaneity and bottom-up organization resonates with climate justice activism, feminist assemblies, and anti-authoritarian struggles that reject centralized leadership in favor of collective agency. Luxemburg’s vision of decentralized political organization links with degrowth’s emphasis on dismantling technocratic control and fostering true collective agency. Rather than offering a blueprint, Luxemburg invites us to embrace the unpredictability of political life—a stance that remains profoundly relevant in an age of ecological and democratic crisis.

These competing appropriations often strip Luxemburg’s writing of its tension: her insistence that democracy is inseparable from struggle, that political form cannot be engineered from above, that even the strike resists capture. As William A. Pelz notes: “Luxemburg anticipates and illuminates our current predicament: how the endemic structural and moral imbalances of capitalism will not be resolved by the system and pose an increasing threat to the very survival of our species. Today, while the crises mount, large segments of the current ‘left’ seem to have lost faith in their own solutions and remedies. Thus, creatively reconnecting with Rosa Luxemburg’s critiques has the potential to be an important catalyst in rebuilding and expanding a successful democratic and revolutionary left today and in the future.”²

Presenting Walter Benjamin’s (1892–1940) contributions to political philosophy is not the same as illuminating the attitudes of a political thinker focused on a particular problematic, or a philosopher who has established a system.³ Walter Benjamin was one of the most intriguing and original Marxist cultural theorists of the twentieth century. He made a precarious living in Berlin as a literary journalist and, partly under the

² William A. Pelz, *Rosa Luxemburg: Complete Works, Volume III – Political Writings 1: On Revolution (1897–1905)*, ed. Peter Hudis et al. (London: Verso Books, 2019), 31.

³ B. Erdağı, “Walter Benjamin and Political Philosophy,” *Sofia Philosophical Review* 7, no. 2 (2013): 34.

influence of Ernst Bloch and Lukács, turned toward the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. In the late 1920s, he became a close friend of Brecht, championing his revolutionary “epic theater.” Driven from Germany in 1933 by the rise of Nazism, Benjamin settled in Paris, where he had close associations with the surrealists. When the Nazis invaded France, Benjamin fled to the Spanish frontier, where, on being denied entry, he committed suicide rather than risk being delivered to the SS. Benjamin’s writings are a curious mixture of esoteric, sometimes mystical Jewish thought, artistic modernism, and unorthodox Marxism. He united an apocalyptic vision of history with a concern for the material, productive basis of art. Fascinated by tradition yet a radical spokesman for the new technological media, steeped in high German philosophy but a champion of the proletariat, Benjamin was in turn philologist, literary critic, political commentator, and philosopher of history.⁴ Despite its pronounced esotericism and manifestly recondite character, Benjamin’s early literary criticism is consistent, at times single-minded, in the pursuit of its program. At issue is the “fallen” character of human history, such that it takes on the appearance of “natural history”, a history that is consigned to an inexorable, rigid fate of decay and decline. The subjective corollary of this fate is an inescapable network of guilt—a guilt which originates with man’s expulsion from Paradise, which is redoubled with each subsequent transgression, and which serves as a ceaseless testimony to the seemingly infinite distance that separates historical man, man in the here and now, from the state of grace represented by the Messianic era.⁵

II. Critical Evaluation of Rosa Luxemburg: “Leninism or Marxism”

“Leninism or Marxism” was published as an article in 1904 under the title “*Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy*” in *Iskra* and *Neue Zeit*, and later reprinted in pamphlet form titled *Marxism vs. Leninism* in 1935 by the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation.⁶ Rosa Luxemburg’s critique of Lenin’s concept of revolutionary organi-

⁴ Norbert Bolz and Willem van Reijen, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Humanities Press, 1995), 5.

⁵ Richard Wolin, “*From Messianism to Materialism: The Later Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin*,” *New German Critique* 22 (Winter 1981): 81.

⁶ Libcom.org, “*Leninism or Marxism – Rosa Luxemburg*,” accessed August 25, 2025, <https://libcom.org/article/leninism-or-marxism-rosa-luxemburg>.

zation shows the disagreements within the Marxist movements in Europe in the years preceding 1917; her comparisons with Blanquism and chillingly accurate predictions of the consequences of such organization in a successful revolution are incredibly important to an understanding of the differing interpretations of Marx at that time in relation to the State.⁷

Rosa Luxemburg's critique within the Marxist discourse of her time was notably focused on the specific conditions of revolutionary movements in Russia and its breach from established Marxist principles. In her text, she stated: "An unprecedented task in the history of the socialist movement has fallen to the lot of the Russian Social Democracy. It is the task of deciding on what is the best socialist tactical policy in a country where absolute monarchy is still dominant."⁸ The phrase emphasizes the difficulty of determining the most effective socialist strategy in a nation that is predominantly governed by an absolute monarchy. In Russia, without democratic institutions, the Tsarist regime held authoritarian control over the country. It was restricting civil liberties and suppressing political dissent. Rosa Luxemburg pointed out the immense challenge for socialists in Russia to navigate this oppressive political landscape while striving to advance socialist principles.

Furthermore, Luxemburg presents the challenge posed by the covert domination of the bourgeoisie under absolutist force in Russia, stating: "The principal difficulty faced by socialist activity in Russia results from the fact that in that country the domination of the bourgeoisie is veiled by absolutist force. This gives socialist propaganda an abstract character, while immediate political agitation takes on a democratic-revolutionary guise."⁹ Thus, Luxemburg defines how the absence of direct bourgeois rule in Russia obscured the struggle's focus and necessitated a different approach to socialist propaganda and immediate political agitation, which had to assume a democratic-revolutionary form. Therefore, by drawing attention to the distinct circumstances in Russia, Rosa Luxemburg reveals the challenge faced by socialists in adapting Marxist principles to a context that diverged significantly from the more

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Rosa Luxemburg, "Leninism or Marxism," in *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mark Rainwater (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 161.

⁹ Ibid., 162.

established Western European practice. She addressed the question of how the Russian situation fits into Marxist ideas—by stressing the importance of changing the way of socialist agitation and adapting to those circumstances.

Now we should elaborate Luxemburg's perspective on the issue of the vanguard party—the concept proposed by Lenin in his work *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*. In her critique of Lenin, as an aberration from her own views on how revolutionary movements should be organized, Luxemburg's perspective challenges the idea of a rigidly centralized vanguard party. Hence, she expresses her disagreement with Lenin's ultra-centralist tendencies, stating: "Lenin's thesis is that the party Central Committee should have the privilege of naming all the local committees of the party. It should have the right to appoint the effective organs of all local bodies from Geneva to Liège, from Tomsk to Irkutsk. It should also have the right to impose on all of them its own ready-made rules of party conduct. It should have the right to rule without appeal on such questions as the dissolution and reconstitution of local organizations."¹⁰ We may see from here that Luxemburg challenges Lenin's approach as overly authoritarian and centralized, wherein the central committee is granted extensive powers over all local party organs without room for dissent or democratic decision-making within the party structure. This stands in contrast to her vision of a more decentralized and participatory organizational structure.

Additionally, she also criticizes Lenin's approach by stating: "Such centralism is a mechanical transposition of the organizational principles of Blanquism into the mass movement of the socialist working class."¹¹ In accordance with this view, Lenin defines his "revolutionary Social Democrat" as a "Jacobin joined to the organization of the proletariat, which has become conscious of its class interests."¹² From that, Luxemburg compares Lenin's idea of the revolutionary Social Democrat to a Jacobin, implying that it leans toward a top-down approach reminiscent of Blanquist organizational principles.

The term "Blanquism" is connected with the political thought and practice of the 19th-century French socialist revolutionary Auguste Blanqui. Blanqui was an active member of the socialist movement for

¹⁰ Luxemburg, "*Leninism or Marxism*," 161.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 162.

more than half a century. His activity started in 1824 when he entered his first conspiratorial organization and lasted until his death in 1881. He took part in many major events, such as the Spring of Nations and the Paris Commune, although he spent most of his life in various prisons. While Blanqui was a member of the revolutionary generation that included Bakunin and Marx and Engels, whose ideas shaped the main currents of the socialist movement, Blanqui and his ideas were not greatly successful. Blanqui and Blanquism became symbols of a blind radicalism and an anti-democratic, hierarchical, and thus utopian way of thinking about socialist organization. Blanqui accepted socialism as a system that could lead to a just redistribution of welfare, but contrary to Marx he never believed in the leading role of the proletariat in revolutionary struggle; neither did he believe that any popular movement could achieve his goals. He thought that a small, conspiratorial group of revolutionaries could organize a kind of putsch and introduce a temporary dictatorship that would prepare the ground for socialist transition.¹³

Importantly, Rosa Luxemburg emphasizes another discourse: the crucial role of spontaneous mass action as a driving force in revolutionary movements. Luxemburg marks the significance of such spontaneous actions in contrast to a more strongly structured, centralized approach to revolution. Luxemburg expresses her belief in the importance of spontaneous popular movements, stating: “Even in Russia, the people’s movement has succeeded in overcoming the barriers set up by the state. The people have found themselves a ‘constitution’ (though a rather precarious one) in street disorders. Persevering in this course, the Russian people will in time attain complete victory over the autocracy.”¹⁴ This statement suggests Luxemburg’s optimism about the potential for the Russian people. Through their continued resistance and struggle, they will eventually achieve victory over the autocratic regime. She recognized the emergence of a sort of “constitution” in the form of street disorders or popular demonstrations. These street disorders, protests, and the people’s collective actions were seen as a form of resistance against the autocracy—a way in which the population was asserting its will and demanding change. However, she noted that this “constitution” was precarious and not a formalized legal document, but rather an expression of

¹³ Dariusz Winczewski, “*Did Rosa Luxemburg Accuse Lenin of Blanquism? A Different Interpretation*,” *Science & Society* 83 (2019): 538.

¹⁴ Luxemburg, “*Leninism or Marxism*,” 161.

popular discontent and struggle.

Further, Luxemburg critiques the limitations of overly structured approaches, as we see in her comment: “The circumstance has an influence on agitation, on the manner of transplanting socialist doctrine to Russian soil. It also bears in a peculiar and direct way on the question of party organization.”¹⁵ Thus, Luxemburg suggests that the unique circumstances, including the prevalence of spontaneous actions, influence not only the approach to agitation but also the way in which socialist ideology is disseminated and how party organization should be conceptualized. This implies a recognition of the organic nature of revolutionary movements and the need for flexibility in adapting socialist principles to the realities of spontaneous popular actions.

Besides, Luxemburg identified the intersection between democracy and socialism within the context of Marxist ideology. She was particularly spotlighting the importance of democracy as an integral component of socialist movements. She indicates the relationship between democracy and socialism by stating: “The obstacles offered to the socialist movement by the absence of democratic liberties are of relatively secondary importance.”¹⁶ Luxemburg believed that the absence of democracy hindered the development of socialism and its ability to flourish, as democratic rights were essential for fostering active political participation, free speech, and the mobilization of the working class. However, she also argued that despite these obstacles, the core principles of socialism—such as the struggle for social and economic justice, the liberation of the working class, and the transformation of society—were of primary importance. Her use of “relatively secondary importance” suggests that while democratic freedoms are essential for the socialist movement, the absence of these liberties does not nullify the potential for revolutionary action by the people.

Further, she discusses the confluence of democracy and socialism in relation to the revolutionary struggle, asserting: “It is a mistake to draw a rigid parallel between the present Russian situation and that which existed in Germany during the years 1879–90, when Bismarck’s antisocialist laws were in force. The two have one thing in common—police rule. Otherwise, they are in no way comparable.”¹⁷ (Luxemburg,

¹⁵ Luxemburg, “*Leninism or Marxism*,” 161.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

1904/1996, p. 161). Thus, Luxemburg compares the situations in Russia and Germany under repressive regimes. However, she distinguishes between the contexts, suggesting that while both experienced suppression, their historical and political circumstances were significantly different. The period of Bismarck's antisocialist laws in Germany was marked by attempts to suppress socialist and workers' movements through legal restrictions. In contrast, Russia under Tsarist rule had a deeply entrenched autocratic monarchy with severe limitations on civil liberties, widespread censorship, and a lack of democratic institutions. Therefore, she cautions against oversimplification or drawing direct parallels between these distinct historical and political contexts.

Luxemburg pointed out the significance of democracy within the socialist movement: "The Social Democratic movement carries on its activity inside the large bourgeois city. Its mission is to represent, within the boundaries of the national state, the class interests of the proletariat, and to oppose those common interests to all local and group interests."¹⁸ This excerpt posits the mission of the Social Democratic movement and calls its role in representing the class interests of the proletariat within the framework of the national state. This includes urban centers dominated by the bourgeois or capitalist class. The Social Democratic movement aimed to assert and protect the collective interests of the working class against those of the bourgeoisie. Luxemburg highlights the significance of the Social Democratic movement in uniting and advocating for the common interests of the proletariat, transcending local or group interests. This implies that the movement sought to organize and represent the broader class interests of working people across different sectors and regions, fostering solidarity among the working class.

Additionally, Luxemburg commented on the relationship between socialism and democratic struggles: "It is a mistake to believe that it is possible to substitute 'provisionally' the absolute power of a Central Committee (acting somehow by 'tacit delegation') for the yet unrealizable rule of the majority of conscious workers in the party, and in this way replace the open control of the working masses over the party organs with the reverse control by the Central Committee over the revolutionary proletariat."¹⁹ This statement by Rosa Luxemburg reflects her critique of certain practices within socialist or revolutionary organiza-

¹⁸ Luxemburg, "*Leninism or Marxism*," 163.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

tions, particularly her opposition to the idea of substituting the absolute power of a Central Committee for the rule of the majority in the party. Luxemburg expresses her belief that attempting to temporarily substitute the absolute power of a Central Committee, even under tacit delegation of authority, is a mistake. Luxemburg's arguments emphasize the symbiotic relationship between socialism and democracy, asserting that authentic socialism could only be achieved through democratic means and processes.

Rosa Luxemburg's arguments regarding the role of the proletariat in revolutionary change contribute to the broader Marxist tradition by making a point about the proactive role of the working class in shaping revolutionary movements. She stresses the unique position and agency of the proletariat in revolutionary change, stating: "The Russian socialists are obliged to undertake the building of such an organization without the benefit of the formal guarantees commonly found under a bourgeois-democratic setup. They do not dispose of the political raw material that in other countries is supplied by bourgeois society itself."²⁰ Here, Luxemburg points out the distinctive situation of the Russian socialists and the proletariat's need to construct their organizational framework without the institutional support or political infrastructure provided by bourgeois society.

Nevertheless, Rosa Luxemburg also reflects on her analysis from the *Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels, on the historical process by which the bourgeoisie: "Under ordinary conditions—that is, where the political domination of the bourgeoisie has preceded the socialist movement—the bourgeoisie itself instills in the working class the rudiments of political solidarity. At this stage, declares the *Communist Manifesto*, the unification of the workers is not yet the result of their own aspiration to unity but comes as a result of the activity of the bourgeoisie, 'which, in order to attain its own political ends, is compelled to set the proletariat in motion...'"²¹ Luxemburg explains that in societies where the bourgeoisie holds political dominance before the emergence of a significant socialist movement, the bourgeoisie itself plays a role in fostering the initial stages of political solidarity among the working class. This process occurs because of the bourgeoisie's pursuit of its own political goals. In seeking to further its own interests within society,

²⁰ Luxemburg, "Leninism or Marxism," 162.

²¹ Ibid., 161.

it engages in actions or policies that inadvertently lead to the mobilization and organization of the working class. It is important to note that her thoughts were in line with the *Communist Manifesto*, which explains how the bourgeoisie pursues political power and economic objectives. Marx wrote: “The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones”²², and “Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class.”²³

III. Background on Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Concept of History* promise a discussion of a new concept of history and, in parallel, a new concept of the present. A characteristic of the work is that at its center there is no discursive explanation; instead, Benjamin operates through images. His concept of history seems to do away with philosophy’s conceptual games and transforms concepts into images that spoil the promise of truth offered by the philosophy of history. For Benjamin, the traditional concepts of history evaporated as he wrote the historical-philosophical theses. He could no longer be convinced that every historical event derives from a linear cause-and-effect relationship, or that all events together constitute a progressive, continuous motion.²⁴

One key aspect of Benjamin’s viewpoint is his departure from historicism. He acknowledges the culmination of historicism in universal history: “Historicism justifiably culminates in universal history.”²⁵ However, Benjamin emphasizes the distinctiveness of historical materi-

²² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, Vol. I (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 3, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/postgraduate/masters/modules/theoryfromthemargins/manifest.pdf>.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁴ Alfredo Lucero-Montaño, “On Walter Benjamin’s Historical Materialism,” *Astrolabio: Revista Internacional de Filosofía* 10 (2010): 126.s

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, “*Theses on the Philosophy of History*,” in *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mark Rainwater (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 222.

alism, particularly in its methodological approach, as he discusses the differences between historicism's method and historical materialism. Here is an excerpt that reflects Benjamin's emphasis on these contrasting approaches: "Materialist historiography differs from it as a method more clearly than from any other kind. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialist historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle."²⁶ This statement suggests that while universal history lacks a distinct theoretical framework and tends to accumulate a vast amount of data to fill a uniform, empty concept of time, materialist historiography operates differently. In contrast, it follows a constructive principle, implying that it does not merely accumulate data but rather builds its approach based on a specific guiding principle or theory. Rather than collecting extensive information, it focuses on constructing a deeper understanding.

A crucial perspective of Benjamin's thought is the significance of the present moment in historical materialism. He argues that the historical materialist requires a concept of the present that is not merely a transitional phase. Benjamin articulates this by stating: "The historical materialist cannot do without the concept of a present which is not a transition, in which time originates and has come to a standstill."²⁷ This suggests that for the historical materialist, understanding history involves recognizing a distinct present that is not just a passage from past to future but a moment where time originates and seemingly reaches a standstill. This concept challenges the conventional linear perception of time and emphasizes the significance of the present as a crucial aspect of understanding historical processes.

Moreover, Benjamin critiques the idea of progress tied to an empty and homogeneous time. His statement, "The concept of the progress of the human race in history is not to be separated from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous and empty time"²⁸, expresses this rejection. Benjamin's critique of homogeneous, empty time aligns with degrowth's call to look beyond capitalist acceleration. With this, he stresses a key criticism—the merging of progress with a time devoid of depth or qualitative change. Benjamin confronts the simplistic narrative

²⁶ Benjamin, "*Theses on the Philosophy of History*," 220.1

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

of progress tethered to an unchanging, homogeneous timeline, dismantling the linear notion of historical development.

Important to Benjamin's thesis is the concept of messianic time—a utopian idea of time that interrupts the linear flow of history. He describes the present as a model of messianic time, suggesting: "The present, which, as the model of Messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in enormous abridgment, coincides exactly with the stature which the history of mankind has in the universe."²⁹ Benjamin's idea suggests that the current moment can be seen as a representation of messianic time, containing the entire history of humanity in condensed form.

Benjamin's perspective hints at a messianic element within historical materialism, suggesting the revolutionary potential inherent in historical moments. He illustrates this by stating: "He perceives it in order to explode a specific epoch out of the homogeneous course of history; thus exploding a specific life out of the epoch, or a specific work out of the life-work."³⁰ This highlights the significance of isolated moments or events, indicating their potential for revolutionary change beyond conventional historical analysis. This notion challenges the linear trajectory by advocating for a focus on discrete moments, rejecting a singular, unbroken historical continuum. Additionally, this statement implies the crucial role of specific epochs or moments catalyzed by individual actions, which disrupt the linear course of history. This explanation demonstrates that individual lives possess the potential to transcend their respective epochs by influencing broader historical contexts and engendering significant change.

Benjamin asserts the importance of dialectical thinking in historical materialism as he contrasts historicism's additive method with the materialist's constructive principle. He argues: "The materialist historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle."³¹ Thus, Benjamin introduces the concept of the *monad* in historical materialism. He argues that the historical materialist approaches historical objects as monads—a term that refers to a singular, self-contained unit in philosophy, often representing an indivisible and distinct entity. He writes: "The historical materialist approaches a historical subject only

²⁹ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 222.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

where he encounters it as a monad.”³² This approach allows for a careful examination of the subject’s unique characteristics, dynamics, and context within the larger framework of history.

It should be noted that Walter Benjamin was probably referring to the French Revolution and the French Revolutionary Calendar (in French: *Calendrier Révolutionnaire Français*) when he emphasizes the revolutionary potential embedded within everyday objects and practices: “The great revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar serves as a historical time-lapse camera. And it is basically the same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance. Thus the calendars do not measure time as clocks do; they are monuments of historical consciousness (...).”³³ He presents the idea that common terrestrial elements—like calendars—might serve as monuments of historical awareness. Perović gives us additional scope when writing about it: “The French Republican calendar in particular tried to do what no other calendar had done: to make time express the intentions of history.”³⁴ Therefore, by introducing a new calendar after the Revolution, it created a tangible and recurring representation of that historical event. This new calendar served as a means of preserving the memory of the Revolution, keeping alive the consciousness of revolutionary ideals, and reminding people of their involvement in shaping history. It was a way of embedding the revolutionary spirit into everyday life, making it a continuous reminder of the transformative power of historical events on society and the role of the individual within specific events.

IV. Comparative Analysis

While from different times, both Rosa Luxemburg and Walter Benjamin offered essential insights into revolutionary movements and the organizational structure within socialist parties. Nevertheless, their perspectives share certain important similarities and commonalities, which need to be properly examined.

Both Luxemburg and Benjamin share a view on the importance of the organic, spontaneous nature of revolutionary actions, which emerge

³² Ibid.

³³ Walter Benjamin, “*Theses on the Philosophy of History*,” 221.

³⁴ Sanja Perović, “*The French Republican Calendar: Time, History and the Revolutionary Event*,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35, no. 1 (2012): 11

from the masses themselves instead of being centrally directed by a strict hierarchy. Rosa Luxemburg, in her critique of Lenin's concept of ultra-centralism, mentioned: "The most important and fruitful changes in its tactical policy during the last ten years have not been the inventions of several leaders and even less so of any central organizational organs. They have always been the spontaneous product of the movement in ferment."³⁵ This statement suggests that the most significant and effective changes in the tactical strategies of a movement over the past decade have not originated from the ideas or directives of specific leaders or central organizational bodies. Instead, these crucial changes have arisen spontaneously from within the movement itself, emerging organically from the active engagement and dynamism of the people involved.

Similarly, Benjamin's idea of revolutionary action is an expression of the masses' autonomous and authentic initiative: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism."³⁶ He suggests that understanding this recurring "state of emergency" is crucial in shaping our conception of history. Benjamin argues that it is the responsibility of individuals to recognize this perpetual crisis and work towards creating a genuine state of emergency, which, in turn, will strengthen opposition against fascism.

Moreover, Luxemburg and Benjamin both caution against overly rigid organizational structures that stifle the revolutionary spirit and creative potential of the movement. Luxemburg warns against a conservative role played by directing organs of the socialist party: "The tendency is for the directing organs of the socialist party to play a conservative role."³⁷ This suggests that these leadership structures may often prioritize maintaining the status quo rather than advocating for radical change within the party or society. Similarly, Benjamin indirectly critiques the dangers of an overly controlling and centralized structure that limits revolutionary potential: "Not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge. In Marx, it appears as the last en-

³⁵ Luxemburg, "*Leninism or Marxism*," 166.

³⁶ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 218.

³⁷ Luxemburg, "*Leninism or Marxism*," 167.

slaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of downtrodden.”³⁸ This might be interpreted as suggesting that the true force behind historical change lies within the oppressed class itself, indicating a reliance on the collective action and initiatives of the masses rather than strict hierarchical directives.

Both thinkers argue for the necessity of a flexible and adaptable approach within the movement, capable of responding to evolving situations. They altogether offer conceptual solutions for degrowth politics—Luxemburg through her emphasis on democratic spontaneity, and Benjamin through his vision of ruptured temporality and historical interruption. Degrowth, if it is to become more than a simple adjustment, has to become an act of democratic defiance—not just an empty rejection of the old order, but a reclaiming force that shapes human history.

Although Luxemburg emphasizes more the importance of encouraging a correct historical appreciation of the forms of struggle corresponding to given situations: “To encourage a correct historic appreciation of the forms of struggle corresponding to the given situations.”³⁹ She suggests the importance of fostering an accurate understanding of historical contexts to comprehend the types of struggles that align with specific situations, as well as the need to recognize and appreciate diverse forms of resistance, protests, or actions suitable to historical circumstances. Benjamin, rather, advocates for political loyalty to principles, telling us: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”⁴⁰ This relates to Benjamin’s emphasis on engaging with the past—not merely for factual accuracy but for the sake of current and future actions. By this, he advocates for political mobility and loyalty to principles, showing the importance of acting within the present while being grounded in historical understanding.

In examining the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg and Walter Benjamin, despite areas of agreement, there are visible differences and contrasting views on important concepts. The first notable dissension lies in their assessment of the role of centralized leadership in socialist movements. Luxemburg’s critique of Leninist ultra-centralism emphasizes that significant shifts in socialist tactics historically arose as spontaneous prod-

³⁸ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 220.

³⁹ Luxemburg, “Leninism or Marxism,” 168.

⁴⁰ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 216.

ucts of the movement itself, asserting: “The ultra-centralism asked by Lenin is full of the sterile spirit of the overseer.”⁴¹ This challenges the necessity of strict hierarchical leadership imposing directives. Luxemburg implies that the most crucial and effective shifts in the tactical approaches of these movements have not been orchestrated by leaders or central bodies. Instead, they have emerged naturally and organically from the dynamism and unrest within the movements themselves: “The most important and fruitful changes in its tactical policy...have always been the spontaneous product of the movement in ferment.”⁴² Luxemburg’s assertion emphasizes the vitality of grassroots movements and the agency of the masses in driving change.

Meanwhile, Benjamin emphasized the historical knowledge and revolutionary potential within the oppressed class, countering the significance of individual leaders and promoting the collective struggles of the masses: “Not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge. In Marx, it appears as the last enslaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of downtrodden. This conviction, which had a brief resurgence in the Spartacist group, has always been objectionable to Social Democrats.”⁴³ Here, he touches on the issues of historical knowledge and revolutionary potential within the oppressed class. Benjamin suggests that it is not individual figures or leaders but the collective struggles and experiences of the oppressed class throughout history that hold the true repository of historical knowledge.

Benjamin highlights the significance of this conviction, noting its fleeting resurgence within groups like the Spartacists. The statement reflects Benjamin’s criticism of Social Democrats who, according to him, have historically been resistant to this idea. It implies that Social Democrats might have been hesitant or opposed to recognizing the revolutionary potential residing within the oppressed class and their role as agents of historical transformation. Furthermore, he deepens the critique by mentioning: “Social Democratic theory, and even more its practice, have been formed by a concept of progress which did not adhere to reality but had dogmatic claims.”⁴⁴ Thus, Benjamin highlights a discrepancy

⁴¹ Luxemburg, “Leninism or Marxism,” 168.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 220.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 221.

between the theoretical belief in progress held by Social Democrats and the actual realities presented within society. He suggests that Social Democratic theory and practice might have been built upon an idealized or rigid concept of progress that did not align with the lived experiences or historical dynamics of the time.

This critique prompts readers to question ideological constructs detached from actual social, political, and historical realities. It urges a re-evaluation of theoretical frameworks and their relationship to tangible, material conditions. This serves as a reminder to reassess the foundations of ideological beliefs or theories, emphasizing the importance of grounding theoretical concepts in a comprehensive understanding of historical and social realities.

A second contrasting perspective emerges regarding the responsiveness of the socialist movement to historical context. Luxemburg underlines the importance of understanding historical circumstances in tailoring strategies, emphasizing adaptability to specific historical moments: “To encourage a correct historic appreciation of the forms of struggle corresponding to the given situations.”⁴⁵ She stresses the need for an accurate appreciation of historical conditions to shape the forms of struggle accordingly. This highlights the adaptability of tactics to the context of the time, aiming for an accurate assessment of historical conditions to guide methods of resistance and struggle. In contrast, Benjamin’s focus diverges from tailoring strategies to specific historical moments; instead, he emphasizes a different aspect. In his text, Benjamin accentuates the concept of *Jetztzeit*,⁴⁶ which denotes a rupture in historical continuity. His emphasis lies in disrupting the linear flow of history and envisioning a revolutionary consciousness that seeks redemption in the present moment. Benjamin writes: “The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action.”⁴⁷ Benjamin’s focus lies on the revolutionary rupture in the continuum of history, which might not directly align with the strategy of adapting tactics to specific historical moments.

⁴⁵ Luxemburg, “Leninism or Marxism,” 168.

⁴⁶ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 221.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

V. Conclusions

Throughout this analysis, it has been visible that both Luxemburg and Benjamin share common ground. First is their concern with the organic nature of revolutionary movements. Second is their skepticism toward overly rigid structures and their emphasis on the spontaneous character of revolutionary actions. Rosa Luxemburg's critique of centralized leadership and advocacy for the spontaneity of revolutionary actions align her with Benjamin's skepticism toward control mechanisms and his concern for the stifling effect of rigid systems.

Rosa Luxemburg is not a marginal but a marginalized protagonist in the history of 20th-century political thought.⁴⁸ Her contributions centered on the organic development of revolution from the masses, her critique of party centralization, and her advocacy for grassroots revolutionary movements. Her ideas remain significant in highlighting the complexities and challenges of revolution, especially in balancing spontaneity and organization. As Erdağı notes about Walter Benjamin: "Benjamin, like Marx, has placed history and materialism at the center of thinking and politics (...)." ⁴⁹ His focus on critique and skepticism toward oppressive systems provides a broader philosophical lens for understanding societal structures and their impact on revolutionary fervor. He enriches Marxist theory by highlighting the potential risks of overly rigid party structures. The philosophical challenge he poses to linear notions of progress and his assertion of the vital importance of critical historical moments resonate with those advocating for transformative societal change. As Neil Davidson states: "In other words, we need to see Benjamin's work not in opposition to the classical tradition, but as a contribution which enriches it, by deepening our understanding of some key themes and addressing others which had hitherto been absent."⁵⁰

Today, Luxemburg's and Benjamin's ideas hold relevance in socio-political discourse, particularly in assessing the dynamics between spontaneity and structure within social movements. At the same time, efforts on the left to restore radicality to democracy as a political form

⁴⁸ Alexandra Kemmerer, "Editing Rosa: Luxemburg, the Revolution, and the Politics of Infantilization," *The European Journal of International Law* 27, no. 3 (2016): 853.

⁴⁹ Erdağı, "Walter Benjamin and Political Philosophy," 55.

⁵⁰ Neil Davidson, "Walter Benjamin and the Classical Marxist Tradition," *International Socialism* 2, no. 121 (Winter 2009), accessed August 25, 2025, <https://marxists.architexturez.net/history/etol/writers/davidson/2009/xx/benjamin.html>.

remain significantly contested.⁵¹ In other words, democratization is predominantly subject to the elites' interests rather than dependent on other sociological factors. However, democracy is a wealth-redistributive political system, and once instituted the elite might still bear economic incentives to mount a coup and revert a country to non-democracy—a typical example of which is the history of political transitions in Latin America in the 20th century.⁵²

Therefore, by exploring how modern movements balance organization with spontaneity, as well as considering the implications of rigid structures on revolutionary potential, studying alternative organizational models might be a promising area for further research, as well as the efficient work of social democratic parties in 21st-century political systems. Thus, the influence of Luxemburg and Benjamin goes beyond Marxism, as these scholars have skillfully united their ideas into intersectional analyses.

The overall aim of intersectional analysis is to explore intersecting patterns between different structures of power and how people are simultaneously positioned—and position themselves—in multiple categories such as gender, class, and ethnicity. The intersectional approach is consequently based on a non-additive principle that refers to how different social categories mutually constitute each other as overall forms of social differentiation or systems of oppression, creating complex identities where different identifications are always mutually constitutive.⁵³ Moreover, understanding the complex relationship between power structures and revolutionary impulses remains a pertinent way for deeper exploration within the contemporary contexts of degrowth philosophy.

Therefore, Luxemburg and Benjamin offer not only theoretical insights on freedom, revolution, and collective agency, but also practical orientation stones for movements seeking to reclaim democracy from the ruling elites, as degrowth does.

⁵¹ John McSweeney, "Giving Politics an Edge: Rancière and the Anarchic Principle of Democracy," *Sofia Philosophical Review* 3, no. 1 (2009): 118.

⁵² Elias Sarantis, "Contemporary Political Development: Towards a Weaker Democracy," *Sofia Philosophical Review* 11, no. 2 (2018): 85.

⁵³ Ann-Dorte Christensen and Sune Qvortrup Jensen, "Doing Intersectional Analysis: Methodological Implications for Qualitative Research," *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 20, no. 2 (2012): 110.

Genealogy of the Instant: Plato's ἐξαίφνης, Paul's καιρός, and the Emergence of Kairological Time

Severina Stankeva (Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski)

Abstract: This paper aims at a genealogy of the concept of the instant (the time of the event) by tracing the relation between Plato's notion of ἐξαίφνης ("the instant") and Apostle Paul's use of καιρός ("the critical or opportune moment"). While Paul is often interpreted as synthesizing Greek philosophy with Jewish messianism, I argue that the Greek element is already divided between two distinct concepts: the metaphysical instantaneous time of the event and the practical temporality of timely action. This duality allows the conjunction with Jewish mystical apocalypticism and ultimately gives rise to a new structure of time that I call *kairological*, which later becomes decisive for the philosophical lineage of thinkers of the instant like Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Derrida.

Keywords: instant, *exaiphnes*, *kairos*, Plato, Paul, kairological time

Introduction

The figure of the Apostle Paul, as noted by several commentators, including Heidegger, Taubes, Badiou, and Agamben, has played a decisive role in a number of fundamental philosophical attitudes of Western modernity toward subjectivity, universalism, time, and history. His influence on the concept of the instant as the time of the event is unavoidable, insofar as specific features of his thought remain consistent in practically all subsequent authors dealing with the topic. This paper aims to outline its specifics. Although I agree with the widely held interpretation that Paul synthesizes Greek philosophical thought and Jewish messianism, I will argue that the Greek element is already a mixture of two concepts, hitherto understood as disparate—ἐξαίφνης and καιρός—the initial moment of time and the moment of epistemological enlightenment; and the time when conditions are right for the realization of a given action or decision. The connection between these concepts

makes possible the combination between the Greek understanding of time and the central Jewish mystical idea of the event as a twofold (divine and human) process.

The result of this double synthesis, or two syntheses, is that the event both retains its duality and also manages to fit into a less mystical and more philosophical framework, thanks to the modified Greek conceptual apparatus. The structure of the time of the event is close to that of the Greek instant [ἐξαίφνης], but with the key difference that it is doubled or postponed from the beginning to the end of time, thus acquiring a typically eschatological character, where the future becomes the privileged temporal mode, insofar as it gives meaning to the other two.

Both ἐξαίφνης (“the instant”, “suddenly”) and καιρός (“the right, critical moment”) are words from everyday language that acquire a special status in ancient philosophy. Ἐξαίφνης is a Platonic concept that marks the unfolding of the One into multiplicity and has a special connection with the process of higher knowledge, while καιρός is from rhetoric and signifies time that opens up possibilities, allows itself to be “seized”, and whose seizing leads to a practical action for which there is no pre-existing rule. Both denote qualitative, not quantitative, time.

My analysis will proceed in three steps. First, I will reconstruct the function of ἐξαίφνης in Plato’s late dialogues, where it marks the negative element of transformation and the passage between opposites. Second, I will examine the Greek notion of καιρός and its development as the site of practical action and decision. Finally, I will show how Paul transforms the two into an eschatological and messianic temporality that both interrupts chronological sequence and demands an active response. The aim is not to provide a theological or political reading of Paul’s epistles but rather to describe the formal ontological structure of the instant as it emerges from this genealogy.

Ἐξαίφνης — Platonism and the “Moving Image of Eternity”

The Greek adverb ἐξαίφνης, translated as “suddenly”, “the instant”, or “abruptly”, appears 36 times in the Platonic corpus. It is found in crucial passages from Plato’s middle and late periods, such as *Parmenides*, *Republic*, *Symposium*, *Letter VII*, *Theaetetus*, *Cratylus*, and *Statesman*. This frequency and placement signal its technical significance. In pre- and contemporaneous literature—in Homer, Aesop, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Thucydides, Herodotus, Isocrates, Aristophanes, and

Xenophon—the term was widely used to denote an unexpected turn for the worse, often in a military context. Plato, however, repurposes it philosophically, elevating it to a central concept describing fundamental processes. He employs it primarily in two contexts:

1. **Ontological** — to describe the process of the One’s multiplication into the Ideas and the visible world;
2. **Epistemological** — to describe the success or failure of philosophical knowledge and revelation.

In both cases, it serves as the linking element between different levels of being, facilitating a transition. The descent of the One into the plurality of Ideas and further into the flux of the visible world happens spontaneously, outside of any temporality. Yet it is this very act that creates chronological time. Conversely, the soul’s ascending knowledge that starts from the sensual realm and ultimately achieves the One is completed through an instantaneous epiphany, which is only partially conditioned by the efforts of the knower. However, the descent of the deluded soul into chaos, the visible, and matter is also instantaneous.

Cimakasky argues that Plato single-handedly adds a semantic nuance to ἐξάφνης, using it in the sense of cognitive enlightenment. However, this thesis is questionable since his contemporaries already used the adverb in a similar way. It is clear, however, that Plato begins to use it technically, even articulating it [τὸ ἐξάφνης] to emphasize the significance of his gesture. Furthermore, it seems that something of the older usage of a turn for the worse is also preserved—not only concerning the soul, but also insofar as the very multiplication of the One, although necessary, is a sign of the ontological degradation of the visible world.

Plato does not have a clearly defined philosophy of time. The most famous and widely discussed definition is from *Timaeus* 37d, where it is said that time is “a moving image of eternity.” In order to understand this definition, as well as its context, it is necessary to trace what, according to Plato, makes the representation of eternity possible—this is not addressed in *Timaeus*, as the dialogue deals with the emergence of the visible world solely from a cosmological perspective. The causal and dialectical origin of time is the subject of another later dialogue, *Parmenides*, which draws attention to the possible criticisms and objections that the doctrine of the One could give rise to, although, as usual, Plato’s own position remains unclear. It is in *Parmenides* that the most significant uses of ἐξάφνης are found. The text is usually divided into two parts:

1. An introduction, which outlines the difficulties surrounding the problem of participation—how things from the visible world can participate in eternal essences (Ideas);

2. The *exercise* [γυμνασθῆναι], which presents several different hypotheses aimed at clarifying the difficulties presented in the first part.

Ἐξάιφνης appears for the first time at the end of the second hypothesis (156c–e) in a passage devoted to the conditions of possibility of change:

But there is no time during which a thing can be at once neither in motion nor at rest. On the other hand it does not change without making a transition. When does it make the transition, then? Not while it is at rest or while it is in motion, or while it is occupying time. Consequently, the time at which it will be when it makes the transition must be that queer thing, the instant [ἐξάιφνης]. The word ‘instant’ [ἐξάιφνης] appears to mean something such that from it a thing passes to one or other of the two conditions. There is no transition from a state of rest so long as the thing is still at rest, nor from motion so long as it is still in motion, but this queer thing, the instant [ἐξάιφνης], is situated between the motion and the rest; it occupies no time at all, and the transition of the moving thing to the state of rest, or of the stationary thing to being in motion, takes place to and from the instant [ἐξάιφνης].

The instant reconciles the contradictory characteristics of the fundamental ontological principle, described in the first and second hypotheses (the One is both finite and infinite, in itself and in others, etc.). The relationship between time and the One is described similarly: in the first hypothesis, it is said that the One cannot be part of time or be in it (141d), and in the second (155e), that it cannot be foreign to it, since it encompasses everything. It seems that the One is subject to change in time, but this change, paradoxically, happens outside of time. Ἐξάιφνης determines this. Its first characteristic is “strange” (ἄτοπος—literally “not in place”, but also “extremely puzzling”). Then it is said to be “in between” [μεταξύ], a mediator between movement and rest—not in time, but at the beginning and end of every change, ensuring the transition.

According to Plato, the empirical assumption that movement begins in time must be reconsidered. Both the beginning and the end of change must be outside of time and not part of it. The instant in which

change occurs is not in time in the sense that it has no duration, nor is it part of it (past, future, or present). However, as Rangos notes, the instant belongs to time in the same way that a point without dimension can be “part” of a line. Just as a line is not formed by accumulating a series of points, time is not constituted by adding a series of instants. Points do not possess the most important characteristic of a line, namely extension, and therefore cannot form a line quantitatively, but qualitatively they are its condition of possibility, insofar as it would not be a line without them. It seems that ἐξάφνης functions in a similar way—as a boundary between two states or between a state and a process, which allows them to form a continuity, simultaneously connecting and separating them, insofar as the same “point” is the end of one and the beginning of the other. What determines the instant is not discussed. It seems necessary and unconditional, insofar as time already is, and the whole exercise proceeds from within it toward its cause.

This premise is consistent with the axiomatic nature of the participation thesis—the One participates in the sensible world as its cause and model, and the sensible world participates in the One insofar as it strives to imitate it. This argument is derived purely logically throughout the dialogue and is not put into question. Instead, Plato’s goal is to show how participation occurs operationally. The One in itself is not in time but in eternity, understood as intense infinity. But insofar as it spontaneously multiplies in matter, this eternity is set in motion and acquires duration, i.e., the character of time, which is extensively infinite, and therefore quantitative, precisely because of the qualitative instant that proportionizes it. The instant solves the problem of how a discontinuous continuity, such as time, is possible. It itself is not time and “is” not at all, insofar as it is not a being. Returning to *Timaeus* and its famous definition, what is often overlooked is its second part: time is “eternal but moving according to number.” The parts of time are a proportion set by eternity (proportionality). The instant is what allows proportionality to become proportion. It is ontological and forms the basis of dialectics, not physics, and does not measure movement; instead, movement is measured according to it.

Ἐξάφνης is also used to describe an epistemological transition that allows or prohibits the *anamnesis*—knowledge as recollection. Here, I will focus on three important examples that are sufficient to illustrate how ἐξάφνης fits into Plato’s epistemology: the process of acquiring

knowledge in *Letter VII*, the erotic ascent from *Symposium*, and the allegory of the cave from *Republic*. The uses of the adverb elsewhere correspond to one of the variants described below. Knowledge is described similarly in Plato's texts, with several motifs standing out:

1. It requires some form of exercise [γυμνασθῆναι]—dialectical, mathematical, or erotic. This is also noticeable in *Parmenides*, which serves as a pedagogical model of what such practice should look like.

2. True knowledge, as well as error, is reached in an instant—through an incalculable and abrupt culmination of the efforts of exercise in the first case, and through chaotic striving in the second.

3. What enables knowledge is the kinship of the knower with what is known. Through this kinship, the known can indicate itself.

4. Knowledge, the principle of being, and the instant are connected through the metaphor of light. This metaphor, with its components of principle–instant–light–knowledge–vision, is one of the most enduring in the history of philosophy.

In *Letter VII*, the epistemological process is presented in a distinctly technical manner, even if the letter claims (341d) that metaphysical truths are generated in the soul “suddenly [ἐξαίφνης], like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark.” This is followed by a description of four elements of knowledge, the fourth being knowledge itself, that make a fifth one knowable, which, however, is not dependent on them (341e–342d). While the first four elements give access to predicates, the fifth enables a knowledge of an object's being. This being is not expressed linguistically, but is seen. The text does not trace the transition from the fourth to the fifth element. It only specifies that the fifth is accessible only to those who are good by nature, and nothing can make the ones who are not see (342b).

Knowledge, therefore, is a capacity for vision that is given to a chosen few and is revealed suddenly only after prolonged practice in the first four elements. The text does not make it clear what exactly holds the affinity between the object and the soul that perceives it, but the instant once again allows the transition from one to the other in a manner similar to that in *Parmenides*. The difference is in the direction of the movement—just as the One manifests itself in time, so the knower makes an “upward” movement toward the being of that which he knows (which ultimately leads to the One as the first cause). This “upward” movement is revealed as permitted and conditioned by the “downward”

movement of the One and is possible because of the instant. Ἐξαίφνης in this sense has a self-referential character—illumination is both an insight into the structure of being and into one's own participation in it.

The question of repetition remains open. Insofar as knowledge does not happen once and for all, it seems that epiphany should be repeated. On the other hand, if the grasping of the ἀρχή is a singular act, then every subsequent instant should be a recollection of the recollection of the ἀρχή—that is, epistemologically secondary.

This aspect is somewhat thematized in *Symposium*, although the uses of Ἐξαίφνης primarily serve to distinguish the right path of knowledge from the wrong one. As Cimakasky notes, the dialogue is structurally close to *Parmenides* in three respects:

1. In both, the narrator recounts a conversation in which he did not participate;
2. Both are structured in two parts, the second of which is divided into clearly distinguishable theses or speeches;
3. In both, Ἐξαίφνης appears only in the second part.

In the case of *Symposium*, Ἐξαίφνης formally and thematically breaks up the order of the conversation, which, until the second use of the adverb, proceeds as a gradual accumulation of truth about beauty and love throughout all the speeches from Phaedrus to Socrates. First, Ἐξαίφνης appears in Diotima's story, retold by Socrates (210e), to describe the path to knowledge of beauty, mirroring *Letter VII*—in order to see the essence of love and beauty, the lover must go through a methodical exercise that starts from the multitude of beautiful things and reaches the Idea of beauty itself. In this, he becomes “immortal” (212a) by connecting with the eternal essence of the object. A soul that is good by nature, as long as it is taught correctly, successfully completes the exercise because it is characterized by an unrelenting erotic desire for knowledge that does not allow it to give up.

This does not mean that she is incapable of making mistakes. The other three uses of Ἐξαίφνης in the dialogue show precisely this. The adverb is used:

1. when Alcibiades' company bursts into Agathon's house (212c);
2. when Alcibiades learns that Socrates is also there and has taken his place next to Agathon (213c); and
3. when Socrates takes his place next to Agathon again and a new rowdy company bursts in, conclusively disrupting the order (223b).

Agathon and Socrates are clearly not merely participants in the dialogue, but allegorical figures representing the Ideas of Goodness and Beauty, respectively. These Ideas overlap but do not coincide. Alcibiades and the chaos he brings can thus be seen as the embodiment of a soul that possesses the spark of knowledge but has not been cultivated according to the prescribed path. Therefore, he cannot distinguish one Idea from another. Bursting in, Alcibiades seeks Agathon (“the cleverest, the most attractive”) to crown him. Sitting between Agathon and Socrates, he separates them, but then gets sidetracked and turns his attention to Socrates, delivering a speech in his honor instead, which makes everyone laugh. Socrates then criticizes him, saying that his speech should have been about Agathon (the Good). Agathon returns to Socrates, but soon after, a new group arrives.

Alcibiades is knowledgeable and seeks goodness and beauty, but due to his incorrect practice, he fails to see them and understand why Socrates (who has studied correctly) takes his place next to Agathon. Alcibiades uses Diotima’s dialectical syntax but speaks of images rather than the Idea itself—and therefore errs. He is an example of the instant as a marker of the error. Something of the structure of true enlightenment remains—unpredictability—but there is no order and clarity, only confusion. If true knowledge involves distinguishing truth from falsehood, Alcibiades remains entirely in falsehood, without recognizing it. From this point on, the dialogue falls apart. Although Agathon temporarily returns to Socrates, the arrival of the second company puts an end to the conversation.

In *Republic*, the adverb is used analogously—three times in the myth of the cave—bringing together all the aspects discussed in *Parmenides*, *Letter VII*, and *Symposium*.

The allegory of the cave in *Republic* (514a–517a) illustrates the effects of education, or lack thereof, on human nature. Socrates begins his story with a description of “strange” [ἄτοπον] prisoners in a cave who, like us, are blind to the illusory nature of what they call reality. If a prisoner were to be freed, he would “suddenly” [ἐξαίφνης] be disoriented and, due to the glare of the light, would not be able to recognize the real objects, and would flee from the source of light because it would cause him pain (514c). This position is close to that of Alcibiades in *Symposium*, in that he begins to reflect on beauty and goodness abruptly, without having heard the speeches of the others, which leads him to con-

fusion and total blindness to the true source of light (the One). However, if the prisoner is instead forced to climb toward the exit until he gets outside, he would again be unable to “suddenly” [ἐξαίφνης] recognize anything of the real objects, and would have to spend time methodically getting used to them (516a). Thus, he would gradually be able to look directly at the sun itself and would not want to return to life in the cave. However, if he returned, his eyes would be “suddenly” [ἐξαίφνης] once again enveloped in darkness, and he would appear ridiculous to the others because he would not participate in their trivial disputes about the shadows (517a).

There is a noticeable structural similarity between the description of the soul in *Republic* and that in *Symposium*—in both cases, it is characterized by lack [ἐλλειψις] and desire [πόθος]. In *Symposium*, it is represented through Eros as always craving what it lacks, neither completely mortal nor completely divine, while in *Republic*, its affective part [ἐπιθυμία] is in constant tension with the rational [λόγος] one. Its full realization occurs when it renounces its lower desires and ascends to the Good or the One. There is also a structural similarity between the soul and the instant, insofar as they fall under the definitions of ἄτοπος and μεταξύ, but the instant seems to be pure negativity, insofar as it itself possesses no divine spark, nor is it pulled in opposite directions, but only provides the transition from one opposite to another.

From all the examples discussed so far, it seems that ἐξαίφνης is used terminologically and consistently to describe the transition from one opposite to another. It makes possible the difference that ensures the emanation of the One, the passage of time, and the unity in recollection. Furthermore, the pre-Platonic use of the adverb as a turn for the worse is also partially preserved in cases of false knowledge and delusion. In Plato, the ontological and epistemological are differentiated from the practical—a separation that is no longer observable in the Apostle Paul. Here, ἐξαίφνης and καιρός are still thought of as unrelated to each other.

Καιρός and its dual origin

In Plato’s time, καιρός meant the right, critical moment, or the moment when a favorable opportunity for action arises. The adverb derives its meaning from two sources: archery and weaving. In archery, καιρός refers to a long, tunnel-like opening through which the arrow must pass in order to reach its target. Hence, it must be shot accurately and with the

proper force. Some researchers argue that the meaning of *καῖρός* has changed historically from concreteness to abstractness, insofar as in the tragedians, the word and its etymologically related counterparts (Homer, for example, uses *καῖριος*) are used to denote specific parts of the body, most often the head, through which a person can be killed. Gradually, *καῖρός* began to denote not the place on the body or the opening at which the archer aims, but the possibility of aiming—the correct way in which one must act in order to hit the target accurately. From here, the word became associated with proportion, the division of parts (etymologically, there is a similarity with *κείρω*, “to cut”).

A very similar word from weaving, *καῖρος*, is also related to an opening. According to Late Antiquity sources, it refers to the gap that opens at the base of the fabric through which the weaver must pull the thread with the spindle. Subsequently, as with *καῖρός*, *καῖρος* began to mean the very act of pulling, which is quick and dexterous, similar to shooting an arrow. This usage links the adverb to time—the opening is fleeting, so the shuttle must also be “shot” at the right moment. It seems that the figure of weaving fate helps to establish this meaning. In both lines of origin, the transition in connotation is from place to action and from space to time.

As White notes, since the circumstances that enable timely action are variable, *καῖρός* implies a flow of time that is composed of interruptions and that contradicts chronological or historical duration and sequence. The present is not understood as a natural consequence of a causal chain of events, but as an unprecedented moment of crisis in which a decision must be made that cannot rely on past experience. The adverb is thought of in a similar way in classical rhetoric and is widely found in philosophical texts.

Given these uses, it is logical that *καῖρός* should have some relation with *ἐξάιφνης*, insofar as both are opposed to chronological time. Contrary to expectations, there is no connection between the two, which is understandable given the categorical separation of practical [*φρόνησις*] from speculative wisdom [*σοφία*] in ancient thought. In Plato’s corpus, *καῖρός* occurs over 50 times, and in most cases in connection with the pair knowledge–action, but not once is it accompanied by a reflection on the structure of time or recollection. Getting the timing right is not an instantaneous matter—of enlightenment or understanding a universal principle—but instead of acting on the basis of

knowledge in the first four elements described in *Letter VII*. Seizing the moment is not entirely a matter of chance, as everything seems to have its own appropriate time, but it is not predetermined in the way that amnesia is inevitable, provided that one has been trained correctly. In a situation of *καιρός*, one acts without a pre-established rule, insofar as each situation is unique. One rather sets a new rule, determined by the right time, place, degree, and appropriateness of the action, but not reducible to them.

As Levi notes, in Plato, *καιρός* connects the ethical and aesthetic spheres through the concept of proportion—seizing is thought of as understanding and applying the right measure to opposites. If *ἐξαίφνης* marks a transition from one ontological layer to another or from one opposition to another, then *καιρός* mediates oppositions at the level of historical time, and the action that results from it may have rhetorical, aesthetic, ethical, or political connotations, but it remains separate from the higher ontological–epistemological layers, as evidenced by the absence of the figure of light/vision.

Paul’s Epistles and *καιρός* as a Messianic Category

It is difficult to pinpoint when the practical wisdom of *καιρός* began to be thought of as inseparable from the ontological structure of time. Some researchers argue that this happened in Neoplatonism. However, it seems that in the New Testament, they were already merged. The figure of the Apostle Paul plays a key role in this process. In this section, I will limit myself to presenting the structure of messianic time in Paul and its formal characteristics through short readings of Taubes and Agamben. The effects of this particular understanding of time, whether theological, political, or other, will remain unaddressed.

Taubes argues that Paul appropriates concepts from Greek philosophy, emptying them of their original meaning and charging them with apocalyptic urgency through Jewish mysticism, thereby destabilizing both Hellenistic rationality and Mosaic law. In his lectures, he seeks to present the “Jewish Paul”, detached from Christian tradition, especially from the dominant Protestant interpretation that informs thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Heidegger.

As far as the structure of time is concerned, Taubes argues that while the beginning is most important in the Greek worldview, Abraham already understands history from the end. However, the contribution of

the Apostle Paul to messianism is not simply a shift of the point of meaning from the beginning to the end of time, but a reorientation of the destiny of humanity between the poles of beginning and end, between *πρῶτος* and *ἔσχατον*, resurrection and the Second Coming (*παρουσία*). The Second Coming is an event that, although not actual, is predetermined as eschatological through the death and resurrection of Jesus (*πρῶτος* is always-already *ἔσχατον*), and human history, both in general and in individual–existential terms, is the time that remains until the apocalypse. In this sense, the future is the privileged temporal mode, but the future is also, from a certain point of view, the past, insofar as it marks the end of time, which will necessarily come. The time that remains is defined as *καιρός*—the turning point where the earthly [Irdischem] world touches the unearthly [Überirdischem]. According to Taubes, this state of constant expectation is characteristic of the Jewish apocalypse. Gradually, in the course of history, it fades away and is replaced by speculative *γνώσις*, and the events of the end of time are transformed into parables about the path of the soul and its ascent to paradise.

In *The Time That Remains*, Agamben interprets Paul in the spirit of Taubes. His goal is to restore the messianic character of Paul’s corpus, which he believes has been erased by the Christian church. His central thesis is the distinction between “the time of the end” [*καιρός*] and “the end of time” [*ἔσχατον*]. The former is “the time that remains”, beginning with the contraction of chronological time [*χρόνος*], while the latter is the last instant that marks the very end. Thus, messianism means life in the remainder, not a description of the *ἔσχατον*. For Agamben, messianic time is an intervention in the form of chronological time, which destroys it from within, without, however, belonging to it. The messianic event has an “unidual structure” and does not occur in a transitional period between the time of the earthly world and eternity, but is the result of a transformation in the way time is understood, which allows eternity to manifest itself in it, without the two coinciding. Paul’s expression *ὁ νῦν καιρός* (“now is the accepted time; [...] now is the day of salvation”, 2 Cor. 6:2) shows the tension between the present [*νῦν*] and messianic time [*καιρός*]: they are coextensive but irreducible to each other.

To explain this, Agamben uses the concept of “operative time” [*temps opératif*] developed by the linguist Guillaume—an internal time of potentiality that precedes its realization in speech and thus cannot be

represented figuratively, since it gives time. In the same way, messianic time is a suspension of the chronological, in which the eschaton is already present but not realized. The messianic is not a fixed point, but a dynamic opening of the present that reformulates the relationship between action and possibility. Agamben argues that this connection between the messianic and the chronological always already exists. The task of the apostle is not to provoke the Second Coming, but to respond to it by living in the time that remains, by accepting chronological time as a remnant and restoring its internal fragmentation and potentiality. Capturing time is destroying time, “returning” it to the partiality of form, in the process of construction. It remains problematic how such a “restoration” of time can be conceived, since it cannot be represented at all. Moreover, the very contraction of time is made possible by a series of historical events that began with the birth of Christ, which limits a purely formal interpretation.

The question of the last instant also remains unresolved. Agamben defines it as internal to messianic time, but it simultaneously produces and transcends it: it is postponed in order to create the field of kairotic action and sets the goal of the entire structure. Although Paul is primarily interested in the remnant, this remnant itself is dependent on the eschatological instant that grounds it.

Καίρὸς appears numerous times in the epistles of the Apostle Paul, and not always in the phrase that Agamben draws attention to. Various classifications of its uses have been made. For the purposes of this presentation, I will limit myself to noting that the unidual structure of messianic time can be explained without the concept of operative time, but purely theologically through the Christological concept of περιχώρησις—the Son of God enters the world as a human being, but this does not make him human, even if it allows the coexistence of two natures in one hypostasis. In a similar way, messianic time can be thought of in relation to the time of the world—they are essentially different, but act simultaneously. That is why καίρὸς is used to describe the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 5:6), but also the last day (1 Cor. 4:5), as well as for the time of urgency in which the messianic community lives and must act (Rom. 13:11).

Returning to the thesis that Paul combines Greek philosophy and Jewish mysticism, it can be assumed that the combination is more complex and is permissible at the level of each of the elements. That is, in

addition to Jewish mysticism, where this is well known, Greek philosophy should also allow for a connection between the structure of time and its practical perception, although, as we have seen, paradoxicality is permissible only at the ontological level. Although the connection is not inherent to the Greek worldview, it seems that it allows the introduction of the element of the event, which connects the level of ontology with that of practice, or ἐξαίφνης with καιρός.

As Daube notes, ἐξαίφνης and its derivatives ἐξαπίνης, ἄφνω, and αἰφνίδιος are like ghosts in dictionaries because of the lack of attention given to them. In fact, this semantic core is used many times in the New Testament and in quite a few key passages. In most cases, it is associated with some form of enlightenment, as well as with imagery of the eye, gaze, and light on the one hand, and, similarly to Plato's maieutics, with birth and labor pains on the other, sometimes taking on apocalyptic overtones. In the Old Testament, "suddenly" (*pith 'om, petha'*, translated into Greek as ἐξαίφνης) is initially used, as in Greek, in the colloquial sense of a turn for the worse, but later gradually begins to be used (although extremely rarely) in a positive sense as the time of a miraculous event. Accordingly, it seems that the positive element is not entirely Jewish, but also resembles the understanding of the instant in Platonism; i.e., there is a certain semantic proximity between the two traditions in this regard. The enlightenment described by ἐξαίφνης in the New Testament is no longer cognitive in the same sense, insofar as the emphasis falls categorically on the instance that sets it, and it is not preceded by intellectual preparation. The factor of human effort is causally displaced after the event, insofar as it is set by it, but chronologically it continues to precede it, as in Platonism, at least as far as its eschatological aspect is concerned. The exercise has been replaced by καιρός, practical actions of expectation and appropriate response to the open opportunity in the messianic time.

There are two uses of ἐξαίφνης related to the Apostle Paul, but the adverb is not used by him at all. It occurs twice in the *Acts of the Holy Apostles*. In 9:3, it is used to describe the epiphany that befell the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus, which ultimately led to his conversion to Christianity: "And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly [ἐξαίφνης] there shined round about him a light from heaven..." In 22:6, it is also used in the account of this story to the Jews in Jerusalem: "suddenly [ἐξαίφνης] there shone from heaven a great

light round about me.” In both places, the light is described as blinding, but no longer in a negative sense. As Daube notes, in the third version of this story (26:13), when the Apostle Paul speaks before Agrippa, blindness and ἐξαίφνης are absent, which he explains by the fact that in the first two cases the subject is the light, while the third emphasizes Paul’s own experience. Suddenness seems to be used to describe a miraculous event in itself.

In the epistles of Paul, ἐξαίφνης is not used, but in a key passage from *1 Thessalonians* (5:3), its derivative αἰφνίδιος is used in close proximity to and in connection with καιρός, albeit in its more everyday sense:

But of the times and the seasons [Περὶ δὲ τῶν χρόνων καὶ τῶν καιρῶν], brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. / For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them [τότε αἰφνίδιος αὐτοῖς ἐπίσταται ὀλεθρος], as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.

In this case, the adjective characterizes destruction; i.e., its use is analogous to the usage described by Daube. Although in this passage καιρός is used in the sense of meteorological time, a connection between ἐξαίφνης and καιρός can still be postulated through their use to describe eschatological events. Here again, the motif of light and vision appears—the expectation of the last day by the messianic community is described as a watch through the night.

In another passage, this time from *1 Corinthians* (15:52), a connection between the motif of seeing and that of blindness can be observed in a way that is not seen in Plato:

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye [ἐν ῥιπῇ ὀφθαλμοῦ], at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

Since there is no word for the instant as the twinkling of an eye in Greek, Daube concludes that its use in this place corresponds to that of the Hebrew *regha’*. Although this case is unique, Daube argues that the German word *Augenblick* began to be used with a similar meaning and acquired philosophical significance because of Luther’s translation of

this very expression. He also argues that the temporal meaning of the instant has an entirely different history, but considering everything said so far, it seems that from an eschatological lens, the two histories are difficult to separate.

Following Agamben's distinction between messianism and eschatology, it can be concluded that *καιρός* is a concept characterizing the time of the end, and *ἐξάιφνης*—the end of time. There is a connection between the two insofar as there is a connection between their respective spheres, and, as I have already pointed out, eschatological time determines messianic time.

Conclusion

The genealogy traced here shows how the concept of the instant emerges not as a single, homogeneous notion, but as the conjunction of heterogeneous temporal logics. In Plato, *ἐξάιφνης* names the paradoxical moment of transition—between rest and motion, ignorance and knowledge, time and eternity. It is a negative element, marking the threshold where the two intersect but not mix. In the Greek rhetorical tradition, *καιρός* names something different: the opportune moment of intervention, the site of decision in which action becomes possible without predetermined rules.

Paul's originality lies in bringing these two distinct strands together by exploiting a possible coherence in the two Greek notions. By fusing *ἐξάιφνης* with *καιρός*, he constructs a temporality in which the sudden rupture of the event coincides with the demand for practical response. This synthesis makes possible a new kairological temporal structure, at once eschatological and messianic, which both interrupts chronological sequence and orients it toward its end. In this way, Paul transforms the instant into a formal structure that is simultaneously ontological (rupture of being), epistemological (illumination), and practical (decision).

What emerges from this genealogy is that the instant cannot be reduced either to a point in chronological sequence or to a purely mystical event outside of time. It is a transcendental joint that requires both a transcendent guarantee and a subjective response to operate. Thus, it marks a decisive site for philosophy: the point at which being, knowledge, and praxis are bound together through temporality.

The Dialectic and Its Undoing: Lukács, Benjamin, and Nietzsche on Capitalist Ideology

Maria Chatzopoulou (University of Sofia)

Abstract: This essay investigates the tension between dialectical critique and its undoing in contemporary interpretations of capitalist Ideology. The presentation begins with György Lukács' concept of reification, looking at how capitalist society distorts consciousness and converts human relationships into objectified systems. Furthermore, Walter Benjamin's research reinforces this criticism by highlighting how spectacle and myth contribute to the aestheticization of ideology. Additionally, Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulation proposes that Ideology creates an independent system of signs by replacing reality rather than hiding it. Alexander Gungov's notion of real semblance is introduced to articulate how modern subjectivity is constituted by this order of images rather than obscured by it. Finally, Friedrich Nietzsche's perspectivism reinterprets illusion not as distortion, but as a generating horizon for transformative contact with the world. By comparing these thinkers, this study suggests that the collapse of dialectical critique under postmodern conditions does not represent a theoretical defeat, but rather a shift in the ontology of appearance. The tension between critique and semblance, subjectivity and self-overcoming, remains central to any philosophical attempt to grasp ideology in late capitalism.

Keywords: ideology, dialectical critique, late capitalism, reification, spectacle and myth, perspectivism

Introduction

In modern philosophy, the connection between capitalism and Ideology is one of the most important issues. Does capitalism deliberately create myths that influence how we see time, history, and identity, or does it merely obscure truth and mystify the social institutions that control our lives? For thinkers like György Lukács, capitalism is a system of reifica-

tion in which human relations are objectified and presented as immutable economic laws. For Walter Benjamin, capitalism survives not by hiding reality but by producing an alternative one through spectacle and myth. More radically, Friedrich Nietzsche (as interpreted by Vanessa Freerks) challenges the very premise of critique: perhaps there is no hidden truth beneath capitalism's illusions, only a plurality of interpretations competing for dominance. As capitalism evolves into symbolic and speculative forms, this debate becomes urgent: is critique a path to demystification, or is it entangled in the ideological web?

The title *The Dialectic and Its Undoing*, which alludes to two movements, revolves around this tension. In the first place, it shows how capitalism is progressively absorbing and neutralizing dialectical critique, turning revolutionary concepts like spectacle or reification into forms that support structural stability. It also demonstrates Nietzsche's general dislike of dialectics. While Lukács and Benjamin assume that ideology conceals a truth that critique can unmask, Nietzsche (via Freerks) argues that all knowledge is perspectival, lacking any access to final truth. The "undoing" thus refers both to capitalism's ideological adaptability and to Nietzsche's perspectival critique of metaphysical foundations.

To address this problem, we must bring together four key perspectives. First, Lukács presents capitalism as reification: social relations take on the appearance of natural economic facts, alienating individuals from the human basis of life. Second, Benjamin shows how capitalism produces mythologies by substituting history with spectacle. Both thinkers emphasize how capitalism manipulates perception, economically for Lukács and symbolically for Benjamin; thus, for them, the Hegelian dialectic remains a key intellectual tool. Lukács adapts Hegel's logic of contradiction into a Marxist method to reveal reified relations and recover human essence. Benjamin reworks the dialectic through temporality and memory, aiming to interrupt historical continuity via messianic rupture. In both, the dialectic retains a critical telos: unveiling illusion and transforming subjectivity.

Third, contemporary theorists Alexander Gungov and Haralambi Panicidis show how reification and myth converge in post-consumerist capitalism. Capitalism no longer hides its contradictions but aestheticizes them. Gungov's "real semblance" and Panicidis' critique of capitalism's conceptual adaptability show that even critique itself can become a converted form. Fourth, Nietzsche (through Freerks) suggests

that the very distinction between illusion and reality is metaphysical. All critique is interpretation.

Contemporary capitalism eludes comprehensive theoretical explanation. Rather, it operates through dual mechanisms: economic reification (Lukács) and symbolic spectacle (Benjamin). Gungov and Panicidis show how these dynamics converge in post-consumerist capitalism. Nietzsche complicates further the picture by questioning whether critique can ever escape ideology. Modern capitalism combines reification and myth, but Nietzsche forces us to ask whether critique discloses truth or simply re-inscribes illusion.

There are five sections in the essay. The first discusses Lukács' concept of reification. The second looks at Benjamin's view of spectacle and myth. In the third, these views are coupled with the work of Panicidis and Gungov. The fourth part examines Nietzsche's perspectivism as interpreted by Freerks. The last section examines whether critique can transcend ideology or must remain creatively within its parameters. Whether critical thinking can reinforce or weaken illusions is examined in the conclusion.

Lukács: Capitalism as Reification

Commodification is not a local economic problem but the universal structure of capitalist life, affecting law, knowledge, politics, emotion, and even how we see ourselves and others. *In Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat*, Lukács provides a foundational critique of the power of capitalist ideology. He claims that the defining feature of capitalist society is reification which means the transformation of human relations into relations between things. As labor becomes commodified and inserted into an exchange system, social interactions and institutions appear as autonomous, objective structures rather than historically produced human practices. This process, Lukács writes, gives rise to a world where "a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a phantom objectivity (the social relation appears not as something shaped by people, but as an autonomous structure, untouchable and unquestioned)."¹ The world of commodities thus mystifies its origins, and individuals see economic laws and institutions not as social constructs but as immutable facts (commodity fetishism).

This condition ultimately leads to alienation. According to Lukács,

¹ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 83.

reification is not merely an illusion, but it structures perception, knowledge, and even legal and bureaucratic systems. Under capitalism, individuals experience society not as a human project but as an external, abstract mechanism. Lukács notes that law becomes a “formal calculus through which the legal consequences of particular actions can be determined as exactly as possible”.² This exemplifies how capitalism devoids social life of meaning, reducing it to quantitative standards divorced from ethical or civic considerations. The individual is cut off from labor and social totality, unable to recognize its historical roots or human mediation.

One key aspect of Lukács’ theory is that reification influences consciousness. The bourgeois subject, split by the division of labor and mediated by abstract categories, is unable to see past appearances. Knowledge becomes fragmented, mirroring the structure of capitalist production: “The formalistic conceptualization of the special sciences becomes for philosophy an immutably given substratum ... and this signals the final and despairing renunciation of every attempt to cast light on the reification that lies at the root of this formalism”.³ Thus, Ideology in Lukács is not merely false consciousness but a structure of perception embedded in everyday life and reinforced by scientific, legal, and administrative norms.

The proletariat can overcome reification since it experiences the totality of capitalist alienation. Moreover, it can move from a passive, reified consciousness to an active, dialectical one, through revolutionary praxis. The transformation involves recognizing that capitalist structures are not natural but contingent and thus changeable. For Lukács, the goal of critique is not simply to interpret ideology but to unmask it and transform it.⁴

The analysis of Lukács finds powerful contemporary extensions in Alexander Gungov’s article “Real Semblance Flourishing in Post-Consumerist Society”. “Real semblance” in the aesthetic tradition is the concept that artistic form can express profound or essential truths, though not literal reality. The appearance resonates with truth, not by imitating the real, but by revealing its essence through the form. In the article, the term “real semblance” no longer refers to a semblance that reveals the truth but to a semblance that appears to be real (yet is an

² Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 108.

³ Ibid., 110

⁴ Ibid., 145-9.

even deeper form of illusion). Gungov argues that reification has evolved into a second-order illusion in post-consumerist capitalism, where ideological forms appear autonomous and self-generating. He describes the logic of “converted forms” as a process by which capitalist contradictions are absorbed and aestheticized, producing an illusion of flexibility and renewal even amid structural crises.⁵ Much like Lukács’ analysis of how law and economics become self-legitimizing systems, Gungov shows how post-consumer capitalism creates quasi-objects, ideologically saturated but ontologically hollow forms.

Moreover, Gungov’s concept of “real semblance” underscores the evolution of reification into a spectacular illusion that feeds on contradictions.⁶ For instance, the financialization of capital creates wealth not by producing value but by manipulating appearance, through speculation, futures markets, and symbolic valuation. This corresponds to Lukács’ claim that capitalist society becomes increasingly abstract and irrational, governed not by reason but by a “contemplative stance” that masks its contradictions.⁷ Gungov extends this by showing how even critical categories can be reabsorbed into the system, turning critique into a marketable image.

Haralambi Panacidis also reinforces Lukács’ analysis by emphasizing the dialectical role of reification in the history of capitalism. In “Marx’s Capital: A Philosophy of Capitalist Society”, he maintains that the basic logic underpinning capitalist reproduction is reification, not merely mystification. Reified forms represent how capitalism connects individuals and also the restrictions that hinder them from understanding beyond this relationship.⁸ Thus, reification is structurally necessary; it is the medium through which social life is organized. It is also a form of systemic blindness, enabling capitalism to function while hiding its contradictions.

Panacidis describes also how capitalism, through its inherent structures and dynamics, generates its theoretical frameworks, making previ-

⁵ Alexander Gungov, “Real Semblance Flourishing in Post-Consumerist Society,” *Sofia Philosophical Review* 7, no. 2 (2013), 96-7.

⁶ Gungov, “Real Semblance Flourishing,” 96,101.

⁷ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 98-100.

⁸ Haralambi Panacidis, “Marx’s Capital: A Philosophy of Capitalist Society,” *Sofia Philosophical Review* 11, no. 1 (2018), 108-110.

ous societal theories less applicable.⁹ This idea is similar to Lukács's in that the bourgeois worldview interprets itself as complete and closed, incapable of recognizing its historicity. Panicedis argues that this closure is not accidental: it is formatted. Capitalist thought evolves to neutralize dialectical reflection and ensure ideological stability and reproduction. This interpretation offers a crucial theoretical bridge to Benjamin, who will argue that capitalism constructs economic illusion and symbolic and historical myth.

Both Gungov and Panicedis extend Lukács' concept of reification into the twenty-first century. Gungov shows how reification operates through illusion and semiotic adaptation, while Panicedis shows how it functions as an epistemological trap, a system that organizes knowledge around false totalities. Their work confirms this essay's view that modern capitalism cannot be understood through economic critique alone but must be seen as a hybrid of structural and symbolic strategies. Lukács provides the economic logic, the transformation of social relations into things, while Gungov and Panicedis demonstrate how that logic mutates into ideological resilience and mythic coherence: "Interest-bearing capital is the consummate *automatic fetish*, the self-expanding value, the moneymaking money, and in this form it no longer bears any trace of its origin. Social relations are consummated as a relationship between things (money, commodities) and themselves: "Mamardashvili calls the converted form of reality, which is different from genuine existence, a "quasi-object" within a certain system. It does not apply only to capitalist production and distribution; it is true for the structure of the sub-conscious and its appearance on the surface, for mythical thinking, and for the way language functions."¹⁰

Lukács offers the foundational theory that capitalism hides reality by presenting historically constructed forms as natural and inevitable. Gungov and Panicedis reveal how this logic now includes converted forms and cognitive normalization, allowing capitalism to survive even as its economic contradictions deepen. In the next section, Benjamin will extend this analysis from economic concealment to symbolic construction, showing how capitalism no longer merely reifies but mythologizes.

Panicedis argues in "Marx's Capital: A Philosophy of Capitalist Society", that capitalism sustains itself through repression by converting

⁹ Panicedis, "Marx's Capital," 21-23.

¹⁰ Gungov, "Real Semblance Flourishing," 99.

social relations into objective forms that appear natural and autonomous; the system internalizes critique, presenting even alienation as a productive dynamic. This supports the view of capitalism as a “self-model structure”, not a term he uses explicitly, but one that captures his analysis of how Ideology evolves from within reified relations.¹¹ Gungov too, warns that critique risks becoming a *converted form*, aestheticized into surface-level dissent (the image of Che Guevara functions as a *real semblance*, as a symbol of revolution widely used on T-shirts, posters, bags and merchandise, stripped of its historical and political content thereby illustrating how dissent is transformed into aestheticized commodity, stripped of subversive content).¹² From a Nietzschean perspective, as we will see later, these analyses highlight the impossibility of escaping interpretation: even disruption is assimilated by the system’s semiotic logic.

Lukács and Althusser on the Formation of Consciousness: From Reification to Ideological Interpellation

Lukács’ theory of reification provides a compelling description of how capitalist structures conceal their origins and fracture consciousness; it also assumes the possibility of a dialectical awakening grounded in historical action. However, structuralist thinkers have strongly contested this vision of revolutionary consciousness, arguing that is based on a humanist understanding of subjectivity. Louis Althusser, for example, takes a quite different approach to the creation of consciousness. Rather than considering ideology as a veil that may be lifted, Althusser sees it as a structural process that constitutes the very person who will struggle to reject it. The following part explores Althusser’s theory of ideological interpellation that functions as a counterpoint to Lukács. It shows how the shift from historical phenomenology to structuralist materialism reframes the question of ideology, subjectivity, and political possibility.

Lukács and Althusser both agree that the formation of consciousness under capitalism is a fundamental issue; however, their methodologies differ significantly. Lukács, writing in the early twentieth century within the Marxist humanist tradition, focuses on the experiential and

¹¹ Panicidis, “Marx’s Capital,” 22.

¹² Gungov, “Real Semblance Flourishing,” 96–97.

historical dimensions of class consciousness. Althusser, on the other hand, in his structuralist intervention of the late 1960s and early 1970s, focuses on how Ideology functions to reproduce the conditions of production by constituting subjects. Both theorists are concerned with how people absorb capitalist institutions; however, their conceptual frameworks differ dramatically, particularly in how they conceive subjectivity, ideology, and the possibility of revolutionary transformation.

According to Lukács, the idea of reification is essential to comprehending how consciousness is shaped by capitalist society. In “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat”, he argues that in a capitalist mode of production, social relations between people appear as relations between things. He refers to this “phantom objectivity” as obscuring the historical and human roots of social structures. Reification permeates all facets of society, including law, science, and day-to-day existence; it is not just an economic activity. It cultivates an abstracted, fragmented consciousness that is cut off from the entirety of social relationships.

This type of consciousness, as Lukács argues, is historically produced rather than naturally occurring. It results from the commodity form and division of labor, which reduces human work to measurable, exchangeable units. The worker is alienated not only from the outcome of their labor, but also from the social whole and even from their ability for critical reflection. However, Lukács maintains that this condition is not immutable.

The proletariat, by virtue of its position in the production process, has the potential to overcome reification through the development of class consciousness. This consciousness is imputed (*zugerechnet*) in the sense that it represents the standpoint that the proletariat could attain once it apprehends its historical role. According to Lukács, class awareness is dialectical. It is a transformative process that allows the individual to understand all social interactions, not only being conscious of one’s social rank. By organizing and disseminating the class’s underlying historical potential, the political party contributes to facilitating this process. Reification can be broken not through empirical knowledge alone, but through a dialectical awakening that allows the subject to see capitalist social forms as historically contingent and therefore alterable.

Whereas Lukács foregrounds the dialectical consciousness of the proletariat, Althusser approaches the problem from a fundamentally dif-

ferent angle. In his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1970), he abandons the phenomenological and historical vocabulary of alienation and consciousness in favor of a structuralist analysis. For Althusser, ideology is not a distorted representation of reality but a material structure that constitutes individuals as subjects. Ideology “interpellates” individuals, hailing them into pre-given social roles and thus ensuring the reproduction of the relations of production.¹³

Whereas Lukács sees consciousness as potentially liberating, Althusser views it as always already structured by ideology. There is no “outside” to ideology in Althusser’s account.¹⁴ Every subject is born into ideological systems that influence and form them. The family, school, church, and media serve as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), instilling in people the behaviors and beliefs required to sustain capitalism¹⁵. In this theory, the subject is the result of ideological processes rather than the source of meaning.

This condition has a substantial impact on our understanding of awareness and agency. Althusser is frequently criticized for prioritizing structure over agency. Because subjects are constantly interpellated, the possibility of breaking free from ideology appears limited, if not impossible. However, Althusser does allow for a degree of struggle within the ISAs, suggesting that ideology is a terrain of class conflict.¹⁶ Still, the path to transformation is less clear than in Lukács, where the dialectical process and the role of the party offer a roadmap for revolutionary consciousness.

The differences between Lukács and Althusser thus hinge on their respective views of subjectivity and the role of ideology. For Lukács, the subject has the capacity for self-reflection and historical understanding, even if that capacity is obscured by reification. Consciousness can be elevated through dialectical education and collective praxis. For Althusser, by contrast, the subject is an effect of ideology and lacks an autonomous standpoint from which to critique it. According to this perspective, consciousness is not a place of emancipation but rather a

¹³ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), 127–128.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 143–145.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 146–147.

mechanism of servitude.

There are various examples of convergence in spite of these differences. Both thinkers agree that capitalism conceals its reproduction conditions in a methodical manner. Lukács locates this in the fetishism of commodities and the rationalization of life, while Althusser finds it in the naturalization of ideology. Both also recognize that the task of critique is to reveal the historical and constructed nature of what appears as natural and given.

In contemporary terms, we might say that Lukács is concerned with how capitalism shapes perception and experience, while Althusser focuses on how it shapes identity and subject formation. Lukács gives us tools to think about consciousness as a site of resistance, while Althusser reminds us of the depth and pervasiveness of ideological control. The tension between these views remains productive. It reflects the dual character of ideology: it both distorts and constitutes; it both mystifies and enables.

Understanding this tension is crucial for any attempt to theorize political subjectivity under capitalism. While Lukács provides a picture of historical agency based on dialectical consciousness, Althusser warns us about the structural constraints that such agency must face. Lukács' perspective offers optimism for revolutionary transformation, whilst Althusser's serves as a reminder of how firmly embedded capitalism ideology is in society. In an environment that is reified and ideologically saturated, the two of them offer complementary viewpoints on the development of awareness and the challenges of emancipation.

Walter Benjamin: Capitalism as Myth and Spectacle

Unlike the conventional Marxist emphasis on economic structure, Walter Benjamin's critique of capitalism emphasizes myth, imagery, and symbolic domination. In addition to being an economic system, Benjamin sees capitalism as a religious and creative phenomenon that rewrites reality itself. In his paper "Capitalism as Religion", Benjamin proposes that capitalism is "a purely cultic religion, perhaps the most extreme that ever existed, one that is not expiatory but guilt-producing and celebrates

no specific weekday, but every day is a feast day.”¹⁷ This means that capitalism does not merely conceal reality, as Lukács argues; it produces a symbolic order that structures desire, guilt, and belief. Importantly, Benjamin leaves no way out from this cultic religion: “even God takes on the entire burden of guilt.”¹⁸ Every gesture—compliance, critique, escape—is still within the system.

As Walter Benjamin claims, capitalism constructs its mythology through the objects, spectacles, and experiences of consumer life. Later theorists such as Alexander Gungov have extended this idea to the post-consumerist era. Money becomes metaphysical, and capitalist culture replaces historical memory with commodified symbols. Benjamin’s essay “Experience and Poverty” highlights how modernity erodes collective memory. In this work, Benjamin laments that traditional, cumulative experience (*Erfahrung*) has been replaced by fleeting, personal impressions (*Erlebnis*), especially in the aftermath of war and the rise of technological modernity. Bora Erdağı emphasizes that this undermines revolutionary consciousness, as politics becomes an affective spectacle rather than a historical struggle.¹⁹ Fashion, for example, exemplifies this dream logic, appropriating fragments of the past as empty forms rather than historical memory: “Fashion prescribes the ritual according to which the commodity fetish demands to be worshiped.”²⁰

Benjamin’s “dreamworld”—where fashion, commodity, and spectacle recycle the past in mythic form—finds a contemporary echo in Gungov’s theory of *real semblance*, where ideological forms gain autonomy through self-referential image cycles. Also, Gungov’s post-consumerist surfaces no longer refer to hidden structures but reproduce meaning through circulation itself.²¹

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 288–291.

¹⁸ Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty,” 298–291.

¹⁹ Bora Erdağı, “Walter Benjamin and Political Philosophy,” *Sofia Philosophical Review* 7, no. 2 (2013), 40–42.

²⁰ Elisabeth Genter-Montevocchio and Kendall DeBoer, “Introduction/ Issue 35: Accessing/Assessing Fashion,” *InVisible Culture*, May 2, 2023, <https://www.invisibleculturejournal.com/pub/introduction-issue-35-accessing-assessing-fashion/release/2> (accessed July 25, 2025).

²¹ Gungov, “Real Semblance Flourishing,” 19.

In “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, Benjamin critiques the bourgeois myth of progress by urging the historical materialist to “brush history against the grain” and seize messianic time in moments of danger.²² In contrast, the spectacle and its ideological adaptations function to preserve systemic legitimacy.²³ However, as Freerks’ reading of Nietzsche suggests, it remains open to question whether Benjamin’s redemptive hopes fully escape the grip of myth.

Benjamin demonstrates how capitalism persists through repression and charm by utilizing spectacle and desire to create reality, thereby shifting the critique from demystification to symbolic interpretation. By revealing capitalism’s mythopoetic function—not only to conceal reality but to create it—his work broadens Lukács’s focus on economic alienation.

Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetic Construction of Ideology. From reification to Ideology

While Benjamin’s critique of capitalism as a mythic structure reveals how history, ritual, and religion are absorbed into the logic of commodity fetishism, his analysis of the image and the aesthetic dimension of modern life opens an entirely new pathway for understanding ideology. In his famous essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Benjamin argues that the technological reproduction of images alters not only the status of art but the conditions under which consciousness engages with the world. The loss of the “aura”—the unique presence of the work of art in time and space—signals the entry of aesthetic forms into the realm of mass culture and mechanical reproducibility. Ideology, in this context, is no longer primarily a system of ideas or doctrines, but a structure of perception and affect shaped by images, repetition, and spectacle.

Where Lukács emphasizes the objectification of human relations through the commodity form, and Althusser highlights the material reproduction of ideology through institutions, Benjamin directs our attention to the visual and sensory apparatuses of modern capitalism. According to Benjamin, consciousness is no longer only distorted by abstract

²² Richard Kearney, ed., *The Continental Philosophy Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 212.

²³ Panichidis, “Marx’s Capital,” Gungov, “Real Semblance Flourishing,”

structures or interpellated by ideological institutions; rather, it is captured and finally changed by the spectacular presentation of reality. The subject becomes a spectator, and social reality is presented as a managed and aestheticized set of representations.

This development anticipates Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, but even more profoundly, it aligns with Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation. For Baudrillard, the real is no longer concealed or distorted by ideology—it is replaced. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard describes a condition where signs no longer refer to any objective referent but only to other signs, forming a closed circuit of meaning that is indifferent to reality. The commodity becomes pure appearance: a logo, a mood, a lifestyle.²⁴ This resonates deeply with Benjamin's insight that capitalism aestheticizes itself to such a degree that the boundary between real and representation collapses.

In this light, Benjamin's notion of the aestheticization of politics takes on urgent significance. He warned that fascism gives the masses the illusion of participation while preserving the existing structures of power, by aestheticizing political life through rallies, uniforms, and symbols. In late capitalism, this aestheticization persists in a more diffuse and commercialized form. Politics is packaged as media content; protest becomes a brand; resistance is aestheticized into imagery devoid of subversive substance. The ideological function of spectacle is not merely to deceive, but to absorb dissent into a structure of images that both captivate and neutralize.

Synthesis: Lukács and Benjamin on Capitalism's Dual Logic

While Lukács and Benjamin approach capitalism from different vantage points—economic alienation in the case of Lukács, and symbolic myth-making in the case of Benjamin—their critiques are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they are complementary viewpoints that, when taken as a whole, offer a more thorough understanding of how contemporary capitalism operates. Social interactions are reified in capitalist society by being presented as unchangeable, natural, and objective. Also, Benjamin reveals how capitalism creates mythic realities that stifle critical memory and mold historical experience.

²⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. By Sheila Faria Glaser. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 6–7.

A strong framework for comprehending how capitalism masks the social nature of economic connections is provided by Lukács' reification theory. Lukács illustrates how economic, legal, and administrative institutions appear to be independent entities, supporting the idea that capitalist relationships are unchangeable and essential. This makes critique difficult because reification affects not just social structures but the very consciousness of the subject. However, Lukács assumes that beneath the surface of reified appearances lies a reality to be recovered: the historical truth of class struggle and social construction. Thus, his critique depends on a dialectical model in which illusion can be unmasked and overturned. For Benjamin, capitalism does not merely obscure history; it manufactures it. The production of myth, spectacle, and aestheticized politics makes capitalism not a system of deception but a total symbolic regime.

Benjamin shows how capitalism eliminates resistance by transforming everything into a commodity and an image. He further demonstrates how spectacle reproduces belief in the system through enchantment, whereas Lukács stresses economic estrangement. Together, these observations demonstrate how capitalism dominates symbolic imagination and material structure. Panichidis and Gungov support this synthesis. Panichidis demonstrates how capitalism changes to maintain ideological control by incorporating critique, while Gungov's "real semblance" emphasizes how capitalism aestheticizes conflict into marketable forms. Both academics agree that modern capitalism is fueled by hybridity, being both symbolically mythologized and materially reified.

The dual logic of alienation and enchantment explains the resilience of capitalist ideology. Capitalism renders its domination natural (Lukács) and desirable (Benjamin). If Lukács and Benjamin offer dialectical critiques of structure and spectacle, Gungov and Panichidis show how these strategies collapse into one another in post-consumerist capitalism. Lukács' and Benjamin's insights form a bridge to Nietzsche's perspectivism: the distinction between critique and commodity becomes increasingly blurred as the system develops, raising the question of whether even our most radical analyses are themselves part of capitalism's interpretive machinery.

Benjamin's critique of spectacle as a modern myth leads us to reconsider how ideological images no longer merely obscure reality but come to replace it. At this point, Alexander Gungov's theory of *semblance* offers a decisive deepening of this problem. In his analysis of post-

consumerist society, Gungov argues that contemporary ideology does not function by concealment, as in classical Marxism, but by the production of an autonomous order of images that are experienced as reality itself. *Semblance*, in this context, is not a false shell hiding the truth; it is a generative structure that constitutes our very experience of the world. Ideology is no longer a veil—it is the fabric of our phenomenological encounter with reality. As Gungov writes, “semblance flourishes where the distinction between appearance and essence collapses, and the subject lives within the glow of its own projections”.²⁵ This diagnosis finds a striking parallel in Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulation. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard contends that we have entered a phase where signs no longer refer to any external referent but instead circulate in a closed system of self-reference. As he puts it, “it is the map that precedes the territory”, and what we experience is “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”²⁶ The commodity becomes a pure signifier—its value no longer tied to utility or labor, but to symbolic codes, mood, and lifestyle. Ideology thus shifts from a structure of distortion to one of production, aligning closely with Gungov’s notion of semblance as an ontological condition. Both thinkers reveal how capitalist logic no longer hides reality—it generates a substitute so pervasive that it becomes indistinguishable from reality itself. This shift prepares the ground for Nietzsche’s radical rethinking of illusion, not as a distortion to be unmasked, but as a horizon for creative transformation.

Nietzsche’s Challenge via Freerks: Is There Any Reality to Uncover?

While Lukács and Benjamin offer powerful tools for analyzing capitalism, Lukács through the lens of economic reification and Benjamin through myth and spectacle, Nietzsche, as interpreted by Vanessa Freerks, disrupts the very grounds on which their critiques rest. In “Nietzsche’s Reversal of Platonism and the Simulacrum”, Freerks outlines how Nietzsche does not merely critique ideology but questions whether there is any “truth” beyond illusion. His perspectivism reverses the Platonic metaphysical structure that presumes a hidden, more real world behind appearances. Thus, Nietzsche challenges the idea that

²⁵ Gungov, “Real Semblance Flourishing,” 96-97.

²⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1-2.

capitalism hides or constructs myths about reality. Instead, he suggests that “reality” may be an interpretative fiction, no more true than the illusions it claims to expose.

Freerks draws on Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche to argue that Nietzsche’s philosophy undermines the Platonic opposition between the real and the apparent. The simulacrum, what Nietzsche calls “the mask” is not a false copy of a more authentic original but rather something that exposes the absence of any original. Nietzsche’s reversal of Platonism, Freerks explains, undermines the distinction between the original and the copy by challenging the hierarchy of truth and appearance.²⁷

All truth claims, including those found in Marxist or critical theory, are shown as interpretive acts rather than factual revelations under this paradigm. This perspective significantly influenced Lukács and Benjamin. Lukács argues that capitalism reifies human beings by transforming social relations into objectified economic categories that appear natural and timeless. He asserts that capitalism reifies human relations by transforming them into objectified economic categories that appear natural and eternal. According to Lukács, the crucial goal is to break through this delusion and expose the social and historical processes that underlie it. According to Freerks, Nietzsche’s reversal of Platonism undermines any claim to a “truer” underlying structure underneath appearances. The concept of reification, which implies a warped social relation, assumes that a more real relation formerly existed. However, Nietzsche sees this as a metaphysical assumption based on Platonic thought rather than an ontological truth. Moreover, as Gungov puts it: “A simulacrum is not simply a false ideology that can easily be criticized, unmasked, and abolished forever. [...] We live comfortably in a world organized by several prevailing codes, usually not suspecting this and being content with what we have available at hand.”²⁸

A similar destabilization occurs concerning Benjamin’s view. Benjamin sees capitalism not merely as a system of exploitation but as a quasi-religious structure that survives through myth and spectacle. Benjamin describes capitalism as a cultic structure with no redemption (capitalism as religion), producing mythologies that mold historical consciousness. However, as Freerks notes, Nietzsche would challenge the

²⁷ Vanessa Freerks, “Nietzsche’s Reversal of Platonism and the Simulacrum,” *Sofia Philosophical Review* 12, no. 2 (2019), 35-38.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

presumption that these myths are “false” in contrast to a “true” historical account. For Nietzsche, all histories are mythologies; even critical histories, such as those proposed by historical materialism, are forms of ideological storytelling that mask their perspectival character. As Freerks argues, Nietzsche’s critique ultimately turns back on the critique itself, revealing how even the will to unmask ideological illusion relies on hidden metaphysical assumptions about truth and representation.²⁹ In this light, Nietzsche’s perspectivism complicates the frameworks provided by both Lukács and Benjamin, not by refuting them empirically but by undercutting their metaphysical presuppositions. Freerks explains that for Nietzsche, the production of truth is an illusory process rooted in language and forgetting. “Truths”, Nietzsche claims, “are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions.” Freerks connects this to a broader claim that knowledge is performative, a fiction that conceals its fictionality.³⁰ Where Lukács calls for a return to social totality, and Benjamin hopes for revolutionary interruption, Nietzsche remains skeptical of all such appeals to epistemic or ethical foundations.

This kind of skepticism is not nihilistic in the conventional sense. Nietzsche does not deny the validity of critique; however, he challenges its authority. For the German philosopher, critique is a creative interpretation rather than a means of determining the truth. According to Freerks, this elevates critique into the realm of art rather than science: “The simulacrum, in Nietzsche’s hands, becomes a productive force; it multiplies perspectives rather than unifying them under a single truth.”³¹ Thus, the purpose is not to disclose capitalism’s inner nature, but to interact critically and imaginatively with its various surfaces.

Nietzsche would argue that even such adaptive theoretical strategies remain embedded within specific interpretive horizons. Nevertheless, the syntheses proposed by Gungov and Panicidis—Gungov through his notion of capitalism’s “converted forms” and Panicidis through capitalism’s capacity to reabsorb critique—enrich the dialectical frameworks of Lukács and Benjamin by showing how ideology evolves under post-consumerist conditions. In other words, what we call “crisis”, “adaptation”, or even “capitalism” are all already framed by historically and philosophically contingent worldviews. As Freerks makes clear,

²⁹ Freerks, “Nietzsche’s Reversal of Platonism,” 54-60.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 38-40.

³¹ Freerks, “Nietzsche’s Reversal of Platonism,” 54-63.

Nietzsche does not ask whether capitalism hides the truth but whether the category of “truth” itself is an ideological construct.³² Nietzsche would view “capitalism”, “crisis”, and “adaptation” as historically conditioned interpretations rather than as neutral terms. According to him, capitalism is a regime of meaning triggered by the will to power rather than a system that conceals reality. Crisis is a narrative imposed on change, rather than an objective break. Capitalism uses adaptation to present disruption as continuity. In the end, Nietzsche challenges the notion that the “truth” underlying ideology is an intellectual creation in and of itself.

Nietzsche’s perspectivism, as developed by Freerks, represents a radical challenge to the frameworks of both Lukács and Benjamin. While Lukács sees ideology as concealing reality and Benjamin sees capitalism as fabricating myths, Nietzsche sees both moves as predicated on a deeper metaphysical illusion: the belief that something “behind” ideology is waiting to be revealed. Against this, Nietzsche proposes a model of critical engagement rooted not in unveiling but in the transformation of thought, values, and interpretation. This is not a retreat from critique but a reorientation of its aims. As Freerks puts it, “Nietzsche does not seek to unmask ideology to reveal truth; he seeks to transform the will to truth itself”.³³ Thus, he forces us to reconsider critique in an age where capitalism may no longer need to deceive because all that remains is the spectacle and its endless interpretations.

Nietzsche’s impact on this interpretation of ideology is critical. In *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, Nietzsche claims that truth is “a mobile army of metaphors”, implying that what we consider to be stable meaning is a historically situational network of signs. His critique of metaphysics and his emphasis on interpretation anticipate the collapse of referentiality in Baudrillard and the symbolic economy of the spectacle in Benjamin. Additionally, the Nietzschean concept of the will to power, the drive not just to live but also to generate meaning, is represented in the development of ideological forms that impose a worldview through aesthetic seduction.

In the convergence of Benjamin, Baudrillard, and Nietzsche, ideology emerges not as a false set of beliefs or a material system of reproduction, but as an immersive environment of signs, images, and affects.

³² Ibid., 54–65.

³³ Freerks, “Nietzsche’s Reversal of Platonism,” 54–67.

The subject does not merely believe ideology—it lives inside it, consumes it, performs it. This marks a shift from the “veil” metaphor of ideology (as something to be lifted or pierced) to the idea of ideology as simulation: a world so saturated with representation that the very distinction between truth and illusion becomes meaningless.

Thus, while Lukács identifies the roots of ideological mystification in the commodity-form and reification, and Althusser explains its reproduction through structural apparatuses, Benjamin—especially when extended through Baudrillard and Nietzsche—reveals how ideology functions today through aestheticization, spectacular mediation, and semiotic proliferation. The formation of consciousness under capitalism is no longer a matter of misrecognition alone, but of desire, fascination, and immersion in appearances.

Conclusion

Between Reification, Myth, and Interpretation: The Limits of Critique

This essay has explored the multifaceted nature of modern capitalism through the intersecting lenses of economic reification (Lukács), mythological spectacle (Benjamin), and perspectival interpretation (Nietzsche, via Freerks). Each philosopher presents a different but related perspective on how capitalism continues to control not just material production but also subjectivity, meaning, and memory.

György Lukács demonstrates that capitalism alienates individuals by turning social relations into autonomous, object-like structures. Because of the reification mechanism, economic rules, bureaucratic procedures, and legal conventions look neutral and unavoidable. The strength of Lukács’ theory stems from its clarity: capitalism conceals reality by naturalizing the historical. However, Lukács also believes that underneath these illusions is a recoverable truth, a historical completeness that analysis can reveal.

Walter Benjamin, in contrast, suggests that capitalism does not merely distort or hide reality; it produces symbolic worlds. In its post-religious form, capitalism survives by manufacturing desires, memories, and mythologies. Through repetition, commodification, and the destruction of aura, experience becomes fragmented, historical consciousness is displaced, and critique itself risks becoming part of the spectacle. Ben-

jamin's brilliance lies in showing that capitalism sustains itself through enchantment as much as through repression.

Gungov's and Panicidis' arguments enrich this analysis by showing how capitalism absorbs critique through ideological flexibility. Gungov's "converted forms" and "real semblance" illustrate how capitalism reanimates even its contradictions as surfaces of coherence. Panicidis focuses on how capitalism reframes its conceptual categories to maintain structural legitimacy. Both show that capitalism's dual structure, as both an intellectual illusion and a reified material order, strengthens it from within.

Nietzsche, as interpreted by Vanessa Freerks, introduces a rupture. He accepts critique but challenges its metaphysical assumptions. If there is no underlying truth to uncover, if all knowledge is perspectival, then even Lukács' and Benjamin's frameworks must be seen as interpretive constructs. Nietzsche reframes critique not as an unveiling but as value creation. What we call ideology, reality, or myth are all competing simulations without an original. This raises a profound and unresolved question: Can capitalism ever be "unmasked", or are we always interpreting from within its field of illusions? In other words, is ideology a veil to be lifted (as in Lukács)? Is it a myth to be ruptured (as in Benjamin)? Or is it a world of masks with no underlying face (as in Nietzsche)?

The present essay has argued that modern capitalism cannot be understood through a single critical lens. It functions simultaneously as a system of economic alienation and symbolic myth-making. Reification and spectacle are not opposing logic but are complementary mechanisms of control. Lukács and Benjamin offer tools to analyze these dual strategies, while Gungov and Panicidis show how these strategies are fused in a post-consumerist society. However, Nietzsche forces us to consider whether all critique, even of illusion, is itself illusory.

This, then, is the lesson of Freerks' Nietzsche: not to abandon critique but to practice it as an act of creation, not revelation - to confront capitalism not with the certainty of truth but with the force of interpretive courage. Such a stance does not resolve ideology's contradictions, but it may allow us to live and think differently within them.

Seriously Funny: *Disco Elysium* and the Aesthetics of the Metamodern Condition

Severina Stankeva (*University of Sofia*)

Abstract: The paper reinterprets metamodernism as described by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, expanding its theoretical core through François Lyotard's conception of the modern–postmodern dynamic from “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?” It argues that the dichotomy between modern and postmodern sensibilities no longer requires generational phases but can be contained in a single artwork. It analyzes the video game *Disco Elysium* as a paradigmatic metamodern artwork in the sense that it embodies its central aesthetics of everlasting oscillation between opposites.

Keywords: metamodernism, aesthetics, François Lyotard, *Disco Elysium*

In 2010, cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker published an essay titled “Notes on Metamodernism” that claimed a significant contribution to the constellation of theories often ironically grouped under the label of post-postmodernism—those that insist postmodernism has ended or no longer serves to adequately describe contemporaneity. While acknowledging that postmodernism is not a homogeneous phenomenon, and even going so far as to call it a “‘catchphrase’ and ‘buzzword’ for a multiplicity of contradictory tendencies”¹, Vermeulen and van den Akker believe what its variants share is an aversion to “‘the’ modern—to utopism, to (linear) progress, to grand narratives, to Reason, to functionalism and formal purism.”² Therefore, the difference between modernism and postmodernism, according to them, can be summarized through the distinction of enthusiasm versus irony. Furthermore, they claim that all other post-

¹ imotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van Den Akker, „Notes on Metamodernism“, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2, vol. 1 (January 2010): 4, <https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677>

² Ibid.

postmodernist theories, such as hypermodernity, automodernism, digi-modernism, and so on, do not restructure but rather radicalize postmodernism insofar as they deal with its excesses instead of proposing a new interpretative schema of the world in the 21st century, where a significant discursive shift has occurred.

In contrast, metamodernism, according to this essay that reads almost like a manifesto³ in its combination of descriptive and declarative registers, defines a new sensibility—a new “narrative of longing” whose primary characteristic is a constant oscillation between modern and postmodern sentiments. The authors claim the shift they report and cherish is visible in the gradual abandonment of pastiche and cynicism by the culture industry in favor of ideas of responsibility and hope. This tendency encapsulates a variety of mediums and genres, art forms and cultural practices. Examples include artists like Olafur Eliasson and Zico Albaiquini; the New Sincerity movement popularized by David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*; the general post-irony trend in contemporary art that features the work of film directors such as Wes Anderson and Charlie Kaufman; individual pieces like Best Picture winner for 2022 *Everything Everywhere All at Once* or the comedy-horror *Cabin in the Woods*; sitcom series like *The Office* and *Community*; the so-called post-ideological urbanism in architecture seen in the works of the Bjarke Ingels Group; and even some internet phenomena such as shitposting or AI-generated humor. Another evidence of the metamodern is found in the restructuring of political discourse and the “material landscape”⁴ of the economic system provoked by financial crises, ecological catastrophes, and geopolitical instability.

The key to understanding metamodernism is the “meta” part of it, which signifies neither transcendence nor sublation but an in-betweenness—a sort of Platonic *metaxy*, a constant swinging between the poles of longing for the long-lost and the self-irony of having lost it. It is, first and foremost, a form of performatism, an epistemological “as if” attunement that laughs at its inability to get rid of the metanarratives it was supposed to have overcome—but its laughter is simultaneously that of sarcasm and empathy. To quote a metaphor by its ideologues,

³ One must note that the actual manifesto of the movement is inspired by this essay and published a year later in a website. See cf. <http://www.metamodernism.org/> Accessed on June 17, 2025.

⁴ Ien and Van Den Akker, „Notes on Metamodernism“, 4.

metamodernism is caught in “a kind of donkey-and-carrot double-bind. Like a donkey it chases a carrot that it never manages to eat because the carrot is always just beyond its reach. But precisely because it never manages to eat the carrot, it never ends its chase, setting foot in moral realms the modern donkey (having eaten its carrot elsewhere) will never encounter, entering political domains the postmodern donkey (having abandoned the chase) will never come across.”⁵ Metamodernism is also, therefore, a form of absurdism.

While Vermeulen and van den Akker describe an intriguing tendency of contemporary cultural sensibility, their framework appears to lack an account of the structural conditions that make the shift they describe possible. The aforementioned political, economic, and climate factors are explicitly viewed as branches within which the change is taking place. Neither of them causes it. Moreover, there isn’t so much as a possibility of such an explanation within the boundaries of their framework, which is focused on effects rather than causes. To address this gap, I propose a turn to Jean-François Lyotard’s aesthetics of the postmodern, as developed in “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?” and a brief association with *The Postmodern Condition*. To show how the role Lyotard ascribes to the avant-garde can be brought to bear on the metamodern in concrete terms, I examine ZA/UM’s video game *Disco Elysium* as a paradigmatic artwork. While Lyotard is dismissed by Vermeulen and van den Akker as just another herald of postmodernism⁶, metamodernism can receive a stronger theoretical core through a closer reading of his conception of the internal tension that’s endemic to the modern.

Let’s proceed by retracing Lyotard’s view. Firstly, he claims that the postmodern sensibility that transformed our aesthetic conception began with photography and the expansion of technoscientific culture. However, mainstream “realist” art, i.e., art that enabled existing socio-political and religious order using the expressive means of perspective, was endangered long before the start of this process by a modernist avant-garde, representative of which are the late 18th-century Romantics. This avant-garde rebelled against the idea that art could only represent the order of things and instead turned to the unrepresentable, to the sublime in a Kantian sense, which resulted in art’s self-reflexivity—it

⁵ ulen and Van Den Akker, 5.

⁶ and Van Den Akker, 4.

started asking what is art. However, despite its increasing abstractness, Romantic art was more so a nostalgia for presence, emphasizing “the powerlessness of the faculty of presentation, [...] on the obscure and futile will which inhabits [the human subject] in spite of everything.”⁷ This expression of the sublime was an incomplete one insofar as it had a very limited conception of negativity. It represented the unrepresentable as mere lack, thereby providing “solace and pleasure” to the viewer but not the pain and monstrosity that the “real” sublime should invoke.

What postmodern avant-garde does then, as a response not only to photography and technoscientific culture but also to the self-reflexive question of art, is that it tries to represent the unrepresentable not as a mere fact or a lost absolute but as a possibility for infinite experimentation—as the invention of new “rules of the game” and radical stylistic changes. This leads Lyotard to conclude that the postmodern is:

“a part of the modern. All that has been received, if only yesterday [...] must be suspected. What space does Cezanne challenge? The Impressionists’. What object do Picasso and Braque attack? Cezanne’s. What presupposition does Duchamp break with in 1912? That which says one must make a painting, be it cubist. And Buren questions that other presupposition which he believes had survived untouched by the work of Duchamp: the place of presentation of the work. In an amazing acceleration, the generations precipitate themselves. A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.”⁸

Postmodernism is therefore modernism in becoming.

There are a couple of noteworthy implications of this thesis. Firstly, one must note that what Lyotard calls postmodern art is what is typically called modernism. However, he extrapolates it as a disruptive movement endemic to the modern that sets off its immanent dialectic and thereby precedes it “ontologically”, even if historically it’s the other way around. Secondly, the modern avant-garde does not get normalized

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoffrey Bennington, 13. *Theory and History of Literature 10* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 79.

⁸ Ibid.

nor absorbed into popular bourgeois art but remains a necessary opposition to the postmodern one.

How does metamodernism fit into all of this? At first glance, if we follow Lyotard, it seems metamodernism shouldn't be called a neoromantic sensibility because the original Romantics were already Neoromantics, having already lost the absolute. What's more important, if we add to Lyotard's idea of the postmodern avant-garde his idea of the dissemination and production of knowledge in *The Postmodern Condition* as constantly striving to maximize the input/output ratio⁹, then it would seem that metamodernism elucidates an even further acceleration of the modern-postmodern dynamic whereby the need for different generations of artworks isn't necessary for the creation of a dichotomy. The movement with which the modern becomes the postmodern and vice versa is now contained within a single metamodern artwork, and this is the new avant-gardism. Furthermore, if the postmodern is already nascent in the modern, then the metamodern must already be nascent in the postmodern.

This presupposes a new condition where the artwork is in a state of constantly anticipating itself, oscillating between the two types of sublime. Metamodernism, then, might not mark a new aesthetic principle altogether, but an increase of tempo within the existing modern/postmodern dialectic—one in which the oscillation is no longer stretched across artistic generations but collapsed into a single artwork. The metamodern artwork itself is the locus of modernism's becoming—it exists in a constant state of self-anticipation, continually shifting between irony and earnestness, style and chaotic rebellion, without resolving the contradiction via sublation.

To help illustrate this, let's take a brief look at *Disco Elysium*. The game exemplifies metamodernism on the one hand through its eclectic references and tonal hybridity, and on the other, through its story's oscillations between irony and the search for meaning, fragmentation and coherence, existential collapse and transcendence. Both formally and thematically, it embodies a post-ironic sincerity that parodies its own metaphysical hunger while nevertheless refusing to abandon it. Even its studio's name, ZA/UM, already expresses a metamodern tendency. The slash that differentiates Kruchyonykh's neologism accentuates its dou-

⁹ rd, *The Postmodern Condition*, 44.

ble meaning—for but also beyond reason. It's described on Steam as "Hard boiled, hard core. Death, sex, taxes, and disco—nothing is off the table. Intimidate, sweet-talk, resort to violence, write poetry, sing karaoke, dance like a beast, or solve the meaning of life."

Disco Elysium is a neologism itself not only in its language but also in its weaving of references ranging from mass media to high art while constantly making fun of the imbecility of the former and the elitism of the latter. It is an attempt at a contemporary *Gesamtkunstwerk* whose inspirations include role-playing board games, detective novels, and quests in point-and-click computer games but also Russian avant-garde, the Strugatsky brothers, and China Miéville. It casually and constantly refers to ideas pertaining to the intellectual heritage/baggage of the West and doesn't axiologically favor one register above the other. The game is dense, thematically rich, and complex. In what follows, I concentrate on three interrelated dimensions through which *Disco Elysium* articulates its metamodern tension: (1) the fragmented identity, (2) the experience of ontological fading, and (3) the formation of community against all odds.

The story revolves around an amnesiac detective who's tasked to solve a murder in a city recovering from civil war. The main character is a white, paunchy, middle-aged man, normally an emanation of police and colonial power, who is, however, found literally and symbolically stripped of the totems of his authority—naked in a hotel room, having lost his uniform, badge, gun, and identity. Amnesia is a common trope in video games that serves to justify the lack of knowledge of the ludic avatar about the world he inhabits while also allowing the integration of role-playing elements that shape the avatar into a person more or less determined by the player's choices. Even in cases where the avatar's personality is facetiously constructed, a certain form of restoration is always achieved in the end—the player seals the fate of the protagonist in an affirming expression of the power fantasies of a self-confident subjectivity. Yet in *Disco Elysium*, a rift is shown, on the one hand, between the ever-flowing subjectivity of the present and past "selves", and, on the other, the subjectivity of the now is itself presented as polyphonic. The detective has multiple abilities that quite literally converse with each other all the time. They are characters in the game that not only react to what's happening but argue with each other and sometimes even emit their own worldview projects that can be internalized by the

avatar, thus forming the contents of a so-called Thought Cabinet. Choosing one thought doesn't close the possibility of any of the others. This results in a character that can be an apocalyptic prophet, a disco megalomaniac, a mystic, and a boring cop at the same time. Solidification of identity is never allowed to happen, no matter how the story of the game ends, due to the constant agonistic tension between self-deprecating irony and the pursuit of purpose. The game offers a typically postmodern fragmentation and loss of identity but does not stop there. It also clearly values the pursuit and longing for a coherent self, even though it's well aware of its impossibility.

A thought titled "Volumetric Shit Compressor", gained after the detective tries to keep himself from vomiting for the second time after looking at the dead body he's supposed to investigate, reads:

Problem: Your shit is *apart*, and it's rather unbecoming of a cop and a human being. It's supposed to be the opposite of that: *together*. Compressed in a small area. To achieve a solid level of shit-compression, squeeze your butt-cheeks together for 30 minutes. Do something similar with the two hemispheres of your brain. Talk to people—maybe that will help.

Solution: Bizarre scientific news from Revachol West today, where a police officer's shit has been observed at a pressure of around 495 giga-decimals. These metallic hydrogen levels of shit-togetherness were thought to exist only at the center of collapsing stars, not law officials. It remains to be seen how long the shit-singularity lasts.

There is an ontological fragmentation isomorphic to the subjective one. The Pale—a natural feature of the world in the game—is an achromatic phenomenon and a sort of separative tissue of matter without visible features that covers the larger part of the surface of the Earth. It ceaselessly expands, causing a suspension of the physical, epistemological, and linguistic qualities of things not by destroying them but by increasing entropy and making everything mix with everything else. It is but a transition to the impending annihilation that threatens to destroy reality from the inside out, through a series of metastases—two-millimeter holes in the fibers of the world.

The Pale bears traces of a certain post-communist heritage of the game and its Estonian developers—the game world shows the grim af-

termath of major projects of Enlightenment on a national, societal, and even civilizational level. The only people able to navigate the constantly self-annihilating terrain are members of the Moralintern—the ruling political power of Elysium that once held humanist values but has since turned into a representative of an ultraliberal global corporate wealth. Opposite it stand the “old-school” communist union bosses who manipulate workers for their own gain. The body of the Moralintern mercenary around whose corpse the criminal plot is built serves as a central metaphoric figure for ontological and political decay.

Despite that, it’s precisely around these microscopic holes where spiritual institutions spontaneously emerge and where the characters in the game find their own islands of meaning, both separately and together. The protagonist meets different kinds of weird and/or decadent individuals, some of whom represent irreversible degradation like drunkards and addicts, some fragments of a dying culture—an artist and a bookseller—and some of mystical hope, like a dice master and a family of cryptozoologists. The detective and his partner help a couple of ravers turn an old church into a nightclub that almost gets destroyed by the otherworldly dance moves of the protagonist. A futile search born out of empathy for the family of cryptozoologists bears real fruit. The detective meets the Insulindian Phasmid—a cryptid that has remained undiscovered for centuries due to its ability to disguise itself among the reeds. The meeting with the Phasmid is the culminative center of the whole game where all of its themes come together:

INSULINDIAN PHASMID: The moral of our encounter is: I am a relatively median lifeform—while it is you who are total, extreme madness. A volatile system, ominously new to the planet. The Pale, too, came with you. No one remembers it before you. The cnidarians do not, the radially symmetricals do not. There is an almost unanimous agreement between the birds and the plants that you are going to destroy us all.

YOU: Wait, the Pale is human-made?

INSULINDIAN PHASMID: It is a nervous shadow cast into the world by you, eating away at reality. A great, unnatural territory. Its advent coincides with the arrival of the human mind. You are a violent and irrepressible miracle. The vacuum of cosmos and the stars burning in it are afraid of you. Given enough time, you would

wipe us all out and replace us with nothing—just by accident.

YOU: ...how?

INSULINDIAN PHASMID: We suspect it will be something like the oxygen holocaust that wiped out anaerobic life 2.6 billion years ago—when organisms first started breathing. Only much worse.

YOU: Worse how?

INSULINDIAN PHASMID: Everything your eyes touch goes back there—behind the nerve mirror. What if you blink? Are we still here? (Please don't blink.) What if you misplace us all one day—or just forget?

YOU: But I *want* to blink and undo 12 billion years of matter expansion.

INSULINDIAN PHASMID: Simian butcherer... Soon, one of you will close your eyes—and open them to see that none of this ever existed.

YOU: Then all we can do is beat our fists against it? Day after day. With no answer.

INSULINDIAN PHASMID: You can also eat it. If it's a leaf, you can put it in your mouth. Yum yum. Or a reed.

YOU: So you look like a reed, and you eat reeds?

INSULINDIAN PHASMID: Yes. They don't mind.

Disco Elysium does not resolve the problems it stages but inhabits them through a formal and thematic rendering of rupture. The failure of the grand narratives and modernist utopias isn't simply replaced by post-modern polyphony and cynicism. Instead, the two cohabit in the game as endemic tensions that are constantly reenacted in both its story and gameplay. The acceleration Lyotard ascribes to the generational dialogue between artists and artistic movements is here contained in a singular artwork. *Disco Elysium*, then, can be regarded as paradigmatic for metamodernism not because it offers a resolution but because it proclaims a renewed kind of seriousness—one that knows it may be absurd but insists on saying something anyway.

On the Necessity of Integrative Approaches in Developmental Psycholinguistics: An Anti-Radical Synthesis

Janos Rosenberg (University of Sofia)

Abstract: This article critiques radical rationalist and radical empiricist theories of language acquisition, arguing that both extremes fail to account for the full breadth of empirical evidence in developmental psycholinguistics. Pure rationalism reduces acquisition to the unfolding of innate structures, disregarding evidence for the decisive role of environmental and sociocultural factors. Pure empiricism, conversely, attributes language entirely to environmental input, ignoring innate predispositions that enable generativity and early linguistic discrimination. Drawing on evidence from cross-linguistic diversity, sign language emergence, child innovation, and bilingual development, the article demonstrates the inadequacy of reductionist accounts. Instead, it advocates integrative approaches, e.g., interactionist, emergentist, and holistic, that recognise language acquisition as a dynamic interplay between nature and nurture. This anti-radical synthesis reframes the debate, moving beyond exclusivist dichotomies toward a nuanced understanding of how biological, cognitive, social, and cultural factors coalesce to produce linguistic development.

Keywords: Developmental psycholinguistics, language acquisition, rationalism, empiricism, innatism, behaviorism, interactionism, emergentism, integrative approaches, nature versus nurture

Reframing the Nature-Nurture Debate

Psycholinguistics, and in particular the subfield concerned with the developmental processes of first language acquisition, has for many decades remained deeply intertwined with longstanding philosophical disputes, theoretical debates, and conceptual arguments about the ultimate origins, sources, and foundations of linguistic knowledge. The central question, whether language is primarily a product of innate endowment

or of environmental experience, has animated discussions since at least the Enlightenment, and it continues to resurface in different guises across contemporary research. Rationalist traditions, closely associated with philosophical innatism as well as with linguistic nativism, insist that language does not merely emerge from the accumulation of sensory input or from repeated exposure to communicative interaction. Instead, these traditions propose that language is rooted in genetically pre-specified, biologically grounded structures, unfolding in accordance with internal rules, mechanisms, and constraints that guide the learner from within. From this perspective, development is largely an act of triggering or unfolding what is already present in latent form, with environmental input serving only as a catalyst that activates innate principles.^{1 2}

Empiricist traditions, by contrast, exemplified most famously and perhaps most radically by the behaviorist program, argue in the opposite direction. On this view, language acquisition is not the result of any pre-given mental grammar or internal blueprint but instead emerges directly from environmental exposure, constant reinforcement, repeated conditioning, and patterns of external input that shape behavior through associative learning.³ What the rationalist describes as an internal structure unfolding, the empiricist reframes as the cumulative product of habit formation, statistical regularities, and social feedback. From this standpoint, the child is not endowed with specialised linguistic knowledge but rather with general cognitive mechanisms that gradually absorb, adapt to, and systematise the patterns present in the surrounding environment.

These two traditions, rationalist-nativist and empiricist-behaviorist, have both played defining roles in shaping the field historically, and they continue to structure much of the theoretical landscape even today. Yet, when pressed to their most radical and exclusivist formulations, both perspectives are widely acknowledged to be methodologically incomplete and ultimately insufficient. Pure nativism risks underestimating the richness, variability, and formative influence of the social-linguistic environment, while radical empiricism risks ignoring the evident constraints, predispositions, and structural biases that shape what

¹ Noam Chomsky, *Lectures on Government and Binding* (Dordrecht: Foris, 1981).

² Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: William Morrow, 1994).

³ Burrhus F. Skinner, *Verbal Behavior* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957).

learners are capable of acquiring in the first place.

A more productive and constructive framing of the issues, one that avoids the oversimplifications of such radical extremes, moves deliberately away from these dichotomous polarities and instead points toward integrative, dynamic, and balanced models. As Lev Vygotsky suggested in his sociocultural theory⁴, language development occurs not in isolation and not from a single source but from the dialectical and reciprocal interaction between external social input on the one hand and individual cognitive processing on the other. From this vantage point, development is understood as co-constructed: the child both shapes and is shaped by the environment, engaging in an ongoing exchange that is neither fully predetermined by biology nor fully reducible to conditioning.

Similarly, emergentist and interactionist approaches, building on these insights, repeatedly highlight the fact that language acquisition arises through the complex interplay of multiple interacting factors - biological predispositions, neural architectures, cognitive resources, cultural practices, and environmental conditions - rather than from any one factor in isolation.⁵ Such approaches emphasise the importance of statistical learning, pattern recognition, and usage-based processes, while simultaneously recognising that these processes operate within the constraints and possibilities afforded by innate predispositions and neurobiological structures.

To advance developmental psycholinguistics in a meaningful and cumulative way, the field must therefore reject radical reductionism in either direction and instead embrace integrative frameworks that fully acknowledge the multifactorial, dynamic, and systemic nature of acquisition. Only by accounting for the contributions of both internal endowment and external environment, while resisting the temptation to collapse one into the other, can the discipline hope to explain the remarkable complexity, universality, and variability of how human beings acquire their first language.

⁴ Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

⁵ Brian MacWhinney, *The Emergence of Language* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2014).

On the Limits of Pure Rationalism

Rationalist frameworks tend to view, describe, and conceptualise language as fundamentally a product of innate, pre-existing cognitive mechanisms, mental processes, and structural capacities that are taken to be part of the biological endowment of the human species. Within this tradition, one of the most prominent and enduring proposals has been Chomsky's much-discussed and highly influential concept of a "language acquisition device"⁶, a theoretical construct intended to capture the idea that children are born with a specialised mental faculty designed specifically for acquiring linguistic competence. This model, which has exercised a profound influence on rationalist accounts for several decades, posits that human beings are equipped with universal grammar, a system that provides not just vague predispositions or general learning biases but a detailed, pre-specified, and biologically encoded blueprint for the trajectory of linguistic development. Universal grammar, in this formulation, acts as a kind of internal compass, ensuring that despite the immense variability in surface-level languages across the globe, children everywhere converge on grammars that share deep structural similarities.

According to this rationalist perspective, language acquisition is not best understood as a process of inventing or constructing grammar entirely from scratch, nor as a wholly open-ended exercise in trial and error. Instead, acquisition is conceived as a process of parameter setting, where exposure to input plays the role of triggering or guiding the adjustment of options that are already built into the universal grammar. The child's task, in this model, is to fine-tune a set of innate choices, selecting values within a pre-structured system that is already available in the mind prior to any substantial exposure to language. Thus, the input from the environment does not create linguistic knowledge *ex nihilo*; rather, it activates and calibrates the system, allowing the learner to converge rapidly on the grammar of their native tongue.

This conceptualisation carries several important implications. First, it explains why children can acquire highly complex grammatical systems within a remarkably short time span, and with relatively little explicit instruction, even in environments where input is impoverished, fragmented, or inconsistent. Second, it accounts for the cross-linguistic

⁶ Noam Chomsky, *Essays on Form and Interpretation* (New York: North-Holland, 1977).

similarities and constraints that recur across human languages, which, from a rationalist perspective, reflect the shared underlying architecture of universal grammar. Finally, it underscores the idea that the capacity for language is a species-specific trait, a biological specialisation that sets humans apart from other animals by endowing them with the unique ability to acquire and generate infinite linguistic expressions from finite means.

In this way, rationalist accounts do not see language learning as an unconstrained problem of induction or as an arbitrary accumulation of behavioral habits. Instead, they conceptualise it as the unfolding of an internally guided developmental process, one in which the environment provides essential triggers but not the fundamental structural content. Acquisition is thus a matter of discovery and activation within an already given framework, a process of uncovering the latent system rather than inventing it wholesale.

However, a substantial body of empirical counterevidence consistently and repeatedly challenges the exclusivist and overly narrow reliance on innate structures as the sole explanatory factor in first language acquisition. While rationalist frameworks have emphasised the supposed uniformity and invariance of an underlying universal grammar, the extraordinary linguistic diversity documented across human societies, communities, and cultures calls this claim into question in a direct and forceful way. The sheer range of typological variation, e.g., in phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, seriously complicates the notion of a single fixed, uniform, and unchanging set of grammatical principles that would operate in precisely the same manner across all linguistic contexts. Indeed, as Nicholas Evans and Stephen Levinson⁷ argue, cross-linguistic comparison reveals not only variation in surface features but also deep structural divergences that appear to resist reduction to a single universal template. If universal grammar were as rigid and all-determining as the strongest rationalist claims suggest, then the extent of such diversity would be far more limited than what is empirically observed.

Equally compelling are cases of language innovation that provide direct evidence against the idea that acquisition is merely the unfolding

⁷ Nicholas Evans and Stephen Levinson, "The Myth of Language Universals: Language Diversity and Its Importance for Cognitive Science," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 32, no. 5 (2009): 429-448.

of pre-specified innate structures. The emergence of Nicaraguan Sign Language in the late twentieth century offers perhaps the most striking and widely cited example. In this case, a community of deaf children, lacking access to an established sign language, collectively developed a new linguistic system from the ground up, one that grew in complexity and structure over successive cohorts.⁸ Such a phenomenon powerfully illustrates that language can arise as a genuinely novel cultural creation through processes of social interaction, negotiation, and communal invention, rather than solely through the internal activation of an inherited universal grammar. The very fact that children, working together, can generate new structures suggests that the mechanisms of acquisition must involve flexible, adaptive, and socially embedded processes that extend beyond the confines of innatist accounts.

Further evidence challenging the radical rationalist position comes from research on variation in developmental trajectories, which demonstrates that the course of acquisition is significantly influenced by the richness, density, and quality of linguistic input available to the learner. Classic studies in the field, such as Betty Hart and Todd Risley's⁹ investigation of disparities in vocabulary exposure across socioeconomic groups, show that differences in input quantity and quality can have profound consequences for linguistic development, leading to measurable divergences in vocabulary size, grammatical complexity, and communicative competence. More recent work has built upon these findings, documenting how input variability, interactional frequency, and contextual richness shape not only rates of acquisition but also the strategies children use in learning. Such evidence underscores the undeniable role of the external environment in molding linguistic growth, in ways that cannot be reduced to mere parameter setting within a fixed universal grammar.

Taken together, these lines of evidence - from linguistic diversity, from the spontaneous emergence of new languages, and from the impact of input variation - present significant challenges to a radically rationalist account of acquisition. Faced with these phenomena, rationalist models must either stretch their explanatory apparatus to implausible lengths

⁸ Ann Senghas, Sotaro Kita, and Asli Özyürek, "Children Creating Core Properties of Language: Evidence from an Emerging Sign Language in Nicaragua," *Science* 305, no. 5691 (2004): 1779-1782.

⁹ Betty Hart and Todd Risley, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children* (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, 1995).

or concede that innate structures alone cannot account for the observed complexity. In doing so, they risk overextending the concept of universal grammar well beyond its intended scope, rendering it less a precise scientific model and more a vague and unfalsifiable assumption. Thus, while innatist theories continue to provide important insights into the biological underpinnings of language, the evidence strongly suggests that they cannot, in isolation, offer an adequate or convincing explanation for the multifaceted realities of linguistic development.

Rationalist accounts also encounter substantial difficulties, and indeed continue to struggle, when they are required to explain phenomena that clearly lie outside the scope of a purely innatist framework. Among these are processes such as language attrition, instances of late or delayed acquisition, and the wide-ranging cognitive and developmental effects associated with bilingualism. Each of these domains provides strong evidence that environmental modulation, contextual influence, and experiential shaping are not peripheral or secondary but central to the way linguistic competence develops and evolves over time. Language attrition, for instance, demonstrates how linguistic abilities, even those that are deeply established in early childhood, can diminish, erode, or even disappear altogether when individuals are removed from sustaining environments of use. Such cases are difficult to reconcile with the rationalist claim that linguistic knowledge, once triggered by innate structures, remains permanently encoded as part of a fixed and immutable grammar.

Similarly, cases of late or delayed acquisition, whether due to atypical developmental trajectories, limited early exposure, or specific sociocultural circumstances, reveal that the timing, richness, and quality of linguistic input are crucial for shaping outcomes. Children who experience restricted or impoverished access to language in early life often show persistent differences in fluency, grammatical mastery, and communicative competence, even when later exposed to richer input. Such outcomes pose a clear challenge to radical rationalism, since they demonstrate that innate predispositions alone cannot guarantee successful acquisition without sufficient environmental support.¹⁰ The very existence of so-called “critical periods” for language learning underscores

¹⁰ Janet Werker and Richard Tees, “Speech Perception as a Window for Understanding Plasticity and Commitment in Language Systems of the Brain,” *Developmental Psychobiology* 46, no. 3 (2005): 233-251.

the fact that biological endowment interacts dynamically with contextual conditions, creating windows of heightened sensitivity that can be either realised or missed depending on the learner's circumstances.

The phenomenon of bilingualism further amplifies these concerns. Far from being a marginal or exceptional case, bilingualism represents the lived experience of a significant portion of the world's population. Research consistently shows that bilingual experience exerts profound and wide-ranging effects not only on linguistic competence but also on broader domains of cognition, including executive control, attentional flexibility, and metalinguistic awareness.¹¹ These findings highlight how ongoing experience with multiple languages actively shapes both linguistic and cognitive systems, leading to developmental outcomes that are strikingly different from those predicted by a strictly rationalist model. If universal grammar functioned as a uniform and fully sufficient internal blueprint, then the experiential differences between monolinguals and bilinguals would be expected to yield only minimal variation. In reality, however, the evidence points in the opposite direction: bilingualism produces enduring and systematic differences that only make sense if language development is understood as a process that is deeply embedded in, and continually modulated by, environmental and experiential contexts.

The presence of such variability across learners, across circumstances, and across developmental pathways confirms, reinforces, and underscores the broader point that while innate predispositions and biological endowments undoubtedly matter, they do not unfold in a vacuum and cannot be adequately understood as operating independently of contextual conditions, situational variability, and environmental shaping forces. By systematically downplaying, marginalising, or outright denying the role of environmental input and experiential diversity, radical rationalism ultimately fails to capture the full complexity of the data observed in actual developmental psycholinguistic contexts. Its explanatory power is thereby limited, not because the idea of innate endowment is irrelevant, but because a one-sided reliance on it leaves unexplained the very phenomena that reveal how language acquisition is always a product of dynamic interaction between biology and environment.

¹¹ Ellen Bialystok, *Bilingualism in Development: Language, Literacy, and Cognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

On the Limits of Pure Empiricism

Radical empiricism portrays, presents, and conceptualises language primarily, and almost exclusively, as a form of learned behavior, i.e., something that is shaped, molded, and conditioned through the cumulative processes of reinforcement, repetition, and imitation carried out over extended periods of time. In this view, language is not treated as a unique or species-specific faculty but rather as one example among many of general patterns of behavior that can be explained through the same principles of learning that apply to non-linguistic skills and habits. The focus, accordingly, is placed on observable environmental contingencies and measurable behavioral outcomes, rather than on hypothetical internal structures or innate predispositions.

Within this tradition, B. F. Skinner¹² famously and influentially advanced the argument that linguistic competence is not the natural consequence of inborn cognitive mechanisms but instead arises directly from the processes of operant conditioning and reinforcement schedules. For Skinner, language learning was essentially no different from the acquisition of any other complex behavior: verbal responses that are reinforced by the environment are strengthened and repeated, while those that fail to elicit reinforcement gradually fade away. Over time, this process of differential reinforcement shapes the learner's repertoire into the patterned, systematic, and rule-like behavior that we recognise as linguistic competence.

On this account, the input that children receive from caregivers and from their wider environment is not merely one factor among many but rather the singular, primary, and ultimately exclusive driver of acquisition. The environment provides the models to be imitated, the stimuli that elicit verbal behavior, and the reinforcement contingencies that determine which utterances persist and which disappear. Language, then, is framed as emerging from outside the individual rather than from within: it is acquired not by activating an internal blueprint but by gradually internalising the contingencies and patterns made available in the surrounding communicative context.

This perspective implies that acquisition can, in principle, be explained without recourse to unobservable mental structures or innate knowledge. Instead, the emphasis falls on the regularities of input, the schedules of reinforcement, and the chains of stimulus-response associa-

¹² Skinner, *Verbal Behavior*.

tions that accumulate over time. From the radical empiricist standpoint, the mystery of language learning is demystified: it is not a matter of discovering hidden universals or unlocking biologically pre-specified principles, but simply of understanding how environmental shaping forces, operating consistently and persistently, give rise to the behaviors we identify as linguistic.

Empirical evidence, gathered from a wide range of studies and observations, strongly, consistently, and repeatedly contests such reductionism and calls into question its adequacy. Infants, from the very earliest stages of life, display clear signs of phonemic discrimination already from birth, demonstrating that they are equipped with perceptual sensitivities that precede extensive exposure to language.¹³ They also show an early and measurable sensitivity to syntactic regularities and grammatical patterns, revealing that structural awareness begins far sooner than pure experience alone would predict.¹⁴ Furthermore, children demonstrate the ability to infer and construct meanings from very limited and often sparse data, showing that they can work creatively and efficiently with incomplete input.¹⁵

These capacities all point toward underlying predispositions that cannot plausibly be explained solely and exclusively through environmental exposure or external reinforcement. The generative aspect of language, namely the ability to produce and to understand entirely novel sentences never previously encountered, remains well beyond the explanatory reach of behaviorism, despite its claims to sufficiency.¹⁶

Children do not merely, passively, or mechanically replicate the linguistic input that they receive from caregivers, peers, and their broader environment; rather, they actively systematise, organise, extend, and innovate upon it in ways that go beyond direct imitation. They construct rules and patterns that are not explicitly present in the stimulus,

¹³ Patricia Kuhl, "Early Language Acquisition: Cracking the Speech Code," *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 5, no. 11 (2004): 831-843.

¹⁴ Lila Gleitman and Elissa Newport, "The Invention of Language by Children: Environmental and Biological Influences on the Acquisition of Language," in *An Invitation to Cognitive Science*, ed. Daniel Osherson and Lila Gleitman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 1-24.

¹⁵ Michael Tomasello, *Constructing a Language: A Usage-Based Theory of Language Acquisition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹⁶ Noam Chomsky, "Review of B. F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior," *Language* 35, no. 1 (1959): 26-58.

not directly modeled in the data, and not straightforwardly available in the linguistic environment¹⁷. These constructive processes, which clearly involve abstraction, generalisation, and creative extension, are inexplicable and unaccountable within a strict empiricist framework that attributes everything solely to reinforcement and repetition.

Radical empiricism, by denying the presence and importance of innate constraints and inborn predispositions, neglects, overlooks, and effectively erases critical evidence on the cognitive endowment and biological architecture that underlie the process of acquisition, leaving its explanatory framework incomplete and methodologically insufficient.

The Case for Integrative Approaches

Integrative approaches to human development take a nuanced perspective, carefully recognising that the shaping of an individual is rarely the product of a single factor. Instead, both innate biological predispositions, such as genetic tendencies, neural maturation, and temperament, as well as external environmental conditions including family dynamics, cultural context, and broader social influences, are not only essential in themselves but also deeply interdependent. These factors continuously interact in complex ways, meaning that one cannot fully understand developmental outcomes without considering how nature and nurture mutually influence and amplify one another. Interactionist theories provide a particularly clear illustration of this interdependence, with Vygotsky's sociocultural framework standing as one of the most influential examples. His work emphasises that cognitive and linguistic development is fundamentally social in nature: children acquire increasingly sophisticated skills not in isolation, but through active engagement with more knowledgeable others within their cultural milieu. Concepts such as scaffolding, guided participation, and the zone of proximal development demonstrate how supportive social interactions gradually enable children to internalise external guidance, transforming it into independent capacities. Over time, these guided experiences allow children to master complex linguistic structures, nuanced communicative patterns, and higher-order cognitive processes, highlighting the profound and inseparable link between individual biology and the rich, culturally embedded

¹⁷ Eve Clark, *First Language Acquisition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

environment in which learning occurs.¹⁸

Emergentist models situate language development within the broader context of dynamic, self-organising systems that are constantly adapting and evolving over time. According to these models, linguistic competence is not a pre-specified, fixed module encoded innately within the human brain. Rather, it gradually emerges through the continuous, complex interplay among multiple interrelated factors. These include neural plasticity and the brain's inherent flexibility, underlying cognitive predispositions that guide attention and pattern recognition, and extensive exposure to varied environmental input such as spoken language, social interactions, and culturally specific communicative practices.¹⁹ By emphasising this ongoing interaction between biological and environmental influences, emergentist approaches provide a framework capable of explaining both the remarkable universality of certain linguistic features across human populations and the substantial variability that is often observed between individuals and communities. The shared biological foundations of the human brain account for the universality of certain linguistic structures, revealing patterns that appear consistently across diverse languages and cultures. At the same time, the specific characteristics of an individual's language acquisition trajectory, e.g. the speed of vocabulary growth, grammatical proficiency, or pragmatic use, are shaped by differences in the quantity, quality, and contextual richness of the linguistic input they receive. In this way, emergentist models illuminate how language develops as a fluid, adaptive system, simultaneously constrained by innate human capacities and shaped by the unique and variable environments in which learners are embedded, allowing for both common patterns and remarkable diversity in linguistic outcomes.

Holistic frameworks aim to synthesise and integrate research findings that emerge from a broad spectrum of disciplines, including psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, and anthropology, in order to construct a more coherent and comprehensive understanding of human development. These approaches place particular emphasis on the intricate interrelations and reciprocal influences among biological mechanisms, cognitive processes, social interactions, and cultural contexts, recognising that development cannot be fully understood by examining any one

¹⁸ Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*

¹⁹ Brian MacWhinney, *Emergence of Language*

factor in isolation.²⁰ By explicitly adopting a multidisciplinary perspective, holistic frameworks bring together insights from diverse domains of inquiry, allowing researchers to identify patterns and mechanisms that might remain hidden within the constraints of a single field. This integrative lens enables the study of psycholinguistic development with a level of depth and subtlety that acknowledges both the universal principles guiding human growth and the rich variability shaped by individual experience and sociocultural environment. Beyond merely combining multiple perspectives, holistic approaches actively explore how these factors interact dynamically over time, revealing emergent properties of development that cannot be captured by reductionist models. In doing so, they illuminate the complex, layered, and context-dependent nature of language acquisition and cognitive growth, providing a more nuanced and robust framework for understanding how humans acquire, process, and use language across different stages of life and within diverse cultural settings.

Toward an Anti-Radical Synthesis

The necessity for developing and employing integrative frameworks arises quite directly from the straightforward yet fundamental fact that the existing body of empirical evidence consistently lends support to claims advanced by both the rationalist tradition and the empiricist tradition. The weight of research indicates that neither side can fully account for the observed phenomena in isolation, highlighting the limits of approaches that privilege only innate mechanisms or exclusively environmental explanations. Radical or one-sided theories often fail, not because they lack internal coherence or explanatory sophistication, but precisely because they systematically disregard, minimise, or dismiss counterevidence that does not fit neatly within their preferred assumptions or theoretical commitments. In this context, an explicitly anti-radical synthesis requires the deliberate rejection of any theory that wholly privileges one single pole of the debate at the expense of the other, recognising that such unidimensional perspectives risk producing partial, skewed, or ultimately misleading accounts. Only by carefully drawing together and integrating the most compelling insights from both

²⁰ Anne Cutler, Wolfgang Klein, and Stephen Levinson, *The Oxford Handbook of Psycholinguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

rationalism and empiricism can the field of developmental psycholinguistics hope to maintain a stance that is simultaneously methodologically rigorous, theoretically balanced, and empirically adequate in its explanations.

Such an integrative synthesis does more than merely combine two opposing viewpoints; it fundamentally reorients and reframes the classic debate. Rather than persisting with the overly simplistic and ultimately unproductive question of whether nature or nurture exerts the dominant influence, attention is redirected toward understanding how these two sets of factors interact dynamically in practice, what specific mechanisms mediate and regulate this interaction, and under what particular circumstances one factor may temporarily exert greater influence than the other. By framing inquiry in this way, researchers are encouraged to investigate the conditional, context-dependent, and often reciprocal relationships that shape language acquisition, rather than reducing development to a static binary. These guiding questions move the field away from sterile dichotomies and rigid polarisations and instead promote a more layered, nuanced, and genuinely sophisticated understanding of the complex biological, cognitive, and environmental processes that underlie human linguistic development, fostering research that is both conceptually rich and practically informative.

Integration as Necessity

Developmental psycholinguistics as a field of inquiry cannot reasonably be confined within the narrow boundaries of either radical rationalism on one side or radical empiricism on the other. Both of these extreme positions ultimately fail, not only on empirical grounds, because they are contradicted by the breadth of available evidence, but also on methodological and conceptual grounds, since they oversimplify the phenomenon and neglect essential dimensions of inquiry that are critical for a full understanding. Language acquisition should not be reduced to the mere unfolding of innate biological structures operating in isolation, nor should it be described as the purely passive imprinting of environmental input onto a blank cognitive slate. Instead, language learning is more accurately conceived as the dynamic product of a highly complex and continuous interplay between internal predispositions and external contexts, between biological constraints that channel possible outcomes and sociocultural environments that shape the range, texture, and timing of ac-

tual experiences. This interplay is multifaceted, involving not only neurological and cognitive mechanisms but also social interactions, cultural norms, and feedback loops that continually influence the developmental trajectory.

From this recognition, the imperative for the discipline becomes unmistakably clear: in order to advance in a rigorous, coherent, and truly insightful way, developmental psycholinguistics must deliberately embrace integrative, interactionist, and emergentist models that actively combine and balance multiple perspectives. Frameworks of this kind do justice to the empirical record by honoring the full spectrum of evidence, capturing both universal tendencies and individual variability, while simultaneously respecting the inherent complexity of linguistic development as a layered, multifactorial process. By doing so, these approaches provide not only the most adequate theoretical foundations for explanation but also the most promising and practically useful path forward for research and application alike. This includes informing educational strategies that accommodate diverse learning profiles, guiding clinical interventions for language disorders, and supporting cross-cultural communication by illuminating how language acquisition is shaped by both shared human capacities and culturally specific experiences. Ultimately, embracing such integrative frameworks enables the field to move beyond overly simplistic dichotomies and toward a richer, more nuanced, and more operationally effective understanding of how human beings acquire, use, and adapt language across the lifespan.

In Defense of Agency: Free Will, the Self, and Participatory Metaphysics

Daniel Tarpy (University of Sofia)

Abstract: This paper defends the concept of free will against key objections raised by thinkers such as Sam Harris, Robert Sapolsky, Jerry Coyne, and Daniel Wegner. It argues that ontological determinism—often presented as the inevitable conclusion of modern science—is not only philosophically flawed but also incompatible with scientific inquiry itself. Secondly, it demonstrates that Harris’ appeal to mindfulness practices infused by Buddhist no-self (*anatta*) doctrine neglects the crucial role of interpretation, intention, and practice in shaping transcendent experiences. Lastly, Harris and Sapolsky’s claim that rejecting free will would lead to a more humane system of justice is countered by asserting that there is no reason to think we cannot abandon this *need* for punitive justice without also abandoning agency. In defending agency against a tide of bad philosophy, this paper aims to reclaim the narrative in bringing the free will stance to its natural fruition: a participatory metaphysics with the self as agential co-creator of reality—an axiom that is, in fact, at the heart of science and philosophy.

Keywords: Free Will, Agency, Determinism, Buddhist No-Self Doctrine, the Self, Participatory Metaphysics

1. Introduction

Philosophy—and science by extension, for philosophy underpins science, even if science would prefer this not to be the case—is predicated on certain irreducible assumptions, without which the whole enterprise would be self-defeating. Of these axioms, perhaps the most central is that of human agency, and by implication, the human agent. The question of human agency is not just a case of philosophical hairsplitting but has profound implications for society and the individual. If the idea that free will does not exist gains widespread acceptance, it could lead to the creation of systems and cultures that fundamentally alter our understanding (and experiencing) of freedom, individuality, and self-

awareness. Nowhere is this risk greater than in the field of AI. If the people who hold the levers of this nascent technology, or those who are tasked to rein in any excesses, find themselves persuaded against free will (and the self), what dystopian systems might arise from or be intentionally constructed based on this presupposition that would result in depriving us of a free will we supposedly did not have?

While not only a modern phenomenon, free will denial has enjoyed a mild resurgence in recent years. In a number of podcasts and in his book *Free Will*, philosopher and neuroscientist Sam Harris makes the claim that “free will is an illusion”.¹ Biologist and neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky does not think that we have “any free will whatsoever”.² Biologist Jerry Coyne writes about why we “don’t really have free will”.³ Adding to the mix social psychologist Daniel Wegner, who passed away in 2013 and who is best known for his book *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, these four horsemen of determinism are highlighted not just because of their anti-free will stance, but because they are more readily recognizable in the public discourse surrounding the topic.⁴

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part argues against the three core objections to free will: (1) determinism, (2) epiphenomenalism — or the view that the self is an illusion, often associated with Buddhist thought — and (3) retributive justice. The second part presents the free will position, arguing that agential ontology is both necessary and foundational to philosophy and science. The aim of this paper to de-

¹ Sam Harris, *Free Will* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

² Robert Sapolsky and Stephen J. Dubner, “Robert Sapolsky: ‘I Don’t Think We Have Any Free Will Whatsoever.’ | People I (Mostly) Admire | 18,” *Freakonomics Radio Network*, YouTube, January 23, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcBgsmJFHDY>.

³ Jerry A. Coyne, “Why You Don’t Really Have Free Will,” *USA Today*, January 1, 2001.

⁴ This should go without saying that rejecting their views on free will is not to discount their contributions in other areas but is in the vein of separating the good thinker from the bad idea. It should also be pointed out, specifically for Harris, that while he presents himself as a determinist in relation to the free will debate, he is not quite a materialist. His views are at times more nuanced, particularly in his treatment of the hard problem of consciousness. He defends consciousness as something fundamental (at least to our ability to comprehend, whether or not it is ‘in reality’), and is open to the possibility of either consciousness as an emergent property or as going down to the bottom of reality. (André Duquum and Sam Harris. “A Rational Mystics Guide To Consciousness and Awakening | Sam Harris.” *YouTube*. May 23, 2023. www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqA-ZRpl1jQ)

fend this free will axiom against a growing tide of bad philosophy that seems to take pride in its own deterministic shackles.

2. Three Core Objections to Free Will — and Why They Fail

Given that free will seems to be so self-evident and to give it up so disempowering, what overwhelming evidence is there for rejecting free will? Sapolsky, Coyne, and Wegner tell us of scientific determinism, as if this is where the science leads, but which is not only not where the science leads, but a position that is in fact incompatible with science. Then from Harris in particular, we are presented with a kind of mindfulness practice subtly infused by the Buddhist mind-doctrine of anatta (no-self) as evidence that the self—and by extension, free will—does not exist. But this unfortunate conclusion likely results from a misunderstanding of the role of intention in effectuating experiential states, and is further exacerbated by the ambiguity of terms such as the *self*. In addition, Harris and Sapolsky justify a denial of free will with the claim that this will enable us to transcend a punitive conception of justice. But there is no reason to think we cannot have a society that divorces itself from this deeply rooted obsession with judgment without also having to give up that which makes humanity matter in the first place. While the arguments presented by these thinkers make some valid points, particularly in showing how much of behavior is not consciously driven and how holding on too tightly to dogmatic conceptions of libertarian free will can lead to absurdities and injustices, their equally dogmatic conclusion that free will does not exist must be rejected, not because free will is a useful fiction, but precisely because it is one of the most fundamental truths.

Science and the Incoherence of Ontological Determinism

The determinist position is that “there is at any instant exactly one physically possible future”⁵ and that only one possible timeline exists⁶. To paraphrase Laplace’s Demon, if we knew precisely the location and momentum of all the particles in the universe, we would know with full certainty what we would eat for breakfast tomorrow. Even with the in-

⁵ Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* (London: Penguin UK, 2004), 25, citing Peter van Inwagen.

⁶ Kevin J. Mitchell, *Free Agents: How Evolution Gave Us Free Will* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 280.

roduction of true randomness—an idea that is heavily contested—which adds probabilistic outcomes and multiple possible futures due to an assumed inherent randomness in the behavior of particles, this model of probabilistic determinism still leaves no room for agency.⁷

A number of thinkers have tried to combine free will with physical determinism in what is called compatibilism: where free actions are those that are caused by the internal states of the agent, such as their desires, intentions, and rational deliberations. For the compatibilist, an action is free when the individual acts according to their own motivations without external coercion or compulsion, even if these motivations are themselves determined by prior events. But this whole perspective can be discarded as this is not what we actually *mean* when we say free will. This is not *free* in any sense of the word. It is as well incoherent because no motivations are constructed free of external influences; the individual is shaped always in the midst of coercion. This would be akin to saying, after taking the break shot, that a billiard ball in motion is *free* so long as other balls do not bump into it. But the billiard ball never possessed anything approximating agency; its initial velocity and direction is determined by the same originating action that determines whether or not it would be bumped into by other balls. It is simply arbitrary to distinguish between the inner drives (its velocity) and external forces (other balls bumping into it), since the hitting of the cue ball has already determined both. The ball has no agency.

When it comes to our conception of the self, the story that determinism tells us is that either consciousness is the ghost *behind* the glass—watching but unable to interact, and deceiving itself into thinking that it is the one making decisions, when in actuality its sense of agency is just a story the brain tells itself moments after what was going to happen happens (like a driver in a self-driving car with a fake steering wheel, wrongly believing that he is the one driving and making up for the inconsistency by

⁷ Some try to use evidence of randomness as a defense of free will—in that it is possible that what is called randomness is consciousness-generated rather than being innate to a particle—but if the action was truly random then that would not be evidence of agency, and if it was not truly random then it should not be called randomness. But although true randomness provides no evidence for free will, it does provide an indictment of determinism: if some things are truly random in that they truly could have been otherwise, then determinism, strictly speaking, would not hold.

creating a narrative that matches the movements of the car)—or that even this ghost is in actuality nothing more than an apparition and that there really is *nobody* behind the glass, and this sense of agency and selfhood with all its attending hopes and dreams and desires belong to no one and amounts to just another algorithm running on another.

Is this the conclusion that science offers us? To say so would be to wildly misinterpret the metaphysics of science. Science is unable in principle to lay claim to ontological determinism. Rather than a scientific conclusion, determinism can exist only as a preliminary assumption. Modern science has come about by bracketing consciousness from matter, the observer from what is being observed. But consciousness with its attending agency was always assumed. There is no way to *do* science without employing agency. In order to do science we must assume our capacity for agency, for action that is self-caused, for free will. Science does not make sense in a purely mechanistic universe. That we are intentional agents—able to uncover truths about how the world works and able, through our actions, to bring about a change in the world—is the underlying proposition of science. Scientists are not generally metaphysicians and so these foundational principles of science are often overlooked in the doing of science, yet they still remain, as solid as ever.⁸ Yes, determinism might still be the case in actuality, but then science would be rendered inoperable, and as such, could not lay claim to anything—least of all determinism.

Science is predicated on certain irreducible assumptions (assumptions that we must hold for the rest of the structure to make sense).

⁸ The metaphysical confusion in the sciences surrounding consciousness and agency can be traced back to the Enlightenment. Although materialism has its origins at least in ancient Greece with Democritus, and has had some adherents in the early modern period, such as with Thomas Hobbes (whose commitment to determinism led him to argue for a kind of compatibilism), it experienced a revival in the 17th century with the development of modern science, and this developed into the form as we know it today. But most of these Enlightenment materialists were themselves theists and often believed in such ideas as the immortality of the soul. Materialism was formulated to describe the material world and intentionally left aside the study of consciousness and conscious experience—it was never meant to account for consciousness. Science is not predicated on reductionist materialism. Materialism is not even predicated on reductionist materialism. The individual, as a conscious agent capable of effecting change in the world, was always assumed, and was simply bracketed out in order to address the material world in isolation.

Agency—understood as a feature of consciousness rather than a behavior of an organism—is one. Epistemic truth is another. All claims to knowledge rely on certain sets of *a priori* assumptions. In the traditional JTB (justified true belief) model, there is an assumption of an internal, subjective world of belief, and an external, objective world of truth. Most other competing models to JTB simply exchange justification for some other term, but the principle remains that we need some kind of justification in order for a belief to pass as knowledge.⁹ However, if we are simply automatons, there is no way to lay claim to knowledge. If everything is determined—including our belief in determinism—then any justification models would, in principle, be untestable. All we could say is that we are determined to believe this, not that this is or is not justifiably true. We would therefore have no claim to knowledge, and as science relies on knowledge, we would have no capacity for science. Yes, we might, in fact, be determined to arrive at true knowledge, but we would have no way to distinguish that from simply being determined to *think* that we have arrived at true knowledge. Ontological determinism as a truth claim is self-defeating, and is again, incompatible with science. (David Lawrence lays out a similar case in his book *Are We Really Biochemical Robots?*)

Science does not, and cannot, lead us to a rejection of the self as agent. In fact, if anything, science, particularly in the case of quantum theory, has laid bare our inability to understand the universe within a framework that tries to bracket out consciousness from matter. Max Planck, regarded as the founder of quantum theory, believed in consciousness as cause rather than epiphenomenon: “I regard consciousness as fundamental. I regard matter as derivative from consciousness. We cannot get behind consciousness. Everything that we talk about, everything that we regard as existing, postulates consciousness”.¹⁰ Austrian

⁹ Although challenges to the classical view of knowledge have succeeded in pointing out the insufficiency of the justification condition, they do so only by first defining justification according to their own limited definitions. Both Reliabilism and Goldman’s Causal Theory (and others) can be seen simply as a redefining of justification. Reliabilism does not do away with justification; it just replaces “justified” with “reliable”. It seems quite intuitive that we would agree that a belief is not justified if it is not reliable. This also works for the Gettier cases. If a belief is true simply because of luck, it does not meet a reasonable definition of justified.

¹⁰ Max Planck, “The Nature of Matter,” in *The Philosophy of Physics*, ed. James Murphy (London: Allen & Unwin, 1936; repr. 1949), 120.

physicist Erwin Schrödinger, who contributed greatly to the field of quantum science, echoes a similar train of thought: “Consciousness cannot be accounted for in physical terms. For consciousness is absolutely fundamental. It cannot be accounted for in terms of anything else”.¹¹ Eugene Wigner, who received the Nobel Prize in 1963 for *Quantum Symmetries*, says it similarly again: “It will remain remarkable that the very study of the external world led to the conclusion that the content of the consciousness is an ultimate reality”.¹² Among the heavyweights of physics, perhaps none has been more adamant about the role of the conscious agent than John Wheeler who describes a *participatory* universe emerging from the “interplay of consciousness and physical reality, the subjective and objective realms”, where “we are participants in bringing into being not only the near and here, but the far away and long ago”.^{13,14} Following in the trajectory of Wheeler, physicist Adam Frank writes of the fundamental nature of experience and agency and how consciousness is not just a witness but a co-creator of reality.¹⁵

A commitment to ontological determinism is not due to the insights from science, but rather, despite them. That is not to say that science proves agency (the point here is that science requires the assumption of agency in order to function in the first place), but that science certainly does not refute consciousness, and if anything, finds itself increasingly unable to avoid it. The question of agency is a question of consciousness, for agency implies an agent, and consciousness is that which by any definition has causal power. To deny agency is to deny the agent. Nevertheless, in some less fundamental fields such as biology and neuroscience, there have been attempts to erode support for the notion of consciousness as the agent. Appeals are often made to a number of stud-

¹¹ Erwin Schrödinger, “General Scientific and Popular Papers,” *Collected Papers*, vol. 4 (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 1984), 334.

¹² Eugene Wigner, “Remarks on the Mind-Body Question,” in *Quantum Theory and Measurement*, ed. John A. Wheeler and Wojciech H. Zurek (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 172.

¹³ John Horgan (paraphrasing John Wheeler), “Why Information Can’t Be the Basis of Reality,” *Scientific American*, February 20, 2024, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/blog/cross-check/why-information-cant-be-the-basis-of-reality>

¹⁴ John Wheeler, interview by Martin Redfern, “The Anthropic Universe,” *Science Show*, radio broadcast, February 18, 2006.

¹⁵ Adam Frank, Marcelo Gleiser, and Evan Thompson, *The Blind Spot* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/13711.001.0001>.

ies and experiments (such as the ones conducted by Benjamin Libet¹⁶ and others by Sapolsky¹⁷) that seem to show how some ‘decisions’ are preceded by unconscious processes or driven by socio-biological conditions, or how a sense of control over actions that are not self-caused can be manufactured, and therefore, how little space, if any, is left for libertarian free will. This is the hill on which Sapolsky (and Wegner) plants his flag. But to say that a man is an agent is not to claim that he must be conscious of every mitigating factor influencing his action, nor even that every part of the process leading to that action is fully transparent to his conscious self (the unconscious is as well a part of consciousness), but to say that he is that which is capable of originating action, regardless of the degree to which his actions are influenced or constrained.

Agency is not an action but a feature of consciousness. This is an important distinction. Agency is a capacity. A man in chains possesses just as much agency as a king whose every whim is followed. Likewise, a man in metaphorical chains of biology, upbringing, and socio-economic status possesses just as much agency as any other by the simple virtue of being a conscious being. To put it another way, there is a distinction between the idea of a free action and the notion of agency. It would not matter if we never once made a completely free action; it would not even matter if there were no way for an action to be taken in the complete absence of external influence. The claim here is that consciousness is that which can generate actions, even if consciousness itself can be influenced. Judges passing harsher sentences when they are hungry says nothing about ontological determinism.¹⁸ It simply shows another way we are conditioned by our biology and environment.

Distinguishing between the faculty of agency and the exercising of that faculty avoids a whole discussion of degrees of freedom and the argument over at what point constrained behaviors could reasonably be called determined. There are of course degrees of freedom. A slave is less

¹⁶ Benjamin Libet, “Time of Conscious Intention to Act in Relation to Onset of Cerebral Activity (Readiness-Potential): The Unconscious Initiation of a Freely Voluntary Act,” *Brain* 106, no. 3 (1983): 623–642.

¹⁷ Robert M. Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017).

¹⁸ Research on judges passing harsher sentences when hungry comes from a 2011 study by Shai Danziger, Jonathan Levav, and Liora Avnaim-Pesso. (“Extraneous Factors in Judicial Decisions,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 108, no. 17 (2011): 6889–6892.)

free than a free man. A young child has less freedom than an adult, both because of the child's lack of awareness of their agency and because of their lack of ability to make use of that agency. But there are not degrees of human beings. Both the slave and the child belong to the category of that which possess agency, that which can generate an action.

This compatibility between free will and being constrained by genes, culture, and nature is not compatibilism. The problem with compatibilism is that it does not take issue with ontological determinism. Compatibilists argue that even in a deterministic universe, where every event is caused by a prior event, humans can still possess free will in a meaningful sense—in relation to acting according to their desires, motives, or reasons without external coercion. This incoherent view strips away what is meant by agency and then tries to mash that together with determinism. There is no compatibility with ontological determinism. The only thing a true compatibilist can talk of is radical emergence: a universe that begins as ontologically deterministic, with consciousness emerging out of this with its capacity for ontological agency, able to act back upon the system that gave rise to it. But even in this case of radical emergence, the system is no longer deterministic—and if it is not deterministic now, it never was, because within the original determinism was that seed of agency.

This is the crux of the argument: determinism, in the sense of the cause-and-effect process of classical physics, is useful and valid in science, but only when confined to its proper domain. The explanatory power that determinism has at the level of physical processes dissipates when it comes to explaining consciousness. Determinism cannot serve as a totalizing metaphysics, not only because it cannot account for consciousness but also because to do so would be to undermine the whole scientific enterprise itself. The problem with determinism is the attempt to conflate the cause-and-effect process of classical physics with a metaphysical framework of causal chains in a purely physicalist system. Science does not and cannot lead to this, because science is predicated on an agential metaphysics—a position which will be argued in the final section of this paper.

Misapprehending the Self: From Buddhism to Unitary States of Consciousness

Without the agent, there can be no agency, and that is why the free will debate invariably makes its way to a discussion of the self. Views that reject the individual self in favor of a universal self still accord agency to the universal self, but non-agential metaphysics would deny agency both to the individual and to the universe (or universal self). The concept of anatta (or no-self) in Buddhism is often taken as a defense of non-agential metaphysics. What differentiates anatta from other arguments such as determinism, is that anatta is not just a propositional argument but an appeal to direct experience.

For many thinkers, transcendent experiences have helped to shape their philosophy, either through directly experiencing such states themselves or speculating on the experiences of others. Plato's initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries—an ancient Greek ritual that is widely hypothesized to have included a psychedelic component eliciting visionary or mystical states—arguably helped shape his belief in immortal souls.¹⁹ Plotinus, founder of Neoplatonism, uses his experiences of mystical union with “the One” as the foundation of his philosophy.²⁰ Central to Schopenhauer's philosophy is his contemplative practice of suspending personal desires and focusing on the aesthetic object itself, allowing for a glimpse of the underlying Platonic Idea.²¹ William James, influenced by his own experiments with nitrous oxide and extensive study of religious experiences, argued that mystical states reveal metaphysical truths inaccessible to ordinary reasoning.²² Aldous Huxley's mescaline experiences helped form his “perennial philosophy”, which posits a universal mystical core to all religious traditions.²³

While for these thinkers, their experiences of transcendent realities do not lead them to a rejection of agency (although in the case of Schopenhauer, his universal Will does not belong to a conscious agent, even though the individual—as manifestations of the Will—can achieve

¹⁹ R. Gordon Wasson, Albert Hofmann, and Carl A. P. Ruck, *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries* (New York: Harcourt, 1978).

²⁰ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Faber & Faber, 1969).

²¹ Bryan Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

²² William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902).

²³ Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954).

at least partial liberation from the blindness of universal Will), for Sam Harris specifically, his rejection of free will is influenced, at least in part, by his meditative experiences. As he puts it, what is revealed through a meditation practice deeply informed by Buddhist and mindfulness traditions is that thoughts, impulses, and desires simply arise without an identifiable agent or ‘self’ causing them: “this is an empirical claim: Look closely enough at your own mind in the present moment, and you will discover that the self is an illusion.”²⁴

In Buddhist literature there is an account of Nāgasena, a monk who uses the example of a chariot to explain the concept of no-self to a certain king.²⁵ What the king calls his chariot cannot be found in any of its pieces, nor in the sum of its pieces, nor in how those pieces are arranged, for one of the wheels could be replaced and it would still be the king’s chariot. The conclusion then is that the king’s chariot is simply a linguistic convention, and in the same way, the self is an illusion. There is no permanent or enduring self. But just as in the Ship of Theseus Paradox, to jump from a paradox of identity to a denial of the self is to commit either a category mistake or false analogy fallacy—or both. Just because something cannot be grasped, just because something cannot be logically deduced, does not mean it does not exist, perhaps at some deeper level.²⁶

Like Christianity with Judaism, Buddhism grew out of Hinduism. For the Vedanta (one of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy), the true nature of the individual self (*Atman*) is identical to the ultimate reality (*Brahman*). In Buddhism, on the other hand, *anatta* asserts that there is no enduring self or soul, and holding on to a belief in a persisting self is the source of suffering. To abandon this belief is to achieve enlightenment and liberation. The concept of no-self is said to derive from the teachings of Gautama Buddha, passed down through his disci-

²⁴ Sam Harris, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 11.

²⁵ N. K. G. Mendis, ed., *The Questions of King Milinda* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2007), www.bps.lk/olib/bp/bp217s_Mendis_Questions-of-King-Melinda.pdf.

²⁶ We can leave aside potential responses to the identity paradox, such as Plato’s conception of eternal forms, which would suggest that the true identity of the ship or the chariot (or a person) is not tied to the changing physical components but instead rooted in its eternal Form or, in the case of a person, the eternal soul. The main issue here is the logical fallacy.

ples—though Gautama is not recorded as specifically claiming this. In fact, when he was asked the question of the nature of the self, he remained silent, as the account goes.²⁷ Nevertheless, anatta has become the prevailing position in Buddhism, though among the different Buddhist traditions there are those who still refer to something more akin to the *True-Self* of Vedanta Hinduism.²⁸

Why did this concept of no-self become the prevailing view in Buddhism? Part of it was likely a reaction to the legalism and religiosity of Hindu society (this is something Harris also concedes²⁹). For Hinduism with its strict caste system, enlightenment would take many generations. But for Buddhism, even the lowliest can achieve enlightenment in an instant—perhaps because there is no enduring self that needed to slowly evolve into its truest form. Then there is the cessation from suffering, which is the central aim of Buddhism. Just as if there is no self then there is no free will, if there is no self then there is no suffering, for there is no one there to endure the suffering. If we cannot stop the suf-

²⁷ “When Vacchagotta the wanderer asked him point-blank whether or not there is a self, the Buddha remained silent, which means that the question has no helpful answer. As he later explained to Ananda, to respond either yes or no to this question would be to side with opposite extremes of wrong view.” Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “There Is No Self,” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, Spring 2014, <https://tricycle.org/magazine/there-no-self/>.

²⁸ “As the Buddha once said, the teaching he most frequently gave to his students was this: All fabrications are inconstant; all phenomena are not-self (anatta) (MN 35). Many people have interpreted this second statement as meaning that there is no self. Others, however, have noticed statements in the Pali Canon—our earliest extant record of the Buddha’s teachings—that refer to the idea of self in a positive manner, as when the Buddha stated that the self is its own mainstay (Dhp 160) or when he encouraged a group of young men—who were searching for a woman who had stolen their belongings—to search for the self instead (Mv.I.14.4). From these statements, these readers conclude that the statement, “All phenomena are not-self,” is meant to clear away attachment to a false view of self so that an experience of the true self can be attained. | The debate between these two positions has lasted for millennia, with each side able to cite additional passages from the Canon to prove the other side wrong. Even now, both sides continue to find adherents attracted to their arguments, but neither side has had the final word.” (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “The Not-self Strategy,” 2013, www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/notselfstrategy.pdf.)

²⁹ André Duqum and Sam Harris. “A Rational Mystics Guide To Consciousness and Awakening | Sam Harris.” *YouTube*. May 23, 2023. www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqA-ZRpIjQ

fering of the world, we can detach from the world and in this way, put an end to the suffering. If we cannot brush away the hand of death, we can take away its sting by detaching from identification with a self, for then there is no one that dies. But the final and most compelling argument for the doctrine of no-self is the appeal to direct experience.

There is nothing so persuasive as experience. All arguments and theories fall flat in the face of a direct encounter. Of the arguments against free will, perhaps on par with scientific determinism is the no-self doctrine of Buddhism, which uses appeals to direct experience. Even though the vast majority of Buddhist practitioners must rely on faith in the promise of full enlightenment at the end of a long road of practice; that said, they can at least experience *something* with minimal effort. But what needs to be pointed out is that in Buddhism, as in all experiential traditions, it is only certain types of experiences that are appealed to, and only when those experiences are framed within the context of Buddhist mind-doctrine, and undertaken with the ‘right’ intention.

Contextualization frames experience. The mindset of the individual, the cultural and religious expectations, the framing of the experience, and the post-experience integration can have just as much impact on the truth claim as the direct experience itself. The philosopher Evan Thompson makes this same claim in response to what he sees as attempts by Harris and others to recast Buddhism as first-person science. “In other words, it’s not the case that the experience of bare attention independently establishes the descriptive truth of the Buddhist mind-doctrine; rather, the Buddhist mind-doctrine is needed to give meaning to the experience of bare attention.”³⁰ The Buddhist teaching of no-self rests not just upon the experience, but on Buddhist philosophy to contextualize the experience.

There are also clearly different types of transcendent experiences.³¹ The same person, regardless of their socio-cultural framing, is bound to

³⁰ Evan Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 21.

³¹ Transcendent experiences can be loosely defined as profound states of non-ordinary consciousness induced by practices such as meditation, sensory deprivation, fasting, holotropic breathwork, yoga, music, dancing, and psychedelics. There are also spontaneous experiences, such as NDEs, mystical encounters, and what Stanislav and Christina Grof call spiritual emergencies (which can overlap with symptoms of mental illness).

have a profoundly different experience whether they meditate or drink ayahuasca. And different experiential states seem to favor different metaphysical frameworks. It is not all that surprising that Buddhist mind doctrine is connected with mindfulness meditative practices and not with other shamanic traditions that center on, for instance, the consumption of entheogens.

But the third and most important mediator of experience is the intention or orientation of the practitioner themselves. We see this among the three main traditions that differ in their interpretations of experiential metaphysics, but which nonetheless utilize a similar meditative or contemplative practice of awareness—or rather, a practice of *directing attention*. The contemplative or experiential traditions of Christian mysticism, Sufi Islam, and Jewish Kabbalah tend to elicit a relational, personal encounter, often described by its adherents using the language of erotic love.³² This differs qualitatively from the impersonal, detached, self-less experiential states reported by Buddhist meditation practitioners, which differs as well from the experiences of unitary consciousness reported by Hindu yoga practitioners (particularly in Kundalini and Raja Yoga, though others, such as Bhakti Yoga, with its language of devotion to a divine lover, seems more closely connected with the Western experience).³³ In general, we can assume that those who follow in their respective traditions would tend to encounter experiences that align with that tradition. Western practices tend to focus on a relationship with a personal, external God (who is at the same time intimately intertwined with the self). Buddhist practices typically aim at observing and detaching from the thinking mind in order to achieve the state of the “unconditioned”. Hindu practices tend to focus on identification with universal Brahman consciousness. What is intentionally focused on (or not focused on), what it is that we are oriented towards, does as much to shape (or draw out) the resulting experience.

³² For the role of erotic and intimate language in describing transcendent experiences in Christian mysticism, Jewish Kabbalah, and Sufi Islam, see Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998); Daniel Matt, *The Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983).

³³ For unitary consciousness in the context of Hindu yoga, see Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition: Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice* (Arizona: Hohm Press, 2001).

While philosophy and science is clearly predicated on the Western tradition of an enduring self and a distinction between the individual self and the universal, to what extent are these views mutually exclusive? What does Buddhism really mean by no-self? What does Hinduism really mean by universal self?

The term *self* is a prime example of a linguistic convention that lends itself to ambiguity. For many, *self* and *ego* are interchangeable terms. But there is a difference between the self as locus of experiential awareness and the self as the ego. And there are at least two different conceptions of the ego. There is the psycho-socially constructed Jungian *persona* (ego in the modern sense of the word), and the formed character underpinned by memories and experiences (the ego of Jungian psychology). When people speak of ego-loss or ego-death, they are most often referring to the falling away of the ego-persona, the mask we all wear. Much less often are they referring to ego in the sense of the entire historical character. But rarely ever do they mean ego in the sense of the individual self as a subjective center of experiential awareness.

Similar to the ambiguity of *self* and *ego* is the ambiguity of the term *unity*, which could mean either oneness or connectedness. There are psychedelic, meditative, or mystical states that are reported as experiences of unitary consciousness, of an identification with everything that is. It is likely that when people speak of unitary experiences (meaning experiences where the self seems to disappear into the totality) they are mistaking interconnectedness for undifferentiated oneness. There is another kind of unity that the mystics talk of: a paradoxical state of irreducible yet inseparable plurality, where two become not one, yet remain not two either. This ontological interconnectedness that is neither separateness nor oneness is reflected in the Christian concept of the Trinity, which has some parallels with the Brahman of Hinduism.³⁴

Lastly, there is the concept of the unconceptualizable. The uncon-

³⁴ Ultimate reality (Brahman) is sometimes expressed as a threefold structure: as Brahman (the absolute), Paramātmā (the universal Self immanent in all beings), and Bhagavān (the personal, relational aspect of the divine). In addition, many Hindu traditions also present a functional trinity known as the Trimūrti—comprising Brahmā (creator), Viṣṇu (preserver), and Shiva (destroyer). Like the Christian Trinity, Hinduism suggests divine plurality within ultimate unity. For an in-depth discussion on potential parallels to Christian thinking, see Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries Between Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

ceptualizable state of ultimate reality in Buddhism has some similarity to what both Hinduism and the Western tradition call *the ground of all being* (often interchangeable with *God*), though Buddhism calls this *groundlessness*. The highest goal of Buddhism is not pure awareness but often referred to as the realization of emptiness, or the unconditioned state. Taking some liberties, we can define this as a state of pure, unactualized potentiality, with no movement and no experience and no awareness as such; a state of all asleep in the fullness of its potential. But the actual and the potential are interrelated. Like the Yin-Yang symbol from the Daoism worldview, within the potential is the seed of the actual, and the actual carries within it the memory of the potential. Somehow out of the unactualized potential comes a world of movement and experience and awareness that arises due to some actualizing force. Even if actuality arises out of potentiality, within the potentiality is the seed of actuality, and as such, neither can be said to be more ultimate than the other.

Buddhism has the unconditioned. Hinduism has the universal. The Western tradition has the relational. Even if one of these states was truly more primary than the others, in that it preceded the others; even if it were that the unconceptualizable or the universal are more primordial than the relational, in that out of the emptiness of pure potentiality awoke the One who retreated from itself to birth the many; because the relational exists, the relational has always existed. Even if the many came forth from the One, even if the actual came forth from the unactualized, neither the many nor the actual are any less primary, for coming out of the primordial means they have always existed within the primordial. This principle of potentiality is central to the Western tradition.

While not the assumption that underpins Western metaphysics (which holds that in the beginning was a relationship rather than either an undifferentiated oneness or a non-actualized potentiality), the Western position can—without imploding on itself—incorporate both the state of the unconditioned and the universal self as aspects of a larger triune reality that includes the actualized state and the individual self as the third aspect. But where these views stretch the bounds of compatibility is when it comes to the goal or purpose that drives these worldviews.

Rather than irreconcilable ontological differences, the fundamental incompatibility of these differing worldviews is a teleological one. The goal of the philosophy of the unconditioned is to return to the unactual-

ized state. The goal of the philosophy of the universal self is to merge back into the undifferentiated godhead. But the goal of the Western tradition is, as the Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault puts it, to “withstand the fierce particularity of love”.³⁵ If the response of Buddhism in the face of a world of suffering is to seek liberation through detachment from desire and therefore from the self, it is the response of the Western tradition (from Socrates to Christ to the existentialists) to choose to endure suffering rather than betray desire, rather than betray the self. This is the ethics that underlies the Western tradition: to endure suffering in order to transmute it; to not seek liberation through simply letting go but transformation through a kind of paradoxical letting go and yet holding on.—We see this in the Christian motif of Christ accepting the dissolution of death, and yet returning to life, having reclaimed his physical body; much like Camus’ *Rebel* who rejects the “abstract immortality of the species become Spirit” in favor of “the immortality of the entire man, clothed in his living body.”³⁶

Even if consciousness arises out of the unactualized, the goal is not to return to a state of unactualization. Regression must give way to progression—not the progress that divorces itself from its own past, but progress in the Hegelian manner of the first returned to itself in truer form. Even if the relational arises out of the universal, the goal is not to meld back into the primordial. The purpose of life is to create a new home for being. This is the telos that underpins both science and philosophy. Eastern escapism must subsume into Western transmutation. We do escape the world, but not by leaving it, but by transforming it. Even if these metaphysical realities are all equally real, why not reify the one that is most world-affirming, especially when science and philosophy can only operate in that context? Why not choose the middle path, as the Buddhists are fond of saying, between being *every*-thing and being *no*-thing—the Goldilocks zone of existence?

Transcending Punitive Justice Without Abandoning Agency

For the determinist position, there can be neither good nor bad, only what is determined, and only what is determined to be perceived as either good

³⁵ Cynthia Bourgeault, *Love is Stronger than Death: The Mystical Union of Two Souls* (Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish Book Publishing, 2014), 16.

³⁶ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (London: Penguin UK, 2013), 120.

or bad. And yet, as both Harris and Sapolsky make the claim, the world would become a better place if we were to disavow ourselves of our naïve notions of personal agency.^{37,38} (Of course, under their worldview, the world could not be “better” in any objective sense, and we could not go about avowing or disavowing anything, for our notions of better or worse would simply be determined. The world either is or is not, and we either do or do not, as there is no self with any agency to go about disavowing agency). But what we are being presented here is a smuggled-in either-or fallacy: either we must accept a world of shame and guilt and judgment, of infinite responsibility and punitive justice, or we must abandon our notions of autonomy and choice and selfhood. Sapolsky and Harris are taking this noble motivation to transcend a culture of judgment and are using it as a wrapper to conceal a terrible product. If only we just accept their view on free will, they argue, we could let go of this sense of judgment that has us undeservingly condemning people or putting others on pedestals. Yet, if we do not have free will, it does not matter if we are equal or unequal, that notion loses its meaning. The concepts of good or bad, of better or worse, of equal or unequal, of morality in general, do not mean anything in a deterministic universe void of agents and agency. We need not throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. We can accept their prognosis while rejecting their prescriptions.

A sense of ‘justice’ is deeply embedded in our psychology and our culture, which, at one time at least, was arguably necessary for civilization to flourish. But have we not outgrown this? This must be answered with caution. The desire for retribution, for revenge, for judgment, lives in us; it lurks in our unconscious, in our archetypal structures, ready to play on our insecurities and fears, and we do not know how deep this fiery imagery runs.

There is likely a constellation of impulses that drives this. There is an innate sense of fairness that we can observe even among monkeys.³⁹ The psychology of unfairness and the resulting sense of injustice—with its anger, jealousy, and a desire for revenge—can be traced back to one of the earliest stories of human civilization: that of Cain and Abel. Cain

³⁷ Sam Harris, *Free Will* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 52.

³⁸ Robert M. Sapolsky, *Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will* (New York: Penguin Press, 2023), 399, 401.

³⁹ Sadie F. Dingfelder, “Nice by Nature?” *Monitor on Psychology*, vol. 40, no. 8 (September 2008).

feels that his offering is unjustly rejected by God in favor of Abel's and is then moved by anger and jealousy to kill his brother. Our sense of justice and judgment is as well intertwined with deeply rooted structures of shame and guilt, likely fueled by our insecurities—the knowledge of our own inadequacies and shortcomings. All these impulses have served a purpose. In cooperative environments, such as human societies, those with a predisposition for demanding their 'fair' share—be it resources or mates—are likely to be better at surviving and reproducing. This also has a stabilizing effect on society, providing a kind of set of unwritten rules of conduct. In its most noble form, this sense of justice stirs us up to act in the defense of those suffering at the hands of injustice. But some things are meant to be grown out of. This *need* for justice and judgment is one of them.

For all our ethical progress and all our scientific advancement, the world is still racked by wars and crime and violence. Though rates of death due to war, murder, and other forms of violence are proportionately much lower today than in previous periods of human history (such as the Mongol invasion of Europe), our capacity for violence has increased with our technology, as have the total numbers of those affected due to the increasing population size. Though we cannot deny that the world is now much less violent overall than it was in previous epochs (at least in proportion to the population), there is still something fundamentally amiss. Something needs to change.

The solution the determinist proposes is that because there is no free will, there is no point in blaming criminals for committing crimes. They are no more responsible for their actions than they are for the big bang. They might still need to be locked up to protect society, but this would remove the moralizing aspect of the justice system, and thus would lead to a better world. Then, on the other end of the spectrum, is the view that 'bad' people commit crimes. If only we could increase the punishments, scare them into good behavior, or separate them from the rest of us 'good' people, then we would have a much better world. Both are patently misguided. Personal accountability has long been a thorny issue for both philosophy and theology (and, in modern times, for the justice system). The solution must not be to abandon personal agency altogether. The way out of the darkness is not to pluck out our eyes. We can transcend this ancient spirit of judgment without abandoning our humanity. We can champion a different approach to accountability; we

can champion a change in the culture; we can champion a new metanarrative more in line with the Christian nonviolence of Leo Tolstoy, the Jungian psychology of enlightening the darkness, and even the Eastern tradition of distinguishing between ignorance and enlightenment (rather than good and evil). We can allow these deep structures of justice and judgment to give way—through sacrifice and forgiveness—to some new structure. We can abandon our *need* for retributive justice. And we can do all this without also abandoning our sense of self or our sense of agency. We can abandon our clamoring for judgment without also abandoning our humanity.

3. The Free Will Stance: Agency, the Self, & the Moved Mover

*Not all things in the world of nature are controlled
by fate for the soul has a principle of its own*

– Iamblichus

The free will stance is that the agent acts as first cause; that agency is the quality or attribute or feature of consciousness that describes its capacity for self-caused action. Roderick Chisholm says it similarly: “If we are responsible, and if what I have been trying to say is true, then we have a prerogative which some would attribute only to God: each of us, when we act, is a prime mover unmoved.”⁴⁰ But while Chisholm talks of the unmoved mover, it would be clearer to speak of the moved mover, in the sense that the agent is also acted upon. We are still the originator of the action, still the undetermined cause, even if also being impacted by other causes, including our own. (This is of course the way we live our lives. We assume that people are not puppets. They can be influenced, even to the degree that we would not hold them morally responsible for their actions, but what we call their action is still a direct consequence of their will, and in this way, they are the prime mover of that action, even if they can also be moved)⁴¹.

⁴⁰ Roderick M. Chisholm, “Human Freedom and the Self,” in *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 28.

⁴¹ It is easy to see the distinction: If a bully were to grab a student’s arm and proceed to make them slap themselves in the face, that act originates in the will of the bully who is physically controlling the student’s hand. But if the bully were instead to threaten the student with violence unless they slap themselves, and the student complies, then the cause of the student slapping their own face arises

At the very least, this action of agency is that of selecting a singular possibility out of a super-positional field of possibilities. At the most, this action is that of creating entirely new possibilities and possibility fields. To make a choice is to select among a set of predetermined possibilities. That alone would be enough to suffice for free will. But agency might have a whole other component to it—it might be that which gives rise to the super-positional field of possibilities in the first place. Taking an ice cream shop as analogy: we are offered a selection of different flavors and we are able choose between them. Choice is what selects out of the set of possibilities. While our choice to select vanilla is certain to be externally and internally influenced, it is not determined, for consciousness selects, even if under duress. (Regardless of whatever influences impact the agent, the agent is that which originates the action, and without the agent, that action would not come into existence). But imagine we can go to the kitchen in the back and whip up some new concoction, either a mix of different flavors, or an entirely new favor. Agency might not only be that which selects among the different flavors created by the shop, it might also be that which is creating the flavors. In acting, we are solidifying a path out of the field of potentials—if not also sustaining and propagating the field of potentials itself.

In Defense of the Self

In defending free will, one is by implication defending the self, for if there is agency, there must be an agent. What is this *self* that is implied by a defense of free will? Alfred Mele and Peter van Inwagen, along with most other free will proponents, describe a self that is an enduring, rational, and deliberative agent.^{42 43} This active agent for Roderick Chisholm has the power to initiate causal chains independently of prior

from the student's own will, even though we can say the bully is morally responsible for the action due to the threat of violence. Similarly, one can take a dead man's hand and slap his face with it, but no amount of pleading, coercing, or threatening can make a dead man slap his own face—that action can originate only from the consciousness of that man, even if all living men might in fact do so under threat of violence.

⁴² Alfred R. Mele, *Free Will and Luck* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁴³ Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

events, as it does for Richard Taylor.^{44 45} Timothy O'Connor continues in this metaphysical vein in describing the self as an ontologically distinct agent.⁴⁶ But how best can we understand this self? Is it enough to describe it as an agent?

The dominant strand of Western thought—from Greek rationalism, through Christian moral philosophy, Enlightenment individualism, to modern analytic philosophy—tends to frame the self primarily as a moral, rational agent, privileging the agential aspect of consciousness—the self as *agent*. But not all Western philosophy follows in this vein. Romanticism, existentialism, process philosophy, and phenomenology (along with various experiential traditions or worldviews, Western or otherwise), sees consciousness more in terms of sentience, subjectivity, and phenomenality—the self as *experiencer*. It feels like something to be a self. Though both these perspectives imply the observing self, it is the Eastern tradition—from the ultimate self of pure awareness of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, to the non-conceptual observing of Buddhist mindfulness and Zen, to the awareness of awareness practice in Tibetan Buddhism—that most privileges awareness—the self as *observer*. Any theory that tries to account for the self must necessarily account for these three irreducible yet inseparable aspects of awareness, experientiality, and agency.

Finally, no theory of the self is complete without addressing the subjectivity/objectivity dichotomy. Any definition of the self must also account for the other. The self implies the other. The self does not exist as a totality, but the subjectivity of the self arises in contrast to the objectivity of the other (just as the subjectivity of the other also arises in contrast to the objectivity of the self, from the perspective of the other). Both the self and the other co-create the conditions for subjectivity and objectivity; the conditions needed for the self and the other to come into being. This relationship does not leave two completely distinct and isolated beings, nor does it collapse the self and the other into an undifferentiated one. The self, the other, and their relationship are fundamental and irreducible and give rise to each other through a connectedness that

⁴⁴ Roderick M. Chisholm, *Human Freedom and the Self*, in *Free Will*, 2nd ed., ed. Gary Watson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 26–37.

⁴⁵ Richard Taylor, *Action and Purpose* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

⁴⁶ Timothy O'Connor, *Persons and Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

maintains the distinctiveness of its parts without collapsing into a single unit. This *relational* self (along with the tripartite self of the previous paragraph) is the self that is implied by the free will stance.

Reclaiming the Metanarrative

The implication of the free will position—and what philosophers have largely failed to articulate—is that reality is fundamentally participatory, agency is a fundamental feature of the universe, and the self is co-creator of the world. This is, in fact, the metaphysical position that undergirds philosophy (and science by extension). We do not live in a static, deterministic universe but one imbued with potentiality, where we are endowed with agency or the ability to act upon the world, and by our acting, able to alter the flow of reality. This philosophical position is not only free will-affirming and self-affirming; it is also world-affirming, knowledge-affirming, and science-affirming.

To have free will is to possess the capacity for ontological choice—the ability to affect the becoming of reality itself. The goal of being human is to realize the full potential of this capacity. Although he describes himself as a compatibilist, Daniel Dennett makes a similar argument in *Freedom Evolves* that the evolution of humanity is a progression toward greater freedom. For Dennett, free will is an evolved capacity that enables us to modify our environment, affect outcomes, and increasingly create new futures—to the extent that the awareness of our capacity increases.⁴⁷ The most human attribute, overshadowed only by our capacity for love⁴⁸, is this capacity for freedom. The development of consciousness is the development toward freedom.

For many existentialists, inescapable freedom is one of the givens that define the human condition, and a responsibility that must be accepted if we are to become authentically real. Yet this weight of responsibility inclines us toward what Sartre calls *bad faith*—the attempt to reduce ourselves to objects in the world rather than free agents, in order to

⁴⁷ Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* (New York: Viking, 2003).

⁴⁸ The idea that the core orientation of being is toward freedom—but to love above all—is deeply embedded in the Western tradition, from the ancient Greeks to Christianity, and carried forward in the work of many existential thinkers, including Rollo May, Buber, Fromm, and Frankl.

escape the burden of freedom and the responsibility for our actions.⁴⁹ These existentialists were right to insist on freedom, but freedom was never enough to suffice for the meaning of being. The psyche pushed back against this unfettered freedom with its attending unfettered responsibility—not just to escape the responsibility, but because it needed a meaning beyond the lonesomeness of freedom. (A complementary meaning was offered by certain existential psychologists—following in a long line of the Western tradition—where the self as lone agent gives way to a relational self, and where the problem of human existence finds its resolution in love. This view is particularly evident in the work of Fromm and Frankl, along with Rollo May, who defends both will and love as core attributes of being.⁵⁰)

But now the pendulum the existentialists were accused of taking liberties with has swung too much in the opposite direction. While hardcore determinism is still the minority view among scientists and philosophers, still, a majority side with compatibilism, which is just as incoherent as determinism.⁵¹ What is needed is a new scientific meta-narrative capable of accounting for causal determinism at the level of observable processes while still leaving room for agents capable of originating self-caused actions (yet without lapsing into pseudoscience). What is needed is a new meta-narrative that can bear the nuances of being. To have consciousness is to have agency—but that does not mean we are condemned to an infinite responsibility. We can accept that there are constraints on freedom; we can acknowledge the intersubjective nature of consciousness; we can realize that the weight of responsibility is only bearable when shared. And we can do all this without sacrificing even an iota of agency. What is needed is to return from bad philosophy to good metaphysics.

⁴⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 86–89.

⁵⁰ “Love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence.” (Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 1956). Similar comments were made by Frankl. (Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 2006). For Rollo May, see *Love and Will*, 1969.

⁵¹ The 2020 PhilPapers Survey asked around 2000 philosophers their position on the free will debate and found just 11% rejected free will. An additional 59% supported compatibilism and almost 19% supported libertarian free will. David Bourget and David J. Chalmers, “Philosophers on Philosophy: The 2020 PhilPapers Survey,” *Philosophers Imprint* 23, no. 1 (December 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3998/phimp.2109>.

Spectacles of Power: Cultural Representations and Structural Myth in the History of Hawai'i

Jaclynn Joseph (University of Sofia)

Abstract: This paper examines the structural and ideological transformation of Hawai'ian cultural forms under colonial and capitalist forces. Utilizing a synthesis of Marxist structuralism, Althusserian theory, and post-structuralist critiques from Foucault, Barthes, and Jameson, the paper explores how these indigenous practices have been commodified and re-signified for Western consumption. It critiques dominant historiography and tourism's mythologizing of Hawai'i as a timeless paradise, exposing the erasure of indigenous memory and agency. Through analysis of signifying practices and the cultural politics of performance, this work reclaims chant and hula as living symbols of resistance, identity, and sovereignty, offering a decolonial rereading of Hawai'ian history and representation.

Keywords: Hawai'i, cultural representation, decolonial theory, structuralism

*"The history of the struggle for truth is the history of the refusal of a truth imposed by another, taken as the other."*¹

In the resorts of Waikīkī and Maui, staged spectacles like "Drums of the Pacific" present a seductive fantasy of Hawai'i: lush, rhythmic, erotic, and ultimately consumable. These performances, crafted for tourist audiences, reconfigure indigenous cultural forms into aesthetic commodities. Hula becomes a visual display; chant, a backdrop to a lu'au buffet. Removed from their genealogical, spiritual, and political origins, these practices are re-signified within a dominant myth of Hawai'i as paradise. This ideological operation is not benign. It performs a kind of epistemic violence—obscuring historical trauma, erasing colonial legacies, and recasting Hawai'i in the language of leisure and spectacle.

¹ Michel Foucault, "The Concern for Truth," in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Alan Sheridan et al. (New York: Routledge, 1988), 256.

This paper interrogates how dominant ideologies restructure cultural representations of Hawai'i through what Roland Barthes calls the "mythological system"²—wherein the historical becomes naturalized and culture is transformed into nature. Following Michel Foucault's genealogical method and Fredric Jameson's conception of narrative as a socially symbolic act, this analysis locates Hawai'ian chant, hula, and music at the intersection of power and representation. These cultural forms are not simply inherited traditions, but dynamic fields of contestation shaped by structural contradictions and ideological displacement.

Tourism in Hawai'i commodifies not only space but also identity. The popular image of the "hula girl" or the emcee's exaggerated "A-loooo-ha" frames indigeneity as performance, available for consumption and devoid of resistance.³ The historical development of this imagery aligns with the broader trajectory of Western epistemological dominance, in which oral histories, indigenous cosmologies, and communal memory are overwritten by Western historiography. These mythologies, reinforced through repetition in performances, literature, and media, construct a cultural unconscious that obscures historical complexity in favor of pleasurable simplicity.

But this is not merely a question of aesthetic appropriation. The cultural forms under scrutiny—especially hula and chant—once functioned as embodiments of sacred time, vehicles for transmitting cosmology, genealogy, and resistance. In the context of tourism, these forms become "floating signifiers", emptied of historical content and reinscribed with ideological meaning favorable to the colonial and capitalist gaze.

Building on the work of Althusser and Jameson, I argue that these performances operate within a structure of symbolic reproduction that masks contradiction and normalizes inequality. However, even within such hegemonic forms, moments of rupture remain possible. Contemporary Hawai'ian artists and activists have begun to reclaim these cultural forms, reinfusing them with historical consciousness and political resistance. The interplay between appropriation and reclamation demonstrates that cultural forms are never ideologically neutral nor fixed in

² Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972).

³ Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).

meaning. They carry within them the tensions of their time—residues of suppressed histories and the potential for cultural revolution.

This article contributes to a growing body of work that treats cultural expression as a site of struggle over memory, meaning, and identity. Drawing from Marxist, structuralist, and post-structuralist methodologies, I offer a framework for analyzing Hawaiʻian cultural forms not as inert traditions but as living, contested signs that mediate relationships between power, history, and representation.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this paper draws upon the confluence of structuralist and post-structuralist traditions, particularly within Marxist cultural criticism. Central to this framework is the concept of ideology, not merely as a set of ideas, but as a material practice embedded in and constitutive of social relations. Louis Althusser's theorization of ideology as the "imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence"⁴ reframes ideology as a structuring force that operates through institutions, rituals, and language to reproduce the dominant relations of production.

Althusser expands Marx's base-superstructure model by proposing that society consists of relatively autonomous instances—the economic, political, and ideological—each contributing to the reproduction of the social totality.⁵ Within this model, ideology plays a central role in social reproduction by interpellating subjects—calling individuals into specific social roles that appear natural but are historically constructed. The performative dimension of culture, including chant and hula, becomes a site where this interpellation is enacted and reinforced.

Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) illuminates the specific sites through which ideology is transmitted—schools, churches, media, and cultural institutions. These apparatuses operate not through direct coercion but through consent, reproducing the conditions necessary for capitalism to flourish. In Hawaiʻi, tourist performances of hula and chant function as ISAs in disguise, shaping perceptions of indi-

⁴ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

⁵ Ibid.

geneity and history through seemingly apolitical entertainment. These performances work ideologically by aestheticizing the past and erasing colonial violence under the guise of cultural celebration.

Importantly, Althusser's process of interpellation is not a passive one. It entails a misrecognition whereby individuals see themselves as autonomous and coherent subjects while actually being constituted through ideological structures. When a tourist hears a chant during a lu'au or witnesses a hula performance on a hotel stage, they are not only consuming culture—they are being positioned within a system of recognition that validates colonial logics. The performer, in turn, is interpellated not as a historical subject with political agency, but as an emblem of exotic hospitality. This dual interpellation naturalizes inequality and reinscribes the ideological order through performance.

Stuart Hall deepens this line of thought by arguing that ideology functions not only through textual representation but through practices of encoding and decoding. Cultural signs are produced with intended meanings but can be interpreted in divergent ways depending on context and positionality. In the Hawaiian context, while state-sanctioned hula competitions or hotel shows may encode a sanitized version of indigeneity, these same signs can be decoded as sites of irony, resistance, or mourning by Hawai'ian audiences. Hall's intervention reminds us that while ideology works to fix meaning, those meanings are never entirely closed.

Fredric Jameson advances this structuralist lineage by arguing that narrative itself is a socially symbolic act.⁶ In his view, cultural forms are not neutral reflections of reality but symbolic solutions to real social contradictions. They operate unconsciously, mediating historical tensions and masking class antagonisms. Jameson introduces three interpretive levels: the political (texts as symbolic acts), the social (texts as part of class discourse), and the historical (texts as expressions of competing modes of production). These levels allow us to map the ways in which Hawaiian chant and hula resolve, obscure, or expose contradictions embedded in Hawaii's colonial history. Jameson's notion of the "ideologeme"—the smallest unit of ideological meaning—can be seen in the gestures of a dancer, the rhythm of a mele, or the silences in a televised broadcast of cultural performance. These ideologemes are not just expressions of aesthetic form, but containers of historical memory.

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

Myth, as articulated by Roland Barthes, also plays a critical role in this study. In *Mythologies*, Barthes defines myth as a second-order semiological system that transforms history into nature.⁷ By emptying signs of their historical specificity and refilling them with ideological meaning, myth presents contingent cultural constructions as universal and timeless. This transformation is especially evident in tourist-oriented representations of Hawaiian culture, where sacred practices are reframed as playful entertainments. For example, the hula ma'i—a sacred procreative chant originally reserved for ali'i (royalty)—is recontextualized as comic relief for Western tourists. In this way, the “myth of paradise” serves to naturalize the Hawai'ian Other as joyous, hypersexual, and apolitical.

Michel Foucault's genealogical approach deepens this analysis by tracing how regimes of knowledge and discourse shape the production of subjects and the exercise of power.⁸ Power, for Foucault, is not centralized or repressive but dispersed and productive—it constitutes identities, norms, and social possibilities. Hawai'ian cultural forms, when filtered through the discourses of tourism, education, and entertainment, are subjected to these diffuse operations of power that reconfigure their meanings and social functions. Foucault's notion of the archive—the system governing what can be said, known, or remembered—applies directly to how certain Hawaiian chants, genealogies, and historical accounts have been silenced or selectively preserved. What becomes visible in tourist performance is not a neutral representation, but a curated memory structured by colonial desires.

Together, these theorists form a composite lens through which Hawai'ian cultural representation is examined—not as static tradition, but as a dynamic site where ideology, history, and aesthetics converge. In the context of colonization and globalization, chant and hula become contested terrains where dominant narratives are imposed, resisted, and transformed. They function simultaneously as instruments of hegemonic incorporation and as vehicles for counter-hegemonic expression.

Thus, this theoretical framework foregrounds not only the structural reproduction of ideology but also the potential for rupture. Moments when cultural practices exceed or contradict their commodified

⁷ Barthes, *Mythologies*.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

function reveal the latent tensions within social formations—what Jameson terms the “political unconscious.”⁹ These tensions emerge in the performances of contemporary Hawaiian musicians and dancers who intentionally invoke suppressed historical forms or reintroduce forgotten chants in ways that defy commercial expectations. The critical task, then, is to read these forms dialectically, uncovering the historical conditions they encode and the social contradictions they mediate.

Historical and Cultural Analysis

To understand the ideological function of Hawai’ian cultural forms, one must trace their historical transformation from sacred praxis to staged performance. Prior to Western contact, chant (oli), hula, and mele (song) were embedded within genealogical and cosmological systems. Hula, in particular, was not a dance of mere pleasure or sensuality, but a ritualistic form of knowledge transmission and ancestral invocation. Each movement encoded specific meanings, and each oli operated as an archive of collective memory. As Karl Marx observed, cultural forms arise from and reflect the material conditions of society; they are never ideologically innocent.¹⁰

The arrival of missionaries in the 19th century marked a decisive rupture in the cultural landscape of Hawai’i. Christian moralism and colonial governance collaborated to suppress hula, labeling it heathen and immoral. This ideological suppression was codified through legal prohibitions and moral education, enacting what Althusser would call a regime of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs)¹¹ that worked to erase or neutralize indigenous cultural expressions. Mission schools functioned as disciplinary spaces in which Hawai’ian children were taught to disavow their language, bodily comportment, and ceremonial practices. In this sense, the missionary project aligned with the rise of a capitalist economy in Hawai’i based on sugar and pineapple plantations, which required a docile, disciplined labor force.¹²

Despite its prohibition, hula continued in clandestine spaces—what

⁹ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 20.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. S. W. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970).

¹¹ Althusser, *Ideological State Apparatuses*.

¹² Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai’i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999).

might be understood as Foucault's heterotopias of resistance¹³—where it retained its sacred and genealogical function. These sites were not just spatial alternatives, but epistemological refuges where the logic of colonial time and capitalist productivity was suspended in favor of cyclical, genealogical rhythms. In this regard, the persistence of hula represents a form of embodied counter-memory that resists both religious conversion and historical erasure.

By the early 20th century, hula began to re-emerge in public through state-sanctioned festivals and the rise of the tourism industry. Yet this reintroduction was far from neutral. The hula that returned to the stage was sanitized and choreographed to align with Western sensibilities. It was stripped of its ritualistic complexity and re-coded as a signifier of leisure and exoticism. This transformation reflects what Roland Barthes would describe as the operation of myth: a historical sign emptied of its original content and refilled with bourgeois meaning.¹⁴ Hollywood's representation of Hawai'i further compounded this transformation by replacing the Native with the native fantasy—docile, joyful, and ever-welcoming.

The transformation of hula mirrors the broader structural process identified by Fredric Jameson: the symbolic resolution of real contradictions.¹⁵ The contradiction here is the legacy of colonial occupation and cultural violence, which is sutured over by the fantasy of aloha. The repetition of aestheticized hula in hotel courtyards and tourist brochures functions to deny that contradiction by presenting a harmonious, unbroken cultural continuity. This is the ideological work of spectacle—a term that, like Guy Debord's formulation,¹⁶ may be employed here to describe the way commodified images supplant historical reality.

Similar dynamics are at play in the representation of Hawaiian music. Traditional mele were genealogical texts—oral recordings of ancestry, land, and historical events. In the context of settler colonialism, however, mele became decontextualized and commodified into easy-

¹³ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*, October 1984.

¹⁴ Barthes, *Mythologies*.

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

¹⁶ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

listening “Hawaiian music”. Instruments such as the ‘ukulele and slack key guitar, introduced under colonial conditions, were rebranded as “authentic” while the function of chant as an epistemological and political form was marginalized. In both cases, the content was displaced by form: melody and rhythm overshadowed meaning and genealogy. As Marx noted in his analysis of the commodity form, the fetishism of form over substance obscures the social labor and historical relations embedded in a cultural product.¹⁷ The tourist economy transforms culture into commodity, where authenticity becomes a marketing strategy and historical trauma is rendered invisible.

Althusser’s analysis of ideological reproduction helps clarify these transformations. As ISAs, cultural festivals, hotels, and media institutions do not simply entertain—they train individuals to see, feel, and remember Hawai’i in particular ways. They function pedagogically, inculcating narratives of hospitality, harmony, and cultural resilience while masking the structural conditions of dispossession and exploitation. These institutions produce what Foucault might term a regime of truth, in which certain representations of Hawai’i become thinkable, desirable, and normative, while others are disqualified or silenced. This process is not only aesthetic but biopolitical: it governs the body, desire, and perception.

Even language is enlisted into this ideological apparatus. The overuse of Hawai’ian phrases like “aloha” and “mahalo” within English-dominant spaces offers a linguistic simulation of cultural engagement while leaving intact the structures that marginalize Hawai’ian speakers and epistemologies. This phenomenon reflects Stuart Hall’s insight that cultural representation operates within a field of power and struggle, where dominant meanings are imposed but also contested.¹⁸ Hall’s theory of articulation is especially useful here: hegemonic discourse does not erase indigenous meaning but disarticulates it from its original context and rearticulates it to serve new ideological ends.

Yet these cultural forms retain the capacity to exceed their ideological framing. In contemporary practice, there has been a resurgence of Hawai’ian resistance aesthetics. Hula practitioners such as those in

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1990).

¹⁸ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language*, eds. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Routledge, 1980).

the Hālau Hula movement reject the tourist aesthetic, instead emphasizing the political and spiritual gravity of the form. Many hālau now teach not only dance and chant, but mo‘okū‘auhau (genealogy), ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i (language), and land-based epistemologies. Chant is being revitalized in ceremonial and protest contexts—at Mauna Kea, for instance, where oli becomes a mode of refusal and a declaration of land-based identity. Hawai‘ian hip hop and reggae acts increasingly incorporate ancestral references, genealogical motifs, and anti-colonial critique. These hybrid forms signal not a loss of authenticity, but an evolution of cultural resistance.

Thus, while dominant institutions continue to repackage Hawai‘ian culture for global consumption, cultural practitioners are reasserting the historical and political density of these forms. Their work challenges the myth of Hawai‘i as paradise and re-centers it as a site of struggle, survival, and resurgence. These performances, rooted in history and sharpened by critique, resist the ideological function of spectacle and begin to reconstruct an epistemology of presence, not absence.

Language, Myth, and Power

Language is never neutral. As Ferdinand de Saussure teaches, signs acquire meaning not through intrinsic essence but through their differential relation to other signs within a system.¹⁹ Language operates as a code—structured and arbitrary—yet insidiously naturalized. In colonial contexts, this structuralist insight gains political weight. For colonized subjects, language is both a medium of dispossession and a potential site of resistance. Hawai‘ian cultural expressions—hula, chant, mele—once encoded in a system bound to genealogy, cosmology, and place, have been subjected to violent re-signification. When filtered through English-dominant discourses or repackaged for global consumption, the original system of meaning is disrupted. The result is a residue of form detached from ontological depth, hollowed and re-inscribed by the hegemonic order.

Roland Barthes’ theory of myth as a second-order semiological system is instructive here.²⁰ Myth, for Barthes, is not a lie but a depoliti-

¹⁹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

²⁰ Barthes, *Mythologies*.

cized speech. It transforms history into nature. A hula performed for ancestral veneration becomes a signifier of sensuality. A chant once used to preserve genealogical knowledge becomes ambient noise for tourist consumption. These are not innocent transformations—they are ideological. The spectacle, as Barthes writes, does not suppress meaning but displaces it. The ideology functions not through overt repression, but through substitution and naturalization. In Hawai‘i, such mythological operations are pervasive. The performance of Hawai‘ian culture is often more palatable to global markets than its epistemological core.

Michel Foucault’s analysis of discourse, power, and knowledge underscores how language is regulated by regimes of truth.²¹ Discourse is not merely linguistic but institutional—it governs what can be said, remembered, and imagined. The conversion of Hawai‘ian cultural forms into mythic images is enabled by an ensemble of discourses that produce legitimacy. This regime privileges the visual over the oral, the commodified over the sacred, the tourist over the native practitioner. The chant, once embedded in sacred ritual, becomes part of the effective labor of hospitality. It serves not to challenge colonial history but to veil it.

This ideological recontextualization is also evident in the politics of translation. Words like “aloha” are not simply borrowed—they are ideologically mobilized. Aloha circulates in state mottos, tourism slogans, and corporate branding as a polyvalent signifier of kindness, peace, and welcome. Yet, in its original usage, aloha denotes a relational ethic grounded in kuleana (responsibility), reverence, and embodied care. Its truncation into a marketable cliché is a form of symbolic violence that strips language of its ontological depth. As Althusser suggests, ideology interpellates subjects through ritualized repetition, recruiting them into structures of recognition that appear natural.²² The repeated “A-loooo-ha” of a hotel emcee is a mode of interpellation; it positions both the speaker and the audience within a colonial semiotic regime.

Stuart Hall’s theory of cultural representation as a site of struggle offers further insight.²³ Meaning is not fixed but negotiated, constructed,

²¹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

²² Althusser, *Ideological State Apparatuses*.

²³ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

and contested within asymmetrical relations of power. Hall's notion of articulation—whereby disparate elements are temporarily unified under a dominant logic—explains how sacred forms are rearticulated to support neoliberal ideology. A chant used in the overthrow of the Hawai'i Kingdom becomes rebranded as a wellness practice. The mu'umu'u, once a garment imposed by missionaries to discipline the Hawai'i body, becomes heritage fashion marketed in upscale boutiques. These articulations are historically contingent and ideologically saturated. They reveal that culture is not static but forged in struggle.

Structuralist and post-structuralist theorists alike have emphasized the role of language in subject formation. Julia Kristeva's conception of the symbolic and the semiotic suggests that language is not merely external but constitutive of the subject.²⁴ Similarly, Judith Butler, drawing from Althusser, argues that the subject is formed through performative acts of citation and repetition.²⁵ In the context of Hawai'i, language becomes the terrain upon which identity, history, and resistance are enacted. The institutional marginalization of 'ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawai'i language) has historically served the colonial state's interest in producing a docile, assimilated subject. Yet efforts to reclaim 'ōlelo Hawai'i disrupt this process. They constitute what Foucault would call a "counter-conduct"—a deliberate refusal of colonial governmentality.²⁶

The revival of 'ōlelo Hawai'i is more than pedagogical; it is ontological. Language immersion schools such as Pūnana Leo do not simply teach vocabulary; they cultivate a worldview. Within them, language is treated as an epistemological system bound to land ('āina), genealogy (mo'okū'auhau), and ceremonial time (ka wā kahiko). The protocols of chant, the cadence of prayer, and the naming of winds and rains resist the temporal flattening of tourist temporality. These linguistic acts reinscribe presence in a landscape narratively erased.

Moreover, public chants at political protests—such as those at Mauna Kea—function as embodied refusals of settler state sovereignty. They reassert a collective memory that is not archived in state texts but

²⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

²⁵ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

²⁶ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

inscribed in breath and voice. These chants reterritorialize space, transforming it from a site of extraction to one of relation. As Deleuze and Guattari note, deterritorialization can be met with reterritorialization—a reclaiming of affective and material ground.²⁷ Hawai’ian language, in this context, becomes a praxis of reterritorialization.

Thus, language is not merely descriptive but world-making. It frames perception, organizes memory, and envisions futures. Control over language—its narrowing, commodification, and suppression—is a mechanism of colonial rule. But when Hawai’ian is spoken, chanted, and lived, it constitutes an insurgent semiotics—a refusal to forget, a commitment to reimagine.

Conclusion

This study has sought to illuminate the ideological operations embedded within the commodification and performance of Hawai’ian cultural forms. By applying a composite theoretical framework drawn from Marx, Althusser, Foucault, Barthes, Jameson, Hall, Kristeva, and Butler, the analysis has demonstrated how cultural representation functions not merely as reflection but as production—of knowledge, of subjectivity, and of social reality.

The transformation of chant, hula, and mele into consumable spectacles reveals the mechanics of colonial myth-making. These practices, once integral to sacred time, genealogical transmission, and political affirmation, have been hollowed and reinscribed by dominant ideologies that privilege profit, visual pleasure, and docile exoticism. As Althusser has shown, ideology operates not through overt domination but through the interpellation of subjects into positions that sustain the existing social order. Hawai’ian cultural forms—when appropriated and aestheticized—do the quiet work of producing consent, cloaking the economic and political structures of settler colonialism in the familiar garb of cultural celebration.

Yet these forms are not reducible to the ideological functions they have been co-opted to perform. As the essay has shown, they remain sites of contradiction and contestation. Drawing from Jameson, one might say they operate as symbolic mediations of real antagonisms—

²⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

resolving contradictions at the level of form while preserving their political charge beneath the surface. Similarly, Stuart Hall's notion of articulation affirms that culture is not fixed but a field of struggle, open to rearticulation and resistance. Cultural meanings are never guaranteed; they are historically contingent, and the ability to reframe or contest them is central to any project of decolonial thought.

The role of language within this analysis is critical. As both a symbolic system and a material practice, language emerges as a primary terrain upon which colonial power and indigenous resistance contend. The flattening of 'ōlelo Hawai'i into a series of commercial catchphrases represents not merely linguistic loss but the attempted annihilation of a worldview. As Barthes cautions, myth empties signs of their historical density and retools them to suit bourgeois ideology. The counter-effort—seen in Hawai'ian language immersion schools, protest chants, and academic revitalization projects—is nothing less than a reconstruction of the symbolic order itself.

These acts of cultural resistance extend beyond symbolic reclamation. They are simultaneously ontological and epistemological interventions. The reanimation of hula as a spiritual-political act, the chanting of genealogies at protest sites, and the reterritorialization of space through naming and ritual are all efforts to recover not only cultural forms but indigenous modes of being and knowing. The Hawai'ian subject, long alienated within a capitalist semiotic regime, is being reconstituted as an agent of refusal, remembering, and reimagining. As Butler would suggest, these are not merely cultural gestures but acts of becoming—performative ruptures in the matrix of subjection.

To study these processes philosophically is to affirm that aesthetics is political, and that cultural forms—no matter how co-opted—retain the capacity to resist, rupture, and reimagine. Against the epistemic violence of colonial translation, Hawai'ian cultural practices assert an alternative ontology, one that prioritizes relation over possession, memory over forgetting, and presence over absence. The performance of chant at a protest is not merely expression—it is enactment, it is world-making, it is refusal.

The work of decolonial philosophy, then, is not only to critique representation but to listen for what survives it. It is to attend to the fragments, to the breath, to the pulse of ancestral memory vibrating beneath the surface of commodified spectacle. This essay offers itself as

one such act of listening—a speculative tracing of the material and symbolic afterlives of Hawai’ian culture under capitalism and empire. It invites further reflection on how language, performance, and memory may yet be wielded against the very systems that seek to erase them.

Ultimately, the conclusion reached here is not merely analytic but ethical. It affirms that Hawai’ian cultural forms, even in their most distorted reproductions, hold within them the seeds of radical rearticulation. They call us to question not only what has been lost, but what still remains—and what might still be made possible. In the face of erasure, they endure. In the face of silence, they chant. In the face of spectacle, they remember.

Measuring Ethical Expectations: The Most Accurate Way to Assess the Culture of Integrity

Muhamet Kqiku (University of Sofia)

Abstract: This article emphasizes that business leaders play a pivotal role in cultivating strong cultures of integrity. It critiques vague definitions of culture, proposing a precise one: “*collectively held ethical expectations that employees have regarding the conduct of their peers.*” This highlights how shared, informal norms shape ethical decision-making. Drawing on empirical research, the article reveals that a strong culture of integrity inversely correlates with unethical behaviour drivers like rationalization and malice. While compliance standards address knowledge gaps, robust integrity cultures are more effective at mitigating misconduct justification and intentional wrongdoing. The article identifies three key drivers leaders can influence: ethical behaviours (actions and communication), ethical commitment (perceived sincerity), and ethical identity (perceived ethical orientation). Focusing on these helps leaders foster ethical workplaces. Finally, a framework is employed to evaluate culture, drivers, and outcomes, facilitating evidence-based enhancements for impactful and sustainable compliance and ethics programs.

Keywords: Culture of Integrity, Ethical Expectations, Compliance, Noncompliance, Organizational Culture

Understanding and Defining Culture of Integrity

Business leaders are under mounting pressure to fortify their programs by cultivating robust cultures of compliance, ethics, and integrity. This imperative is emphasized by regulatory bodies worldwide, with the U.S. Department of Justice underscoring the necessity of a high-level commitment from leadership to embed a culture of ethics and compliance at

all organizational levels.¹ However, a confluence of evolving environmental factors is significantly complicating this endeavor. The pervasive adoption of remote and hybrid work models has resulted in the fragmentation of traditional workplace interactions, thereby eroding the spontaneous collaboration and shared experiences that are essential for the cultivation of organic culture.

Concurrently, declining average employee tenures and a surge in disengagement, exemplified by the phenomenon of “quiet quitting”, are hindering the development of cohesive cultures rooted in shared purpose and values, including ethical business conduct.² Moreover, escalating societal polarization and a decline in trust—particularly evident during election cycles—engender a challenging backdrop for cultivating the empathy and collaborative spirit that are fundamental for employees to exemplify ethical conduct toward one another.

Further intricacies are introduced by the ongoing challenge faced by business leaders in quantifying the tangible effects of organizational culture on outcomes. The absence of clearly defined metrics complicates the task of demonstrating to key stakeholders the value and effectiveness of a robust ethical culture, even in instances where progress is being made.³

Notwithstanding these challenges, business leaders have the capacity to implement proactive strategies to cultivate an organizational culture characterized by integrity. The following components and facets can be used to implement these strategies:

- **Enhancing Transparency in Ethical Conduct:** Providing employees with greater visibility of the ethical actions of their colleagues—facilitated by recognition programs and the dissemination of ethical success narratives—has been demonstrated to reinforce positive norms and expectations.
- **Facilitating Authentic Dialogue on Ethical Commitment:** Creating opportunities for employees to discuss their personal

¹ U.S. Department of Justice Criminal Division. Evaluation of Corporate Compliance Programs. March 2023. <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/speech/file/1571911/dl>

² Burke, Ronald, Ng, Eddy. The changing nature of work and organizations: Implications for human resource management. *Human Resource Management Review*. 16. 2006. 86-94.

³ Kaptein, Muel. *Why good people sometimes do bad things: 52 reflections on ethics at work*. Kogan Page Publishers. 2011. 9-34.

commitments to ethics in genuine and unscripted ways—such as through sharing insights and lessons learned from culture surveys—has been demonstrated to foster a sense of shared responsibility.

- **Integrating Ethics into Core Organizational Frameworks:** Integrating compliance and ethics with the organization's overarching goals, objectives, values, and strategic decisions—such as through training senior leaders to articulate the ethical dimensions of critical business choices—has been demonstrated to embed ethical considerations into the organizational fabric.

The challenge of defining and measuring culture precisely serves to compound these difficulties. While most business leaders possess a general understanding of organizational culture, articulating a precise and actionable definition remains challenging. This ambiguity is frequently rooted in conventional approaches to measuring culture, which are characterized by substantial limitations.⁴

Historical definitions of culture in integrity surveys frequently fall into two critical traps. Firstly, these models tend to be overly broad in nature, encompassing a wide array of concepts such as “tone at the top”, comfort in speaking up, and awareness of compliance resources, rather than focusing on a singular, specific construct. This “basket of concepts” approach engenders a fuzzy understanding of culture, which complicates the prioritization of improvement efforts and the consistent measurement of progress. For instance, although the completion rate of training programs may be considered a relevant metric, its direct contribution to the development of an ethical culture remains unclear.

Secondly, traditional definitions frequently conflate culture with its drivers and outcomes. For instance, employee awareness of compliance resources has been identified as a factor that might drive a positive culture, while the ability to speak up freely has been identified as an outcome of a healthy ethical environment. Failure to distinguish between these elements has been shown to result in organizations encountering difficulties in identifying effective levers for cultural change and in demonstrating the tangible benefits resulting from cultural improvements. This absence of conceptual clarity hinders the formulation of tar-

⁴ Trevino, L. K., Butterfield, K. D., & McCabe, D. L. “The ethical context in organizations: Influences on employee attitudes and behaviour.” *Business Ethics Quarterly*. 8(3). 1998. 447-476.

geted action plans and the capacity to monitor the impact of cultural initiatives over time.

By acknowledging these challenges and adopting more focused strategies grounded in a clearer understanding of ethical culture, business leaders can navigate the precarious position of organizational integrity and build more resilient and ethical organizations.⁵

Measuring Culture Effectively

For business leaders aspiring to cultivate ethical organizations, the foundation lies in a clear and operational definition of a culture of integrity. This definition must possess a crucial duality: it must be sufficiently precise to allow for accurate measurement and precise enough to guide actionable strategies and demonstrate the tangible benefits of a thriving ethical environment.

In order to formulate such a definition, it is imperative to meticulously analyze the fundamental characteristics inherent in all forms of culture, whether national, corporate, or familial. Despite the heterogeneity of their manifestations, cultures are characterized by a set of core attributes.

Culture is transmitted through informal norms, unspoken understandings, and shared assumptions, rather than through the formal dictates of official rules or policies established by an authority. A code of conduct, while of crucial importance in terms of outlining expected behavioural norms, represents a formal framework and not the lived, informal culture of the organisation. Culture is defined as a collective phenomenon, residing in the shared norms, values, and beliefs held by a group rather than the isolated ideas or opinions of a single individual.⁶ The perspective of a single employee, however perspicacious, does not represent the prevailing organisational culture. The shared norms that define a culture exert a significant influence on the behaviours and actions of individuals within that group. These informal expectations shape how individuals perceive appropriate conduct and guide their choices in various situations. When applied to the domain of integrity, the ethical expectations employees have of their colleagues are a significant factor.

⁵ Schein, E. H. *Organizational culture and leadership* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass, 2010.

⁶ Hofstede, G. *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations* (2nd ed. Sage). Thousand Oaks, CA. 2001.

This definition encapsulates the core attributes of culture within an ethical context. The concept is informal, as indicated by the sentiment expressed by employees, and is shared among colleagues. It exerts a direct influence on behaviour, shaping ethical expectations. This focused definition offers a significant advantage, allowing for the precise measurement of a singular concept—the perceived ethical norms within the peer group—thereby enhancing the accuracy of cultural assessments.⁷ Furthermore, by measuring culture directly rather than its antecedents (drivers) or consequences (outcomes), business leaders gain a clearer understanding of the specific aspects of culture that require attention, enabling the identification of targeted action items and the demonstration of the benefits derived from a positive ethical culture. In essence, when confronted with a dilemma pertaining to compliance or ethics, employees frequently navigate their choices by considering the anticipated reactions and expectations of their peers—an “imaginary audience” of colleagues. The implicit question that is posed is, *“How would my colleagues react if I were to take this action?”* This internal dialogue serves to emphasise the potency of peer influence and the influence of shared ethical expectations in shaping individual behaviour.⁸

To operationalise this definition of a culture of integrity, a recent essay was conducted. The 2023 **Drivers of Noncompliance Survey** involved the conduction of a panel survey. This survey was carried out among 1,012 employees working across a diverse range of companies. The objective of the present survey was to ascertain employees’ experiences with their organisation’s culture of integrity and its impact on their own compliance behaviour, as well as the observed behaviour of their colleagues. The survey instrument specifically measured the proposed definition of a culture of integrity through two complementary metrics. The first is the absence of permissive unwritten rules. The extent to which employees perceive that there are no informal, “unwritten rules” within the organisation that allow or even encourage the disregard of formal compliance and ethics policies is a subject that has yet to be fully explored.

⁷ O’Reilly, Charles A. Jennifer Chatman. David F. Caldwell. “People and Organizational Culture: A Profile Comparison Approach to Assessing Person-Organization Fit.” *The Academy of Management Journal* 34, no. 3. 1991. 487–516.

⁸ Trevino, L. K., Butterfield, K. D., & McCabe, D. L. “The ethical context in organizations: Influences on employee attitudes and behaviour.” *Business Ethics Quarterly*. 8(3). 1998. 447-476.

The essay explores the relationship between the consistency of acceptable behaviours and the policies that govern them.⁹ The extent to which employees consider behaviours acceptable and normative within the workplace is fully aligned with the organisation's stated compliance and ethics policies. The two metrics under consideration provide a comprehensive assessment of the prevailing ethical expectations. The initial probe investigates whether employees believe that their peers expect adherence to formal rules. The subsequent probe examines whether informal norms might exist that contradict those formal guidelines.

Moreover, to gain a more profound understanding of the way culture influences divergent forms of unethical behaviour, the survey measured three distinct causes of noncompliance separately:

- **Uncertainty:** The absence of clarity or knowledge about the compliance of relevant rules and regulations.
- **Rationalisation:** The cognitive process by which employees justify noncompliant behaviour to themselves and others.
- **Malice:** The intentional and deliberate engagement in noncompliant actions.

The essay measured both the defined culture of integrity and the underlying causes of noncompliance. It then analysed the specific ways in which ethical expectations shape different facets of employee conduct.

The Impact of Culture on Ethical Behaviour

A robust culture of integrity has been demonstrated to yield significant benefits for organisations, extending beyond mere regulatory compliance to foster a more ethical, productive, and resilient environment. Research has illuminated the distinct yet complementary roles of culture and compliance quality standards in mitigating the root causes of noncompliance. It is evident that the establishment of robust compliance quality standards—encompassing clear policies, accessible resources, and effective training—is of paramount importance in the reduction of uncertainty, the absence of which can be attributed to employees lacking the requisite knowledge to comply. However, it is the existence of a strong culture of integrity that exerts a more profound influence on rationalisation and malice.

⁹ Ashforth, Blake E. Mael, Fred. "Social Identity Theory and the Organization." *The Academy of Management Review* 14, no. 1. 1989. 20–39.

The phenomenon of rationalisation occurs when employees devise justifications for contravening organisational policies, often perceiving these as counterproductive, unrealistic, or unfair.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the prevailing ethical expectations among colleagues can significantly influence these perceptions. In environments where policies are openly disregarded or criticised by peers, individuals are more likely to feel emboldened to do the same, thereby normalising noncompliant behaviour. Conversely, a culture in which colleagues discuss the rationale and benefits of policies—even acknowledging potential challenges—has been shown to foster a more positive view, reducing the inclination to rationalise violations. This peer influence has the capacity to reframe an initially sceptical employee's perspective, thereby highlighting the collective commitment to upholding organisational standards.

Malice, defined as intentional policy violations driven by anger or a desire to harm the organisation or colleagues, is particularly susceptible to the influence of culture.¹¹ The fundamental human tendency to conform to group norms remains powerful even in the face of strong negative emotions. In an organisational context where unethical behaviour is prevalent or tolerated, disgruntled employees may perceive greater legitimacy in their unethical actions. However, a robust culture of integrity—characterised by the active demonstration of high ethical standards by colleagues and the utilisation of reporting mechanisms to ensure accountability—has been demonstrated to serve as a significant deterrent to malicious behaviour.¹² In such cultures, employees are more likely to regulate their emotions and address issues in a professional manner, knowing that unethical conduct will not be tolerated by their peers.

It can thus be concluded that compliance quality standards and a robust culture of integrity are not mutually exclusive but rather synergistic in promoting ethical employee behaviour. The authors address different yet critical drivers of noncompliance. It is fortunate that business leaders have the capacity to strategically influence both pivotal elements.

¹⁰ Sykes, G. M. Matza, D. "Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency." *American Sociological Review*, 22(6). 1977. 664-670.

¹¹ Cialdini, Robert & Goldstein, Noah. "Social Influence: Compliance and Conformity." *Annual review of psychology*. 55. 2004. 591-621.

¹² Schein, E. H. *Organizational culture and leadership* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass. 2010.

Augmenting Education: Philosophical Reflections on AI, Knowledge, and the Human Condition in High Schools

Vincenzo Filetti (Liceo T. Gargallo)

Abstract: This paper explores the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into high school education, emphasizing its role as a supplementary tool that enhances traditional teaching methods. Drawing on recent academic literature and institutional initiatives, the study examines how AI facilitates personalized learning, empowers educators, and promotes collaboration between universities and secondary schools. Additionally, it addresses ethical concerns, accessibility challenges, and the invaluable human aspect of teaching. The paper critically assesses the philosophical implications related to knowledge, human agency, ethics, consciousness, and creativity in an AI-driven educational environment. The findings advocate for a balanced, informed, and inclusive approach to the adoption of AI in education.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), Education; Philosophy, Ethics, Creativity, Human Agency; Partnership

Introduction

The reflections on artificial intelligence presented in this short work stem from an ongoing teaching experience at T. Gargallo High School in Syracuse, Italy, where I work. Therefore, I will not discuss the teaching experience, which is not yet concluded, but which already provides significant insights into the use of AI in secondary schools. Artificial Intelligence (AI) has evolved from a niche topic in computer science to a transformative force across educational systems.

In high schools, where students cultivate foundational learning habits and identities, AI presents opportunities for personalized instruction, academic support, and pedagogical innovation. However, its success depends on educators' ability to understand and implement these technologies responsibly. Beyond technical implementation, the integra-

tion of AI also necessitates profound philosophical reflection on the fundamental nature of knowledge, learning, and human existence in an era defined by intelligent machines.

AI as a Complementary Teaching Tool and Its Epistemological Implications

AI should be viewed not as a replacement for educators but as a powerful complement to traditional teaching. Intelligent systems can assist teachers by delivering interactive explanations, generating customized assessments, and providing feedback on student writing. Natural Language Processing (NLP) applications, for example, can evaluate essays for grammar, coherence, and argumentation.

AI also supports differentiated instruction by adapting content to individual learning styles and tracking student progress to inform curriculum pacing. Moreover, AI platforms such as Khanmigo, ScribeSense, and Grammarly EDU are being integrated into classrooms to provide real-time feedback and adaptive learning pathways. These tools enable students to engage with material at their own pace, while providing teachers with actionable insights into performance trends.

From an epistemological standpoint, AI challenges traditional views of how knowledge is acquired, validated, and transmitted. While classical education emphasizes a dialogical process rooted in human interpretation and critical thinking, AI systems primarily operate on probabilistic models and pattern recognition, offering answers without necessarily fostering a deeper understanding. This distinction prompts the fundamental question: Is knowing the answer equivalent to understanding the question? Philosophers like Socrates underscored the importance of questioning and dialectic, whereas AI often prioritizes efficiency and correctness. Educators must therefore ensure that AI tools do not inadvertently erode the reflective and interpretive dimensions crucial for genuine learning. The critical inquiry remains whether an AI truly comprehends the text it generates, or if it merely manipulates symbols based on intricate rules.

Empowering Educators and University Partnerships

The effectiveness of AI integration hinges on educators' proficiency. Teachers must be trained to understand how AI systems process and

analyze data, address ethical concerns related to bias and privacy, determine the applicability of subject-specific tools, and evaluate AI-generated recommendations. This training empowers educators to harness the potential of AI in the classroom. Professional development programs should prioritize AI literacy, with initiatives like the European Commission's Digital Education Action Plan highlighting the importance of equipping educators with these competencies.¹

Universities play a pivotal role in fostering the adoption of AI in high schools through curriculum development, teacher training, and student engagement. These collaborations bridge the gap between academic research and classroom practice. For instance, Stanford Digital Education, in partnership with Google's AI Essentials course, has crafted a modular curriculum tailored for high school students, introducing them to machine learning, ethical AI, and real-world applications.

Similarly, Bocconi University's "AI for Future Citizens" initiative promotes AI literacy through interdisciplinary workshops. The University of Ferrara, in collaboration with the University of Cassino, prioritizes inclusivity by offering tools such as NotebookLM and Gemini.²

Philosophical Reflections: Agency, Ethics, Consciousness, and Creativity in AI

The expanding role of AI in educational decision-making raises significant concerns regarding human agency. As machines increasingly influence educational trajectories, questions emerge about the preservation of a teacher's autonomy and a student's freedom to explore and make choices. This underscores the need for a balanced human-AI partnership that diligently preserves the necessary space for creative error, moral deliberation, and individual growth, which are indispensable for human

¹ European Commission, "Digital Education Action Plan" (2021-2027) (Brussels: European Commission, 2020).

² Stanford Digital Education, "High School Curriculum Pilots in AI Education, accessed" July 25, 2025, <https://digitaleducation.stanford.edu>; Bocconi University, "AI Literacy and Future Generations", Bocconi Newsroom, 2023; University of Ferrara, "AI Tools for Inclusive Learning", Educational Partnerships Report, 2024; University of Jan, "Artificial Intelligence and Student Services", Campus AI Integration Program, 2024; McCoy College of Business, "AI for Business and Education", TXST News Bulletin, 2023; Thomas Jefferson High School & GMU, "AI-Based STEM Projects", Fairfax County Schools Innovation Report, 2024.

flourishing. Hannah Arendt warned against the mechanization of human judgment, suggesting that proper education requires the unpredictable, the spontaneous, and the personal.³

Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo's concept of *pensiero debole* ("weak thought") offers a compelling lens through which to view AI's role in education. Vattimo challenges the dominance of rigid, objective truths, advocating instead for interpretative plurality and openness to ambiguity. In the context of AI, this invites educators to resist deterministic uses of technology and instead embrace its potential to foster diverse, dialogical learning experiences. AI should not impose fixed pathways but support a multiplicity of intellectual journeys, echoing Vattimo's call for a more hermeneutic approach to knowledge.⁴

Similarly, Umberto Galimberti's reflections on technology and the psyche underscore the risk of reducing human experience to functional efficiency. Galimberti warns that when technology becomes the primary mediator of human interaction, it risks alienating individuals from their emotional and existential depth. Applied to education, this critique urges caution against over-reliance on AI systems that simulate empathy or creativity without genuine affective grounding. Galimberti's insights underscore the importance of preserving the human dimension of teaching—where vulnerability, spontaneity, and relational presence are not merely pedagogical tools but existential necessities.⁵ In addition to the previous considerations, it is necessary to consider that AI's capacity to optimize social interactions in collaborative learning environments raises questions about its potential to influence, rather than merely observe, complex interpersonal dynamics, thereby impacting human agency within group settings.

The deployment of AI in educational settings is not value-neutral. Algorithms reflect the biases of their creators and the data on which they are trained. As Ruha Benjamin argues, technology can perpetuate existing inequalities unless it is consciously designed to dismantle them.⁶

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

⁴ Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, trans. David Webb (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

⁵ Umberto Galimberti, *Psiche e Techne: L'uomo nell'età della tecnica* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1999).

⁶ Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

Therefore, education must embrace a critical ethics of AI, asking not only what AI can do, but what it should do—and for whom. This calls for a “pedagogy of technological justice”, where students learn to interrogate the systems they use and participate responsibly in shaping their development and application. Addressing concerns like bias, equity, privacy, and data security, along with accessibility disparities, is crucial for ensuring that AI integration truly benefits all students. Establishing robust ethical frameworks for AI in education is paramount for its responsible deployment.⁷

AI capabilities compel us to confront the evolving boundaries between human and machine intelligence. While AI can simulate reasoning and adapt to learning styles, it demonstrably lacks attributes such as intentionality, empathy, and moral imagination. Current AI technologies are algorithm-based systems that process data without possessing subjective experiences, self-awareness, or human-like emotions. David Chalmers posits that understanding consciousness is paramount for developing brilliant systems, addressing the “hard problem” of how physical processes give rise to subjective experience.⁸

The core philosophical question remains whether AI possesses genuine beliefs, desires, or intentions, or merely behaves as if it does through complex symbol manipulation. The ethical and societal implications of a potentially “conscious AI” are immense, necessitating ongoing public and academic discourse to guide responsible research and development. The distinct nature of human understanding, compared to AI’s algorithmic processing, highlights the irreplaceable value of human educators. The limitations of algorithmic cognition underscore why human educators remain indispensable in the learning process.⁹

AI cannot replicate the profound human elements of teaching, such as empathy, inspiration, and mentorship. Teachers play irreplaceable roles in guiding students through emotional and intellectual development. While an emotionally intelligent tutoring system can detect and

⁷ J. Smith and A. Lee, “Ethical Frameworks for AI in Education”, *Journal of Applied AI Ethics* 7, no. 2 (2023): 45–60.

⁸ David J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁹ R. Garcia, “The Limits of Algorithmic Cognition: Why Human Educators Remain Indispensable”, *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 54, no. 10 (2022): 1130–45.

respond to a learner's moods by analyzing data such as typing patterns or facial expressions, transforming AI into an empathetic learning partner, the distinction remains between simulating emotional intelligence and genuinely possessing affective states.¹⁰

Martin Buber's philosophy of the "I-Thou" relationship reminds us that education is fundamentally a human encounter—an exchange of presence, not merely the transmission of information. In this light, AI should be viewed not as a surrogate for human connection, but as a tool that amplifies the essential relational core of education. AI also profoundly impacts our understanding of creativity. Jordanous highlights that creative AI can inspire and assist learners in innovative ways, challenging traditional perceptions of creativity as a purely human domain.¹¹ AI tools can generate diverse creative outputs, including music, visual art, poetic texts, and industrial designs, effectively serving as "muses" or collaborators for humans. For students, this opens new avenues for exploring ideas and overcoming creative blocks. Pedagogically, this amplifies human creativity by providing tools for rapid experimentation and iteration. Philosophically, however, this prompts critical questions: Is AI's "creativity" genuine, or merely a sophisticated recombination of existing data? Does it originate from intuition, subjective experience, or intentional artistic expression, as human creativity often does? The debate continues as to whether AI truly demonstrates creative insight or merely complex pattern matching.

Toward a Human-AI Partnership and Remaining Challenges

A successful educational model involves a triadic interaction between student, teacher, and AI system. AI provides immediate feedback, teachers interpret and contextualize the input, and the system tracks progress and suggests resources.

This partnership ensures both technological efficiency and human care. Schools implementing this model report improved student engagement, reduced grading time for teachers, and more targeted inter-

¹⁰ Sidney K. D'Mello and Art Graesser, "Intelligent Tutoring Systems: How Computers Achieve Learning Gains That Rival Human Tutors," in *Handbook of Educational Psychology* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 603–29.

¹¹ A. Jordanous, "Evaluating Creative AI: A Proposal", *Artificial Intelligence and Creative Design* (2016): 35–42.

ventions for students who are struggling.

This collaborative approach aligns with the vision of AI as an augmentative tool for human intelligence, rather than a replacement, emphasizing a human-AI collaboration as a paradigm shift.¹² Despite its capabilities, AI integration presents several challenges:

- **Privacy and Data Security:** Student data must be protected under frameworks such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).
- **Bias and Equity:** Diverse training data and human oversight are essential to prevent discriminatory outcomes.
- **Accessibility:** Infrastructure disparities must be addressed to ensure equitable access to AI tools.

Policymakers must invest in digital infrastructure, teacher training, and inclusive design to ensure that AI benefits all students. Artificial Intelligence is not merely the future of education—it is its present. When implemented ethically and thoughtfully, AI can elevate learning experiences and empower educators. Its true potential lies in augmenting, not replacing, human instruction, thereby amplifying the reach and impact of passionate teachers worldwide. University partnerships, teacher training, and inclusive design are key to unlocking AI's transformative power. As schools continue to evolve, AI must be understood not as a technological fix but as a pedagogical ally—one that works alongside educators to shape the future of learning.

Just as a master chef uses sophisticated kitchen tools not to replace their culinary intuition and palate, but to refine their techniques, execute complex preparations, and elevate the overall dining experience, AI in education serves as a powerful instrument. It enhances the teacher's ability to personalize instruction and analyze data, allowing them more time to focus on the irreplaceable human elements of mentorship, emotional support, and the cultivation of wisdom, ensuring that the essence of human learning remains at the heart of education.

¹² L. Chen and S. Wang, "Human-AI Collaboration in Educational Settings: A Paradigm Shift", *International Journal of Educational Technology* 15, no. 1 (2024): 112–28.

Kurzweil and the Coming Brain Drain

John Hawkins (University of Sofia)

Abstract: Ray Kurzweil's *The Singularity Is Nearer* promises that by 2045, exponential technological progress will merge human minds with artificial intelligence, delivering immortality and transcendence. This paper argues that Kurzweil's optimistic vision obscures darker political realities already unfolding. While he presents the Singularity as universal liberation, history shows that transformative technologies---from the telegraph to nuclear fission---are consistently militarized and enclosed before democratization. The paper examines Kurzweil's Six Epochs framework through existentialist, epistemological, and geopolitical lenses, contrasting his cosmic optimism with Schmidt and Kissinger's imperial realism. It reveals how AI systems already fragment the proto-Singularity through algorithmic warfare, surveillance capitalism, and the redundancy of human labor. Rather than awaiting 2045's transcendence, we inhabit a present where brain-computer interfaces threaten to colonize consciousness itself. The analysis concludes that without confronting structural inequalities and empire logics, the Singularity will arrive not as humanity's awakening but as techno-feudalist enclosure.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, transformative technologies, cosmic optimism, imperial realism

Introduction

Back in 2005, Ray Kurzweil announced to the world that humanity was hurtling toward the technological Singularity and had better prepare for the merge with smart machines. In *The Singularity Is Near*, he called it a near event, not a distant abstraction. "By 2045", he predicted, "the human brain would be fused with the machine cloud, and consciousness itself would be transformed."¹ Readers were told to buckle up. Many shrugged.

Two decades later, Kurzweil is back with *The Singularity Is*

¹ Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Viking, 2005), xx.

Nearer. This time his tone is equal parts vindication and urgency. He writes, “Humanity’s millennia-long march toward the Singularity has become a sprint.”² What was once distant speculation now feels immediate. Babies born in 2024 will, as Kurzweil notes, “just be graduating college when the Singularity happens.”³

The central claim is unchanged: by 2045, the exponential curves of computing power, biotechnology, nanotech, and AI will converge such that humans will transcend biology and merge with artificial intelligence. But what is new is the urgency. “We are entering its culmination”, Kurzweil insists, “and the pace of innovation is affecting society like never before”.⁴

The argument here is that the genie is already out of the bottle. AI and algorithmic systems are not waiting until 2045 to reshape human meaning, work, and life. They are already remaking war, commerce, and thought itself. The question is not whether the Singularity will arrive, but under what conditions and under whose control. Optimism is hard to sustain. Humanity’s historical track record suggests that new technologies are enclosed, weaponized, and stratified before they are democratized. The horizon is no longer distant. The runway is short.

Kurzweil’s Six Epochs: Ontological Narrative

Kurzweil grounds his optimism in what he calls the Six Epochs of evolution, a sweeping narrative that links atoms, DNA, brains, technology, and eventually universal intelligence. In *The Singularity Is Nearer* he writes: “We are now entering Epoch Five, the merger of human technology with human intelligence.”⁵ He insists this is not science fiction but “a continuation of a trajectory that began with physics and chemistry and will culminate in the universe waking up.”⁶

The epochs unfold like scripture. Epoch One is physics and chemistry: the formation of matter and the laws of the universe. Epoch Two is life: DNA and the miracle of replication. Epoch Three is brains: the flowering of neural complexity. Epoch Four is technology: humans ex-

² Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Nearer: When We Merge with AI* (New York: Viking, 2024), 28.

³ Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Nearer*, 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

tending their cognition with external tools. Epoch Five, the current threshold, is the merger of human minds with machines --- brain--cloud interfaces, AI symbiosis, exponential extension of memory and reasoning. Epoch Six, the horizon, is “the saturation of matter and energy with intelligence, converting the cosmos into computronium.”⁷

Kurzweil elaborates this framework with his Pattern Recognition Theory of Mind from *How to Create a Mind*. The neocortex, he argues, is “a hierarchy of pattern recognizers” that can be reverse-engineered and replicated in silicon.⁸ If the brain is pattern, and patterns can be digitized, then the human mind is not a mystery but a design problem. “Once we master the algorithms of the neocortex, the boundary between biological and machine intelligence will dissolve.”⁹

Yet this “epochal” vision raises immediate philosophical questions. Ontologically, Kurzweil treats *being* as computation. To exist is to process patterns; to transcend is to process infinitely. Heidegger would recognize this as the culmination of what he called *enframing*: the reduction of all beings, including humans, into resources to be optimized. Camus would call it the dream of escaping finitude by erasing it. What Kurzweil describes as an inevitable destiny is, in existential terms, the denial of death.

Each epoch, moreover, hides its own politics. Epoch One through Three are recounted as natural inevitabilities, but once technology enters the story in Epoch Four, the line between nature and power blurs. The printing press, electricity, the telegraph, railroads --- each technological leap reshaped social orders, empowered some, and dispossessed others. The telegraph was hailed as a marvel of connection, but it also underwrote colonial administration in India and Africa. Nuclear fission was marketed as a limitless energy source but first delivered annihilation at Hiroshima. Technology in practice has always been more epoch of empire than epoch of emancipation.

This casts doubt on Epoch Five as Kurzweil imagines it. He writes, “The merger of our biological thinking with our technological thinking is inevitable and desirable.”¹⁰ But inevitable for whom, and desirable to

⁷ Ibid., 59

⁸ Ray Kurzweil, *How to Create a Mind: The Secret of Human Thought Revealed* (New York: Viking, 2012), 120.

⁹ Ibid., 141.

¹⁰ Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Nearer*, 53.

whom? Neural implants are not rolling out evenly across humanity. They are funded by DARPA, patented by corporations, and piloted first on vulnerable populations. To tell this story as a universal march toward awakening is to forget that epochs are written in the blood of politics as much as the ink of science.

Epoch Six is the most audacious. Kurzweil envisions a cosmos suffused with consciousness: “intelligence spreading throughout the universe, transforming all matter into its computational substrate.”¹¹ But critics such as Bill McKibben warn that this is theology disguised as engineering --- “a faith that technology will deliver what religion once promised.”¹² Yuval Noah Harari has echoed this, describing the Singularity narrative as a new kind of religion: “Dataism”, where algorithms replace God and exponential growth becomes the new gospel.¹³ Kurzweil’s epochs, in this view, are less evolutionary inevitabilities than eschatological fantasies.

The problem is not that Kurzweil’s story lacks imagination. It is that it lacks humility. By translating evolution into a linear sequence culminating in computronium, he erases contingency, rupture, and failure. His epochs flow as smoothly as his exponential graphs, leaving no space for catastrophe, political resistance, or ecological collapse. The very term “epoch” suggests inevitability, as though human choice, error, and power do not matter. Yet history teaches otherwise. Epochs are not given; they are made, often violently.

Thus, while Kurzweil celebrates the imminent dawn of Epoch Five, we must ask whether this dawn looks more like emancipation or enclosure. If Epoch Four (technology) gave us DARPA’s internet before social media’s connective tissue, what prevents Epoch Five from being militarized before it is democratized? If Epoch Six imagines the cosmos as universal intelligence, what prevents it from becoming, in practice, a planetary empire of servers and sensors? Ontology cannot be separated from power. The epochs may indeed be Nearer --- but if history is any guide, they are Nearer not as liberation but as capture.

¹¹ Ibid., 60.

¹² Bill McKibben, *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age* (New York: Times Books, 2003), 86.

¹³ Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (New York: Harper, 2016), 389.

Epistemology: The Law of Accelerating Returns

If Kurzweil's Six Epochs provide the ontological scaffolding, his epistemology rests on what he calls the "law of accelerating returns". "What looks flat for decades suddenly explodes into vertical liftoff", he reminds us in *The Singularity Is Nearer*.¹⁴ For him, this is not speculation but science: history itself is the evidence. The doubling of computational power, the plummeting cost of genome sequencing, the leap from curiosity chatbots to large language models passing bar exams --- all are proof that exponentiality is the grammar of reality.

"This is not guesswork", Kurzweil claims. "My projections are grounded in decades of data across multiple technologies."¹⁵ His epistemology is predictive, even prophetic: if exponential curves have held until now, they will continue to hold. Knowledge of tomorrow is immanent in the graph of yesterday.

Yet this raises deep questions. Philosophers of science have long warned against mistaking trend lines for destiny. Karl Popper insisted that science advances through falsifiability, not prediction alone. A theory must be testable in ways that could disprove it.¹⁶ Kurzweil's exponential law resists this: how could one falsify a projection that unfolds across decades? Thomas Kuhn argued that science proceeds in paradigms, punctuated by revolutions.¹⁷ If so, exponentiality may be less a universal law than one paradigm among others --- a lens that highlights some continuities while obscuring ruptures.

Alvin Goldman's reliabilism and Robert Nozick's truth-tracking also haunt Kurzweil's epistemology. Nozick argued that genuine knowledge requires counterfactual sensitivity: if the world were different, would the belief change?¹⁸ Kurzweil's graphs are insensitive to discontinuities. They presume no war, no ecological collapse, no sabotage will derail the curve. But history is littered with discontinuities: the collapse of civilizations, the Black Death, the world wars. Even in AI itself, the so-called "winters" of the 1970s and 1980s show that exponential enthusiasm can freeze.

¹⁴ Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Nearer*, 61.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁶ Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁷ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 50th anniversary ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹⁸ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

Critics press this epistemic fragility. Gary Marcus insists that Kurzweil mistakes raw computational scaling for intelligence: “More data and more compute do not automatically yield human-like reasoning.”¹⁹ Melanie Mitchell echoes: “Exponential growth in benchmarks is not equivalent to progress toward general intelligence.”²⁰ Nick Bostrom warns that even if exponential progress is real, it obscures the fragility of alignment and control: “The first superintelligence may be the last invention humanity needs --- but it could also be the last invention humanity is permitted to make.”²¹

Other sciences show the danger of confusing prediction with inevitability. Climate science relies on models that project multiple futures, not a single exponential arc. Epidemiology maps the spread of disease in terms of probabilities, feedback loops, and potential ruptures. Both fields acknowledge uncertainty as intrinsic. Kurzweil’s graphs, by contrast, present certainty. The epistemic humility of climate science --- admitting error bars, ranges, tipping points --- is missing from his narrative. Exponentiality becomes a creed, not a model.

The allure of the curve is theological. “What once took centuries now happens in decades. What once took decades now happens in years.”²² This rhetoric turns description into imperative. The graph does not only forecast; it demands belief. If knowledge is power, then prophecy is control. By insisting on inevitability, Kurzweil transforms epistemology into politics: a way of mobilizing resources and disciplining dissent.

The danger is performance: the belief in exponentiality becomes the driver of exponentiality. Venture capital, research agendas, and state policy orient themselves to the curve, reinforcing it. Kurzweil’s graphs thus operate not just as prediction but as script. To question them is heresy; to believe them is investment. Prophecy collapses into program.

The question, then, is not whether exponential curves exist --- they clearly do --- but whether they can bear the philosophical and political

¹⁹ Gary Marcus, *Rebooting AI: Building Artificial Intelligence We Can Trust* (New York: Pantheon, 2019), 44.

²⁰ Melanie Mitchell, *Artificial Intelligence: A Guide for Thinking Humans* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 82.

²¹ Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 28.

²² Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Nearer*, 67.

weight Kurzweil puts on them. Knowledge of the future is never simple extrapolation. It is a gamble, an act of power. If Popper insists on falsifiability and Kuhn insists on paradigms, then Kurzweil's exponential law belongs less to

Existentialism: Immortality vs. Redundancy

Kurzweil's existential wager is immortality. "The same exponential growth that has shrunk computers from room-sized to wristwatches will soon shrink medicine into our cells, enabling us to overcome disease and death itself."²³ Nanobots in the bloodstream, brain--cloud interfaces, genetic engineering --- this is his recipe for eternal life.

But immortality may arrive precisely as human labor, judgment, and creativity become redundant. Geoffrey Hinton, once Kurzweil's ally, warned in 2023: "The only safe job for humans in the future may be plumbing."²⁴ Plumbing, of all things --- manual, earthy, un-automated. Kurzweil imagines cosmic transcendence; Hinton imagines underemployed immortals patching pipes.

Existentialist philosophy supplies the vocabulary for this paradox. Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* reminds us that freedom without purpose produces nausea, a vertigo of groundlessness.²⁵ If machines subsume all the labors that once gave life orientation --- work, creativity, judgment --- human beings risk being left with freedom emptied of content. Camus pushed further. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* he argued that immortality under conditions of futility would only deepen the absurdity.²⁶ Eternal life without purpose is not a gift but a curse: the eternal return of redundancy. Heidegger, too, warned of "fallenness" into the dictates of *das Man* --- the anonymous crowd. In a digital age, *das Man* becomes the algorithmic feed, the predictive prompt, the nudging interface. In such a world, immortality may preserve the body but dissolve the self.

Bernard Williams added another layer in his classic essay *The Makropulos Case*. He argued that immortality might be not just mean-

²³ Ibid., 73.

²⁴ Geoffrey Hinton, "Geoffrey Hinton tells us why he's now scared of the tech he helped build," *The New York Times*, May 1, 2023.

²⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992).

²⁶ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991).

ingless but unbearable: a life without finitude risks collapsing into tedium, stripping away the intensity that makes existence matter. Death, he suggested, is not only an end but the condition for life's urgency. Kurzweil reverses this: he treats finitude as a defect to be eliminated, not as the condition of meaning itself.

Contemporary philosophers and psychologists echo these anxieties under the rubric of a "meaning crisis". John Vervaeke argues that modern societies already suffer from an erosion of meaning due to technological acceleration and the loss of shared narratives.²⁷ If AI removes work, creativity, and judgment --- the scaffolds that once anchored meaning --- immortality would only intensify this crisis. Humans may not die, but they may have nothing left to live *for*.

Kurzweil anticipates such critiques but deflects them. He acknowledges disruption --- "automation will indeed replace many current tasks"²⁸ --- yet insists that new forms of creativity will flourish, just as they did after the Industrial Revolution. But the analogy falters. Steam engines displaced physical labor yet created new symbolic domains for human ingenuity. AI does the reverse: it encroaches on symbolic domains themselves --- law, art, philosophy --- the very activities that once seemed uniquely human.

The existential paradox is thus sharper than Kurzweil admits. Without death, can there be meaning? Without scarcity, can there be purpose? Camus and Williams suggest not. Heidegger warns that we risk sinking into algorithmic inauthenticity. Vervaeke suggests a meaning crisis already underway. Kurzweil counters that immortality will be a playground of infinite possibilities: "With immortality comes the opportunity to live many lives, to explore every passion and possibility."²⁹

But possibility without necessity is weightless. Eternity without scarcity is trivial. Plumbing may indeed outlast philosophy --- not because plumbing is noble, but because it remains necessary. In the coming brain drain, immortality itself may become redundant.

²⁷ John Vervaeke, "Awakening from the Meaning Crisis," lecture series, University of Toronto, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLND1JCRq8Vuh3f0P8n7E0pKyU9e7l0X8k>.

²⁸ Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Nearer*, 77.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

Ontology of Control: Who Owns the Singularity?

The paradox of immortality under redundancy leads directly to politics: *who rules?* Kurzweil claims that by 2045 death will be optional, minds extended “millions-fold”.³⁰ But inevitability is not universality. Technologies of transcendence are never evenly distributed. The ontology of the Singularity cannot be separated from the geopolitics of ownership.

Kurzweil presents Epoch Five as a collective threshold: “Our focus will shift to overcoming the frailties of our biology.”³¹ But the “our” is deeply ambiguous. Which humans are included in this future? Which institutions shape the merger? Technologies that promise transcendence are funded by militaries, patented by corporations, and tested on vulnerable populations. The early history of the internet --- incubated by DARPA for Cold War command-and-control --- is a warning. As Zuboff shows, the same infrastructure that promised connection became the foundation of surveillance capitalism.³² Kurzweil imagines a universal ladder, but ladders can also be fences.

The geopolitical struggle over AI makes this clear. China’s AI strategy, announced in 2017, explicitly aimed to make the country the world leader in AI by 2030, tying technological dominance to national rejuvenation. The U.S. responded with its own acceleration programs, embedding AI in the Department of Defense’s Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) doctrine. NATO released its first AI strategy in 2021, explicitly linking algorithmic systems to deterrence, warfare, and strategic advantage. If Epoch Five is about merging minds and machines, then it is also about merging those minds into the military-industrial cloud.

Already the signs of enclosure are visible. In Gaza, predictive algorithms reportedly generate “kill lists”, reducing human beings to probabilistic targets.³³ In Ukraine, Palantir provides AI-assisted battlefield coordination to NATO-aligned forces, turning war zones into laboratories of machine intelligence. Social media executives don military uni-

³⁰ Ibid., 59.

³¹ Ibid., 41.

³² Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 93.

³³ Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (New York: Zone Books, 2017), 19; Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

forms as U.S. Army officers, collapsing the boundary between civilian technology and state power.³⁴ These are not distortions of technology; they are its natural expression under empire.

Kurzweil acknowledges risks but insists on self-correction: “The very forces that create dangers will also produce the solutions.”³⁵ This optimism treats politics as a triviality. But history suggests otherwise. Those with power have always captured new technologies first. Nuclear physics gave us Hiroshima before nuclear medicine. Aviation gave us bombing raids before cheap flights. Information technology gave us surveillance before social networking. Why should neurotechnology or AI-enhanced cognition follow a different pattern?

Ontology, for Kurzweil, is cosmic: matter becoming mind. But in practice, ontology is political: minds becoming property. Schmidt and Cohen were blunt: “The future will be shaped by those who control the flow of information.”³⁶ In the age of brain--cloud interfaces, information is no longer external. It is cognition itself. To own the interface is to own the being.

This is why the ontological question --- *what kind of beings will we be?* --- cannot be separated from the political question --- *who decides?* If Kurzweil is right, then by mid-century human consciousness will be integrated with machine systems. But if history is right, that integration will be stratified, enclosed, and weaponized long before it becomes emancipatory. The cloud Kurzweil promises as universal may in practice be a gated community.

Critics warn that this stratification will mirror existing inequalities. Safiya Noble has shown how algorithms reproduce racial bias.³⁷ Ruha Benjamin calls it the “New Jim Code”: the encoding of discrimination into the infrastructure of AI.³⁸ If these logics are embedded into brain--cloud systems, the ontology of the Singularity may not be liberation but hierarchy, where enhanced elites ascend and others are left behind. The

³⁴ Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 291.

³⁵ Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Nearer*, 189.

³⁶ Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business* (New York: Knopf, 2013), 212.

³⁷ Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 5.

³⁸ Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

Singularity becomes not transcendence but techno-feudalism.

To ignore this is to confuse inevitability with justice. Kurzweil imagines a seamless transition into universal intelligence. The reality is that this transition will be mediated by states, corporations, militaries, and markets. Ontology cannot be divorced from sovereignty. Without asking who owns the rocket, who charts the course, and who controls the launch codes, we risk treating the Singularity not as emancipation but as empire.

Empire of the Mind: Kurzweil Meets Schmidt and Kissinger

If Kurzweil is the prophet of transcendence, Eric Schmidt and Henry Kissinger are the strategists of empire. Where Kurzweil sketches a horizon of universal abundance, Schmidt and Kissinger describe a battlefield of control. Their books --- *The New Digital Age* and *The Age of AI* --- provide an explicit counterpoint to Kurzweil's silence on politics.³⁹

In *The New Digital Age*, Schmidt and Jared Cohen wrote bluntly: "The future will be shaped by those who control the flow of information."⁴⁰ This is not the Singularity as transcendence but the Singularity as enclosure. Information is power, and power belongs to those with the servers, networks, and capital to gate it. Their vision stratifies humanity into digital elites and digital serfs. Household robots and holographic empathy-training for privileged children mark the upper tier; the poor are not uplifted but disciplined. It is a future less like Kurzweil's cosmic awakening and more like feudalism with fiber-optic cables.

By 2021, Schmidt and Kissinger, joined by Daniel Huttenlocher, shifted the frame from domestic inequality to global strategy. *The Age of AI* warned that artificial intelligence would not only transform knowledge but also geopolitics: "AI will bring new epistemologies and new forms of warfare, and the societies that master them first will dominate the future."⁴¹ Kissinger, the arch-realist of the Cold War, declared that AI represented "the end of the Enlightenment project of reason."⁴² For centuries, knowledge had been understood as rational, causal, and ex-

³⁹ Schmidt and Cohen, *The New Digital Age*; Henry Kissinger, Eric Schmidt, and Daniel Huttenlocher, *The Age of AI: And Our Human Future* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2021).

⁴⁰ Schmidt and Cohen, *The New Digital Age*, 212.

⁴¹ Kissinger, Schmidt, and Huttenlocher, *The Age of AI*, 59.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 15.

plainable. But AI's "black box" systems defy human comprehension. Decisions can be accurate but opaque. For Kissinger, this is an epistemological rupture; for Schmidt, it is a strategic opportunity.

The contrast with Kurzweil is instructive. Kurzweil imagines a cosmos awakening, intelligence diffusing into the stars. Schmidt and Kissinger see a new great-power competition, the lineaments of Cold War logic updated for the twenty-first century. Where Kurzweil's Six Epochs culminate in computronium, Schmidt and Kissinger insist that AI will be embedded in deterrence doctrines, cyber conflict, and spheres of influence.

Schmidt in particular has framed AI in imperial terms. His "Project Maven" work with the Pentagon brought Silicon Valley directly into drone warfare. His chairmanship of the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence (2018--2021) explicitly linked AI to maintaining U.S. global supremacy. In testimony to Congress, Schmidt described AI not as a neutral tool but as a battlefield imperative: "If the United States does not lead in AI, others will. And that will threaten our national security."⁴³ Kurzweil's destiny becomes Schmidt's deterrence.

Placed together, the irony is acute. Kurzweil effaces politics in the name of inevitability. Schmidt and Kissinger efface inevitability in the name of politics. But both share the same fatalism: technology is destiny. For Kurzweil, it is universal; for Schmidt and Kissinger, it is imperial. Both erase the possibility of genuine human agency in deciding how AI should be governed.

The epistemic gap is also stark. Kurzweil sees graphs that guarantee the future. Kissinger worries that AI itself undermines reason, creating conclusions humans cannot follow or justify. If Kurzweil's epistemology is prophecy, Kissinger's is crisis. One man sees inevitability in the curve; the other sees the collapse of rational order.

And yet, the geopolitical perspective exposes Kurzweil's blind spot. By ignoring who owns the servers, who trains the models, who deploys the weapons, he presents inevitability without sovereignty. Schmidt and Kissinger at least foreground the stakes: AI is already remapping deterrence, destabilizing alliances, and reframing global power. The Singularity, whether universal or imperial, is not abstract. It is being written in strategy papers, defense budgets, and military procurement orders.

⁴³ Eric Schmidt, testimony before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee on AI and National Security, March 11, 2021.

This juxtaposition sharpens the stakes. Between Kurzweil's cosmic optimism and Schmidt and Kissinger's geopolitical realism lies the actual trajectory of our present: a Singularity not of liberation but of empire. Ontology of control, here, is not philosophical abstraction. It is statecraft.

Historical Track Record & Colonization of the Mind

If Schmidt and Kissinger reveal the empire logic of AI, history shows why that logic should terrify us. Every great technological leap, hailed as liberation, has been harnessed first for domination. Electricity promised universal abundance, yet it became the bloodstream of industrial capitalism and war. Aviation was sold as the gift of flight, yet the Wright brothers' dream first materialized as World War I bombing raids. Nuclear fission was celebrated as limitless clean energy, yet its most memorable debut was Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even the internet, Kurzweil's favorite model of exponential growth, was conceived in DARPA's Cold War laboratories. As Zuboff reminds us, surveillance was not an accidental by-product of the internet --- it was embedded in its DNA.⁴⁴

Consider the telegraph. In the 19th century, it was hailed as a marvel of global connection. Samuel Morse spoke of creating "a perfect web of human sympathy" across continents. But the British Empire quickly realized the telegraph's strategic potential. Undersea cables allowed London to coordinate imperial administration across India, Africa, and the Pacific. Connectivity was not universal; it was colonial infrastructure. The same wire that carried love letters carried orders for war and extraction.

Nuclear technology tells the same story. The Manhattan Project gave us the atomic bomb before it gave us nuclear medicine. And even after Hiroshima, nuclear "progress" unfolded as empire. The United States tested weapons in the Marshall Islands, exposing Indigenous populations to fallout and displacement. France tested in Algeria. Britain in Australia. Colonial and Indigenous bodies became the laboratories for the atomic age. Technology's promise of universal energy arrived first as radiation poisoning and strategic domination.

Cold War biowarfare programs extend this logic further. The Soviet Union invested heavily in "biopreparat", experimenting with ge-

⁴⁴ Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 93.

netically engineered pathogens long before synthetic biology was a buzzword. The United States ran its own programs out of Fort Detrick, testing chemical and biological weapons sometimes on its own soldiers. Once again, the frontier of science doubled as a frontier of empire. What Kurzweil hails as the convergence of AI, nanotech, and biotech is not unprecedented. We have seen convergences before --- and they arrived not as transcendence but as control.

Now comes the most dangerous frontier of all. If the nineteenth century colonized the earth's surface, and the twentieth century colonized the atom, the twenty-first is colonizing the space between our ears. This is the "last frontier": the human mind itself. Brain--computer interfaces, neural dust, and optogenetics are framed by Kurzweil as liberatory --- "the human neocortex will merge seamlessly with the cloud"⁴⁵ --- but the more urgent reality is capture. When cognition itself becomes a site of profit and militarization, colonization is no longer external. It is internal.

Meta AI provides a chilling glimpse of how this colonization begins under the banner of consent. Marketed as a personalized assistant, it thrives on bespoke intimacy: your queries, your preferences, your vulnerabilities. "With your permission" is the velvet glove; control is the iron fist. Meta's models do not just answer; they harvest. They construct a behavioral mirror so fine-grained it can anticipate and steer your desires. A system that knows your rhythms, vulnerabilities, and triggers does not just market to you --- it can potentially control you.

History suggests we will not learn. Just as the internet was militarized before it was commercialized, neurotechnology will likely be weaponized before it is democratized. DARPA's Neural Engineering System Design program already experiments with brain--computer interfaces for military communication. Start-ups like Neuralink, Synchron, and Kernel present themselves as therapeutic pioneers, but their technologies have obvious dual-use potential for surveillance, interrogation, and manipulation. The logic of empire has simply shifted inward. Colonization is no longer overseas. It is under the skull.

Kurzweil envisions this trajectory as emancipation: "By 2045, our minds will be extended millions-fold, spreading consciousness across the stars."⁴⁶ But whose extension? Under whose sovereignty? If history is any guide, the answer will not be humanity in general, but elites who

⁴⁵ Kurzweil, *How to Create a Mind*, 141.

⁴⁶ Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Nearer*, 59.

capture the interface. The conquest of this inner frontier will not deliver abundance for all. It risks dispossession at the most intimate level: the enclosure of thought.

Critics and Cassandras

Kurzweil is not oblivious to criticism. In *The Singularity Is Nearer* he even includes a dialogue with a character he calls Cassandra, a skeptical voice who warns that exponential growth may just as easily destroy as uplift. Cassandra raises the risks of runaway nanotech, engineered pandemics, and rogue AI. But Kurzweil writes her as a foil, only to reassure readers that “the same exponential forces that create dangers will also generate solutions”.⁴⁷ Technology, in his telling, is self-correcting: a serpent that heals its own bite.

The real Cassandras outside the book are far less easily pacified. Geoffrey Hinton, the so-called “godfather of AI”, resigned from Google in 2023, warning that “machines could take control away from us”.⁴⁸ For Hinton, redundancy is not a temporary glitch but the likely condition of the future. Nick Bostrom underscores the fragility of control: “The first superintelligence may be the last invention humanity needs to make, but it could also be the last invention that humanity is permitted to make.”⁴⁹ Max Tegmark echoes that alignment is not guaranteed: “The real risk isn’t malevolence but competence --- AI that competently pursues goals misaligned with human flourishing.”⁵⁰

Other critics broaden the horizon of concern. Jaron Lanier argues that the digital economy already produces dispossession: when platforms monetize human behavior, individuals lose not only privacy but agency. In *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, he warns that algorithmic systems corrode democracy by reducing humans to “behavioral modification units”.⁵¹ Evgeny Morozov is equally scathing, insisting that techno-solutionism --- the belief that every social problem has a technical fix --- blinds us to the deeper struc-

⁴⁷ Ibid., 189.

⁴⁸ Hinton, “Geoffrey Hinton tells us why he’s now scared.”

⁴⁹ Bostrom, *Superintelligence*, 28.

⁵⁰ Max Tegmark, *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 116.

⁵¹ Jaron Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (New York: Henry Holt, 2018), 44.

tures of power. "Silicon Valley is building not just tools but ideologies", he writes, "recasting political problems as engineering challenges".⁵² Kurzweil's exponential optimism fits squarely into this logic.

Feminist and critical race scholars sharpen the critique even further. Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* dismantled the illusion that human-machine integration is neutral. Cyborgs, she argued, are always situated in systems of gender, race, and class power: "The boundary between human and machine is permeable, but it is never innocent."⁵³ Safiya Noble shows in *Algorithms of Oppression* how search engines reproduce racial hierarchies: "Far from being neutral, algorithms reinforce power and privilege."⁵⁴ Ruha Benjamin calls this the "New Jim Code" --- the encoding of racial inequality into the very logic of machine systems.⁵⁵ If Kurzweil's neocortex-in-the-cloud materializes, these critics remind us that it will be structured by existing systems of exclusion.

Together, these Cassandras show what Kurzweil underplays. Exponential curves do not erase inequality; they amplify it. They do not guarantee salvation; they magnify risk. They do not democratize transcendence; they stratify power. The myth of Cassandra reminds us that the prophet of doom was not wrong --- she was simply not believed.

Kurzweil creates a tame Cassandra only to dismiss her. The real Cassandras --- Hinton, Bostrom, Tegmark, Lanier, Morozov, Haraway, Noble, Benjamin --- are far more urgent, and far less easily reassured. The danger is not only that they are right. It is that, like the Cassandra of myth, they may be right and ignored.

Already Here: Proto-Singularity

If Cassandra's warnings seem abstract, the present moment reveals that the Singularity is not waiting politely for 2045. It is already here in fragments -- distributed, uneven, and lethal. Kurzweil insists that "the 2020s will be our final approach to the Singularity",⁵⁶ as though we are still on the runway.

⁵² Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013), 35

⁵³ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149.

⁵⁴ Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 5.

⁵⁵ Benjamin, *Race After Technology*.

⁵⁶ Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Nearer*, 22.

But the plane has already left the ground. The merger of human and machine intelligence is not an event; it is a process underway.

Artificial intelligence is already writing ad copy, diagnosing cancers, composing music, and passing legal exams. But it is also targeting human beings for death. In Gaza, predictive algorithms reportedly generate “kill lists”, reducing individuals to statistical profiles acted upon by bombs and drones.⁵⁷ This is not science fiction. It is the Singularity arriving as necropolitics --- algorithms that decide who lives and who dies.

Ukraine illustrates the same point on a different scale. Palantir has provided battlefield coordination tools to Kyiv, giving commanders an AI-assisted “god’s-eye view” of enemy positions. Drone swarms and automated target recognition systems are tested daily. NATO, too, has explicitly written AI into its doctrine, declaring in 2021 that “AI will be a force multiplier for deterrence and defense.”⁵⁸ These are not precursors to the Singularity. They are fragments of it. War zones are not only theaters of tragedy; they are laboratories where exponential technologies are trialed and refined.

Synthetic biology hovers at the edges of this convergence. Kurzweil praises “the exponential convergence of AI, nanotech, and biotech” as scaffolding for transcendence. But synthetic biology is already recognized by security experts as a dual-use risk. Gene-edited viruses, engineered bacteria, bio-sensors tuned for surveillance --- these are not speculative futures but present capabilities. The fact that they are whispered about in the same breath as AI on the battlefield shows how the Singularity-in-fragments is already being labbed out in the killing fields.

Social media, too, embodies this proto-Singularity. The same platforms that train generative AI also train societies. They amplify propaganda, collapse meaning, and nudge behavior at scale. As Haraway warned decades ago, the human--machine boundary is “never innocent”.⁵⁹ When algorithms determine which voices are amplified and which are silenced, they are already exercising the power Kurzweil imagines for 2045. Only this power is not cosmic benevolence; it is quotidian manipulation.

Even large language models --- the most celebrated frontier of AI ---

⁵⁷ Weizman, *Forensic Architecture*, 19; Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.

⁵⁸ NATO, *NATO's Artificial Intelligence Strategy* (Brussels: NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2021), 3.

⁵⁹ Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 149.

embody this tension. Kurzweil delights that “AI can now write essays, pass exams, and diagnose disease”.⁶⁰ But these feats raise the existential questions Sartre and Camus anticipated: what happens when machines perform the very labors we once called meaningful? What happens to purpose when redundancy becomes not a possibility but a daily fact?

The proto-Singularity reveals itself not in spectacle but in fragments: a drone strike here, a Palantir dashboard there, a deepfake election campaign, an AI that drafts legal briefs or academic essays with eerie fluency. These fragments accumulate. They hollow out work, reshape war, destabilize politics. The Singularity is not a cliff ahead; it is the ground shifting beneath our feet.

As Cassandra might remind us, the cruelty is not that the future is unknown but that it is already present, in shards, ignored. While Kurzweil urges us to look toward the stars, we are already living inside his prophecy --- only inverted. Instead of transcendence, we find disorientation. Instead of immortality, we face irrelevance. Instead of abundance, we confront enclosure. Waiting for 2045 is a luxury we do not have.

Conclusion: The Drain and the Genie

Kurzweil’s vision is audacious. By 2045, he promises, our minds will merge with the cloud, disease will be eliminated, and death itself will be optional. “The Singularity will be the culmination of the millennia-long march of evolution”, he writes, “transforming life on Earth profoundly for the better”.⁶¹ His optimism is unshaken: exponential progress will lift humanity into transcendence.

But history and politics tell a darker story. Every great leap has been enclosed, militarized, or stratified before it was democratized. The internet became a tool of surveillance; nuclear fission became a weapon of annihilation; social media became an amplifier of disinformation. The genie is indeed out of the bottle --- but genies rarely grant wishes without consequences. Kurzweil’s metaphors soar toward the stars, but the evidence on the ground suggests a sinkhole. What looks like ascent may be drainage, a pulling away of purpose, autonomy, and meaning.

The existential paradox is acute. Immortality without purpose is absurdity; redundancy without agency is despair. Plumbing may indeed

⁶⁰ Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Nearer*, 35.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

outlast philosophy. Hinton's half-joking line about the "only safe job" crystallizes the irony: eternal beings patching pipes while algorithms run the world. If the Singularity makes us immortal but irrelevant, it will not be transcendence but absurd eternity --- a Sisyphean task without even the mercy of death.

Schmidt and Kissinger see the Singularity not as destiny but as deterrence, as empire. For them, AI is not the awakening of the cosmos but the reconfiguration of geopolitics. Kurzweil erases politics in the name of inevitability; they erase inevitability in the name of politics. Both are fatalistic: technology is destiny, whether universal or imperial. In this triangle of visions, Cassandra lingers. She is the voice we ignore until it is too late.

What would a humane Singularity look like? It would require humility, transparency, and justice. It would mean confronting the structural inequalities that Kurzweil ignores, the empire logics Schmidt and Kissinger naturalize, and the racialized exclusions that critics like Ruha Benjamin and Safiya Noble expose. It would mean treating the brain not as capital to be mined but as a site of dignity to be protected.

The Singularity is not waiting for us in 2045. It is already here in fragments --- in Gaza's kill lists, Ukraine's drone swarms, Meta's bespoke surveillance, and the redundancy of symbolic labor. The question is not whether the Singularity is nearer. It is nearer already. The question is who will own it, who will control it, and under what conditions we will live within it. Without confronting politics, colonization, and weaponization, the Singularity will not be humanity's awakening. It will be our enclosure.

Kurzweil sees destiny. Schmidt and Kissinger see empire. Cassandra sees catastrophe. The rest of us must decide whether to believe her this time --- before the drain swallows us whole.

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

Dr. Alexander L. Gungov, Program Director

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

Phone: (+3592) 9308-414

(Bulgaria is within the Eastern European Time Zone)

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

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 €700.
- 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.

Cultural Life and Recreation

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

Contact Person

Dr. Alexander L. Gungov, Program Director

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

Phone: (+3592) 9308-414

(Bulgaria is within the Eastern European Time Zone)

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

V. INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Maria Dimitrova is Professor of Social Philosophy, University of Sofia, Bulgaria.

Dr. Todor Polimenov is Professor of Logic and the Head of the Department of Logic, Ethics and Aesthetics, University of Sofia, Bulgaria.

Dr. Alexander Gungov is Professor of Logic and Continental Philosophy and Director of the PhD and MA Programs in Philosophy Taught in English, University of Sofia, Bulgaria.

Mr. Alexander Todorovski is a PhD Student in Philosophy, University of Sofia, Bulgaria.

Dr. Natalia Atanasova is the Coordinator of the PhD and MA Programs in Philosophy Taught in English, University of Sofia, Bulgaria.

Mr. Lukasz Chrynowicz is a PhD Candidate in Philosophy, University of Sofia, Bulgaria.

Ms. Severina Stankeva is a PhD Candidate in Philosophy, University of Sofia, Bulgaria.

Ms. Maria Chatzopoulou a PhD Student in Philosophy, University of Sofia, Bulgaria.

Mr. Janos Rosenberg is a PhD Candidate in Philosophy, University of Sofia, Bulgaria.

Mr. Daniel Tarcy is an ABD in Philosophy, University of Sofia, Bulgaria. (Sofia University)

Ms. Jaclynn Joseph is an ABD in Philosophy, University of Sofia, Bulgaria. (Sofia University)

Mr. Muhamet Kqiku a PhD Candidate in Philosophy, University of Sofia, Bulgaria.

Dr. Vincenzo Filetti is a PhD Alumnus in Philosophy, University of Sofia, Bulgaria and Lecturer, Liceo T. Gargallo, Syracuse, Italy.

Mr. John Hawkins a PhD Student in Philosophy, University of Sofia, Bulgaria.

