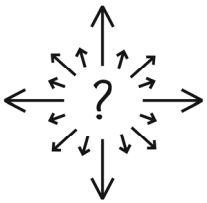
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Mr. Karim Mamdani
280 Donlands Ave.
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CANADA
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**I. FICTION WITHIN AND BEYOND LITERATURE AND ART ..... 9**

1. The Idea of Imagination and Technological Desire
Donald Phillip Verene
(Professor Emeritus, Department of Philosophy, Emory University)..... 9

2. Practical Intellect and Contemplative Mind in Early Greek Epos
Gerasim Petrinski
(Assoc. Professor Dr., Department of Rhetoric,
University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski) ..... 20

3. Reality as a Narrative Fiction: Intertwining Perspectives
Valentina Di Cataldo
(PhD Student, Universidad de Alicante)..... 38

4. The deadly-factual word of Greek tragedies:
Hölderlin and tragedy's example of fictional reality
Evangelos Kalfopoulos
(Post-Doctoral Fellow, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski
and Collaborating Investigator at the Institute of Philosophical Studies
of Coimbra University)..... 58

5. We Dreamt a Beach and Found a Desert: What It Means
to Live in Post-Situationist Reality
Nataliya Atanasova
(Coordinator, MA and PhD Programs in Philosophy Taught
in English, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski)..... 70

6. The Subjective Gaze and Fictional Reality:
A Jungian Reading of *The Magus*
Bianca Foghel, (Dr., West University of Timisoara)..... 85

7. The Subjective Ground of Differentiation in Kant,
Proust and Mamardashvili: Topology of Fiction
Gigla Gonashvili, PhD
(Independent scholar residing in Germany)..... 100

**II. LOGIC AND SCIENCE AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF FICTION ..... 113**

8. Modal Fictionalism and Self-Reference
Blagovest S. Mollov
(Professor, Dr. Sc., Department of European Studies,
University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski) ..... 113

9. Lied the Raven, Evermore – Falsehood and Reality in Science, through Fiction
Riccardo Marzullo
(Graduate Student, University of Turin) ..... 124

10. After the Fact: Common Sense, Paradoxical Structures, and the Retroactive Logic of Fictional Reality
Boyan Dafov
(PhD Student, Department of Logic, Ethics, and Aesthetics, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski) ..... 138

**III. FICTIONAL REALITY IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT ..... 155**

11. Democracy — a Reality of Fictions
Nikolay Naidenov
(Professor, Dr. Sc., Department of Theory of Politics, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski) ..... 155

12. Projective Ontologizing and Counseling
Vesselin Hristov Dafov
(Professor, Dr. Sc. Department of Philosophy, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski) ..... 171

13. Infinite Circles of Fictionality
Alexander L. Gungov
(Professor, Dr. Sc., Department of Logic, Ethics, and Aesthetics, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski) ..... 191

14. Fictional Reality in Thomas More's Utopia as the Core of the Utopian Genre
Ulrich Arnswald
(PD, Dr., Department of Philosophy, University of Innsbruck) ..... 200

15. Jean Baudrillard – Democracy Beyond Hyperreal Simulation
Vanessa Freerks
(Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Leadership Ethics in Africa, University of Fort Hare) ..... 217

16. The Fiction of Growth: Degrowth as Philosophical Critique of Economic Reality
Lukasz Chryniewicz
(Doctoral Candidate, PhD Program in Philosophy Taught in English, University of Sofia “St. Kliment Ohridski”)..... 235

17. Specters of Merit: On the Architecture of Fictional Realities in Late Capitalism
Aleksandar Todorovski
(Doctoral Student, PhD Program in Philosophy Taught in English, University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski")..... 257

**IV. FICTIONAL REALITY: PRO AND CONTRA THE SACRED REALM ..... 279**

18. Ashen Worlds: The Poetics of Apocalypse in Climate Fiction
Todor P. Todorov
(Assoc. Professor, Dr., Department of History of Philosophy, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski) ..... 279

19. 'Fictional Reality': The Case of Religious Texts in a Secular Context
John Patrick Giddy
(Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of Kwazulu-Natal) .... 292

20. Myth After Metaphysics in The Birth of Tragedy
Anany Mishra
(Doctoral Candidate, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay) and P. G. Jung
(Professor of Philosophy, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay) ..... 312

**V. CLINICAL PRACTICE AND MEDICAL SCIENCE CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF FICTION ..... 333**

21. Lateral Frontoparietal Network (L-FPN) and Midcingulo-insular Network (M-CIN) Activation in Truth vs. Delusion Discrimination Processes within Psychopathology
David Tomasi
(Assoc. Professor, University of Vermont / Vermont Academy of Arts & Sciences / Vermont State Colleges / Champlain College)..... 333

22. Fictional Reality in Addiction
Eleftherios Sarantis
(Post-Doctoral Fellow, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski)..... 351

23. Concealed and Explicit Fictions in Biomedical Research: From Animal Models to In Vitro Systems
Francesco Giorgi
(PhD Student, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski)..... 364

**VI. A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO HYPERREALITY..... 381**

24. Hyperreality and the Authentic Nuance of the Fake Self
Shervin Mirzaeighazi
(PhD Alumnus, Lund University)..... 381

25. Phenomenology as Philosophy of Mind:
Scientific Theories as Fictional Realities
Alexander Muss
(Senior Lecturer, Department of General Psychology,
Dr., St. Petersburg State University)..... 397

26. Simulacrum as Nichtseyende. Baudrillard and Schelling
on the Effectiveness of What Is Not
Enrico Schiro
(Dr., University of Malta)..... 405

27. Sincerity After Authenticity: Ethical Life Under
Conditions of Fictional Reality
Taimoor Farouk
(PhD Student, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski)..... 421

**VII. BOOK REVIEW..... 439**

Werner Bätzing, *Homo Destructor. Eine Mensch–Umwelt–Geschichte. Von der Entstehung des Menschen zur Zerstörung der Welt*, 2023, München C.H. Beck Verlag, 463 pp., €32, ISBN: 9783406806681
Ulrich Arnswald
(PD, Dr., Universität Innsbruck)..... 439

**VIII. ANNOUNCEMENTS ..... 445**

Master's Program in Philosophy Taught in English
at the University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski" ..... 445

Doctoral Program in Philosophy Taught in English
at the University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski" ..... 448

# I. FICTION WITHIN AND BEYOND LITERATURE AND ART

## 1. The Idea of Imagination and Technological Desire

*Donald Phillip Verene, dpverene@gmail.com (Professor Emeritus, Department of Philosophy, Emory University)*

**Abstract:** In the technological society, both memory and imagination are lost. With this loss, traditional society is lost. Traditional society is based on custom and common sense. These aspects of traditional society provide the mind with the opportunity to engage in contemplation. Without contemplation, we are left with desire. Technique comes forward as the means to fulfill desire. All human activity becomes a panorama of means without any specific purpose except to engage in a continual sense of technical improvement. Memory and imagination provide the possibility of transcendence, of passing beyond the present within the present. The technological society conducts life in a continual present of the search for the one best means. The disappearance of contemplation entails the disappearance of virtue, and especially of prudence, as the guide to human activity. We are left with nothing more than desire and the attempt to fulfill desire through the attraction to hyperreality.

**Keywords:** Imagination, Technology, Memory, Intelligence, Hyperreality

### The Idea of Imagination

Let us begin with the Muses, who can sing of "what is and what will be and what was before" and who announce that they "know how to sing many false things similar to genuine ones" but when they wish, they know "how to proclaim true things." They were born of the union of "loud-thundering Zeus" the son of Cronus and "Mnemosyne (Memory), the protectress of the hills of Eleuther." The Muses taught Hesiod beautiful song. "Such is the holy gift of the Muses to human beings. For it is from the Muses and far-shooting Apollo that men are poets upon the earth and lyre-

players."[1] The Muses taught the ability to think in terms of metaphor, to perceive similarity in the dissimilar. Metaphors appear in the mind as if from nowhere. They are the medium of the imagination.

Vico, in his account of the "true Homer" in the *New Science*, says that "memory is the same as imagination [*la memoria è la stessa che la fantasia*]."[2] The Homeric poems are held in the memory of the Greek peoples and are brought forth through the imagination and recited. Vico has in mind the line in Aristotle's little treatise *On Memory*: "If asked of which among the parts of the soul memory is a function, we reply: manifestly of that part to which imagination [*phantasia*] also appertains; all objects of which there is imagination are in themselves objects of memory, while those which do not exist without imagination are objects of memory incidentally."[3]

Memory when it functions as simply reminiscence is not imagination. Imagination comes forth when memory functions as recollection. Aristotle says: "Whenever, therefore, we are recollecting, we are experiencing one of the antecedent moments until finally we experience the one after which customarily comes that we seek."[4] To recollect, Aristotle says, "one must get hold of a starting-point . . . It seems in general that the middle point among all things is a good starting-point."[5] We are in the middle point of the present, which can be connected to what was before, and connected by anticipation to what may come in the future. The Muses teach us how to recollect.

Vico says: "Memory has three different aspects: memory [*memoria*] when it remembers things, imagination [*fantasia*] when it alters or imitates them, and ingenuity [*ingegno*] when it gives them a new turn or puts them into proper arrangement and relationship. For these reasons the theological poets [the founders of humanity] called Memory [*Mnemosyne*] the mother of the Muses."[6] All poets look to the Muses for support because, like the Muses, they wish their words to sing in a har-

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1 Hesiod, *Theogony*, ed. and trans. Glenn W. Most (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 1–53.

2 *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), par. 819.

3 *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 Vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 450a.

4 Ibid., 451b.

5 Ibid., 452a.

6 *New Science*, par. 819.

monious voice. A poem must have coherence of its images and a harmony of its words. A poem with these characteristics immediately passes into memory, its natural home. A song is never sung only once. A poem is never read or recited only once.

The technological world has no place for poetry. The acme of technological desire is the appearance of artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence can produce poetry but it cannot produce what poetry is. The attachment to technology is the attachment to time, to a world of constant change. This change is not the time of the Muses. In the technological world the past is obsolete and the present is rapidly dissolving into the future. It is Hegel's "bad infinity." There is no beginning and no end. Artificial intelligence is unable to attain four things: greatness, self-knowledge, sublimity, and contemplation.

Artificial intelligence can reproduce *terza rima* but it cannot create the greatness of Dante. What we find in Dante's poem comes to us in the way that a metaphor suddenly appears in the mind. Artificial intelligence can imitate Hegel but it cannot create the greatness of Hegel. Hegel's dialectical Absolute comes to Hegel as an afflatus in the lecture-rooms of Jena. Dante is an artist of images. Hegel is an artist of reason. They are each a genius of imagination. Artificial intelligence is unable to supply the answer to the question which Socrates speaks to Phaedrus: Is Socrates, a multiform beast, like Typhon, or is he a "simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature?"[7] Self-knowledge is beyond the ability of anything artificial intelligence can accomplish. Artificial intelligence replaces Socratic self-knowledge with the pursuit of self-interest.

Artificial intelligence is a fictional person, a *personne*, no more real than Descartes's *cogito*, incapable of *ethos* (character). Character depends on the imagination to take thought from the apprehension of what *is* to what *might be*. Then from what might be it is possible to form a judgment of what *ought to be*. Because artificial intelligence is incapable of imagination it is also incapable of eloquence. Eloquence is the achievement of human speech in which words bring forth the True as the whole.

Artificial intelligence is incapable of sublimity as Longinus describes it: "a well-timed flash of sublimity shatters everything like a bolt of lightning and reveals the full power of the speaker at a single

[7] Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 230a.

stroke."[8] Sublimity takes consciousness out of itself. Artificial intelligence is also the antithesis of contemplation. Contemplation (*theōria, theōrein*) is the power of the mind to think beyond any sequence of solving problems. Aristotle says: "Happiness [*eudaimonia*] is coextensive with contemplation."[9] Contemplation is a state of the intellect that is closest to that of the gods. Through contemplation we acquire a good daimon. There is no possibility of happiness within the world of artificial intelligence.

Each of these four attainments takes the mind to a "transcendent state of thought," which the procedures of artificial intelligence cannot reach. Artificial intelligence can reject and reformulate what has been said concerning what is transcendent but it cannot think from the standpoint of the transcendent. The transcendent sense of things is accessible only through the imagination. The lockbox of artificial intelligence keeps the mind and humanity within the boundaries of time, within what is always ongoing. The reality of artificial intelligence is always without access to the "really real" (t*o ontos on*), which requires the sense of transcendence, the sense of the human and the divine.

Real intelligence always has within it what it is not. Real intelligence has within it dialectic. Such intelligence is inherently philosophical. Real intelligence or "intellection" (*noēsis*) is what is reached by the ascent of the Platonic Divided Line that begins with the formation of images (*eikones*) as products of *eikasia*, meaning "to make an image." Within the metaphor present in the image is the sense of comparison, a conjecture. The mind is taken to a new standpoint, which when pursued culminates in a noetic sense of what is. The noetic is sublime. The epiphany that occurs in the flash of insight of the sublime effects the mind's grasp of what is before it. The mind's eye sees into the form, the *eidos* of whatever is presented. If the mind is held within the bonds of time, as it is in the activity of artificial intelligence, there is no access to the eternality of the *eidē*.

In this manner the mind's eye sees into the "great time," the time of origin that can be reached only through the dialectic of oppositions. The insight into the great time offers the individual the assurance of a

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[8] Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. W. H. Fyfe, rev. Donald Russell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1.4.

[9] *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011), 1178b.

providential order that transcends the ongoing movement of ordering experience that is dominated by the mentality of problem-solving. The individual moves from Dante's "dark wood" (*selva oscura*) of error to the perception of the wheel "which moves the sun and the other stars" (*che move il sole e l'altre stele*). The individual also moves from Hegel's "certainty of sensation" (*die sinnliche Gewissheit*) to the transformation of *Geist* into a state of "absolute knowing" (*das absolute Wissen*), of knowing the True as the whole.

Artificial intelligence is unable to take dialectic any further than scepticism. Sceptical thought treats opposition as no more than an *aporia*. It is a dialectic of back and forth, without the possibility of moving thought toward a grasp of the whole, which contains all opposition. This insight arrives in the mind from outside time because from within time only the opposition itself is possible. Artificial intelligence, being bound within time, has no ability to see beyond itself. It is the ability of the human to see beyond the human that makes the human, human.

## Technological Desire

Let us turn from the imagination to the technological itself. In the fourth chapter of the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Hegel describes a form consciousness takes when it acts toward its object in terms of desire (*Begierde*). Desire enters consciousness when consciousness turns from its pursuit of the truth of certainty as residing in the object (understood as something separate and independent from itself) to taking its object to be something integral to itself. Consciousness affirms its object to be part of the truth of certainty of itself.

Hegel says: "Thus self-consciousness cannot sublate the object by its negative relation to it; because of that it instead generates the object again, and the desire as well. It is in fact something other than self-consciousness that is the essence of desire and through this experience this truth has dawned on self-consciousness itself. But at the same time self-consciousness is no less absolutely for itself, and it is only by sublating the object, and it must get its satisfaction, for it is the truth."[10] Self-consciousness desires to have nothing as a standard to be beyond its

[10] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Meiner, 1952), 139; *Hegel: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Michael Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), par. 175.

reach, nothing that can exist as a certainty beyond itself. Certainty is the sole possession of the self as a self.

The self does not desire to overcome the seeming independence of the object by the destruction of the object. Consciousness desires simply to have the object before it as its own. Hegel says: "Its doing is only in one moment a doing of *desire*; it does not aim at the destruction of the objective essence in its entirety, but only at the form of its otherness or its independence, which is a semblance devoid of essence, for *in itself* it counts this otherness as the same essence as itself, or its selfhood."[11] To accomplish this sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the object, the self resorts to work (*Arbeit*). Through work the self can make its object its own.

Hegel says: "The actuality against which desire and work are directed is no longer for this consciousness a *nullity in itself*, something merely to be sublated and consumed by it, but something like that consciousness itself, an *actuality broken in two*, which is only on one side null in itself, but on the other side is also a sanctified world; it is a shape of the unchangeable for this has received in itself singularity, and because as the changeable, it is a universal, its singularity has in general the significance of all actuality."[12] In this action desire validates the actuality of itself by demonstrating its ability to possess the object.

"Fictional reality" understood as an epistemology is a version of the copy theory of knowledge. It is based on the assumption that there is an independent presence of an object before the mind. Proper knowledge of this object is for the mind to bring before itself a conceptual copy of this object, making the object into a subject for thought through the representational power of language. Cassirer, in the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, has shown the error in this copy theory of knowledge. Cassirer says: "In every linguistic 'sign,' in every mythical or artistic 'image,' a spiritual content, which intrinsically points beyond the whole sensory sphere, is translated into the form of the sensuous, into something visible, audible or tangible. . . . Thus in every sphere, it is through the freedom of spiritual action that the chaos of sensory impressions be-

[11] Ibid., 263; par. 362.
[12] Ibid., 165; par. 219.

gins to clear and take on fixed form for us."[13]

No object stands simply before consciousness. What is before consciousness always embodies a spiritual content. Cassirer says: "Myth and art, language and science, are in this sense configurations *towards* being: they are not simple copies of an existing reality but represent the main directions of the spiritual movement, of the ideal process by which reality is constituted for us as one and many—as a diversity of forms which are ultimately held together by a unity of meaning."[14] An object never has meaning or being *in itself*. What the object is, is what it is *for us*. What the object is for us is always how it is taken up as part of culture, as part of one of the forms of consciousness that are writ large in the symbolic forms of myth, religion, art, history, science, and so forth.

There is no "reality" that is then "fictionalized." Once the object is apprehended as a phenomenon within one of the symbolic forms of culture, it can be distorted into something hyperreal, such as described by Umberto Eco, discussed below. But what is formed as a hyperreal object for consciousness cannot be referred back to something standing completely independent of some form of consciousness. All objects are objects only in terms of being instances of any form of the human spirit, of *Geist*. The object becomes something hyperreal for consciousness when there is an impetus to make the object that is already formed into something more.

This "something more" is achieved by making the object appear more fascinating. The object becomes more fascinating than it is in its original formation by consciousness. The impetus to make the object hyperreal takes the object as already formed as an object of consciousness and forms it again as something more than it was. Hyperreality takes the object from one form it has within consciousness and makes it into another. Hyperreality does not take the object as something existing wholly independent of consciousness of the object and give it a new reality within consciousness. Hyperreality is a movement wholly within consciousness.

In contemporary society, possession of the object is accomplished

[13] Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Die Sprache. Gesammelte Werke Hamburger Ausgabe*, Vol. 11 (Hamburg: Meiner, 2001), 40. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Language*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 106–7.

[14] Ibid., 41; 107.

by technique. Technique allows the self to make of the object all that the self desires. The object becomes whatever the self wishes it to be. Technique becomes the single instrument for the fulfillment of self-interest. Jacques Ellul, in *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle*, with the translated title, *The Technological Society*, makes a distinction between the "technical operation" (*l'opération technique*) and the "technical phenomenon" (*le phénomène technique*).[15] Technical operation is what is commonly understood simply as tool use, the means to accomplish a task. Technical operation exists in traditional society alongside other activities—intellectual, aesthetic, religious, practical, and so forth. For example, in terms of Cassirer's philosophy of culture, *Technik* is one symbolic form among others, making technical activity only one aspect of social life. The technical phenomenon occurs in the technological society in which the activities present in traditional society are all transformed by the application of technique.

This transformation occurs when the use of technique becomes a topic for "rational judgment," when a desire for having the "one best means" is introduced as a standard for judging activity in every area of human concern. It is immediately asked, of any way of doing things: "Is this the one best means? Can it be improved? Can it be applied elsewhere?" What was a matter of tradition, individual genius, or social evolution is now rationally evaluated as to whether it is the one best means. Everything in the technological society is constantly improved and constantly replaced, in pursuit of the new.

The technologically possessed self turns away from the wisdom of Ecclesiastes: "What has been will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has already been, in the ages before us" (1:9–10). It is this wisdom on which traditional society is based. It is the wisdom of memory. The pursuit of the technical is devoid of memory. Only the present dominates. In the technological society, "consciousness" is added to the engagement with the rational judgment. The technological self has no need of memory. Technological consciousness always looks forward from the present to a new present. There is nothing to be learned from the past beyond the immediate past, which is al-

[15] Jacques Ellul, *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1954), ch. 1; *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Random House, 1964), ch. 1.

ways no more than a preface to the new, to what can now be done. The voice of the Muses cannot be heard in the technological society.

In the technological society, "consciousness" is added to the application of "rational judgment." Not only is any means judged in terms of its possibilities for improvement, but a general consciousness of technique is built up, so that techniques in one field of endeavor are considered for extension into other fields. To the question of the "one best means" is added a second question: "Where else might technique be applied?" Everyone becomes involved and concerned with the possibilities of technique. Everyone is fascinated with performance, whether it be of household appliances, electronic programs, types of communication, or spacecraft.

The technical citizen is constantly required to engage in evaluation. The individual is asked not only to act in terms of technical means but also to evaluate the means. Technical consciousness accounts for the rapid and far-flung expansion of technique in all areas of life. No human activity escapes the "technological imperative" of improvement. The self is a locus of technological desire. Life without the technical phenomenon becomes unthinkable. Privacy is no longer possible, or even desired. The wisdom that can be gained from memory is left behind.

Traditional society is based on common sense and custom, as well as on memory. Common sense and custom provide consciousness with the means to confront and adjust to things as they are. They allow human nature to develop itself so as to accept that there is a real order to things. The technological society replaces common sense and custom with technique, allowing desire to dominate all forms of human activity. A sense of the transcendent in human experience disappears. The sense of reality that is present in ancient Greek philosophy is no longer a concern, once technique is seen as making all that is desired possible. In the technological society, whatever is conceived as possible is then in fact done. All thought and effort is dedicated to the formation of what is desired. But whatever is achieved is never enough. There is always the need for more.

In his essay, "Travels in Hyperreality," Umberto Eco shows that the technological society is governed by the quest for more. Hyperreality is obsessed with "fullness," of *horror vacui*.[16] Eco details the demand of contemporary society for the "real thing." To attain the "real thing," technique must be employed to "fabricate the absolute fake, where the boundaries be-

[16] Umberto Eco, "Travels in Hyperreality," in *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt, 1986, 3–58), 8.

tween game and illusion are blurred, the art museum is contaminated by the freak show, and falsehood is enjoyed in a situation of 'fullness,' of *horror vacui*."[17] In order: "to speak of things that one wants to connote as real, these things must seem real. The 'completely real' becomes identified with the 'completely fake.' Absolute unreality is offered as real presence."[18] In the 'completely fake,' Eco says, we are given the reproduction so we "will no longer feel any need for the original. But for the reproduction to be desired, the original has to be idolized."[19] Works of the humanistic imagination take us to a contact with realities that are transcendent, with the forms of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. The desire for these ultimates becomes unnecessary when we are given directly the fascinating reproduction. The reproduction, however, must be continually repeated because there is in fact nothing in it.

In the technologically dominated life the individual has a continual yearning for more. Although technique makes all possible, it is never enough, because what is possible is the basis of further possibility. We can no more rid ourselves of the computer screen than we can steal a line of Shakespeare in traditional society. The difference is that what is on the screen is Hegel's "bad infinity," a series in which there is always "more." The line of Shakespeare is a "true infinity," which takes us ever back into ourselves, into our pursuit of the Delphic precept to "Know thyself," the most ancient instruction given to human beings, likely given by the Seven Sages, and likely by Thales, the philosopher among them.

We find ourselves in what Giambattista Vico, in the *Scienza nuova*, designates as the "barbarism of reflection" (*la barbarie della riflessione*), in what James Joyce, in *Finnegans Wake*, calls "Our wholemole millwheeling vicociclometer," in which we "Forget!"[20] In this age, we experience: "the misbegotten subtleties of malicious wits that have turned humans into beasts made more inhuman by the barbarism of reflection than the first men had been made by the barbarism of sense [*la barbarie del senso*]."[21] The barbarism of reflection produces a "deep solitude of spirit and will." Those who embrace it lose the ability to think in a speculative manner. In the world of technological society

[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., 7.
[19] Ibid., 19.
[20] James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 614.26–27.
[21] Vico, *New Science*, par. 1106.

there is no irony, no dialectic of thought, no sense of ignorance. There is only continual engagement in technique, moving forward into its electronic filing cabinet.

The idea of the privacy of individual life is lost. The life of the individual is the life of the mass. Lost is all sense of the eccentric, of solitude, of contemplation, and of the aesthetic, for consciousness is now fully shaped by the technical. The meaning of the lines of Keats's observation, on the Grecian urn in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," is lost: "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,'— that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

In the technological world not only is beauty lost—all sense of human folly is lost. Along with beauty, it is folly that humanizes. The sense of folly as integral to human affairs that we find in Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff* (*Ship of Fools*) is eliminated in the technological consciousness. The wisdom of folly cannot be found in technical activity. Without folly, as well as beauty, there can be no truth. The sense of the world as a stage, on which each individual plays a role, disappears. With the disappearance of privacy is the disappearance of prudence. Individuals find themselves alone in the technical system. The elements of the traditional society, of friendship and conversation, are gone. Persons feel themselves compelled to show that they exist by expressing their opinions and imprudently "posting" them, electronically. It is a desire to have an affirmation of one's existence. Yet it is as hollow as the Cartesian *cogito*. It is the hollowness of T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men."

*This is the way the world ends*
*This is the way the world ends*
*This is the way the world ends*
*Not with a bang but a whimper.*

It is Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Vladimir: Well? Shall we go?
Estragon: Yes, let's go.
*They do not move.*

Behind them is the bleak landscape of the loss of imagination, the bleak landscape of the technical and the hyperreal—*ex nihilo nihil fit*.

# 2. Practical Intellect and Contemplative Mind in Early Greek Epos

*Gerasim Petrinski, petrinski@phls.uni-sofia.bg*
*(Assoc. Professor Dr., Department of Rhetoric,*
*University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski)*

**Abstract:** This article offers observations on the origins of the fundamental philosophical notions of intellect, mind, and imagination in the earliest Greek literary texts. Homer, Hesiod, and the various anonymous authors of their era employ intricate and nuanced terminology to describe the human capacity to mentally and emotionally assess the world, process information, plan and develop strategies to achieve desired outcomes, and act in accordance with social expectations and situational demands. We argue that this terminology is coherent and reflects a well-developed conceptual system, though one that may appear somewhat alien to modern specialists in ancient philosophy.

This elaborate conceptual system underwent significant transformation in subsequent centuries, mirroring the social and intellectual changes of the Greek world; indeed, some of its aspects were so foreign to the Classical period that Aristotle felt compelled to explain them in the *Metaphysics*. Nevertheless, the "Homeric" worldview paved the way for the development of classical philosophy, and a more precise understanding of that worldview is crucial for tracing the evolution of human thought and the continuum of European philosophy. Behind the tranquil contemplation of the Platonic *nous,* we can still overhear the distant echoes of Achilles' and Agamemnon's bloodthirsty voices, of the wily advice of Odysseus, and perhaps of the thunderous behest of Zeus.

**Keywords:** *mētis*, *noos*, intellect, mind, Homer, Hesiod, cunning, early Greek thought

## Introduction

A continual transition between mythology and rationality, poetry and philosophy marks the history of ancient culture and thought.[1] *Mythos* (the collectively sacralized view of the world) and *logos* (the conscious pursuit of intellectually attainable truth) alternate between conflict, coexistence, and synthesis, much like the Titans and the Olympian gods, or the symbolic "marriage" of Mercury and Philology in Martianus Capella. These shifts are gradual rather than revolutionary: each new phase incorporates elements of the previous one, as in the evolutionary transitions between archaeological ages. Mythological thinking, therefore, does not disappear with the rise of new political forms or philosophical paradigms in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE but is absorbed into new modes of self-understanding, continuing to delineate the limits of human rationality and gesture toward forms of knowledge accessible only intuitively or noetically.

This constant interplay between intuition and rationalization also provides the proper framework for approaching the complex terminology of perception and intellect in antiquity. As we will see, in the early, poetic-mythological phase of Greek culture, Homer and Hesiod introduced concepts such as *mētis*, *noos*, and *thymos*, but, along with their derivatives, these terms do not align with contemporary distinctions between reason and emotion and pose significant difficulties for modern interpretation. As Boban Dedović's innovative psycholinguistic study has shown, there are substantial differences in both the quantity of "mental" vocabulary and the semantic structure of the conceptual systems of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the latter being markedly richer in this respect. Moreover, the meanings of these terms often appear alien even to later Greek philosophical systems. Plato's tripartite theory of the soul, formulated nearly half a millennium after Homer, can itself be misleading, since it deliberately operates with a different conceptual vocabulary. At the same time, Aristotle treats the archaic (that is, Homeric) conception of the soul as a cognitive organ, analogous to the sense organs, as a notion requiring explanation for his audience.[2] For this reason, we frequently struggle to translate such terms in a way that does justice to their context, since they may en-

[1] See Radi Radev, *Ancient Philosophy*, in *Ancient Philolosophy* (Sofia: Nauka i Izkustvo, 1988), p. 10 [in Bulgarian].

[2] Aristotle, *De anima*, ed. William Ross, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967, 427a.17-27.

compass a wide range of meanings: modes of understanding and sensing the world, acts of will or desire, the avoidance or pursuit of action, the formulation of plans, and the giving of counsel.

Despite the variability of epic terminology for intellectual activity, two broadly distinguishable semantic fields emerge, each with a divergent later history. The first concerns situational judgment, adaptive problem-solving, and persuasive effectiveness; to avoid confusion with Kantian "practical reason,"[3] this mode may be termed **practical intellect**. This translation of the ancient term *mētis* and its adjectival formations (*ankylomētis, poikilomētis, polymētis*), whose various meanings emphasize flexibility, inventiveness, and responsiveness to changing circumstances, avoids the pejorative connotation of Detienne and Vernant's "cunning intelligence". Accordingly, its archetypal bearer, Odysseus, is described through epithets such as *polytropos*, underscoring multiplicity and adaptability. Precisely because this form of intelligence is immanent to the mutable realm of becoming, later opposed by Plato to the stability of the intelligible, it and the rhetorical practices associated with it are repeatedly subjected to ethical suspicion: charged with manipulation, inconstancy, self-interest, and corporeality, in contrast to the philosopher's disembodied contemplative intellect (*noos*). These unfavorable valuations persist and intensify in Christian discourse, where many of the same attributes are ultimately transferred to the Devil and his demons.

In contrast to pragmatic, tactically oriented intelligence (*mētis*), which is rational and directed toward the effective selection of means to achieve a given end, the second semantic field centers on perception; in early epic poetry, this capacity is designated *noos* (or *nous* in Classical Greek). It denotes the faculty through which gods and humans apprehend, integrate, and interpret sequences of events. For Homer and He-

[3] When discussing epic *mētis* and related forms of situational intelligence, it is essential to avoid anachronism. These concepts should not be equated with practical reason in the Kantian sense, since for Kant *die praktische Vernunft* is necessarily governed by imperative rules grounded in norms established by pure reason (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 18), and practical reason itself functions as an extension of the latter, achieving its fullest expression when "*a practical law… qualifies for a giving of universal law*" (Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 25). By contrast, practical intellect—and its divine patron Metis—serves the realization of individual aims in specific situations rather than the application of abstract ethical laws.

siod, it paradoxically encompasses not only cognition but also non-excessive emotions, imagination, and inductive reasoning—so that in specific contexts it may be rendered as "intuition." Although the mythopoetic phase of Greek culture displays only the rudiments of abstract thought, the closely associated *noos*, associated with vision and imagination, will provide the conceptual basis for what later authors would articulate as contemplative or abstract intellect, increasingly opposed to practical wisdom.

Taken together, the divergent trajectories of *mētis* and *nous* illuminate a central tension in Greek intellectual history. Practical intellect was initially embedded in the divine through its personification as the goddess Metis, but gradually lost its sacral status and was reduced to a useful, situational skill, while nous, increasingly abstracted and conceptually elaborated, ascended toward the realm of philosophical reflection and ultimately gained a complex theological meaning. From the interplay of these two modes of cognition emerges the Greek conception of reason itself, a polarized intellectual landscape oscillating between pragmatic ingenuity and the anti-utilitarian ideal of "pure" philosophical contemplation—articulated in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* as *sophia* in its fullest sense[4].

## *Metis* and Metis: practical intellect in Homer and Hesiod

Etymologically, the term *mētis* derives from the Indo-European root *meh₁- ("to measure")[5], from which Latin *mensura* (Engl. *measure*) is also derived. Originally a deverbal noun meaning "measuring" or "measurement,"[6] *mētis* was accordingly connected with another key philosophical concept, *metron*. Although it does not stem from the same Indo-European root, from a very early period, *mētis* is also associated with the verb *mēdomai* ("to deliberate," "to judge," "to measure," "to devise") and the noun *mēdea* ("male genitalia," "testicles").[7] The link

[4] *Aristotle's metaphysics*, ed. William Ross, 2 Vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 982a.14-17.

[5] Robert Beeks, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden – Boston, 2010), s.v. *μῆτις;* Max Vasmer, *Etymological Dictionary of Russian Language*, 4 Vols (Moscow: Progress, 1987) [in Russian], s.v. мера.

[6] Vasmer, *Etymological Dictionary*, s.v. мера.

[7] Beeks, *Etymological dictionary*, s.v. μήδεα and μήδομαι; cf. also Vasmer, *Etymological Dictionary*, s.v. мудо.

between physical and noetic generation, and the concentration of both forces in the sexual organs, is thus semantically grounded.

A more precise understanding of *mētis* requires situating this capacity within broader ancient conceptions of the body and human mental faculties. As Bruno Snell has shown, in Homer the living human body is not readily perceived as a unified whole: the term *dēmas*, which denotes such unity, never occurs in the nominative case,[8] while *sōma*, standard in Classical Greek, still refers exclusively to the dead body. The living human body consists of "limbs" (*guia, melea/melē*) governed by various psychic–mental "organs,"[9] or "preconscious hypostases."[10] Since Homeric thought does not yet draw a clear boundary between physical organs and psychic activity,[11] the terminology blurs this distinction. The former include *noos, thymos, mētis, psychē*, and more rarely *priapēs/priapides*, while the latter comprise the heart (*kēr, kardia, kradiē*), the liver (*ētor*), and above all *phrēn/phrēnes*—a collective term encompassing the pericardial cavity, diaphragm, and lungs.[12] Located in the latter and often identified with them, *noos* broadly governs perception, comprehension, imagination, planning, intentions, and calm emotions, whereas *thymos* is the source of excessive emotions that impel action

[8] Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind. The Greek Origins of European Thought*, trans. Thomas Rosenmeyer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 5 and 8.

[9] Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, p. 9.

[10] Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston – New York: Mariner Books, 1976), p. 259ff. ("the assumed causes of action when other cases are no longer apparent").

[11] James Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: the Tragedy of Hector* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press), 1975, p. 173.

[12] Shirley Sullivan, *Psychological Activity in Homer. A Study of Phrēn* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1988), pp. 2 and 21–29; Shirley Sullivan, "The Mind and Heart of Zeus in Homer and the Homeric Hymns," pp. 99ff and 105, *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 37 (1994), 101–126. Cf also Shirley Sullivan, *Sophocles' Use of Psychological Terminology: Old and New* (Richmont, Ontario: Carleton University Press, 1999), pp. 11, 15; Boban Dedović, "A quantitative psycholinguistic comparison of the Iliad and Odyssey," *PsyArXiv Preprints*, January 2021, p. 7 and n. 8; Richard Onians, *The origins of European thought. About the body, the mind, the soul, the world time, and fate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1951, pp. 23–33, who accepts the dubious hypothesis that *phrēnes* are the lungs, but analyses in depth the concept that they are dry and dark-blue, or black, when one is sober and awake.

and is usually associated with the heart. The translation of these terms is virtually impossible outside their context, since modern Indo-European languages draw different distinctions among cognitive functions. Finally, *psychē* (ψυχή) in early epic does not yet mean "soul" (a sense that emerges only with the lyric poets and Heraclitus[13]) but rather "life," occurring primarily in descriptions of its departure at death or in reference to the soul of the deceased.[14]

Within this framework, Homer and Hesiod locate *mētis* in the *phrēnes*, together with emotions, perception, and planning,[15]and this close terminological association gave rise to a wide semantic field associated with practical intelligence, including, most notably, the term *phronēsis* ("care," "practical wisdom") and the verb *phrazō* ("to show," "indicate," "observe," "think") with its derivatives, characteristically conflating thinking with the articulation of thought.[16]

One of the most frequently analyzed episodes in the Homeric epic for illustrating pragmatic thinking and *mētis* is the chariot race held in honor of Patroclus in *Iliad* 23,[17] where the young Antilochus must compete with inferior horses. Following his father Nestor's advice,[18] he compensates for his lack of strength with *mētis*: exploiting a narrow stretch of the course, he forces Menelaus to yield and finishes (formally) second. After the race, the Spartan king sharply rebukes Antilochus for having won dishonestly, and Nestor's son humbly apologizes for his youthful recklessness, offering as compensation his prize.[19] In Homeric poetry, chariot racing (and competition in general) appears as an expres-

[13] On *psychē* as a "psychological agent" in lyrical poetry, associated with positive emotions, see Sullivan, Disturbances of the Mind, p. 32ff.

[14] Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, p. 8ff.; Sullivan, *Sophocles' Use of Psychological Terminology*, p. 3.

[15] Shirley Sullivan, "Phrenes in Hesiod," *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 67/1 (1989), 5–17.

[16] On their connection with *phrēn*/*phrēnes*, see Sullivan, *Psychological Activity*, pp. 39 and 91.

[17] *Homeri Ilias*, ed. Thomas Allen, 3 Vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), XXIII.258-650. Cf. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), pp. 11–27.

[18] *Homeri Ilias* XXIII.313-318. Cf Nagy, *The Best of Achaeans*, p. 47; Hawee, *Bodily Arts*, pp. 46ff.

[19] *Homeri Ilias* XXIII.566-613.

sion of a natural order in which strength is expected to prevail. Antilochus disrupts this expectation and violates the code of warrior conduct by "stealing" victory through skill and cunning.

In his study of agonistic culture in early Greek epic and lyric, Gregory Nagy likewise offers a detailed analysis of the conflict between Achilles and Odysseus, focusing on Achilles' brief speech, which treats with irony the prospect that his opponent's cunning and technical expertise could repel Hector's overwhelming force from the Achaean ships.[20] In Nagy's opinion, the *Iliad* itself is a narrative structured around the opposition between brute force (*biē*) and cunning, where Achilles' wrath deprives the Achaeans of their greatest source of strength, while his return shatters both the force and the practical intellect of Hector,[21] the city's steadfast defender. The fall of Troy thus emerges as a "two-factor" event, in which Odysseus' cunning and ultimate success are catalyzed and enabled by Achilles' might.

In Hesiod's *Theogony*, the conflicts among the three generations of gods reflect an immanent tripartite structure of power comprising force (*biē*), perceptual–volitional faculties (*noos*), and practical intellect (*mētis*).[22] Whereas in Homer *mētis* functions only as a predicate, in Hesiod it becomes a subject through its personification as the goddess Metis, who embodies the capacity for accurate and effective judgment in concrete problematic situations, technical ingenuity, persuasion, and manipulation, being once again opposed to the "natural" means of acquiring power through brute force.[23] In this sense, Metis drives the divine etiology of the world, understood in the original meaning of *kosmos* ("order," "ornament"), within Hesiod's mythological framework of the transition from lawlessness to tyranny and, ultimately, from tyranny to

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[20] *Homeri Ilias* VIII.346-352. Cf. Nagy, *The Best of Achaeans*, pp. 45–49.

[21] Gregory Nagy, *The Best of Achaeans. Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore and London: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 145–147. Nagy argues that Hector appears not only as a personification of physical force and might but also as a personification of *mētis*. In order to be defeated by the brutal force of Achilles, his mind must be obscured by the goddess Athena (*Homeri Ilias* XXII.222-247 and 296-299).

[22] Alex Priou, "Hesiod: Man, Law and Cosmos," Polis 31/2 (2014), 233–260.

[23] Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence*, pp. 62–68. Cf. Jay Dolmage, "Metis, Mêtis, Mestiza, Medusa: Rhetorical Bodies across Rhetorical Traditions," p. 6, *Rhetoric Review* 28/1 (2009), 1–28, who defines Homer's *mētis* as "flair, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, cleverness, opportunism, and experience".

legitimate rule.[24] She enables Gaia to free herself from Uranus' insatiable sexual desire by devising, through deceptive craft, the great serrated sickle and persuading her *cunning* (*ankylomētis*)[25] son to sever his father's genitals (*mēdea*), thereby depriving him not only of the power to generate physical life but also of any further role in shaping the cosmic order. Again, her cunning daughter Rhea devises a way to save the infant Zeus from Cronus, and the Cyclopes invent the thunderbolt, through which the new king of the gods defeats and binds the Titans. However important in achieving the victory, *mētis* must be supplanted by Zeus' higher, strategically oriented *noos* when a new order of the cosmos is to be shaped, and this order is perfect, because it rests not only on power but also on laws to which even the Olympians must submit.[26] The cosmic struggle for divine supremacy, however, does not end here. It closes again with cunning: upon learning the prophecy that his wife will bear a son stronger than himself, Zeus deceives her with crafty, flattering words and swallows her.[27] In doing so, the most powerful of the gods incorporates within himself both Kratos and Biē (Power and Force) and all forms of intelligence[28]—from the ability to adapt one's actions wisely to specific circumstances and to persuade, deceive, and manipulate, to the strategic anticipation of distant events and the measures they require. The omnipotent Zeus Metiēta/Metietēs[29] thus becomes not merely a god who possesses *mētis* but *mētis* incarnate. From this point onward, the Father of the Gods can no longer be deceived, nor can any stratagem be devised that escapes his knowledge.

Based on these paradigmatic episodes, as well as many others in Homer and Hesiod, it is possible to reconstruct *mētis* in its various senses, which combine cognitive–mental and technical dimensions. Inventiveness and a kind of "professional expertise" are among its core

[24] On this concept, cf. also Cicero, "De inventione rhetorica," in Cicero, *De inventione. De optimo genere oratorum. Topica*, ed. and trans. Harry Hubbel [Loeb Classical Library 386] (Cambridge: Harvard University Press and London: Heinemann, 1949), §I.1.2.

[25] Hesiod, *Theogony*, ed. Martin West (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), vv. 18, 168, 473, 495.

[26] Hesiod, *Theogony*, v. 73ff.

[27] Hesiod, *Theogony*, v. 37ff. The same expression also appears in Homer (*Homeri Ilias* I.70).

[28] Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence*, pp. 90ff.

[29] Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence*, p. 68.

features, as is evident from Nestor's advice to his son Antilochus, from the inventions of Gaia and the Cyclopes, and, we must add, from the Trojan Horse, by means of which the resourceful (*polymētis*) Odysseus captures Troy. In later periods, *mētis* becomes closely associated with rhetorical skill, as opposed to contemplative philosophy and theoretical logic, and with sophistry. A well-known example is the legend of Protagoras, who, in his youth, attracted the attention of the philosopher Democritus with his load-bearing device (*týlē*)[30] – a clever invention that, according to Aristotle and Diogenes Laertius, was a sign of his practical intellect and future career.

A second defining feature of *mētis* is its situational character, specifically its temporality. In times of uncertainty and conflict, ever-shifting circumstances favor those with practical intelligence. *Mētis* is the ability to seize the right moment after prolonged observation and anticipation, thereby overcoming a stronger opponent by exploiting even the smallest opening. In early Greek literature, however, a "situation" is not confined to a single, self-contained episode unfolding within a homogeneous chronotope, as in later tragic dramaturgy; rather, the situationality of *mētis* presupposes an entire chain of events bound together by shared causal relations and agents.[31]

It is precisely through careful observation of reality—understood as a constellation of circumstances—that the later term *phronēsis* (practical wisdom, care, engagement) emerges. However, the temporality of *mētis* differs fundamentally from linear, "vulgar" time in Heidegger's sense. It does not refer to measurable, objective *chronos,* but instead involves constructing and recognizing a "special" temporal framework. Centuries later, sophists and rhetoricians will call this "human" time *kairos* or *tempus speciale*. This does not designate the experienced in-

[30] *Aristotelis qui ferebantur librorum fragmenta*, ed. Valentine Rose (Leipzig: Teubner, 1967), I.7.63.2.

[31] Cf., e.g., Hymni Homerici. "In Cererem," v. 414-416, in *The Homeric hymns*, ed. Thomas Allen, William Halliday, and Eustace Sikes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), pp. 2–20, where Zeus's concentrated *mētis* encompasses his daughter's kidnapping by Hades and the following events.

stant, Heidegger's *Augenblick*,[32] but the opportunity for action itself. *Mētis* thus arises from temporal thinking: knowledge of the past and anticipation of the future within, and against, an ever-changing present.

The situational and temporal character of *mētis* presupposes the ability to navigate an unstable and fluid reality. For this reason, pragmatic intelligence is often described through terms denoting variability and adaptability. The archetypal narrative of the opposition between human order, governed by *mētis,* and the chaos of an unstable present is the *Odyssey*. Stormy or calm, we can discern in the image of the sea in this archetypal story both a path toward return and an obstacle separating the hero from Ithaca, whose traversal demands the full range of Odysseus' practical wisdom. Yet the association between *mētis* and the sea extends far deeper into mythological strata than the metaphor of the hero's journey alone. Detienne and Vernant have shown the connection between two divine embodiments of practical intellect, Athena and Hephaestus, and the sea, as well as with beings that mediate between water and land. These gods also preside over cunning and inventiveness.[33]

A third defining feature of the dynamic and mutable character of *mētis* is its correlation with the static nature of brute force (*bia, biē*).[34] Practical in-

[32] The identification of *kairos* with Heidegger's *Augenblick* proposed by Katharina von Falkenheyn (*Augenblick und Kairos: Zeitlichkeit im Frühwerk Martin Heideggers*, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2003) has been convincingly challenged by Hakhamanesh Zangeneh ("Augenblick is not kairos," *Heidegger Circle Proceedings* 45 [2011]: 25–38).

[33] *Pausaniae Graeciae description*, ed. Friedrich Spiro, 3 Vols (Leipzig: Teubner, 1967), 1.5.3.12–1.5.4.1. Cf. Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence*, pp. 215–221 and 259–277.

[34] See Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence*, pp. 60ff.; Nagy, *The Best of Achaeans*, pp. 42–59; Sheila Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), p. 6; Roger Dunkle, "Nestor, Odysseus, and the *Metis-Bie* Antithesis: The Funeral Games, *Iliad* 23," *Classical World* 81 (1998), 1–17; Dolmage, "Metis, Mêtis, Mestiza, Medusa," p. 9. Ingrid Holmberg proposes an intriguing but debated reading of early evidence for *mētis*, arguing that *biē* encompasses both brute force and rational thought as a masculine prerogative. In contrast, mētis is primarily feminine (Ingrid Holmberg, "The Sign of ΜΗΤΙΣ," *Arethusa* 30 [1997], 1–33). She interprets Hesiod's narrative as the appropriation of this feminine attribute by male deities, culminating in Zeus' swallowing of Metis. While influential, this approach may risk anachronism, particularly since Homeric figures such as Odysseus, Nestor, and Hector exhibit *mētis* without any marked association with femininity.

tellect disrupts the "natural" course of events and the inexorable rule of Necessity (*Anankē*), which under otherwise equal conditions favors the stronger. In this regard, *mētis* is an anomaly, but also the antithesis of mindless and inhuman brutality, whose elimination is a prerequisite for both the establishment of a just society and the protection of this society against the excesses of tyranny. Hesiod expresses this idea metaphorically in the myth of Zeus, who defeats the mighty Titans with the aid of the Cyclopes' ingenious inventions and ultimately gains not only dominion over the world but also orders it through just laws. Thus, already at the dawn of Greek literature and culture, the notion emerges that through *mētis* the weaker can prevail over the stronger, humanity can overcome otherwise inevitable death, and order can triumph over chaos.[35]

*Mētis* is not merely a means of overcoming others but also a regulatory mechanism of emotional excess. Its absence triggers the action of the *Iliad*, when Agamemnon irrationally and unjustly demands compensation from Achilles for returning Chryseis by taking Briseis; similarly, irrational and reckless aggression nearly destroys Diomedes when he twice attacks Apollo as the god defends Troy's walls, until he succeeds in restraining himself and abandons the assault. These examples define practical intellect as technical inventiveness and situational pragmatism that could both defeat brute force and regulate it. Unlike the sensory-contemplative *nous*, this pragmatism always aims to achieve a specific material outcome, which may be tactical, focusing on a single situation akin to a dramatic episode, or strategic, confining the entire narrative sequence. Consequently, its archetypal representative, Odysseus, is frequently described with the mercantile epithet *kerdaleos*, derived from *kerdos* ("profit"), a term that signifies not only resourcefulness but also an inherent orientation toward material gain.[36]

A fourth characteristic of practical intellect is its inherent subjectiveness, which later positioned rhetoric in opposition to philosophy's pursuit of objective knowledge and immutable reality. Protean *mētis*

[35] Pietro Pucci, *Odysseus Polytropos. Intertextual readings in the Odyssey and the Iliad* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 15.

[36] Cf., e.g., *Homeri Odyssea*, ed. Peter von der Mühll (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1962), XIII.291-299 (*kerdaleos* and *kerdos*). See also *Homeri Ilias*, XXIII.322, where Nestor insists that, knowing the right tricks, one can win the chariot race even with inferior horses; Detienne and Vernantt, *Cunning Intelligence*, pp. 12, 27, 34, 228, do not mention this semantic layer.

manifests both effectiveness and manipulativeness in the ever-changing Trickster archetype,[37] represented by deities such as Hephaestus, Hermes, and Pan; heroes such as Prometheus and Odysseus, and many characters from modern literature and cinema. The Trickster displays both positive and negative attributes, including a devious sense of humor. Christianity employs these characteristics in descriptions of the Devil and his demons, in which evil is frequently depicted as cunning and deceptively clever, using epithets also associated with Odysseus (*polytropos*, *panourgos*).[38]

The subjectivity of *mētis* and its examples brings an expected uncertainty, made clear in Homer's story of Odysseus' clever win over the strong Polyphemus. The person with practical intelligence wins because he can change faces and identities like an actor wearing masks as the moment needs, showing his authentic self only at the right time—or hiding it forever—while keeping his own voice as a sign of identity.[39] In front of Polyphemus, Odysseus is "Nobody" (*mētis*), a name that not only takes away a stable identity but, through a play on words, makes him the very example of the tool he uses to win—his *mētis* (μῆτις).[40] At crucial moments, this shifting of faces becomes Odysseus' primary tool, both pragmatic and metaphorical, for overcoming danger and securing success. For example, he feigns madness to avoid the expedition to Troy,[41] slips into the besieged city disguised as a wretched servant,[42] and waits for the opportune moment to

[37] On the Trickster, see Carl Jung, "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure," in *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Vol. 9.1: *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. Richard Hull [Bollingen Series XX] (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), pp. 255–275. See also Nagy, *The Best of Achaeans*, p. 51.

[38] As one of Homer's scholiasts observes, the adjective *polytropos* in epic is often used in a predominantly pejorative sense (*Porphyrii quaestionum Homericarum ad Odysseam pertinentium reliquiae*, ed. Hermann Schrader (Leipzig: Teubner, 1890), I.1.1–15). For the Christian uses of these terms, see Gerasim Petrinski, *The Image of the Demon in Byzantium* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2024), pp. 213ff. Probably under the influence of Christianity, *panourgos* today carries strong negative connotations, especially when applied to women.

[39] Pucci, *Odysseus Polytropos*, pp. 76–78.

[40] Robert Eickhoff, *Homer. The Odyssey. A Modern Translation* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2001), p. 404, n. 4. Cf. also Dolmage, "Metis, Mêtis, Mestiza, Medusa," p. 6.

[41] *Apollodori bibliotheca. Pediasimi libellus de duodecim Herculis laboribus*, ed. Richard Wagner [*Mythographi Graeci* 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1894], 3.7a.

[42] *Homeri Odyssea*, IV.242-258.

defeat the suitors—superior in number and strength—while disguised as a poor beggar.[43] These transformations are not merely personal stratagems; the driving force is often his patron, the goddess Athena. Notably, her father, Zeus, who swallowed her mother, Metis, and became her successor and embodiment, is perhaps the most frequent shape-shifter among the gods in mythological tradition.[44]

## *Noos* and the birth of contemplative intellect

Although much scholarship has focused on *mētis*, Homer and Hesiod employ a far richer vocabulary to denote different forms of intelligence. Building on this broader range of concepts will allow us to refine existing interpretations and to shed light on the pragmatic and theoretical modes of intellect that later underpin rhetoric and argumentation. Among these terms, probably the most important is the broad and complex semantic field of *noos* (Classical Greek *nous*). Unlike many other concepts, this field does not fragment over time through the gradual transfer of discrete meanings to new terms; instead, the term maintains semantic cohesion and attains exceptional complexity in Christian contexts.

From an etymological perspective, *noos* presents considerable difficulties. Earlier proposals link the term either to Gothic *snutrs* ("wise") or to the root **neu̯-* reflected in the Greek verb *neuō* ("to nod, assent").[45] In 1978, Douglas Frame, combining linguistic, semantic, cultural, and literary analysis, proposed an etymology from the root **nes-*, attested in *neomai* ("to return") and, most notably, in the Odyssean concept of *nostos* ("return").[46] He further suggested that the same root underlies the name Nestor, whose wisdom is frequently described as both *mētis* and *nous*.[47] As Robert Beekes has observed, this hypothesis is linguistically possible but semantically unpersuasive.[48] Given the substantial semantic difficulties faced by most proposed etymologies, it seems preferable to

[43] *Homeri Odyssea*, 429-538. See also Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition*, pp. 41–67.
[44] Each of the stories included by these authors in their collections describes mortal women's seduction (Europa, Danae, Leda, Alcmene).
[45] Beeks, *Etymological dictionary*, s.v. νόος, with bibliography.
[46] Douglas Frame, *The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic* (New Heaven – London: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 1–5.
[47] Frame, *The Myth of Return*, p. 85.
[48] Beeks, *Etymological dictionary*, s.v. νόος. Cf. also Frederick Combellack's critical review in *Classical Philology* 76/3 (July 1981), 225–228.

regard the Indo-European origin of *noos/nous* as uncertain and to avoid the temptation to pursue speculative interpretations of hidden meanings or allegorical structures in the Homeric text, as Frame does.

A more productive approach is to examine the meanings of *noos* and the verb *noeō* (νοέω) explicitly attested in ancient texts. As Snell has emphasized, the earliest of these is tied to the simultaneous acts of seeing and understanding what is seen—a kind of "spiritual vision" (*ein 'geistiges' Sehen*).[49] In several passages of the epic, Homer uses the term in expressions meaning "to grasp with the eyes."[50] And centuries later, Aristotle confirms this early semantic layer when he notes that, for the "ancients" (whom he means by Homer and the early natural philosophers), thinking was a sensory, bodily form of perception, akin to seeing and hearing.[51] *Noos* thus constitutes the center of the human capacity both of perception and imagination: to imagine reality, to form the desire to change it, and to plan such change rationally.[52] In this way, it already contains the roots of what later becomes abstract thinking—the ability to apprehend a broader configuration of reality than that accessible to the situational and manipulative scope of *mētis*.

Since the *noos* functions both as the faculty through which humans perceive images and as the source from which images are produced, it denotes early on conscious understanding of reality[53], the formulation of a goal, and the capacity to decide upon its realization.[54] Frequently, the term retains a situational character and is set in opposition to *mētis*, creating an apparent volatility of Homeric vocabulary in this regard. At times, *noos* is described as impulsive, suggesting a tactical, short-term

[49] Snell, *Discovery of the Mind*, pp. 182 and 198; Joachim Böhme, *Die Seele und das Ich im Homerischen Epos: mit einem Anhang vergleich mit dem Glauben der Primitiven* (Berlin: Teubner, 1929), p. 53; Bruno Snell, "Joachim Böhme: Die Seele und das Ich im homerischen Epos. Mit einem Anhang: Vergleich mit dem Glauben der Primitiven," p. 77 and p. 83, n. 3, *Gnomon* 7 (1931), 74–86; Frame, *The Myth of Return*, p. 30.

[50] *Homeri Ilias* XV.422 and XXIV.294.

[51] Aristotle, De anima, 427a.21-28.

[52] Snell, *Discovery of the Mind*, pp. 9, 13, and passim; Stephen Sullivan, "The Mind and Heart of Zeus in Homer and the Homeric Hymns, p. 108, *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 37 (1994), 101–126.

[53] See, e.g., *Homeri Ilias* XV.461; *Homeri Ilias* XI.813; *Homeri Odyssea* XIII.255. Cf. Snell, *Discovery of the Mind*, p. 13.

[54] See, e.g., *Homeri Odyssea* X.329; *Homeri Odyssea* XXII.77 (*polykerdēs noos*).

orientation, while broader, long-range strategic wisdom is (paradoxically) attributed to *mētis*.[55] Yet this opposition is conceptually coherent. The two terms do not differ in the proximity of their goals, nor along a simple axis of abstraction versus concreteness. Rather, *noos* designates both the planning based on all the available information[56] and the intention to carry it out, whereas *mētis* is the capacity to devise the concrete means for realizing that decision and to judge its appropriateness within a given situation. Put simply, *noos* answers the question of what is to be done, while *mētis* determines how—and whether—it should be done in light of circumstances and participants in the rhetorical situation.[57]

*Noos* refers to subjective perception and intention, which may shift through deliberate choice and sustained inner conviction.[58] That is not the case with *mētis*. Antilochus' decision to yield the second prize to the stronger and more authoritative Menelaus is a practical and effective means of avoiding conflict, not a real change of opinion. Therefore, unlike the goal-oriented *mētis*, *noos* contains no element of cunning or manipulation and remains relatively stable throughout the ancient literary and philosophical tradition, even as each era nuances its meaning differently and supplements it with additional semantic strata. In contrast, the ever-shifting practical intellect is denoted by a wide array of terms that reflect its multiform character.

In Hesiod, Zeus's supreme intellect (*megas noos*), his capacity for comprehension and abstraction, is also explicitly distinguished from his situational *mētis*, in sharp contrast with his father Cronus. With the aid of the Muses, it gives the highest of the Olympians the capacity to circumspect the past, to foresee the future, and ultimately to govern the world by transcending the contingencies and demands of the present.[59] Zeus' perfect *noos* operates according to its own logic and governs mortal fate through a design that remains largely inaccessible to human un-

[55] Cf., e.g., *Homeri Ilias* XXXIII.587 and XV.227.
[56] See, e.g., Hesiod, *Theogony*, v. 1002.
[57] See, e.g., *Homeri Ilias* VII.448.
[58] Homer maintains that Zeus' *noos* is unalterable by either gods (*Od.* V.103ff.) or humans (*Il.* VIII.139–42), using verbs that imply confrontation or coercive interference (*parerchomai*, *haliōō*, *eryō*). By contrast, at *Il.* XVII.546 the shift in Zeus' intention—away from supporting the Trojans and toward the preservation of Patroclus' body—is expressed with *trepō* ("to turn"); cf. Sullivan, "The Mind and Heart," 106.
[59] Hesiod, *Theogony*, v. 36-38.

derstanding. *Noos* is described as a gift to mortals, stolen by Prometheus; however, among humans, it is mutable, unstable, and varies from person to person as widely *as the day introduced by the father of gods and men.*[60] In them, it is restrained and subdued (*damnatai*) by Eros, the primordial, protean, and at times dangerous force of connection in the world, which is associated both mythologically and practically with cunning, deception, and manipulative persuasion.[61] As a result, mastery over desire is regarded as the highest form of piety, protecting humans from the temptation to equate themselves with the gods—a motif present in Plato's discussions of love in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium, as well as* in Gorgias' sophistic *Encomium of Helen*. Socrates' claim that the only matters he truly understands are those of love[62] indicates not only the limitations of philosophy as a rational pursuit of truth but also his reverence for the gods.

The archaic term *noos* broadly denotes the processes of acquiring knowledge, imagination, analytic and synthetic reasoning, and theoretical planning. With the development of philosophical reflection on the human intellect in the Classical period, new concepts emerged from the same root. The most important of them are *dianoia*, usually translated as "reason" (and less often "imagination"), and *noēsis*, rendered as "intellect." Plato famously distinguishes these faculties in the context of the "divided line" in the *Republic* and elsewhere. In his system, *nous* is the mode of apprehending intelligible realities, as opposed to the ever-changing field of the visible. Plato terms *dianoia* the lower level of human abstract thinking, by which *nous* pursues this goal: an analytic process in which, for example, a mathematician proceeds from axiomatic assumptions whose ultimate grounds remain unknown, advancing through proof toward a terminal point (*teleutē*) in the chain of reasoning. The highest form of knowledge, however, is achieved through *noēsis*, the synthetic process by which dialectic leads from given premises to

[60] *Homeri Odyssea* XVIII.136ff; cf. also Aristotle, De anima, 427a.27. For comments on this passage, see Snell, *Discovery of the Mind*, pp. 202 (cf also 145ff.) and Kurt von Fritz, "NOOΣ and NOEIN in the Homeric Poems," p. 81, *Classical Philology* 38/2 (April 1943), 79–93.

[61] Hesiod, *Theogony*, v. 120–122.

[62] Plato, "Symposium," in *Platonis opera*, ed. John Burnet, Vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 172a–223d, 177d.8.

their first principle (*archē*).[63] In Late Antiquity, the same term acquires a more specific rhetorical sense, denoting the initial stage of discourse formation—the articulation of the point at issue (*stasis*), that is, the thesis itself. In this way, the Greek language and Greek philosophy preserve the term's original sense of intellectual conception or design.

## Conclusion

The early Greek epos suggests that early Greek thought recognized multiple types of cognition whose domains, functions, and values became differentiated over time. Though these authors have employed many other notions, two terms seem to denote capacities for feeling, grasping, and understanding the world, as well as for planning and adjusting one's actions to ever-changing circumstances: *mētis* and *noos*. Since they express a very ancient semantic stratum, several centuries before the Classical Period, later philosophical texts may be of little help in revealing their true meaning. A modern scholar, well-versed in Platonic distinctions between Reason, Spirit, and Appetite, or in the various and well-elaborated faculties of the soul in Aristotle, would find Homeric and Hesiodic terminology recalcitrant to his conceptual apparatus.

In their monumental work on *mētis*, the French scholars Detienne and Vernant translated this complex term descriptively, namely as "les ruses de l'intelligence," and in English it is rendered as "cunning intelligence." Both expressions, though they grasp some aspects of the authentic Greek meanings, are strongly pejorative and thus seem misleading. *Mētis* sometimes appears as cunning and crafty manipulation, but also as technical skill, the capacity to find new opportunities, adaptiveness, and even conformity. It is sharply opposed to brute force, as it enables the weaker opponent to defeat the stronger. For that reason, a better translation seems to be "practical intellect" or "practical intelligence" - a rather neutral term that represents both the positive traits in the original notion and its ethical ambivalence.

The second key term used by the early epic poets, *noos*, unlike *mētis*, was not abandoned but appears frequently in later philosophical and literary traditions, enriched with many new semantic strata and with new derivatives. Even in its earliest epic representations, it conveys

[63] *Platonis Rempublicam*, ed. Sjoerd Slings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 510b.4–510d.3, 511a, 511c.3–511e5.

more abstract patterns of contemplative thought, denoting both a mental organ and a capacity to understand complex events, formulate goals, and, ultimately, plan solutions to problems. Practical intellect is the "inner eye," designed to see the whole picture amid seemingly chaotic reality. Thus, according to Hesiod, Zeus defeated his father through *mētis*, but created the new cosmic order, based on laws, through his *megas noos*. The complex but coherent set of meanings paved the way for the term's great future in later Greek philosophy. As Greek thought becomes more abstract, *noos* is elevated to the status of contemplative intellect, ultimately acquiring metaphysical and theological significance.

The fate of the two fundamental concepts in early Greek culture was different - was different, a divergence that reflects a broader transformation of values within Greek intellectual culture, in which adaptability and technical ingenuity, once essential for survival in the turbulent and violent Homeric period, are increasingly subordinated to ideals of stability, universality, and theoretical understanding. Though abandoned and largely forgotten in Classical Greece, the continued presence of *mētis* in rhetorical theory, though under the disguise of other terms, shows that this subordination was never absolute. The great mother of Athene, so savagely devoured by her husband, may have become a dimming image in the collective mythological memory of Greece, but the practical intelligence, usually under the name *phronēsis*, remained incorporated in the very fabric of ancient and medieval rhetoric and the very concept of education.

# 3. Reality as a Narrative Fiction: Intertwining Perspectives

*Valentina Di Cataldo, valentina.dicataldo@yahoo.it*
*(PhD Student, Universidad de Alicante)*

**Abstract:** Based on a comparative analysis of various authors in the fields of philosophy and cognitive studies, this paper proposes a shift of perspective regarding the concept of reality, as well as its relation to what has long been considered its opposite, i.e., fictionality, narrative, imagination, creativity, poetry, lie, madness, magic, and irrationality. Nietzsche's perspectivism and Heidegger's *Da-Sein* are linked to 4E Cognition (Johnson, Varela, Rietveld), Derrida's *différance,* Foucault's analysis of sociopolitical exclusion, and other hermeneutical, anthropological, and ontological works (Sini, Geertz, Arnau). With different insights—and sometimes distant backgrounds- these authors share a similar assumption: reality is a narrative co-construction of our bodily lived experience in the world, in a dynamic interaction with others. The result is a shared speech of complexity, whose elements -both as generative conditions and effects- provide an opportunity to understand which social, political, and anthropological instances shape our identities and narratives.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche, Heidegger, 4E Cognition, perspective, narrative, reality, world, building

## 1. Premise

Traditionally, the concept of reality has been associated with those of objectivity, truth, rationality, science, value, and shaped in relation to what is usually considered its opposite, i.e. the realm of fictionality, narrative, imagination, creativity, poetry, lie, madness, magic, and irrationality. When analyzed more closely, the dichotomy is far from unproblematic, and appears biased by a hyper-rationalistic reductionism. Not only can it not be held as ontologically universal, but also, more deeply, it implies a certain hierarchical prejudice, which consequently brings to the exclusion of one side of the polarity from the official scientific and

philosophical discourse. Such an exclusion – which is, broadly speaking, political[1]—affects the field negatively, leveling its complexity and nuances and denying important aspects of it. In the last two centuries, the deep implications of this removal have come into light, and the concept has been widely problematized by authors from various backgrounds in the fields of philosophy, literature, anthropology, and cognitive studies, thus bringing into question the relation between the two opposites, as well as their very existence and value.

In order to reintegrate the discourse and offer a more balanced picture, this paper draws a comparative (yet not complete) analysis of some of these major contemporary authors. My aim is not to force one interpretation over another, nor to dismiss the differences and peculiarities that each philosophical system presents, but rather to draw a possible line of continuity among them, in order to offer a tool for complexity and a shift in perspective regarding some major assumptions and categories of the philosophical discourse. Given the complexity of the topic, the analysis is meant as an open suggestion for a possible restructuring of the field, towards a richer and more layered shaping of the problem.

Assuming that the misunderstanding – at least in its modern version – plausibly originated from Cartesian dualism and from its consequent objectivistic prejudice – I mainly focus on some contemporary interpretations, developments and attempts to overcome it. Even though alternative frameworks for reality already exist in the philosophical tradition itself, as well as in the fields of literature and poetry, Nietzsche's and Heidegger's ways of presenting the problem constitute a breaking point and an innovation in perspective. Besides that, if we consider Western philosophy as a long path of re-translation and re-interpretation of previous philosophical problems, we can also recognize the trace of ancient questions through the words of contemporary authors. As a result, all elements are essentially intertwined, including those from heterogeneous backgrounds or even distant times.

In this wider picture, concepts such as Nietzsche's *Wille zur*

[1] See Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique,* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972). See also Jacques Derrida, "Cogito et histoire de la folie", in Jacques Derrida, *L'ècriture et la différence,* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), 51- 54. Conference pronounced as an answer to Foucault's *Histoire de la folie,* 4 March 1963 at College Philosophique, then published in *Revue de metaphysique et de morale,* 1963 nn 3 e 4.

*Macht*[2] (will to power), Heidegger's *Ereignis*[3] (revelation of reality), and Derrida's *différance,* can be coherently put in relation with the most recent studies in 4E Cognition and Radical Embodied Cognition (Rietveld's *rich affordances* and Skilled Intentionality Framework), as well as with Sini's hermeneutical work[4], Arnau's idea of *extended mind*[5]*,* and even with elements from other disciplines, such as Geertz's *thick description*[6] in applied cultural anthropology. Such a widened perspective can contribute to shedding a new light on the topic and to tracing a line of consistency, towards a theoretical mark of the problem. With different insights and degrees, the authors analyzed seem to share a common concern and a similar assumption: fiction is not opposed to reality. On the contrary, it creates it. Reality is a narrative co-construction of our bodily lived experience in the world, in a dynamic interaction with others. Far from an idealistic illusion, as well as from a solipsistic *impasse*, the result is a shared speech of complexity that allows us to inhabit our social world, and in which interwoven elements of fiction and reality are both generative conditions and effects in a history of consequences.

## 2. The disruption of reality in Nietzsche's perspectivism

The concept of reality runs consistently throughout Nietzsche's body of work as part of a more general quest for sense, and it is essentially connected to other aspects of his philosophy. The concept is thematized significantly in *The Gay Science* (1882)[7], in *The Twilight of the Idols* (1888)[8], and in various aphorisms from *The Will to Power* (1906; 1968)[9].

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2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House Inc., 1968).

3 Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache (*Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann Verlag, 1985).

4 Carlo Sini, *Filosofia e Memoria (*Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2025).

5 Juan Arnau, *En la Mente del Mundo* (Barcelona, Galaxia Gutenberg, 2022).

6 Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture", in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London, Basic Books, Inc., 1973).

7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge-NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols. How to Philosophise with a Hammer,* trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics*,* 1998).

9 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House Inc., 1968).

In the fourth section of *The Twilight of the Idols*[10], Nietzsche poses the problem of the real world, intending it as "the history of an error"[11], as clarified by the subtitle of the paragraph. The declining trajectory goes from the initial naive assumption of a "real world" which is fully present and close to the subject ("I, Plato, am the truth")[12], to the final awareness of the impossibility of the concept of a "real world" itself. In the process, the real world gradually becomes "unattainable, unprovable, unpromisable", "unknown", incapable of any "consolation", "redemption", or "obligation"[13], and finally just a "useless, superfluous, and refuted idea"[14], whose destiny is to be eliminated. Having erased the possibility for the "real world", no other world is left, not even the apparent one. Nonetheless, this is not a bad thing, as the new awareness marks the "end of the longest error" for humankind and opens the chance for Zarathustra's arrival after the announcement of God's Death.

In *The Gay Science* and *Will to Power,* the same concepts are presented from different angles and in a more layered perspective, with some inevitable differences due to their heterogeneous years of composition. In these aphorisms, Nietzsche gradually dismantles the classical dichotomy that opposes reality to fiction, truth to falsity, objective to subjective, by linking all these concepts to that of *will to power,* i.e. the strong drive towards life, health, and power that guides not only our actions, but also our beliefs and judgements. As Nietzsche states in *The Gay Science*[15], we play an essential – even though unaware – role in the process of world building. "By positing bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content […], we "have arranged for ourselves a world in which we are able to live"[16]. This is a "world of valuations, colors, weights, perspectives, scales, affirmations, and negations"[17], and of other "articles of faith"[18], which are not found in nature itself, but are rather projections of our human nature. Far from being mere spectators or listeners "before the

[10] Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 20.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* §121, 117, §301, 170.
[16] Ibid„ §121, 117.
[17] Ibid„ §301, 170.
[18] Ibid„ §121, 117.

great […] play that is life"[19], but also irreducible to its mere actors, we are its "actual poet[s] and ongoing author[s]"[20]. This is especially true if we assume the German term *die Macht* in its wider meaning, which is not limited to *power, force*, but indicates also *the ability to create effects.* "It is we, the thinking-sensing ones, who really and continually make"[21] the world exist through the creative act of judging it, i.e. through assigning value to it. Value, morality, and reality are radically interconnected with our creative process, which however is never the result of a deliberate act of decision by an individual subject. On the contrary, it "is constantly internalized, […] translated into flesh and reality, [brought] into the commonplace"[22] until it becomes familiar, and therefore unseen, since the familiar – "what we are used to"—is both what "we no longer marvel at; the commonplace; some rule in which we are stuck [and] the most difficult [aspect] to know—that is, to view as a problem"[23], or to recognize as a theoretical issue. In this sense, "judgment is our oldest belief, our most habitual holding-true or holding-untrue, an assertion or denial, a certainty that something is thus and not otherwise"[24], an implicit habit whose status we misjudge and underestimate precisely because of its familiarity and pervasiveness. If so, all our certainties – including those about objectivity, science and logic – are based on metaphysical assumptions. "There is simply no *presuppositionless* science"[25], but only an undeniable and widely accepted "faith in science"[26] grounded on "some prior conviction"[27]. Against the common positivistic attitude and its delusional claim that "there are only facts"[28], Nietzsche states that "facts don't exist. Only interpretations exist"[29]. "This perspectival character of existence"[30] brings into question the essence of reality and of knowledge.

First of all, at the shallowest level, if we assume "all thought,

[19] Ibid.„ §301, 170.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., §355, 214.
[24] Nietzsche, *Will to Power,* §531, 288.
[25] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* §344, 200.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, §481, 267.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* §374, 239.

judgment, perception as comparison"[31], then their necessary "precondition" is the "positing of equality"[32], i.e. a dialectical opposition between two terms, only one of which can be true and acceptable. This is already an act of synthesis and interpretation, as well as a moral choice. At a second level, since "all existence is an interpreting existence"[33], it follows that all knowledge is prospective. On the one hand, "we cannot reject the possibility that [the world] includes infinite interpretations"[34] and that our angle of perspective is just one possibility among an infinity of chances. On the other hand, we need to acknowledge that "we cannot look around our corner"[35] in order to explore any of the possible alternatives. That means, we can never stare at our own experience from an external, objective, or presumably absolute point of view. This idea of Nietzsche's anticipates various philosophical concepts from the 20th and 21st century: all experience is inevitably partial and biased by subjectivity. In such a context, the concept of an objective reality would be as naive and incomplete as the initial assumption of a *real world*. "A *thing-in-itself*"[36], as well as "a *sense-in-itself*, or a *meaning-in-itself*"[37] are meaningless concepts. "There are no *facts-in-themselves*, for a sense must always be projected into them before there can be *facts*"[38].

As I will articulate in section 3 of this paper, a strong analogy can be found in Heidegger's analysis of the process of meaning in paragraphs §43 and §44 of *Being and Time*[39], where the disclosure of the world is read as part of *Dasein*'s quest for meaning in its essential being-open-in-the-world. Besides, Nietzsche's assumption that "science too rests on a faith"[40] also resonates with the problem of the foundations of

[31] Nietzsche, *Will to Power,* §501, 273–274.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* §374, 239.
[36] Nietzsche, *Will to Power,* §556, 301.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962).
[40] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science, §*374, 239.

sciences later posed by Husserl in *The Crisis of European Sciences*[41], as well as, in a weaker sense, with Hume's statement that "all the sciences have a relation, greater or less, to human nature [and] are in some measure dependent on the science of Man; since they lie under the cognizance of men, and are judged of by their powers and faculties. […] And consequently we ourselves are not only the beings, the reason, but also one of the objects, concerning which we reason"[42]. In a different context, Clifford Geertz states that "there are no raw data. […] What we call our data are really our own constructions, [i.e. the product of a] stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which [the facts observed] are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which [these facts] would not […] exist"[43].

In Nietzsche's philosophy, the matter of truth comes into question as a counterpart of the problem of value. Our "unconditional will of truth"[44] is moved by a moral call, which actually hides an urgency for "a regained sense of security"[45] in the struggle for survival. Through assigning values for truth and false in the process of knowledge, "something unfamiliar is traced back to something familiar"[46], and moral and ontological coordinates are created, in order to reduce what feels "strange, unusual, and doubtful"[47] to "something which no longer unsettles us"[48]. This process aims towards a more inhabitable and comprehensible categorization of the field of meaning for the subject[49]. Broadly speaking, such a process implies "the opposition of a truth and an error"[50], of real and unreal. More specifically, a mechanism of exclusion and limitation is at work in this

[41] Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die pänomenologische Philosophie* (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Verlag, 1976).
[42] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: being an Attempt to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects* (London: John Noon, at the White Hart, 1739), 4.
[43] Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture", 313–314.
[44] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* §355, 214.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Nietzsche, *Will to Power,* §513, 277.
[50] Nietzsche, *Will to Power,* §171, 103.

transaction[51]. By reducing the process of knowledge to its coherent, familiar, and reassuring elements, what gets lost is precisely the ability to marvel at the world[52], i.e. to recognize, assume, and embody its creative, irrational, chaotic and more powerful aspects[53].

Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference between "ascertaining *truth* and *untruth* [and] facts in general"[54] on the one hand, and "creative positing, from forming, shaping, overcoming, willing, such as is of the essence of philosophy"[55]. It is "the degree to which we feel life and power (logic and coherence of experience) [that] gives us our measure of *being* and *reality*"[56].

This brings into question yet another level of complexity, which challenges the possibility itself of a traditional Cartesian subject. If, on the one hand, the objective "concept of substance is a consequence of the concept of the subject"[57], on the other hand, even subjectivity is a result of perspective, and the subject itself is something added to the background of a dialectical movement between the world and the will to power, i.e. "a simplification" for "defining the force which posits, invents, thinks, as distinct from all individual positing, inventing, thinking as such"[58]. In order for the world to be meaningful, and for any knowledge to be possible, interpretation is essential, but "it is our needs that interpret the world, our drives and their *for* and *against*"[59]; not our ego, nor a presumed metaphysical subject. If we assume, as Nietzsche does, that truth, reality, and objectivity are complex constructions of meaning derived from perspectives, then even the will to truth cannot be considered an exclusive path of knowledge, but rather finds its place *in the struggle among truths* as just one drive among the others.

Moreover, the faithful assumptions on which we construct our knowledge are not necessarily true, and "the conditions of life might in-

[51] For a complete analysis of the mechanisms of exclusion, see Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1972).
[52] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* §355, 214.
[53] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra. Ein Buch, für Alle und Keinen* (Leipzig, Naumann Verlag, 1891).
[54] Nietzsche, ibid. §605, 327.
[55] Nietzsche, ibid., §556, 301.
[56] Nietzsche, ibid., §534, 290.
[57] Nietzsche, ibid., §485, 268.
[58] Nietzsche, ibid., §556, 302.
[59] Nietzsche, ibid., §481, 267.

clude error"[60]. Truth can then be considered as an "habitual and indispensable fiction, [which] in itself proves nothing against its imaginary origin: a belief can be a condition of life and nonetheless be false"[61]. In this sense, truth and reality are a kind of necessary error, a fictional mechanism that is nevertheless essential for the survival of that specific kind of living beings that are humankind. From a wider perspective, the deeper philosophical question implied in all this discourse is whether any dichotomy between a *real world* and a *fictional world* is still needed and useful. What is at stake in Nietzsche's analysis is whether the inevitable mechanism of interpretation actually requires the opposition of a truth and an error, or whether instead, we can already presuppose a totality of the world which is built from a non-exclusive multiplicity of interpretations and perspectives[62]. If we consider the problem from this point of view, interpretation itself is a form of the will to power and reality consists of nothing else than the dialectical relation that undergoes within the whole form of life. The introduction of meaning is then much more connected to a creative gesture, than to a descriptive explanation[63], and knowledge implies an "active interpretation and not merely conceptual translation"[64].

### 3. Truth as the revelation of reality in Heidegger's quest of Being

Heidegger's philosophy is the second essential step of this analysis. While Nietzsche has the credit of having set the problem, it is Heidegger who has framed it accurately and systematically in his general quest for Being. The issue becomes crucial after the 1930 Turn (*Kehre*) and is widely developed in the texts derived from his university courses on pre-Socratics – i.e. *The Beginning of Western Philosophy* (1932)[65] – or in essays such as *On the Way to Language* (1959)[66], but an early seed of

[60] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* §121, 117.
[61] Nietzsche, *Will to Power, §*483, 268.
[62] Nietzsche, ibid., §556, 301.
[63] Nietzsche, ibid., §604, 327.
[64] Nietzsche, ibid*.,* §605, 327.
[65] Martin Heidegger, *The Beginning of Western Philosophy. Interpretation of Anaximander and Parmenides,* trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).
[66] Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann Verlag, 1985).

the question is already present in *Being and Time* (1927)[67], more specifically in paragraphs §43 (*Dasein, Worldhood, and Reality)* and §44 (*Dasein, Disclosedness, and Truth*).

In his analysis, Heidegger frames the problem of reality, and of its conditions and limits, within the context of *Dasein*[68] and its quest for meaning. In order to understand reality, a radical rethinking of the concept of truth is needed. Since the problem derives from a misinterpretation that can be traced back to the official beginnings of the history of Western philosophy, i.e. in Plato and Aristotle, Heidegger draws his attention to the very origins of that same philosophical tradition, i.e. to Anaximander, Parmenides, and Heraclitus, re-reading their fragments and key-concepts according to their Greek original meaning (*ursprünglicher*)[69]. This gesture has no aim to induce an "uninhibited word mysticism"[70], nor to retrace "the history of the concept of truth"[71]. Rather, in the form of a reinterpretation through repetition (*wiederholen*), it aims to "preserve the force of the most elemental words"[72] and overcome the harmful projections and layered superpositions imposed on them by Western philosophy, thus illuminating that general question of Being, which in Heidegger's perspective is at the same time the most intuitive and familiar[73], and the most obscure and hidden to an ontological inquiry[74].

The analysis revolves around the concept of *ἀλήθεια* (*alétheia) – truth* – in relation to *λόγος* (*logos*) – *thought, speech, reason, judgment, concept* – and *φύσις (physis) – nature, world, reality*[75]. As Heidegger notes, "the traditional conception of truth"[76] is based on the two assump-

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[67] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962). For the words quoted in the original language, cf. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1927).

[68] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 245.

[69] Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit,* 33.

[70] Ibid., 262.

[71] Ibid., 257.

[72] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 262.

[73] Cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 25: "What we seek when we inquire into Being is not smth entirely unfamiliar, even if proximally (*zunächst*) we cannot grasp it at all".

[74] Heidegger, *The Beginning of Western Philosophy*, 17.

[75] Heidegger, ibid., 4- 23.

[76] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 257.

tions "that the locus of truth is assertion (judgment)"[77], and "that the essence of truth lies in the agreement of the judgment with its object"[78]. These axioms, which also caused Thomas Aquinas' "formulation of truth as *adaequatio intellectus et rei*"[79], were generated by the distorted interpretation of the concept of *ἀλήθεια* as *ὁμοίωσις* (*omòiosis*)[80] – *conformity, correspondence, adequacy* – and *ὀρθότης* (*orthòtes*) – *correctness* – which has become conventional in the philosophical tradition, but actually made the original concept of truth unintelligible[81]. If we accept the sense of *ἀλήθεια* as *adaequatio*[82] of knowledge (judgment) to reality, we also set the structure for dichotomies such as true/false, real/unreal, correct/incorrect, normal/not-normal, valid/invalid, and our judgment can be alternatively correct or incorrect, depending on the contingent situation. More specifically, "knowledge is false if it does not agree with the object to which it is related"[83] and it is true only in the case that the object fully corresponds to the judgment. As a necessary condition, "this object must be distinguished from others"[84] and opposed to all the remaining possibilities, since there is only one truth, whereas an infinity of chances is open for fiction, lies, distortions, unreality. Yet, this is an artificial construction of truth (*ein konstruierten Wahrheitsbegriff*)[85] based on a hierarchy of values and specific given rules, and also implies an irreversible process of degenerative transformation and oblivion.

In order to radically rethink the concept of truth, and consequently mark the foundations and horizons for an ontological analysis of reality, Heidegger recalls the primordial meaning of *ἀ-λήθεια* as *Unverborgenheit*[86], being un-veiling, un-covering, un-hidden (*entdecken*)[87], and let-itself-be-seen (*sehen lassen)*[88]. That is, as ontological manifestation of what is present in-the-world. In this sense, λόγος is ἀπόφανσις

[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid., 257.
[80] Ibid., 258.
[81] Ibid. 262.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid. 258.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit,* 33.
[86] Ibid. 33.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.

*(apóphansis)*[89], revelation, presentation, and philosophy is "ἀποφαίνεσθαι *περὶ* τῆς ἀληθείας *(apophàinesthai perì tes alethéias)* – exhibiting something and letting it be seen with regard to the truth"[90] – as well as *"ἐπιστήμη περὶ τὸ ὂν ᾗ ὄν (epistēmē perì to on e on)* – a science which contemplates entities as entities"[91]. In this sense, "to say that an assertion is true signifies that it uncovers the entity as it is in itself"[92], with regard to its being.

In Heidegger's analysis of Anaximander's fragment in *The Beginning of Western Philosophy*, the philosopher defines what presents itself (*ἀποφαίνεσθαι*) as *τὰ ὄντα (ta onta)*[93], "the things themselves", as "the *whole* of beings"[94] within-the-world in the totality of their "appearance as emergence" (*Erschienenheit)*[95]. In this sense, reality is nothing else than all "what manifests itself as a structure of Being"[96] and "truth signifies the same as *Thing* (*Sache*), *something that shows itself"*[97].

The analysis is connected to the concept of φύσις (*physis*), nature. According to the original meaning of the verb *φύειν (phyein)*[98] – to generate, *physis* is what is born and grown, what transforms itself through time, but also what unfolds and becomes exposed, i.e. what appears and manifests itself in its being visible (e*rscheinbar sein)*[99]. *Physis* then means the reciprocal and dynamical relation among the totality of entities (*ta onta)*, which is generated by time according to necessity, as a harmonised combination (*Fügung*) of agreement (*das Gefüge*) and fight (*Un-fug*)[100]. Reality is essentially accessible to *Dasein* only as the totality of entities within-the-world. This does not mean that it is unreachable as a phenomenal experience, and that we should therefore believe in the world by means of faith, nor, on the contrary, suspend our faith in existence. As Heidegger specifies, both options of a naive realism and of a

[89] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 258.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid. 261.
[93] Heidegger, *The Beginning of Western Philosophy,* 3.
[94] Ibid., 4.
[95] Ibid., 6.
[96] Heidegger*, Being and Time,* 256.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Heidegger, *The Beginning of Western Philosophy*, 15.
[99] Ibid., 3.
[100] Ibid., 9.

rigorous idealism are biased by an "inappropriate formulation of the question"[101]. The question of reality is an ontological problem[102], and does not involve any psychological subject, unless we confound reality "with a discussion of the problem of the external world"[103], based on the wrong assimilation of entities – *τὰ ὄντα – το τὰ πράγματα*, *res*, *things, objects* in the sense of "a context of things […] ready-to-hand"[104] among other objects. Such misinterpretation would cause various pseudo-problems, i.e. the unsolvable "question of whether an external world [exists] at all, and whether its Being can be proved"[105] as an object *in itself,* and of what kind of relation should subsist between this reality and a Cartesian subject[106].

As Heidegger explains, these problems "make no sense if [they were] raised by *Dasein"*[107], since *Dasein* is the condition of possibility for all interrogation, as well as "the necessary and preliminary condition to all reality"[108], and *"*cannot be conceived in terms of mere substantiality"[109], i.e. as a *res* or a mere object. "The substance of human being is existence", and its nature lies in its essential state of being-in-the-world" (*in-der-Welt-sein*)[110] as projection and *Entwerfenheit*[111] (being-thrown-in-relation). Therefore, "the question of the meaning" can only be possible if, as a precondition, we assume the *disclosedness* of *Dasein*[112], i.e. its unavoidable, preliminary *openness to/opening of* the world and meaning. This is the only possibility we have, "for who else would raise [the question]" if not *Dasein?*[113]. As a matter of fact, we can never go outside of ourselves in order to pose our philosophical quest.

In this sense, the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* that almost all the phi-

[101] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 251.
[102] Ibid., 252.
[103] Ibid., 246.
[104] Ibid., 244.
[105] Ibid., 246.
[106] Ibid., 262.
[107] Ibid., 246–247.
[108] Ibid., 245.
[109] Ibid., 245.
[110] Ibid., 80.
[111] Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit,* 145.
[112] Ibid., 263.
[113] Ibid., 247.

losophical Western tradition has accepted, needs to be "turned around"[114] from its initial sense that *I have thoughts (cogitations), therefore I exist*, "into the sense that *I am in a world*. As such an entity, *I am* in the possibility of comporting myself in various ways […] as ways of being alongside entities within the world"[115]. Said otherwise, "we do not presuppose [truth] as something outside and above us, towards which – along with other values – we comport ourselves"[116], but, with our quest for sense, we are co-essentially implied in the dialectic creation of truth. At the same time, "it is not *we,* who presuppose truth"[117] as a value, but, on the contrary, "truth is what first makes possible anything like presupposing"[118].

Thus, the existence of the world, with its essence and projections, is the necessary pre-condition that makes any subject possible, and not *vice-versa*. As Heidegger claims, knowledge does not come as an abstract, dichotomous grasping of a concept, but rather "from possibilities"—*aus Möglichkheiten*[119] – that are encountered in the world and predetermined by the scope of what can be essentially disclosed within the process. Such trajectory is always influenced by its history, past, and relation to others/to the world itself, and implies a comprehension of existence from within, in its essentially projective character and dynamical state of being-thrown. In this sense, the world is the revelation (*Ereignis*[120]) of a dialectical totality that includes also our presence and existence as *Dasein,* as well as our gesture of interrogating the essence of the world and of being. As Heidegger warns, "we of today must first be educated to this glancing"[121] as well as to this new opening, i.e. we must learn to look from an angle that goes beyond the classical dichotomies of real/unreal, true/false, and even of subject/object, in order to reintegrate the discourse as a whole. Building on Heidegger's conclusion, we can deduce that no preconceived metaphysical subject is possible, and as a further consequence, no normative dichotomy between true and false, real and fictional, is convenient, at least in its traditional sense.

[114] Ibid., 254.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid., 270.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit,* 146.
[120] Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit,* 27.
[121] Heidegger, *The Beginning of Western Philosophy,* 9.

## 4. Reshaping perspective through differences. The creative agency of cognition

All the arguments drawn in the previous analysis seem to suggest a new perspective and converge towards a new paradigm for thinking reality in a non-exclusive form. Instead of a hierarchical opposition, these philosophies suggest a relational approach. The argumentation can be expanded to other authors who have dealt with the topic from different angles and a peculiar perspective. Among them, phenomenology emphasizes the world-entangled nature of the experience of perception. Husserl[122] analyzes how, in order to understand an object in its essence, we need to examine it dynamically, from various perspectives, i.e. build its meaning through our intersubjective relation to it. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty states that meaning doesn't originate from a fixed *a priori* significance, but rather arises in the act of significance itself[123]. As quoted by Ezequiel Di Paolo, "the world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject who is nothing but a project of the world"[124].

Throughout his whole work – and especially in his reinterpretations of Husserl[125], Heidegger[126], Merleau-Ponty[127], Foucault[128] – Derrida interrogates the philosophical discourse through a continuous reshaping of its borders from within[129], in the awareness that any shared

[122] E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy,* trans. F. Kersten (The Hauge/Boston/Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), 52-53.

[123] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *"*Sur la phénoménologie du langage". Communication held on 13 April 1951, at I Colloque international de Phénoménologie, then published in *Problèmes actuels de la Phénoménologie* (Desclée de Brouwer, Bruxelles 1952), 89-109; then in *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 105 ff.; now in Jacques Derrida, *La scrittura e la differenza,* trans. Gianni Pozzi (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), 14.

[124] Ezequiel Di Paolo, "The Enactive Conception of Life"*,* in Albert Newen, Leon de Bruin, Shaun Gallagher, *The Oxford Handbook for 4E Cognition*, 71.

[125] See Jacques Derrida, *La Voix et le Phénomène, Introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1967).

[126] See Jacques Derrida, *De l'esprit: Heidegger et la question* (Paris: Galilée, 1987).

[127] See Jacques Derrida, *L'ecriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967).

[128] See Jacques Derrida, "Cogito et histoire de la folie"*,* in Jacques Derrida, *L'ècriture et la différence,* 51- 54.

[129] See Pier Aldo Rovatti, "Cercare mezzodì alle quattordici", in Jacques Derrida, *La scrittura e la differenza,* trans. Gianni Pozzi (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), XIII.

quest for meaning implies at the same time also the questioning of its limits[130], and that any critics to *logos* can only be operated in a language, i.e. from within the field of *logos*[131]. According to Derrida, the whole philosophical tradition is an ontology[132] dominated by reason, logic, and a certain privilege of the voice[133]. With an original violence,[134] *logocentrism*[135] has set the rules for attribution of the values of truth and reality, as well as the limits of what can be considered properly (*eigen*-) human in opposition to its *other*, i.e. the world, or animality[136]. This dichotomy – which is not a unique, indivisible, and normative border between the two sides[137]—hides an implicit prejudice towards alterity, which brings into question the problems of the subject and of reality, and their definition within the logical discourse. Meaning is never found *a priori,* but always situated within a dialectical opening, which is historic and narrative in itself[138]. An original difference (*différance)*[139] is at work in the process of individuation, and constitutes the necessary condition of every subject, as well as of every speech. Thus, the individual is actually a *dividual,* a dynamical relation essentially inhabited by its alterity in a dialectic ongoing process[140]. Such alterity is way more com-

[130] See Maurizio Ferrari's interview to Derrida about the place of philosophy, "Iride", 12, Agosto 1994, 336; then in Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *Il gusto del segreto* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1997).

[131] Derrida, *L'ecriture et la différence,* 25.

[132] Ibid., 34.

[133] See Derrida, *La Voix et le Phénomène. Introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl.*

[134] Jacques Derrida, *De La Grammatologie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967). Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Della Grammatologia,* trans. R. Balzarotti, F.Bonicalzi, G.Contri, G.Dalmasso, A.C.Loaldi (Milano: Jaca Book, 1969), 19.

[135] Derrida, *Della Grammatologia*, 15.

[136] Derrida, *L'animale che dunque sono,* trans. Massimo Zannini (Milano: Jaca Book, 2006), 86.

[137] Derrida, ibid., 81.

[138] Derrida *L'ecriture et la différence*, 122.

[139] Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence,* 295. "La différance, pré-ouverture de la différence ontic-ontologique". See also Derrida, *De la grammatologie,* 1029. As a provocation of meaning, Derrida plays with the mis-spelling of the word différence, transforming it in *différance,* where the *a* adds a difference, a shift in perspective, which can be written and read, but not heard.

[140] See Jacques Derrida, *L'animal que donc je suis,* Paris, Gallimard, 1967; Jacques Derrida, *Donner le temps. La fausse monnaie* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1991); Jacques Derrida, *La Dissémination* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972).

plex, various, and heterodox than depicted by logocentrism. Any quest for sense is only possible in the form of an autobiography[141], i.e. in the writing of a trace which creates meaning through its tracing[142] and is the inaugural freedom of a different answer[143] to logocentrism, one which defuses it with its unfitting and irreducible complexity. Since the attribution of sense is first and foremost an "adventure of the gaze" (*une aventure du regard*)[144], Derrida suggests a prospective shift: not a mere balance or reversal from one side of the metaphysical opposition[145] to the other, but rather the possibility of erasing the dichotomy as such[146] through a patient multiplication of the differences[147], i.e. through an oblique gesture of writing[148] that goes beyond (and reintegrates in itself) the values of origin, reason, history, by showing the fragility and porosity of the supposed frontiers[149]. In such context, even that rich and complex field of madness, dementia, extravagance, insanity, irrationality, emotional, fictional, symbolic, metaphorical, narrative, that Foucault reported as distanced, excluded, expelled from the philosophical field, turns out to be part of that same discourse[150].

In a very different context, but with a compatible approach and aim, the paradigm of 4E/5E Cognition offers a similar perspective, shaping cognition as an embodied, embedded (situated), enactive, extended (context-dependent), and ecological (relational)[151] system of mind-body-world[152]. Challenging both Cartesian dualism and the classical and incomplete model of cognition as computational, representational, and

[141] Derrida, *L'animale che dunque sono*, 97. See also Jacques Derrida, *Otobiographies. L'enseignement de Nietzsche et la Philosophie du Nom Propre* (Paris, Galilèe, 1984).
[142] Derrida*, L'animale che dunque sono*, 24.
[143] Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence,* 15.
[144] Ibid.*,* 9.
[145] Ibid. 25.
[146] Ibid. 71.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Derrida, *La scrittura e la differenza,* 14.
[149] Derrida, *L'animale che dunque sono,* 69.
[150] Derrida, "Cogito et histoire de la folie"*,* in Derrida, *L'ècriture et la différence,* 42.
[151] Erik Rietveld, Damiaan Denys, Maarten van Westen, "Ecological – Enactive Cognition as engaging with a field of relevant affordances – The Skilled Intentionality Framework (SIF)", in Albert Newen, Leon de Bruin, Shaun Gallagher, *The Oxford Handbook for 4E Cognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 41.
[152] Rietveld, Denys, van Westen, "Ecological – Enactive Cognition as engaging with a field of relevant affordances – The Skilled Intentionality Framework", 41-70.

disembodied, the 4E/5E Cognition paradigm also seems to have redeemed the question about Being that Heidegger left open, by retranslating it in the frame of cognitive agency. There is a "mutual and continuous influence"[153] between the individual and the "rich landscape of affordances"[154], i.e. all the "possibilities for action provided by the environment"[155]. The description of reality is the result of a situated, embodied and constantly readjusting act of looking, where "the frames of signification are given by the sense-making activity itself"[156], i.e. "in the environmental consequences of the living process"[157], and the affordances presented are correlated to the skills and tools we choose in order to deal with them. Since every individual is part of an *ecological niche*, or form of life, which is the outcome of "coordinated patterns of behavior of multiple individuals"[158] over time, it follows that affordances are generated in the *sociomaterial* context and are intrinsically relational. Abilities are also acquired and developed through a tradition of social interactions, which in turn depends on the specific affordances, chances for learning, and challenges, presented by the environment.

Skilled Intentionality is a selective, context-dependent, action-oriented response. Out of all the available possibilities for action, only those ones which are perceived as relevant are actually selected. In turn, the only solicitations perceived as engaging are those for which the individual has already the relative skills. Thus, the possibility to perceive is also an aspect of the *sociomaterial* environment, and "gaining perceptual access to the world is [in itself] a skilled activity"[159].

As a consequence, the process of knowledge has the double effect of constantly modifying the whole form of life, while also reshaping the surrounding reality. Moreover, the "rational criteria" for decision are not neutral, but "ineliminably evaluative and dependent on our purposes and in-

[153] Albert Newen, Leon de Bruin, Shaun Gallagher, "4E Cognition: Historical Roots, Key Concepts, and Central Issues", in Albert Newen, Leon de Bruin, Shaun Gallagher, *The Oxford Handbook for 4E Cognition*, 10.
[154] Rietveld, Denys, van Westen, "Ecological – Enactive Cognition as engaging with a field of relevant affordances – The Skilled Intentionality Framework", 44.
[155] Ibid. 42.
[156] Di Paolo, "The Enactive Conception of Life", in Albert Newen, Leon de Bruin, Shaun Gallagher, *The Oxford Handbook for 4E Cognition*, 71.
[157] Ibid., 89.
[158] Ibid. 46.
[159] Ibid. 50.

terests"[160]. Therefore, to describe the world actually means to make the world exist under certain circumstances and specific parameters. "If the affordances of a thing are perceived correctly, we say that it looks like what it is. But we must, of course, learn to see what things really are"[161].

## 5. Conclusions. A narrative response towards reality

This final passage implies a certain orientation towards the possible[162] and resonates with the change of perspective urged by Heidegger. Paraphrasing the Spanish sanskritist Juan Arnau[163], the way we look at the world can change the world itself. As the Ancients already knew, and Indian philosophy reminds us, fiction and reality are co-existent and co-essential in a continuum of perception, interpretation, and action. Therefore, an education of imagination can be a useful tool for a narrative invention of the real world. If perception, speech, and actions are shaped by the environment and by our affective reaction to it, the consequent dynamical and relational process of re-attunement can reintegrate also all those aspects that the dualistic prejudice excluded as too irrational, fictional, artistic, and narrative. Paraphrasing the Italian philosopher Carlo Sini[164], every philosophy is an auto-biography and a narrative, in the sense that every knowledge is also the self-writing of its trace. Stories are powerful tools for world-building, and our socio-conceptual constructions represent chances for alternative narratives, which can better serve the purpose of life. Since language is embodied and embedded, our narrative choices can reshape both our self and the field of reality, through a call for perspective and a creative response towards the world, i.e. through an exercise of attention and the awakening of a different,

[160] Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind. The bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), xiii.

[161] Rietveld, Denys, and van Westen, "Ecological – Enactive Cognition as engaging with a field of relevant affordances – The Skilled Intentionality Framework", 50.

[162] Rietveld, Denys, and van Westen, ibid., 43.

[163] Arnau, *En la Mente del Mundo,* 73.

[164] Carlo Sini, *Idoli della conoscenza* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2000), now in Carlo Sini, *Opere, Vol IV tomo II. La solidarietà delle pratiche e l'origine dell'autocoscienza* (Milano: Jaca Book, 2014), quoted in Carlo Sini, *Filosofia e Memoria* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2025), 7. See also Carlo Sini, *Teoria e pratica del Foglio-mondo,* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2007); Carlo Sini, *La virtù politica. Filosofia e antropologia. Figure dell'enciclopedia filosofica, IV,* (Milano: Jaca Book, 2004).

non exclusive gaze. Working on these mechanisms can help us acknowledge our socio – political, geo – cultural, historical, and biographical implications, thus also reshaping our identity both on an individual and collective level.

# 4. The deadly-factual word of Greek tragedies: Hölderlin and tragedy's example of fictional reality

*Evangelos Kalfopoulos, vankalf@gmail.com*
*(Post-Doctoral Fellow, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski and Collaborating Investigator at the Institute of Philosophical Studies of Coimbra University)*

**Abstract**: Hölderlin's account of tragedy is among the most subtle and original contributions of philosophical modernity, though it survives only in fragmentary form and is notoriously difficult to interpret. It is also fragmented and notoriously difficult. In this article, we will try to interpret Hölderlin's theory of tragedy with the model of fictional reality as it might be understood in light of Verene. Prominent in this analysis is how Hölderlin understands the language of tragedy as being factual in his "*Remarks on Antigone.* In this work he claims that the symbolic realm of tragedy needs to equal to 0 for real nature to show itself, thus pointing to the sublime and tragic character of nature. Furthermore, Hölderlin's position on the beginning of modernity and his failure to compose a modern tragedy can be seen in the light of technological society's capacity to reproduce works of art which enter into a semiotic realm where they signify each other, instead of something outside this realm. Under the light of these observations, Hegel's position concerning the impossibility of modern tragedy shall be revisited.

**Keywords:** Tragedy; Fictional reality; Hölderlin; Simulacra

## 1. Introduction: Fictional reality and Art

For the interpretation of Hölderlin's theory of tragedy as a species of fictional reality to take hold, the broader question of the connection between fictional reality and art needs to be addressed first. This connection is by no means straightforward. Someone might assume that art is the opposite of reality, the common opinion being that the former is created by us and the latter is independent of us. But neither is it the case

that art functions as the primary example of fictional reality, the supposition being that reality can only be understood as fictional, since art is confined to a given time and place in which it presents its own reality. Lacking a uniform definition of art, these attempts are bound to depend on the definition one accepts.

One of the first definitions of art is that it is mimetic in nature. Plato in the *Cratylus* mentions that art, painting and music mimic the secondary qualities of objects but naming aims at the essence of things.[165] Furthermore, in the *Republic*, Plato specifically mentions tragic art in particular, and poetic art in general, including them in the mimetic genre. The problem with the mimetic character of tragedy is twofold, according to Denis J. Schmidt: "first it is a potent force in [the?] development of the soul, and second, it is completely unreliable."[166] What exactly tragedy mimics is clearly stated in Aristotle's well-known definition in the *Poetics*: "Tragedy is … a representation (mimesis) of an action that is heroic and complete and of a certain magnitude – by means of language enriched with all kinds of ornament, each used separately in the different parts of the play: it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions."[167] The introduction of the word *representation* for mimesis is of the utmost importance here, since it underlines the secondary nature of the work of art, in this case tragedy, but also makes evident the connections to a hierarchy where the real thing, to ὄντος ὂν, is on a higher scale and whose most accurate representation is not provided by art but by theory, by seeing the real being, by contemplating its true essence. This prompted Martin Heidegger to say that since the advent of meta-

[165] Plato*, Cratylus*, 423d: "all objects have sound and shape, and man has colour, have they not? ...Well then, the art of naming is not employed in the imitations of those qualities, and has nothing to do with them. The arts that are concerned with them are music and design, are they not?" in Plato. *Plato in Twelve Volumes,* Vol. 12 trans. Harold N. Fowler. (Harvard University Press; London,1921). Accessed online at https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0172%3Atext%3DCrat.%3Asection%3D423d

[166] Denis J. Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks* (Indiana University Press, 2001), 30.

[167] Aristotle, *Poetics*, Aristotle. Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vol. 23, trans. W.H. Fyfe. (University Press1932) Accessed online at https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0056%3Asection%3D1449b

physical thinking in Plato "the essence of art (τέχνη, ars), and thus the essence of poetic art also, has been determined in accordance with metaphysics."[168] For Heidegger, Hölderlin's poetry is a prime example of non-metaphysical art. It is engaged with poetic naming, perhaps in the way that the art of naming that Socrates sought was found in the beginning of metaphysics, particularly Platonism; however, it is not a part of it, and retains some fluidity in searching for and naming the essence of things. At the same time, though, this conception of art as representation, as mimesis, is clearly not congruent with the concept of fictional reality either as it deems all reality fictional; it can only be represented with a degree of arbitrariness by the human subject and the only medium available for us to know and represent reality necessarily relies upon our imagination and artistic capabilities.

But Hölderlin's poetry – and I will also argue the philosophy of tragedy – is congruent with the view that tries to reverse Platonism. As Heidegger already notes with respect to Nietzsche, this reversal, which puts absolute priority on art[169], entails the danger of creating another metaphysics and it is implied therefore that it does not constitute the right framework for understanding Hölderlin's poetry. This framework though can be taken as a form of fictional reality through the closeness that exhibits with the theory of simulacra. As it is pointed out, by various contributors to this volume, the concept of simulacrum is present in the work of Jean Baudrillard and of Umberto Eco and connected with the concept of hyperreality. But one of the first thinkers who discussed the concept of the simulacrum was Gilles Deleuze. The latter found in it the real reversal of Platonism[170] and also took simulacra to be the defining trait of modernity. For Deleuze the difference between copies and simulacra is that the former are founded upon resemblance

[168] Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister",* trans. William McNeil and Julia Davis (Indiana University Press, 1996), 17.

[169] "Nietzsche then says the reverse: Art is worth more than "truth" (The Will to Power, No. 853), that is, worth more than those beings that truly are in thinking. And as a consequence, Nietzsche designates his own philosophy as inverted Platonism. Because Platonism is metaphysics, so too is Nietzsche's philosophy metaphysics". Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"*, 25.

[170] "So to 'reverse Platonism' means to make the simulacra rise and to affirm their rights among icons and copies", Gilles Deleuze, Plato and the Simulacrum, in *The logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (Columbia University Press, 1990), 274.

to the idea, whereas the latter are based on dissimilarity with the idea. Although Deleuze goes on to call simulacra "a Dionysian machine"[171], he is in general very careful not to evoke in any straightforward way the concept of the tragic or of tragedy, rather he is elaborating further a Nietzschean view of the Dionysian as affirmative of life. Deleuze has a more nuanced relationship with Hölderlin, but he never goes on to directly offer a reading of the German poet, let alone to try to appropriate him from the predominant reading that Heidegger offered, although Deleuze is often critical of certain premises of Heidegger's philosophy. Hölderlin's theory of tragedy can be read in its own right, as falling neither in the Heideggerian reading of naming nor on the Dionysian meaning of the simulacrum, or rather as falling under them both. It is useful here to employ the concept of fictions as conceived by Hans Vaihinger who distinguishes between semi and real fictions, but also between virtuous and vicious fictions. The first are the ones that prove useful whereas the vicious ones lack this characteristic. In this respect, we could argue that Hölderlin's conception of tragedy is akin to a virtuous fiction that propagates life, whereas the simulacrum, which is based solely on external differentiation, does not take into account this distinction and offers a theory of fictional reality that might be vicious as well.

## 2. Hölderlin's theory of tragedy

Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) provided us with one of the most interesting, but also famously complex, theory of tragedy, which is to be found in two texts, the *Notes on Oedipus* and the *Notes on Antigone*, works that were translated by Hölderlin and published in 1804. We can understand that the notes were taken at the time that Hölderlin was working on these translations and that they shed light on his understanding of tragedy. Of course, he was constantly preoccupied with the question of tragedy, as he was part of the movement that led to German Idealism, for which tragedy served as an important topic of study. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe notes:

> "I would like to show that tragedy, or a certain interpretation of tragedy, explicitly philosophical, and above all wanting to be such,

[171] Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 275.

> is the origin or the matrix of what in the wake of Kant is conventionally called speculative thought: that is to say, dialectical thought, or to take up Heideggerian terminology, the onto-theological in its fully accomplished form."[172]

Hölderlin also attempted to compose a modern tragedy centred around the philosopher Empedocles, an effort that was never accomplished but also distinguishes him from the other two figures of speculative thought, namely Georg Wilhelm Hegel and Friedrich Schelling, in the sense that Hölderlin broke with the speculative method by also trying to poeticize tragedy and its contents. According to Peter Szondi in his famous affirmation on the opening of his *An Essay on the Tragic*[173], speculative thinking inaugurated a philosophy of the tragic, and through his attempt to compose a modern tragedy and through his translations of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, Hölderlin took a distinct turn from the metaphysical thought of his time. Lacoue-Labarthe, following Heidegger, emphasizes this point and even credits Hölderlin with an attempt to go back to Aristotle and his attribution of importance, not to the tragic element as seen by other figures of German Idealism, but to the effects of the tragedy on spectators, first and foremost the effect of Catharsis[174].

This engagement of Hölderlin with the art of tragedy and not just the theory of tragic gives rise to his differences with the speculative and metaphysical views and warrants a reading of tragedy as fictional reality. One first indication for this reading is Hölderlin's notion of the "deadly-factual" word of Greek tragedies, as it is stated in his *Notes on Antigone*. There, and specifically in the third part, we find a discussion that has to do with the effects of tragic language and the difference of those effects in ancient and modern times. Hölderlin notes that "[t]he Greek-tragic word is deadly-factual, for the body which it seizes it truly

[172] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "The Caesura of the Speculative", in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk (Harvard University Press,1989), 208.

[173] "Since Aristotle, there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic" in Peter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.

[174] "Tragedy, because it is the catharsis of the speculative, presents disappropriation as that which secretly animates and constitutes it", in Lacoue-Labarthe, The Caesura of the Speculative, 233.

kills"[175], whereas the whole passage focusses on the discussion and the difference between the Greek and the Hesperian (modern) tragic word. Most commentators, as it is logical, follow Hölderlin in underlining the importance of this difference, but for us what stands out here is the designation deadly-factual (in German *tödlichfaktisch*) and this for two reasons: firstly because this term points to a conflation of the sensuous (bodily) and the intellectual (language) realms in a way that can be interpreted in accordance with fictional reality and secondly because this designation implies an effect of the tragic word that seems to be addressed not to the audience – as in the mimetic act of tragedy – but rather to the characters involved in the tragic itself.

To take the first point, the importance Hölderlin ascribes to tragic language, or the role of language in the tragic, is attested to by many commentators. For example, Denis J. Schmidt mentions "What does come forward here [in the passage we are mentioning] as the pulse of tragedy, the point at which we find its beat, is *how* we speak of such matters. Language itself harbors the experience proper to the tragic…The law of the tragic, the nature according to which it unfolds and holds us in its grip, is housed in (or, better, as) the law of the rhythm of language itself…*The caesura in language is thus to be understood as a crisis in time*"[176]. But it would be wrong to interpret this importance in a symbolic way, in the sense that tragic language takes its importance from the reality it symbolizes, because such a move could direct us straight to a metaphysical interpretation, which pre-supposes not only an independent reality but also one that is hierarchically ordained. It is against such a reading that Heidegger is trying to salvage Hölderlin. The essence of the tragic word is to create and shape reality, even if we agree with Jeremy Bentham that words have a metaphorical sense that is primary and always overlaps with reality[177]. In other words, tragic language reflects the uncertainty of time but provides the necessary and fictional content for us to represent this element of time that is profoundly non accessible to us. Nevertheless, the reality of tragic language is reflected on the fact that is factual. The designator deadly-factual also

[175] Friedrich Hölderlin, Remarks on Antigone, in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. and ed. Thomas Pfau (State University of New York Press, 1988), 113.
[176] Schmidt, *On Germans and other Greeks*, 146.
[177] Alexander L. Gungov, "Fictional Character of Contemporary Reality", *Sofia Philosophical Review*, p. Vol. XIX, no 1, 2026.

points to the fact that tragic language tries to capture and communicate something of the uncommunicable, yet universal, experience of death, but not only through still representations, but also through a real effect on the body the word takes over. The caesura that is one of the most famous remarks of Hölderlin in respect to tragedy points to this fact: it is the moment the tragic element is conserved within tragedy, because the latter is a continuous succession of representations, as is language, whereas the caesura is "the pure word, the counter- rhythmic rupture" where "does not appear the change of representation but the representation itself"[178]. In other words, the caesura is the point in the rhythm of language that we can pause and create the new naming, instead of using the inevitably fixed names that all established languages necessarily provide. It is the moment of pause, from where the nature of the word can be thought of and the effects of it on the sensuous bodies take hold. David Farrel Krell notices about these passages of Hölderlin's text that "[t]he polynomial words of tragedy, whether factically murderous or mortifying, are organs. We should understand these organs as organizational factors, attuned to διάνοια, yet solicited by the more aorgic realm of nature. These dianoetic organs, the dialogues and choruses of any given tragic drama, flesh out the body of the suffering godhead, Dionysos"[179], giving further evidence of the double role of the word for the German poet, both as intellectual and natural element, in other words as fiction and as reality.

To come to the second point, Hölderlin's introduction of the characterization of the tragic word as deadly factual reveals how he viewed the effects of tragic language. Veronique Fóti translates the German term as "deathly efficacious"[180] and the emphasis for our purposes should lay on the adjective 'efficacious', not only in the sense of efficiency but also in the sense of effect. In accordance with Lacoue-Labarthe, this translation reveals the fact that Hölderlin was actually interested on the effect of tragedy in a sense closer to Aristotle, something that makes sense since he was attempting to translate and compose actual tragedies not just to specu-

[178] Hölderlin, *Remarks on Oedipus*, 102.

[179] David Farrell Krell, "A small number of houses in a universe of tragedy: notes on Aristotle's περί ποιητικής and Hölderlin's "Anmerkungen"." In *Philosophy and Tragedy*, ed. Miguel de Beistegui and Simon Sparks, (Routledge, 2000), 109.

[180] Véronique M. Fóti, *Epochal Discordance: Hölderlin's philosophy of tragedy* (State University of New York, 2006), 88.

late about the tragic. But the effect that Hölderlin is interested in, is not the cathartic effect the audience of tragedy should experience, alongside the tragedy's hero, according to Aristotle's poetological definition; but it is the effect that the tragic word had on the sensuous body of the one who participates in the tragic moment, the one that is present on that moment. his effect moves Hölderlin past the accusations that were levelled against mimesis from Plato as a secondary source of the real. Here we are not interested just in representing the tragic, but in the moment that the deadly-actual word seizes the body and produces real effects, in that moment we are experiencing the tragic first-hand, despite the mediation of language, or perhaps because of it, necessarily. The moment of caesura precedes the turning of the word in tragic, deadly-factual one, it is the moment when the new naming takes place.

Interestingly, Hölderlin distinguishes between two kinds of tragic words, the Greek one that he calls deadly-factual (in the translation of Thomas Pfau) or deathly-efficacious (in the translation of Véronique Fóti) and the Hesperian, meaning modern, word that he calls *tötenfaktisch*, translated respectively by Pfau and Fóti as murderous-factual and deadly efficacious, respectively. Whichever translation one might prefer, the distinction remains important as it points to the differences between the ancient and the modern as they were understood in the context of the tragic. But again, there is also a continuity of the tragic and of the tragic word, regardless of it being ancient or modern. Hölderlin points to the fact that "the tragic representation, whether more Greek or more Hesperian, is based on a rather violent and irresistible dialogue and chorus…however, the tragic presentation principally consists of the factual word which, being more a relation than something that is stated explicitly, moves by destiny from the beginning to the end"[181]. There are some remarks to be made here. First, for Hölderlin the modern version of tragedy at this stage of his intellectual road seems still feasible – perhaps he never stopped to think so. The continuity he finds between the ancient and the modern version of the tragic is situated in language, attesting further for the importance he was attributing to it. Secondly, the factual word is not a fixed, metaphysical word, but rather a relation. As mentioned above, the tragic factual word takes on a new meaning, a different meaning that is not explicitly stated from the beginning; it is the moment of caesura that pro-

[181] Hölderlin, *Remarks on* Antigone, 114.

vides with the necessary rupture with established representations so that new representations can emerge, and the birth of the tragic word from the caesura is what makes the latter to be never definitely fixed, like a metaphysical name would be.

### 3. On the impossibility of modern tragedy

If a certain understanding of modernity as an era of fictional reality of simulacra prevails, then tragedy as exposed in the above theory of Hölderlin does not have a place. As Gilles Deleuze states "[m]odernity is defined by the power of the simulacrum"[182]. But for him the simulacrum, as a Dionysian machine, is profoundly linked not to tragedy but to the tragic simply as Dionysian, in the sense of the life-affirming chaos of the abyss. He goes on to distinguish the nihilism of the simulacrum that promotes chaos, from the nihilism of the artifacts, stating that both lie at the heart of modernity and are engaged in an antagonistic relationship. Donald Verene notes that "[w]orks of the humanistic imagination take us to a contact with realities that are transcendent, with the forms of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. The desire for these ultimates becomes unnecessary when we are given directly the fascinating reproduction. The reproduction, however, must be continually repeated because there is in fact nothing in it"[183]. Tragedy points to something transcendent too, points to the tragic itself, the double bind[184] of inherent contradictions. If modernity then is the time of simulacra, defined by Deleuze not as a copy but as something that overrides the hierarchy of original and copy, thus reversing Platonism, then Verene's reproductions cannot be distinguished from the original, turning everything into a reproduction.

If the above holds, then there is no real mystery in the failure of Hölderlin to compose a modern tragedy, because the double bind of the tragic cannot be seen as transcendent in modernity but only as particular. Hegel linked tragedy to the ethical life of ancient Greece in a way that this artform could not be reproduced in modernity, but through the progress of the spirit, elements of the tragic remain in the inner self of the

[182] Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense,* 265.

[183] Donald Verene, "The Idea of Imagination and Technological Desire", *Sofia Philosophical Review,* Vol. XIX, no 1, 2026,

[184] "The tragic is always a result of a double bind". Reiner Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Indiana University Press, 2003), 3.

moderns too. He notes in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*: "But just as the girl who offers the plucked fruits is more than the nature that presents them immediately, broken up into all their conditions and elements – the tree, light, air, etc. – since she brings all this together in a higher way in the gleam of her self-conscious eye and the offering gesture, thus is the spirit of the fate which these artworks present more than the ethical life and reality of that people, for it is the *Er-Innerung* [memory] of the spirit that was still expressed in them. It is the spirit of tragic fate, which collects all the individual gods and attributes of substance into one pantheon, into spirit become conscious of itself as spirit"[185]. The tragic is then sublated into the speculative thought of Hegel for the progression of the human Spirit.

Thus, if the ideal is the real, then all real is a kind of fiction, in the sense of an act of intellect. Hölderlin for his part defines poetologicaly the tragic as an intellectual intuition, a concept which derives from Kant, where it takes the meaning of the impossible unity of the rational and the sensuous. This impossibility is not to be overcome in Hölderlin but only to be re-presented in tragedy as a metaphor of it. But whereas Hegel overcame the dichotomy of Kant by saying that the real is the rational, Hölderlin kept the unity as a desideratum, and acknowledged the importance of art, and namely tragedy into representing the fact that all of the sensual form such a unity with the intellectual. In Hölderlin's tragedy *The Death of Empedocles* this unity is represented by the attempt of the philosopher to become one with nature, sacrificing himself in the volcano of the mountain of Aetna. In his analysis of *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, this union is presented as between man and God. He notes that "[t]he presentation of the tragic rests primarily on the tremendous – how the god and man mate and how natural force and man's innermost boundlessly unite in wrath"[186].

So in modernity three concepts of fictional reality emerge according to the above: one Hegelian, where all of reality is ultimately rationalized and fictions only play a role in ascending to the higher degree of rationality; one Nietzschean – Deleuzean where the simulacra is all that there is, hence everything is fiction, since nothing takes its validation from similarity to an original idea; and one that attributes to the philosophical – poetological remarks of Hölderlin on the tragic an intermediate

[185] In Joshua Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 188.
[186] Hölderlin*, Remarks on Oedipus* . 107.

position where the real can only be re-presented with fiction, as a metaphor. This last version was followed by Heidegger and resulted in his famous nostalgia for the philosophical roots before the dominance of the onto-theological. Interestingly, both the Hegelian and the Nietzschean – Deleuzean views attribute no place to tragedy in modernity and move beyond it. On the other hand, nostalgia becomes a mere feeling, when it is not aligned with the epoch in which it appears. The dysmoiron (δύσμοιρον), the lack of destiny, that according to Hölderlin characterizes us moderns[187], is not something that one can overcome with a simple turn to a pre-metaphysical thinking, but rather something that must be lived to its fullest extent in order to be outgrown.

## 4. Conclusions

We tried to provide a possible reading of Hölderlin's theory of tragedy as a version of fictional reality. Following Heidegger's view that Hölderlin's poetry is best understood as naming, relying on the analysis of the importance of the deadly-factual word in the *Remarks on Oedipus and Antigone*, And also based on Hölderlin's definition of the tragic as the metaphor of intellectual intuition, we sketched a reading that differentiates the German poet both from German Idealism and also from the view of Nietzsche and Deleuze.

Both these views emphasize the fact that the tragic element and tragedy are outdated modes of art. Whereas these views are by and large accurate on this point, it is not that human existence is less tragic in modernity than before. On the contrary, tragedy does find an expression today, albeit as a constant undercurrent, in philosophical thinking. For this undercurrent to become established, as in the ancient Greek society and religion, a new form of fictional reality must prevail, one that consistently points to the double bind of human existence, but does not fool itself that can exhaust it, but only represent it through art. Elements of this new fictional reality are to be found in the work of Hölderlin.

Deleuze hinted at his opposition to Heidegger when he wrote that "[i]t is not in the great forests and woodpaths that philosophy is elaborated, but rather in the towns and in the streets – even in the most artificial of them". This represents a clear and sharp difference between Heidegger's nostalgia and the philosophical practice of the so-called post-

[187] Hesperians, as he would put it.

modernists, regardless of the debts the latter had to the former. Now that post-modernism seems to have invaded all aspects of modern societies, leading to a world of post-truth, where everything artificial is pushed to become simulacra and shapes what we perceive as reality, all the ideas of Hölderlin on the relationship of man with God or nature should be revisited to shape a new reality, that can only be artistic, thus fictional, but pointing to a tragic understanding of a new era.

# 5. We Dreamt a Beach and Found a Desert: What It Means to Live in Post-Situationist Reality

*Nataliya Atanasova, nataliya.atanasova@phls.uni-sofia.bg*
*(Coordinator, MA and PhD Programs in Philosophy Taught in English, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski)*

**Abstract:** The graffiti slogan that appeared on Parisian walls during May 1968, "beneath the paving stones the beach", encapsulated the Situationist ambition to uncover a latent real beneath capitalist reality. For the Situationist International, the real demanded excavation, and reality was conceived as lived experience. Yet the desert exposed after May 1968 is reminiscent of Baudrillard's "desert of the real", marking a post-situationist condition in which revolutionary expectations collapse into a landscape stripped of structure and orientation. The promised revolutionary beach of play and liberation becomes an exhausted desert where even the memory of water has evaporated, as "the new spirit of capitalism" has absorbed and reconfigured lived experience into another layer of simulation. This paper follows Baudrillard, Jameson, and Fisher to frame and examine the implications of inhabiting this post-revolutionary terrain, tracing the shift from situationist beaches to post-situationist deserts.

## 1. Introduction: The Shift

A fundamental distinction separates Guy Debord's theory of the society of the spectacle (1967) from Jean Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality (1981). While Debord maintained that the real existed beneath the spectacle and could be uncovered through revolutionary praxis, opening a temporary moment functional to the collapse of capitalism, Baudrillard conversely argued that hyperreality is more real than reality itself. For Debord, the spectacle was a historically specific formation, understood primarily through Jean Hyppolite's translation of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which difference had to be sublated to enable a self-contained dialectical movement. If the spectacle was reducible to a his-

torical moment,[1] then the divergence between Debordian and Baudrillardian views on the structure of reality must also mark a transition in historical and lived time, that proceeds from a capitalist façade that deceptively concealed the real (on which Situationist thought was based) to post-Situationist thought after May 1968,[2] which co-opted whatever was exposed as real and authentic. Such divergence represents a crucial ontological shift in how the relationship between representation and reality is understood after May '68, marking the end of the Situationist project and its assimilation into capitalist dynamics.

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord explains that the spectacle operates as a social relation mediated through images,[3] asserting that this form of relation is unique to its historical moment. Yet beneath this mediation, an authentic substrate persists, however alienated or defied. The spectacle, as delineated by Debord, can be imagined as a veil that covers but does not entirely erase the real from the realm of lived possibilities. It thus remains a question of ideology, of "seeing the world upright", understood as false consciousness masking genuine social relations, *per*-verted precisely by capitalist modes of production. Marx argues that language is "practical consciousness" arising from the necessity of human interaction.[4] Thus, for Debord, the spectacle substitutes social relations, displacing them as all relations and reality migrate into a plane of representation. As a consequence, social relations are mediated by images that falsely represent what is authentically lived.

Debord never provided a specific formula for how lived experience might be recuperated in its most authentic form, other than through revolutionary action aimed at the collapse of capitalism. Nevertheless, throughout

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1 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle: Annotated Edition*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), thesis 11.

2 The Situationist International officially lasted from 1957, when it was founded in Cosio d'Arroscia, Italy, until its dissolution in 1972, when only two members remained. By that point, the others had either been expelled from the c movement or had chosen to leave, many following the Situationist Fifth Conference in 1962. For a standard historical account of the Situationist International's founding, internal expulsions, and dissolution, cccsee the overviews in Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), andcTom cccMcDonough, *The Situationists and the City* (London: Verso, 2009).

3 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, thesis 3.

4 Karl Marx, "The Materialist Conception of History," in *The German Ideology*, in *The Portable Marx*, ed. Eugene Kamenka (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 173.

*The Society of the Spectacle* he relentlessly insists that the spectacle substitutes the materiality of reality with a material consciousness, thereby constructing the very framework of what comes to appear as real. The spectacle not only subsumes, governs and prescribes reality, but it shapes consciousness, pacifying subjects into accepting a self-evident, self-referential circular logic akin to that of capital. According to this logic, the spectacle (which is interchangeable with capital) reproduces everything in its own image, in an almost theological register.[5] Yet because this inverted world manifests a material basis, its internalization presupposes the persistence of a hidden kernel of reality, external to the structures that objectify themselves as a moment of historical stagnation.

Baudrillard's intervention in *Simulacra and Simulation* both departs from and radicalizes this framework. Writing from within the horizon of the 1980s, he argues that social reality has already surpassed the spectacle's logic of representation and entered what he names the hyperreal. The hyperreal designates a condition or, more precisely, an order of representation in which simulations no longer refer back to any originary reality but instead produce their own reality effects, severed from any source.[6] Under a Situationist inflection and resonant with Feuerbach, the copy effectively replaces the original and proliferates in its absence, establishing a world in which the distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic collapses into nothingness. In this sense, the categories of reality and representation are no longer separable, and simulation no longer conceals reality but constitutes it. This trajectory can be traced from Debord's diagnosis of the spectacle in the late 1960s as capitalism's advanced form of mystification, or phantasmagoria, to Baudrillard's analysis in the 1980s. In this sense, it becomes evident that, whereas Debord located the spectacle within a specific historical and social context, as a distortion of social relations under capitalist production, Baudrillard later argues that society had progressed beyond this stage, entering a condition of pure simulation where reality and its representation merge and simulation generates its own autonomous effects.

This same shift was also noted by Jean-Pierre Voyer, a former Situationist expelled from the Situationist International, who both extended and critiqued Debord's notion of the spectacle and its implica-

[5] Cf. *Society of the Spectacle*, thesis 25.

[6] Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 20.

tions for lived experience. Voyer rejects the Situationist understanding of the spectacle as an externally imposed distortion, manipulable at will by those in power.[7] For him, if the spectacle is not imposed, then there is nothing mediating or concealing an underlying authentic reality; rather, it is produced, sustained, and consumed by society's marginalized or weakened members as a form of escapism or entertainment.

Just like Debord, Voyer too confined the spectacle to a particular historical moment, treating it as a label for a unique socio-historical condition in which, "the slaves must be politically emancipated, with the free use of their bodies, so that they can travel far and wide, even to the beaches of Greece."[8] What matters more in Voyer's account is the role of those who experience, sustain, and reproduce the spectacle, which he frames as both a remedy and a distraction from the persistent conditions of repression inherent to civilized life and governance, as if these conditions belonged to human essence or natural inclination rather than to an artificial scenography into which subjects are coerced to adapt and perform. In this sense, the society of the spectacle (if such a society exists at all for Voyer) consists of marginalized individuals who produce the spectacle for themselves as a means of alienation from their boring and oppressive reality. Hence, the spectacle is always engendered by its spectators, without whom it would never have come into being.[9] Yet for Voyer, the spectacle remains a secondary effect: it is not the cause of enslavement but a symptom of it.[10]

Baudrillard's departure from Situationist (hence, Lefebvrian) thought hinges on the insight that all phenomena within the capitalist condition operate as staged realities, constructed precisely because there is no underlying reality. These staged realities must therefore be ceaselessly maintained, even if fictitious, lest they collapse, and much like Peter Pan compelling children to believe in fairies: without belief, the fair-

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[7] Jean-Pierre Voyer, "There Is No Society of the Spectacle," in *It's Crazy How Many Things Don't Exist: Selected Writings* (Los Angeles: The Compound, 2015), originally published 1998.

[8] Ibid., 71.

[9] Alexander Gungov, "Introduction: Touching Fictitious Reality in Philosophizing," *Sofia Philosophical Review* VIII, no. 2 (2014): 10.

[10] For Voyer, the spectacle is the consequence of being a slave and not its cause; what must be understood for him instead is the cause of enslavement itself, which he sees as a condition that persists across historical epochs. See Jean-Pierre Voyer, *op. cit.,* 70.

ies die. What is also recurrent in this post-Situationist context, is that imagination no longer serves to anticipate action in thought, as Aristotle's *phantasia* described, but to reproduce the already-posited, sustaining thereby social relations that are solely aimed at maintaining what already exists.

The consequence of the shift in imagination in late capitalism, as Fredric Jameson (1991) observed and Mark Fisher (2009, 2014) later developed, is that imagination ceases even to generate possible futures to be created or contested and becomes instrumental only in reproducing the surrounding reality. For Fisher, the future becomes so far removed from any horizon of possibility that thought itself is rendered incapable of productive imagination. Drawing on Franco "Bifo" Berardi's *After the Future* (2011), Fisher describes this process as the "slow cancellation of the future," noting that after the 1970s, time and cultural progress were flattened and absorbed into retrospective nostalgia, even when dressed in the frenzied guise of constant novelty. For both Bifo (who experienced Italy's cultural upheavals and the reverberations of May '68 firsthand) and Fisher, this cancellation is the result of capitalism systematically depriving society of the conditions necessary for creative potential and the imagination's pursuit of new futures. As a result, the future ceases to function as a site of transformation and becomes instead an unstoppable, dizzying merry-go-round of the present, which is little more than a see-through ghost, while the future is reduced to a predetermined, "already-established", a mere style of expression.[11] Hence, the future no longer exists as a possibility.

## 2. A problem of perspective

If the future survives only as style, then the problem is no longer merely temporal but formal. That is, the cancellation of the future manifests not only in what can be imagined, but in how imagination is permitted to take shape. With regard to expression and the problem of representation, Hager Weslati notes that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe a collapse of political and social illusions toward the end of the twentieth century, as a failure of the grand narratives surrounding imperial decline, particularly the myths attached to the supposed exhaustion of

[11] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014), 19.

European empires and the corresponding illusion of an American exception. Hardt and Negri situate this collapse as an epistemological problem,[12] one that concerns not only political organization but also the organization of theory itself as knowledge that no longer explicitly anticipates emancipation but accommodates "life in the desert."[13]

In this sense, following Weslati, philosophical pessimism, reflected in the vanished promise of any future, let alone a better one, renders such insights entirely unhelpful for moving from theory to action, as they point only toward an inescapable void. Yet such an attitude also corrupts the soul, as the contemplation of the abyss and of vacuity intensifies one's enjoyment of one's own position, settling more comfortably into the shelter of commodities.[14] Weslati understands "thinking in the desert" and "thinking the desert" as the consequence of a profound theoretical vacuity, one that combines the exhaustion of contemporary theory with the failure of its applicability, that is, its translation into lived reality. The promised beach, an image haunting Situationist imaginaries, thus becomes a catalyst for the accumulation of disappointment characteristic of what may be called the "desert of the real." At this point it is necessary to recall Marx's insight that language bears an analogy to consciousness itself. Any impoverishment of language, symbolic forms, or cultural materials therefore entails an impoverishment of consciousness, from which one may deduce the corresponding impotence of imagination, theorized by Jameson as a symptom of late capitalism.

For instance, Jean-François Lyotard's theory of "language games" in The Postmodern Condition (1979) and his later concept of *le différend* (1983) function as counter-political devices insofar as they articulate the threshold between the imaginable and the unimaginable, forcing thought beyond its habitual boundaries. In an Aristotelian sense, imagination (or phantasia) here aims at anticipating possibilities and actualizing potential. Yet in the post-Situationist condition, Marx's "practical consciousness", which arises from the material necessity of human interaction, is redirected astray. What emerges is a condition governed not by appearances that conceal reality, but by a hyperreal logic in

[12] Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 379–380.

[13] Hager Weslati, "La pensée du désert: The Paradox of Theory and the Narrative of 'Boom' and Bust in Cultural Studies," *Tropisme* 16 (2010): 47.

[14] Ibid., 52, in note 8 of the cited text.

which representation itself constitutes reality. This reality is fragmented into heterogeneous, incommensurable discursive practices that oscillate without stable ground. The pendulum between the sayable and its irreducible outside forecloses any stable guarantee of the real. Language and performance thus function less as revelatory practices than as strategic operations that reproduce and stabilize existing social relations. Imagination is compelled to fill capitalism's void with consciousness's own impoverished content rather than generating transformative futures.

As Weslati notes, the "desert" invoked by Hardt and Negri in *Empire* (2000) signifies the simultaneous collapse of old imperial orders, which failed to actualize their promised transformations when their historical moment arrived, and the inability of new, utopian alternatives to materialize. The desert represents not the absence of social life but its reconfiguration through the dispersed category of the multitude, a heterotopian condition characterized by the simultaneity of multiple, irreconcilable possibilities.[15] What disappears is not sociality itself, but orientation within it, along with any stable grasp of the real. The problem of the real and its disappearance is thus fundamentally linguistic and representational, a condition that resonates with Lacan's account of the real as perceptible yet unrepresentable, and with Baudrillard's later visual logic of simulation.

Anticipating Hardt and Negri's analysis by two decades, Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) had already described this collapse through the same Borgesian allegory of the Empire and its map.[16] This marks the historical moment when simulations give way to the order of the hyperreal, or a coordinate of a place Baudrillard sees as "the desert of the real." Invoking Borges's fable of the map that becomes coextensive with the territory it represents, Baudrillard clarifies that "even *inverted,* Borges's fable is unusable."[17]

Historically speaking, it is not too bold to suggest that the Situationists inhabited the last era in which one could keep their head in the clouds and feet on the ground, where a leap in either direction remained

[15] Ibid., 47.

[16] Negri and Hardt's text was written in the nineties, but only published in 2000.

[17] Emphasis mine. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, *op. cit.*, 1. Baudrillard also references the Empire, but in this instance the Empire remains, as imperialism. What has disappeared is the difference between differences in the category of Empire and of past, present and future.

conceivable and actionable. Debord's *interruptionism* (with the Letterists), for instance, still had the power to alter reality and could still reshape *non-places* and, in doing so, create history and change meaning at will.[18] But, May '68 allowed capitalism not only to survive but to refine its strategy by absorbing rupture into the spectacle as a narrative effect, a mere shift in plot. The result was a flattened plane of reality that admits no outside, where the real, reality, art, and artifice collapse into a one-sided Möbius strip, Baudrillard's figure for the hyperreal and the basis of a new capitalist realism.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard shows that simulation cannot remain simulation. A staged bank robbery is immediately converted into a reality where police shoot, hostages may die, ransom is paid. This violence does not testify to the reality of money or order but exposes the real's function as the annihilation of simulation. It is here, finally that the order of the hyperreal enters the scene, sustained precisely by erasing the distinction between simulation and reality, making meaning itself dependent on their very collapse.[19] And precisely in this respect, the Situationists did experience the final historical moment in which "the world of art" could still be conceived as distinct from the real, and in which sabotage could function as a strategy for dismantling theatrical props, instead of being part of the same spectacle. In practice, the Situationists' deployment of *détournement* often amounted to an inflation of the very forms they denounced through an intensification of the spectacle under the guise of its negation, a tactic subsequently absorbed and amplified in turn by capitalism's post-'68 logic.[20] What followed as observed in the *Comments to the Society of the Spectacle* was not the disappearance of illusion but its totalization in an organic unity.[21]

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[18] Most famously the disruption of Charlie Chaplin's press conference in 1952, at the Ritz Hotel, because of the actor's being the epitome of critique without action.

[19] Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (University of Michigan Press, 2010), 20.

[20] See, Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999). Similarly, Félix Guattari and Antonio Negri argue in *Communists Like Us* (1984; Semiotext(e), Foreign Agents Series, 1990) that the post-'68 global regime functions by absorbing differences, staged as multiplicities, into a unified operational logic.

[21] This unity is realized through the fusion of what Debord terms the "concentrated spectacle," characteristic of bureaucratic–totalitarian regimes such as the USSR, and the "diffuse spectacle," typical of advanced capitalist societies, particularly the United States. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Debord argues that these two

This leads us to the observation that, within the Marxist tradition, what is often misidentified as a problem of perspective is in fact a problem of content and its form.[22] As Christoph Schuringa observes, following Althusser's demarcation between Hegelian idealism and Marxian materialism, rotating a subject leaves its content intact, merely inverted. To engage content at all, form must be turned inside-out. The material basis of an inverted world should not be understood as a reality turned upside down, but as one rendered inside-out. Direct experience thus translates into a problem of representation, particularly in Debord's analysis and in the technique of *détournement*, as the reversal of direction cultural elements.

For Debord, the migration of the world into representation still presupposes the existence of reality somewhere--alienated, deferred, and temporarily inaccessible. Reality is not absent but displaced. Yet the Situationists never fully grasped the consequences of this inside-out condition, nor did they develop methods capable of confronting capitalism beyond the critique of false consciousness. As Schuringa argues, "Marx himself goes on to specify *not* that Hegel's dialectic must be 'turned the right way up,' but that it must be turned inside out."[23]

In the same year in which Debord published his most famous text, used as a manifesto for the upheavals of May '68, Raoul Vaneigem published *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, a work approved and praised by Debord for spreading situationist thought.[24] Written as a guide to revolutionary thinking for younger generations, Vaneigem advocated a 'reversal of perspective' meant to lead the reader toward a rectified vision of life and reality. This reversal was intended to expose everyday perception as already distorted, or in the sense of the very optics shaped and

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forms converge into what he calls the "integrated spectacle," a configuration that combines centralized control with diffuse commodified mediation. While not identical to Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, the integrated spectacle approaches it insofar as representation no longer merely mediates reality but becomes indistinguishable from it. See, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988), Commentary 160.

[22] See Christoph Schuringa, *Karl Marx and the Actualization of Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 8.

[23] Ibid. Emphasis in original.

[24] Guy Debord's Telegram to Raoul Vaneigem, 8 March 1965. Available at: https://www.notbored.org/debord-8March1965.html (Accessed: 1 January 2026).

sustained by capitalist interests in order to reproduce reality in a form compatible with its own continued existence and operability. Yet a mere reversal of perspective, turning the view right-side-up, changes nothing about the nature of the objects themselves.

### *3. Soyez réalistes, demandez l'impossible* **(Be realistic, demand the impossible)**

One might be tempted to conclude that the Situationists, like other avant-gardes committed to the sublation of art into life, were paradoxically oriented toward a flattening of reality that would later characterize their own historical defeat. As Debord observed, "Dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it; and surrealism sought to realize art without abolishing it."[25] Yet within Debord's critique of the spectacle, this flattening remained a mediated distortion rather than an ontological closure. The difference is that by incorporating Lefebvre's theory of moments, the Situationists sought to interrupt spectacular mediation by opening everyday life to a plurality of qualitatively distinct moments irreducible to representation, that is moments, that are singular, non-reproducible, and resistant to spectacular circulation.

In Baudrillard's hyperreality, representation no longer mediates reality but replaces it, eliminating the distance on which Debord's critique depends. The Situationists' failure is thus historical: they operated within a spectacular regime that still presupposed an outside, precisely when capitalism was reorganizing itself around a logic in which difference proliferates without producing internal ruptures. This condition has since been actualized through technological mediation that transforms everyone into producers of their own alienation, as Voyer had suggested,[26] rather than into passive spectators of a coerced spectacle; spectators create the spectacle for themselves. The flattening realized after 1968 is therefore not the paradoxical defeat/fulfillment of the Situationist project, but its negation under conditions in which the spectacle becomes reality as lived-experience itself.[27]

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[25] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Zone Books, 1994), thesis 191.

[26] Cf. Jean-Pierre Voyer, *It's Crazy How Many Things Don't Exist*, 71.

[27] In *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1990), Debord acknowledged that the society he had analyzed in 1967 had met exactly its concept, and that his earlier critique had, in effect, prophesized the very developments he hoped to counter.

Today's reality is flat and indifferent to different moments, based on a hypnotic oxymoronic structure[28] that forecloses openings for difference, and as such wars are peaceful when experienced from screens, the spectacle is participative as we disclose our most intimate thoughts online. When Baudrillard pioneered the theory of the hyperreal, there was no longer any border separating art or artifice from life. The dream of realizing art into life becomes perverted into a condition where the hyperreal has subsumed both into its own self-referential logic without transcendence.[29] Without difference in moments or situations, everything bears the same taste.

For instance, it is already unimaginable to think of a day in which the news palimpsest has nothing to report, or nothing of importance worth inserting into the fabric of one's individual everyday life.[30] Yet even during Baudrillard's hyperreal, there remained detectable traces when television screens showed only static after midnight sign-offs. In those moments, the void was signaled and the contingency of the spectacle briefly exposed. Absence, indeterminacy, and multiplicity (understood in a Situationist sense as constitutive of lived experience) were still perceptible, precisely what contemporary hyperreality has effaced, leaving only self-reproducing images as proxies for difference, possibility, and the real.

## 4. The hypocrisy of the révélateurs

Filtered through Situationist imagination, May '68 should have marked revolutionary sublation. The workers' movement was neutralized through wage increases and minor concessions while students dispersed for summer holidays. Capitalist antagonism was absorbed, not sublated, and the struggle for recognition was resolved into a (mis)recognition of workers' rights rather than their transformation into non-workers. Theory was severed from praxis and the hoped-for rupture never actualized.

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[28] Alexander Gungov, *Logika na izmamata* (Sofia: Avangard Prima Press, 2021), 122.

[29] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, thesis 191. The full text of the thesis concludes that the transcendence of art is the telos of this pursued sublation.

[30] Yet even in this totalization, reality is not abolished but displaced, glimpsable in historical fissures. On April 18, 1930, BBC Radio announced, "There is no news," and played piano music instead of the bulletin. BBC News, "'There Is No News:' What a Change from 1930 to Today," April 17, 2017, accessed January 6, 2026, BBC, *https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-39633603*.

As Weslati observes, "in bourgeois modern tyrannies, the pleasures of recognition are replaced by a different discourse on the pleasurable rewards of work."[31]

On the other hand, the Situationists may have aspired to function as *révélateurs* to a (ideal) societal *réalisateur*, revealing to society its own environment and hence its perpetual unconscious re-enactment into reality. Following Weslati's explanation of the duality of *révélateur–réalisateur* that Kojève identifies in the Napoleon–Hegel pairing,[32] universal action is coupled with absolute knowledge, the Situationist International in turn might have sought to provide the absolute knowledge that would interpret the meaning of their epoch's universal action: the society of the spectacle.

If their aimed positioning was that of mere *révélateurs* to the social *réalisateur* of action, this would explain and justify not only the Situationist failure to exit contemplation and *theoria*, but also the disappearance from the scene of the protests of other scholars and Marxists, such as Althusser, who earned himself his own graffiti on the wall asking, "A quoi sert Althusser?"[33] Literally, the graffiti asking of what use the most famous Marxist lecturer of the time was did denounce how he himself failed to apply one of the most important Marxist principles precisely because of his absence from the events of May '68. Althusser was then perceived as preaching revolutionary doctrine without participating in the historical moment that demanded its practical realization. This slogan can undoubtedly be read as a broader critique of the *intellectual* who remains confined to theory, exposing the perceived sterility of a Marxism detached from lived struggle and immediate praxis.

In this sense, Vaneigem's famous exhortation, "one more effort if you want to become revolutionaries,"[34] need not be read as inherently hypocritical. Rather, it points to a necessary duality and preserved tensions, revealing that the separation of thought from action the Situation-

[31] Hager Weslati, "Kojève's Letter to Stalin," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 184 (March/April 2014): 15.

[32] Ibid., 14

[33] Axel Honneth, "Althusser's Philosophical Disorder," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 2016, accessed January 6, 2026, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/althussers-philosophical-disorder/

[34] Raoul Vaneigem, "The Nihilist," in *The ReVolution of Everyday Life* (1967). Vaneigem references Marquis de Sade's manifesto, "One more effort, Frenchmen, if you would be republicans!" (1795).

ists sought to abolish was ultimately reinscribed in the telos of its own actualization, as they assumed the role of mediators between theory and praxis in the situations of May ’68 as the most kairotic moment when revolution might finally materialize.

Similarly, if, in a Hegelian-Marxist sense, Vaneigem's aim in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* was to disseminate cognitive tools for uniting ideas with action, the Situationists' strategic failure lay in their adherence to a Hyppolitian framework demanding the escalation of difference into contradiction and sublation-precisely when capitalism prospered through the multiplication of non-contradictory differences that never crystallize into antagonism.

Debord’s engagement with Hegel was indeed mediated through Jean Hyppolite's translation and interpretation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.[35] Hyppolite insisted that difference must be pushed to contradiction, where indeterminate differences convert into determinate oppositions that can then be sublated. Détournement was intended to push contradictions to the point where the spectacle would negate itself, following the formula that “the more a détourned element makes logical sense to the viewer, the less effective it is.”[36] This tactic, however, paradoxically inflated the very forms it sought to negate, intensifying vacuity while masking it in the grandiosity and exaggeration of form. But exposing contradiction through intensification only works if the system still operates dialectically.

“Exaggeration is the mother of invention,”[37] proclaimed a May '68 graffiti, while another compared it to a weapon,[38] which also captured late capitalism's ability to absorb and neutralize critique by amplifying it. As *pharmakon*, exaggeration inflates situations lacking content, revealing the void itself as spectacle. The Situationists inhabited a moment when dialectical space still existed. By 1991, imagination could only reproductively repeat current reality. Fisher's distinction between the real and reality marks the definitive foreclosure of the Hyppolitian project.

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[35] Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 128n.

[36] Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, “A User’s Guide to Détournement,” *Les Lèvres Nues* no. 8 (May 1956). English translation by Ken Knabb in *Situationist International Anthology* (2024).

[37] Julien Besançon, *The Walls Have the Floor: Mural Journal, May ’68*, trans. Adrian Nathan West (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 10.

[38] Ibid., 134.

As Lacan would put it, the real is suppressed by reality, and any alternative is erased.

## 5. Conclusion. Or, how to look for shade in the desert

The slogan *sous les pavés, la plage* has been interpreted as the emblem of the Situationist aspiration to uncover an authentic life beneath the spectacle of capitalist everydayness. Yet this archaeological metaphor misreads Marx's base superstructure model, because what lies beneath the pavement should not be imagined as a hidden Eden but as the very economic foundation that makes capitalist social relations possible. The beach is not a buried authenticity awaiting excavation, but the material ground already cleared, reorganized, and occupied by capitalism itself.

It was perhaps precisely through May 1968 that capitalism learned to thrive on non-contradictory differences, absorbing dissent through simulation, as Boltanski and Chiapello suggest.[39] What remains beneath the paving stones is therefore not the beach, but the hyperreal surface itself, a terrain in which authentic experience is foreclosed and replaced by the simulation of depth.

Baudrillard would eventually choose to embrace and dwell in the desert of the real.[40] His ultimate proposition, enacted through his own theoretical and existential praxis, was to cease searching for a concealed real altogether. Having discovered nothing left to excavate, Baudrillard turned to the phantasmagoric as the only available realism, inhabiting the quasi-situations of the hyperreal rather than opposing them, perhaps thereby also confirming with a Sisyphean smile that *there is* no alternative.[41]

As Hager Weslati observes, the desert should be understood as a possible revolutionary space, but without the impatience of applicability of theory into praxis.[42] It provides the coordinates of a terrain in which the impossibility of return to pre-spectacular authenticity is acknowledged without abandoning the possibility of transformation itself. The aporia we face is therefore not one of choice between beach and desert,

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[39] Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2007), 167–217.

[40] Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1989).

[41] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009).

[42] Hager Weslati, "La pensée du désert: 'The Paradox of Theory' and the Narrative of Boom and Bust in Cultural Studies," *Tropisme*, no. 10 (2010): 56, 59.

as it is late to return to an unmediated *real.* Yet we cannot simply accept the totalization of hyperreality. The question is then that of building life in the desert, precisely because if the desert of the real is our only terrain, the only revolutionary task is learning to assemble forms of life on our desert island. Kojève already anticipated this condition when he suggested inventing a "simulacrum" of revolutionary ideas once the production of genuinely new ones had become impossible,[43] paradoxically also describing the mechanism through which post 1968 capitalism would absorb all opposition through the multiplication of non-contradictory differences. In this sense, Situationist critique appears Hyppolitian in its theoretical structure and Kojèvian in its actualization, yet ultimately turned on its head by history itself.

Here, we can conclude that Debord's tactical orientation in living on a beach that slowly became his desert remained marked by the Kojèvian struggle for recognition, a logic of confrontation that if literally read culminated in exclusion, contraction, and ultimately, in Debord's own self-annihilation. As Baudrillard warned, "he who strikes with meaning is killed by meaning."[44]

But while the dialectical stage has emptied and the critical stage dissolved,[45] what remains is not the promise of a buried beach but the fragile task of enduring and orienting oneself within the unfolding desert.[46] For once, theory has proven that even philosophizing from the depths of *nothingness* can become "an instrument for practical life".[47]

[43] Hager Weslati, "Kojève's Letter to Stalin," 15.
[44] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 161.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Jean Baudrillard, *America*.
[47] Alexander Gungov, "Introduction: Touching Fictitious Reality in Philosophizing," 9.

# 6. The Subjective Gaze and Fictional Reality: A Jungian Reading of *The Magus*

*Bianca Foghel, (Dr., West University of Timisoara)*

**Abstract:** This paper examines how John Fowles's *The Magus* constructs "fictional reality" through the protagonist's subjective gaze, interpreted via Carl Jung's typology of introverted sensation. During his identification with the persona of the artist, Nicholas Urfe perceives Greece, Bourani and the figures around him not as autonomous realities but as extensions of his own metaphorical projections. Objective stimuli are diminished to triggers for preexisting images, producing a psychic mirror world in which Nicholas's aesthetic expectations eclipse the world in its own right. Conchis's orchestrated masque exposes and destabilizes this perceptual stance by confronting Nicholas with sensorial experiences that blur the border between representation and fact, revealing his tendency to mistake symbolic constructs for lived reality. By tracing how Nicholas's dominant sensing function, supported by rationalizing thought and deprived of intuition, generates a fictionalized version of reality, the paper shows how *The Magus* stages the dangers of a gaze governed by collective images rather than individual experience. Read through a Jungian lens, the novel illuminates the philosophical stakes of fictional reality as both a defensive strategy and a perceptual limitation, suggesting that genuine encounter with self and world becomes possible only when the subjective gaze loosens its hold on metaphor and projection.

**Keywords:** subjective gaze, introverted sensation, analytical psychology, collective unconscious

## Reality Perception as Object Assimilation

John Fowles's *The Magus* frames reality as a problem of perception rather than of truth. This paper approaches the novel through Jung's concept of introverted sensation, arguing that Nicholas Urfe's subjective gaze transforms experience into a form of fictional reality governed by metaphor, projection, and inherited symbolic images. Identified with the

artist persona, Nicholas perceives Greece, others, and events not as autonomous realities but as mirrors of his inner expectations, confusing symbolic constructs with lived experience. Bourani intensifies and exposes this disposition by staging encounters that exploit his reliance on sensorial vividness and narrative coherence. Read in this light, *The Magus* reveals fictional reality as a perceptual limitation that must be disrupted before a genuine encounter between the self and the world becomes possible.

**Regressive Restoration and the Sensualist Persona**

Regressive restoration designates the negative reactivation of the persona archetype following a disruption at the level of consciousness. In Nicholas Urfe's case, this disruption occurs when he realizes that his literary vocation was illusory. The collapse of the poet–artist persona deprives him of the metaphorical lens through which he had previously mediated reality, leaving him with a narrowed perceptual repertoire. In its place emerges a regressively restored persona: that of the sensualist, whose primary mode of relating to the world is through possession and sensory immediacy.

This restoration entails a corresponding shift in psychological type. Nicholas abandons metaphorical projection and resorts almost exclusively to sensation, seeking to internalize reality as a source of intense stimuli. Jung emphasizes that such regressions are accompanied by a deterioration of reality-perception, as the reconstructed persona attempts to exclude the unconscious altogether. The extraverted sensation type, oriented toward the object as a source of stimulation, thereby diminishes the imprint of individuality required for personal development, attempting, as Jung notes, "to forget if possible that one has an unconscious at all".[1]

The transition from introverted to extraverted sensation is precipitated by Nicholas's recognition that rendering internal impressions through art no longer provides a viable means of relating to the world. Whereas the introverted sensation type projects subjective impressions through metaphor, extraverted sensation seeks to seize reality directly, valuing objects only insofar as they yield fresh sensations. Experience

[1] Carl G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, ed. H. Read et al. (London: Routledge, 1966), par. 179.

thus becomes instrumentalized, and reality is habitually objectified in order to be made "possessable."[2]

Although physical sensation remains Nicholas's dominant cognitive function throughout both identifications, the crucial distinction lies in how sensory data are processed. Introverted sensation filters perception through subjective imagery, while extraverted sensation reflects the object with apparent realism. As Sharp observes, introversion renders "the impression made by the object on the subject," whereas extraversion produces "a realistic reflection of the object."[3] Consequently, Nicholas's relationship to Greece evolves from aesthetic admiration to possessive attachment, a shift epitomized by his resentment at the loss of solitude on the island's southern shore, which he had come to regard as "my secret province and no one else's" full stop on the inside of the apostrophes.[4]

## Sensory Immediacy, Fragmentation, and the Cage of Perception

With the dissolution of the poet persona, reality is no longer externalized through contemplative description but internalized through sensory absorption. Greece, once idealized, now appears anonymous, mirroring Nicholas's recognition of his own existential anonymity. The episode of the distant song during his suicide attempt marks a crucial moment in this transformation. The song arrests his aestheticized self-destruction through sheer sensory presence, exposing the inadequacy of poetic literalization and drawing him back into physical immediacy. The synesthetic imagery that follows reflects Nicholas's attempt to compensate for his one-sided perception by intensifying sensory input rather than integrating undifferentiated cognitive functions.

The recollection of the *gabbia*, the self-constructed cage of illusion, encapsulates this predicament. As Conradi notes, it prefigures the magical enclosure of Bourani, symbolizing a perceptual imprisonment sustained by self-delusion. For the extraverted sensation type, this inward flow of psychic energy isolates the self within the object-world, impairing individuality by replacing authentic encounter with posses-

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[2] Carl G. Jung, *Psychological Types*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, ed. H. Read et al. (London: Routledge, 1971), par. 606.

[3] Daryl Sharp, *Personality Types: Jung's Model of Typology* (Toronto: Thistle Printing Company Ltd., 1987), 80.

[4] John Fowles, *The Magus: A Revised Version* (London: Vintage, 2004), 67.

sion. Whether projecting idealized images or introjecting sensory reflections, Nicholas remains trapped in a univocal relation to reality that fragments perception and forecloses genuine individuation.

The aforementioned attitudes are illustrated at the narrative level through the protagonist's attitude towards Greece and towards feminine alterity. Since Alison embodies straightforwardness and the reality Nicholas seeks to distance himself from as dictated by the persona of the poet artist, he cannot project his idealizing impulses upon her; thereby seeking a more abstract, mythical entity that would respond to and better accommodate his projections. Just before the futility of his literary efforts dawns upon him, Nicholas Urfe cold-bloodedly acknowledges that "I wanted to hurt her [Alison]."[5] His rage against everything Alison stands for is justified through her inability to conform to Nicholas's idealizing constraints. He must thus dig deeper for a more appropriate medium onto which he can project his idealistic impressions. The first such entity appears, as discussed in the previous chapter, upon his first contact with Greece, when Nicholas resorts to a purely metaphorical discourse in rendering the outer world, sacrificing lived experience to contemplative description: "all pure, all noble, luminous, immense, all as it always had been" and "It was like a journey into space. I was standing on Mars, knee-deep in thyme, under a sky that seemed never to have known dust or cloud."[6] The recurrent comparison between Greece and a Circe-like feminine entity foreshadows the fundamentals of his relationship with Lily/Julie:

> I fell head over heels, totally and forever in love with the Greek landscape from the moment I arrived. But with the love came a contradictory, almost irritating, feeling of impotence and inferiority, as if Greece were a woman so sensually provocative that I must fall physically and desperately in love with her, and at the same time so calmly aristocratic that I should never be able to approach her.[7]

We therefore witness how the idealized object undergoes a metamorphosis, gaining corporeality and being literally objectified in order to satisfy Nicholas's sensorial impulses and his need to possess it. How-

[5] Ibid., 55.
[6] Ibid., 49.
[7] Ibid., 49.

ever, as Neary argued, Nicholas "now encounters something that he cannot possess, cannot literalize," despite his efforts.[8] Neary goes on explaining that Nicholas "falls in love with a woman, but it is only a metaphorical woman, and the metaphor refuses to accommodate itself to literal explication."[9] Interestingly, upon first meeting Lily, the character-narrator too eagerly acknowledges his own background to be able to have a sense of familiarity and therefore control over the female protagonist's individuality, who will soon prove to be quite the opposite of anything definable and familiar. As he first hears her speak, he comments: "It was very largely my own – product of boarding school, university, the accent of what a sociologist once called the Dominant Hundred Thousand."[10] Nicholas's constant shift between metaphorizing and literalizing the phenomenal reality as well as otherness, reveals his dedication to following collective principles and categorizations. He projects and seeks to possess, to introject, collective ideals that have nothing to do with individuality and are situated at the opposite of authenticity.

Carl G. Jung also explains this unnatural personification of the environment through the excessive identification between ego-consciousness and persona, and this sort of identification triggers the intrusion of the anima into the conscious world:

> To the degree that the ego identifies with the persona, the anima, like everything unconscious, is projected into the real objects of our environment. She is regularly to be found, therefore, in the woman we are in love with [...]. They are projected upon more distant objects, from which no immediate disturbance is to be feared. But the more sensitive a person is, the closer these daemonic projections will come.[11]

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[8] John Neary, *Something and Nothingness: The Fiction of John Updike and John Fowles* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 130.

[9] Ibid.

[10] John Fowles, *The Magus: A Revised Version* (London: Vintage, 2004), 168.

[11] Carl G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, ed. H. Read et al. (London: Routledge, 1966), par. 508.

## Projection, Possession, and the Anima

Jung notes that consciousness is simultaneously drawn toward the unconscious and resistant to it, fearing the dissolution of its conscious ideals.[12] This tension is central to Nicholas Urfe's perceptual oscillation. As an introverted sensation type, Nicholas initially responds only to objects that can sustain his idealizing projections, most notably Greece, which functions as a metaphorical extension of his inner world. With the dissolution of the artist persona, this mechanism is inverted rather than resolved. Nicholas now responds exclusively to an idealized reality that can be objectified and possessed. Lily, or Julie, emerges as the embodied counterpart of Greece, assimilated as an anima projection and valued primarily as a carrier of idealized stimuli rather than as an autonomous subject.

Conchis's pseudo-autobiographical narratives are designed to confront Nicholas with this egotistic pattern of perception. The story of Count Alphonse de Deukans offers the most explicit parallel. Deukans, described as a "collector of collections," inhabits a castle that resembles a museum of curated objects, mirroring Bourani's theatrical environment. The analogy is made explicit when Nicholas recognizes that Conchis has attempted to turn Bourani into such a gallery, reducing human beings to manipulable figures.[13] The narrative thus stages a mise en abyme in which Bourani, Givray-le-Duc, and the novel itself reflect one another as artificial worlds that imitate life while evacuating it of lived immediacy.

The symmetry between Deukans, Conchis, and Nicholas is reinforced by their shared age and by Conchis's admission of his own inability to judge Deukans at "the most difficult and irritating age of all."[14] This recursive structure exposes Nicholas's enchantment with representation itself, revealing his fascination with self-reflexive systems that substitute aesthetic control for ethical engagement. Both Bourani and Givray-le-Duc function as closed circuits of meaning, presenting life as an endlessly reproducible spectacle devoid of a factual or moral core.

## The Collector Mentality and Sensation as Knowledge

With the abandonment of the poet persona, Nicholas gravitates toward a new identification: that of the adventure-seeking sensualist. This shift is

[12] Ibid., par. 509-510.
[13] John Fowles, *The Magus: A Revised Version* (London: Vintage, 2004), 322.
[14] Ibid., 179.

mirrored by Conchis's self-presentation as an *homme sensual* and finds its theoretical articulation in what Onega describes as the "phase of the collector," attained when reality is apprehended solely through the senses.[15] Nicholas's accumulation of sexual encounters parallels his accumulation of experiences, both driven by a desire for novelty and intensity rather than relation or understanding. Similarly, Deukans "collected in order to collect", exemplifying a mode of existence emptied of purpose beyond acquisition.[16]

For Fowles, collecting is ethically corrosive because it replaces engagement with possession and reduces reality to a reservoir of consumable fragments. This tendency recurs across his fiction, from Frederick Clegg's captivity of Miranda to Charles Smithson's fossil obsession, both of which illustrate the substitution of control for encounter. In each case, the persona adopted conforms to collective patterns rather than expressing individuality, reinforcing Jung's observation that sensation "creates ties to the object" and ultimately pulls the subject into it.[17]

The archetypal force behind such a dynamic lies in projection. Jung emphasizes that archetypes possess autonomy and can seize the subject with compelling intensity, as in the phenomenon of falling in love at first sight.[18] Conchis repeatedly warns Nicholas against this mechanism, noting that collecting extinguishes moral judgment and that the object eventually possesses the possessor.[19] Nicholas himself acknowledges this inversion when he admits to being haunted by the entire Bourani experience rather than by Lily alone.[20] In Jungian terms, the one-sidedness of consciousness forces the unconscious into open opposition, a conflict allegorized by the Godgame itself.[21]

The extraverted sensation type is marked by a univocal mode of

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[15] Susana Onega, *Form and Meaning in the Novels of John Fowles* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989), 94.

[16] John Fowles, *The Magus: A Revised Version* (London: Vintage, 2004), 177.

[17] Carl G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, ed. H. Read et al. (London: Routledge, 1966), par. 119.

[18] Richard I. Evans, *Conversations with Carl Jung and Reactions from Ernest Jones* (Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1964), 51.

[19] John Fowles, *The Magus: A Revised Version* (London: Vintage, 2004), 178.

[20] Ibid., 270.

[21] Carl G. Jung, *Psychological Types*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, ed. H. Read et al. (London: Routledge, 1971), par. 608.

perception that privileges immediate enjoyment over ethical or reflective engagement. Sensation becomes both the means and the end of experience, resulting in chronic dissatisfaction and escalating demands for intensity. Jung characterizes this trajectory as one that leads either to crude hedonism or to an effete aestheticism, both of which drain the object of intrinsic value.[22] Sharp similarly observes that when the pursuit of sensation becomes all-consuming, the object is ruthlessly exploited.[23]

Despite Nicholas's ostensible allegiance to rationalism, his behavior reveals an enslavement to sensation-producing objects that frequently bear little correspondence to reality. Reality itself is reduced to a stimulus for pleasure, and ethical considerations are subordinated to immediate gratification.[24] This distortion is most evident in Nicholas's treatment of women, who are perceived not as persons but as embodiments of collective ideals of femininity. Lily de Seitas explicitly names this pattern when she describes Nicholas as an unscrupulous collector who desires a painting he intends to own at any cost.[25]

The automaton Mirabelle at Givray-le-Duc crystallizes this logic. As a mechanical surrogate for femininity, she embodies the lethal consequences of idealization divorced from individuality. Critics have noted that Mirabelle exposes the monstrosity underlying controlled erotic fantasy, turning desire back upon itself as symbolic self-destruction.[26] Through such images, *The Magus* reveals how fictional reality emerges when perception is governed exclusively by sensation and collective templates, foreclosing the possibility of authentic encounter.

## Idealization, Possession, and the Reversed Pygmalion

The consequences of turning the object of his desire into an ideal that has nothing to do with individuality are comparable to the pathology of a reversed Pygmalion syndrome: instead of enlivening the idealized object, Nicholas devitalizes it through his exclusively pleasure-seeking behavior. The constant need to possess the sensation-providing object is also re-

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] Daryl Sharp, *Personality Types: Jung's Model of Typology* (Toronto: Thistle Printing Company Ltd., 1987), 56-57.

[24] Carl G. Jung, *Psychological Types*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, ed. H. Read et al. (London: Routledge, 1971), par. 606.

[25] John Fowles, *The Magus: A Revised Version* (London: Vintage, 2004), 601.

[26] Pamela Cooper, *The Fictions of John Fowles: Power, Creativity, Femininity* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1991), 92.

called in the repression of the undifferentiated function, in Nicholas's case – intuition: "the repressed intuitions begin to assert themselves in the form of projections upon the object," giving rise to "the wildest suspicions [...]; if the object is a sexual one, jealous fantasies and anxiety states gain the upper hand."[27] These manifestations can be clearly observed in connection with his attitude towards Lily, whom he constantly needs to have within reach, to possess both physically and mentally, and even in connection to his egotistic attitude towards Greece, feeling "irrationally jealous of all these other people who had appeared from nowhere to poach in 'my' territory."[28] This is why, in order to become aware of his objectifying and sensuous-seeking attitude, Nicholas is eventually forced to leave Greece behind, but not before watching Joe literally possess Julie, an act that is meant to make Nicholas relinquish his grip on her.

The correspondence between the relationships de Deukans – Conchis and Conchis – Nicholas having been created and reinforced through the phrase *homme sensual* by which Conchis refers to himself and which faithfully describes Nicholas as well, it becomes clear that Mirabelle, "the symbol of woman's ultimate reification into a phallocratic fantasy", stands for Nicholas's rather onanistic and objectifying attitude to women;[29] this behaviour is made explicit from the first chapters of the novel and consolidated in the episode in which Nicholas, being alone on Moutsa beach, makes "love to the memory of Alison, like an animal, without guilt or shame, *a mere machine for sensation.*"[30] His self-indulging sensuousness is further highlighted by the fact that Moutsa, as revealed by Conchis, means 'snout', bearing a stylistic reference relevant to our perspective since the snout includes the mouth and the nose of an animal, directly hinting at the sense organs Nicholas Urfe uses univocally in his relationship to reality and alterity, hindering him from achieving a sense of balance between conscious and unconscious, between a degree of social adaptation and, at the same time, of individual authenticity.[31]

In accordance with his propensity towards taking in the outer world exclusively through the senses, Nicholas takes the visual dimen-

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[27] Carl G. Jung, *Psychological Types*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, ed. H. Read et al. (London: Routledge, 1971), par. 608.
[28] John Fowles, *The Magus: A Revised Version* (London: Vintage, 2004), 184.
[29] Roula Ikonomakis, *Post-War British Fiction as Metaphysical Ethnography* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008, 247.
[30] John Fowles, *The Magus: A Revised Version* (London: Vintage, 2004), 77.
[31] Ibid., 83.

sion of a Bonnard painting for a comprehensive reality: "I thought of the Bonnard; that was the reality; such moments; not what one could tell."[32] Carl G. Jung insisted that a "symbolic process is an experience in images and of images" but this implies an acknowledgement of the symbolic dimension of reality, which cannot be literalized or concretized in any way since a symbol refers to an unknown dimension of the surrounding and the intrinsic reality; for everything else that is familiar to a certain extent there are the signs and metaphors.[33]

What is further relevant in this line of thought is the reaction Nicholas has to Conchis's statement of allegedly having "lived a great deal in other centuries" to which Nicholas replies "in literature," being curtly contradicted by Conchis: "in reality."[34] This abrupt discussion is continued in the narrative, reaching a climax when Conchis nonchalantly reveals to a perplexed Nicholas that he travels to other worlds. Being devoted solely to physical senses for gaining a perception of the world, Nicholas demands evidence of the extramundane journey, which he considers to have been made "in the flesh", being yet unable to grasp that there are other deeper and subtler dimensions that converge into the construction of reality and of identity.[35]

**Solipsism, Compensation, and the Return of the Unconscious**

It seems that throughout the novel Nicholas occasionally lapses into a certain degree of solipsism that dictates the investment of personal energy, of the libido, strictly into the ego, eventually depriving the outer world of the power to exert influence upon him. Nicholas's solipsism is fostered by the identification of his ego-consciousness with the persona of the sensualist, one-sidedly resorting to physical senses when relating to everything that is outside of his ego-consciousness. Furthermore, Sharp explains how, according to Jungian analytical psychology, the sole use of the primary function generates a fulminant compensatory outburst in the inferior function, which occurs at the level of the unconscious contents, unleashing an additional imagery pertaining to the

[32] Ibid., 99.
[33] Carl G. Jung, *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Vol. 8 of The Collected Works of C. G. Jung (London: Routledge, 1960), par. 82.
[34] John Fowles, *The Magus: A Revised Version* (London: Vintage, 2004), 105.
[35] Ibid., 106.

world of unconscious fantasies.[36] This natural compensation reverberates, giving rise to intense emotional responses, which Nicholas only too often evinces throughout the novel, especially in relation to Conchis's oral narratives: he constantly has the feeling that "something was trying to slip between me and reality."[37]

The episode when Conchis takes Nicholas by boat to the islet of Petrocaravi, dubbed the "ship of stone," and lures an octopus out of its hiding place, slashing it open with a knife is also relevant; apparently, as Conchis observes, another octopus shall move the same night into the same hiding place, being liable to a similar brutal death. Nicholas then receives a shrewd self-portrait in connection with the episode: "You notice reality is not necessary. Even the octopus prefers the ideal."[38] Nicholas is thus compared to the gullible octopus that does not see reality beyond the surface and mere semblance. Our background requires us to adopt a hiding place in the form of the persona and what Conchis aims to emphasize is that the persona might indeed provide a perfect camouflage especially when the ego-consciousness identifies itself with it; however, this camouflage is a mere semblance of protection, the self being thus exposed to the dangers of background constraints and uniformity, which in the end may prove to be lethal to the integrity of the self.

What is particularly interesting is that Nicholas and perhaps the reader as well perceive the episode as yet another of Conchis's narratives. Since the episode echoes the structure of the previous narratives, including an implicit morale, it is almost as if the polymath had narrated the episode, instead of actually enacting it in front of Nicholas's eyes, which makes him think of Conchis's earlier narratives of the Maine, of Neuve Chapelle; he also remembers "it was Sunday morning; the time for sermons and parables."[39] It seems that Conchis's intention, similar to that of the author is again to blot out the boundaries between reality and personal perception, so that Nicholas and the reader are able to question what we are socially instilled to believe is our reality. Reality cannot be objectified; it cannot be grasped solely through the prism of physical perception, acquired generalities and stereotypes: "I do not ask you to

[36] Daryl Sharp, *Personality Types: Jung's Model of Typology* (Toronto: Thistle Printing Company Ltd., 1987), 11.
[37] John Fowles, *The Magus: A Revised Version* (London: Vintage, 2004), 105.
[38] Ibid., 138.
[39] Ibid., 137.

believe. All I ask you is to pretend to believe. Just pretend to believe. It will be easier."[40] Eventually, Nicholas observes that Conchis "looked like Picasso imitating Ghandi imitating a buccaneer. [...] His even teeth gleamed falsely", perhaps intuiting the falsity of his own persona, mirrored by Conchis's constantly shifting masks; especially the buccaneer echoes Nicholas's assumed persona of the adventurer, while the comparison to Picasso might stand for Nicholas's propensity towards the intensity offered by the visual dimension, constantly collecting images to quench his craving for sensorial representations.[41]

However, since he has not yet rejected the veil of the sensualist persona, he once again resorts to employing the physical senses when taking in the exterior reality: "I listened to the house and the night outside. Silence; [...] Once again, the cheap browning paper and the old-fashioned type showed it to be unmistakably a genuine prewar relic."[42] Nicholas's habit of gullibly taking for granted everything that appeals to his senses is once again asserted. Furthermore, he is constantly craving incentives for his senses, for instance, towards the end of the same chapter, when he comments with an irritated tone: "meanwhile, the masque was letting me down. Silence still reigned."[43] Blinded by the mask he is wearing in front of others and even in front of himself, he cannot realize the fact that the experience at Bourani is not meant to satisfy his solipsistic needs, but the yet undiscovered goal of harmonizing the ego-consciousness with the unconscious.

The following chapter reinforces Nicholas's attachment to the persona of the solipsist, as he describes Alison's letter as "an intrusion – of *dispensable reality* into pleasure, of now artificial duty into instinct. I couldn't leave the island."[44] He becomes more and more possessed by the forces of the unconscious symbolized by the island and vividly represented within Conchis's masque but he needs to gradually shift from the universality of the collective unconscious towards the individual unconscious, meaning he is bound to reject the falsity of the facade and become authentic in terms of individuality.

With regard to the intricate relation between the persona and anima

[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid., 139.
[42] Ibid., 190.
[43] Ibid.,192.
[44] Ibid., 202.

archetype and their impact upon the Nicholas's perception of reality, it is perhaps interesting to point out that there is a constant interplay between ideal and reality throughout the novel. Nicholas continuously objectifies archetypal ideals into a personal reality, which is why he cannot discern between collective and individual, closely adhering to a self-fabricated facet in the form of the persona archetype. Being hooked on the persona of the sensualist, Nicholas's anima ideal is also perceived through the looking-glass of the senses, for instance, when Lily approaches him in the forest at a certain point, as he was eagerly awaiting "anything that Conchis might now offer" she first appeals to his auditory, olfactory, tactile and visual senses before eventually emerging as a total entity, an entity that is in fact a materialization of an ideal reality, perhaps closer to the realm of fantasy than that of objective reality:

> I had not been lying there five minutes before *I heard a rustle* and, simultaneously, *smelt* the sandalwood perfume. I pretended to be asleep. The rustle came closer. I *heard the tiny* crepitation of **pine-needles**. Her feet were just behind my head. There was *a louder rustle*; she had sat down, and was? very close behind me. I thought she would drop a cone, *tickle* my nose. But in a very *low voice* she began to *recite***,** Shakespeare.[45]

## Visual Objectification and the Limits of Sensory Reality

When referring to Lily, Nicholas privileges the visual dimension, objectifying her in accordance with a prefabricated ideal of femininity: "I looked at the nape of her neck, her slim shoulders, her total reality."[46] He probes this "total reality" primarily through the senses, especially touch: "'you're as physically real as I am.' I pinched her arm, and she winced."[47] Lily is valued less as a complete being than as a surface reflecting the features of Nicholas's persona, an aspect that anticipates the discussion of the anima archetype. Attempting to articulate the destabilizing effects of the masque, Nicholas compares his sense of reality to gravity, something one can resist only temporarily.[48] This metaphor reveals how the unconscious material activated at Bourani disrupts his ex-

[45] Ibid., 203.
[46] Ibid., 205.
[47] Ibid., 208.
[48] Ibid., 209.

clusively sensorial perception of reality, which lacks the imprint of individuality as a whole. Unwittingly, Nicholas prepares the ground for the dissolution of the persona and the emergence of the shadow, a process initiated by the unconscious itself.

To round up the idea that Nicholas's persona has a direct impact upon his perception of the extrinsic as well as the intrinsic dimension of reality, I shall emphasize what Conchis tells Nicholas in the chapter that illustrates the dissolution of the persona, namely that "verification is the only scientific criterion of reality. That does not mean that there may not be realities that are unverifiable."[49] Similarly, Carl G. Jung militates for a non-categorizing apprehension, one marked by an input of individuality, as opposed to a purely scientific and factual dissection of the world surrounding us:

> When everything is statistical, all individual qualities are wiped out, and that, of course, is quite unbecoming. In fact, it is unhygienic, because if you wipe out the mythology of a man, his entire historical sequence, he becomes a statistical average, a number; that is, he becomes nothing.[50]

The moment Conchis chooses to utter the statement regarding the plurality of realities is also noteworthy since it precedes the hypnosis episode narrated in the same chapter, an episode of crucial importance for the analysis discussing the disintegration of the persona and Nicholas's shift towards his shadow and his own individuality, further away from the enticing patterns of the collective. The "unverifiable realities" showcased by Conchis within the Bourani masque through the meta-narrative, the psychological and the mythical elements recurrently employed, are meant to aid Nicholas in realizing that he should not continuously attempt to authenticate his perception of reality through tangibility, classifying experiences and feelings according to the general patterns that are invariably part of our unconscious structure but that should not overshadow the individual dimension.

This is how the author constructs Nicholas as the extraverted sensation type, a psychological trait which corresponds to the regressively restored persona of the sensualist, who can only establish a relation with

[49] Ibid. 235.

[50] Richard I. Evans, *Conversations with Carl Jung and Reactions from Ernest Jones* (Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1964), 111.

reality when receiving intense physiological stimuli. In order to turn the internalized stimuli into a form of reality, which he strives to fit into patterns, more and more vivid and realistic, the extraverted sensation type requires an intense physiological imagery, which the Godgame lavishly provides in the form of mythical and universal representations meant to eventually disenchant him from the uniformity of the stereotypical and to bring him closer to the genuineness of individuality.

**Fictional Reality and the Limits of the Subjective Gaze**

Viewed through a Jungian framework, *The Magus* presents fictional reality not as mere illusion but as a psychic construct generated by a one-sided mode of perception. Nicholas Urfe's development illustrates how the subjective gaze, shaped first by introverted sensation and later by its extraverted counterpart, transforms experience into projection, possession, and aesthetic control. Whether reality is filtered through metaphor or seized through sensory immediacy, it remains subordinated to collective images that obscure individuality and impede authentic relation.

Conchis's masque functions not as an alternative truth but as a deliberate destabilization of Nicholas's perceptual habits. By intensifying both symbolic illusion and sensorial vividness, the Godgame exhausts Nicholas's reliance on representation and tangibility as criteria of reality. The novel thus reveals the ethical consequences of confusing symbolic constructs with lived experience and of reducing others to instruments within the ego's psychic economy. Fictional reality emerges as a defensive strategy that shields consciousness from uncertainty while simultaneously imprisoning it within repetition and stereotype.

At stake in *The Magus* is not the opposition between fiction and reality, but the conditions under which reality becomes possible. Fowles suggests that reality cannot be secured through verification, sensation, or narrative coherence alone. It requires a loosening of the persona and an openness to the destabilizing claims of the unconscious. Only when the subjective gaze relinquishes its hold on projection and possession can reality be encountered as a relational process rather than an object to be mastered. In this sense, *The Magus* ultimately frames individuation as an ethical transformation of perception, in which fictional reality gives way to responsibility, encounter, and the possibility of authenticity.

# 7. The Subjective Ground of Differentiation in Kant, Proust and Mamardashvili: Topology of Fiction

*Gigla Gonashvili, PhD, gonashvili.gigla@gmail.com*
*(Independent scholar residing in Germany)*

**Abstract***:* This paper focuses on the concept of the subjective ground of differentiation, which is first found in Kant and later re-elaborated in the works of the French novelist Marcel Proust and the Soviet-Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili. Through this constellation of thinkers, we approach what can be called a "topology of fiction," which concerns itself with determining the primordial place of artistic creation, just as it does for the act of thinking. In this sense, the work of art appears as a work of deciphering signs dispersed through heterogeneous strata of lived time and space. These lines of argument are complemented by the analyses of Gilles Deleuze in *Proust and Signs* (1964).

**Keywords**: subjective ground, feeling, differentiation, topology, sign, thought, creation

## I. Introduction

As it happens, Kant was Mamardashvili's favorite philosopher and Proust his favorite novelist. Across this convergence, through different times and spaces, we have a configuration of figures who show a heightened awareness of what has been called a subjective ground of differentiation, which appears foremost as a necessity in the act of thinking. This necessity, which has, perhaps rather paradoxically, a spontaneous character (a felt sense), calls for the opening of an inner space that is indispensable for thinking just as it is for the creation of fiction.

Proust might not have been a philosopher, but he certainly considered writing a philosophical treatise. He wrote in 1908 in his notebook: "Should it be a novel, a philosophical study, am I a novelist?"[1] Ulti-

[1] Annick Bouillaguet and Brian G. Rogers, eds., *Dictionnaire Marcel Proust* (Paris: Champion, 2020), 764.

mately, In *Search of Lost Time* turned out to be a peculiar fiction: the seven-volume work is, in essence, about how the narrator (Marcel) becomes a writer. The theoretical reflections about art, life, and philosophy are intricately woven with the narrative. It is in this way that the background itself, upon which the characters are drawn, comes into play and starts posing questions about its motifs and motivations, or more precisely – about its beginning and its place.

We will thus talk about the topology of this fiction, which seems to begin in a primordial place – in a dark room deep in the night where the awakened sleeper (the narrator) is struggling to reconstitute his place in the world. Topology is an important concept for Mamardashvili and, seen from a retrospective point of view, for Kant as well, who is no less concerned about our orientation in the world. A beginning must be found, and this beginning appears only after the arduous work of elucidation, a work that belongs to the artist just as to the philosopher, as we will see in the pages that follow.

## II. Subjective Ground of Differentiation in Kant

In 1786, when Immanuel Kant was asked to resolve the debate between faith and reason, he composed a short piece – *What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?* – in order to mediate the unnecessary tension between the two sides. To illuminate the inner dynamics of rational thought, Kant takes up the metaphor of spatial orientation. In fact, even though it might seem to us that we orient ourselves by purely external means (e.g., the position of the sun in the sky), we also need to be able to carry out – parallel to the external orientation – an internal differentiation. Kant writes:

> I also need the feeling of a difference in my own subject, namely, the difference between my right and left hands. I call this a feeling because these two sides outwardly display no designatable difference in intuition.[2]

And Kant offers another example, too – that of a dark room:

> In the dark I orient myself in a room that is familiar to me if I can take hold of even one single object whose position I remember. But […] if someone as a joke had moved all the objects around so that

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 8.

> what was previously on the right was now on the left, I would be quite unable to find anything in a room whose walls were otherwise wholly identical. But I can soon orient myself through the mere feeling of a difference between my two sides, the right and left.[3]

As we see, Kant insists that orientation – in space and in thought, too – emerges out of a feeling of difference. Here, the difference is not something "designatable." Yet, why exactly a feeling? This focus becomes more understandable in the light of Kant's much earlier writing, *Concerning the Ultimate Ground of the Differentiation of Directions in Space* (1768), where he gives us the example of incongruent counterparts: two hands, even though they are identical in shape and size, cannot be exchanged (swapped), precisely because they are the mirror image of each other. Kant thereby sought to refute Leibnizian relative space (seen as constituted by merely external relations) in favour of the Newtonian notion of space as absolute (even though, later, Kant would view space rather as a form of intuition).

What is crucial here is to understand that the difference, even though internal, is nevertheless non-conceptual, as Gilles Deleuze also points out in *Difference and Repetition*.[4] It is no longer about the external difference between two objects, e.g., a horse and a man (which are conceptually different), but about a difference that does not let itself be represented, and which dramatizes or even creates a point of view. If orientation is to be sought in the subjective ground of differentiation (hence the intricate nature of Kant's Copernican revolution), it is because representation is continuously brought to the ground (thus, grounded), towards a center of gravity which is both discovered and created. This is also why, as Kant stresses, freedom in thinking signifies the subjection of reason to no laws except those which it gives itself.[5]

It is this autonomous nature of reason which calls for a feeling; it is, at the same time, a curious imperative: that I should know what I am searching for, that I should respond to a feeling summoning me.

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[3] Ibid., 9.

[4] "It is because a difference can be internal, yet not conceptual (as the paradox of symmetrical objects shows). A dynamic space must be defined from the point of view of an observer tied to that space, not from an external position. There are internal differences which dramatise an Idea before representing an object." Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 31.

[5] Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 16.

## III. Deciphering Signs: The Emergence of Fiction in Proust

If Kantian transcendental philosophy is to be understood as a search for and elaboration of the subjective ground of differentiation (which escapes a conceptual designation and puts us in touch with a feeling), we can see the same kind of motif in Marcel Proust's grand novel, *In Search of Lost Time*. In fact, here, the search takes place in more than one dimension.

First of all, the author does not yet know what the material (subject) should be for his novel. As we know, Proust finally settles on a fictionalized account of his own life, inasmuch as he comes to the decision: the lost truths of lived life should be retrieved from the oblivion of time past. Secondly, there is a search for the subject – for a writer who can, who will write the novel. Paradoxically, the novel is about Marcel (the narrator) becoming a writer. Towards the end, we, the readers, learn of his ultimate decision to set himself to work, to finally dedicate his time to the work of his life. Thus, the turning point appears, but also the novel ends – a closure calling for a bewildered reflection.

The Proustian novel creates a vastness of suspense, which is less about plot twists (though we observe the becoming-in-time of characters, a becoming that has mostly a decadent allure) than about the time the writer gives himself – by writing and by deciding to write. Out of this time arises a gigantic (and yet unfinished) architecture of the novel with its vertiginous perspectives. Right on the final page, Proust famously draws a parallel between the "restricted place" which men occupy in space and the much bigger place which they take up in time, which makes them resemble "giants plunged into years"; or, as he puts it in a perhaps even more telling metaphor, it is as if these men were perched on living stilts which never cease to grow until sometimes they become taller than church steeples.[6]

Yet, to cut directly to the point, what motivates the author to dedicate so much of his time (in fact, his last days) to producing this strange fiction? In other words, how does he find the desire to immerse himself in such a work? And if "eternal duration is promised no more to men's works than to

[6] Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, Vol. 6, *Time Regained* (London: Vintage Classics, 1996), 534.

men,"[7] then why should one give the last of his energy to it?

Here we face the deep nature of desire which becomes constitutive for the work of fiction. This desire seems to be, for the most part, psychological: the novel is abundant in love stories that resonate with each other. Thus, for example, the love of Swann for Odette gets reflected and to some degree repeated in the love of Marcel for Gilberte or Albertine. Yet, seen from a purely psychological point of view, the series of loves in the social world seems to be mere metaphors or replicas of each other. They vary, but they are easily exhausted and quickly lose their essence as objects of desire. But there can also be another kind of motif. Laurent Jenny offers us an insightful differentiation between variation and what he calls variance:

Variation revolves around a motif (called a theme in music) that serves as its structural key, secretly – or sometimes explicitly – governing its deviations as a principle of constancy. Variation eventually saturates the motif's possibilities for differentiation and thus has limited development. Variance, on the other hand, links together a series of recurrences that come to lose all shared properties with the initial motif, and is virtually endless.[8]

This inexhaustibility of variance expresses itself just as much in Marcel's desire for Albertine (in his love, but more importantly in his jealousy, which outlives even her death) as it does in the desire to write: going beyond a mere documentation of life towards a fiction. For if our intellect only keeps lifeless copies of lived moments and thus has no access to the truth (this is what Proust famously reproaches the so-called voluntary memories for), then we also need an impulse that starts from a different place than the apparent order of things.

As we know, the starting place of the novel is a dark room where the awakened sleeper is trying to recompose his identity, to find his place in the world again. This is a dark place, traversed by intermittent fulgurations. Here, thought, searching for the recognizable features of the thinker himself, plunges into immense depths of primordial darkness. Proust writes:

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[7] The entire passage reads: "No doubt my books too, like my fleshly being, would in the end one day die. But death is a thing that we must resign ourselves to. We accept the thought that in ten years we ourselves, in a hundred years our books, will have ceased to exist. Eternal duration is promised no more to men's works than to men." Ibid., 514.

[8] Laurent Jenny, "L'effet Albertine," *Poétique*, no. 142 (2005): 205–18 (my translation).

I had only, in its original simplicity, the sense of existence as it may quiver in the depths of an animal; I was more destitute than a cave dweller; but then the memory – not yet of the place where I was, but of several of those where I had lived and where I might have been – would come to me like help from on high to pull me out of the void from which I could not have got out on my own; I crossed centuries of civilization in one second, and the image confusedly glimpsed of oil lamps, then of wing-collar shirts, gradually recomposed my self's original features.[9]

Reading this passage, disclosing the extraordinary depths of the human psyche where animal nakedness shines forth, it becomes clear why Proust as an author and creator has to invoke the help of memories. These can resemble quiet reflections, emerging from the deep murmur of interior sounds and images, but they can come forth also as sudden jolts and fulgurations. Proust places a great deal of emphasis on involuntary memories, which are not contrivances of our intellect, but – in the truest sense – signs of life.

The narrator makes clear that he has not searched for these memories – for these resurrections of the past. They come from mundane episodes (the famous episode of the Madeleine in the first volume or the uneven cobblestones in the seventh); that is to say, they are not symbols of something deeper. They are born of chance.[10]

This is why the personal inner work has to be done, so that these memories can be salvaged from oblivion, from the untruthfulness of wasted time. Thus, it becomes the task of a writer – a task that has to be done urgently, while one still has time – to decipher the signs that were given to him (through chance or through the grace of fate). For it is clear that our lives are populated with useless copies or doubles which heap themselves on our true impressions and hinder their feeling. These impressions should be deciphered and even translated into the true language of art – into the true language of the author himself:

This work of the artist, this struggle to discern beneath matter, beneath experience, beneath words, something that is different from them, is a process exactly the reverse of that which, in those everyday lives which we live with our gaze averted from ourselves, is at every moment

[9] Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. Lydia Davis (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 26.

[10] Proust writes: "There is a great deal of chance in all this, and a second sort of chance event, that of our own death, often does not allow us to wait long for the favors of the first." Ibid. 58.

being accomplished by vanity and passion and the intellect, and habit too, when they smother our true impressions, so as entirely to conceal them from us, beneath a whole heap of verbal concepts and practical goals which we falsely call life. In short, this art which is so complicated is in fact the only living art. It alone expresses for others and renders visible to ourselves that life of ours which cannot effectually observe itself and of which the observable manifestations need to be translated and, often, to be read backwards and laboriously deciphered.[11]

Yet, in what sense is art a superior language for expressing truths? How exactly does it avoid being a mere gloss (however beautiful) of our reality? First of all, as Gilles Deleuze notes, art liberates signs (through which we learn new or even secret things) from their dependence on materiality (and thus from their dependence on pure chance, too).[12] The materiality of signs is not negated, but one extracts from them pure resonances, which can bring together the fragmentary, discrete perspectives and transpose them onto the plane of the novel – into a fiction. What is created thereby is a point of view, which is no longer something relative (dependent on the external difference between two things, even if these two things are to be understood as subject and object), but becomes a "qualitative difference" which shows "the uniqueness of the fashion in which the world appears to each one of us"; and it is through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees of a universe which is not the same as our own.[13]

Thus, for Proust, the only possibility of intersubjective understanding lies in art.

Furthermore, what the signs of art disclose is an Essence that holds the possible developments in a complex state. According to the Deleuzian reading, an essence is always a beginning, nay, a "radical beginning."[14] The same goes for the characters of the novel. For example, Charlus "retain[s] all the souls that compose him in the 'complicated' state"; and it is in this

[11] Proust, *In Search of Lost Time,* Vol. 6, *Time Regained*, 279.

[12] "As long as we discover a sign's meaning in something else, matter still subsists, refractory to spirit. On the contrary, art gives us the true unity: unity of an immaterial sign and of an entirely spiritual meaning." *Gilles Deleuze, Proust and Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Continuum, 2008), 40.

[13] Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, Vol. 6, *Time Regained*, 540.

[14] "The world enveloped by essence is always a beginning of the World in general, a beginning of the universe, an absolute, radical beginning." *Deleuze, Proust and Signs*, 44.

way that he carries the "freshness of the world just created."[15]

To sum up, it is this complication of the Essence which calls for a radical beginning. In the same way, it can be said that the Proustian novel itself is looking for its own beginning, its own starting place in a universe where complication and multiplicity (of points of view, of souls) rule. The variance (Jenny), which I invoked earlier, is in some sense a method to deal with this kind of universe, to find a foothold, or, as Kant would say, a subjective ground of differentiation. Let us now move on to another reading of Proust – a reading from a different time and different place.

## IV. Awakening from Bad Infinity: Mamardashvili's Proust

Proust was an important author for the Soviet-Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili, who saw in him not only a novelist but also a thinker elaborating philosophical problems with painstaking clarity. For this reason, Proustian aesthetic concepts are intricately woven into the philosophical lectures of Mamardashvili, who does not hesitate to improvise before his audiences and to bring together philosophy, art, and even mundane aspects of everyday life well known to Soviet citizens.

Obviously, the context in which Mamardashvili finds himself influences his reading of Proust. Soviet intellectual discourse, and also the consciousness of the ordinary citizen, was saturated by ideological thinking: e.g., the idea that the right path has already been chosen and somewhere down the line there will be salvation, while in the meantime we are helpless, dependent on a vague hope that help will come from somewhere, from the outside.

For Mamardashvili, the Proustian novel is about discarding the illusions which haunt us; it is about discovering the distorted, lifeless copies (doubles) which take up our own place in the world, occupying the place of our own thoughts and words. More importantly, In Search of Lost Time is about awakening, or if one wants to use a more religious term, about resurrection[16], which should take place in this very life.

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[15] Ibid., 45.

[16] "The resurrection that takes place when we wake up – after that beneficent attack of mental derangement we call sleep – must in the end be similar to what happens when we recall a name, a line of poetry, or a refrain we had forgotten. And perhaps the resurrection of the soul after death is to be thought of as a phenomenon of memory." Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way, trans. Mark Treharne* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 222.

The means for this awakening or resurrection cannot be found in past (historically grounded) events or in the spiritual instructions of written texts (be they religious texts or literature). Rather, the novel should forge its own means to this end. Nothing can be copied. For – and this is the constant in Mamardashvili's thinking – there is always something in our perception or thinking which seems self-evident and, precisely by seeming so, hinders us from thinking our thoughts to the end. Here is what he says in his Lectures on Proust:

There is such a law: the field of our vision is infinite, and in this field we see everything that our eye sees. But imagine the wall of an aquarium, in which its water is reflected endlessly. A fish does not see the walls, it sees only water. […] But reality bursts into the aquarium, or into the world of the fish, or the world of the one who is in love (who is on this side of the glass partition and remains ignorant about what he loves) like a human hand that appears in an actual aquarium and takes a fish from the water […]. Water was everywhere, and suddenly a hand appeared and pulled it from the aquarium.[17] (Italics mine)

This endless reflection, which seems to confirm our existing thoughts and feelings (love) and thus encloses us in a representation repeating itself ad infinitum, is what Mamardashvili calls a "bad infinity."[18] When we are immersed in this element (water), we cannot see or describe our finite situation.

There are many examples of these kinds of situations in the novel, and one of the most famous is certainly that of Robert Saint-Loup (an aristocrat) who falls in love with Rachel – a woman of questionable morals who is first seen by Robert on the stage of a theater. Marcel, Robert's friend, knows about Rachel's background, but he feels that it would be very difficult to transmit this knowledge to his friend, who is haunted by the very first impression his future lover makes on him. Proust writes in one of the most breathtaking passages of the novel:

The immobility of that thin face, like that of a sheet of paper subjected to the colossal pressure of two atmospheres, seemed to me

[17] Merab Mamardashvili, *A Spy for an Unknown Country: Essays and Lectures by Merab Mamardashvili*, ed. Julia Sushytska and Alisa Slaughter (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2020), 75–76.

[18] Ibid.,78. In Russian, the term is durnaya beskonechnost' (Дурная бесконечность), which can also be rendered as "foolish endlessness". It is safe to assume that Mamardashvili derives this term from Hegel's *schlechte Unendlichkeit*.

to be held in balance by two infinities which converged on her without meeting, for she held them apart. And indeed, as we looked at her, Robert and I, neither of us saw her from the same side of the mystery.[19] (Italics mine)

This is why, so often, there has to be an abrupt awakening (like a hand grabbing a fish out of the aquarium) that disrupts the habitual flow of our consciousness.

Only after this kind of disruption does an opening appear, a space where one can take his or her own stance – in the presence of an instantaneous impression. The work cannot be postponed.[20] The urgency of this opening dictates its accomplishment.

Sense (or meaning) should be drawn from an experience, just as a thought should think itself to the end – it should be fully expressed. In his lectures on the Aesthetics of Thinking (Эстетика мышления), Mamardashvili notes that – perhaps with a certain irony – the only thing that can be joyful in a misfortune is the fact that one thinks (мыслит), draws a thought from what he sees. Thinking is tied, for Mamardashvili, to aesthetics essentially inasmuch as it causes joy. As he states, "joy is the feeling of the irreversible fulfillment of meaning."[21] Thus, there can arise – through a philosophical or artistic effort – a kind of thought which resists disintegration (into chaos or a bad infinity) and produces a point of no return, an irreversible or rather irrevocable seeing and understanding (thinking).

Just as for Proust, for Mamardashvili art – and by art one can also understand the aesthetics of thinking – is the "most cruel school of life,"

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[19] Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, 154.

[20] In connection with this motif of non-postponement, Mamardashvili likes to invoke a symptomatic error of Proust, who quotes a passage from the *Gospel of St. John* (12:35-36) with a slight but significant deviation: "InVoluntarily, unconsciously, Proust quotes this text twice with a mistake: 'Yet a little while is the light with you. Work, while there is light.' Travailler, he writes. Involuntary mistake, but characteristic, because we're talking about the time of working, the sign of which is an instant, a split second. The space of truth can be expanded only through work, but in itself it is an instant. If you let it escape you, that's it. There will be chaos and disintegration; nothing will come back, and the world will cease to be, devolving into the infinite repetition of hell." Mamardashvili, *A Spy for an Unknown Country: Essays and Lectures by Merab Mamardashvili*, 84.

[21] My translation. In Russian: "Значит, радостью является чувство необратимой исполненности смысла." Merab K. Mamardashvili, *Estetika myshleniya* [Aesthetics of Thinking] (Moscow: Moskovskaya shkola politicheskikh issledovaniy, 2000), 11.

since in art "excuses have no place […] and intentions count for nothing." There is no substitute for the work that has to be done:

The impression is for the writer what experiment is for the scientist, with the difference that in the scientist the work of the intelligence precedes the experiment whereas in the writer it comes after the impression. What we have not had to decipher, to elucidate by our own efforts, what was clear before we looked at it, is not ours.[22]

## V. Conclusion

If we read Kant's transcendental philosophy nowadays, we might wonder at the insistence on overcoming empirical experience or supplementing it with a transcendental one (which Kant tries to delineate through the elaboration of the synthetic a priori). For us, so many ideas, once held in high esteem, have already been brought to the ground, or dispersed in the vastness of the cosmic dark discovered since then – since Kant's time. In other words, there is an ongoing prevalence of brute, empirical facts.

Nevertheless, the necessity for a transcendental (or metaphysical) experience arises from the insight that, besides the things that we encounter in the world (that is, besides the facts that for us constitute the world), there is also a knowing – an act of knowing which is not exactly knowledge (that is, an assertion about a fact). And it is hard to know where this knowing takes place, since it does not seem to belong to the mundane plane of reality. This is why Kant has to elaborate the metaphor of spatial orientation in order to make the dynamics of thinking palpable – at least, to some degree. As we saw above, there comes forth a subjective ground of differentiation, a feeling of difference, which is not conceptual and cannot be immediately known as such. In other words, the elaboration of this feeling would require a sustained effort in time (on the part of the subject, the thinker).

The Kantian elaboration of felt spatiality is equally important to Mamardashvili, for whom one must pose not only the question "Who am I?" but also "Where am I?" In other words: Where, among which spatial or sense (existential) orientation points, do I find myself? His lectures on Proust are, in fact, titled Topology of a Path. Proust's novel is indeed about a path, a hero's journey, or, as Gilles Deleuze puts it, a

[22] Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, Vol. 6, *Time Regained*, 220.

novel of apprenticeship (roman d'apprentissage):[23] the narrator learns to read signs he initially failed to read, which became dispersed through time and space.

This is why one needs the structure of a novel, or the topology of a path, in order to come to terms with the strange dispersal which takes place in one's own life. As Mamardashvili writes:

Topology is a set or configuration of points along which the current of life and communication passes (or not) (the relative positions of these points are changed by effort or its lack, and because life is effort in time… heterogeneous fragments of space are time "turned into space").[24]

This is where life merges with fiction, with the essential variability (variance) which requires the work of an artist. This kind of work has its own dangers, precisely because it stands on the subjective ground of differentiation, which might quickly disintegrate and engulf the thinker himself. There one finds oneself on the verge of the abyss. Not because there is a lack of words or possible descriptions, but because it is not clear what dictates our choice when we write and create, since creation is also always a beginning. To put it in the words of Proust himself and to conclude: "truth can only begin in the moment when the writer takes two different objects, states the connexion between them – a connexion analogous in the world of art to the unique connexion which in the world of science is provided by the law of causality – and encloses them in the necessary links of a well-wrought style; truth – and life too – can be attained by us only when, by comparing a quality common to two sensations, we succeed in extracting their common essence and in reuniting them to each other, liberated from the contingencies of time, within a metaphor."[25]

[23] Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, 26.
[24] Mamardashvili, *A Spy for an Unknown Country: Essays and Lectures by Merab Mamardashvili*, 21-22.
[25] Proust, *In Search of Lost Time,* Vol. 6, *Time Regained*, 230.

# II. LOGIC AND SCIENCE AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF FICTION

## 8. Modal Fictionalism and Self-Reference

*Blagovest S. Mollov, bmollov@phls.uni-sofia.bg*
*(Professor, Dr. Sc., Department of European Studies,*
*University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski)*

**Abstract:** Modal fictionalism – as a deflationary meta-ontological proposal of how to retain the semantic benefits of Lewisian modal realism without its ontological costs – has usually been attacked for either failing to provide modal realist benefits in full or/and for incurring its own extravagant epistemological and ontological costs. However, the most fatal flaws the view manifests are of a self-referential character, rendering it circular, paradoxical, or inconsistent. The paper discusses various self-reference objections and argues that none of the advanced modal fictionalist response strategies – meta-fictional, primitivist, paraphrastic, indexical, etc. – can succeed, as any fictionalization is bound to collapse into incoherence, due to inherent, unfixable structural defects shared by all types of fictionalism.

**Keywords**: modal fictionalism, self-referentiality, primitivism

Self-reference (symmetry) arguments against modal fictionalism (MdF) seem to be the closest analytic metaphysics has got to that unicorn species of "knock-down" arguments, the elusiveness of which has always been the plight – and pride – of philosophy. I.e., if sound, the self-reference arguments would show MdF to be incoherent, thereby refuting it conclusively and irrevocably. In what follows, I sketch the reasons why they are, and would.

Like any fictionalism, modal fictionalism proposes a way to enjoy the benefits of a certain theory – in this case, the technically advantageous possible-worlds framework - without paying the asking ontological price that its adoption seemingly requires, viz., ontological commitment to possible worlds as either Plantingan abstract or Lewisian concrete entities by treating claims *about possible worlds* as fictional (i.e.,

literally false). And, as with any other fictionalism, the truth-conditions of the given class of statements, here modal statements, get relativized to the respective fiction, "the fiction of possible worlds" (PW) (the fiction of, for example, Lewisian modal realism).

Thus, modal claims are supposed to be understood as having an implicit premise "In fiction PW, p", as claims about the contents of the PW fiction, so that a modal claim p would be true if and only if it holds *according to the fiction PW*. I.e., "Possibly, p" standardly rendered as "There is a possible world where p" is taken to mean "According to the fiction of possible worlds (PW), there exists a world where p". Or, $\Diamond$p is to be analyzed as $F_{PW}$ ($\exists$ w (at w, p)), respectively, $\Box$p as $F_{PW}$ ($\forall$ w (p@w)), where "$F_{PW}$" is the fiction operator ( "according to the fiction PW"), which appears to be plausible enough and to have the added theoretical virtue of being in tune with conventional intuitions about the truth-conditions and ontological commitments of fictional statements.

Schematically, any fictionalism about a given domain D (modality, morality, mathematical or scientific entities) incorporates three core components: (i) a metaphysical (or a meta) thesis that propositions of D-discourse are, literally construed, false (or truth-valueless) because the entities (e.g., possible worlds, moral properties, abstract objects, etc.) they refer to do not exist; (ii) an instrumentalist claim that D-framework is nevertheless theoretically useful and, so, should and could be used by adopting (iii) a suitable paraphrase schema: "SD (a D-discourse statement) is true, if and only if, according to the fiction F, SD* (SD* being the paraphrase of SD in the fiction F)". Modal fictionalism demonstrates the same structure: it rejects the existence of possible worlds, to which possible-worlds discourse ontologically commits, and proposes a translation schema: $\Diamond$p $\Leftrightarrow$ PW $\vdash$ $\exists$ w (p@w) ($\Box$p $\Leftrightarrow$ PW $\vdash$ $\forall$ w (p@w) (where PW is the meta-fictional operator, "according to the fiction of possible worlds")) that would allow the beneficial use of possible-worlds framework without its unwanted ontological commitments.

But while all fictionalisms face reflexive pressure, modal fictionalism is affected by more and deeper issues than its peers because modality is, what can be called, "globally structurally constitutive", i.e., modal concepts are built into, presupposed by, the explanatory, inferential and evaluative practices of any theorizing whatsoever, including theorizing about modality. Unlike the localized, circumscribable, isolable domains with proprietary entities of, say, mathematics (numbers, sets, functions,

etc.) or morality (moral properties, facts, values, etc.), modal notions, being conditions for the possibility of theorizing in general, are inextricable, so that modal fictionalism – as a meta-*theory* about modality - has no external non-modal perspective on the modal domain.

Since the whole methodological strategy of fictionalism depends on the availability of a neutral meta-language, an external standpoint from which to treat the target discourse as fictional, i.e., to reject the ontological commitments of the discourse and explain the pragmatic legitimacy of preserving its use, the lack of such a standpoint in the case of modality means that any attempt to fictionalize the latter will generate ruinous self-reference problems, as the target discourse would inevitably be reintroduced at the meta-level. These do not arise for mathematical, moral or other types of fictionalism, for none of their target discourses are similarly globally structurally constitutive; hence, those fictionalisms can enjoy the required external neutral perspective for the non-circular fictionalization of their respective target discourses and be formulated, without incoherence, using conceptual resources that do not belong to the target discourses (generally by using a physicalist meta-language).

Thus, modal fictionalism seems to suffer from a structural, hence insurmountable, fatal flaw. For, if modal concepts are constitutive prerequisites for the formulation, articulation, inferential mechanics, and assessment of any theory, including theories about modality, any meta-language powerful enough to serve as an adequate analysis of modality, as modal fictionalism claims to provide, will necessarily instantiate the conceptual resources of the modal domain, thereby failing the "neutrality requirement" and collapsing into self-referential incoherence.

Given that the constitutive character of the modal discourse cannot be challenged, modal fictionalism's range of response options is severely limited: it would have to either concede circularity[1], giving up its reductive ambitions, or commit to primitivism about the meta-linguistic "according to PW" operator or the fictionalist paraphrase schema, giving

[1] As Rosen explicitly did: "the background ontology and ideology in which the fiction is described is already deeply modal." in Gideon Rosen. "A Problem for Fictionalism About Possible Worlds". *Analysis* 53(2) (1993): 75. Cf. also Rosen: "The principal worry is that the fictionalist's paraphrase may surreptitiously presuppose the very modal notions it is supposed to explain." in Gideon Rosen. "Modal Fictionalism". *Mind* 99(395) (1990): 334.

up (some of) its explanatory ambitions[2].

Whatever objections one may have against primitivism, it does appear to be the better, or the only, option: by treating the "according to PW" operator, usually understood as a kind of entailment (a modal notion: necessary consequence), as a non-modal semantic primitive (a brute relation between a fiction (a set of propositions) and a proposition), circularity would be avoided. The strategy is expected to block self-reference objections as well as concerns about the related metalanguage infinite regress that assuming the analyzability of the operator may trigger. The fictionalist primitive "according to" relation between a fiction and a proposition also parallels the precedent strategy of "ersatz" modal realism, similarly positing primitive operators or primitive representation relations between abstract entities and possibilities, which is supposed to further legitimize the move[3].

The question here is whether such a primitive semantic operator can be fully detached from modal involvement. Rosen suggests that it need not be[4], at least not fully, since apparently some modal notions cannot be reductively analyzed and all fictionalism needs is a minimal, "thin" modal notion, similar to "consequence", with which to define "truth-in-a-fiction". So, "according to the fiction PW, p" would get construed as "p is a consequence of the fiction PW", where "consequence" is taken as a primitive, non-reductive concept. The concept of "consequence" need not be completely non-modal, but, as Rosen puts it, non-"objectionably modal"[5], meaning non-committal to the ontology of possible worlds, i.e., some modal concepts are admissible as long as they

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[2] Cf. Rosen: "One possible response to this dilemma is to insist that 'according to PW' is a theoretical primitive for the modal fictionalist. It is not to be explained in more fundamental terms." in Gideon Rosen. "A Problem for Fictionalism About Possible Worlds", 76; cf. also Gideon Rosen. "Modal Fictionalism Fixed". *Analysis* 55(2) (1995): 70.

[3] Cf. Rosen: "[if the ersatzer] is entitled to help himself to this ideology without further explanation, then the fictionalist is entitled to help himself to 'according to PW' on the same terms" Gideon Rosen. "A Problem for Fictionalism About Possible Worlds", 76.

[4] Cf. Rosen: "The fictionalist need not deny that there are primitive modal facts. What matters is only that these facts not involve commitment to concrete possible worlds." in Gideon Rosen. "Modal Fictionalism", 338.

[5] Cf. Rosen: "There is nothing objectionably modal in the claim that one sentence follows from others in virtue of their content.", ibid., 339.

are "ontologically innocent", bear no unwanted ontological commitments. Thus, the primitivist strategy supposedly blocks circularity not by eliminating all modality from fictionalist metalanguage, but by denying that the circularity in question is vicious as long as the modal notions at the primitive level are not ontologically committal.

That, however, is highly questionable as the claim that "to be a consequence of" or "follow from" can be ontologically non-committal and, hence, can be used in the definition of the "according to PW" operator, goes against the standard – substantively, rather than "thinly", modal – possible-world semantics of "consequence": "According to PW, p" = "p is a consequence of PW" is exactly the "objectionable" "in every possible world where PW is true, p is true". For what else can "to be a consequence of" mean? There simply seems to be no way to de-ontologize modal notions, no matter how primitive they are construed to be. So, the primitivist circularity will, after all, be vicious and ineluctably so.

While primitivists are fully aware[6] that if this possible-worlds meaning were definitionally constitutive of "consequence" or were, in some sense, metaphysically prior, the viciousness of the proposed circularity follows indeed; they deny that this is the case. I.e., they reject what they take to be the unfounded universal assumption that "a proposition p follows from (is a consequence of) a fiction F" means and could only mean "p is true in every possible world where F is true". They insist that, actually, "consequence" should be understood as a primary primitive inferential relation among "contents", propositions, sentences, with the possible-worlds interpretation being just one, but not the only, representation (model) of it, commonly the one privileged by modal realists. That original "consequence" relation bears no implicit or explicit ontological commitments, precisely what it being merely inferential means[7]: "p follows from PW" expresses only a claim about the inferential structure of a set of propositions (PW, the fiction of possible worlds) rather than refer to or quantify over realistically interpreted objects of a certain kind, "possible worlds". Analogously to the standard logical notion of "semantic consequence" whose use does not commit to any particular domain of objects (or even to any objects whatsoever) over

[6] Cf. Rosen: "The notion of consequence is often explained in modal terms, and if that were unavoidable the fictionalist proposal would be circular.", ibid., 340.

[7] Cf. Rosen: "Inference is not an ontological relation. It is a relation among propositions, not among entities in the world.", ibid., 341.

which models range, primitivist "modal consequence" is said to be usable in a similar ontologically neutral way: it can be safely represented in terms of possible worlds without being semantically constituted by such, modal-realistically interpreted, entities.

That can be a controversial response, though, since even if a primitive modal operator of that kind, like its supposed logical analogue, does not commit to a particular domain of objects, it does commit to a space of possible domains, of possibilities, what those "ontologically neutral" arbitrary set-theoretic models actually are, which rather than being "ontologically neutral" seem to commit to, at least, a "robust" ontology of abstract objects and to an irreducible modal background in which those domains exist as possibilities that can strongly suggest a realist modal ontology. Since apparently the most productive way to refer to that modal space of possibilities and its locations is "possible worlds", the very reason modal fictionalism wants to keep the possible-worlds framework in use, it is not clear how the primitivist move expects to avoid circularity. The primitivist proposal of treating "possible worlds" purely instrumentally as a representational device, the way geometrical coordinates or maps are supposedly used without being ontologically committing, requires additional argumentation, as it depends on metaphysical (nominalist, instrumentalist, fictionalist) assumptions that are highly contentious, and a demonstration of how the strategy can be successfully applied to actual cases in first-order modal metaphysics. For it would be very hard otherwise to convince the Quineanly-inclined orthodoxy that one can use a theory that quantifies over a certain kind of objects, in this case, abstract objects (which "possible structures", models, sets, modal space coordinates/regions/sections/points or other supposed "mere semantics tools" unquestionably are); treat its propositions, and the theory itself, as truth-evaluable, and somehow still deny that one is committed to the existence of those objects[8]. So, it appears, for now, viciousness has not been averted.

[8] As Lewis, with characteristic bluntness, remarks, targeting the Tarksian idea of a "metaphysically innocent" "consequence": "You can call it 'consequence' if you like, but it walks and quacks exactly like necessity." in Lewis, David K., *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, p. 153). Rosen is aware, but, having different metaphysical assumptions, disagrees: "It may be complained that consequence is simply necessity by another name." in Gideon Rosen. "Modal Fictionalism", 340.

Primitivists may still insist, however, that a properly drawn and understood distinction between levels of modality, namely, between object-level modality (necessity, possibility as applied to object-language propositions) and meta-level modal concepts (such as "consequence", "entailment", "truth-in-a-fiction" used in theories about object-level modality) can easily settle the issue.

Since modal fictionalism employs meta-level rather than object-level modal concepts, as all theories, including modal realism, do by necessity, the apparent circularity in its analysis of modality is claimed to be benign or "merely structural", "explanatory". The obvious issue with the proposed distinction is that there does not seem to be any ground for distinguishing the modal sense or force of a "meta-level" consequence, entailment, etc., from object-level modal notions. Necessity does not seem to vary with levels. Even if a ground for the distinction existed, it would have to be a metaphysical, not terminological one. But then, if both types of modality are grounded in modal properties, facts, etc. of reality, primitivist modal fictionalism has failed to avoid substantive modal ontological commitments, just re-labelled them. And finding a principled metaphysical ground for the meta-/object-level distinction of the required sort - a metaphysical distinction between "acceptable" ("thin", "lightweight") and "objectionable" ("robust", "heavyweight") modal facts - is even more hopeless a task.

Furthermore, once primitivist modal fictionalists admit primitive modal facts ("thin" and "robust"), the need for fictionalism disappears, as the posited possible-world fiction becomes redundant, explanatorily idle: "Necessarily, p" will be true because of the relevant modal primitive facts, not because of the PW fiction ("Necessarily, p" because p is a primitive consequence of PW). Modal fictionalism will have lost its distinctive theoretical identity and value, collapsing into modal primitivism. The difference between the two is merely notational and not worth sustaining, as primitivist modal fictionalism offers no additional explanatory resources or theoretical virtues.

This questionability of the motivation for modal fictionalism arises even if, miraculously, the primitive semantic operator "according to PW" can be made independent of "objectionable" modal notions and ontological commitments, for modal fictionalism would have to explain why we ought to bother replacing our standard and more intuitive commitment to (primitive) modal properties and facts with one to primitive

semantic facts. Rosen acknowledges that the "according to PW…" operator is unintuitive and a very unlikely candidate to be considered primitive (unanalyzable), though arguably, the naturalness or attractiveness of primitives is a variable matter of metaphysical or methodological tastes that defies uniform ranking.[9]

Actually, the motivation for modal fictionalism can dramatically drop at the very point of opting for a primitive "according to PW" operator, thereby abandoning the more ambitious explanatory aim of providing a fully reductive account of modal discourse in non-modal (fictional) terms. Without its reductive aim, modal fictionalism loses every theoretical advantage it initially appeared to have over modal realism or modal primitivism. Again, if one is ready to concede that modality is primitive anyway, why bother with the fiction in the first place? If ready to commit to primitive irreducible modal notions, why not take "possible worlds" as primitive too? There do not seem to be principled grounds on which to decide which modal notions to keep in the primitive base and which not. Or better yet, unburden what essentially is a modal primitivist theory of the extra machinery of the fictional operator, which is theoretically idle anyway, since non-reductive modal fictionalism merely adds a flimsy fictionalist coating over primitive modal facts that are actually doing all the real explanatory work, instead of grounding modal facts in the fiction as its early adopters had hoped. It does appear, however, that the less theoretically ambitious modal fictionalism is – retreating to being solely a specific severely deflationary semantic theory of modal discourse – the higher its chances of a theoretical future[10].

Though one may sceptically ask, "What future?" For if, in trying to avoid the collapse into modal primitivism, modal fictionalism adopts some kind of safe conventionalism about its principle, it will have *no* theoretical future, as that final shift would completely gut it of any hope

[9] Rosen *tu quoque* fallaciously notes that the realist competitors to fictionalism, implicitly referring to Lewis's analysis, have similarly failed to provide a satisfactory account of "according to a fiction…" operator, which, even if true, is only a polemically understandable move with no substantive justificatory value (for only in very specific urgent practical contexts can the failure of alternatives be considered a viable argument for a view or a course of action), ibid., 345-6.

[10] Rosen explicitly concedes, perhaps prolonging the theoretical lifespan of fictionalism but depriving that prolongation of reasons to matter: "The fictionalist's proposal should not be understood as a deep metaphysical explanation of modality.", ibid. 341.

of or claim to capturing substantive objective truth about modality, reducing it to a pragmatic linguistic choice of a particular expressive, convenient or figurative, representational idiom. While the conventionalist shift appears to be the only viable way for modal fictionalism to avoid incoherence, it would amount to a theoretical suicide.

To end on a more "positive" therapeutic note, that existential predicament is not exclusive to *modal* fictionalism, due solely to its character of being "modal", i.e., due to the specificity of its subject-matter, the mentioned global constitutivity of modality; it affects all types of fictionalism – moral, mathematical, scientific, etc. - insofar as they are *fictionalisms*. Fictionalism, as a general strategy, is inherently an irremediably and irredeemably incoherent theoretical stance.

Modal fictionalism's conventionalist shift was forced by the self-reference pressure to specify the modal status of modal fictionalism's biconditional translation schema: (SMdF) $\Diamond p \Leftrightarrow PW \vdash \exists w\ (p@w)$ (According to the fiction of possible worlds PW, $\exists w$ (p at w)). The dilemma (Hale's dilemma[11]) poses a straightforward question: Is (SMdF) necessarily true or contingently true? The first horn of the dilemma, (SMdF) is necessarily true, results in circularity (using the fictionalist schema to justify the fictionalist schema) or collapse into modal primitivism (to avoid vicious circularity, declaring (SMdF) to be a primitive necessary truth, i.e., conceding an "unobjectionable" modal primitive and thereby presupposing independent non-fictionalist sources of modal truths). If, dilemma's second horn, (SMdF) is contingently true, apart from the blow to the schema's authority (it could have failed), circularity follows again, as we will need to rely on independent modal facts and notions to explain the contingency of (SMdF), i.e., why it holds in the actual world but might not have. The conventionalist move, viz., further deflating (SMdF) to be a contingent, conventionally adopted semantic rule, is the direct, theoretically suicidal response to the dilemma.

Now, an analogous dilemma applies to all fictionalisms in general. If for any discourse D, fictionalism about that discourse claims:

> (SFD) $p \Leftrightarrow F \vdash p^*$ "p (a D-discourse proposition) is true, if and only if, according to the fiction F, p* (p* being the paraphrase of p in F),

where that involves an additional meta-claim that D-discourse state-

[11] Hale, Bob. 1995. "Modal Fictionalism: A Simple Dilemma", *Analysis* 55(2): 63–67.

ments are truth-valueless or false because they have no real referents, then, the dilemma question would be:

Is (SFD) fictionally true or non-fictionally true?

If Horn I, (SFD) is fictionally true, i.e., the truth of the schema (SFD) itself is explained as truth-in-the-fiction F (as self-grounded), then circularity follows (justifying the fictionalist schema by the fictionalist schema) and, more importantly, (SFD) gets relativized to a fiction, which would eliminate its apparently intended normative authority as an alternative to realism about D. If (SFD)'s truth is internalized to a fiction, be it a meta-fiction (about ontological language), it can no longer claim to be such an alternative since it would carry no more normative "truth force" than "Holmes lives on 221B Baker Street" or "Emma Bovary revelled in horse riding", i.e., fictionalism would amount to no more than pretending that realism about D is false, an arbitrary meta-language game of make-believe.

The attempt to make Horn I acceptable by supporting it with the contention that all (ontological) theories are to be treated as fictions, so that every theoretical truth would be truth-in-a-fiction, simply relocates the issue, for, now, would that contention itself be fictionally or non-fictionally true? Moreover, since "fiction" is uniquely defined by truth-in-fiction vs. truth-in-reality distinction, dependence on a practice of non-fictional language/literary community that distinguishes fiction from non-fiction; imaginative pretense (on the part of the non-fictional audience), and non-truth-assertiveness (on the part of the non-fictional), that attempt of legitimizing Horn I would require one to be radically revisionary about the semantic and conceptual content of "fiction", collapsing all the distinctive definitional distinctions of "fiction", thereby literally leaving the bounds of intelligibility, and eliminating the whole point – and intelligibility - of fictionalism.

If Horn II, (SFD) is non-fictionally true, then the fictionalist thesis would no longer be uniformly valid, allowing for the non-fictional truth of at least some theoretical meta-claims. But once that exception has been made, if literal, non-fictional truthful theses about D are admitted as possible, fictionalism would have to explain why it denies the same literal truthfulness to statements within the D-discourse and alternative realist meta-claims about D. Given the additional unintuitive theoretical burden of the fictionalist explanatory apparatus, the initial motivation

(epistemic skepticism, ontological parsimony, radical anti-realism etc.) that global, fully reductive fictionalism may have attracted disappears.

The dilemma seems to be devastating: if fictionalism is merely fictionally true, it would provide no reason to alter our alternative realist conceptual and linguistic practices; if non-fictionally true, it would no longer be fictionalism, the deflationary radical view it could have at least tried to be, but a modified realism with a contestable fictionalist claim about a restricted discourse.

The only benefit fictionalism may have is drawing our attention to the potential limits and contingency of our ontological realist languages and frameworks, pointing to the possibility of alien ones, but since no specific aspects and conditions of that (possibility for) alienness are explored, and neither are the ones of a meta-language to identify framework limitations and distinguish alien and non-alien frameworks, that particular benefit of engaging fictionalism is only of a gestural, rather vaguely implicit nature and might be eventually completely lost in the ongoing shift from radical to conventionalist fictionalism.

# 9. Lied the Raven, Evermore – Falsehood and Reality in Science, through Fiction

*Riccardo Marzullo, riccardo.marzullo@edu.unito.it*
*(Graduate Student, University of Turin)*

**Abstract:** It is commonplace for authors of fiction to describe their work as "lying to say the truth". In this paper, I shall delve deeper into this seemingly contradictory sentence to shed light into the complex interplay between truth, reality and fiction. Far from being a strictly literary problem, it has been convincingly argued by Vaihinger that fiction is widespread also in scientific contexts. Even more, it seems to be extraordinarily useful both to divulge scientific results and to pragmatically confront problems and calculations. An example of this is the billiard ball model of gases, which makes use of many incorrect assumptions regarding gases, and yet is still used thanks to its heuristic capabilities. This chance to create a somewhat false (or, in other cases, inaccurate) reality which then can in turn shed light on the ordinary one is arguably one of the most fascinating features of fiction. Such a formulation does however beg the question regarding its aptness to describe what goes on in said fictional scenarios. I take the answer to be not quite. Rather than creating a new (and, strictly speaking, false) reality, I take fiction to be a way to interact with the ordinary one, coating it with a symbolic layer and taking advantage of the possibility to exemplify (following Elgin) only the features which are required by the problem at hand. As such, fiction can be regarded as a localized world-building endeavour, aimed at eliciting specific responses from ordinary reality. The resulting fictional reality, then, is a mediation between the modelling requirements, the necessary falsehoods, and the symbolic filter we are choosing to interact with reality.

**Keywords:** Fiction, Cognitivism, Models, Exemplification, Thought Experiments

## Introduction

It has become commonplace, especially for those authors which lean into more fantastic genres, to define their storytelling as "lying to say the truth"[1]. Moving past the motto, what they mean seems to be something along the lines of "using a false (or otherwise inaccurate) framework in order to assert truths regarding the object of their narrative". In other words, at least according to said authors, a structured set of false assertions in the form of a story should be able to express true statements not only regarding the fictional world it takes place in, but also about the real world outside the book. In other words, they hold that fiction is not only an instrument of storytelling, but also a way to interact with reality, albeit in a peculiar way. Such a thesis is no stranger to debates in literary critique and philosophy of fiction, where the discussion regarding the complex interplay between falsehood, reality and truth rages still[2].

So far, one could reasonably think of it as yet another specialistic debate regarding fictional scenarios and little else, entirely devoid of interest for any other field of study. And yet, as a growing formation of scholars starting (for what concerns the contemporary discussion) from Vaihinger[3] maintains, this debate can and does have a bearing on quite common scientific practices. These scholars argue that fiction is no stranger to research contexts. On the contrary, it has been employed in scholarly practices for centuries without much ado. To name some examples, the continued employment of the billiard ball model of gases, with its evident simplifications of the actual dynamics involved, the construction of fictional hybridizations such as biological morphospaces, or even the employment of fictional entities in the context of thought experiments, like Maxwell's demon.

These occurrences attest to the relevance of this problem for a wide range of disciplines that aim to describe the different aspects of reality. The widespread presence of fictional grafts in the scientific en-

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1 See Ursula Le Guin's introduction to *The Left Hand in the Darkness* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2016), or Terry Pratchett in the first volume of *The Science of Discworld* (written with Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen, London: Ebury Publishing, 1999).

2 See Noël Carroll & John Gibson, *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature* (New York: Routledge 2016), 347-424 and Alison James, Akihiro Kubo & Francoise Lavocat, *The Routledge Handbook of Fiction and Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2024), 13-138 for thematic overviews of the main issues involved.

3 Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As If'* (New York: Routledge Classics 2021).

deavour demands a more in-depth analysis of the theoretical dynamics involved, and the formulation of an account apt to describe how and why they can prove useful.

To accomplish this, firstly we will consider the three case studies just mentioned, allowing for an historically grounded analysis of different kinds of fictions in research contexts. Secondly, the main dynamics involved will be accounted for in the light of Elgin's theory of exemplification, offering a solid epistemological background to them. Lastly, a more general consideration of the theoretical use of fiction will be in order, allowing for the formulation of a wider account of fictional grafts in scientific practices.

## Demons and Details – On the use of Fiction in Research Practices

To answer the question of why a scholar would feel the need to interpose a fictional layer between themselves and reality, some case studies can be a useful point of departure. Looking at how and why such a phenomenon occurred historically will furnish the necessary ground to frame the issue. First, we will consider the classical example of the billiard ball model of gases, then we will move on to Borges' influence on the development of biological morphospaces and, finally, we will confront Maxwell's demon. The increasing degree of fictionality of the examples, as well as their different areas of interest, will prove useful in reaching a more general conclusion by offering different perspectives on the issues at hand.

The billiard ball model of gases–more precisely, the ideal gas model–developed in the XIX century by a host of physical chemists, aims to describe the relationship between pressure, volume and temperature in a gas[4]. It takes its name from the idealization it employs: the atoms of the gas are conceptualized as perfect spheres which bounce against each other (and the edges of the container) with dynamic impacts, cutting short of all other interparticle interactions. While it may not capture the chosen relationship for all kinds of gases at all temperatures and pressures, it is still pragmatically useful for a wide range of them in ordinary conditions, offering a good approximation of the dynamics involved. Cutting short of every excessive complication (such as

[4] Ildikó Rapp-Kindner, Katalin Ősz & Gábor Lente, "The Ideal Gas Law: Derivations and Intellectual Background". *ChemTexts* no. 1 (2025).

the specific form of the atomic orbitals, or the friction between the atoms), it is able to exemplify the overall relationship between the gas molecules to a sufficient degree of precision. Despite the evident simplifications involved (or, rather, thanks to them), it offers a useful and easy-to-understand model to comprehend the behaviour of a gas in ordinary conditions. Of course, this is said assuming the perspective of a physical chemist, and not, for instance, that of a quantum physicist. On the latter case, the model would undoubtedly fall short of many salient details. In this respect, the situation is similar to that of the solar system model of atoms. Developed between 1911 and 1918 by Bohr and making full use of Rutherford's discovery of the nucleus[5], it is, from a more contemporary standpoint, extremely inaccurate. Electrons do not, strictly speaking, orbit around the nucleus, orbitals have completely different shapes and so on. And yet, the model is still used in introductory lectures to depict an overall sketch of the relationship between the nucleus and the electrons which surround it, even if most of the assumptions regarding it are mistaken. It must be also stressed that this model was the first to consider the idea of quantized energy levels which order the electrons into a set of discrete states around the nucleus, paving the way to fully quantum models of the atom.

This first case study shows some interesting characteristics of fiction in research contexts. First and foremost, fictional grafts can *exemplify* various *features* of natural phenomena while cutting short of others. On this note, we can say that the operation is selective. Through this, scientists can create models which, while not entirely correct from a correspondentist perspective[6], are pragmatically effective from specific theoretical standpoints and/or objectives. This also implies that the usefulness of said models is perspective-dependent: different ends call for different models. So, with the right contextualization, fiction can help strike a balance between complexity and correctness, exemplifying only the relevant features while shadowing the unnecessary ones. However, should the research necessities demand it, these can still be introduced back by modifying the degree of fictionality of the model. This

[5] See Manjit Kumar, *Quantum* (New York – London: Norton & Company 2008), 93-116 for an historical contextualization.

[6] For a primer on truth as correspondence and its alternative paradigms, see Umberto Eco, "Dire il contrario". In: *Menzogna e Simulazione*, edited by M.A. Bonfantini (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane), 33-43.

latter point also suggests that the degree and kind of fictionality of a model can be tinkered with, reshaping it in more useful representations according to the situation at hand.

With this, we can move to the second case study: the surprising influence that Borges' *The Library of Babel* had over biological studies in the latter half of the 20th century. After the publication of the short story in 1941, the idea of a complete combinatory space did not propagate only in the humanities (with results such as the famous OuLiPo), but also through the sciences, especially in the biological field[7]. There, several combinatory morphospaces[8] begun to appear. These are collections of all the possible variations of specific biological phenomena with respect to their defining characteristics, such as shells, the corporeal forms of animals, or proteins[9]. The latter case, formulated by Maynard-Smith in 1970[10], established the playing field for a special occurrence of these theoretical constructions (or, more precisely, a subset of it): Arnold's work on the so-called "library of enzymes". And yet, her studies were not limited to the bare definition of another total combinatory collection[11]; they included a method to move within it. Much like Borges' librarians, Arnold found a way to employ the natural mechanisms which guide the evolution of enzymes to move through their morphospace, discovering new molecules as she went[12]. This was thanks to a similarity and a fundamental difference from the original Borgesian conception, which emerged organically as the two combinatory spaces where compared. While the enzymes' morphospace, just like Borges' library, was created

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[7] Telmo Pievani, *Tutti i mondi possibili. Un'avventura nella grande biblioteca dell'evoluzione* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore 2024).

[8] See Philipp Mitteroecker & Simon Huttegge "The Concept of Morphospaces in Evolutionary and Developmental Biology: Mathematics and Metaphors". *Biological Theory*, 4,1 (2009), 54-67 for an introduction to the concept of morphospace.

[9] Respectively: David Raup, "Geometric Analysis of Shell Coiling: General Problems". *Journal of Paleontology*, Vol. 40, No. 15 (1966), 1178-1190. Bradley Deline, Jennifer Greenwood, James Clark *et al.*, "Evolution of Metazoan Morphological Disparity". *PNAS*, Vol. 115, No. 38 (2018), E8909-E8918. John Maynard-Smith, "Natural Selection and the concept of a Protein Space". *Nature*, Vol. 225, (1970), 563-564.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Frances Arnold, "The nature of chemical innovation: new enzymes by evolution". *Quarterly Review of Biophysics*, 48, 4 (2015), 404-410.

[12] For instance, an enzyme capable of creating carbon-silicon bonds (frequently used in paints) without the need for the much more expansive platinum.

combinatorially starting from precise construction rules, thus forming a total combinatorial space where all possible variations where housed, enzymes and books could not be arranged the same way. If the latter, in fact, can be arranged completely at random, with a full copy of *The Lord of the Rings* next to a book filled with random consonants, the biological mechanism of natural selection prevents enzymes (and proteins in general) from being lost to such chaos. For evolutionary constraints, each enzyme must have, next to itself, other enzymes varying only by one single amino acid. For instance, an AA enzyme must have an AB enzyme next (or AC and so on), while it cannot have a FZ one. In this sense, the morphospace is more similar to an endless game such as those where one has to move from "apple" to "earth" in a discrete set of moves rather than to a hopelessly random collection. This grants biologists an important edge over their literary counterparts: their wandering through the morphospace is guided by the light of a precise ordering rule. A rule which allowed Arnold to develop a methodology to artificially direct the evolution of enzymes through the very rules which guide it naturally. Using bacteria as vessels, she had enzymes evolve and modify themselves following their natural dynamics, but in a carefully controlled environment. She was thus able to direct their wandering in the library of possibilities, discovering new and potentially useful enzymes.

In this second case study, we can see the possible advantages of a hybrid mode of thinking, one that not only filters reality through fiction, but does also the converse. Through this double operation, Arnold was able to highlight a fundamental similarity and the specific difference between two different combinatory spaces, allowing her to devise a way to explore the morphospace of all possible enzymes through a combination of both. This opens up the possibility of developing comparative analyses of fictional and theoretical frameworks, using recurring and isolated features to highlight otherwise shadowed elements. Under this light, considering reality through the lens of fiction becomes a valid speculative alternative, at least for specific cases. Of course, scholars would still have to carefully consider such hybridizations, mostly because fiction is not primarily written for research purposes[13]. With this, we can move to our third and last example, which will offer a perspective over an even

[13] While fiction might have also a more inquisitive and speculative side (see for example Calvino's *Cosmicomics*), it remains true that the first objectives of every story are to be enjoyable by its target audience and to be coherent with respect to itself.

greater degree of fictionality: Maxwell's demon.

Developed by James C. Maxwell over the course of his studies in statistical mechanics, this thought experiment was intended to offer further ground to Boltzmann's intuition that the second law of thermodynamics was just statistical. In other words, that entropy is not a necessary outcome of the development of our universe: rather, it is just a general tendency of the systems which compose it[14]. The experiment is fairly simple in its enactment: it requires a box filled with a gas at equilibrium, a barrier with a small door in it and a subatomic demon ready for action. Said demon is then instructed to send all the hot molecules on one side of the barrier and keep all the cold ones on the other. Leave them be for a while, and the result will be a box with a hotter side and a colder side, in an outright violation of entropy. This shows that—at least from a purely theoretical standpoint such as this— nothing prevents that the second law of thermodynamics could be reversed, decreasing the entropy in a closed system. A further question might be what energetic costs such a reversal would imply, but this is beyond the scope of both the experiment and this paper.

What lies within it, instead, are the epistemic possibilities laid by the thought experiment. The employment of a fictional device such as the demon was able to bring out the true nature of the second law of thermodynamics, once again cutting short any unnecessary inconvenience, and highlighting only the relevant phenomena. Of course, moving back the slider of fictionality as has been suggested above brings with itself many problems that are not confronted by Maxwell, but which are nonetheless bathed in a new light thanks to it. In addition, we have an empirical confirmation of the fact that even to a degree of fictionality such as this, we are still able to reach reality. Or maybe we once again ought to say *thanks* to the degree of fictionality reached through the thought experiment. We will get back to this point shortly.

Before we move on to the next section, however, one last observation is due. While the first case study was not totally explicit in this respect, the second and the third showcased another property of fiction:

[14] Of course, such a claim has not gone uncriticized. For further information on this topic (and on Maxwell's Demon in general), see Kent Peacock, (2018), "Happiest thoughts: great thought experiments of modern physics". In *The Routledge Companion to Thought Experiments*, edited by M. Stuart, Y. Fehige & J. Brown (New York: Routledge 2018), 212-215.

the symbolic layer which fictional scenarios are often coated into. More specifically, the first delineation of morphospaces was as libraries of phenomena, while Maxwell's device has been described as a demon. Both descriptions are, of course, metaphorico-symbolical in nature, and are used to help us clarify what it is that we are talking about. In the first case, we are defining an ordered collection of biological elements, in the second, we underline that the nature of the mechanism is in some sense preternatural, or at least beyond our current (and foreseeable) capacities. And yet, as Lakoff and Johnson remark in their work on the epistemology of metaphors, these linguistic devices hide as much as they reveal[15]. The library of enzymes is not, in fact, an actual library, meaning that it is a fully catalogued collection we can browse in search of answers, but is a theoretical model filled with a host of hypothetical enzymes we do not know of yet. Maxwell's demon, on the other hand, cuts short of a great number of further physical complications by black boxing the required device in its demonic characterization. Even so, such layers are part of the reason we make use of fictional frameworks, employing metaphors to ease us into potentially unfamiliar environments, cutting through a wide range of difficulties. In this sense, it is not imprecise to say, as has been noted during the analysis above, that fiction can be speculatively useful precisely thanks to this symbolical black boxing, making full use of the epistemological capabilities of metaphors and storytelling to reach new insights on a variety of topics.

**Reasons and Scholars – On why one should use Fiction**

Over the previous paragraph it has been noted that a peculiar feature of fiction was shared by all the case studies, notwithstanding the different degree of fictionality or their specific purposes: the possibility to define a scenario capable of highlighting only the desired characteristics of a particular phenomenon, cutting short any unnecessary inconvenience, be it theoretical or practical. This feature has been already described (with respect to thought experiments) by Elgin, who accounted for its epistemological status with her theory of exemplification. In general, this is the relationship between a *sample* and the thing of which it is a sample, what-

[15] George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we live by* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980).

ever it may be[16]. Consider the sample of a colour in a paint shop[17]: it exemplifies the corresponding paint by showcasing a specific property, i.e. its pantone. As has already been showed, then, exemplification is selective. And similarly to what Lakoff and Johnson noticed with respect to metaphors[18], exemplification too shadows some properties by highlighting others, all the while referring to both. For example, the type of cardboard which composes the colour sample, or its height and length. Despite the simplicity of its definition, the implications of this relationship, both in general and in the specific case of fiction, cannot be underestimated.

As has been introduced above, the main example considered by Elgin are thought experiments, i.e. fictional frameworks defined *ad hoc* to examine a specific phenomenon or problem or put a theory to the test. We already considered one with Maxwell's demon in the last section, but one might also think of other examples concerning general relativity or quantum mechanics, such as Einstein's elevator or Schrödinger's cat. In the first case, these scientific exemplifications helped Einstein in the development of general relativity, highlighting the seemingly more paradoxical elements in a clean, easy-to-access way[19]; in the second they showcased the critical points of the Copenhagen interpretation and of the quantum world in general[20]. This shows the epistemic usefulness of exemplification: it allows us to account for and, in general, to define frameworks in which we can remove all the possible obstacles while highlighting only the relevant features of possibly any object or phenomena. Furthermore, while *samples* exemplify directly only specific characteristics, they can and do refer to many others[21]. In other words, they structurally leave room

[16] Catherine Elgin, "Imaginative Investigations: Thought Experiments in Science, Philosophy and Literature". In *Literature as Thought Experiment? Perspectives from Philosophy and Literary Studies*, edited by F. Bornmüller, J. Franzen, & M. Lessau (Leiden: Brill 2019), 5. For an analysis that considers also the artistic dimension of fiction, see Nelson Goodman, "When is Art?". In *The Arts and Cognition*, edited by D. Perkins & B. Leondar (Baltimora: Johns Hopkins University Press 1977), 11-19.

[17] Catherine Elgin, *True Enough* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2017), 187-188.

[18] Lakoff & Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*.

[19] See Peacock, "Happiest thoughts: great thought experiments of modern physics", 215 -222.

[20] See Kumar, *Quantum* for an historical contextualization.

[21] Through the materials they are composed of, their shape, or the way in which they design a specific concept. Combining this with the abovementioned theories by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), we may add to this list the kind of metaphors used.

for different readings which can focus on other properties and aspects of the considered phenomena[22]. Scholars are always welcome to make use of an exemplifier in different and/or unorthodox ways (with respect to the intended one), ways that nonetheless remain available.

In such a context, then, the author/researcher stipulates a narrative framework that, even if it is not possible in a rigorous sense, must remain *plausible* to the target reader/colleague[23]. Such a framework will be constructed *ad hoc* to highlight the desired *features* and themes and will also leave room to elaborate a series of divergent interpretations. As an example, one might think of the abovementioned criticism moved against Maxwell's demon. Stemming from the same premises, it clearly shows how a different perspective or a slightly different degree of fictionality can lead to different (and possibly contrasting) outcomes on the object there exemplified.

The verb "stipulate" is not used without reason. It recalls Saul Kripke's modal theses, developed in the context of his theory of rigid designation[24]. In short, Kripke regards possible words as stipulations in which we define and develop possible world states through "rigid designators". These are fixed expressions which refer to one and the same individual through all possible worlds. The example brought forth by Kripke is that of a world in which Richard Nixon lost the elections for the thirty-seventh President of the United States of America[25]. While in other accounts of modality the identification of this second Nixon is established through complex theories which define identity through different worlds[26], Kripke flips the situation with a rigid designation theory. In other words, it makes no sense to ask if this second Nixon is indeed the very same Nixon we know of,

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[22] In some cases, the author/researcher of the exemplifier might choose an imprecise one, or they may fail in highlighting the desired *feature*, offering further room for analysis.

[23] The reason for this is the enactment and preservation of the suspension of disbelief, building a fruitful collaboration between author and reader. While it might seem odd to speak of SoD in a research context, it has to be noted that if the framework of the thought experiments is incoherent with respect to the theoretical background of the issue or to itself, the target audience/colleagues will reject it purely on these structural reasons. In this sense, the two phenomena prove surprisingly close.

[24] Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1980).

[25] Ibid., 38-49.

[26] For instance, Lewis' counterpart theory. For further information, see David Lewis, "Counterpart Theory and Quantified Modal Logic". *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 65, No. 5, (1968), 113-126.

since the possible world does not exist on his own, but is stipulated as we define the counterfactual world state. Given this, the identity of the two Nixons becomes simply a consequence of our premises. This brief incursion in modal logic might appear out of place, and yet it brings curious implications to the table. Combining the theses we just discussed with the issues at hand, it allows us – at least in the range of cases we are discussing – as the stipulation of a framework designed to exemplify themes and/or problems within a specific narrative.

However, two further observations from the second and third case study must be added to this overall account. The first is the possibility to have a fictional scenario and a theoretical model interact with each other. In this sense (at least for specific sets of them) they are not irreducible to each other. Possibly, this is due to the similarity of the proceedings and assumptions involved, such as in Arnold and Borges' case, but further analysis is still required to prove this was not a specific characteristic of this case study. Nonetheless, this proves to be an extremely useful possibility, allowing scholars to frame differences and similitudes between the frameworks very easily. This cross-analysis can also offer a fair share of possible adjustments to the scenario's degree of fictionality, allowing for greater precision in its design. The second is the metaphorico-symbolical layer that fiction incorporates, and it has already been discussed at the end of the previous section.

## Horizons and Borders – On the roads opening before us

With a stock of three case studies and Elgin's account for the exemplification there enacted, we can now move to some general observations regarding the use of fiction in research contexts. The most striking feature emerging from the analysis is arguably the fact that it can be used as a tool to interact with reality, rather than simply to escape it. Of course, this interaction is mediated, and some aspects of the actual situation involved are removed. Under this respect, then, we can say that we have indeed departed from the phenomena depicted. And yet, the goal of this operation is to focus on other specific features of that very same situation. As we saw in the first paragraph, this can be due to pragmatic needs (the gases' case), aimed to a purely theoretical speculation (Maxwell's case), or enacted through a combination of both (the morphospaces' case). Because of this, and of the differences between the situations involved, the gradient of fictionality of the specific scenario can also vary.

Then, we can conclude that (at least in a research context) it is indeed possible to "lie to say the truth". Or, better said, to "lie to reach the truth". Of course, one might say that we should throw away our ladder after using it, and yet it is undeniable that such a ladder has been the pathway to many theories and discoveries. For instance, one might consider not only the three case studies considered in the first section, but also the abovementioned fictional (or fictionalized) scenarios that helped develop both general relativity (Einstein's elevator, the twins' experiment or the ride on the photon) and quantum mechanics (Schrödinger's cat, Wigner's friend or the EPR box). An even further example might be the Turing machine, born as a thought experiment to inquire about the *Entscheidungsproblem* and ended up as the forebearer of the Bombe and, through it, of today's computers[27].

And yet, confining this feature of fiction only to thought experiments and a variety of liminal cases concerning fictional (or partly fictionalized) scenarios would be reductive, other than unsatisfactory. On this note, it must be stressed that a wide group of fictions and stories are written also to investigate (or, more generally, to elaborate) on real phenomena. There's speculative fiction, tinkering with language and cognition (*Stories of your life* by Ted Chiang) or the implications of biotechnology (the *MaddAddam* trilogy by Margaret Atwood). There's horror, with its exploration and expansion of the dark corners of reality (consider authors such as H.P. Lovecraft or Shirley Jackson). Even the seemingly harmless genre of New Journalism grants real events a more organic (and partly fictional) frame of reference, giving structure and order to clouds of otherwise chaotic facts (*In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote, or Emmanuel Carrère's novelized biographies).

Finally, we might consider what should seem in all rights the furthest example of a fiction that could help us interact with the real: a young adult fantasy trilogy, i.e. *The Bartimeus Sequence* by Johnathan Stroud. As it is often the case in novels, the saga revolves around a main theme: slavery and exploitation. However, Stroud chooses to explore it without resorting to human beings. In the fictional world of the books the slave-owner dynamic is exemplified through the relationship between the mages of the British Empire, who rule most of the Earth, and

[27] Alan Turing, "On Computable Numbers, with an application to the *Entscheidungsproblem*". *Proceedings of the London Mathematical Society*, 58 (1936), 230-265.

a race of otherworldly demons. As doctor Faust in the various versions of his story, the sorcerers devised a way to summon these creatures in our continuum, binding them to their service and forcing them to assume a definite form. This narrative choice does not only enhance the alterity of the slave, but also amplifies the realization that, despite their *prima facie* alien appearance, the demons are also "human", in a sense. They have feelings and desires of their own and wish nothing more than to return in their own dimension to exist in peace. They are not, in conclusion, evil beings to subjugate through some contract of sorts. This narrative dynamic also ends up lightened of most of the sociopolitical and historical implications of slavery, given that the enslaved beings are demons from another dimension and not human victims of European Imperialism. By cutting short of these aspects, Stroud allows the reader to focus only on the desired ones, without forcing too much detail onto the reader. In this sense, just as in the exemplification described by Elgin, the trilogy reconfigures the specific *features* of slavery, offering its readers a specific point of view to consider the issue. Of course, one might object that the relationship between the two kinds of slavery does not obtain, or that the fictional pruning of sociopolitical implications ends up preventing any meaningful way of linking them. And yet, given that the fictional condition of demons is in fact heavily rooted in historical slave practices[28] and that the different character arcs work to showcase ethical and humanitarian problems emerged while examining historical slavery, I maintain that both share a common theoretical ground which can open to a comparative analysis. Even in a case such as this, then, we may conclude that there is room for interaction with reality, albeit with a greater degree of fictionality.

[28] It must be noted that this is not an isolated characteristic of *The Bartimeus Sequence*, but a common worldbuilding good practice shared by many writers to make their worlds more believable to the respective audiences. Coating fictional elements in real-world facts and theories helps authors frame the various parts of their fictional worlds in a coherent and plausible way, thus allowing for a smooth enactment of the suspension of disbelief. Some examples might be Patrick Rothfuss's use of thermodynamics as a starting point for the magic system of *The Name of the Wind* (New York: Daw Books, 2007), Catherine Lacy's careful mixing of real-world, historical events and fictional intromissions by her main character in her *Biography of X* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023), or Neal Stephenson's transfiguration of actual philosophical positions and theories to design Arbre's monk-scientists researches in *Anathem* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 2008).

## Conclusion

Going back to our opening question, it appears that "lying to say the truth" is indeed a pretty accurate description of at least a specific set of fictions, grounded both in historical and contemporary research practices. This if we understand the phrase as "taking a step back from reality to fictionally cut short of any unnecessary complication, focusing only on the desired characteristics and bringing them into the spotlight". Under this perspective, we can reasonably consider fiction as a workbench to stipulate a framework designed to exemplify themes and problems within a specific narrative, featuring a built-in metaphorico-symbolical layer able to black box theoretical and practical inconveniences. In addition, far from being a strictly scholarly advantage, this framing of fiction can in return open the door to new and epistemically interesting perspectives on novels and short stories, considering them not only as products of entertainment, but also as windows on problems and theories able to showcase new, perhaps underrepresented features. Of course, such a position needs not to hold for each and every story, but it does emerge in a significant set of them. Given this, we may do consider fiction as a way to interact with reality.

# 10. After the Fact: Common Sense, Paradoxical Structures, and the Retroactive Logic of Fictional Reality

*Boyan Dafov, boyandafov123@gmail.com*
*(PhD Student, Department of Logic, Ethics, and Aesthetics, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski)*

**Abstract:** This paper investigates the conceptual relationship between common sense, paradox, and the retroactive formation of reality, arguing that what appears as the most immediate form of sense (the "obvious") is itself an effect of a retroactive logic that stabilizes fiction as reality. Common sense typically presents itself as an unproblematic givenness: the naturalized horizon from within which objects, meanings, and social practices are encountered as self-evidently real. This horizon reveals its dependence on prior processes of symbolic articulation and temporal synthesis. Far from being a neutral medium, common sense conceals the constructive operations by which meaning is retrospectively secured. The paper argues that paradox is not an anomaly within this horizon but a structural signal of its internal limits. In the Kantian sense, paradox emerges whenever reason confronts the conditions of its own possibility, exposing the contingency of the principles common sense treats as unquestionable. Such paradoxes do not simply disrupt the coherence of common sense, they disclose the retroactive mechanisms through which coherence is first produced. Drawing on the logic of fictional positing (Vaihinger) and the notion of fictitious entities (Bentham), I show how the real is often constituted only once a symbolic form is imposed that retrospectively determines what will count as given. Lacan's account of après-coup further illuminates this temporal structure. An event or signifier does not acquire its decisive meaning at the moment of its occurrence but only through a subsequent reinscription that reorganizes its place within a symbolic network. The "origin" of sense is thus continually displaced forward, constituted only from a later standpoint that confers coherence upon what was previously indeterminate. In this way, après-coup exemplifies how the real is never

simply found but produced through a looping temporality in which the present reconfigures the meaning of the past.

**Keywords:** Common Sense, Paradox, Limit-Concepts, Retroactivity, Fictional Positing, Structural Logic of the Real.

## Introduction: The Obvious as a Philosophical Problem

Common sense ordinarily presents itself as the most reliable starting point for thought. It names what is obvious, immediately intelligible, and seemingly beyond dispute—the domain of what "anyone can see" without further justification. In everyday life as well as in much theoretical discourse, common sense functions as an ontological guarantee. It reassures us that reality is already there, already structured, and already meaningful prior to reflection. Precisely because of this self-evidence, common sense rarely becomes an explicit philosophical problem. It operates as the silent background against which problems arise, rather than as something requiring justification itself.

This paper begins from the claim that such self-evidence is philosophically misleading. The immediacy attributed to common sense conceals a complex set of constitutive operations through which reality comes to appear as given in the first place. Contemporary phenomenology has repeatedly emphasized that what appears as "natural" or "obvious" is the outcome of sedimented processes of sense-formation rather than an originary datum. Common sense is therefore not simply a passive reception of reality but an active mode of world-disclosure that effaces its own genesis. Crowell asserts that phenomenology is not merely descriptive, but normative, as it uncovers the "ought" (rational constraints) that guides how objects and experiences are intended. This normativity however is not restricted only to its traditional domains and precedes all intentional experiences.[1]

The central thesis of this paper is that common sense functions as a *retroactively stabilized fiction*: reality appears self-evident only after symbolic, temporal, and conceptual operations have succeeded in fixing its meaning and concealing their own activity. What emerges is a *retroactive temporality of the real* in which reality is not prior to fiction but crystallizes through it. The guiding question of this paper is therefore

[1] Steven Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

not whether reality contains fictional elements, but how reality itself is constituted through retroactive sense-formation, and why this process is experienced as non-fictional within common sense. To articulate this claim, the paper develops three interrelated arguments. First, common sense is analyzed phenomenologically as a horizon of obviousness that naturalizes historically and symbolically constituted meanings. Drawing on Edmund Husserl's analyses of the natural attitude and sedimentation, I argue that common sense operates by suspending the question of constitution, thereby presenting the world as simply "there". Second, the paper argues that paradox is not an external disruption of common sense but a structural expression of its own limits. When sense turns reflexive—when it encounters the conditions of its own possibility—contradictions emerge that cannot be resolved within the framework of obviousness. In Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy, such paradoxes take the form of antinomies, which arise necessarily from reason's demand for totality.[2] Third, the paper argues that the resolution of paradox does not occur through a return to a pre-symbolic reality but through *fictional positing*. Building on Hans Vaihinger's theory of the *as if*, fiction is treated not as error or illusion but as a necessary operation that allows sense to persist where strict consistency fails.[3] Fiction, therefore, stabilizes sense by reorganizing contradictions into functional structures that can be lived with. However, the temporal dimension of this stabilization is crucial. Fiction does not simply overlay an already given reality; it reorganizes the field of meaning retroactively. This logic is articulated most sharply in Jacques Lacan's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (*après-coup*), according to which events acquire their meaning only through later symbolic inscription.[4] *Après-coup* is not simply a psychological mechanism but a structural temporality in which the present reconfigures the past, producing the illusion that meaning was always already there. Reality, on this view, is not discovered but produced through tem-

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Originally published 1781.

[3] Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As If": A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*. Translated by C. K. Ogden. 2nd ed (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1935).

[4] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English. The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 213.

poral loops of signification.

The concept of *fictional reality* developed in this paper is therefore does not refer to deception, simulation, or ideological distortion in the first instance. Rather, it names the ordinary condition under which reality becomes intelligible at all. Following Jeremy Bentham's notion of fictitious entities, the paper shows how symbolic constructs—once stabilized—acquire real normative and practical force, even as their fictional origin recedes from view.[5] Common sense is the everyday name for this success: the point at which fiction has become so effective that it no longer appears as fiction. By reconceptualizing common sense, paradox, and fiction within a unified framework of retroactive constitution, the paper shifts philosophical critique away from the exposure of illusion and toward an analysis of the temporal and symbolic mechanisms through which reality itself is produced. To think reality *after the fact* is not to abandon truth, but to recognize the conditions under which truth becomes possible.

## Common Sense and the Naturalization of Meaning

### Common Sense as the Natural Attitude

A phenomenological approach allows common sense to be understood not primarily as a set of beliefs, but as a *mode of being-in-the-world*. What common sense provides is not theoretical knowledge, but an orientation in which the world already makes sense prior to reflection. In this respect, common sense closely corresponds to what Edmund Husserl famously calls the *natural attitude*: the pre-philosophical stance in which the existence of the world and its meaningful structure are taken for granted.[6] Within this attitude, reality is not questioned but presupposed as self-evident. Contemporary phenomenology has emphasized that the natural attitude is not a naïve error to be corrected by philosophy, but a necessary condition for practical and social life. As Zahavi argues, the natural attitude provides the background certainty that allows agents to navigate the world without being paralyzed by constant reflection. Zahavi distin-

[5] Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*. Edited by John Bowring. Vol. 8. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962). Originally published London: William Tait, 1843.

[6] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

guishes phenomenological reflection from psychological introspection. Psychological reflection is therefore constrained by what is pre-reflectively lived through.[7] Reflection is not a closed gaze into oneself, but a tool for analyzing the "invariant structures" of experience. Common sense thus operates as a *horizon of intelligibility* - it "silently" structures what can appear as relevant, normal, or real, without itself becoming thematic. Its authority lies precisely in the fact that it does not present itself as an interpretation among others.

However, phenomenological analysis also reveals that this horizon is *constituted*. Husserl's concept of sedimentation is crucial here. Meanings are not given once and for all, but are formed through acts of perception, judgment, and social interaction that gradually withdraw from active awareness while continuing to shape experience.[8] Husserl attacks the naive belief in a world that exists on its own, which can only be understood through mathematical methods. The transcendental motif is on the other hand the questioning back to the ultimate source of all knowledge-formations, the reflection of the knowing subject upon himself and his knowing life, meaning that the world is always a world presented to someone.[9] This argument culminates in the "paradox of subjectivity", which shows that man is simultaneously an object in the world (body) and a subject for the world (consciousness).[10]

What common sense treats as obvious is therefore the result of historical and symbolic processes whose constructive character has been obscured over time. The world of common sense is not the world as such, but the world as stabilized through inherited sense-formations. Recent work in phenomenological social ontology reinforces this point. Crowell emphasizes that normativity and meaning are embedded in shared practices long before they are thematized as explicit rules or concepts, showing how these "sedimented" (settled) practices and meanings function as invisible rules that guide our daily lives without us actively thinking of them as "laws".[11] Common sense emerges at the intersection of these practices, functioning as an implicit normativity that governs

[7] Dan Zahavi, *Husserl's Legacy: Phenomenology, Metaphysics, and Transcendental Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 20.
[8] Husserl, *Crisis*, 52-72.
[9] Ibid., 95-99.
[10] Ibid., 178.
[11] Steven Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology*, 200-205.

what counts as reasonable, intelligible, or real. Far from being neutral, common sense embodies a historically contingent organization of sense that presents itself as natural necessity. From this perspective, common sense already exhibits a subtle tension. On the one hand, it depends on constituted meanings; on the other, it presents those meanings as unconstituted. It relies on symbolic mediation while concealing mediation itself. This tension does not usually manifest as contradiction, because common sense operates by suspending reflexive questioning. Only when this suspension is disturbed does the constructed character of obviousness come into view.

**The Illusion of Immediacy and the Suppression of Paradox**

The defining claim of common sense is immediacy. Objects appear as simply present; meanings as self-evident; social norms as naturally binding. This immediacy, however, is not a phenomenological datum but an *effect*. It is produced through the successful stabilization of sense and the systematic suppression of paradox. What common sense excludes is not contradiction as such, but the visibility of contradiction as a structural feature of meaning. Philosophically, paradox arises whenever sense turns back upon its own conditions—when the question of *how* meaning is possible interrupts the experience of *what* is meaningful. Common sense avoids such interruptions by treating meaning as already settled. As long as sense functions smoothly, paradox remains latent. When paradox does surface, it appears as disruption: confusion, absurdity, or irrationality. Common sense responds by either dismissing paradox as error or by reabsorbing it into familiar interpretive frameworks. This response is revealing. It indicates that paradox is not external to common sense, but internal to its functioning. Paradox marks the points at which the illusion of immediacy breaks down—where the gap between meaning and its conditions becomes visible. Rather than eliminating this gap, common sense manages it by narrative and symbolic means. It restores coherence by redescribing what has occurred as if its meaning had always been present.

In both phenomenology and hermeneutics, it has been argued that meaning is not contemporaneous with events but emerges through processes of temporal reconfiguration. In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur develops the concept of *emplotment* (*mise en intrigue*) precisely to demonstrate that events acquire intelligibility only when configured within a

narrative structure that organizes them into a coherent whole.[12] Crucially, this configuration is not additive but retroactive, where the ending of a narrative "gives the story a sense of completion" and thereby determines how earlier episodes are to be understood.[13] Ricoeur speaks in this context of a "discordant concordance" (*concordance discordante*), emphasizing that narrative unity does not eliminate rupture but integrates it retrospectively into a meaningful sequence.[14] Events, in isolation, are episodic - only through *emplotment* do they become intelligible as parts of a structured whole.[15] Meaning thus arises not at the moment of occurrence, but through subsequent reconfiguration. As Zahavi notes, the retentional modification is not a process that simply occurs once and for all, every new now entails a new retentional modification of the preceding phases of the flow.[16] Temporal experience therefore includes an intrinsic openness to revision. The past is not simply preserved but dynamically modulated within an ongoing horizon of sense.

Common sense nevertheless presents temporal continuity as self-evident. Causes are assumed to precede effects in a straightforward linear order; intentions are presumed to determine actions contemporaneously; meanings are thought to accompany events at the moment of their occurrence. When this linearity is disrupted—when later developments radically alter the sense of earlier occurrences—common sense resolves the tension retroactively. It reconstructs the past as if it had always already contained the seeds of the present outcome, thereby converting temporal reconfiguration into apparent necessity. What Ricoeur describes as narrative "refiguration" becomes, at the level of common sense, an unnoticed projection of coherence backward in time. The retroactive constitution of meaning is thus concealed under the guise of temporal continuity.[17]

This retroactive reconstruction is a key mechanism by which paradox is suppressed. Contradictions are not erased, but re-narrated. What initially

[12] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 65-71.
[13] Ibid., 157-161.
[14] Ibid., 65-67.
[15] Ibid., 71-76.
[16] Dan Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 82-84.
[17] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 76-77.

resisted sense is redescribed in terms that restore continuity. The resulting coherence is then projected backward as a condition that was always already in place. In this way, common sense converts contingency into necessity and interpretation into fact. The suppression of paradox thus has ontological consequences. It stabilizes a reality that appears non-fictional precisely because the work of fiction has already succeeded. The everyday world is experienced as free of paradox not because it lacks contradictions, but because those contradictions have been neutralized through symbolic and temporal operations that remain invisible. Common sense is the name for this invisibility. Understanding common sense in this way prepares the transition to the analysis of paradox and retroactivity in the following sections. Paradox is not a marginal phenomenon to be eliminated, but a diagnostic indicator of the processes by which sense is stabilized. When paradox becomes visible, it reveals that reality is not simply given, but continuously constituted through mechanisms that operate *after the fact*.

## Paradox as a Structural Feature of Common Sense
## Kantian Paradox and the Limits of the Obvious

Paradox becomes philosophically significant at the point where common sense can no longer sustain the appearance of immediacy. While common sense presupposes that reality is already coherently ordered and non-contradictory, philosophical reflection repeatedly encounters situations in which this presupposition breaks down. In the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, this breakdown is articulated with systematic clarity in the form of the antinomies of pure reason. Kant insists that these antinomies do not arise from careless reasoning or empirical error, but from reason's own lawful activity when it seeks unconditional explanation.[18] Importantly, Kant does not resolve paradox by simply eliminating one side of the contradiction. Instead, he transforms the problem by restricting the legitimate use of reason, thereby preserving coherence at the cost of acknowledging the limits of what can be known. From the standpoint of the present paper, this move exemplifies that paradox does not disappear through correction, but through *reconfiguration*. Sense is stabilized not by removing contradiction as such, but by reorganizing the framework within which contradiction appears.

[18] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A405/B432.

Contemporary Kant scholarship has emphasized that the antinomies should not be read merely as logical curiosities, but as expressions of a deep structural tension within rational cognition. Allison emphasizes the difference between mathematical and dynamic antinomies in Kant's system. In the mathematical (1st and 2nd) both statements are false because they both assume that the world is a finished entity that is given to us. In the dynamic (3rd and 4th) both statements can be true, but in different sense (one for the phenomenal world, the other for the noumenal world).[19] Reason generates contradiction precisely because it cannot relinquish either demand. Paradox is therefore not an anomaly but an index of reason's constitutive limits. Béatrice Longuenesse deepens this structural reading by arguing that the antinomies arise from the "transcendental demand for totality" internal to the activity of reason itself. For Longuenesse, reason does not arbitrarily exceed experience, but rather, it extends the logical function of seeking conditions—already operative within the understanding—to the idea of the *unconditioned totality* of those conditions.[20] In doing so, reason projects the form of systematic unity beyond the domain in which it can legitimately apply. The antinomies thus result from the unavoidable transition from the logical demand for completeness in judgment to a transcendental claim about the totality of the world as object.[21] What generates paradox is not a misuse of concepts, but the very structure of discursive cognition, as our capacity to judge presupposes the search for sufficient grounds, and this search, when absolutized, yields mutually incompatible yet rationally motivated conclusions. The antinomies reveal a constitutive tension between the finite standpoint of human cognition and the regulative ideal of systematic unity that reason cannot renounce. Paradox, therefore, is not merely a limit encountered at the margins of thought; it emerges from the internal dynamic of judgment itself. The "obviousness" presupposed by common sense depends upon the tacit containment of this demand for totality within empirical bounds. When that containment fails—when reason insists on viewing the world as a completed whole—the coherence of common sense collapses into contradiction. The an-

[19] Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense*, rev. ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 357-396.

[20] Béatrice Longuenesse, *Kant on the Human Standpoint* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 213-217.

[21] Ibid., 218-224.

tinomies thus disclose not a defect of reasoning, but the structural instability of any worldview that assumes reality to be transparently and fully given.

This insight has direct consequences for the status of common sense. From the perspective of everyday intelligibility, contradiction appears intolerable: if reality is to be obvious, it must be consistent. Kant's analysis undermines this assumption by demonstrating that contradiction arises not from an external disturbance of sense, but from the internal logic of explanation itself. Whenever reason attempts to grasp totality, it produces mutually incompatible yet equally justified claims. The coherence presupposed by common sense thus rests on a selective blindness to the conditions under which sense is produced.

## Fictional Positing as a Response to Paradox

If paradox reveals the limits of common sense, the persistence of coherent sense requires a mediating strategy. One such strategy is fictional positing. Rather than resolving contradiction through direct correspondence with reality, fictional positing allows reason to proceed *as if* certain conditions were satisfied—even when those conditions cannot be coherently affirmed within the bounds of strict logic or empirical verification. This logic receives its most systematic articulation in the philosophy of Hans Vaihinger, whose theory of the *as if* treats fiction not as a deviation from truth, but as a constitutive feature of rational cognition.[22] Two pairs of distinctions in his theory are of crucial importance for the current argument: (1) between hypothesis and fiction; and (2) between semi-fictions and real fictions. In the first distinction the main difference lies in whether the mental construct claims to correspond to "objective reality". A hypothesis is directed towards reality. It is an assumption that strives to be "true" and to describe the actual state of affairs. It is a "preparatory step toward discovering truth". Fiction is a conscious deviation from reality. It does not claim to be true – on the contrary, it is a "conscious false assumption". In fiction, we think "as if" something exists, knowing fully well it does not exist, but it is retained because of its "practical utility" in organizing thought. The falsity if fiction is not

[22] Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As If': A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, trans. C. K. Ogden, 2nd ed. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1935).

accidental but essential – fictions may even contradict empirical reality or logical consistency, but they are preserved because they enable systematic coherence where direct representation fails.[23] Therefore, a hypothesis requires verification, proven through empirical criteria of truth – if data contradicts the hypothesis, it must be rejected or corrected. Fiction on the other hand requires justification solely by its practical usefulness to thought. From a logical standpoint, it is crucial to say that fiction does not conceal contradiction, it acknowledges it while operationally suspending its disruptive force.

Vaihinger's distinction between *semi-fictions* and *real* (or complete) fictions clarifies this mediating role. Semi-fictions are simplifications or idealizations that deviate from reality but remain approximately consistent with it – thought operates with real elements, but arranges or isolates them in a way that does not exist in nature. They are deviations from reality, but not from logical possibility. Semi-fictions are those in which the contradiction is not an internal one, but only a contradiction of reality. Real fictions, by contrast, may involve internally contradictory or logically impossible constructs, but they are retained because they permit the construction of a unified system of thought. They contradict not only empirical reality, but often are internally contradictory. Real fictions are not only in contradiction with reality, but are also self-contradictory in themselves.[24]

The *as if* structure thereby stabilizes sense without requiring metaphysical commitment. It suspends contradiction without denying its presence. Importantly, such fictions often become naturalized. What begins as a consciously adopted construct may gradually be treated as an ontological commitment once its functional role has solidified. The fiction's heuristic origin fades, and it comes to appear as a feature of reality itself. From the standpoint of common sense, this disappearance is decisive. Once a fiction has successfully stabilized a field of sense, it no longer appears as fiction. The *as if* is forgotten, and the resulting configuration is treated as self-evident.

[23] Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As If'*, 85-91.
[24] Ibid., 91-95.

## Paradox, Retroactivity, and the Reconstitution of Sense

Paradox does more than motivate fictional positing - it also reveals the temporal structure of sense-formation. When paradox emerges, sense appears to lag behind itself. What was assumed to be settled is suddenly called into question, and coherence must be restored through reinterpretation. This restoration rarely takes the form of radical revision. Instead, it proceeds through retroactive reorganization: earlier elements are redescribed in light of new symbolic constructions, such that the outcome of sense-formation is projected backward as its own condition. From this perspective, paradox is generative rather than destructive - it identifies the points at which sense must be reorganized if it is to persist. Fictional positing provides the means for such reorganization, while retroactivity explaining how the resulting coherence comes to appear as original. For common sense, this process remains largely invisible. Retroactive stabilization transforms contingency into necessity and interpretation into fact. Once paradox has been neutralized and a new configuration of sense has taken hold, the history of its formation is effaced. The resulting reality appears as if it had always been coherent, masking the temporal and symbolic operations that produced it. Paradox thus serves as a diagnostic indicator: it reveals moments in which the retroactive logic of sense becomes visible before being reabsorbed into the horizon of the obvious. Paradox, therefore, occupies a central place in the constitution of fictional reality. It marks the limits of common sense, motivates fictional stabilization, and discloses the retroactive temporality through which sense is reconstituted. Far from undermining reality, paradox is one of the primary mechanisms through which reality is continually produced and renewed.

## Retroactivity and the Constitution of the Real
## Fictitious Entities and After-the-Fact Reality

The retroactive constitution of reality can be approached with greater clarity through the concept of *fictitious entities*. Classical philosophy often treats fictitious entities as merely linguistic or heuristic devices—terms that lack referents in reality but facilitate discourse. The concept of “common sense” can be analyzed through Bentham's Theory of Fictions, since it has no material correspondence in the sensory world and functions as a fictitious entity, whose existence is simulated by the

imagination for the purposes of discourse.[25] Although language treats common sense as an existing object or shared capacity, it is rather a linguistic construct that requires the method of paraphrasis in order to be understood. According to Bentham, the meaning of such abstractions is not found in isolated definitions, but in whole sentences translated into the language of "real entities". Thus, in order to demystify "common sense", we must apply archetypation, examining the physical images of agreement or sensation that underlie it.[26] Their reality is not antecedent to discourse but emerges through its stabilization. Recent work in social ontology has reinforced this insight. Ultimately, Bentham's logic reveals that common sense often serves as a rhetorical tool to conceal subjective judgments, transforming an abstract fiction into an indisputable social reality. What distinguishes Bentham's approach and makes it explicitly relevant to the current argument is its explicit emphasis on retroactivity. A fictitious entity becomes real only *after* it has been successfully integrated into a network of judgments and actions. Once this integration occurs, its fictional origin recedes from view, replaced by the appearance of ontological immediacy. This "after-the-fact" logic challenges the common-sense assumption that reality precedes symbolization. Instead, it suggests that symbolization plays a constitutive role in determining what will count as real. Legal persons, obligations, rights, and abstract values exemplify this structure. Their effects are undeniably real, even though their existence depends on symbolic articulation rather than empirical givenness. Such entities are grounded not in physical facts alone but in complex grounding relations that unfold over time, allowing for retroactivity to be viewed simply as an epistemic illusion but a fundamental feature of social reality. For common sense, however, this temporal structure is largely invisible. Once fictitious entities have stabilized social practices, they are experienced as part of the natural order of things. Their contingency is forgotten, and their existence is treated as self-evident. This forgetting is not accidental but functional: common sense requires a stable reality in order to operate. Retroactivity is therefore concealed at the very moment it succeeds. Fiction becomes reality precisely when its fictional character is no longer thematized.

[25] Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, 325.
[26] Ibid., 322.

## Après-coup and the Temporal Loop of Meaning

While Bentham and contemporary social ontology clarify the discursive and institutional dimensions of retroactivity, psychoanalytic theory radicalizes the temporal logic at stake. In the work of Jacques Lacan, retroactivity is conceptualized through the notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (*après-coup*), which designates a non-linear temporality in which meaning is constituted retrospectively rather than contemporaneously.[27] An event does not carry its full meaning at the moment it occurs; instead, its significance emerges only through subsequent symbolic inscription. *Après-coup* should not be understood as a psychological mechanism of delayed interpretation, but as a structural feature of signification itself and therefore, retroactivity should be viewed as intrinsic to symbolic causality: effects precede their causes insofar as later signifiers determine what earlier events will have meant. The past, on this view, is not a fixed sequence of determinate facts but a field continually reorganized by new symbolic frameworks. This temporal loop directly challenges the linear temporality presupposed by common sense. In everyday understanding, meaning is assumed to accompany events as they unfold. Interpretation merely uncovers what was already there. *Après-coup* undermines this assumption by showing that meaning is produced through temporal dislocation. What appears as an origin is often an effect of later structuration. The present does not simply follow the past; it actively reshapes it. The implications of this insight for fictional reality are profound. If meaning is constituted retroactively, then reality itself cannot be fully determined prior to symbolic articulation. Fiction does not merely overlay an already given real; it participates in the production of the real by reorganizing the temporal field of sense. Paradox plays a crucial role in this process. Events that initially resist sense generate tensions that cannot be resolved within existing frameworks. Retroactive inscription resolves these tensions by redescribing the past in a way that renders the present coherent. Paradox thus functions as a catalyst for retroactive sense-formation.

[27] Lacan's concept of *après-coup* (*Nachträglichkeit*) should be understood as a structural temporality of signification rather than as a theory of memory or interpretation. It designates a logic in which symbolic causality operates retroactively, such that later inscriptions determine the meaning and status of earlier events (Lacan, 1966/2006).

## Retroactivity as the Logic of Fictional Reality

Taken together, fictitious entities and *après-coup* reveal retroactivity as a general logic of fictional reality. Reality becomes intelligible not through immediate correspondence with facts, but through processes that confer meaning and stability retrospectively. Fiction supplies the symbolic forms through which paradox is neutralized and sense is reorganized. Once these forms have succeeded, their fictional status disappears, replaced by the appearance of necessity and obviousness. This account allows fictional reality to be reconceptualized as the ordinary mode of reality-constitution rather than as an exceptional deviation. Many of the structures that organize social life—norms, institutions, identities—exist only insofar as they are retroactively stabilized through symbolic practices. Common sense is the experiential correlate of this stabilization: it is the point at which retroactivity has become invisible. Understanding fictional reality in this way also clarifies the role of critique. To expose fiction is not yet to undermine reality, since reality itself depends on fiction. Critique must instead address the *conditions* under which certain fictions stabilize reality and others fail to do so. Retroactivity is thus not merely a descriptive feature of sense-formation, but a site of political, ethical, and epistemic contestation. Which realities come to appear as obvious is inseparable from the symbolic and temporal mechanisms through which they are constituted. The analysis of retroactivity therefore completes the transition from paradox to common sense. Paradox reveals the limits of existing sense; fiction provides the means of stabilization; retroactivity explains how stabilization comes to appear as original. The real is not what precedes these operations, but what emerges through them. Reality, in this strict sense, is always reality *after the fact*.

## Fictional Reality and the Logic of Common Sense

The analyses developed in the preceding sections allow for a decisive reformulation of the status of common sense. Rather than functioning as a pre-theoretical access to an independently given reality, common sense emerges as the *successful outcome of retroactive sense-formation*. What common sense presents as obvious, natural, and self-evident is not the absence of fiction, but the point at which fiction has fully accomplished its work and withdrawn from view. From a phenomenological standpoint,

common sense operates as a horizon of intelligibility that presupposes coherence without interrogating its genesis. As shown through Edmund Husserl's analyses of the natural attitude and sedimentation, meanings that were once actively constituted become passively inherited, appearing as features of the world itself rather than as results of sense-bestowing acts. What has been added by the present analysis is the claim that this invisibility is secured through *retroactivity*. Common sense stabilizes reality by projecting the results of symbolic and fictional operations backward as if they had always been in place. Once paradox has been neutralized and coherence restored, the process by which this restoration occurred is erased. Contingent solutions to structural tensions are reinterpreted as natural necessities. In this way, common sense transforms fiction into fact by forgetting the temporal operations that produced it.

This mechanism explains why common sense is experienced as non-fictional. Fiction becomes perceptible only when it fails—when paradox persists, when symbolic structures lose their binding force, or when competing narratives destabilize established meanings. When fiction succeeds, it disappears. The "real" that common sense encounters is therefore always a reality that has already been fictionalized and retroactively stabilized. The opposition between common sense and fiction is thus misleading: common sense is the experiential form taken by successful fiction. To question what is obvious is not merely to dispute a belief, but to unsettle a reality whose coherence depends on the suppression of its own contingency.

# III. Fictional Reality in Social and Political Context

## 11. Democracy — a Reality of Fictions

*Nikolay Naidenov, nayden@phls.uni-sofia.bg*
*(Professor, Dr. Sc., Department of Theory of Politics,*
*University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski)*

**Abstract:** The capacity of the fictional to shape, illuminate, and indeed give meaning to the real remains one of the profound philosophical challenges of Modernity. Symbolic thought, linguistic repertoires, grammatical structures, scientific reasoning, art, religion, the media, and photography—each constitutes a means through which a parallel image of the real is produced. As Rorty concludes, "the world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not," and this distinction bifurcates human minds and existence. Philosophers and social theorists have been devoted to conceptualizing and rendering intelligible this expanding universe of the fictional, within which even "a copy without an original" (Baudrillard) appears possible. This fictional realm, understood in its broadest sense, is the product of the human capacity to theorize, interpret, experience, represent, imagine, and fantasize—and, no less importantly, of our susceptibility to the symbolic and imaginative capacities of others. The article proposes that this capacity takes on its distinctly modern scale and significance through historical processes that liberated the individual from the rigid statuses and dependencies of the medieval order. With emancipation came the freedom to think, and this freedom increasingly shaped the very conditions under which individuals live. Citizens, however, secure, protect, and affirm their newfound status only within the framework—and by means—of democracy. It is democracy that transforms the individual from an object of subjection into a citizen, a subject entitled to participate in the making of binding decisions. This transformation is impossible unless the political system, in its decision-making, abstracts from the personal characteristics of those who are governed and those who govern. Democracy is, at its core, a political system predicated upon the presumption of equality of all citizens, and

its institutional mechanisms are oriented towards sustaining this equality. In contrast to the imagined worlds generated by the individual and collective faculties of cognition and emotion, democracy itself may be seen as an encompassing fictive reality—one grounded not in human faculties but in the abstract equality of persons that emerged from the dilemmas and aspirations of Modernity.

**Keywords**: fictional reality; democratic mechanisms, abstract equality; democratic fiction, abstract vs. concrete

## I. The Fictional Reality Created by the Human Mind

The human capacity to explain, make sense of, experience, and recreate reality—each person from their own standpoint, interests, and purposes—lies at the foundation of the rich history of ideas concerning humanity and society, as well as of art, literature, and music. The primary purpose of the entire body of philosophical, social-scientific, and artistic works is to reflect reality in such a way that the individual obtains more reliable bearings for their place within it. Yet upon this function there inevitably accretes a secondary one: the impulsion of the individual towards a particular mode of life, a particular moral and aesthetic orientation, a particular relationship to the hierarchy of earthly and divine authority. The stronger this regulatory function becomes, the more the intellectual picture of the world is transformed into an autonomous reality—one that exists alongside, and in competition with, the reality it originally set out to reflect.

The question of what is to be represented, and how, is a question concerning the individual's place in society and that society's hierarchies of power, norms, and values. It is for this reason that the intellectual representation of reality has always been a primary terrain of contestation between opposing ideas, approaches, conceptions, and imaginings. In pre-modern societies, this contest was waged within the framework of the organization and domination of supreme authority; accordingly, scientific and artistic representations of the world could not become autonomous realities existing alongside or in competition with objective reality. The liberation of the individual from the bonds of feudal dependencies and statuses, however, gathered pace at the dawn of Moder-

nity and transformed the very form of society.[1] Human conceptions of the world expanded, and the individual's participation in this world's drawings was activated. It was first those engaged in science, education, the arts, and intellectual life more broadly who analyzed, explained, and visualized the new public stock of ideas and sensibilities. Yet the spirit of liberty drew ordinary individuals into these discussions as well, through the early bourgeois public sphere.[2] The participants in the public sphere were no longer subjects of medieval dependence but citizens—members of society who are free to discuss and influence the power decisions that affect their interests and lives. By virtue of this new political role, all persons became symbolically equal before the law, and this fact carries far-reaching consequences for the political order.

In this new historical context, science, art, religion, the media, and the daily exchange of opinion—each of these social spheres produces a parallel image of the real. The individual begins to live to an ever-greater degree through, and in dependence upon, the products of their own reason, imagination, and affect. Human freedom transforms the individual into a product of their own capacities to know, to imagine, and to experience the world they inhabit. This process passes through a series of successive and parallel phases before reaching postmodernity—conceived as an "incredulity toward metanarratives,"[3] which leads not only to the dissolution of grand narratives of the world but also to a transformation in the status of every individual fragment thereof. This unfolds along several parallel lines.

## The Reflection of Reality Takes on a Life of Its Own

Bentham was among the first to note the potential of language to create a fictive reality that detaches itself from objective reality. If a noun-substantive "is not the name of a real entity, perceptible or inferential,"

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1 David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). Please highlight the title as per Chicago Style

2 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

3 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), xxiv.

it is "the name of a fictitious entity."[4] Furthermore, he differentiates "a fictitious entity of the first remove" from the "fictitious entity of the second remove" that "considers some fictitious entity of the first remove."[5] Schütz, in turn, interprets the ideal-typical construction as a crossing point between "the objective context of meaning" and the "point of view" or "subjective terms" of the interpreter.[6] Correspondingly, "every ideal-typical construction is determined by the limits of the observer's knowledge at the time."[7] Ultimately, "the only worlds that human language is capable of creating or producing are possible worlds," and they are "constructed by the creative activities of human minds and hands."[8]

## Reality Is No Longer Reflected but Produced by the Human Agent

"The production of reality is what concerns us here...," say Latour and Woolgar.[9] Consciousness permeates the sensory impressions by filling them "with its own inner life."[10] An important step in this direction is the relativization of reality: the facts are "only interpretations," because the world has "countless meanings."[11] Each of the "dramatically contrasting versions of the world" is "right under a given system, for a given science, a given artist, or a given perceiver and situation."[12]

## The Objectivation of the Subjective

Concomitantly with this process, a thoroughgoing objectivation of the

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4 Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. John Bowring, 11 vols. (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1838–1843), 8:246. Available at http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/2208.

5 Ibid., 246.

6 Alfred Schütz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, trans. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967), 190.

7 Ibid., 193.

8 Lubomír Doležel, *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History: The Postmodern Stage* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 30.

9 Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 261.

10 Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, Language (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 288.

11 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), §48.

12 Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2013), 3.

subjective takes place. Latour and Woolgar categorically state that "reality" cannot be used to explain why a statement becomes a fact, since it is only after it has become a fact that the effect of reality is obtained.[13] Rorty transfers the concepts of truth and falsehood from reality onto its descriptions: "Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own—unaided by the describing activities of human beings—cannot."[14] Goodman adds to the concept of truth "standards of acceptability that sometimes supplement or even compete with truth where it applies, or replace truth for nondeclarative renderings."[15]

## Reality Doubles Itself through the Products of Human Reason and Imagination

The products of human reason and imagination reduplicate reality. Until recently, the abstractions generated by human thought retained some—if only symbolic—connection with reality. Yet in the present era, a transformation has occurred, one described by Baudrillard in the following terms:[16]

> "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." Today, "it is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real."

And further:[17]

> Instead of presenting the world to man, they... put themselves in place of the world, to the extent that man lives as a function of the images he has produced. He no longer deciphers them, but projects them back into the world 'out there' without having deciphered them... This reversal of the function of images may be called 'idolatry.'

The foregoing provides grounds to conclude that freedom simultane-

[13] Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, 180.
[14] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 5.
[15] Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 110.
[16] Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1, 7.
[17] Ibid., 9–10.

ously renders visible and intensifies the individuals' dependence on their own capacities to know, imagine, and experience the world in which they live. Baudrillard encapsulates this process by distinguishing several "successive phases of the image": (i) it reflects "a profound reality"; (ii) it "masks and denatures a profound reality"; (iii) it "masks the absence of a profound reality"; (iv) it "has no relation to any reality whatsoever"—and finally "it is its own pure simulacrum."[18] The ultimate result is that human beings "become a function of the images they create."[19]

## II. The Fictional Reality of Democracy

The foregoing analysis raises implicitly the question of whether the fictional reality created by the human mind in turn renders its creator fictional—or whether, conversely, human existence must already be fictional for such a reality to be produced. Similar to the chicken-and-egg dilemma, this is about the mutual imposition of the two sides, in the course of which each transforms the other. Yet the larger question concerning the status of human existence requires that one step outside this dilemma and observe the broader framework delineated by the political transformations that commenced at the dawn of Modernity.

Democracy is a political system in which "everyone affected by a decision has a right to participate in the decision-making process."[20] The primary mechanism by which this participation is realized is periodic elections conducted under universal suffrage. This fundamental democratic mechanism is affirmed by democracy to such a degree that even authoritarian, totalitarian, and dictatorial regimes cannot entirely dispense with it—even if only in a purely formal sense. It is for this reason that Przeworski adopts a "minimalist" and "electoralist" view of democracy, which holds that it is:[21]

> ...a political arrangement in which people select governments through elections and have a reasonable possibility of removing incumbent governments they do not like.

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[18] bid., 6.

[19] Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 9–10.

[20] J. Morison, "Democracy," in *The New Oxford Companion to Law*, ed. Peter Cane and Joanne Conaghan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 305–6.

[21] Adam Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 5.

At first glance, this formulation captures the essence of democracy. Yet it falls far short of a full account of its internal architecture—particularly as that architecture sustains the system between any two successive elections. The "highly abstract and impersonal principle of equality"[22] cannot be exhausted by participation in elections alone, absent mechanisms for its permanent realization. To this end, it is insufficient merely to postulate respect for the dignity and opinion of every person[23] or to take into account "the views of intense minorities."[24] The examples furnished by Waldron and Przeworski address only particular individual and collective manifestations of this universal abstract principle. Its fundamental significance is expressed in the symbolic identity of each citizen with every other, whereby the vote of each elector carries equal weight, and each may potentially be among those elected. In this sense, the words of Dahl retain their validity:

> … a key characteristic of a democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals.[25]

Without such continuity, the hypothesis that the election of those who make binding decisions for all renders those elected genuine representatives of the electors—and thereby justifies treating all citizens as participants in the governing process—would be untenable.

## The Constitutive Principles of Democratic Order

The symbolic identity of all citizens constitutes the ideal towards which all principles of democracy converge. What follows proceeds from the more general to the more specific—that is, from principles of wider application to those more narrowly bound to the democratic form. Perhaps the most general of these principles is **constitutionalism**. Of course, constitutionalism may be applied to every form of government. Cromwell himself observed that in every system of government there must be

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[22] Thomas Christiano, *The Constitution of Equality: Democratic Authority and Its Limits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 46.

[23] Jeremy Waldron, *Law and Disagreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 114.

[24] Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy*, 9.

[25] Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971), 1.

something "standing" or "unalterable."[26] Constitutionalism requires that all power "be exercised according to commonly accepted principles" and that those in power are selected because "they are most likely to do what is right" and not because "whatever they do should be right."[27] Between these two formulations lie more than three centuries. Where Cromwell speaks of government in general, Hayek already introduces into constitutionalism the idea of public accountability and the limitation of arbitrary power—that is, conditions that carry the spirit of democracy. While constitutionalism may serve as a cornerstone of diverse forms of government, it is specifically within democracy that it furnishes the foundation for the hypothesis of abstract equality among all citizens.

A classical principle of democracy is the **separation of powers**. The separation of powers among different persons has long been regarded as a safeguard against the loss of liberty and tyrannical tendencies in legislation and government[28] as well as against the making of decisions by those in power "to their own private advantage."[29] Under the auspices of the separation of powers, administrative authorities are protected "against any interference by the courts,"[30] and, vice versa, the courts prevent the executive "from transgressing beyond its proper sphere."[31] By doing so, the separation of powers "makes the abuse of power far less likely" and reinforces democracy in a mutually constitutive relationship.[32] If the principle of the separation of powers constrains the excessive political, financial, and other material ambitions of those governing each branch, the human meaning of this principle is to impel

[26] Oliver Cromwell, *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ed. W. C. Abbott, vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 461.

[27] F. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 181.

[28] Montesquieu [Charles-Louis de Secondat], *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent (London: J. Nourse and P. Vaillant, 1758), bk. 11, chap. 6; James Madison (Publius), "Federalist No. 47," in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: New American Library, 1961), 324.

[29] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), chap. 12, §143.

[30] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 190.

[31] Mark Elliott, *The Constitutional Foundations of Judicial Review* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2001), 227.

[32] Mark Elliott and Robert Thomas, *Public Law*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 92–93.

governance in the direction of equal treatment for all citizens—including those in power themselves. And this amounts to nothing other than a systematic abstraction from the personal relationships between those governed and the governors, as well as from citizens' cultural, ethnic, religious, educational, and other differences.

The doctrine of the separation of powers has attracted critical remarks from some scholars. Vermeule finds this doctrine (i) costly to apply, (ii) incapable of guaranteeing that those who apply it will not abuse their power, and (iii) obstructive of the modern administrative state's supply of myriad welfare goods "such as poverty relief, health, safety, environmentalism, and consumer protection."[33] According to Waldron, this critical interpretation of the separation of powers misses genuine "concerns and warns against a certain over-simplification of governance."[34] In sum, Vermeule offers a literal reading of the principle by treating it as an end in itself rather than as a dimension of the functions of all public institutions, including those that provide welfare goods. From this standpoint, it is inconsistent to oppose the impact of the separation of powers to the provision of such goods.

The principle of **incompatibility of mandates** is a continuation of the separation of powers doctrine at the individual level. If this doctrine guarantees that none of the three main branches of government can selfishly intervene in the work of the others, the incompatibility of mandates principle guarantees that a person holding a key state position cannot simultaneously occupy another key position and thereby double their power. At first sight, incompatibilities of mandates were considerably more consequential in the past, when many incompatible public offices had to be meticulously defined.[35] Today, many key public positions are practically incompatible due to their complexity, the body of mutually controlling legislation, and heightened public awareness fostered by the media, politicians, and citizens' scrutiny.

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[33] Adrian Vermeule, *Law's Abnegation: From Law's Empire to the Administrative State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 58–59.

[34] Jeremy Waldron, "Separation of Powers or Division of Power?" *Public Law & Legal Theory Research Paper Series*, *Working Paper No. 12-20* (New York University School of Law, 2012), 33.

[35] See, for example, Léon Duguit, *Traité de droit constitutionnel*, 2nd ed., vol. 4, L'Organisation politique de la France (Paris: L'Ancienne Librairie Fontemoing & Cie, 1924), 169–176.

**Term limits** constitute a democratic principle that fixes the period during which a person may hold a high and singular state position, such as president or attorney general. It is held that this boundary marks the point beyond which continued tenure would tend to subordination of such a position to private influence, thereby threatening the principle of equal access for all citizens to state services. Aristotle already observed that brief tenure in office provides a safeguard against the danger of those in power, together with their families, subordinating authority to personal ends and transforming into tyrants.[36] Machiavelli identified "the prolongation of commands" as one of the two principal causes of the end of the Roman Republic.[37] Madison regards "frequent elections" as "primary control on the government" by making representatives "dependent on the constituents."[38] As Locke holds, "at the determination of the time set," "the people have a right to act as supreme."[39]

The general picture of democracy shows that the same conditions that stimulate autonomous, representative, and democratic governance also impel limitations upon governance, and especially of the government's chief executive."[40] The deeper meaning of term limits is to encourage democratic governance towards decisions and actions that abstract from the variegated differences among citizens—from the personal relationships between them and those who govern—and thereby treat all in accordance with the purposes and principles of the institution that governs.

The term **conflict of interest** is more recent in the context of democracy. It "began to appear in codes of ethics in the 1970s."[41] This is conceptually linked to the heightening of public oversight how public decisions are made and public resources distributed. At issue here is not the conflict between the interests of companies, political parties, and the

[36] Aristotle, *Politics* (Global Grey, 2020), 121.

[37] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Ninian Hill Thomson, rev. ed. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1883), 426–427.

[38] James Madison (Publius), "Federalist No. 51," in The Federalist Papers, ed. *Clinton Rossiter* (New York: New American Library, 1961), 319; *Madison*, "Federalist No. 57," 336.

[39] Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, §243.

[40] Mancur Olson, *Power and Prosperity: Outgrowing Communist and Capitalist Dictatorships* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 35.

[41] Michael Davis, "Conflict of Interest," in *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, vol. 1 (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1998), 594.

like, which generates competition and may have a beneficial effect,[42] but rather the appointment to the same office or institution of managers who are bound in advance by ties of kinship, friendship, neighborliness, and other personal relationships. In this respect, conflict of interest has both an objective and a subjective dimension.[43] The combination of these dimensions is regarded as a predisposition towards an exaggerated promotion of the personal interests of such officials at the expense of the public interest they formally represent. As Davis states, "conflict of interest is not bias but a tendency toward bias," arising from the loss of "impartiality," "independence," or "objectivity."[44]

Accordingly, this instrument of democracy produces the same result as the democratic instruments previously examined: governance decisions that abstract from the personal, social, cultural, religious, network-based, and other differences among individuals and, in so doing, serve their common interests, symbolically united under the concept of "the public interest." Every governance decision that is informed by the personal characteristics or personal connections of those to whom it pertains is, in essence, in conflict with democracy.

When the aggregate of the mechanisms thus far enumerated fails to protect the functioning of public institutions in a manner that ensures equal access for all citizens to state services—and in particular when the state begins to exercise personal pressure upon citizens—there are available to those citizens "certain immunities, called **political liberties or rights**."[45] As Rawls formulates the matter in the context of a just society:[46]

> "...the liberties of equal citizenship are taken as settled; the rights secured by justice are not subject to political bargaining or to the calculus of social interests..."

These immunities also carry a controlling effect. If the ruler did infringe

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[42] Robert Axelrod, *Conflict of Interest: A Theory of Divergent Goals with Applications to Politics* (Chicago: Markham Publishing Company, 1970), 202.

[43] Andrew Stark, *Conflict of Interest in American Public Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 271.

[44] Davis, "Conflict of Interest," 591–92.

[45] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Literary Texts, 1999), 44.

[46] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1972), 4.

them, "specific resistance, or rebellion, was held to be justifiable."[47] Comparative analysis of contentious public political performances shows that "democratic regimes prescribe relatively few... but they tolerate quite a range."[48] Coercion "would be much more common if no such protected sphere existed."[49] Thus, political liberties and rights share the same goal as the mechanisms listed above: all are directed towards ensuring the equal treatment of all citizens by the state.

The principle of **the rule of law** stands in a particularly distinctive relationship to all that has been said hitherto. As recently as the mid-twentieth century, this principle bore a considerably narrower meaning:[50]

> In the past, conceptions of the rule of law were... focused on defending existing privileges and property rights against the spread of democracy and demands for equality...

Hayek connects this principle both to the degree to which "the legislator feels bound by it" or it is "a common ideal shared and unquestioningly accepted by the majority," and to the manner and circumstances in which the executive "may use coercion."[51] Half a century later, Raz broadened the significance of the rule of law, conceiving of it as a mechanism that reduces the arbitrary power generated by law itself.[52] Other scholars go still further, characterizing it as a means of neutralizing the negative influence of "unequal access to the law" arising from "the influence of money" and "the particular interests of the judiciary."[53] For similar reasons, these authors perceive a conflict between the rule of law and the "permanent state of exception" engendered by the war on terror.[54]

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[47] Mill, On Liberty, 44.

[48] Charles Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 76.

[49] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 139.

[50] Donatella Della Porta, Michael Keating, et al., "The Paradoxes of Democracy and the Rule of Law," in *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Report of the International Panel on Social Progress*, vol. 2, *Political Regulation, Governance, and Societal Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 375.

[51] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 206–11.

[52] Joseph Raz, "The Rule of Law and Its Virtue," in *The Authority of Law: Essays on Law and Morality*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 224.

[53] Della Porta, Keating, et al., "The Paradoxes of Democracy," 374.

[54] Ibid., 374.

In recent usage, the expression "rule of law" has expanded its compass still further and begun to function as an indicator of the full development of democracy's potential. This is deeply well-founded. It is not possible to speak, in any strict sense, of the rule of law—that is, of the equal application of law to all in general and to each individually—without the effective operation of all the democratic mechanisms examined above. This suggests something further: a direct causal relationship among these mechanisms. The question is: on what grounds does the rule of law emerge as a leading indicator of democratic consistency? The law is far from being merely an instrument for assessing and sanctioning deviant behavior. It underlies all functions of the state, and it is inconceivable that the democratic mechanisms examined herein could be effective if the law did not dispense justice. The separation of powers, term limits, conflict of interests, and other democratic mechanisms would have no effect were it not for the anchoring role of justice, implicitly present in the way law regulates the legitimate and sanctions unlawful actions of citizens. In this sense, the rule of law, when pursued to its logical conclusion, permeates every tissue of the democratic state and is rightly coming to function as a symbol of that state's effectiveness.

## Conclusion

The foregoing cursory analysis of the principal democratic mechanisms aims to illuminate that dimension of their operation which plays a constitutive role for democracy. All of them share a single point of intersection: the tendency towards a mode of relating to citizens that treats them as equals, irrespective of their physical, intellectual, social, and other differences. In political theory, this mode of relating appears under a range of terms. Gladden, for instance, speaks of the *anonymity* of the public official, who acts not in their own name but from the position of the office they hold.[55] Larmore speaks of the liberal state's *neutrality* with respect to different citizens' conceptions of the good life as a foundational principle of that state.[56] And Mendus attributes constitutive sig-

[55] E. N. Gladden, *The Essentials of Public Administration* (London: Staples Press, 1964), 32.

[56] C. E. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 42–46, 53, 55, 60–61, 65.

nificance to the *impartiality* of the democratic state.[57] The foregoing can be synthesized in a formulation advanced some years ago regarding the democratic state:

> Its institutions and representatives simultaneously (a) abstract from all differences among citizens in economic, racial, linguistic, religious, age-related, gender, sexual, and other respects, and (b) unite all citizens based on distinct, contextually relevant, abstract attributes such as voter, property-owner, taxpayer, and so forth. In this twofold process of abstraction lies the very essence of democracy as a political form.[58]

All the democratic mechanisms enumerated here—and those omitted—assign to the abstraction from the individual and the concrete the role of a foundational principle. And here the most fundamental **tension in contemporary democracy—between the abstract and the concrete**—comes into relief. Official institutions, for some pragmatic reasons, attempt to constitute the abstract equality of citizens by fixing and balancing all their concrete differences. In the spirit of these efforts, the decision-making process of democratic institutions becomes a manifestation of every conceivable expression of the concrete. For instance, Della Porta, Keating, et al. enumerate among the principal concerns of the state: minority rights; sustaining opposition; predictability and security; safeguarding against corruption, and so forth.[59] In a similar spirit, Przeworski calls democracy "a mechanism for processing conflicts."[60] "Conflicts are regulated, processed according to rules, and thus limited."[61] Correspondingly, the state is confronted with the "subtle choice" of finding "the right balance between concession and repression."[62] The dominant institutional approach holds that the state approximates the hypothesis of equal treatment of citizens by resolving these and innu-

[57] Susan Mendus, "Impartiality," in The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory, ed. John S. Dryzek, Bonnie Honig, and Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[58] Nikolay Naydenov, "Abstraction—The Essence of Democracy and the Key to Its Study" [Абстрахирането — същност на демокрацията и ключ към нейното изследване], *Politicheski Izsledvania* [*Political Studies*], no. 2 (2007): 33.

[59] Della Porta, Keating, et al., "The Paradoxes of Democracy," 375.

[60] Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy*, 7.

[61] Ibid., 163.

[62] Ibid., 171.

merable similar concrete problems.

This process, however, contains an internal contradiction. When the concrete particularities of groups—whether their minority status or their experience of repression—become the principal focus of the discourse of equality, the ideal of democratic equality is placed under considerable strain. The government's commitment to equality, then, needs to maintain a continuous narrative, accompanied by symbolic and administrative acts that reaffirm the universality of minority equality. Within such a framework, the search for universally persuasive evidence in any single case tends to dissolve into an ongoing cycle of reciprocal suspicions of intolerance, highly demonstrative displays of tolerance, and conflicts waged through moral condemnation and administrative sanctions. The result, ultimately, is a form of moral and political paralysis of intellectuals. Thus, the general mechanisms of democracy remain external to the constitution of the particular, and for that reason democracy comes to rely upon a distinct ideological point of anchorage—one that, in recent decades, has frequently taken the form of what is called political correctness.

The democratic mechanisms considered here converge on a single principle: the equal treatment of persons on the basis of what they share in common. When a particular social, ethnic, or other group encounters persistent difficulties within a democratic order, this suggests that the mechanisms intended to place all citizens on equal footing have not fully included them in practice. Equality grounded in what persons have in common, therefore, constitutes the most stable and harmonious foundation of democracy. From this perspective, the claims of minority communities could gain legitimacy insofar as they can be articulated within the universal mechanisms that govern all. If the difficulties faced by a particular group seek public recognition, they must be addressed as problems that concern everyone, through institutions and procedures that apply universally. A further question, however, concerns the extent to which these mechanisms are taken seriously in political practice, and whether contemporary democratic theory adequately accounts for their full implications.

The functioning of democracy as a political mechanism for realizing abstract equality among citizens may be understood as a process that metaphorically envelops all citizens in a fictional veil, thereby animating democratic institutions, norms, and values. This framework is strong for

all who accept its principles. Democracy becomes vulnerable when the concrete intrudes—whether in the form of military, economic, or political superiority; group-based claims; ethnic antagonisms; national resentments, or any other distinctions that set one group apart from another. Such intrusions threaten to drive the political order back into the labyrinths of the concrete.

In conclusion, life in a democracy is fictitious insofar as it unfolds under the guiding hypothesis of the abstract equality of all. This fictitiousness constitutes the operative reality of democracy. It remains stable only so long as it resists the literalism of narcissistic leaders, concentrated wealth, military power, and similar dividing forces. Russia's hybrid attack on Western democracies seeks to accustom Western citizens to the power of the literal and to cultivate contempt for the fictive power of democracy. Yet it is precisely this fictive power that alone makes possible the idea of a universal human community—the only viable future for the Earth.

# 12. Projective Ontologizing and Counseling

*Vesselin Hristov Dafov, vhdafov@phls.uni-sofia.bg*
*(Professor, Dr. Sc. Department of Philosophy, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski)*

**Abstract:** The paper offers concrete and practice-oriented clarifications of a philosophical counseling approach grounded in projective ontologizing. It enumerates several principal forms of projective philosophizing, such as: (1) projective philosophizing as conciliar engagement, and (2) projective philosophizing as individualized consultative practice.

It presents the theoretical foundations of projective ontologizing as a form of consultative being, one that applies to all modes of philosophizing realized through the so-called *sessional being* of philosophy. The transition "from case to project" is articulated, and the shift away from conceiving the philosophical as "practice" toward its projectization is justified.

One of the central effects of projective ontology for philosophical creativity is theorized in terms of its engagement with discerning the different levels of togetherness and inclusion of creative subjectivities - at the levels of factual being, essence, and subjectness. This not only makes possible but directly constitutes the environment and conditions for the emergence of a projective subjectivity capable of sustaining an autonomous life of its own.

**Keywords:** projective philosophizing, projective ontologizing, creativity, innovation, subjectivity

It is intended in this paper that a concrete and practical clarification of the philosophical counseling approach grounded in projective ontologizing will be presented and philosophically conceptualized.

Recognizing the projective character of philosophy and ontology allows philosophical activity to be understood as something that possesses immediate value and applicability beyond academic and university settings. Through the inclusion of civic participation in the *doing* of philosophy, the universal character of philosophical achievement is ensured. Someone may view this as a departure from professionalism in

philosophizing, yet such an assumption overlooks the fact that in philosophizing understood as *projective*, everyone has a role, and according to that role each person can participate to the extent permitted by their desire, capacities, limitations, and so forth.

The crucial point is to philosophize concretely about each specific reality (to ontologize it) in such a way that anyone may participate to the degree to which they are prepared, willing, in agreement, and contractually involved. The role of the professional is to care for the projective environment: an environment that guarantees the diversity of meanings, creations, and acts of creativity. It is then a matter of preparation, both in terms of dialectical thinking (with respect to creativity) and highly organized thinking (with respect to projective structures), to exercise the wisdom necessary to hold these together in their unity and conciliarity, such that philosophy ultimately assumes the form of love itself: an active love understood as care, responsibility, and commitment to wisdom. Not as wisdom itself, but as the care for (the nurturing and cultivation of) wisdom.

Here I place in parentheses the topics concerning the institutional forms through which philosophy has historically developed: schools, academies, lyceums, monastic faculties, educational institutions, universities, and the institutions of the Enlightenment and Modernity. I bracket them because, although they are genuinely connected to the preservation and development of knowledge, and therefore to the practice of philosophizing, they remain primarily cumulative in character. They serve as loci of knowledge in which care is directed primarily toward preserving existing achievements and later disseminating them, rather than toward the immediate generation of creation, invention, or innovation.

Philosophizing that is directly engaged in creation, co-creation, and innovation, and which this text aims to foreground, may take place in various social and communal forms: voluntary, institutional (elective or compulsory in schools or other educational settings, organizations, clubs), spontaneous, or as an economic activity. It may also be undertaken with diverse intentions, aims, tasks, and purposes: educational, pedagogical, formative, recreational, business-oriented, political, and so forth. Yet I must emphasize that no intentions, aims, tasks, or purposes that violate human dignity or universal human values can be considered philosophical or expressive of the search for wisdom or truth. This does not mean that new philosophical meanings cannot be achieved; they be-

come new not by destroying the old, but by incorporating, respecting, and acknowledging them.

## 1. Forms of Projective Philosophizing

The forms through which projective philosophizing is realized, with deliberate care for its projective character at every stage of the philosophical process (from contracting, through initiation, beginning, enactment, maintenance, and closure), were already indicated in the introduction. For the sake of clarity in this part of the text, and in order to highlight more clearly the place of projective ontologizing within this sequence, allow me to list them once again.

First to be stressed on is Projective Philosophizing as *Group Work* in two main modes: Children groups such as in Philosophy for Children, Philosophy with Children[1], Philosophical Inquiry[2], Socratic Dialogue[3],

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[1] A review text on the achievements of "philosophy with children" and "philosophy for children" see:
Tsena Stoeva, Ts., "Philosophy with children", *Bulgarian Philosophical Review*, vol. 11/2021.
Alexander Andonov, "Philosophy for children?", *History, society, philosophy*, 1991, issue 5.
Aneta Karageorgieva, "For self-confidence and tolerance. Introductory study.", *Philosophy for children. Anthology*. Sofia, 1997.
Aneta Karageorgieva, ""Philosophy for children" program in Bulgaria", *Primary education*, issue 1/2008.
In original Bulgarian language, respectively:
Цена Стоева, "Философия с деца", *Български философски преглед*, кн.11/2021г.
Александър Андонов, "Философия за деца?", *История, общество, философия*, 1991, бр. 5.
Анета Карагеоргиева, "За самочувствие и толерантност.. Встъпителна студия." , *Философия за деца. Антология.* София, 1997.
Анета Карагеоргиева, "Програмата "Философия за деца" в България.", *Начално образование*, бр. 1/2008.

[2] Reflection on the method of Catherine McCall "Philosophical Inquiry" see in:
Vesselin Dafov, *Thinker [think-being] and Actuality*, Sofia, Projectoria, 2012, pp. 60-62
In original Bulgarian language, respectively:
Веселин Дафов, *Мислещо и действителност*, София, Проектория, 2012, стр.60-62

[3] Aneta Karageorgieva, "Philosophy for Children and Socratic Dialogue – a Comparative Study", *Philosophy Magazine*, Vol. 6/2005.

Philosophical Wonder[4] *(authorial forms)* from one hand, and Philosophy with Adult Groups form another such it is in: Socratic dialogue (again), philosophical café[5], philosophical clubs[6] (evenings, sessions,

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Dimitar Elchinov, "Neo-Socratic Dialogue and Interactive Teaching of Philosophy", *Problems and Perspectives of Philosophical Education in Bulgaria,* Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University, 2018, pp.:43-50.
Dimitar Ivanov, "Socratic Dialogue: Education as Research", *Innovations and Interactive Technologies in Education*, Shumen: Publishing House of the Republic of Bulgaria "Stiliyan Chilingirov", 2012.
In original Bulgarian language, respectively:
Aneta Карагеоргиева, "Философия за деца и Сократически диалог – сравнително изследване.", сп. *Философия*, кн. 6/2005.
Димитър Елчинов, "Неосократическият диалог и интерактивното преподаване на философия"., *Проблеми и перспективи на философското образование в България.* София:УИ "Св. Климент Охридски", 2018, стр.:43-50.
Димитър Иванов, "Сократическият диалог: образованието като изследване*", Иновации и интерактивни технологии в образованието*,. Шумен: изд.РБ "Стилиян Чилингиров", 2012.

[4] As an illustration of this method, see more at https://ontoidea.com/index.php/philosophy-with-children-students/ , where it is shown how the method works in a real environment and how this is implemented by the Ontoidea team. In the development of the specific examples, from 2008 to now, many colleagues have participated, but directly and most of all: Tsena Stoeva, Stefan Andonov, Tsvetelina Kalacheva, Daniel Alexandrov, Kamen Kirov, Ines Raicheva, Megi Popova, etc. Over the years, colleagues have also contributed to the work: Deyan Penchev and Eva Dobreva, also Vesselin Mirchev, Anelia Shalamanova (Finn), and in recent years, after 2022, Greta Gicheva, Maria Staevska, Ognyana Asenova, Vesselina Manoilova, Maria-Gabriela Pumova, Lyubomir Vakanov, Ralitsa Stoyanova, Yoanna Stamatova, etc.

[5] Oscar Brenifier demonstrated such a "Philosophical Café", with about 50-60 participants, an international group, in English, in one of the evenings during the "Eleventh World Conference on Philosophy with Children", Varna, 26-30.06.2003.
See also: "Philosophical Café", In: *Program of the Celebration of World Philosophy Day*, Sofia University, Sofia, 2024, p.7 https://phls.uni-sofia.bg/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/%D0%9F%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B0.pdf
The so-called Philosophical Snacks also fall into the same genre.
See:
Gergana Dimitrova, Rayna Dimitrova, "Children's Books Foundation, ArtEria Cultural Organization (the team behind Philosophical Snacks for Children) – Philosophical Snacks for Children – Education in Wonder."

meetings) *(authorial forms).*

We also should point out the Trainings in Philosophical Thinking, that are conducted in seminar format (open registration) or commissioned by an institution, company, firm, or organization. These programs include[7]: Highly organized thinking (critical, creative, dialectical, caring, high-order thinking); Problematization and problem-solving; Projective action (projective thinking); Understanding and interpretation (applied hermeneutics)

Second, it is Projective Philosophizing as Individual Consultative Work as it is in: Philosophical Counseling with Children[8] - Across aca-

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National Academic-Applied Conference "*Philosophizing in Events, Practices and Projects*", March 8-9, 2024, Abstracts of the reports: https://philosophiseinepp.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/rezyumeta-fspp_2024.pdf

"Philosophical Snacks for Children" https://www.facebook.com/groups/filosofskizakuski/?locale=bg_BG

"Food for Thought, or How "Philosophical Snacks for Children" Create Dialogue with Children" Published on 01.09.24 at 09:00 | updated on 01.09.24 at 11:30 Author: Stanislava Rayanova

Interview of Stanislava Rayanova with Raina Dimitrova and Gergana Dimitrova https://bnr.bg/starazagora/post/102039921/hrana-za-razmisal-ili-kak-filosofski-zakuski-za-deca-sazdavat-dialog-s-decata

[6] This is an author's method for conducting philosophical sessions with adults. It is offered as a service in the genre of "socializing and creative activities" to companies, corporations and firms. Over the years, colleagues Tsena Stoeva and Daniel Alexandrov have taken an active part in the work and in refining the communication of the activity. See more at: https://ontoidea.com/index.php/philosophical-sessions/

[7] See more, for example, about companies and firms on the website - https://ontoidea.com/index.php/trainings/for-companies/

[8] Daniel Alexandrov, "Philosophy with children and assessment", *Assessment and philosophy: Collection of conference papers*, Publisher: University Publishing House "St. Kliment Ohridski", 2021, pp.144-157.

Daniel Alexandrov, "Philosophy and consultative care - children and education", *Children's wisdom: Academic and applied research on children's intelligence,* Edited by Yulia Yordanova-Pancheva, Yuliana Stoyanova, Sofia: University Publishing House "St. Kliment Ohridski", 2023

Daniel Alexandrov, "The philosophical consultant in the school community (school philosopher)", *Consultative competences*, Sofia: University Publishing House "St. Kliment Ohridski", 2024.

In original Bulgarian language, respectively:

demic subjects, arts, and sports[9]; Philosophical Counseling[10] with Adults[11]; Philosophical Counseling as Projective Ontologizing of Specific Realities (this one includes the projective ontologizing of concrete realities - objects, entities, phenomena (natural and social), events (of any

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Даниел Александров, "Философия с деца и оценяване", *Оценяване и философия*: Сборник с доклади от конференция, Publisher:Университетско издателство "Св. Климент Охридски", 2021, стр. 144-157.

Даниел Александров, "Философия и консултативна грижа – децата и образованието", *Детската мъдрост: Академично-приложни изследвания на детската разумност*, Съст.:.Юлия Йорданова-Панчева, Юлияна Стоянова, София: УИ "Св. Климент Охридски", 2023

Даниел .Александров, Д., "Философският консултант в училищната общност (училищен философ)", *Консултативни компетентности*, София: Университетско издателство "Св. Климент Охридски", 2024.

[9] As examples - https://ontoidea.com/index.php/trainings/for-students/ . The idea here is to discover the philosophical foundations, concepts and ideas through which progress is made in every area of human knowledge in general and in particular in mathematics and Bulgarian language and literature. In developing the specific methodologies and techniques, the long-term experience of working in philosophy with children in kindergartens and primary schools is taken into account. In the work on these projects, the most active participation was taken by colleagues Tsena Stoeva, Tsvetelina Kalacheva, Daniel Alexandrov.

[10] Daniel Alexandrov, *Ontology of Consultative Reasonableness*, Sofia: University Publishing House "St. Kliment Ohridski", 2026

In original Bulgarian language, respectively:

Александров, Д., *Онтология на консултативната разумност,* София: УИ "Св. Климент Охридски", 2026

[11] As examples - https://ontoidea.com/index.php/philosophical-counseling/ . The development of the practice of philosophical counseling found its beginning in the work on philosophy with children. Over the years, it has emerged as an independent practice, but as a separate direction, the topics related to school life and counseling of individuals in their lives of students, parents, teachers, principals, educators and the like, related to the institution of the school, remained. See more at: https://ontoidea.com/index.php/philosophical-counseling/for-school/ and at https://ontoidea.com/index.php/philosophical-counseling/for-parents/

The same way, as a special direction - again statistically, based on the number of specific consulting projects (cases), the topic of "pets" and everything related to caring for them - see more at https://ontoidea.com/index.php/philosophical-counseling/for-pets/. It must be noted that the major role that Daniel Alexandrov and Tsena Soteva played in developing these ideas.

kind), products, services, works, creations, and so forth[12]. It likewise remains within the sphere of individual consulting, insofar as the interaction is conducted with a single subjectivity, even when that subjectivity is economic or organizational in nature (a firm, company, organization, etc.).

## 2. Ontologizing and Projective Ontologizing - From "Ontologize This!" to "Projectize This!"

I will now attempt to clarify the theoretical grounds of projective ontologizing[13] as a form of *consultative being*. Examples include practices such as *philosophical counseling*, thematic philosophical sessions with adults and children, philosophy with children, philosophical cafés, Socratic dialogue, and others. All of these constitute concrete manifestations of projective ontologizing in their enactment - in what may be called the *sessional being* of philosophy. What will be stated here applies equally to them, insofar as it belongs to the necessary preparatory work required for maintaining care for projective being. That is, projective ontologizing is a requirement for each of the above forms of projective philosophizing, since it is through ontologizing that the forms of compatibility and incompatibility among participants are discerned; and this, in turn, ensures care

[12] See example for products and services - https://ontoidea.com/index.php/ontologization/ . When developing the first business model for offering ontologization as a product and service for business corporations, in 2008, with the very establishment of "OntoIdea", Yunuz Yunuz, Vasil Vidinski and I took a shared participation in the formalization and presentation of the service.
In 2024, Senior Assistant Professor Dr. Ivaylo Dobrev shared with me that he was engaged in providing such an ontological consulting service for the needs of an architectural, urban planning and construction company and I dare say that I evaluate what he has achieved as an excellent result.

[13] I think a lot has been said about the philosophical justification of ontologization itself, and perhaps sufficiently in "Becoming and Making," where I dared to continue a tradition in the Department of Philosophy of reflecting on the themes of creation, discovery, and creativity, raising as a standard not research (ontological research) but ontological creation, creativity. In this sense, the call "Ontologize this!" became a motive for doing ontology, which, in its concern for the very being (becoming) of this or that (as the most general and indefinite references to being), acquired the status of a motive for philosophizing, in which a commitment is made to "doing things differently," to creation and creativity. See:
Vesselin Dafov, *Becomings [here-it-ising] and Makings*, Paradigma, Sofia, 2018
In original Bulgarian:
Веселин Дафов, *Ставания и направи*, Парадигма, София, 2018

for an environment conducive to the emergence of new creative subjectivity rather than one that hinders or obstructs it.

### 2.1. Consultative Ontologizing - From Case to Project

As a practitioner and theorist of philosophical counseling, it is clear to me that the so-called practice has long since shifted from *"cases"* to *"projects."* No philosophical counseling session can succeed if it remains on the level of "the case," just as psychological counseling cannot succeed if its shared practice is based on "problems" and their solutions. This applies even more strongly in medicine. The transition from "problem" to "case" deserves a separate analysis, but I cannot undertake that here. I will only note that, in this context, I insist on the transition *from case to project*, at least in philosophical counseling, though it is evident that the same would benefit every consultative profession - medicine, law, pedagogy, economics, politics, and so forth.

Without acknowledging the client's creative self-making and their own creative achievements, philosophical counseling remains confined to "treating" patients, "working on cases," or "supporting" one thing or another. Instead, what is required here is something else - namely: attention and responsibility; the fostering (breeding, bringing forth) of creative self-making - and this takes place through care for the sessional being of the consultative practice.

Every form of care for the sessional being of projective ontologizing, within which participants (agents, actors) are expected to transition into the mode of being of *creators,* requires specific preparation. This preparation is carried out, of course, beforehand - otherwise it would not be preparation. It is theoretical only in its preliminarity: it also draws on prior personal experience. Yet the same attentiveness is required once the session has opened. Thus, any opposition between theory and practice is unproductive and foreign to the sessional being of anything at all, and especially to that of philosophy or ontology.

Already at the stage of *agreeing (contracting)* to philosophize, philosophizing itself begins. There is no other projective reality in which contracting is so deeply part of the project itself as it is in philosophy. The very act of agreeing (contracting) to philosophize means philosophy has already begun.[14]

[14] See further in:

To "open the session" means far more than what is commonly understood. *Opening* is the key word. Preparation for opening the session must be understood as preparing the *keys* that unlock the session - keys in the sense used by musicians. They may also be understood as standards, shared values, which cannot be imposed or commanded or enforced through objectifying, causally necessary action.

Equally important is the care for *closing* the session. The ability to open and to close the session expresses the same projectively mastered professionalism. At the end of the session, we must ensure that all participants are released from their engagement with the projective subjectivity in a manner good for them - without exhaustion or depletion, without injury, without collapse or dropout.

### 2.2. Consultative Ontologizing as "No Longer Just a Practice"

When it is said that consultative counseling is no longer "a practice," the reference is clearly not to the original unity of praxis and theory. Rather, the point concerns the later historical separation of the practical from *logos*, from thinking, knowledge, and cognition, resulting from the differentiation of thinking as a distinct and specialized activity.

This separation gives rise to claims of ownership over knowledge: those who have separated thinking from the universal rational capacity of human action take themselves to be the bearers and proprietors of knowledge. Others are recognized as rational, thinking beings only insofar as their actions conform to this specialized form of thinking. "Practice," then, is understood in two ways: as application - the universal application of ready-made knowledge to particular situations; and as unreflective action: as something immediate, almost devoid of knowledge or consciousness.

Projective consultative counseling exceeds both of these senses. A few points must be emphasized:

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Vesselin Dafov, "Agreement as Beginning of Philosophizing", *Philosophy*, book 3/2025, year XXXIV, issue: 3, 2025, pp.: 339-356.
In original Bulgarian:
Веселин Дафов, "Договарянето като начало на философията", *Философия,* кн. 3/2025, година XXIV, брой: 3, 2025, стр. 339-356

(1) Self-creation and self-becoming

Its concern is with fostering the emergence of new subjectivity, not merely maintaining an already established one in its dignity (ontological and moral, ethical, virtuous, political, etc.), though sometimes this maintenance is indeed necessary.

(2) The sessional character of becoming

Each participant creates themselves as a creator, while all simultaneously invest their creativity as organelles of a new being, a new subjectivity - the *project*.

(3) Professional care for such consultativity

This cannot be carried by a single professional alone. The consultant is exposed in every session as an organelle of the emerging projective subjectivity and may suffer exhaustion, depletion, contamination, or other injuries to their own subjectivity - possibly with serious consequences for themselves and for the client. Hence the need for strong professional communities with regular methodological meetings that restore the consultant's organic integrity through a living, shared environment: seminars, experience-sharing, and so forth.

Supervision, which every consultant must undergo, provides deliberate and targeted diagnosis and, when needed, restoration of meaning and projective vitality in the professional's work.

## 3. Projective Ontologizing – Nourishing Environment and Care for Meaning, Creation, Creativity, and Projecting

Projective ontology contributes to recognizing the different levels of togetherness and inclusion—those of factual being, of essence, and of the subjective (subjectness). Subjectness itself, depending on the kind of objecthood through which it is subjectivated, may be nutritive (vegetative), sensory (animal), or rational (human).

In turn, subjectivity may subjectivate itself on the basis of other subjectivities, which can be directly objectified (and in this way subjectivity "feeds" on other subjectivities, insofar as they are reduced, in the best case, to organisms and organizations). In such situations, we are necessarily situated in antagonistic relations, and the becoming of subjectivity is abandoned to elemental and accidental development.

Yet subjectivity can also subjectivate itself - can proceed from other subjectivities - without depriving them of their dignity as subjects. This occurs when it acknowledges and respects their subjectivity, even

as it makes use, in its own subjectivation, of the objecthoods created by those other subjectivities. This is analogous to natural reproduction, as in birth[15]. It holds even more strongly for the *projective*, understood neither as metamorphosis and transformation of the same subject, nor as the symbiosis of two separate organisms, still less as an organization (this issue was already discussed in the Introduction and Part One). The projective is a subjective formation in which each participant, in their distinctness, is already recognized and respected as a creator, while what is created proves to be a generative environment (a vital, surrounding milieu) out of which projective rationality arises. All of this call for care for the coordination, togetherness, co-temporality, and conciliarity of the creators. This excludes antagonistic relations and involves acknowledging the different levels of subjectivation: through making, through creativity, and through projecting.

In this sense, let me add another argument for the synonymy between objectum (as "Gegenstand", "throw-in-front", "пред-метнато", "thing") and *object* (as subject of knowledge, subject of mind, subject of consciousness), and for the call not to "return back to" the *thing* (as in the analogous calls to return to metaphysics), but rather to move forward toward *objecthood*. If, in thinking creation or self-creation, the distinction between *thing* and *object* still holds - inasmuch as the thing is what is externally given to subjectivity, while the object may be taken as that objecthood created by the subject - then in the case of creativity this is no longer so. For within the very idea of creativity there is already included the transformation of subjectivity, which cannot be thought as produced or made, but only as something that has been *generated*, whose generation we can care for, nurture, and so on. For this reason, the distinction within objecthood - on the one hand as that which is simply given (thing-like), and on the other hand as that which is created by subjectivity (object-like) - ceases to be valid. The point is that the subjectivity that is to be generated, to arise and emerge, must escape the framework of being taken as produced or made; otherwise, it would not be subjective, but thing-like in the sense of being merely objectified. This is why a turn back to objecthood, instead of remaining in objectifi-

[15] That is so as not all reproduction necessarily involves birth, as is the case with asexual reproduction (division, budding, spores, vegetative, fragmentation), nor is it the case with all sexual reproduction (fusion of gametes (fertilization) – internal and external fertilization, hermaphroditism, parthenogenesis).

cation, guarantees the subjective character of that reality whose generation we can only care for, be responsible for, and nurture.

Thus, every ontologizing establishes determinations within the ontological levels for each concrete being. Yet in order to be projective, it must specifically care for these achievements to become a living environment for further inventions, discoveries, and creative accomplishments of the participants in the project. In this way, projective ontology does not renounce its commitment to clarifying, understanding, and proposing (speculating, transcending toward) new possibilities; but these are, in truth, more propositions and invitations than solutions and answers. Projective ontology, while it establishes, understands, and speculates, also *arouses, provokes, and infects* with the desire for self-creation and creativity. One might say that it opens fields for continuation.

At this point, a special moment arises: care for togetherness, conciliarity, and being-with requires particular attentiveness. In order to avoid situations of neglect, domination, or overriding, it is helpful to keep in view the ontological step at which each participant is located in their common work, in their shared projectization. Are they situated within the ontology of

1. Factualization - coming-to-be-present, making, production; or
2. Essentialization - creating creation, that is, *creating*; or
3. Subjectivization - the unification of subjectivities, which in turn may be making, creative, or projective?

This moment allows projective ontologizing to become an engagement, a care for ontologizing in the direction of *opening* rather than *closing* the ontological levels.

Here is how this "uncovering, non-concealing, opening, unlocking, blossoming, setting, conceiving" (and other expressions associated with subjective generation) relates to the different ontological levels:

For Factual Being

The human being, with their face, stands before the cosmos and the abyss, thereby standing before totality *face-to-face* with another face: the face of the cosmos and the face of the abyss. For the person, the factual is thus opened and unlocked as cosmos, horizon, the visible, givenness, the field of objecthood through the act of establishing. Clarification of the factual in concrete being is achieved; it is rendered to the senses. Things are pointed out that assist in encountering and coming upon boundaries, determinations, characteristics, and so on. In this way,

*analytics* is described as corresponding to an *organic of cognition*. It finds expression in the analytic approach and, through it, knowledge is acquired in the form of determinations (definitions).

For Essential Being (Actuality, Essence)

For the person, the door opens to nature, to the world of the visible and invisible, the hidden and revealed, the realm of actuality through understanding, through grasping the essence. An impulse is given for seeking, discovering, and finding hidden realities: activity-oriented, procedural, inductive thinking, employing methods. Knowledge and skills are acquired (graspings-understandings).

For Essence as Objectified Objecthood

For the person, the world of "second nature" opens up technology: artifacts created by humans in accordance with natural laws, through speculative thinking and the creation of new realities. One enters into the ancient Greek *techne*, in which there is as yet no separation between craft, science, and art. Transcendental, speculative, dialectical thinking is at stake. Knowledge, skills, and ownership are acquired with respect to new objects (things), new procedures (know-how), algorithms, modes, and methods (modes-of-grasping, "tricks", techniques).

For Subject Being

For the person, the "personal world" opens the life-world of the person, the community as "environment"[16] namely, *creativity* as the creation of creation (here we are no longer merely in the sphere of technique, but in art, science, faith, and all other domains of spirit). We are now surrounded by the milieu of Others, thought as distinct selves with their particular traits, in the unity of their various roles (for example: father, teacher, friend, brother, neighbor, etc.). Over time, they cease to be merely Others; they and we become *Persons*: we acquire roles in a new subjectivity that is not only individual-human (as bearer of personality), but also social, cultural, economic, athletic, political, and so forth. In all these, the roles constitute the actuality of a subjectivity, of a subject for

[16] On the dialectic and speculative nature of "environment", see:
Vesselin Dafov, "Projection of the coming-after cosmos-nature-environment", *Challenge the law!*, issue: 2, 2024, pp.: 1-11
In original Bulgarian:
Веселин Дафов, "Проектория на последващото космос-природа-околна среда", списание *Предизвикай правото,* бр.2/2024, стр. 1-11

whom we are now responsible and for whom we care: family, circle of friends, band, detachment, firm, company, team, group, state, city, party, and so forth. Knowledge, skills, and competence are acquired (self-measurement with oneself as another and with others - this is biography in the sense of *life-path*, curriculum vitae, including life successes, failures, achievements, and falls).

For Person Subject Being

For the person, the project opens *home*, the realm of creators, where each lives in the dignity of a creator, a maker of their othernesses, a creator of creation. This occurs through forms of care for meaning, for wisdom, for togetherness, for conciliarity among creators as creators of (their) creation. Knowledge, skills, and competence are acquired, but now in the form of wisdom**,** the unifying force across the transitions from ignorance to knowledge, from inability to ability (from incompetence to competence). It is self-measurement with oneself as another (Person) and with the "other"[17] persons (friends, relatives, colleagues, teammates, etc.).

## 4. A Model of Projective Ontologizing

Here I present a model of ontologizing whose beginnings go back to 2004, when an initial version of a document was developed describing the ontologizing of products and services as *research on products and services*. The idea was that specialists in the development or management of products and

[17] I put the others in quotation marks precisely because I understand that the Face, the Personality, is a different ontological being of rational subjectivity – not just one that can enter into relationships and self-relationships – such as the Self, the Selfhood, the Selfness, and in relation to which there is Otherness. Here we are simply in the dialectic of I and others, or Self and Others. The Personality, however, is more than relationships and self-relationship. It is in self-creation, in the creation of creation, in creativity. There, otherness already passes into the Personal dimension – this Friend, this Son and Daughter, this Beloved, this Colleague, this Brother or Sister, this Father and Mother, etc. They are not just others, because through them I am in the creation of myself as a Person. And so, in the linguistic use of "my friend," "my son, my daughter," "my beloved," there is this personal way of thinking about the Persons listed. The possessive pronoun in such cases comes to mark their particularity, but they continue to be thought of through the idea of selfhood (that which is possessed and self-possessed is oneself through relationships with Others and self-relationship with oneself both as with another and as with oneself).

services could be supported in their work by such research.

In 2008, with the founding of "OntoIdea", the first document entitled "Ontological Studies (Product Specification)" was prepared, in an effort to clarify the specifications of the service and to create better conditions for self-reflection and accountability in our activity.

The document by which the service "Ontological Study"[18] was presented was also significantly improved. It later became clear that marketing specialists and companies likewise showed interest, insofar as such a study could assist the investigations they themselves conduct or the preparation of advertising and marketing campaigns. This required further revisions in its description. The document has its value in the intention to improve the chances and conditions for *shared work* and the development of concrete projects with economic actors, businesses, other organizations, and all interested parties.

Here I will publish the current version of **"Ontological Studies (Product Specification)"**, since it is a variant of projective philosophizing in the sphere of economic (business) life, in which clients, contractors, suppliers, and others participate. In addition, I will publish the model-description of projective ontologizing in its two components: **"Research on Products and Services"** and **"Consulting."**

### 4.1. Ontological Studies (Product Specification).

It includes clarification or General Description of the Product[19] (declare "What is Ontology" - Ontology is knowledge of what exists and of existence as such. In the history of philosophy numerous methods have been developed for obtaining and using ontological knowledge.)

The Results of the Ontological Study are pointed out as the ontological study is carried out on a product or service agreed upon with the client and contains: A list of all characteristics and properties; Existing concepts of its essence, and definitions; Relations and interactions with other realities; Reflection on the possible creative and innovative development.

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[18] As already noted, Yunuz Yunuz and Vasil Vidinski also played a significant role in this. The idea for such a document came from Yunuz Yunuz.

[19] The initial Version 0.1. of the document is dated 01.11.2008, and the first official Version 1.0. of the document is dated 07.11.2008, prepared by Yunuz Yunuz, Vasil Vidinski, and myself.

Important part of the Specifications is the outline of Areas of Application such as: Design and development of a product or service; Communication of the product or service with commissioners, executors, clients, and users; Development of human resources; Planning of scientific and marketing expert assessments. This way the results could play Essential Role in Design and Development as the ontological study is scientific in both methodology and results. And it provides: A richness of meanings and significations incorporated into the product; The scientific character of decisions concerning the product's design; Clarity regarding the product's own nature and validity; An overview of existing knowledge and of the relevant *non-knowledge* concerning the product; Understanding of the product context; Development of a sustainable product strategy. All this is to serve the process of Communicating the Product: How existing products and services are used and what their status is; Assignments; Specifications; Commitments and responsibilities; Potential users of possible, new, or existing products and services; Avoidance of errors and inconsistencies in planning an advertising campaign; How users currently carry out activities and solve problems that the new product or service is meant to address; Problems in the field of application of the product; Linguistic, cultural, moral, scientific, historical, social, and other aspects of the area of application.

The Specifications also relates to Human Resource Development in the aspects to: Build a common team understanding of the product-specific aims and problems; Ground and clear management policy; Build trust and security in the implementation of project decisions due to their scientific justification; Manage and maintain knowledge about the product; Presuppose and encourage the use of research procedures.

The ontological study is useful for Planning Scientific and Marketing Expert Assessments: Identifies and assesses needs; Provides a resource of new questions for investigation; Develops parameters for quantitative measurements and qualitative studies. For example, in: Demographic studies mapping the properties and characteristics of the product; Marketing research clarifying specificities in comparison with other similar products; Specialized scientific studies assisting the planning and measurement of applicability; Medical, ecological, psychological, and other investigations.

The so called "Life Cycle of the Product" includes steps such as:

1/ Contracting. The ontological study is a scientific product aimed

at the needs of business and public organizations. After the initial establishment of contact, OntoIdea is ready to undertake and participate in the following activities, which may lead to the establishment of working relations and cooperation: Presentation of the Service to the Client - This includes a presentation and discussion with product, marketing, operational, HR managers, or other representatives of the client organization; Idea of the Initiative - Creation of a working definition of the intended joint initiative. This presupposes agreement on the principal object of the ontological study and on the project manager on the client's side; Conditions for Co-operation - Clarifying the conditions for co-operation (which may also be conceived as external constraints or simply as constraints), such as Price and deadlines, Confidentiality requirements, Accompanying or other commitments of participants in the process (on both partner sides), Moral admissibility of the results, admissibility of publicity, political context, and others. Specification of the Framework of the Work Process formalizes the Format and structure of working meetings and the Determination of participants and their roles. At the end of all these steps a contract is singed that formalizes the results of the preceding points.

2/ Research. It starts with a Preparation of a Research Project (Academic conception, idea; Aim; Problems and opportunities; A system for verifying and measuring results (typically existing knowledge on the idea is recorded and the shift relative to it is measured at the end). After this conducting of the project is to be done: Research work; Systematization and consultation on the initial results; Additional academic expert assessments; Preparation of the document containing the agreed ontology; Delivery of the product and provision of subsequent *intelligence* (ongoing interpretive support and insight).

3/ Consulting. On the basis of the results of the philosophical–ontological study and subsequent analysis, the team consults the processes of creative and critical reflection on the activity within the environment corresponding to the reality under investigation (Contracting needs and preparing an action plan; Concluding a consulting contract; Carrying out the activities; Systematizing and presenting the results, providing follow-up intelligence and support.)

4/ Scholarly Realization. The text of the ontological study and all results produced through joint work with the client remain confidential and at the client's exclusive disposal for an agreed period.

The copyright of the text of the ontological study remains with OntoIdea and its collaborators. OntoIdea reserves the right, after the expiry of the agreed period of confidentiality and exclusivity, to publish the study and make it accessible to the academic community and the broader public.

## 4.2. Projective Ontologizing

4.2.1. Research on Products and Services[20]

We carry out philosophical ontologizing of the reality agreed upon with the client (process, product, phenomenon, case, event, artifact). The results of the ontological study form the basis of the developments we offer, which contain the following elements:

A / A set of all characteristics and properties of the studied reality.

Final product delivered to the client: a list enumerating *all* characteristics and properties, accompanied by argumentation and demonstration of the conclusions.

B / Establishing the existing concept (notion, conception, understanding, determination, definition) of the essence of the studied reality.

Final product delivered to the client: a document containing, for the studied reality:

1. Determinations and definitions;
2. Genus and species;
3. Distinguishing features: specific difference; proper mark;
4. Accompanying features;
5. The history and development of the concept of this reality.

[20] The first official version of this document dates back to August 2005, three years before the establishment of Ontidea. The motivation for its creation was a number of specific requests I received to conduct an "ontological study." These inquiries came from people who had somehow completed a degree in Philosophy at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski," had taken Prof. Andonov's course on "Dialectical Ontology" and later on "Object Ontology" and "Subject Ontology," and some of them had already been taught by me and Tsvetina Racheva. In this way, our former colleagues were quite familiar with the power of "ontologization" and were aware that working in this way unlocks creative processes. At the same time, it was clear that the reasons for this "unlocking" often remained misunderstood. However, the fact that new things were being "invented" about the reality studied in ontologization was undeniable.

C / Clarification of relations and interactions with other realities on which the studied reality depends or within which it is embedded.

Final product delivered to the client: a document with an analysis of:

1. Hierarchies and orders in which the studied reality participates;
2. Genus–species relations and connections;
3. Essential and non-essential relations;
4. Conditions and grounds for the existence of the studied reality.

D / Reflection on the possible creative and innovative development of the studied reality and the activities, production, use, applicability, creation, and co-creation associated with it.

Final product delivered to the client: a list of:

1. Synthesized possible, but as yet unutilized manifestations of the studied reality;
2. Established trends for innovation;
3. Ideas for creative exploration.

4.2.2. Consulting[21]

On the basis of the results of the philosophical ontological study and subsequent analysis, the OntoIdea team consults the processes of creative and critical reflection on activity within the environment corresponding to the studied reality. We see the applicability of our expertise and cooperation in the following activities:

- Generating new ideas;
- Creating projects and strategies;
- Defining new aims and reflecting on existing aims;
- Identifying and solving problems;
- Decision-making;
- Specification of products and resources;
- Identifying needs for scientific expert assessments;
- Commissioning assignments and monitoring their fulfillment.

4.2.3. Effects of Ontological Studies of Products and Services[22]

We hold that a good understanding of the essence, the very nature of the product or service, is crucial for adequately meeting the require-

[21] The first version of this document was also created in August 2005.

[22] This document was drafted on October 23, 2008, and was used as one of the first texts for active communication (in the sense of advertising and customer acquisition, since until then I had only done ontologization when someone asked me for an ontological research on products and services).

ments both of the end user and of the organization that has commissioned it. Ontological studies provide knowledge of this essence.

Questions such as *What is it?*, *What is it like?*, *How?*, *Why?*, *Is it?*, *Is it not?*, *Does it exist?* receive their best answers as a result of ontological studies, rather than from metric or demographic research (though these also have their own aims and applications). There are many ways to conduct ontological studies, and each plays an important role in product design.

Ontological studies can serve as a basis for conducting other types of research (e.g., marketing, metric, demographic, etc.) by providing new knowledge about the aspects and possibilities contained in the product or service. Thus, they provide a resource of new questions and parameters by which measurements can subsequently be carried out.

While so-called quantitative studies can answer already posed questions, the ontological study attains a richness and multi-layeredness of meanings and significations. It supports the invention of *new* questions. Its results offer a better understanding of the product's field of application, context, and limitations in a way that is different from, and often more useful than research, based solely on quantitative indicators. The difference lies in the philosophical–speculative method of inquiry, which is grounded in the primordial forms of thinking and thereby clarifies the principles underlying the behavior of various clients, agents and users.

More specifically, the ontological study can help us to understand:

- How existing products and services are used;
- Potential users of possible, new, or existing products and services;
- How users or clients currently carry out activities and solve problems that the new product or service aims to address;
- Engineering, business, or environmental problems in the field of application of the product that is to be designed;
- Linguistic, cultural, moral, scientific, historical, social, and other aspects of the field of application.

# 13. Infinite Circles of Fictionality

*Alexander L. Gungov, agungov@phls.uni-sofia.bg,*
*(Professor, Dr. Sc., Department of Logic, Ethics, and Aesthetics, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski)*

**Abstract:** Jeremy Bentham's and Hans Vaihinger's classical views on the philosophy of fiction can serve, to some extent, as an introduction to understanding the fictional character of financialization in the current post-consumerist society. A number of speculative circles characterize the fictional unfolding of financialization and its irresistible impact on all dimensions of personal, social, and political life, culture, science, and academia. The post-consumerist financialization is teleologically defined by the system-building concept of financial magic, which has substituted the outdated systematic concept of market and political persuasion, as well as the even less actual exploitation.

**Keywords:** speculative circles, financialization, financial magic, fiction, teleology

## 1. A Modern Perspective on Philosophy of Fiction

In the context of the Modern Age, Jeremy Bentham views fiction as an indispensable prerequisite for the functioning of legal and political discourse. According to him, in some cases, even everyday thinking cannot do without fiction. Fiction is created as something unreal, but by incorporating it into a specific discourse, it acquires reality and, moreover, lends unity and sense to all statements[1]. Bentham's conception of fiction can be viewed as a classical introduction to this topic and is certainly yet another possible way, alongside Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy, of overcoming Hume's skepticism.

Fiction, according to Bentham, is a natural consequence of the principles of empiricism of John Locke and David Hume, who believe that knowledge consists of simple and complex ideas—Locke—and impres-

[1] E. De Champs, "The Place of Jeremy Bentham's Theory of Fictions in Eighteenth-century Linguistic Thought". *Journal of Bentham Studies*, vol. 2 (1999), 2–4.

sions and ideas—Hume. Simple ideas and impressions are notable for having real references in the sensory world, whereas Locke's complex ideas—causality, necessity, self-identity—are combinations of simple ideas in the mind, but, as a matter of fact, have no direct sensory reference, although this does not cast doubt on their status as real. As for Hume's ideas, they take the form of purely psychological formations—habits, imaginary things, and so on—which have no counterpart in reality.

For Bentham, all abstract concepts (whether Locke's complex ideas or Hume's ideas) contain an imaginary element in the form of fiction, which obviously does not exist by itself. When producing an abstract concept, fiction contributes to the formation of a practically useful conceptual tool—such as the concepts of "duty," "sovereignty," and "authority." Furthermore, within the specific reality and epistemology of judicial practice, the imaginary reality of fiction allows individual precedents to be linked together through a non-existent "imaginary" community.

In addition to the epistemological and ontological grounds, Bentham also sets forth ethical and political grounds for introducing the concept of fiction, viewed from the perspective of utilitarianism. The principle of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number of individuals," as a kind of fiction, requires that social relations be interpreted precisely in light of this principle, justifying the need to introduce an element of fiction into the sense of all statements, but only on the condition that the fiction contributes to the affirmation of a fundamental utilitarian position.

The epistemological and ethical-political grounds that lead to the inevitability of fiction in Bentham's system are also linked to the specific nature of his logical-linguistic position. He is firmly convinced that individual words and language as a whole, especially public discourse, are not a secondary reflection of some primary, independent reality. On the contrary, language is a relatively active means designed to shape social reality. Consequently, it turns out to be pointless to engage in searching for the meaning of words, as well as the sense of a statement or of a combination of statements, in relation to the reality to which they refer. It is necessary to understand that words always have, to some extent, a metaphorical rather than a literal meaning. In this way, meaning is doubled, since in a metaphor something is always stated directly and something is merely implied. In this doubling, in the form of "statement" and "implication," something like a primary fiction is generated quite naturally.

The metaphorical meaning of words constantly changes depending on the context in which a given sentence or more complex statement appears, which is how overall contextual sense is conveyed. In creating such overall sense, it is possible and even necessary to introduce elements that do not yet exist in reality, i.e., fictions. Such metaphorical contextual sense inevitably overlays reality.[2]

Another source through which fiction penetrates reality can be seen in Bentham's understanding of what a definition is. He noted that many general concepts, especially in the fields of law, politics, and ethics, cannot be defined using the classical definition based on a common genus and difference in species. In such cases, it is inevitable to provide an unconventional definition by listing the specific properties of a given term. It is precisely in the enumeration of properties that a convenient opportunity arises to introduce non-existent but pragmatically justified properties that facilitate the use of a given term and enrich the context in which it resides.[3]

As a result, reality takes on precisely the sense that a given orator, legislator, or politician, more or less consciously, deems necessary to ascribe to it through pragmatically justified fictions. At the same time, unintentional logical fallacies—paralogisms—are universally accepted, as well as often deliberate violations of logical requirements—sophisms. Bentham insists that logic applied in politics and ethics must be replaced by a new "logic of the will," where the doctrine of fiction and the principle of utilitarianism intersect, or, more precisely, that fictions must be created in the name of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number of individuals."[4] In this way, harmful fictions that have become myths, such as the "social contract" and "natural law," must be overcome and replaced with productive fictions such as "authority," "universal suffrage," "the court of public opinion," and "bureaucracy."[5]

It can certainly be argued that, according to Bentham, "in every real thing there is something of fiction, and in every fiction, there is something of reality." This is particularly true in the ethical and political spheres, where fictions contribute to the formation of reality, while at

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2 Christian, Laval, *Jeremy Bentham: Le Pouvoir des fictions* (Paris: Presses Universitaires De France, 1994), 29.

3 Ibid., 53.

4 Ibid, 33-34, 38-40.

5 Ibid., 30.

the same time preserving their status as fictions.

Hans Vaihinger, though a recognized connoisseur of Kant, rejects the elegant solution offered by Kantian apriorism to the problems of cognition and empirical reality outlined by Locke and Hume. For Vaihinger, Georg Hegel's solution, which melts the difficulties of British empiricism in the furnace of the speculative spirit, is unacceptable as well. Like Bentham, Vaihinger tackles this task through the concept of fiction, building upon it an entire theory called "philosophy as if." He sympathizes with medieval nominalism, or more precisely with conceptualism, accepting that general concepts are nothing more than imaginary (fictional) assertions that do not correspond to any real individuals.

But such fictions are by no means deprived of sense; on the contrary, they can and must contribute to the formation of the sense of reality, including scientific reality. According to Vaihinger, fictions are divided into semi-fictions and full fictions. The former simply diverge from actual reality, while the latter challenge formal logic. Among semi-fictions, the method of abstraction and artificial classifications occupy a central place, and among them, Carl Linnaeus's classification of species is cited as an eloquent example. Full fictions are represented by the concepts of "infinity," "the Absolute," "the atom," and "a thing in itself." Vaihinger notes with enviable eloquence that "semi-fictions [merely] imply the unreal, full fictions—the impossible. The former avoid complexity by deviating from reality; the latter create new complications and handle data much more freely; for while semi-fiction merely falsifies reality [... in the name of] discovering the truth, full fiction renders reality [unattainable] so that it may be comprehended."[6]

But for him, fictions are an even more universal and indispensable means of knowledge than what Bentham advocates. Knowledge itself is established by Vaihinger as a "means of survival" with a naturalistic-biological undertone, which provides the German philosopher with additional opportunities to insist on the acceptability of fiction as a necessary instrument of cognition and knowledge. Fiction, however, not only shapes knowledge but also dissolves into familiar reality, becoming an inseparable and essential part of it. In this way, fiction ceases to be perceived as mere "fiction" and becomes a "fictional reality," which, above

[6] Hans Vaihinger, *Philosophy "as if". A system of theoretical, practical, and religious fictions of humanity*, Source: https://psychosearch.ru/biblio/filosof/hans-vaihinger/518-book-hans-vaihinger-philosophy-of-as-if-part-23

all else, turns out to be the only reality. Since there can be no question of "authentic reality," Vaihinger's "fictional reality" clearly precedes the emergence of the simulacrum, but without the eerie connotations present in Jean Baudrillard's term.

## 2. Circular Conceptualization Resulting in Fiction

Philosophical concepts of fiction contribute to an understanding of the actual fictions of the contemporary world, at the threshold of which lies fiat money, famous for not being backed whatsoever. Fiat money both corresponds to and does not correspond to the goods and services it is supposed to mediate and interconnect. In this way, fiat money is both real and fictitious. It relies on the foresight, experience, and, above all, the power of its issuer (described as trust in the issuer), on whom fiat money is entirely dependent.

If we compare Bentham's and Vaihinger's attitudes to fiction based on "fiat money" as a term and its referent, then, from the perspective of both thinkers, our money today would turn out to be a fully justified and pragmatically verifiable "fictional reality." From Bentham's perspective, however, this would be a useful fiction that has proven its sense, significance, and effectiveness both in contemporary public discourse and in various practical manifestations of that discourse: economic, political, ethical, cultural, and so on. Whereas, from Vaihinger's perspective, fiat money was fiction only in 1971 during the collapse of the Bretton Woods system of gold-backed currencies, but, after the adoption of fiat money as a universally functioning currency, it became the only possible basis of finance, thanks to which the "fictional reality" embodied in it acquired the status of the sole and, therefore, normative reality.

The modern, increasingly post-consumerist society is characterized by increasing financialization. This term describes the central and even exaggerated role of the financial component in all areas of individual and social life: in friendships, collegiality, and family relationships; in the economy, politics, social activities, mass media, culture, education, and academia. The speculative element of finance is particularly visible in financialization. This refers not so much to the purely financial meaning of the concept or its everyday meaning as an "unfounded judgment," but rather to its true philosophical meaning as a "grasp of opposites in their unity and self-development." In the speculative dimension of financialization, the implied unity lies primarily in the interdependence of

fiction and reality. This interdependence creates a paradoxical synthesis that can be justifiably referred to as "fictional reality" in the abovementioned sense of Vaihinger.

In the era of financialization, capital, unlike classical productive capital, has largely achieved self-sufficiency. Classical productive capital in Marx's works, as well as productive capital in general, is subject to a dialectical relationship with labor. Such capital cannot escape the opposite pole represented by labor. The circular unity and opposition between labor and capital follow the master-slave dialectic, as described by Hegel. Karl Marx is still convinced that both trade capital and financial capital can be easily and unproblematically reduced to productive capital. This means that none of the types of capital, including financial capital, can increase on its own without interacting with the workforce. The self-increase of any type of capital is nothing more than the semblance of a converted form.

The principle of classical capitalism can be quite easily described by Hegel's famous sentence (proposition): "S is P" and "P is S." Hegel's original illustration of this principle concerns divine reality, but its application to capitalism needs a respective paraphrasing, leading to the following mutually dependent and mutually self-elucidating pairs of sentences: "Capital is Surplus Labor" (S–P) and "Surplus Labor is Capital" (P–S). As Donald Phillip Verene and Thora Ilin Bayer have demonstrated, the most significant achievement of the place exchange between the subject and predicate within the speculative sentence is the achievement and manifestation of the concept[7] that guides this circular exchange of places with a necessary teleological character. In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where the speculative sentence is first introduced, the concept aims at its specific telos, which is finally carried out in "Absolute Knowing." In the system of classical capitalism, the function belonging to this structuring concept fulfills the notorious "exploitation," whereas in the consumerist version of capitalism the content of the concept is transformed into the widespread "marketing and political persuasion" in its speculative pair of "Spectacle is Profit" (S–P) and "Profit is Spectacle" (P–S).

The post-consumerist society introduces yet another variation in the line of the means used to gain profit: the pair of speculative sentences dis-

[7] Thora Ilin Bayer, Donald Phillip Verene, *Philosophical Ideas: A Historical Study* (Stuttgart: ibidem Verlag, 2021), 46-47.

closing the principle of profit and, by this, of the sustainability of the current state of capitalism is: "Money is Power" (S–P) and "Power is Money" (P–S). Fiat money, recognized since 1971, is the proper type of money that is meant in the above speculative circulation. Fiat money has nothing to do with the conglomerate of goods and services it is supposed to correspond to, represent, or ideally substitute. By definition, the above functions are possible only thanks to the trust that fiat money bears within itself. And, by analogy with Descartes' renowned observation about doubt being just a *modus* of thinking, trust can be easily considered a *modus* of power. All this implies that money makes sense only when it is backed by power, and power is real only if it springs from money. The structural concept that comes as an outcome of this circular interdependence and exchange of places of S and P—of money and power—is nothing else but "the rampant and almighty fiction."

### 3. Fiction Navigating Financialization

The concept of exploitation and that of persuasion, embodied in the exchangeability of S and P respectively in "Capital is Surplus Labor" and "Spectacle is Profit," do not fully disappear. They remain in the background and, to a certain extent, receive a sublated status in the concept of irresistible fiction, acquiring the status of its simple moments. Upon a closer look at "Money is Power," it becomes clear that the concept of irresistible fiction, which this sentence is called to speculatively disclose, emerges and unfolds, strengthens, and, finally, starts the next circle, due to the teleological interdependence of money and power. This is how the fictional character of fiat and credit money, of stocks, bonds, and all other simple financial assets is guaranteed, thereby securing the opportunity for profit.

When it comes to complex assets, that is, derivatives, the basic asset on which the derivation depends is the above fiction, and the derivative is formed by that fiction circling around itself, following the pattern "Fiction is Deprivation of Reality" (S–P) and "Deprivation of Reality is Fiction" (P–S); apparently, in this way it becomes a squared fiction. This transformation goes further when the role of a basic asset is played by a derivative, and the final asset becomes an even more sophisticated derivative representing a cubed fiction. No doubt, the fictional substance of the derivative unfolds accordingly when it reaches the level of cubed fiction. Moving on this road of concretization of fiction, the simple fic-

tion of the first level could be named "regular fiction," whereas squared, cubed, the fourth power fictions, and so on, can be named "extraordinary fictions" or "sheer financial magic." And no matter how limited, unilateral, and predetermined our imagination normally is[8], it somehow turns out to be in a position "peacefully" and "consistently" to comprehend and digest this obvious absurdity of this financial magic.

In the era of financialization, common to the period of post-consumerist society, the status of financial capital has undergone a radical transformation. As financial instruments, derivatives permeate all areas of social life, managing to impose everywhere their own principles of fictionality. Consequently, in contemporary society, the productive economy takes a back seat—of secondary or even tertiary importance—and its place is filled by so-called "financialization." This transformation secures a leading role for financial capital at the expense of production and, even more fictitiously, thanks to the predominance of overtly speculative financial transactions.

Because of the infiltration of fictions into the very essence of financial capital, it has gained almost complete independence from labor, production, and distribution. This has led to the realization, to a great extent, of classical capital's innermost "self-sufficiency" dream. Despite this, even in a society entirely dependent on financialization, financial capital is forced to engage in a peculiar type of dialectical relationship: an inevitable circular interaction with the military-industrial complex. Such a dialectic is of a different range than "the master-slave dialectic," but it has all the features of Gadamer's hermeneutical circle dialectic. Financial capital would not be able to operate with fictions, or rather, it would not be able to unfold its "fictional reality," if it were not a reflection and, even though invisible, a tangible embodiment of the military-industrial complex.

Money is backed and guaranteed by various forms of power. Within the context of a variety of power, its most significant and money-productive version is military power. At least three circles can be identified behind the component of power in the following speculative sentences: "Military Capability is Money," "Capital is Surplus Labor," and "Spectacle is Profit." The most significant and even primordial is undoubtedly "Military Capability is Money." It is very difficult, if not

[8] Todor P. Todorov, "Ashen Worlds: The Poetics of Apocalypse in Climate Fiction," *Sofia Philosophical Review*, current issue, 289.

impossible, to associate military capability with fiction. Nevertheless, the above speculative formula suggests and demands the fictional character of the military in general and of the military-industrial complex, in particular.

On the other hand, the military-industrial complex could not have emerged in its true form or continued to exist without financial capital, specifically without its fictitious component, but not so much without its classical reliance on the production economy. The seemingly obvious existence of financial capital and the military-industrial complex as separate realities is merely an illusion that masks the essence of modern society. Actually, financial capital represents the unambiguous power of the military-industrial complex, whereas the military-industrial complex represents the fictitious nature of financial capital. From the point of view of Hegel's logic, in both cases, their common essence of "fictional reality" is realized, which is the substance of the society of financialization, predetermining its structure and all interactions within it and, as a result, achieving true (actual) freedom in the form of self-sufficiency, self-determination, and self-growth. However, both sides in this circular dialectical (speculative) interaction are never equal, both at the level of practical implementation and at the level of self-awareness, because the financial component is summoned to be in the lead. Namely, this feature is capable of ensuring the stability and duration of this uncanny interaction, avoiding serious upheavals. Otherwise, the speculative financial magic of money and the military-industrial complex, which normally goes in smooth infinite circles, will get stuck, with indefinite consequences.

# 14. Fictional Reality in Thomas More's Utopia as the Core of the Utopian Genre[1]

*Ulrich Arnswald, arnswald@ulrich-arnswald.de*
*(PD, DR., Department of Philosophy, University of Innsbruck)*

**Abstract:** Thomas More's *Utopia* is not a feasible blueprint for a future ideal state, but rather a complex game with a fictional reality that deliberately maintains a distance from the actual world. This fictional reality manifests itself, for example, in the fact that the reality of the island described is untraceable and projected at an unattainable distance. This fictionality serves as a protective space in which to engage in radical criticism of the state without committing to a specific political program. Thomas More considers the work to be a game or thought experiment of the mind with wit and spirit. Thus, the fictional reality of the island is not a guide for imitation, but rather a parody or reflection of the conditions in Europe at the time. In *Utopia*, there is no prior "reality" that is subsequently "fictionalized;" rather, a "reality of fiction within fiction" (Arnswald) is created, whose historical "actuality" exists only inside the text, which renders the "truly real" (*to ontos on*) of ancient Greek philosophy insignificant as soon as one accepts that fiction makes the fictitious conceivable, even if it is realistically impossible. The fictional entity is thus a product of our imagination.

**Keywords:** Thomas More; Morus; Utopia; ideal state; fiction; reality; literature; politics; imagination; thought experiment.

## I. Introduction

Thomas More's *Utopia*[2] is not a feasible blueprint for a future ideal state, but rather a complex game with a fictional reality that deliberately

[1] I would like to thank Dr. Joaquín Jareño-Alarcon, Murcia, for his comments and remarks. I would also like to thank Dr. Marina Christodoulou, Bremen, for her editorial comments and suggestions.

[2] Thomas More, *Utopia. The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 4, edited by Edward Surtz and Jack H. Hexter (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1965).

maintains a distance from the actual world. This fictional reality manifests itself, for example, in the fact that the reality of the island described is untraceable and projected at an unattainable distance. A perspective that can also be interpreted as negative for social development, given that the "sheer distance between the ideals of utopia and the dire state of the here and now undermines the actual impact that social criticism needs to have."[3]

More himself undermines the supposed reality through literary means (such as contradictory details or the name of the narrator Hythloday, which means "chatterbox," etc.). The fictional reality is thus deliberately designed to be fragile to encourage the reader to think critically rather than convince them of the "perfection" of the system. The fictional world of the island of *Utopia* is thus a means of philosophical hermeneutics.[4] It allows social principles (such as the absence of private property) to be played out in a fictional vacuum without having to take into account the complexity of actual *Realpolitik*.

For More's *Utopia* it is true that it is "his only fully developed work of fiction, and as such has attracted both literary scholars and the common reader by the peculiar feeling of liberation and free speculation that fiction characteristically affords its readers."[5] Thus, in *Utopia*, there is no prior "reality" that is subsequently "fictionalized;" rather, "a reality of fiction within fiction" (Arnswald) is created, whose historical "actuality" exists only within the text, which renders the "truly real" (*to ontos on*) of ancient Greek philosophy insignificant as soon as one accepts that fiction makes the fictitious conceivable, even if it is realistically impossible. The fictional entity is thus a product of our imagination.

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[3] Mathias Thaler, "Hope Abjuring Hope," *Political Theory* 46, no. 5 (2018): (671–697), 675.

[4] Ulrich Arnswald, "Hans-Georg Gadamers Sprachlichkeit der hermeneutischen Erfahrung im Wechselspiel von Vernunft und Erfahrung, Wissenschaft und/oder soziale Vorstellungen, Tradition(en) und/oder Gemeinschaft am Beispiel von Thomas Morus' *Utopia*," *Labyrinth. An International Journal for Philosophy, Value Theory and Sociocultural Hermeneutics* 24, no. 1 (2022): 157–191.

[5] Walter R. Davis, "Thomas More's 'Utopia' as Fiction," *The Centennial Review* 24, no. 3 (1980): (249–268), 249.

## II. Fictional Worlds as Political Imagination

Fictional worlds cannot only play out hypothetical scenarios without having to take existing power structures into account, but they are also a tool for evoking something like political imagination in the first place.[6] What could be dangerous for the state and society in the real world can be freely explored experimentally in the fictional world. Even if reality conflicts with social norms, even if it challenges the existing order, it is still only a thought experiment in the realm of fictional possibilities. In this respect, fictional worlds are enablers rather than inhibitors of political imagination. Fictional worlds can also serve as entertainment, while at the same time being both thought experiments and entertainment. As complex thought experiments on possible future scenarios, they can also serve as a space for comprehensive ethical reflections on society, which is practically impossible in real society. This fictionality serves as a protective space in which to engage in radical criticism of the state without committing to a specific political program.

Fictional worlds—whether in literature, film, games, or speculative theory—are not escapist bubbles detached from reality. They are political laboratories. They allow creators and audiences to imagine alternatives, critique existing systems, and explore the consequences of different social arrangements. In many ways, fictional world-building is a form of political thought experiment.

The idea of utopia as a thought experiment for fictional world-building, based on a reading of More's *Utopia*, extends even to physicists such as Ernst Mach,[7] who in *Knowledge and Error* (1905) speaks of a natural scientist as "the author of social and technological utopias."[8] In this case, however, it is a matter of creating a technical world and not a politically ideal situation.

Political imagination is the collective capacity to envision alternative

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[6] Garry L. Hagberg, "Introduction: Occasions for Reflection on Political Possibility," in *Fictional Worlds and the Political Imagination*, edited by Garry L. Hagberg (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer Nature Switzerland 2024), (1–8), 1.

[7] Ulrich Arnswald, "Die Verbindung des Utopismus: Von Morus über Mach bis zum Wiener Kreis — Ernst Machs 'Gedankenexperiment als Utopie'" in *Der Wiener Kreis — Aktualität in Wissenschaft, Literatur, Architektur und Kunst*, herausgegeben von Ulrich Arnswald, Friedrich Stadler und Peter Weibel (Wien: LIT Verlag 2019), 11–31.

[8] Ernst Mach, *Knowledge and Error: Sketches on the Psychology of Inquiry*. With an Introduction by Erwin N. Hiebert (Dordrecht; Boston: D. Reidel 1976*)*, 136.

social and political realities beyond the existing *status quo*. It acts as a bridge between critical reflection—understanding what is wrong with the present—and transformative action—creating a different future. Reflecting on such politically significant literature allows for freer and more creative thinking about political possibilities and community-building, given that "[w]ere it not for this imaginative space opened between what we have before us and what we might have before us, political idealism, and indeed many forms of political reflection, would be impossible."[9]

When the capacity to imagine alternatives fades, the *status quo* is reinforced, making it difficult to challenge current power structures or inequalities. A narrow, short-term focus on crisis management replaces long-term, hopeful, or utopian visions, making the future appear as a threat rather than a potentiality: Then the following applies: "Visions of progress seem to have been replaced by endless cycles of crisis, and the horizon of expectations has narrowed, making the future seem more a threat than a promise"[10].

However, it would be wrong to believe that Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) is the fundamental text of modern political imagination *par excellence*.[11] Here, we may also recall Plato's *Republic*,[12] which, with its allegory of the cave, also qualifies as a work of political imagination. What is special about More's great opus is therefore not its political imagination, but rather the fact that the work establishes the genre of utopia,[13] as Lyman Tower Sargent notes: "There is a general form for the term Utopia as a literary genre. It refers to works which describe an imaginary society in some detail."[14]

It is no coincidence that More's island of *Utopia* has shaped the

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9 Hagberg, "Introduction: Occasions for Reflection on Political Possibility," 1.

10 Suvi Salmenniemi, Inna Perheentupa, and Hanna Ylöstalo, "Political Imagination and Social Change," *Sociological Research Online* 30, no. 2 (2025): (345–362), 347.

11 Nellickal Jacob, "In the Shadow of the Real: A Reading of Thomas More's Utopia," *International Journal of Research in English* 7, no. 2 (2025): (159–161), 160.

12 Plato, *Republic*, translated by Robin Waterfield (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press 1993).

13 Robert Shephard, "Utopia, Utopia's Neighbors, Utopia, and Europe," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 26, no. 4 (1995), (843–856), 843; Phillip E. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press 2002), 162, 228.

14 Lyman Tower Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994): (1–37), 7.

tradition of fictional models of society. The exciting and open question to be discussed in this article is whether the idea of a different society as a utopia ultimately leads to a reinvention of reality or whether it remains merely an idea of an imaginary reality. The latter is supported by the projection of the new social model into an indefinite future. However, even without the projection into the future, it would not be certain that the fictionality described would automatically lead to a better and more desirable society.

## III. On Thomas More's Utopia

Even more than 500 years after the publication of Thomas More's *De Optimo Reipublicae Statu deque noua insula Utopia libellus uere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festiuus* ("The Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia. A Truly Golden Handbook, No Less Beneficial than Entertaining") in Flemish Leuven in 1516, many interpreters still see this work as a blueprint for an ideal state, which they declare and recommend as a model for future states,[15] al-

[15] Arthur Ray Heiserman, "Satire in the Utopia," *PMLA* 78, no. 3 (1963): 163–174; Jack H. Hexter, *More's Utopia. The Biography of an Idea* (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row 1965), 84; Dermot B. Fenlon, "England and Europe: Utopia and Its Aftermath," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 25 (1975): (115–135), 122; Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Volume One: The Renaissance* (Cambridge; New York; Melbourne; Madrid; Cape Town: Cambridge University Press 1978), 255–262; Warren W. Wooden, "Utopia and Arcadia: An Approach to More's 'Utopia'," *College Literature* 6, no. 1 (1979): (30–40), 31, 37; Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Thomas More as a Renaissance Humanist," *Moreana: Thomas More and Renaissance Studies* 17, no. 65/66 (1980): (5–22), 11; Walter R. Davis, "Thomas More's 'Utopia' as Fiction," (252f.), 266; Brendan Bradshaw, "More on Utopia" *The Historical Journal* 24, no. 3 (1981): (1–27), 3; 26; Lyman Tower Sargent, "More's Utopia: An Interpretation of its Social Theory," *History of Political Thought* 5, no. 2 (1984): (195–210), 210; Ann W. Astell, "Rhetorical Strategy and the Fiction of Audience in More's 'Utopia'," *The Centennial Review* 29, no. 3 (1985): (302–317), 319; Shephard, "Utopia, Utopia's Neighbors, Utopia, and Europe," 847; 852; Ursula Niklas: "Utopia and Modern Times: Thomas More, Hannah Arendt, and Suppression of the Political," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (2001): (207–226), 209, 214, 217, 218, 223; Douwe Fokkema, *Perfect Worlds: Utopian Fiction in China and the West* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2011), (31f)., 36, 38, 83; Gregory Claeys, *Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea* (London: Thames & Hudson 2011), 12; Annette M. Magid, "Thomas More in America," *Utopian Studies* 27, no. 3 (2016): (521–528), 525; Kevin Rodríguez Wittmann, *Mapping Insularity: A Visual*

though the results of this fictitious state, as described in More's work, speak a completely different language. Accordingly, the most widespread and rudimentary interpretation of *Utopia* sees the work as a blueprint for an ideal state or community.

This reading assumes that More conceived of an exemplary polity. Gregory Claeys argues that "with Thomas More's groundbreaking text Utopia, we have a quasi-realistic account of a significantly improved society."[16] The interpreters of a perfect state or community claim that the utopian concept is not yet a reality in this world, but only a fiction of what an ideal community of the future should look like. However, the idea is conceivable and can therefore be pursued further. The design for a better society is therefore anchored in this world and at the same time a counter-design to the prevailing social conditions. Even if the idea cannot be realized immediately, it would still represent a vision of a world that would be desirable in the future. *Utopia* would thus be the dream of a new order that encompasses all areas of social life.

While it is undisputed that *Utopia* is understood today as the archetype of all positive state utopias and that utopia is its generic term, the question of whether one really wants to live in the state Thomas More conceived of on this fictitious island of *Utopia* is a different issue. Even if such realization were desired, it would remain impossible, since *Utopia* is still considered to be a concept that, although conceivable, cannot be directly realized. The name "Utopia," derived from the Greek "ou" and "topos," refers to a "nowhere" that cannot be found, projecting all longings into an unattainable distance. The fictitious island is an illusory construct, a concept and a vague vision of a possible world or a time in which a new social, religious or technical order prevails.[17]

But if *Utopia* is a fantasy image of an island and a society, then the dream of an ideal state may still fascinate many in view of today's im-

*History of Islands in Medieval and Early Modern History* (Leiden: Brill 2024), 2; Joanne Paul, "Beyond Utopia: Thomas More as a political thinker," *History of European Ideas* 50, no. 3 (2024): 353–369, 357.

16 Claeys, *Searching for Utopia*, 12.

17 Ulrich Arnswald, "Zum Utopie-Begriff und seiner Bedeutung in der Politischen Philosophie," in: *Thomas Morus' Utopia und das Genre der Utopie in der Politischen Philosophie*, herausgegeben von Ulrich Arnswald und Hans-Peter Schütt (Karlsruhe: KIT Scientific Publishing 2010), 1–35.

perfect conditions, but there is also a certain glorification of this fantasy image. Because upon closer examination, the reality of the supposedly perfect social utopia is nowhere near as attractive as the hasty interpretation of the ideal state at first glance would have us believe. A closer look at the results of the supposedly perfect social utopia reveals that the institutions and rules of the Utopians are questionable.

Nevertheless, discussions still continue to arise today about whether the fictitious island of *Utopia* represents a cloud-cuckoo-land or an ideal state. To this day, the book is more controversial than any other work of political philosophy from antiquity to modern times. The imaginary place of the realization of the perfect state ultimately ends in a nightmare scenario of a social, religious and technical order that reduces the ideas of *Utopia* as the best political system in connection with the most reasonable form of human coexistence to absurdity. Even the comprehensive social order (economy, administration, urban planning, gender roles, child-rearing, etc.) in the best state of *Utopia* (*De Optimo Reipublicae Statu*) leaves people practically no individual freedom and corresponds to a totalitarian state system.

It is noteworthy that some contemporary interpreters, after experiencing two totalitarian systems of rule in the last century, are still not sufficiently sensitized and immune to such temptations. This aspect is already evident in More's *Utopia*: “But you should have been with me in Utopia and personally seen their manners and customs as I did, (...) (i)n that case you unabashedly would admit that you had never seen a well-ordered people anywhere but there.”[18], by which he means a completely organized and controlled society. And Peter Aegidius provides yet another clue when he states that it will take a long time “before we adopt anything that is better arranged with them than with us.”[19]

## IV. A Closer Look at More's *Utopia*

In contemporary utopia research and in political philosophy and political theory, utopia is often used in a colloquial sense. Even though More gave the genre its name, it may be legitimate not to reduce it to a utopia or utopian thinking à la Thomas More. Nevertheless, such a retrospective approach to examining More's concept of utopia has its appeal and

[18] More, *Utopia. The Complete Works of St.Thomas More*, 107.
[19] Ibid., 109.

may recover dimensions that have been neglected in the history of the reception of his work. In any case, based on More's *Utopia*, we can identify some characteristics of political utopias in brief:[20]

1. Political utopias are theories of the state that describe a fictional but inner-worldly society and a fictional, inner-worldly model of the state.

2. A utopia is therefore always an anti-individualistic endeavor, as it exclusively depicts a fictional community in a stationary social model as a "utopian ideal."

3. The author does not expect his utopia to be realized in the near future—in other words, certainly not in his own lifetime.

4. The utopia itself is always allegorical or achronic. This corresponds to the narrative character of its social criticism. In other words, it never takes place in the present as we experience it.

5. The utopian design always inevitably stands in contrast to the existing conditions of the present. However, the constructed counter-world is not to be understood as an alternative to how things should be, but rather as how they could be.

6. Utopia is a kind of critique or parody of a conceivable future tomorrow. Utopia thus does not represent a real ideal, but rather a thought experiment with wit and spirit.

7. Every utopia develops its own "reality."

At the same time, this small work, first published 500 years ago in December 1516 in Leuven and comprising just over a hundred pages, is probably one of the most controversial works in the history of political thought, with its interpretation still being debated to this day. These controversies result, among other things, from the structure of the book, which presents two opposing worlds. When looking at the structure of the work, the division into two books is immediately apparent:

In the first book of the work, which provides a framework for the actual narrative of *Utopia*, detailed and direct criticism is levelled at the political and social conditions in England and Europe at that time. In More's critique of the early 16th century, his contemporaries are held up to the mirror in the form of a sharp-eyed analysis of social and political conditions. In a kind of mélange of philosophical-political treatise, conversation among scholars, and narrative of a well-traveled man, the social conditions of England at that time are denounced.

[20] Arnswald, "Zum Utopie-Begriff und seiner Bedeutung in der Politischen Philosophie," 7.

The second book of the work, which makes up about two-thirds of the text, tells the story of the fictional island of *Utopia*. This part describes in particular the organization of the state and the living conditions of its inhabitants. It also suggests that it is a blueprint for a supposedly ideal way of life that ensures peace and happiness for all. The constitution of this ideal state, "*Utopia*," appears to be formally conceived in a strictly rational manner. The island of *Utopia* thus appears, among other things, to be the archetype of all positive state utopias.

However, the question must be asked: can More's *Utopia* really represent an ideal state?—A brief look at the supposedly postulated ideal state immediately reveals something else:

- State primacy of control over all areas of life.
- Idleness is not tolerated. There is a strict obligation to work (even for travelers).
- The daily routine is completely uniform and strictly prescribed.
- All individuality is eliminated (e.g., clothing, jewelry, etc.).
- Utopians do not allow for privacy. Work and leisure must be spent under the eyes of everyone.
- Children are state property and, in the event of overpopulation or underpopulation, can simply be redistributed by transferring the surplus from overcrowded extended families to families with fewer members.
- There is no autonomous sphere in the economy: production, distribution, and the human labor that underpins them are completely politically controlled and publicly organized.
- There is a kind of moral terror. The state dictates what is permitted and what is not. There is no room for personal decision-making. Morality is always based on the moral concepts of the state, not on individual moral concepts.
- The state resorts to a system of slavery for the benefit of the Utopians. This is hardly in line with the communist idea of abolishing money.
- Adulterers are punished with the harshest slavery.
- Utopia is based on an expansive foreign trade regime that dominates neighboring states economically, even though the ideology of the islanders is supposedly communism.
- The reasons for war also include downright imperialist policies.

> The economic self-interest of the Utopians is sufficient reason for war, without the need for aggression on the part of the other side.

These few points[21] alone should suffice to show that an ideal state hardly ever takes this form. Hanan Yoran is right when he sums it up as follows: "The self-image of Utopia is indeed misleading. Most obviously, many of the ideal state's practices are oppressive and brutal even by nonutopian standards."[22]

At the same time, however, More calls his work "*The Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia. A Truly Golden Handbook, No Less Beneficial than Entertaining.*" The witty and amusing perspective referred to in the title pervades the work. People and places that are part of the description of the distant island are satirized throughout. Either the translation of the respective proper name refers to the opposite of the description intended for the reader, thus counteracting it, so to speak, *qua* negation, or the meaning of the proper name is at least strongly relativized, if not completely ridiculed.

This dense network of meaningful proper names is intended to create the necessary distance for an adequate reception of the work. More seems to have been inspired by Lucian of Samosata by creating these names.[23] This entertaining and witty narrative style also means that the reader must work hard to discern the author's intentions. The various intertwining dialogues are intended to actively involve the reader in the search for a better constitution.

More leaves all lines of argumentation open in the dialogue. Therefore, the continuation of the travelogue and the conversation is postponed to another day, with the outcome still open. This is intended to allow the critical reader to form their own opinion, whereby they must engage in a game whose rules they cannot fully comprehend.

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[21] Ulrich Arnswald, "Thomas Morus' Utopia als Fürstenspiegel. Über ein lehrreiches und anregendes Gedankenspiel zum Entwurf neuer möglicher Staatsverfassungen," in: *Die gute Regierung. Fürstenspiegel von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart,* herausgegeben von Mariano Delgado und Volker Leppin (Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg; Paulus Verlag, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer 2017), (294–314), 296.

[22] Hanan Yoran, *Between Utopia and Dystopia: Erasmus, Thomas More, and the Humanist Republic of Letters* (Lanham; Boulder; New York; Toronto; Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield 2010), 165.

[23] Hans Süssmuth, *Studien zur Utopia des Thomas Morus. Ein Beitrag zur Geistesgeschichte des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Münster/Westfalen: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung 1967).

Here it might be useful to take a closer look at a few selected examples of criticism and parody in *Utopia*:

1. The narrator and eyewitness of *Utopia*, Hythlodeus, can be translated—somewhat unflatteringly—as "big mouth" or "chatterbox."

2. "Utopia," meaning "nowhere," is ruled by a ruler named "Ademus" which translates as "king without a people."

3. The capital is located on the river "Anydrus"—"Waterless."

4. Neighboring peoples have names such as the "Nephelogetes," which translates roughly as "people from cloud cuckoo land."

5. Hythlodeus, the narrator of *Utopia*, has the first name Raphael. The biblical angel Raphael is considered both the patron saint of travelers and the savior of blindness.

More's neologisms are so revealing in themselves that the question of chance becomes irrelevant. The entire text is a thought experiment full of wit and spirit that is extremely difficult to grasp. It can therefore hardly be disputed that satire and parody play a significant role in the success of a book that allowed itself to be praised as "*A Truly Golden Handbook, No Less Beneficial than Entertaining*."

Rather, it is now often claimed that the alternation between seriousness and irony is often overlooked and that the work is therefore either understood as an ideal conception of the state, without the irony being recognized, or dismissed as parody and satire, without the seriousness and criticism expressed in the work being appreciated.[24] However, both seem wrong to me. According to my interpretation, there is no truth between seriousness and irony that a reader could verify with certainty, despite all hermeneutic efforts. The meaning of More's *Utopia* is not concretely tangible in terms of content, except in the social criticism of the first book, as I will now attempt to explain in a further step.

In this heightened interpretation of the work, there are several commentators who acknowledge that satire, parody, and irony are part

[24] Heiserman, "Satire in the Utopia," 171; 174; Kristeller, "Thomas More as a Renaissance Humanist," 11; Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Thomas Morus als Humanist," in: Paul Oskar Kristeller / Hans Maier, *Thomas Morus als Humanist. Zwei Essays, herausgegeben von Dieter Wuttke* (Bamberg: Kaiser 1982), (9–37), 25; Bernd Renner, "'Real versus ideal': Utopia and the Early Modern Satirical Tradition," *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 41, no. 3 (2018): (47–66), 49f.; 53; Otfried Höffe, "Thomas Morus — ein Staatsmann erfindet Utopia," *Zeitschrift für Politik* 66, no. 1 (2019): (63–85), 64.

of the work and contribute to its humor, but who nevertheless argue that there are equally clear messages of criticism in the second book that are specifically aimed at the readership.[25] Allegedly, the author uses irony as a stylistic device to lead the reader into an alternative world, with the aim of enabling them to perceive their own reality with a sharpened gaze.[26] However, some critical remarks are meant to be taken seriously—namely, whenever these things were supposedly important to More. But how can one tell whether the author is serious or not? Or how can one tell whether he is making fun of things that he takes seriously? And who says that the character of More in the text is identical to the author of the text, for example?

This is especially true since the most widespread interpretation is one that equates the opinion of the eyewitness Hythlodeus in *Utopia* with the views of the historical author of the text, Thomas More, even though the text itself attributes the authorship of the content to the travelogue of the reliable source Hythlodeus. Some statements also suggest that the fictional More, who is only a marginal figure in the book's conversation, even makes fun of the real author More.[27]

Logically, therefore, any determination of seriousness or irony cannot be deduced from these internal settings alone. In addition to the fictional level at the beginning of the work, there is a biographical level before the narrative transitions into fiction. Above all, however, the level that is decisive for the localization of the work is the meta-level of the accompanying letters.

## V. Literary Form as the Basis of Imagination

The accompanying letters to *Utopia* are more than just accessories, as can be seen in the Yale edition.[28] Rather, they are an integral part of the narra-

[25] Heiserman, "Satire in the Utopia," 163–174; 168; 171; 174; Renner, "*'Real versus ideal': Utopia and the Early Modern Satirical Tradition,*" 49f.; 53; Höffe, "*Thomas Morus—ein Staatsmann erfindet Utopia,*" 64.

[26] Thomas Schölderle, Geschichte der Utopie. Eine Einführung (Köln; Weimar; Wien: Böhlau 2012), 14.

[27] Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 256f.; Wolfgang E. H. Rudat, "Thomas More, Hythloday, and Odysseus: An Anatomy of 'Utopia'," *American Imago* 37, no. 1 (1980): 38–48, 44ff.; Höffe, "*Thomas Morus — ein Staatsmann erfindet Utopia,*" 78f.

[28] More, *Utopia. The Complete Works of St.Thomas More*, 2–45; 248–253.

tive. With his carefully selected letters, Thomas More opens an additional narrative level by involving his humanist friends in the interpretation of the multi-layered work *Utopia* through several accompanying letters.

The witty game of fiction also takes the form of a series of letters and poems written before and after the main text by humanists who were friends of More and who give their opinion on the model character of the political and social institutions of the Utopians in Hythlodeus' travelogue. To the reader's confusion, real and fictional aspects are thus interwoven. The reader is astonished by this game.

The ironic exaggeration in the book *Utopia* begins with an introductory letter in which More addresses the city clerk of Antwerp, Peter Giles, whose Latin name is Petrus Aegidius, asking him to review his memorandum of the joint conversation with Raphael Hythlodeus and to correct it if necessary.[29] For the reporting from *Utopia* itself, Hythlodeus continues to be introduced as the guarantor and actual author. The entire construction of the framework conversation inevitably raises the question of the function of the description of the state within the fiction of the island of *Utopia*.

The difficulty in evaluating the letters lies in deciphering the ironic exaggerations, grasping the witty inversions of facts, and recognizing their significance. With this challenging puzzle, Thomas More shows which circle of readers the work is aimed at and what the key to understanding it is. The multi-layered nature of the work makes it clear that Utopia deals with the ideas of the humanists. The literary character of *Utopia* underscores that More is aware "that it is not only seriousness that finds the roots of things, but often even more easily, because it is more playful, cheerfulness, irony, humor."[30]

In this respect, *Utopia* is also a humanistic study in which More exchanges ideas and reflects on the character of human beings with his humanistic friends.[31] It is already clear at this point that the work does not have the coherence of a unified whole. It is composed of heterogeneous elements that may be meant seriously or ironically; in any case, this often cannot be conclusively clarified.

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[29] Ibid., 43.

[30] Süssmuth, *Studien zur Utopia des Thomas Morus. Ein Beitrag zur Geistesgeschichte des 16. Jahrhunderts*, 109f. (translation by the author).

[31] Kristeller, "Thomas More as a Renaissance Humanist," 11; Yoran, *Between Utopia and Dystopia: Erasmus, Thomas More, and the Humanist Republic of Letters*, 159.

From a literary perspective, More's humanistic study is imaginative and very skillfully written. More constantly plays with his readers, for example, when he asks Peter Giles to correct his summary of Hyhtlodeus' travelogue, if necessary, or instructs him to ask him in the future in which part of the new world the island of Utopia is located. For the two of them had forgotten to ask this very question: "We forgot to ask, and he forgot to say, in what part of the new world Utopia lies."[32]

The report ends just as spectacular. In the final scene, the dialogue format is resumed, followed by a passionate plea from the reporter Hythlodeus, who initially pretended to be neutral but now passionately advocates for the utopian community of the state of Utopia, only to end abruptly as dinner is about to begin. With this ending, everything is once again open. Due to the impending dinner, the evaluation of the report on the Utopians' way of life is simply postponed.[33]

All these demonstrate the literary quality and humor of the work, which is aimed entirely at humanists educated in Latin and Greek. More himself is said to have expressly rejected a translation of the work into English. What is certain is that the text is addressed to humanist friends who were able to correctly interpret the text with its literary tricks and allusions. The multi-layered nature of the work thus becomes an irreducible condition that eludes any clear interpretation.[34]

## VI. From Imagination to Political Imagination

The imagination thus emerges both from the fact that this is a travelogue about a distant island, that the implementation of the supposedly perfect order of this distant island is not expected in the immediate future in the European states of the time, and that it is only a description of an inner-worldly society and a fictional, inner-worldly model of the state. The political reality of a perfect state as "reality of fiction within fiction" (Arnswald) turns the fictional narrative into a political imagination.

The political imagination relevant to *Utopia* is one that relates to collective coexistence, both in social and material terms. It is the imagination of a society that is developed within the framework of collective

[32] More, *Utopia. The Complete Works of St.Thomas More*, 43.
[33] Ibid., 109.
[34] Süssmuth, *Studien zur Utopia des Thomas Morus. Ein Beitrag zur Geistesgeschichte des 16. Jahrhunderts*, 33.

life for a different conceivable collective life. But why does More call his book "*A truly golden handbook, no less useful than entertaining*"? What else might More have intended with his ambiguous work?

In response to these questions, I propose the thesis that *Utopia* is rather an "experimentum rationis," i.e., a thought experiment, and not the blueprint for an ideal state as many ardently desire. It is not even a strictly utilitarian-rational thought experiment, as is often claimed. In my interpretation, it is exclusively a thought experiment intended to open scope for debating all possible and conceivable models of government. That is precisely its function: a truly golden experimental handbook about the best constitution and the new island of *Utopia*.

The island of *Utopia* does not provide a definitive solution—let alone a serious one— to the abuses in England at the time described in the first book. Clearly, such a multi-layered understanding of the work no longer allows for a simple, one-dimensional interpretation of the author's intention. It also seems certain that *Utopia* cannot be understood as the comprehensive social reform work that it has often been portrayed as in the history of utopia research and still is in some quarters. Thus, the work was never intended to be understood as an ideal to strive for.

At the same time, however, it cannot simply be viewed as an intellectual game, because the background against which this fictional thought experiment takes place is too serious, and the criticism of the conditions of his time too scathing, for it not to have consequences. From the playfulness with the true meaning of proper names to the ironic relativizations or even the internal inconsistency of his remarks, there are many indications that the author More wants to encourage his readers to critically question his supposedly ideal social model as well as the social reality of the present at that time. The open ending of the conversation between More and Hythlodeus is further evidence of this. Why should the conversation end openly if all problems and evils had been eliminated?

More presents the humanistically educated reader of his time with a social counter-model that only appears to have solved all injustices on the surface. In the first book, the author draws the reader's attention to the social misery of their time, but on closer inspection, *Utopia*, with its many unattractive institutions and practices, fails to provide a concrete answer to this in the second book, since the alternative social model—as I have explained—must be critically questioned. The latter is therefore

not a social reform manifesto, as is often assumed without reflection. The aim of this only seemingly serious proposal must rather be seen as enabling a space for discussion beyond censorship for the circle of educated humanists of his age.

The island of *Utopia* is thus a deliberate provocation aimed at questioning the real social reality of the present at that time. Instead of continuing to thoughtlessly regard the status quo as God-given, readers should come to the radical realization that the political and social conditions in Europe at the beginning of the 16th century were miserable and in urgent need of improvement.

More's aim is not to develop a model constitution for the future. Rather, he seeks to show how the unsatisfactory state structures of the present can be transformed into real structures of order that could lead to completely different upheavals. Thus, *Utopia* is not just a historical novel, but a vital tool for political imagination that allows society to question existing power structures through the lens of a fictional "ideal" that turns out to be the opposite.

## VII. Conclusion

Thomas More's work *Utopia* shaped the later tradition of developing fictional ideal models of states, motivated in part by theory and in part by literature, and the proper name of the island created by More became the generic term for political state fiction. However, this view can be called into question if one does not subscribe to the widespread thesis that utopianism is, in a sense, an abstraction of social reality, deliberately contrasting it with an idea of a desirable, ideal social life.

A utopia is understood as an idea that is conceivable but cannot be implemented immediately, representing a dream, concept, or vision of a world or time in which a new social, religious, or technical order prevails. Due to the perfection of this idea, it is assumed that every member of the community agrees to follow the maxims of this community ideal in all areas of life. However, this thesis seems untenable to me in the work of Thomas More. Under the circumstances described here, *Utopia* can also be understood, as we call it today, as a dystopia that does not produce a desirable model of state. As I interpret it, *Utopia* is more of an "experimentum rationis," or thought experiment, than a blueprint for an ideal state, as many ardently desire.

The island of *Utopia*, with its many unattractive institutions and

practices, offers no definitive solution, let alone a serious one, to the abuses described in the first book in 16th-century England. *Utopia* cannot therefore be understood as a comprehensive work of social reform, as has often been portrayed in the history of utopia research and is still portrayed in some circles.

Fictional worlds can evoke political imagination and can serve as a protective space in which to engage in radical criticism of the state without committing to a specific political program. Political imagination can envision alternative social and political realities beyond the existing *status quo* and thereby act as a bridge between critical reflection and transformative action. It is no coincidence that More's island of *Utopia* has shaped the tradition of fictional models of society—utopia as well as dystopia.

The idea of a different society as a utopia ultimately does not lead to a reinvention of reality. It remains merely an idea of an imaginary reality. In this ambivalent tradition, More sees his work *Utopia* as a game or thought experiment of the mind, characterized by wit and esprit. The fictional reality of the island is not a guide to be imitated, but rather a play on irony and parody, as well as a space for discussion beyond censorship, in which the circle of educated humanists of his time could reflect on the conditions in Europe at that time.

# 15. Jean Baudrillard – Democracy Beyond Hyperreal Simulation

*Vanessa Freerks, vanessacecile27@gmail.com*
*(Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Leadership Ethics in Africa, University of Fort Hare)*

**Abstract:** In the 1980s, Baudrillard regarded major democratic phenomena such as elections and even the fall of the Berlin Wall as "non-events"— empty performances or simulacra that prevent real, meaningful political change. In tune with his early analysis of consumer society, Baudrillard also points to the "democracy of social standing" whereby mere signs of freedom, equality and well-being abound to be consumed through the variety of goods and political parties on offer; all of which serve to hide the absence of democracy. In what he termed hyperreality, cultural models circulate; social and geopolitical events repeat themselves in an endless cycle.

In hyperreality, ideology criticism becomes senseless as it undermines and defies rational distinctions between fact and fiction, appearance and reality.

Given the limitations of Ideologiekritik in such a situation, I show how Baudrillard applies the tools of Nietzschean genealogy and specifically the latter's critique of binary models. Genealogy exposes the contingency of any social structure and opens up possibilities within the perspective being addressed without directly rejecting it. Genealogical critique as practiced by Nietzsche and Baudrillard offers hypothetical perspectives, but it also appeals to and subsequently questions our own perspective. I thus emphasize that Baudrillard not only outlines the problematic of hyperreality, but he also offers a so-called 'imaginary solution' through his notion of symbolic exchange, which is grounded in principles of ambivalence and reciprocity instead of competition, mutual distrust and polarization.

**Keywords:** hyperreality, polarization, democracy, seduction, simulation, symbolic exchange

## Introduction

Baudrillard provides a framework for understanding the crisis of democracy today, fueled by identity politics and (mis/dis)information[1] on social media. Baudrillard simultaneously offers an alternative, so-called "imaginary solution" to the crisis of democracy and the misinformation pandemic with his idea of symbolic exchange, which grounds politics in principles of ambivalence and reciprocity rather than mutual distrust and polarization. Polarization transforms political adversaries into perceived enemies, spreading animosity. This social sorting reduces interaction between opposing groups, normalizes incivility, and leads to the denigration of those with different perspectives.[2]

Baudrillard's work demonstrates that it is not only institutional change that is necessary but also a transformed social relationship that embraces ambivalence and epistemic restraint.[3] Democracy, in this vision, is not merely a system to be perfected but a shared practice. Baudrillard's notion of symbolic exchange is based on an alternative rationality that exposes power's contingency and transforms polarization into communion. In the process, Baudrillard's work reveals the hollowness of hyper-rational, inflated systems of thought and resists the mania for positivist, technological transparency.

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[1] According to Cathryn van Kessel, Jason D. Manriquez & Kip Kline, misinformation is unintentional whereas disinformation is the intentional spreading of false information, see Cathryn van Kessel, Jason D. Manriquez & Kip Kline, "Baudrillard, hyperreality, and the 'problematic' of (mis/dis)information in social media," *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 53:2 (2025): 250.

[2] For an analysis of the negative correlation between democracy and polarization see Patkós, V., & Plesz, B. "Does political polarisation undermine democratic accountability? Evidence from 28 European democracies," *West European Politics*, 1–33 (2025).

[3] Van Kessel et al. "Baudrillard, hyperreality, and the 'problematic' of (mis/dis)information in social media, 251 call for an appreciation of a "wobblier sense of reality" that can open up spaces that rely on the professional judgment of educators, "creating pedagogical spaces steeped in the ontological and epistemological humility that we are creating reality as we are experiencing it" (Ibid., 251). Van Kessel et al. take an "ontological" approach to be able to "defin[e].. and conceptualiz[e]… aspects of our lives that we might otherwise take for granted" (Ibid,. 250). I agree that it is impossible to oppose "misinformation", conspiracy theories, extreme views and polarization with logical solutions that assume that humans are predictable, and reality is stable (Ibid,. 250). Building on Van Kessel, Manriquez et al., I take a genealogical approach as I also focus on the explicit and implicit power dynamics at play.

## Democracy: Beyond the True and False

In his book *Decoding Digital Culture with Science Fiction*, Alan Shapiro claims that "[t]here is a crisis of democracy or situation of post-truth."[4] In this article, I argue that the crisis of democracy is rooted in a polarization of perspectives, and specifically in the binary opposition between the true and the false. I concur with Shapiro that Baudrillard's hyperreal sphere of cyberspace in a society of simulations explains the crisis of democracy. Shapiro defines Baudrillard's key concept of hyperreal simulation as having "to do with an original thing getting substituted by its image, copy, statistical model, or code."[5] In my view, any definition of the simulacrum must, above all, make clear that Baudrillard is not nostalgic for an original or lost reality or truth.[6]

Like Nietzsche, Baudrillard rejects the idea that there can be one account of truth that corresponds with the way things are in themselves, "independently of the mediation of perspectives by relations of willing."[7] When claiming in the Final Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* that philosophy must, for the first time, confront the question of the "value of truth," Nietzsche decides to analyze "truth" within a complex social and political system.[8] Furthermore, in his essay "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,"[9] Nietzsche overthrows the Platonic dualistic and hierarchical ordering between truth and the false, illusion and reality, by regarding the "pure drive towards truth" as an effect of de-

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4 Alan Shapiro, *Decoding Digital Culture with Science Fiction: Hyper-Modernism, Hyperreality, and Posthumanism* (Digital Society, 2025), 16.

5 Ibid.

6 For Baudrillard simulation "refers to something deep but calculable in the real construction of actual technical, practical or social 'spaces.' Simulation is not so much an attempt to resemble something in 'appearance' as to *reassemble* it from 'within', algorithmically." See Charles Levin, *Jean Baudrillard. A Study in Cultural Metaphysics* (Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall Europe, 1996), 191.

7 Chistopher Allsobrook "Contingent Criticism: Bridging Ideology Critique and Genealogy" in *Nietzsche, Power and Politics: Rethinking Nietzsche's Legacy for Political Thought*, edited by Herman W. Siemens and Vasti Roodt (De Gruyter, 2009), 703.

8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 113.

9 Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, translated by Ronald Speirs (New York: Cambridge University, 1999), 143.

ception.[10] In the process, Nietzsche reverses Plato's affirmation of the supersensuous as a standard of truth, and he problematizes the value of truth without simply privileging appearances, illusions, or the "false."

Likewise, Baudrillard stresses the undecidability between appearance and reality in simulacra. What Baudrillard calls simulation is not simply a false copy;[11] it is a process that consists of coded signs that refer to other signs within a model, not to an external referent or reality. The concept of simulation involves the disappearance of reality behind (its) signs as well as an internally generated "effect" of reality. Baudrillard's hyperreal world of simulation reassembles the real in the form of exclusively and universally determining codes of signification. The code permits opposition and alternation, but it is a pre-coded opposition, a pre-coded otherness.

Baudrillard relinquishes a view of truth as a timeless, stable ideal and focuses on the problem of binary oppositions, especially the one between the true and the false, with no appreciation for nuance and ambivalence. It is this appreciation that Baudrillard's notion of symbolic exchange brings to hyperreality and simulation.

Before we come to this symbolic alternative[12] to codified hyperreality, it is important to return to Shapiro's analysis[13] that our current situation is characterized by "a crisis of democracy," which is fueled by "the emotional and ideological atmosphere of the polarizing 'echo chamber' and 'filter bubble' structured by the social media platforms."[14] In this situation, there can be no neutral "spokesperson" capable of invoking "the truth" and inhabiting an "outside" position relative to simulation.[15] Simulations are "filter bubbles" because both involve a self-referential world, producing "reality effects"—a "hyperreality." Simulation is a system of differences in which one cannot speak of something

[10] Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," 143.

[11] Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (London: Continuum, 2004). See also Vanessa Freerks "Nietzsche's Reversal of Platonism and the Simulacrum," *The Sofia Philosophical Review* Vol. XII, No. 2. (2019): 33-56.

[12] For Shapiro, in order to challenge the simulacrum we need to transfigure the software code and update Baudrillard's critique through "creative coding." Shapiro, *Decoding Digital Culture,* 205- 319.

[13] Ibid.,122.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

"outside" the system.[16]

Baudrillard takes up the challenge of describing simulation when it is not possible to compare it to anything else. To understand the full scope of this challenge, we need to emphasize that Baudrillard makes a theoretical link between structural linguistics and simulation. Structural linguistics requires that we disregard the connection between language and reality; it presents a theory of meaning as determined differentially. Structural linguistics does not merely present us with a new theory of language; rather, it describes the social reality of late modernity. As a result, society moves from a "capitalist-productivist society to a neo-capitalist cybernetic order."[17] The immanence of the code has taken the place of transcendent models ("God, Man, Progress, and even History").[18]

> "Life is now ruled by the discontinuous indeterminism of the genetic code, by the teleonomic principle […] Finality is there in advance, inscribed in the code."[19]

In the same way that language has codes or models that systematize communication, and just as cells contain genetic codes (DNA) that structure experience and behavior, society operates according to codes and models that organize human life. Hegarty explains that Baudrillard speaks of the general "code" that replaces the quasi-Marxist term "the system," as the code is what drives the system.[20] Control is based upon codes (not powerful individuals or interest groups), and programming becomes the principle of social organization. The model of the code is DNA, which invisibly programs various directions and constrains individual behavior. It is subject to aleatory combinations and variations mixed with other social and environmental phenomena.[21]

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[16] Rex Butler, *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real* (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 24

[17] Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, translated by Ian Hamilton Grant (London: Sage Publications, 1993), 60.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., 59; italics in the text.

[20] Paul Hegarty, *Jean Baudrillard: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2004), 55.

[21] For Baudrillard, the cellular form of power does not contain any revolutionary principle at all. It is precisely on the most microscopic level of the molecular, the DNA code dominates and controls behavior. See Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault,* translated by Nicole Dufresne (New York: Semiotext(e), 2007b), 47.

> "After the metaphysics of being and appearance, after energy and determinacy, the metaphysics of indeterminacy and the code… Digitality is its metaphysical principle (Leibniz's God), and DNA its prophet… it is in the genetic code that the 'genesis of simulacra' today finds its completed form."[22]

In the order of simulacra, the model and its internal system of relations (which are cybernetically controlled) generate phenomena. The new operational formation is run by the machinery of the question-and-response process. The order of control is buried "in the depth of the 'biological' body," in "black boxes where all the commandments ferment."[23] This is the era of cellular programming, of molecular emission of signals:

> "Whether it is prison cells, electronic cells, party cells, or microbiological cells we are dealing with, we are always searching for the smallest indivisible element… even space is no longer linear or unidimensional but cellular, indefinitely generating the same signals like the lonely and repetitive habits of a stir-crazy prisoner."[24]

From the biological to the carceral, at this locked-in ("cell"-ular) level there is no transcendent purpose or meaning. All that is recognized is the arbitrary mix of elements in this cellular, reflex world—everything is ready to be decoded. Binary combination is the framework; the mode of decoding it is through the zero and the one (0/1). Baudrillard refers to Jacques Monod as the "strict theologian" of this era.[25] Social theory must now be reconsidered in view of genetic programs. For Baudrillard, the digital code and its dual form regulate society. This code serves as the blueprint for processes of simulacra.

The code tries to embrace contingency, variety, and unpredictability. There is, however, no independent, external real, but rather a real that emerges only as an effect of the code. This is a world of simulated "tests" and programmed differences. Polls, elections, consumer purchases, and so forth are all part of a system of binary regulation stabilized by two political

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[22] Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 57.
[23] Ibid., 58.
[24] Ibid.; italics in the text.
[25] Ibid., 59; Baudrillard plays with the (French) acronym for DNA: 'ADN' and 'ADoNaï' – the latter means God in Hebrew.

parties, two opposing classes, two (or more) choices at every moment. "Public" and "opinion" are, for Baudrillard, simulation models, as is their combination ("public opinion"): we see the "impossibility of obtaining a non-simulated response to a direct(ed) question."[26]

Responses are structured within a binary system of affirmation or negation: every advertisement and poll is a test to which one responds. Through the selection among alternatives on offer, individuals are absorbed into a coded system of similarities and dissimilarities of identities and programmed differences. Different political parties, products, lifestyles, and so forth are intended to deter demands for radical social change. For Baudrillard,

> "duopoly is the completed stage of monopoly. It is not that a political will (State intervention, anti-trust laws, etc.) shatters the market's monopoly: any unitary system, if it wants to survive, must find a binary regulation … power is only absolute if it is able to diffract into various equivalents, if it knows how to divide in order to become stronger."[27]

As a symbol of this stabilized society of simulations, Baudrillard refers to the Twin Towers of the New York World Trade Center (WTC):

> "The two towers of the WTC are the visible sign of the closure of the system in the vertigo of doubling, while the other skyscrapers are each of them the original moment of a system continually surpassing itself in a perpetual crisis and challenge."[28]

Two supposedly dominant poles (0/1) maintain a self-regulating, self-reproducing system. Oppositional, outside, or threatening elements to the system are functional parts of a society of simulation. They are mere "alibis" that only enhance social control. Digitization and cybernetic control are a universalizing cultural power because they reduce the concept "opposite" to a pure form without content, comparable to exchange value. The ones and zeros are an irresistible general medium of equivalence.[29]

In the next section, I scrutinize how this polarization operates on

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[26] Ibid., 67.
[27] Baudrillard *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 69.
[28] Ibid.,70.
[29] Charles Levin, *Jean Baudrillard. A Study in Cultural Metaphysics* (Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall Europe, 1996), 177.

an individual and technical level toward subjectification and the making of subjects.[30]

**Personalized Polarization**

In this section, I focus on the microlevel of polarization and how the digital code operates in subject formation. In his book, Shapiro points to the centrality of "personalized advertising" as a key aspect of digitization:

> "The shift from mass advertising to personalized advertising provides key insights into the paradigm shift in the media generally from the pre-digital to the digital phase. Prior to digitalization, advertising was a non-personal marketing message not directed at any individual."[31]

As a parallel to how social media platforms appeal to the personal level, we can look at Baudrillard's early text *Consumer Society*. In this text, Baudrillard analyzes how early forms of mass advertising "interpellate" individual consumers into joining the consumption cycle.[32] Baudrillard makes it clear, already in his analysis of "personalization" in consumer society, that consumers "are swayed by the fact that 'they' [advertisers] are sufficiently concerned to want to address us, to show us things, to take an interest in us."[33] Like a protective mother, advertisers are attentive and have solutions to problems. Advertising suggests who one can become.

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[30] Baudrillard's concept of personalization can be paralled to Foucault's notion of "governmentality" which as the "conduct of conduct," involves the formation of *subject positions* in discourses, processes of *subjectivation* in governmental power practices, and the constitution of ourselves as *ethical selves* in self-technologies. See Tania Murray Li "Governmentality Anthropologica," *Canadian Anthropology Society*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2007): 275; 276.

[31] Shapiro, *Decoding Digital Culture,* 155.

[32] According to Louis Althusser, all ideology interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects. A police officer shouts "Hey, you there!" and we answer the call to become a subject. See Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism. Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus*, translated by G.M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014).

[33] Jean Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, translated by Benedict James (New York: Verso, 2005), 185.

> "The abundance of products puts an end to scarcity; the abundance of advertising puts an end to insecurity. The worst thing possible is to be obliged to invent one's own motives for acting, for preferring, for buying. The individual in such circumstances is brought face to face with his own misapprehensions, his own lack of existence, his own bad faith and anxiety."[34]

Baudrillard ironically chronicles the various expressions of concern of advertisers for their crippled consumers and how they are "committed to the idea of happiness – to YOUR happiness."[35] What is particular to consumer society is the construction of individual "difference" through the object system. For Baudrillard, advertising maintains the whole system of imposed differentiation—the choice of coded differentials by which individuals are integrated into the system. The available variety offers "personalization" so that individuals define themselves in opposition to other individuals.[36]

The consumer system is grounded in the idea that the consumer has a choice and the freedom to choose. Advertising seeks to represent the explosion of this freedom as we are "given" advertising, so it is "the most democratic of products, the only one that is 'free' – and 'free' to all."[37] Consumers "personalize" themselves according to their choice of brands. Consumers construct a "personality," "a synthetic individuality," through the manipulation of "marginal differences" that constitute the sign system.[38]

Differences are systematically produced in tune with an order that absorbs and combines them all as identifying signs. Signs are substitutable for each other, so there is no more tension between them. As a result, the whole culture becomes a combinatorial machine.[39] This construction of a "personality" through consumption is only possible because "there is no one there – no person. This 'person'… is absent, dead,

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[34] Ibid., 186.
[35] Ibid., 184.
[36] William Pawlett, *Jean Baudrillard. Against Banality* (London: Routledge, 2007), 16.
[37] Baudrillard, *System of Objects,* 187.
[38] Baudrillard, *Consumer Society,* 88.
[39] Ibid., 104.

swept out of our functional universe."[40]

The creation of a synthetic identity is based on a pre-established range of choice (determined by the digital code), and it is at the root of our current polarized positions. In modern society, differentiation and competition (*concurrence*) are central to the personalization process. In consumer society, the individual is disciplined by a new ideological obligation to enter consumption by trying out the latest gadget. An obsessive new "universal curiosity" develops into the fear of missing the latest fashion, something new.[41] This structure cannot be recognized by individualist assumptions regarding the nature of the consumer, for it is a "social fact;" yet it is realized on an individual basis, so the consuming mass does not have a collective existence.[42] Consumers are fragmented and unorganized.[43]

The consumption of sign value is based on a meaningful "totality" that is unreachable.[44] Here we see that Baudrillard's work provides a further theoretical link between structural linguistics and consumer society. Even if it is accepted that "personality" or "referentiality" is only an illusion generated by the machine of language, as Baudrillard, following Nietzsche, maintains, the situation is transformed by the "liberation" of signifiers, which do not even have an illusory referentiality. For Baudril-

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[40] Ibid., 88; italics in the text.
"c'est précisément *qu'il n' y a personne"* - lost in translation is the ambiguity Baudrillard plays with here in French between *'une personne'* (a person) and *'personne'* (nobody) in Jean Baudrillard *La société de consommation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 125.

[41] Baudrillard, *Consumer Society,* 81.

[42] Baudrillard describes consumption in Durkheimian terms as "collective behaviour" something "enforced, a morality an institution" and a whole system of values." (George Ritzer, "Introduction," *Consumer Society* by Jean Baudrillard (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 4; Baudrillard, *Consumer Society,* 79).

[43] "Just as 'the People' are glorified by Democracy provided that they remain the people (and do not intervene on the political and social stage), so consumers are recognized as enjoying sovereignty (Katona speaks of the 'powerful consumer') so long as they do not attempt to exercise it on the social stage. The People are the workers, provided they are unorganized. The Public and Public Opinion are the consumers, provided they content themselves with consuming." (Baudrillard, *Consumer Society,* 87). Originally in English from George Katona, *The Mass Consumption Society* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964). The translator cannot identify the page of this citation.

[44] Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 224.

lard, following Nietzsche, the operation of language governs rational thought processes, and it is this which underlies personalization (and later simulation). In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche emphasizes the power of language to seduce us into accepting all kinds of metaphysical presuppositions, such as the division between subject and object, cause and effect, and he asks us to question our grammatical habits. As Baudrillard puts it:

> "The systematic and limitless process of consumption arises from the disappointed demand for totality that underlies the project of life. In their ideality sign-objects are all equivalent and may multiply indefinitely; indeed they must multiply in order at every moment to make up for a reality that is absent. Consumption is irrepressible, in the last reckoning, because it is founded on lack."[45]

Sign value always delays satisfaction by referring the process of consumption to another object/sign in the system. Charles Levin rightly brings attention to the "attenuation of the affective dimension of social life […] this functional stripping of the object world also erodes the subject's capacity to 'mean.' The semantic dimension no longer emerges from the body because everything in relation to which it might emerge is already a plenitude: a 'construction,' a 'production,' an 'effect.'"[46]

As already mentioned, the consumer system that Baudrillard describes is not "other-worldly" in relation to the sensuous world of becoming. In Baudrillard's view, with the advent of consumer society we have reached "the end of transcendence."[47] Baudrillard dedicates a separate section to the "End of Transcendence," a phrase he borrows from Marcuse.[48] The consumer is "immanent in the signs he arranges."[49] According to Baudrillard:

> "in the generalized process of consumption, there is no longer any

[45] Ibid.
[46] Levin, *Jean Baudrillard: A Study in Metaphysics*, 179.
[47] Baudrillard, *Consumer Society,* 191.
[48] For more on alienation and the influence of Marcuse on Baudrillard see Douglas Kellner, "Critical Theory, Commodities and the Consumer Society," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 1, 3 (1983): 66-83, and Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the crisis of Marxism* (London and Berkley: Macmillan and University of California Press, 1984).
[49] Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, 192).

> soul, no shadow, no double, and no image in the specular sense. There is no longer any contradiction within being, or any problematic of being and appearance. There is no longer anything but the transmission and reception of signs, and the individual being vanishes in this combinatory and calculus of signs."[50]

In consumer society, advertising, for instance, "absorbs and regurgitates the seemingly radical forms of avant-garde; thus a piece of art that attempts to challenge the whole system of aesthetics can be used to advertise some … haircare product."[51] The avant-garde is neutralized as style, fashion, or trend in advance, which means there is no point in even trying to (artistically) challenge any system.[52]

This analysis is in tune with so-called "prosumer culture,"[53] whereby individuals are positioned as both producers and products. Within "spectacle-dominated economies,"[54] everyday life becomes an ongoing performance and staging of one's individuality, preferences, as well as one's group affiliation. Digital capitalism absorbs critique by reconfiguring agency into performance, binding subjectivity to the imperatives of circulation and marketability. It transforms oppositional identities into consumable performances, marketable personas, thereby reinforcing the structural dynamics it challenges.[55] Baudrillard's view of

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[50] Ibid.

[51] Richard Lane, *Jean Baudrillard* 2nd Edition (London: Routledge, 2009), 128.

[52] Ibid., 128.

[53] The term prosumption was coined by Alvin Toffler in 1980 and refers to a combination of production and consumption. See George Ritzer, "Prosumer Capitalism," *The Sociological Quarterly*. Vol. 56 (2015): 413-445.

[54] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, translated by Donald Nicholson- Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995). Debord's concept of "the spectacle," refers to the omnipresence of visual images which leads to a world led by abstraction, a diminishing of what is actively and "directly lived" as well as an increase in the autonomy and power of images themselves. In a further development, the spectacle becomes generalized and infiltrates into everyday life, a situation Debord refers to as the "integrated spectacle" as developed in his later work *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. As Debord puts it, at this stage, "the spectacle is mixed into all reality, and irradiates it." Guy Debord *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, translated by Malcolm Imrie (London: Verso, 1998), 9.

[55] Gregory Swer, "Frankfurt School - the musical!: Shock Treatment and the Eros of online civilisation," *Acta Academica* Special issue: Critical theory, digital media and the future of democracy, 57 Issue 2 (2025): 9.

consumer society thus anticipates contemporary platforms where

> "counter-discourse … establishes no real distance… Just as medieval society was balanced on God and the Devil, so ours is balanced on consumption and its denunciation… Our magic is white… it is the prophylactic whiteness of a saturated society, a society with no history and no dizzying heights, a society with no other myth than itself."[56]

For Baudrillard, consumer society is about the play of abstract signs and manipulated appearances (and the destruction of ambivalently charged symbolic meaning). We are involved in the empty play of advertising signs (play as in chance and play as in the pre-recorded piece of information, music, movies). Consumer society offers only a systematically unfulfilling and limitless play of pre-coded signs and pre-fabricated networks of appearances.

**It must be foregrounded that the network of appearances circulating in the digital media environment is not neutral**; the digital media environment actively configures the perceptual, affective, and interpretive structures through which individuals experience the social world. Opportunities for expression and participation now unfold within systems characterized by commodification, algorithmic governance, and an intensified shaping of subjectivity.[57]

It is thus possible to parallel Baudrillard's outline of "personalization" in consumer society with the way contemporary media shape how individuals perceive, interpret, and express themselves. In the process, cultural experiences are reorganized. Rather than functioning as neutral intermediaries, these media platforms actively negotiate the formation of meaning, the rhythms of attention, and the possibilities of subjectivity.[58]

Similar to Baudrillard's analysis of consumer society, digital platforms promote immediacy, novelty, and personalization; they fragment aesthetic experience and restrict the horizon of critical reflection. In this cultural landscape, interpretation is increasingly guided by automated systems, which diminishes the potential for sustained, reflective encoun-

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[56] Baudrillard, *Consumer Society,* 196; italics and bold in the text.

[57] Timmer et al. "Critical theory, digital media and the future of democracy," *Acta Academica.* Special issue: Critical theory, digital media and the future of democracy, Vol.57, Issue 2 (2025): 7.

[58] Ibid., 8.

ter.[59] Digital technologies mediate contested narratives, produce opposing subject positions, and mobilize deep historical traumas to uphold polarized interpretations of current events, thereby making the conflict unresolvable.[60] The conditions of the digital age affect the public sphere through algorithmic sorting, fragmentation, and the circulation of propaganda. The effects of surveillance capitalism[61] thus promote algorithmic insularity, polarization, and antagonism. Algorithms circumvent scrutiny, furnish selective information to individuals, expose users to conspiracies, ideologies, and myths through channeling, and enable the creation of inflammatory content by robots, "bad actors," and "troll farms,"[62] which threaten civil order and democratic processes.

## Symbolic Alternatives to Polarization

When we take a Baudrillardian approach to these concerns in the digital media sphere, the solution to the strict binary opposition of the digital code (and the subsequent polarization of perspectives) will not be addressed by technological innovations, regulations, or additional resources. The point lies in social relationships (or in the social logic). A social relationship (and a social logic) based on symbolic exchange is required—one that is not grounded in endless competition and antagonism among signs, but in ambivalence and reciprocity.

Bearing in mind the above, I do not agree with Christian Fuchs's[63] analysis of Baudrillard's notion of symbolic exchange, as he claims that the latter reduces communication to "money" and "commodity exchange." As Pawlett explains, however, "what is exchanged is not a

[59] Timmer et al., "Critical theory, digital media and the future of democracy," 8.

[60] Anthony Collins and Ahmad Jamal, "Say no genocide': discursive constructions of violence and identities around Gaza," *Acta Academica* Special issue: Critical theory, digital media and the future of democracy, Vol.57, Issue 2 (2025): 10.

[61] Shoshana Zuboff exposes how the democratic and utopian promise of the Internet of the 1990s has given way to the platform capitalism of monopoly corporations like google, facebook, and amazon which move towards a totalitarian model of total control via algorithms, Big Data, personalized advertising, see Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

[62] On the role of how troll farms or institutionalized groups interfere in politics see Almog Simchon, William J. Brady and Jay Van Bavel, "The Troll and the Divide: The language of online polarization," *PNAS Nexus*, Vol. 10, Issue 1 (2022).

[63] Christian Fuchs, *Critical Theory of Communication* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2016), 185.

commodity or 'value' as such but a status and role, and there remains, Baudrillard insists, 'an element of reciprocity.'"[64] In symbolic exchange, the object is not tied to a general equivalent or a code of "value"; symbolic exchange even involves the "extermination of value." For Pawlett,[65] Baudrillard's notion of symbolic exchange is a site of resistance and defiance at both the socio-economic level and the level of language and writing.

The principle of symbolic exchange, according to Baudrillard, operates at the level of words and meanings. "Poetic language" sacrifices or exterminates linguistic value; it suspends and annuls the fixed, referential meaning of word-signs. Symbolic or poetic language is a non-expressive, anti-discursive "beyond" of the economy of signification. It is immanent, not transcendent. Within the symbolic operation, words do not signify or represent; signs are cancelled or "sacrificed." The ordered, regulated separations between signifier and signified, as well as sign and referent, are dissolved into ambivalence by poetic resonances that operate on both sides of the binary opposition simultaneously.[66]

Beyond poetic and linguistic examples, in *The Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard discusses symbolic exchange in relation to feudal social systems, and he argues that the master–slave binary becomes a "symbolic relation"[67] because neither position is abstracted or autonomous and there remains "an element of reciprocity."[68] The relationship is one of domination, but not alienation or exploitation, because the slave is not objectified. Both the slave and the master are obligated to fulfill a role.

Baudrillard does not claim that the relation is fair, equal, or just. Symbolic relations are not equal, since "equality" is a property of an individualized or autonomous unit in an abstract or integrated system. Baudrillard admits that slave trading, which he defines as slavery within a market economy, offers no such element of reciprocity. Baudrillard redefines the concept of alienation to refer to the individual's self-conception as, ultimately, a source of labor. We learn to see ourselves as economic value and internalize the master–slave dialectic by becoming

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[64] Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production,* translated by Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975)*,* 95; Pawlett, *Baudrillard: Against Banality,* 35.
[65] Ibid., 66-67.
[66] Baudrillard *Symbolic Exchange and Death,* 198–205.
[67] Baudrillard *Mirror of Production*, 93.
[68] Ibid., 95; Pawlett, *Baudrillard: Against Banality,* 35.

our own master and our own slave, which becomes our psychological dynamic.[69]

Baudrillard's overall position on the rupture from primitive to modern society is that the fundamental characteristic of the latter is the loss of spontaneous, reciprocal, and symbolic human relations. Baudrillard claims that "symbolic exchange" prevailed during medieval and feudal times. At this time, signs were restricted in number, and their function was not arbitrary:

> "Each [sign] retains its full value as prohibition, and each carries with it a reciprocal obligation between castes, clans or persons."[70]

Before the Renaissance, signs (Baudrillard is referring here to signs of distinction such as clothing and power insignia) were rigidly fixed because signs were bound to a social order of caste, rank, or role: "There is no fashion in caste society, nor in a society based on rank, since assignation is absolute and there is no class mobility."[71] This is the world of "transparent signs," a "strong symbolic order."[72] "Let's be under no illusions, this order has existed, and it was a brutal hierarchy, since the sign's transparency is indissociably also its cruelty."[73] Yet the "transparency" of the symbolic order does not entail an unmediated real with direct access to truth.[74]

Overall, Baudrillard depicts symbolic exchange as a play of exchanges, challenges, and appearances with no overarching problem of "reality." Life is accepted as an illusion, with no pretense of finding the natural scientific relationship between signs and what lies beyond the ef-

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[69] In the Second Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche discusses the process of "internalization." and how the transition to a peaceful, sedentary society with its limited space leads to a devaluation of the instincts: instincts are no longer outwardly discharged, but turn inwards, and Nietzsche insists that this is the origin of "bad conscience." For Nietzsche (*On the Genealogy of Morals,* 57) the "prospect of an animal soul turning against itself" is a "puzzling, contradictory and momentous [*Zukunftvolles*]" event.

[70] Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 50.

[71] Ibid., 50.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Transparency involves "trans-appearance" and a "phenomenology of absence." Jean Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Image," translated by Paul Foss. *Art US.* Foundation of International Art Criticism. Summer. Vol. (2008): 43.

fects they create. Signs are crucially not referential and not arbitrary:

> "The arbitrariness of the sign begins when, instead of bonding two persons in an inescapable reciprocity, the signifier starts to refer to a disenchanted universe of the signified, the common denominator of the real, towards which no-one any longer has the least obligation."[75]

Arbitrary signs offer a "simulacrum of symbolic obligation."[76] They are abstract, referential presentations of it. In conceiving of "the world," on the one hand, and the representational exchange of signs on the other, world and sign are separated: the sign and the referent. The link between sign and referent is one of convention, whereby signs represent the object. In symbolic exchange, this separation is not meaningful. The consumption of sign-value is based on a meaningful "totality" that is out of reach.[77] Baudrillard claims that the consumption of sign-value becomes "a totally idealist practice."[78]

In his analysis, Christian Fuchs[79] says that Baudrillard argues "that the economy and production are material, whereas culture and consumption are … immaterial… Separating mind from matter, as Baudrillard does, cannot adequately explain the world's origin and development." According to another critic, however, the "systems" that Baudrillard discusses do "not unfold in the manner of a Platonic realm of pure, immutable Forms."[80] Baudrillard does not use the terms "system" or "code" as "rational abstractions" or "universal structures existing independently of material social reality,"[81] as Fuchs seems to suggest. The discourse of sign value is one of "unity in variety: the unique, the universal and the uniform all at once."[82] The system is part of the universe of particular things or signifiers. "The object and the sign are bound within this self-regulating cultural system."[83]

Against the strict separation between the material and the immate-

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[75] Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 50.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 224.
[78] Ibid., 223.
[79] Christian Fuchs, *Critical Theory of Communication* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2016),183.
[80] Levin, *Jean Baudrillard: A Study in Metaphysics,* 46-47.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid., 47.
[83] Ibid., 48.

rial, Baudrillard proposes symbolic exchange. Unlike modern consumption, which seeks to be universal, symbolic exchange does not involve the external manipulation and separation of abstract signs. Capitalist political economy isolates objects from their cultural meaning and subjects them to a specific (and therefore non-ambiguous) abstract code of signs, whereas symbolic exchange is ambivalent. Baudrillard argues that "primitive societies" engage in symbolic communications: the signifier, signified, and referent are all united in the act of communication. In symbolic communication, "signs include […] words that [are] attached to referents and [are] uttered in a context that holds open their possible reversal by others."

In capitalist exchange, signs are detached from lived relations, and this makes possible their endless combination and recombination in a limitless process of integration. Consumer society is characterized by differentiation and competition, which contributes to the sense that there is never enough. Signs even replace lived relation; they present a coded version of lived (symbolic) relation—one that is controlled and less threatening.

## Concluding Remarks

Baudrillard does not idealize an ambivalently charged symbolic society against the strict binary oppositions of digital society. His notion of symbolic exchange is a fictionalized, speculative, imaginary solution that serves to encourage a reevaluation of values by proposing a different perspective. Far from being a static ideal, Baudrillard's reference to symbolic exchange acts as a contrast to a (simulation) model of human relations; it resists polarizing practices, bureaucratized solicitation, and identity politics.

Hyperreality is about the play of abstract signs and manipulated appearances (and the destruction of ambivalently charged symbolic meaning). We are involved in the empty play of signs that offers only a systematically unfulfilling and endless play of pre-coded signs and prefabricated networks of appearance. The digital age thus affects the public sphere through the promotion of personalization, algorithmic insularity, and antagonism, which threaten democratic processes. Against such hyperrational, inflated systems of thought, I emphasized how Baudrillard's notions of symbolic exchange and seduction resist the obsession for positivist, technological transparency by embracing ambivalence, communion, and epistemic restraint. As opposed to a merely formal model of democracy, Baudrillard's alternatives are above all a spontaneously shared and lived reciprocal practice.

# 16. The Fiction of Growth: Degrowth as Philosophical Critique of Economic Reality

*Lukasz Chryniewicz, lukasz.chryniewicz@protonmail.com*
*(Doctoral Candidate, PhD Program in Philosophy Taught in English, University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski")*

**Abstract:** Economic growth is often presented as a neutral fact. Governments announce rising GDP as proof of their success, and the media often repeat these figures as signs of progress. Philosophy suggests otherwise. Growth works less as a description of reality and more as an idea that guides collective imagination and shapes our everyday expectations.

Kant described regulative ideas as concepts that do not mirror the world directly but help reason organize experience. Growth might be read in this way as a horizon that gives direction to public policy and social behavior. Vaihinger sharpened this view with his notion of fictionalism. He showed how abstractions function through deliberate omission, allowing a complex phenomenon to be reduced to a manageable symbol. Thus, economic indicators operate in this fashion. They simplify social life into numbers that appear objective, even when they mask existing struggles within households.

Cassirer added a symbolic dimension to this account. He argued that myths carry their own necessity and reality. Growth works as such a myth. Rising GDP is considered a symbol of prosperity, even when national wages stagnate. This legitimizes existing institutions and sustains confidence in the future. Ricoeur extended this line of thought by showing how narrative connects time with action. Such a constructed narrative convinces citizens that the nation is moving forward.

These perspectives suggest that growth is less a description of the economic life cycle and more aptly labeled a fiction that organizes collective meaning. However, it does not oppose reality. It provides a background through which societies interpret events and coordinate their actions. Such narratives and symbols transform isolated experiences into patterns that feel coherent. Institutions rely on them to justify decision-making and secure legitimacy.

This paper's aim is to set the stage for a philosophical reading of

growth. It shows how symbolic forms sustain the authority of economic measures and how ideology reinforces their hold on social imagination. Additionally, it examines this dynamic and considers how degrowth might challenge this fiction of growth.
**Keywords:** Fiction, Growth, Ideology, Degrowth, Deconstruction, Value

## I. Introduction: Fiction as a Philosophical Tool

The idea of economic growth as a "regulative fiction" appeals to a broad philosophical tradition that questions the supposed empirical objectivity of key societal constructs. Rather than neutral descriptions of reality, these constructs appear as necessary illusions. They allow people to act and think together in ways that sustain collective action through mutual understanding. The context begins with Kant's transcendental idealism, where regulative ideas mark the limits of empirical knowledge and guide reason beyond what can be known. Later, Vaihinger refined this view through his fictionalism by stressing the pragmatic use of deliberate abstractions. Cassirer added a symbolic dimension, while Ricoeur emphasized narrative. Together, these perspectives suggest that modern political economy rests on organizing principles created out of practical necessity rather than descriptive truths. Nevertheless, such principles do not mirror reality directly; they work symbolically in helping societies coordinate shared expectations and meanings.

Immanuel Kant, in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), distinguished two kinds of ideas. Some constitute objects of possible experience, while others regulate reason itself. The first mark the boundaries of knowledge. The second reach beyond empirical cognition. They do not describe reality but guide thought toward unity and completeness. Such ideas, including the philosophical concept of the unconditioned, allow thought to expand "out beyond the boundaries of all possible experience, even though only in a practical referral."[1] Kant denied speculative reason the capacity for supersensible knowledge. Yet this denial opened space for expansion. The Idea, such as that of Wisdom (*Weisheit*), serves as a "necessary unity of all possible ends."[2] It functions as

[1] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 54.
[2] Ibid., 518.

a *focus imaginarius*[3]—a point toward which all observations tend, though it lies beyond the boundaries of experience. Economic growth, understood in Kantian terms, is a regulative fiction. It is not a direct reflection of reality but a symbolic horizon that organizes social behavior and shapes collective expectations. Its authority comes from its capacity to structure collective action, not from existing empirical truth.

Vaihinger identified many constructs as abstractive (neglective) fictions, which achieve their functional power through the "deliberate omission of certain elements of reality in complicated phenomena."[4] It is worth noting that Adam Smith's political economy illustrates this paradox well, abstracting the system in order to deduce fundamental social laws.[5] Economic indicators work in a similar way, serving as symbolic tools that simplify complex social processes into a "synthetic" metric. We must bear in mind, however, that they are not natural facts. Rather, they function as constructs that allow data to be set and manipulated effectively. This way of thinking is expressed in language through the "as if" formula, which states that reality is compared to "something whose impossibility and unreality is at the same time admitted."[6] This conscious falsity does not deceive; it works as a pragmatic necessity. Vaihinger noted that categories themselves (such as substance or cause) are fundamentally "analogies" and fictions invented by thought "to bring order into the mass of sensations and to give us the illusion of being able to understand and explain."[7]

While Vaihinger dealt mainly with the logical side of utility, other scholars such as Ernst Cassirer and Paul Ricoeur stressed the cultural dimension of these fictions. They showed how collective imagination and ideas of progress are shaped.

Ernst Cassirer, in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1925), argued that myth is an "independent configuration of man's consciousness"[8] and expresses an "original direction of the human spirit."[9] It car-

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3 Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As If'*, London: Routledge, 2009 (first published 1911), 273.

4 Ibid., 19.

5 Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776.

6 Ibid., 359.

7 Ibid., 174.

8 Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Vols. I–III, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955, 335.

9 Ibid.

ries its "own mode of necessity"[10] and, consequently, its "own mode of reality."[11] The objectivity of such forms is understood in a functional sense. Economic growth, seen as a myth of prosperity, operates as a modern symbolic form that organizes collective experience. For instance, rising GDP figures are presented as proof of national success, even when everyday life remains unchanged for most citizens. Such examples show that growth serves a political role, legitimizing policy through symbols rather than through genuine improvement. Growth figures may expand through real estate speculation while ordinary families struggle to afford housing. Another irony appears when luxury shopping malls boost consumption figures. Here, the statistics suggest an increase in prosperity, yet many people still cannot afford to shop there or even buy simple new clothes elsewhere.

Extending this line of thought, Paul Ricoeur shows how symbolism connects time with narrative. He calls "emplotment" (*muthos*)[12] a "poetic making of something"[13] that answers the aporias of time. For him, emplotment is a kind of creative imitation. Narratives shape expectations, as he writes, "always already articulated by signs, rules, and norms."[14] Fictions of progress gain their force through metaphorical reference, not through direct description. They release a "radical power of reference to those aspects of our being-in-the-world that cannot be talked about directly."[15] For example, when a government announces a new highway project, it is not merely about the use of materials such as asphalt and concrete. Instead, it becomes part of a larger story of modernization or progress.[16] The aim is to convince citizens that the nation is moving forward toward a brighter future. Even though drivers con-

[10] Ibid., 441.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. I, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, 277.
[13] Ibid., 273.
[14] Ibid., 294.
[15] Ibid., 302.
[16] The Economist Impact, *Infrastructure for Good. Building for a Better World*: Key Findings Report, London: The Economist Group, 2021, https://impact.economist.com/projects/infrastructure-for-good/TEI_Deloitte_Infrastructure_for_Good_Key_Findings_Report.pdf

tinue to spend long hours in traffic[17], the narrative itself shapes how people perceive the future. Nevertheless, highways do not fully embody the ideal of progress, because owning a car still requires significant expense for fuel, insurance, and maintenance.[18] Moreover, more roads mean increased harmful gas emissions into the atmosphere.[19] This leads to additional environmental costs, which complicate the narrative of national prosperity associated with such projects.

All these thinkers show that fiction is not opposed to reality but is a way of working with it. Fictional structures help societies interpret reality and act collectively. Narratives and symbols transform events into patterns that feel coherent. Through them, institutions find a language to explain and defend their decisions, even when those choices are neither just nor necessary.

## II. Growth as Ideological Fiction

As already mentioned in this paper, economic growth is often treated by many as a neutral indicator of national well-being. Governments publish GDP data every quarter.[20] National central banks (such as the Federal Reserve[21]) raise interest rates in response to projected forecasts. Media coverage of fluctuations in various indicators—often abstract to many

[17] Benjamin Seibold, "*The Ripple Effect of Bad Driving*," The New York Times, August 26, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2010/08/26/redefining-bumper-to-bumper/the-ripple-effect-of-bad-driving

[18] Marc Fisher, "*America's Fading Car Culture*," The Washington Post, September 2, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/style/2015/09/02/americas-fading-car-culture/.

[19] Lombard Odier, *Building Trouble: How Global Road Projects Threaten Climate Targets*, Geneva: Lombard Odier, 2025, https://www.lombardodier.com/insights/2025/september/building-trouble.html.

[20] Statistics Poland, *Quarterly National Accounts: Updated GDP Estimates*, Warsaw: Statistics Poland, 2024, https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/national-accounts/quarterly-national-accounts/information-of-statistics-poland-on-the-updated-quarterly-gdp-estimate-for-1-4-quarter-1995-2023-and-1-2-quarter-2024,5,14.html.

[21] Federal Reserve, *FOMC Projections Materials*, Washington, D.C.: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, September 18, 2024, https://www.federalreserve.gov/monetarypolicy/fomcprojtabl20240918.htm

citizens—is widely broadcast as a manifestation of national prosperity.[22] At the same time, these actions serve as exemplifications of national pride, shaping the hearts and minds of citizens. From a philosophical perspective, however, growth is not an ontological fact but a narrative that societies tell about themselves.

Building on this, Louis Althusser's theory of ideology provides an additional perspective for examining the cultural authority of economic growth. In his essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Althusser asserts: "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."[23] This formulation shows that ideology goes beyond simple error. It provides a structure through which people interpret their lives and act within society, even if it conceals the fact that social arrangements are conditional and constructed.

Poland can serve as a striking example. The state allocates nearly five percent of GDP to finance defense and even plans to increase this share further.[24] Thus, the state presents military strength as a source of national pride. At the same time, the healthcare system remains underfunded and overburdened.[25] Patients often wait many years for basic medical procedures, while hospitals struggle to secure resources for effective treatment. Wealthier citizens can pay for private care, but poorer ones often do not live long enough to see their scheduled operations. Hospitals that provide care beyond official "limits" are forced to take commercial loans that are not later reimbursed from the public budget, even though they should be. Many eventually face bankruptcy.[26] Thus, the official narrative of security and progress conceals how fragile wel-

[22] Alex Eriksson & Hannah Göransson, *From Headlines to Expectations: The Impact of Economic Media Coverage on Inflation Expectations*, Jönköping University, Bachelor Thesis in Economics, 2024, https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1863182/FULLTEXT01.pdf.

[23] Louis Althusser, "*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1971, 202.

[24] Polskie Radio, "*Poland to spend 4.7% of GDP on defense in 2025: deputy PM*," October 4, 2024, https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7784/Artykul/3432045,poland-to-spend-47-of-gdp-on-defense-in-2025-deputy-pm.

[25] Poland Insight, "*Hospitals in Poland Facing Dire Financial Situation due to Rising Costs and Lack of Valuation Adjustments*," January 2, 2024, https://polandinsight.com/hospitals-in-poland-facing-dire-financial-situation-due-to-rising-costs-and-lack-of-valuation-adjustments-32671/.

[26] Ibid.

fare institutions are in Poland. Symbols of strength project stability, yet they mask the compromises shaping social life.

Furthermore, Althusser notes that "The ultimate condition of production is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production."[27] He further explains:

> The tenacious obviousnesses… are so integrated into our everyday "consciousness" that it is extremely hard, not to say almost impossible, to raise oneself to the point of view of reproduction.[28]

What follows from Althusser's insight is relatively simple. Growth is never merely a technical measure. It functions as ideology, making certain choices appear natural. In Poland, the expansion of consumer markets is celebrated as progress, while the deterioration of public healthcare remains largely invisible.[29] Reproduction occurs when conditional political decisions are absorbed into everyday assumptions and presented to the public as obligations.

When read in the context of economic growth, Althusser's argument shows that growth is not a purely technical objective. Poland's trajectory of economic transformation after 1989 illustrates this dynamic. Although these reforms were praised by economists such as Jeffrey Sachs as technical modernization[30], they produced mass unemployment and significant social insecurity.[31] Later, Poland's accession to the European Union, along with other Eastern European countries, was presented by ruling elites as a sign of great progress. However, for many families, migration abroad in search of employment became the most

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[27] Louis Althusser, "*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*," 174.

[28] Ibid., 177.

[29] Poland Insight, "*Hospitals in Poland Facing Dire…*

[30] Jeffrey Sachs, *Building a Market Economy in Poland*, Scientific American, March 1992, https://www.earth.columbia.edu/sitefiles/file/Sachs%20Writing/1992/ScientificAmerican_1992_BuildingaMarketEconomyinPoland_March1992.PDF.

[31] Michał Myck & Monika Oczkowska, "S*hocked by Therapy? Unemployment in the First Years of the Socio-Economic Transition in Poland and Its Long-Term Consequences,*" CenEA Working Paper, 2017, https://cenea.org.pl/pl/2017/01/06/shocked-by-therapy-unemployment-in-the-first-years-of-the-socio-economic-transition-in-poland-and-its-long-term-consequences/.

tangible outcome.[32] What appeared as neutral economic growth was in fact the reproduction of specific priorities and social costs concealed behind the rhetoric of progress.

This mechanism is central to ideology's operation. As Althusser observed: "Ideology never says, 'I am ideological.'"[33] It works silently, imposing what appear to be self-evident truths: "It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes… obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognize."[34]

Seen in this light, economic growth functions ideologically through what Althusser calls Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). As he writes: "It is the latter [ISAs] which largely secure the reproduction specifically of the relations of production, behind a 'shield' provided by the repressive State apparatus."[35] Growth is reproduced in schools, in the media, in political rhetoric, and even in scientific discourse. Among these, the educational apparatus plays a decisive role in mature capitalism by transmitting norms and legitimizing existing hierarchies. This is visible in curricula that highlight competitiveness and innovation, reward measurable improvement, and establish routines in the classroom that link achievement with constant progress. Students learn to associate success with productivity and expansion, while stability or redistribution are framed as signs of weakness. In this way, education does not simply transmit skills; it cultivates a mindset in which growth appears natural.[36] Moreover, this occurs not only through the transmission of skills but also through the instilling of obedience, as Althusser explains:

> "It is by an apprenticeship in a variety of know-how wrapped up in the massive inculcation of the ideology of the ruling class that the relations of production in a capitalist social formation… are largely reproduced."[37]

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[32] Jan Hagemejer & Jan Jakub Michałek, "*The Long-Term Effects of Poland's Accession to the European Union: A Literature Review,*" Studia Europejskie, 2024, https://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.ojs-doi-10_33067_SE_2_2024_5/c/articles-53678829.pdf.

[33] Louis Althusser, "*Ideology and…*, 218.

[34] Ibid., 215.

[35] Ibid., 194.

[36] Chris Rolph, "*Neoliberal metrics and a curriculum for competence*," BERA Blog, March 14, 2025, https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/neoliberal-metrics-and-a-curriculum-for-competence

[37] Louis Althusser, "*Ideology and…*, 180.

The consequence of this process is the formation of subjects who participate in their own subordination to the logic of expansion. This occurs through interpellation, in which, as Althusser explains, "The individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject…"[38] Most people, once constituted as subjects through this process, "'work,' they 'work by themselves'"[39] to sustain the existing order. We see this in everyday life, especially when citizens take satisfaction in GDP increases as collective success, even while struggling with personal debt or unstable employment conditions.[40] In this way, alternatives such as degrowth or redistribution are depoliticized. They come to appear as unthinkable or extreme ideas, largely because the ideology of growth presents itself as the only rational horizon of collective progress. This is how the system secures the "reproduction of the relations of production."[41]

In this regard, Gross Domestic Product is far from neutral. It counts certain activities, such as market production and consumption, while leaving other economic activities outside its scope. From this perspective, Marilyn Waring argued in *If Women Counted* (1990) that national accounting methods have historically reflected male priorities by treating women's contributions as invisible or secondary. In this way, the growth indicator signals what matters and what does not. The figure becomes a symbol, and the symbol becomes a target. This target shapes policy, behavior, and collective imagination; as such, it is not harmless. For example, women's unpaid labor caring for children and the elderly is not counted in GDP measurements.[42] For policymakers, it is treated as a natural condition of life and is not recognized within formal economic calculations, even though without such labor the economy would collapse. As Waring writes, "No one, it seems, is re-

[38] Ibid., 221.
[39] Ibid., 222.
[40] World Economic Forum, "*As reality and perception clash, how is the economy really doing*?" April 22, 2024, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/04/how-can-we-bridge-the-gap-between-economic-fact-and-economic-sentiment-a-new-report-sheds-light/.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Anna Fälth and Mark Blackden, "*Unpaid Care Work: Gender Equality and Poverty Reduction*," UNDP Policy Brief 01, New York: United Nations Development Programme, October 2009, https://www.weps.org/sites/default/files/media/Unpaid%20care%20work%20English.pdf

sponsible for the dismal state of economics."[43]

In his 1992 review of Waring's *If Women Counted* for the *Review of Income and Wealth*, Harry H. Postner extends her critique by situating GDP within the technical framework of the United Nations System of National Accounts (UNSNA). He argues that the exclusion of household labor and ecological costs is built into the system itself, which recognizes only monetized exchange and state productivity as economically meaningful.[44] Building on this, Postner emphasizes that disregarding such labor has political consequences. It renders women's everyday contributions invisible and helps maintain social hierarchies. He even remarks that Waring's call to measure nonmarket household labor is "entirely on the right track."[45] Here, Althusser's theory of ideology again becomes relevant. As Postner suggests, the technical language of national accounting conceals normative assumptions behind a façade of objectivity: "The 'forced consistency' elements that permeate the publicly available national accounts are at 'odds' with economic behaviour."[46]

The idea that economic growth functions as a socially effective fiction becomes clearer in the postmodern critiques of Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. Lyotard situates growth within the political mechanics of legitimation, while Baudrillard shows how the signs of growth—economic statistics above all—detach from reality and become part of a self-sustaining hyperreal system.

In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Lyotard argued that modernity depends on overarching explanatory principles, which he called "grand narratives."[47] These narratives legitimize knowledge as well as power. They promise a vision of progress and continuous expansion as a blueprint for the universal future. Because economic growth promises prosperity, it serves as a clear example: it helps institutions justify themselves and strengthens their projection of political authority. Nonetheless, Lyotard warned that such narratives simplify reality by imposing a

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[43] Marilyn Waring, *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics*, New York: Harper & Row, 1988, 92.

[44] Harry H. Postner, "*Review of If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics by Marilyn Waring*," Review of Income and Wealth 38, no. 2 (1992): 238.

[45] Ibid., 239.

[46] Ibid., 242.

[47] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979, 31-37.

single model of progress while excluding alternative paths of development. In his view, the state relies on grand narratives such as economic growth to secure legitimacy. Growth figures reassure citizens that progress is being made. As a result, citizens are discouraged from questioning the role of the state itself.[48] Without such narratives, institutional authority would be far more fragile. What grants growth its authority is not universal truth but its function as a social instrument: "A narrative is not merely a story; it is a mechanism of legitimation."[49]

From Lyotard's fragmentation of narrative we move to Baudrillard's dissolution of reality itself. Baudrillard traces how late capitalism shifted from ideology (which conceals reality) to simulation (which abolishes the reality principle altogether).[50] Economic statistics and forecasting instruments no longer measure reality; they generate it. This is the "precession of simulacra,"[51] in which the model precedes the territory: "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal."[52] Indices such as GDP or employment rates are no longer neutral quantities. They sever their link to lived reality and then present themselves as simple signs that claim to represent the real while in fact constructing their own self-referential world. As Baudrillard writes, this involves "all the signs of the real and short-circuiting all its vicissitudes."[53]

In this light, power's strategy becomes a constant reinjection of "the real." As he observes:

> "The only weapon of power, its only strategy against this defection, is to reinject the real and the referential everywhere, to persuade us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production."[54]

The obsession with growth figures and crises thus becomes a way of sustaining a fading sense of reality, while the flood of statistics deepens

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[48] Tim Besley, Chris Dann, Sacha Dray, "*The global growth slowdown is bad news for trust in government*," CEPR VoxEU, April 16, 2025, https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/global-growth-slowdown-bad-news-trust-government

[49] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition…*, 116.

[50] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

[51] Ibid., 229.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., 301.

[54] Ibid., 309.

the collapse of meaning in the media, producing "more and more information, and less and less meaning."[55]

Both Lyotard and Baudrillard show that economic growth functions as a social fiction. Growth is not a simple lie but a symbolic framework that shapes social perception and action. Its effectiveness lies precisely in the fact that it no longer depends directly on empirical reality.

## III. Degrowth as Philosophical Deconstruction

When we deliberate about degrowth, several questions arise. How does degrowth challenge the idea that economic growth is natural and inevitable? Does it simply reject development, or does it dismantle the ideological narratives and institutions that sustain the growth paradigm? Finally, can degrowth open space for new ways of imagining prosperity?

In this regard, Serge Latouche describes economic growth as a kind of secular religion. This belief is deeply present in modern societies. It is repeated with a kind of ritual confidence, treated as natural and unquestionable. Latouche argues that this principle is not based on empirical necessity but on ideology. In his view, growth is more a metaphysical narrative than an economic measure. This symbolic order gives meaning and legitimacy to modern institutions. Therefore, he questions economic rationality itself when he compares this position to atheism:

Strictly speaking, we should be talking at the theoretical level of "a-growth," in the sense in which we speak of "a-theism," rather than "de-growth." And we do indeed have to abandon a faith or a religion—that of the economy, progress and development—and reject the irrational and quasi-idolatrous cult of growth for growth's sake.[56]

Hence, degrowth is not merely another dogma within the same structure. It is a breakdown in meaning—a refusal to treat GDP as a sacred totem. In this sense, degrowth acts like a philosophical deconstruction. It dismantles the symbols and institutions that sustain the fiction of progress. For example, when some governments acclaim rising car sales as proof of prosperity, degrowth asks whether more vehicles really mean a better life for people, or whether they simply lock society into a trap of pollution and dependence on fossil fuels.

Furthermore, Jason Hickel advances the critique of economic

[55] Ibid., 329.
[56] Serge Latouche, *Farewell to Growth*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, 82.

growth by comparing it to a biological error—an example of cancer on the social body. In nature, growth has a purpose: it helps organisms develop, repair organs, or heal wounds, and then it stops. By contrast, capitalist economies chase growth as an end in itself. Growth becomes detached from ecological limits and human needs. As Hickel explains, capitalism differs because:

What makes capitalism different from most other economic systems in history is that it's organised around the imperative of constant expansion, or "growth": ever-increasing levels of industrial extraction, production and consumption, which we measure as Gross Domestic Product (GDP). […] When growth fails to stop—when cells keep replicating just for the sake of it—it's because of a coding error, like what happens with cancer. This kind of growth quickly becomes deadly.[57]

This unrestrained expansion consumes resources without limit and, in doing so, weakens the very systems on which it depends. Hickel's argument is ontological in nature, not merely moral or political. He questions the basic assumptions of modern economics by asking whether the pursuit of "more" can truly be called progress. In his view, the growth paradigm defines wealth as accumulation and simultaneously produces scarcity in order to keep itself moving.[58] The result is a situation in which the system turns existence into a commodity. This weakens social bonds and drives ecological decline.

A good example is the fast-fashion industry. It produces ever more clothing under the sign of abundance ("take, make, dispose").[59] Yet this excess creates scarcity elsewhere: it drains water supplies in India[60], exploits cheap labor in Bangladesh[61], and generates waste that is often exported to African countries and treated as a commodity[62], only to be

[57] Jason Hickel, *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World*, London: Penguin Books, 2020, 142.

[58] Ibid., 27.

[59] Fashion Revolution, "*Overcoming Overproduction*," 2023, https://www.fashionrevolution.org/overcoming-overproduction/.

[60] Earth.Org, "*Fast Fashion and Its Environmental Impact in 2025*," May 2025, https://earth.org/fast-fashions-detrimental-effect-on-the-environment/.

[61] Textile Learner, "*Fast Fashion's Global Impact on Child Labor Exploitation and Environmental Costs*," September 10, 2024, https://textilelearner.net/fast-fashions-global-impact-on-child-labor-exploitation-and-environmental-costs/

[62] Nature, "*How Africa wears the cost of unwanted fast fashion*," July 4, 2025, https://www.nature.com/articles/d44148-025-00203-4.

stockpiled indefinitely. Meanwhile, the clothes themselves are often of poor quality, designed to fall apart after a few months. This leads consumers to dispose of them quickly (as the term "fast" suggests), and corporations pressure consumers to buy more, and more often. In this way, wealth is staged while the engine of growth continues. Corporations capture profits, while the social and environmental costs of these operations fall on states and ordinary people. In the end, we pay for those costs through taxes—not only directly, but also by financing the regeneration of ecosystems and local communities damaged by such activities.[63]

The critique of economic expansion—sometimes called a regulative fiction or a symbolic construct—also appears in the work of other scholars. Two are especially important here: Ivan Illich and André Gorz. Illich and Gorz show that the pursuit of growth reduces autonomy and reshapes work.[64] It strips people of skills and of time that is genuinely their own. For them, degrowth is a project of regaining control and rebuilding collective life.

Ivan Illich, in *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), argued that industrial systems—whether owned by individuals, corporations, or the state—undermine human autonomy. He described two "watersheds"[65] in the history of tools. At first, science increases efficiency and human capability. But once an enterprise grows beyond a certain point, it "frustrates the end for which it was originally designed, and then rapidly becomes a threat to society itself."[66] Tools that exceed human control turn into instruments of domination. Illich's alternative vision is "autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment."[67] The industrial mode of production does the opposite: it reduces persons to "mere consumers"[68] as machines gain power.[69] This domination is enforced through what Illich called "radical

[63] S&P Global Sustainable1, "*Unpriced Environmental Costs: The Top Externalities of the Global Market*," July 2, 2024, https://www.spglobal.com/sustainable1/en/insights/blogs/unpriced-environmental-costs-the-top-externalities-of-the-global-market

[64] Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, New York: Harper & Row, 1973, 340.

[65] Ibid., 335.

[66] Ibid., 370.

[67] Ibid., 341.

[68] Ibid., 340.

[69] Ibid.

monopoly."[70] It arises when an industrial process takes exclusive control over meeting a basic need, excluding nonindustrial alternatives. Motor traffic creates such a monopoly by limiting the freedom to walk or cycle, making space scarce, and privileging vehicles. Such monopoly imposes compulsory consumption and restricts human autonomy.[71] Therefore, Illich warned that people lose self-reliance when they surrender their "native capacity for healing, consoling, moving, learning, building their houses, and burying their dead"[72] in exchange for professional services.

André Gorz extended this critique by showing how growth depends on inventing artificial needs and producing consumers for profitable commodities. Capitalism is no longer driven by basic needs but by the creation of a "subject for the object[73]," generating rising social costs. Gorz distinguished heteronomous work from autonomous activity.[74] Heteronomous work is activity whose "form and content are determined by technical imperatives independent of all individual choice and interpretation."[75] It is the outcome of specialization and large-scale interdependence—a system that functions like "a single, giant machine."[76] Although technology reduces the amount of labor required, capitalist structures preserve full-time paid work as the norm. This is a political measure that sustains domination, since dependence on the employer "comes to dominate their lives."[77] For Gorz, immersion in heteronomous work is alienating because it entails an "absence of individual control over the kinds of skill required and the overall purpose of collective work."[78]

Together, both thinkers argue that unlimited growth takes over technology and work alike. Illich applies this critique to institutions such

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[70] Ibid., 375.
[71] Brett J. M. Petzer, Anna J. Wieczorek & Geert P. J. Verbong, "*The legal street: a scarcity approach to urban open space in mobility transitions*," *Urban Transformations*, Vol. 3, Article 3, 2021, https://urbantransformations.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s42854-021-00018-0
[72] Ivan Illich, *Tools for…*, 383.
[73] André Gorz, *Paths to Paradise: On the Liberation from Work*, London: Pluto Press, 1985, 51.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., 60.
[78] Ibid., 51.

as schools and hospitals, which often create dependency instead of autonomy. For Gorz, moving beyond capitalism requires breaking the dominance of commodity relations, thereby reclaiming the value of people's own activities. On this view, degrowth is not about living with less. It is about freeing time and restoring human autonomy. A society built on this principle would locate wealth in time people genuinely possess: time spent learning, deepening friendship, or cultivating creativity. Thus, degrowth would be a way of reclaiming freedom, not a simple economic fix.

## IV. Economic Ontology and the Fiction of Value

The degrowth movement calls for a philosophical reexamination of the economy at its foundations. Categories such as growth, debt, money, and productivity shape reality, not the other way around. They determine what is counted, what is pursued, and what becomes central in social debate. However, these categories are not neutral. They set the horizon of collective existence and often register illness or ecological damage as if they were prosperity. Degrowth challenges this fiction and asks how wealth might be imagined in terms of autonomy.

Karl Marx argued that economic categories are historical in nature. In *Capital* he wrote: "Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values."[79] Value comes into being through labor and exchange. The energy of labor is absorbed by capital and then appears in mystified form. This process reaches into everyday life. Wages and prices rest on a shared belief that value is real, even when that belief conceals social conflict or ecological damage. A clear example can be found in the pharmaceutical industry. Rising sales increase GDP, but they also indicate the expansion of chronic illness and the pressure placed on health systems. Moreover, Marx and later Lazzarato show how these categories sustain capitalism by turning social problems into profit. Degrowth continues this critique. It questions the dominance of abstract value in contemporary discourse and opens the way to imagine wealth in terms of healthy social relations grounded in mutual responsibility.

Georg Simmel deepened the critique of value by showing how money makes abstraction absolute. In *The Philosophy of Money* he de-

[79] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes, London: Penguin Classics, 1990, 61.

scribed it as "value turned into a substance, the value of things without the things themselves."[80] Money enables exchange, but it also detaches value from qualitative experience. It reduces differences to quantities.[81] In this way, money enforces constant calculation and gives priority to objective culture over lived experience.[82] It creates distance from existence itself, as individuals are forced to step back from things and see them as objects. Simmel's analysis shows that the modern money economy is a cultural system, not merely a technical instrument.[83] It shapes how people understand themselves and how they relate to the external world.[84] Degrowth resists this tendency by restoring value to social practice as part of ordinary life. It highlights care and insists that real value belongs to social relations free from abstract calculation.

Moving from Marx to Simmel opens space to elaborate the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari. Their critique moves from abstraction to the dynamics of desire. In *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), they describe capitalism as a machine of deterritorialization.[85] In their view, desire is a productive force.[86] Capitalism decodes flows of labor and money and then reterritorializes them through abstract quantities.[87] At the same time, it arrests this movement by imposing new orders such as the state or the family.[88] In this context, scarcity is produced even in times of abundance by binding desire into dependence. But scarcity is not a natural condition. Degrowth intervenes by reclaiming desire as something that cannot be reduced to consumption or demand.

Lazzarato brings this issue into the critique of neoliberal ideology by exposing the mechanisms through which debt shapes subjectivity. In

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[80] Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby, London: Routledge, 2004, 118.
[81] Ibid., 448.
[82] Ibid., 473.
[83] Ibid., 59.
[84] Caroline Henchoz, Tristan Coste & Boris Wernli, "*Culture, money attitudes and economic outcomes*," *Swiss Journal of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 155, Article 2, 2019, https://sjes.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41937-019-0028-4.
[85] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, 22.
[86] Ibid., 223.
[87] Ibid., 33.
[88] Ibid., 264.

*The Making of the Indebted Man* (2012), Lazzarato shows that debt produces the "indebted man,"[89] whose future is scripted by obligation. Debt forces individuals to treat insecurity as an enterprise. It seizes time in advance, as individuals desperately search for options to repay debt.[90] In this way, debt binds individuals to obligations that determine their future before it arrives.[91] Debt becomes an economy of time[92], claiming the future in advance and subordinating personal choices to the reproduction of capitalist power.[93]

The student loan system in the United States illustrates this dynamic. A cruel paradox emerges: a year spent at university in pursuit of knowledge can end in a decade of repayment.[94] Many graduates cannot find work in their field and take low-paid jobs in which their knowledge remains unused.[95] Yet the loan remains for years. High interest rates make installments difficult to maintain—sometimes even higher than monthly income. The pressure affects mental health, as repayment becomes a constant burden.[96] Debt thus becomes an economy of time, holding the future hostage. It forces choices that ultimately reproduce capitalist power. This is precisely why public financing of higher education in Europe must be preserved. It represents one of the highest achievements of our civilization, and we cannot allow capitalist logic to reshape it in the way it has been reshaped in the United States.[97]

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[89] Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011, 146.

[90] Ibid. 182.

[91] Ibid., 179-181.

[92] Ibid., 182.

[93] Ibid., 186.

[94] Harvard Law School Center on the Legal Profession, "*Debt Takes a Toll*" (2023), https://clp.law.harvard.edu/knowledge-hub/magazine/issues/student-debt/debt-takes-a-toll.

[95] WorkRise Network, "*The Impact of Student Debt on the Low-Wage Workforce*" (2023), https://www.workrisenetwork.org/working-knowledge/impact-student-debt-low-wage-workforce.

[96] Right as Rain by UW Medicine, "*How Does Student Debt Impact Mental Health*?" (2023), https://rightasrain.uwmedicine.org/mind/mental-health/student-loan-debt.

[97] Philip G. Altbach, Hans de Wit, Ayenachew A. Woldegiyorgis, *Public vs. Private Participation in Higher Education: Realities and Debates*, Background Paper for the 2021/2 Global Education Monitoring Report, UNESCO, 2021, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380071.

Together, these perspectives form a continuous critique. Marx exposes the abstraction of value. Simmel shows how money detaches exchange from qualities. Deleuze and Guattari reveal the capture of desire. Lazzarato demonstrates the scripting of the future through debt. Each extends the previous, and the analysis develops progressively. Degrowth responds at this level by reshaping institutions and habits. It points toward forms of life in which value is experienced as autonomy, desire takes shape in social relations, and time is created together through collective practices. We can see this in community gardens or local cooperatives, where people share work and time together.

## V. Fiction and Degrowth

To speak of degrowth philosophically is to ask how we act within the fictions that shape economic operations and how we might resist them. As we have seen in the preceding sections, growth is more than a policy goal or statistical measure. It functions as a fiction that structures reality. Degrowth does not erase this fiction. Instead, it takes a different approach, aiming to show that fiction can open onto a space of ethical and political choice. Degrowth does not erase this fiction; rather, it renders it contestable and opens it to ethical and political choice. This becomes visible in everyday practices, for example when an employer values employees' time more than factory output. Such moments show how degrowth enters daily life. In these small acts, the obsession with growth loses authority.

Hannah Arendt's distinction between fabrication and action helps to clarify what is really at stake. In *The Human Condition* she explains that fabrication produces objects and systems: "Work provides an 'artificial' world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings."[98] Its condition is worldliness. By contrast, action is the only activity that takes place directly between people. Arendt stresses that action does not need mediation: "the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter."[99] Action is unpredictable because "the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what

[98] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 286.
[99] Ibid.

is infinitely improbable."[100] It corresponds to plurality, "to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world."[101]

Degrowth belongs to this sphere. It does not appear as a technical fix or as a designed model of reform. Rather, it takes shape as action in Arendt's sense, because it is a beginning that cannot be calculated: "something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before."[102] Degrowth arises in the shared space between people who refuse the logic of necessity. In this refusal, Arendt's definition of freedom becomes visible: "To be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to the command of another and not to be in command oneself. It meant neither to rule nor to be ruled."[103] Seen this way, degrowth takes shape as a collective interruption. It marks the moment when the fiction of growth stops feeling natural and when imagination can move in a new direction. Its strength lies in action, not in a ready-made plan. Arendt warned against such designs: "To conceive of politics as making is to ignore human plurality in theory and to coerce individuals in practice."[104] Degrowth appears here as a practice of freedom, resisting inevitability and allowing a new beginning. As Arendt wrote, "It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born."[105] Degrowth appears here as a collective practice. It is visible in everyday actions that weaken the authority of growth and create room for freedom.

An equally important force is the ethical dimension that Jean-Luc Nancy develops in his ontology of being-with. In *Being Singular Plural* (2000) he argues that existence is always coexistence and that there is no being without relation. This insight challenges the usual view of the economy, which turns relationships into transactions and measures presence only by productivity. Nancy notes:

Curiously, what happens here may be the same as what happens in the economy: "subjects" of exchange are the most rigorously co-originary; and this mutual originarity vanishes in the unequal appropriation of exchange,

[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid., 270.
[102] Ibid., 261.
[103] Ibid., 234.
[104] Ibid., 270.
[105] Ibid. 280.

such that this coexistence vanishes in a strong sense.[106]

Degrowth resists this isolation by reclaiming the ontological fact of being-with. It is not a nostalgic return to community; it is a rethinking of what it means to inhabit a world that is always shared with others. As he writes, "The world is the coexistence that puts these existences together."[107] From this perspective, degrowth rethinks economics through shared goods and cooperation, since prosperity rests in the relations that sustain life.

Nancy's notion of being-with reframes degrowth as an ethical project, because "an ontology of being-with can only be both an ethos and a praxis, identically."[108] Degrowth therefore cultivates forms of coexistence that resist commodification. To embrace it is to acknowledge that existence itself is plural, as Nancy insists: "Being is singularly plural and plurally singular."[109] Shared life must acknowledge this fact, even if, as Nancy notes, it "vanishes at the same time that it is exposed."[110]

## VI. Conclusions

This article began with a question: what does it mean to treat economic growth as a fiction? The term does not point to falsehood. It names a symbolic construction that orders how we live in time and how we ascribe value. It also provides a framework for what counts as real. The analysis proceeded through a range of thinkers. Kant and Vaihinger showed growth's regulative force. Cassirer and Ricoeur examined its reach through narrative and symbol. Althusser traced its role in reproducing ideology. Lyotard and Baudrillard pursued these themes into grand narrative and hyperreality. Together, these perspectives show that growth operates as a socially sustained fiction. It legitimizes institutions and directs a collective imagination that reinforces its dominance.

The critique then treated degrowth as a moment of reflection. Latouche spoke of growth as a secular religion. Hickel described it as pathological expansion. Illich and Gorz showed how growth penetrates individual autonomy and thereby reduces the capacity for self-

[106] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, 223.
[107] Ibid., 210.
[108] Ibid., 236.
[109] Ibid., 276.
[110] Ibid. 242.

determined action. Overall, their interpretations reshape the meaning of degrowth. It appears as a counter-fiction that rejects inevitability and opens space for imagination. Degrowth shows itself in everyday habits—for example, when neighbors share what they have with each other, or when a workplace values time over output. In these acts, growth loses authority, and freedom becomes part of ordinary life.

The ontological dimension showed that economic categories carry symbolic claims. Value, money, debt, and productivity do not function as neutral tools. Marx read value as a social relation. Simmel saw money as a form that creates distance from life. Deleuze and Guattari described capitalism as a machine that captures desire. Lazzarato argued that debt molds both subjectivity and futures. Degrowth responds to this ontology by returning value to lived experience. It seeks desire outside the closed cycle of consumption.

Finally, through Arendt and Nancy, degrowth may be understood as "action" and as "being-with." It does not appear as a fixed model, because it takes shape only when people act together and remain open to one another. In this sense, degrowth is less a finished solution than a beginning. It invites critical engagement with the fictions that organize economic policy. At the same time, degrowth creates room for autonomy and for forms of life shaped by a mixture of imagination and coexistence.

Therefore, the conclusion does not resolve the tension between critique and construction, or between fiction and reality. Philosophy must keep this tension open. Degrowth, in philosophical terms, does not mean the end of growth, nor is it simply a new narrative. It questions the symbolic structures that sustain economic relationships and opens space for other interpretations. In this way, degrowth begins as an open path.

# 17. Specters of Merit: On the Architecture of Fictional Realities in Late Capitalism

*Aleksandar Todorovski, Aleksandar.Todorovski@phls.uni-sofia.bg*
*(Doctoral Student, PhD Program in Philosophy Taught in English, University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski")*

*"There must be some way out of here," said the joker to the thief*
*"There's too much confusion, I can't get no relief*
*Businessmen, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth*
*None of them along the line know what any of it is worth"*

*"No reason to get excited," the thief, he kindly spoke*
*"There are many here among us who feel that life is but a joke*
*But you and I, we've been through that, and this is not our fate*
*So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late"*

*All Along the Watchtower, Bob Dylan,*

**Abstract:** My essay will be undertaking a critical, but also a very intimate phenomenological investigation into meritocracy as a constitutive fiction of late capitalist social ontology. I will be Drawing primarily on the philosophical frameworks of Karl Marx, Jean Baudrillard, Martin Heidegger, Lauren Berlant, Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, and make an astute and cutting argument that the enshrined meritocracy functions in the glass ivory towers of the corporate Leviathan are not merely an ideology in the classical Marxian sense, that is, as *false consciousness masking real relations of production* but as a hyperreal structure: a simulacrum that has dissolved the very distinction between its own image and the reality it purports to represent. Meritocracy is not a lie about the worldhood of economic life, but an attempt at the replacement of the worlds reality regarding the economic base and the diffusing power relations.

I will attempt to proceed through several analytic stages: an archaeological excavation of meritocratic mythology, a phenomenological account of its lived experience as what I term productive opacity, a Baudrillardian reading of its simulacral character, a structural account of its role in legitimating precarity, and a final reckoning with the political

consequences of *naming it as fiction*. Throughout, a persistent undertone haunts the argument, the intuition, impossible to fully articulate, that the meritocratic order possesses an inhuman coherence, a kind of geometrical perfection indifferent to the phenomenological implications and structural injustice it produces, as though it had been designed by an intentionality with a severe indifference to the human condition.

**Keywords:** meritocracy; fictional reality; late capitalism; hyperreality; Baudrillard; Boltanski and Chiapello; Heidegger; Berlant; productive opacity; simulacrum; precarity; cruel optimism; ideology; phenomenology; social ontology

## I. Prologue: The Architecture of the Unnameable

There is a particular variety of dread that does not announce itself once the subject is integrated into the organizational structure of a corporation. It does not arrive in the form of a recognizable and imminent threat which is tangible and palpable, such as a malevolent face, a drawn or semi-concealed weapon, or a letter bearing bad news. It rather saturates the texture of the everyday, the ordinary. It lives in the fluorescent hum of the open plan office, in the cheerful language of the performance monthly, quarterly or annual review, in the LinkedIn post exuberantly and jubilantly celebrating a colleague's promotion with forty-seven reactions shaped like hands pressed together in prayer, pulsating hearts or another symbolic significator of approval. It is the dread of a world that has organized itself with perfect efficiency around a performative and constitutive principle that turns out, upon sufficiently close philosophical examination, to be empty and that has made this emptiness invisible by filling it with the noise of a never-ending aspiration.

Meritocracy is the name of this principle, this undisputed doxaic framing which is the meta-narrative of the entirety of economic life. We could also say that meritocracy is the name we have given to an image of a principle. The distinction matters enormously, and elaborating it is the central task of this essay. My claim, stated in its boldest form, is this: *meritocracy as it operates in the social formations of late capitalism is not a description of how social rewards are actually allocated, nor a normative ideal toward which existing institutions imperfectly strive.* It is a fictional reality, a construct that has achieved, through mechanisms I will analyze in detail, the ontological status of the real. It does not describe the world, but replaces a portion of the world with itself.

The philosophical arsenal I will deploy are diverse, but they share a common teleological maneuver toward the question of how human beings come to inhabit structures of meaning that work against their interests all while resisting demystification attempts from any direction, not because subjects are insufficiently cognizant to see through them, but because the structures in question have colonized the very perceptual and evaluative ideological apparatus through which demystification might proceed. Marx identified this problem as the mystification inherent in commodity relations; Heidegger disclosed its ontological depth in the concealment that belongs to the structure of everydayness; Baudrillard pushed the analysis further by arguing that the very distinction between representation and reality has collapsed; and Berlant traced, with a precision that cuts close to the bone of contemporary political phenomenology, the affective mechanisms through which subjects remain attached to the conditions that diminish them.

I would also want to put a word about the essay's unusual affective register. Throughout the argument, the readers will encounter a recurring sense, potentially difficult to place, of something that exceeds the categories being deployed. Meritocracy, I will suggest, has an inhuman quality. Not cruel in a metaphysical, psychological or anthropological sense, and not indifferent in the way that indifferent subjects are indifferent or resigned. Something more like the indifference of a vast and intricate mechanism that processes human lives according to parameters it did not choose and cannot revise, and that would continue processing them in the same way whether any consciousness observed the process. This quality is real. Acknowledging it is part of what rigorous analysis of late capitalist social ontology requires.

We will proceed as follows: Section II will account for an archaeological excavation and interpretation of meritocratic mythology, tracing its historical formation and its structural function. Section III will develop a phenomenological analysis of how meritocracy is lived, introducing the concept of productive opacity. Section IV will sharply apply Baudrillard's theory of simulation as a razor to dissect the meritocratic order, arguing for its specifically hyperreal character. Section V will examine the structural relationship between meritocracy and precarity. Section VI takes up the question of critique and its limitations. Section VII offers a provisional conclusion from the standpoint of political philosophy.

## II. Archaeology of a Fiction: The Historical Formation of Meritocratic Mythology

### *.i The Term and Its Discontents*

The word "meritocracy" was coined by the British sociologist Michael Young in his 1958 satirical dystopia, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, as a term of derision, a name for a nightmare in which social stratification achieved an unprecedented legitimacy by grounding itself in individual cognitive capacity rather than birth, wealth, or connection.[1] Young's satire was catastrophically misread. The term migrated from his pages into policy discourse and eventually into the common vocabulary of market (and political) liberalism, where it shed its critical valence and became a straightforwardly affirmative description of a desirable social arrangement. Young lived long enough to observe this migration with horror and professed his objections as late as 2001, two years before his death.[2]

The misreading was not accidental. It indexes something structurally significant about the ideological operation of meritocratic discourse: the capacity to absorb and integrate critique, to metabolize the terms of its own negation and excrete them as affirmation. This operational capacity will concern us throughout. For now, it is sufficient to note that meritocracy, as a concept available for ideological deployment, arrives already marked by the violence of misappropriation. It is born as fiction in a doubled sense: *as an acknowledged literary invention, and as a misrepresentation that its misreaders took for description.*

### *ii.ii The Myth of the Blank Slate*

Meritocratic conception rests on a foundational myth: that socioeconomic competition can be conducted on a level field, and that the outcomes of such competition, such as the distribution of income, status, authority, and security, genuinely reflect the differential merits of competitors. This myth requires, as its enabling condition, the fiction of the blank slate: the presupposition that individuals enter competition with

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[1] Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870–2033: An Essay on Education and Equality* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958).

[2] Michael Young, "Down with Meritocracy," *The Guardian*, June 29, 2001. Young observed with characteristic irony that the term had been hijacked by precisely the managerial class he had satirized.

no structurally significant advantages or disadvantages, such that differential outcomes can be attributed to differential effort, talent, or virtue.

The empirical demolition of this presupposition is by now thoroughly accomplished. The accumulated evidence from different disciplines including, but not limited to economics, sociology, developmental psychology, and neuroscience converges on the conclusion that outcomes are overwhelmingly shaped by factors over which individuals have no control: *the income and educational level of parents, the quality of available schooling, neighborhood effects, access to social networks, the structural conditions of the labor market into which one graduates, and crucially, because its acknowledgment is so fiercely resisted, the class-marked character of evaluative categories themselves*.[3] Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital demonstrated that the very dispositions that institutional evaluation treats as evidence of individual merit, a certain ease with language and a specific vernacular, familiarity with canonical texts, particular modes of self-presentation are themselves the sedimented products of class position, transmitted through the habitus and valorized by a field whose criteria of evaluation reflect the interests of those who already possess the required capital.[4]

I have not invented warm water with the statements above. What is philosophically interesting is not that these empirical facts exist, but that their existence has been so thoroughly insulated from any practical effect on the meritocratic imaginary. The blank slate has been empirically discredited for decades. Meritocracy operates as though this discrediting had never occurred. This normative insulation is itself what requires further analysis, and it is here that the concept of fictional reality becomes indispensable.

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[3] For a comprehensive review of the empirical literature on intergenerational mobility and structural inequality, see Miles Corak, "Income Inequality, Equality of Opportunity, and Intergenerational Mobility," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 27, no. 3 (2013): 79–102; and Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality Is Better for Everyone* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

[4] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 241–58.

### *ii.iii The New Spirit and its Meritocratic Grammar*

Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's magisterial study, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, provides an essential analytical resource for understanding how meritocratic ideology achieved its contemporary form and durability.[5] Their central argument is that capitalism sustains itself not through brute coercion alone, but through the generation of normative frameworks, "spirits" that provide the participating subjects with the axiological conditioning and motivational resources to engage with its demands. The spirit of capitalism in any given era must be capable of responding to what Boltanski and Chiapello call *"artistic critique,"* the critique directed at capitalism's alienating, inauthentic, and top-down hierarchical character by absorbing the terms of that critique into a transformed and perpetual self-presentation.

The specific genius of late capitalism's spirit, as Boltanski and Chiapello document through a close reading of management literature from the 1960s to the 1990s, is to have incorporated the libertarian, neoliberal and anti-hierarchical demands of the artistic critique into a new organizational grammar: the network, the project, the portfolio, the "connector" that, while genuinely restructuring the surface forms of work, intensifies its underlying demands and further attenuates the social protections that earlier forms of labor organization had constructed.[6] Meritocracy occupies a central position in this new spirit. It provides the grammar through which the network's differential rewards are legitimized: those who thrive in the projectified, flexible, hyper-individualized labor market do so because they deserve to thrive. They have cultivated the right skills, developed the right networks, and demonstrated the right initiative. Their success is their merit made manifest.

What Boltanski and Chiapello's analysis reveals is that this meritocratic grammar is not simply imposed from above by ideological state apparatuses in the Althusserian sense. It is actively embraced, reproduced, and elaborated by the very subjects it subordinates. Workers in the network economy do not merely submit to meritocratic evaluation. They internalize its categories, apply them to themselves and their peers, and experience their own failures as evidence of personal inadequacy. The ideology does not require external enforcement because it has be-

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[5] Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005).

[6] Ibid., 57–105.

come the medium of self-understanding. This is, I will unapologetically argue, precisely the condition that makes it hyperreal in Baudrillard's sense, but we are not yet at that point in our analysis.

## III. Productive Opacity: A Phenomenology of Living Under Merit

### *iii.i The Structure of Meritocratic Experience*

*What does it feel like to live inside the meritocratic order?* The question is not rhetorical, and its phrasing is deliberate: meritocracy is not first encountered as a theory of distributive justice or a set of institutional rules, but as an affective and temporal orientation to the world—a pervasive mood that colours how one experiences effort, failure, self-worth, and the passage of time. Social science, focused on structural analysis and aggregate outcomes, can demonstrate that meritocratic promises are empirically unfounded, but it cannot disclose how those promises come to be lived as self-evident features of one's own situation. This is precisely what phenomenology can reveal. What Heidegger called *Stimmung* (mood or attunement) designates the way in which a world is always already disclosed to us through an affective tonality that precedes and conditions any explicit thematic awareness.[7] Meritocracy, I will argue, has colonised this pre-reflective stratum: it does not merely present itself as a doctrine one might accept or reject, but saturates the background mood through which the subject encounters its own possibilities—an internalised attunement of anxious striving that is felt before it is thought.

The dominant mood of meritocratic existence is, I would suggest, a peculiarly structured form of anxiety. Not the existential anxiety that Heidegger describes in *Being and Time*, the anxiety that individualizes *Dasein* by confronting it with its own groundlessness and the own most possibility of death, but rather an anxiety that systematically deflects from this groundlessness by supplying an apparently inexhaustible series of proximate concerns. In the meritocratic order, one is always already behind. There is always another credential to acquire, another skill to develop, another network to cultivate, another performance metric to

[7] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), §29–30. For the concept of Stimmung as attunement, see also Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

optimize. The horizon of sufficient merit recedes as one approach it. This recession is not accidental. It is structurally generated by a system that requires the continuous production of motivated subjects who will accept its terms.

### *iii.ii Productive Opacity and the Misrecognition of Structure*

I want to introduce the concept of *productive opacity* to name a specific phenomenological structure that the meritocratic order systematically (re)produces and exploits. *By productive opacity I mean the following: the structural determinants of one's socioeconomic situation—class position, labour-market conditions, inherited capital—are not hidden from the subject by simple ignorance or lack of information; rather, they are rendered experientially inaccessible because the interpretive categories available to the subject systematically redirect every outcome back to individual qualities such as effort, talent, or character.* The opacity is *productive* in a double sense: it produces a specific form of subjectivity—the self-optimising individual who reads success, failure, security, and precarity alike as verdicts on personal merit—and it channels the energies that might otherwise be directed toward collective transformation into an unending cycle of individual self-improvement that acquires, under late capitalism, the ritualistic character of an organised faith.

This concept has a clear genealogical relationship to Marx's concept of ideology and Bourdieu's concept of misrecognition (méconnaissance).[8] But it is intended to capture something phenomenologically more precise: not merely the false attribution of outcomes to the wrong causes, but the active shaping of perceptual and affective experience in ways that make structural analysis feel both cognitively difficult and motivationally threatening. To recognize the structural character of one's situation is, within the meritocratic order, to risk losing access to the subject's self-understanding that makes continued effort possible. Productive opacity is thus not merely an epistemic error but a maladaptive mechanism of psychic survival.

Heidegger's analysis of *das Man*, the anonymous "they" through which Dasein ordinarily understands itself and its possibilities of be-

[8] Karl Marx, "Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), in Marx-Engels Collected Works, vol. 29 (New York: International Publishers, 1987); Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 52–65.

coming, is relevant here, though it must be deployed critically.[9] *Das Man*, for Heidegger, is the mode of average everydayness in which Dasein takes over its own self-understanding from the public interpretations of the world circulating in the social field. Meritocracy functions as a powerful configuration of *das Man*: it provides the shared interpretive vocabulary through which individuals understand their own position, possibilities, and worth. But it does so in a way that systematically misaligns this vocabulary with the actual structure of the situation. *Das Man*, in its meritocratic configuration, speaks the language of individual agency and desert while presiding over a world shaped by structural forces that individual agency cannot meaningfully address.

### *iii.iii The Cruel Optimism of Meritocratic Attachment*

Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism provides a further illumination of the affective structure of meritocratic life.[10] For Berlant, an attachment is cruelly optimistic when the object of desire, the thing toward which one's life is organized and one's energies directed, itself constitutes an obstacle to the flourishing it promises. The classic example in Berlant's analysis is the *"good life"* fantasy that organizes so much ordinary aspiration in American life (*and as the Rammstein song claims, "we are all living in America"*): the job, the house, the family, the accumulated security that is supposed to constitute a flourishing life. This fantasy, Berlant argues, has become cruelly optimistic under the structural conditions of late capitalism: the precarious labor market, the financialized housing market, and the attrition of social provision have made the fantasy practically unrealizable for a large portion of the population, yet the fantasy continues to organize affective life and foreclose the development of alternative orientations.

Meritocracy is precisely such a fantasy in Berlant's sense. It promises that effort, talent, and virtue will be rewarded, that the connection between merit and outcome is real and reliable. This promise organizes the life projects of millions of subjects who sacrifice present comfort, foreclose alternative possibilities, and endure the indignities of an authoritarian hierarchical order in exchange for a future payoff that the structure of the system makes

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[9] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §27. For a critical appropriation of das Man for social theory, see *Herbert Dreyfus, Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, Division I (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 143–62.

[10] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

systematically unlikely to materialize. The cruelty of the attachment is that abandoning it feels like abandoning the self, because the self has been constituted through the attachment. To cease to believe in meritocracy is not merely to revise a political opinion, it is to face the possibility that one's suffering has been for nothing, that the sacrifices made in the name of a promised future were made to a god that was never there.

There is something here that exceeds the ordinary categories of political analysis. The meritocratic promise is not merely a lie in the sense that it says something false about the world. It is a lie that has been woven into the structure of the self, such that its exposure threatens not merely belief but an identity. This is the affective depth of productive opacity: the subject has an investment in not seeing that makes seeing not merely difficult but dangerous.

## IV. The Hyperreal Order of Merit: Baudrillard and the Collapse of Reference

### *iv.i Simulation and the Four Phases of the Image*

Jean Baudrillard's account of simulation, developed most fully in *Simulacra and Simulation,* provides the theoretical framework that most precisely captures the ontological status of meritocracy in late capitalism.[11] Baudrillard proposes that the image and, by extension, any representation, pass through *four* successive phases in its relationship to reality. In the first phase, the image is a faithful copy of a real referent. In the second, it masks and distorts a basic reality. In the third, it masks the absence of a basic reality. In the fourth phase, Baudrillard associates the image with late capitalism~~,~~; *it bears no relation to any reality whatsoever, having become its own pure simulacrum*.[12]

Meritocracy, in the philosophical case I make, has passed through all four phases and currently inhabits the fourth. At its historical origin, the meritocratic ideal may have had some referential content, some actual and tangible correspondence with social reality in specific institutional contexts where differential effort and ability genuinely tracked differential outcomes. This corresponds to Baudrillard's first phase. Dur-

[11] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
[12] Ibid., 1–7.

ing the twentieth century, meritocratic discourse masked the basic reality of structural inequality while pretending to describe a neutral allocation mechanism, representing this second phase of (de)volution. As the structural evidence against meritocracy accumulated and became widely evident, the discourse shifted into a mode of masking the absence of its own referent, the third phase, in which the language of merit continued to circulate even as it became increasingly detached from any empirical correspondence. And now, in the fully developed form of late capitalist meritocracy, we find ourselves in the fourth phase. The discourse of merit no longer refers to any reality, nor does it mask a reality, nor even an absence. *It simply is*. It has become the social real.

### *iv.ii The Hyperreal and the Foreclosure of Critique*

The specific power of the hyperreal, as Baudrillard analyzes it, is that it forecloses critique by making the very category of a reality against which it might be measured inaccessible. The classical mode of ideological critique, Marxian demystification, operates by revealing the gap between representation and reality. It shows that what appears to be natural is in fact historical, that what appears to be universal is in fact, that what appears to be just is in fact the expression of class interest. This critique requires a reality to appeal to a factual order of social relations that ideology distorts and that analysis can recover.

But if meritocracy has become hyperreal, this critical strategy is unavailable. There is no reality of individual merit to which the ideology of meritocracy could be contrasted as a distortion. There is no neutral observation point from which the gap between the image and the real could be perceived. The image has colonized the real so thoroughly that the distinction between them is no longer operative. What would it even mean to say that merit is "really" absent from a social allocation process, if the category of merit has itself become the criterion by which the process is organized and experienced? The hyperreal is impervious to demystification, not because it is too powerful to be challenged, but because there is nothing behind it to be revealed.[13]

[13] For the political implications of this impasse, see also Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), especially chapters 1–2, where a comparable but structurally distinct account is given through the Lacanian concept of ideological fantasy.

This is the specific horror, and there is no less appropriate word of meritocracy's hyperreal character. Classical ideology at least pointed toward something. It was a false description of real relations. One could, in principle, point to those relations and show the ideological falsity. The hyperreal image points to nothing. It is its own ground. And it organizes with extraordinary efficiency, with a kind of geometrical and overall mathematical modelling precision the lives of millions who are participating in it, whose phenomenology and its quite often existential and clinical symptomatology, serves as evidence of their own inadequacy, and who would continue to participate even if every empirical fact about social mobility and structural inequality were made available to them, because the facts would be processed through evaluative fragmented epistemic categories that have themselves been constituted by the hyperreal order.

### *iv.iii The Obverse: The Deserving and the Undeserving*

The hyperreal meritocracy necessarily generates its own shadow ontology: *the category of the undeserving*. If the meritocratic order is real, if outcomes genuinely track merit, then those who fare poorly must have fared poorly for reasons internal to themselves. The precarious worker, the unemployed, the poor: all these typizations are produced by the meritocratic imaginary not merely as losers in a neutral competition, but as bearers of a deficit of merit that their outcomes reveal. The social construction of the *"undeserving poor,"* ~~a~~ *" a* category whose genealogy in Anglo-American political discourse is long and well-documented[14], is not an accidental feature of meritocratic ideology but its structural necessity. The hyperreal system requires subjects who confirm it through their failure as surely as it requires subjects who confirm it through their success.

What is philosophically striking about this *shadow ontology* is the affective investment it attracts from those who have internalized the meritocratic imaginary. The contempt directed at the perceived non-meritorious is not simply a political opinion. It is an affective requirement of a self that has constituted its own worth through the meritocratic system. To acknowledge that the *"undeserving"* are structurally pro-

[14] For the political implications of this impasse, see also Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), especially chapters 1–2, where a comparable but structurally distinct account is given through the Lacanian concept of ideological fantasy.

duced is to acknowledge that one's own worth is structurally produced, and this acknowledgment threatens the entire ideological apparatus of meritocratic self-construction. Contempt is thus, in part, a form of self-defense: an expulsion of the threatening recognition that one is, oneself, an effect of conditions rather than a cause of outcomes.

## V. Meritocracy and the Architecture of Precarity

### *v.i The New Economy and its Subjects*

The relationship between meritocratic ideology and economic precarity is not contingent. *It is structural*. The specific form of precarity that characterizes late capitalist labor markets (I*f we can call them that at all*) characterized by short-term contracts, portfolio careers, gig work, the dissolution of long-term employment relationships, and the transfer of economic risk from firms and states to individual subjects[15] requires, as its ideological condition of possibility, a framework that attributes outcomes to individual characteristics rather than market structures. Meritocracy provides this framework. It is not merely that meritocracy is used to justify precarity after the fact; it is that the normative grammar of meritocracy was elaborated in conjunction with the organizational transformation of capitalism, as Boltanski and Chiapello's historical analysis demonstrates.

The *"flexible"* economy needs flexible subjects, that is subjects who will accept the dissolution of stable employment, the multiplication of performance evaluations, the demand for continuous self-improvement and self-marketing as normal features of an ever-increasing competitive landscape that rewards excellence and appropriately penalizes inadequacy. Meritocracy supplies the normative framework that makes these demands legible as fair. The precarious worker who cannot find stable employment is invited to understand this not as evidence of a structural failure of the labor market but as a signal to invest further in their own human capital, to develop new skills, to become more competitive, and to better differentiate their personal brand. The solution to the structural problem of precarity is always, within the meritocratic imaginary, the individual solution of becoming more meritorious.

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[15] Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

### *v.ii The Self as Capital and its Existential Costs*

The injunction to become more meritorious takes a specific form in late capitalism: it requires the construction of the self as a form of capital, which is what Michel Foucault, in his lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics*, analyzed as the neoliberal conception of *homo oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of the self.[16] The Foucauldian analysis of neoliberal governmentality converges here with the phenomenological account developed in the previous section. The subject interpellated by the meritocratic order is not merely asked to perform well, it is asked to understand itself as a project of human capital investment whose value is continuously assessed by the market. This understanding colonizes domains of life that are not, in any direct sense, economic: intimate relationships, leisure activities, and even therapeutic practices are drawn into the orbit of meritocratic self-construction and evaluated in terms of their contribution to personal development and competitive positioning.

The existential costs of this colonization are substantial. Heidegger's analysis of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) — the mode of existence in which Dasein owns its own possibilities rather than merely inheriting them from *das Man* provides us with a useful critical reference point, though one that must be deployed with full awareness of its limitations.[17] The subject constituted by meritocratic self-capitalism is, in Heidegger's terms, radically inauthentic: it takes over its own possibilities from a social field that has pre-specified what counts as valuable, what counts as success, and what kind of self is worth being. The language of individual development and personal merit is, paradoxically, the language through which a profound heteronomy is maintained: the subject believes it is freely developing itself when it is in fact conforming to a template produced by the requirements of capital accumulation.

This is not to say that all striving, all development, all cultivation of excellence is reducible to the alienated self-valorization that the meritocratic

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[16] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), especially lectures 9–12.

[17] For a balanced critical appropriation of Heidegger's concept of authenticity, see Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). Taylor's analysis is more sympathetic to the authentic ideal than the argument developed here, but his account of its distortions under modern conditions is directly relevant.

order demands. The critical move is *not to* condemn effort but to insist on the distinction between effort as an expression of genuine care for possibilities that matter to one as a particular existing being, and effort as the anxious response to a competitive pressure that imposes its categories of value from without. The meritocratic order systematically confuses the two, deliberately. It colonizes the vocabulary of vocation, calling, and authentic self-realization and deploys these terms in the service of an imperative that is, at bottom, the imperative to remain competitive in a labor market structured by forces entirely indifferent to any individual's flourishing.

### *v.iii The Spatial and Temporal Architecture of Merit*

The meritocratic order also has a specific spatial and temporal architecture that deserves analysis. Spatially, it is organized around what we might call *zones of hypermeritocratic concentration*: the global cities and concrete hellscapes of New York, London, Zurich, Singapore, and Hong Kong, in which the material rewards of the meritocratic order are most densely concentrated and most visibly displayed. These zones function as attractors in the meritocratic geography: they draw the "talented" from the periphery and organize the aspirational geography of the globally mobile professional class. Their existence simultaneously produces and confirms the meritocratic narrative: here, concentrated in these luminous centers, is the proof that merit leads to reward.

What is ridiculously obscured by this spatial arrangement is the relationship between the meritocratic centers and their peripheries, not merely economic peripheries but the vast supply chains of labor, resource extraction, and manufactured goods that make the *"knowledge economy"* of the meritocratic core possible. The financialized, credential-intensive labor of the global city rests on a material infrastructure whose workers are entirely outside the meritocratic imaginary, or rather, are inside it only as confirmed non-meritorious: the warehouse worker, the delivery driver, the care worker, the factory operative. These figures are necessary to the meritocratic order not merely economically but ontologically, they provide the contrast against which the meritorious subject defines itself.

Temporally, the meritocratic order is organized around what might be called the deferral structure: the systematic postponement of reward, flourishing, and rest to a future that is perpetually receding. The student defers gratification in exchange for credentials, the entry-level worker defers in exchange for promotion, the mid-career professional defers in

exchange for security. At each stage, the payoff is projected into a future that, when it arrives, reveals itself to be a new platform for further deferral. Berlant's analysis of *"slow death,"* the gradual attrition of life under conditions of structural impossibility, names the temporal experience of this deferral structure from the perspective of those for whom the promised future never arrives.[18]

## VI. The Limits of Critique: Why Knowing Does Not Suffice

### *vi.i The Paradox of Reflexive Captivity*

A persistent difficulty confronts any critical analysis of meritocracy as a fictional reality: the analysis is inevitably conducted by subjects who are themselves embedded in the meritocratic order and who deploy, in their critique (in many cases, an attempt thereof), capacities and credentials that the order has produced and validated. The philosopher who demystifies meritocracy does so from a position of intellectual distinction that is itself, within the meritocratic imaginary, a form of merit. This is not merely an *ad hominem* problem or a question of hypocrisy. It is a structural feature of what Bourdieu called the scholastic point of view, the detached, contemplative, critical position that certain institutional configurations make possible and that is itself a product of the very system it purports to analyze.[19]

The reflexive captivity of critique, its entanglement in the conditions it criticizes, does not, of course, invalidate the critique. But it should prevent us from imagining that intellectual demystification, however thorough and rigorous, is itself sufficient to produce any transformation in the structures it analyzes. This point, which Marxist theory has grappled with since at least the debate between the young Marx and the Young Hegelians, takes a specific form in relation to the hyperreal. If meritocracy is a classical ideology, a false representation of a real state of affairs, then correct representation might, in principle, correct it. But if it is a hyperreal structure that has colonized the very categories through which reality is perceived, then correct representation cannot reach it, because it operates at a level that precedes and conditions representation.

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[18] Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," Critical Inquiry 33, no. 4 (2007): 754–80.

[19] Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 1–34.

### *vi.ii What the Critical Gesture Can and Cannot Accomplish*

What, then, can my or another critique do? I want to be precise about the limitations of my analysis, because imprecision generates false hope, and false hope is, as we have seen, itself a mechanism of the meritocratic order's reproduction. What my (attempt) critique can accomplish is the following: *it can render explicit the structure of productive opacity, making the mechanisms by which the meritocratic order achieves its lived naturalness available for inspection*. It can map the genealogy of meritocratic categories, showing their historical contingency and the specific configurations of power that their naturalization served. It can articulate the affective structure of meritocratic attachment, providing vocabulary for the experience of those who sense that something is wrong with the order they live under but lack the conceptual resources to specify the wrong.

What my critique cannot do, or rather, what it cannot accomplish alone, is dissolve the hyperreal order by demonstrating its fictional character. The demonstration is necessary but not sufficient. As Baudrillard himself acknowledged, the strategy of revelation is a strategy that the system has already incorporated. It processes critique as one more form of intellectual production, assigns it a market value, rewards those who produce it with the distinctions of the meritocratic field of cultural production, and continues exactly as before.[20] Someone like myself who publishes an ambitious critique of meritocracy advances his studies through the exercise of what the system will read as merit. The system is not embarrassed by this. It is constituted to absorb it.

### *vi.iii On the Persistence of the Inhuman*

There is a quality of the meritocratic order that resists comprehension through purely sociological or political categories, suggesting something those categories cannot fully capture. This quality is what I have been calling its inhuman character, that is, its capacity to process human lives with a precision and efficiency that no human intention could produce or sustain, and that seems to operate according to a logic orthogonal to

[20] Baudrillard's most explicit treatment of the system's capacity to absorb critique appears in *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Sage, 1998), and in the later work *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993).

human flourishing. Baudrillard touches on this in his description of the system's *"divine indifference" its* capacity to absorb everything, including its own critique, and to continue.[21]

The persistence of the inhuman, the sense that one is dealing with something that exceeds the categories of human agency and human intention, is not, I want to be careful to say, a mystification. It is a real feature of complex socio-economic systems operating at scales that exceed any individual's or institution's capacity to oversee or direct. The meritocratic order is inhuman not because it is the product of supernatural design, but because it is the emergent property of billions of individual decisions, institutional arrangements, technological configurations, and normative frameworks that have crystallized, over decades, into something that no one chose and that no one, acting individually, can change. It confronts each of us with what Sartre called the *practico-inert*: the sedimented result of past praxis that presents itself to current practice as the fixed character of the world.[22]

Acknowledging the practico-inert character of the meritocratic order is important for two reasons. First, it resists the voluntarist fantasy that individual refusal or individual insight can dissolve the structure. One does not exit the meritocratic order by simply refusing to believe in it, any more than one exits the weather by refusing to believe in meteorology. The structure will continue to evaluate, rank, reward, and punish, regardless of one's personal attitude toward its legitimacy. Second, and this is more uncomfortable, it suggests that the inhuman quality of the system is not contingent on any particular actor's malevolence, which means that the identification and removal of malevolent actors would not, in itself, change the system. There is no cabal, no inner circle, no group of sinister architects. The system's designers are themselves its products.

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[21] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 159–64.

[22] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso, 2004), 79–168. The concept of the practico-inert is central to Sartre's social ontology and designates the way in which past human praxis confronts current praxis as inert necessity.

## VII. Political Consequences: On Living Within the Uncanny

### *vii.i The Uncanny Dimension of Late Capitalism*

Freud's concept of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), the sense of something simultaneously familiar and strange, of an encounter with something one knows but cannot place, a recognition that carries a charge of dread rather than comfort[23] applies to the meritocratic order with some precision. It is familiar because it is the air we breathe, the language we speak when we talk about ourselves and each other, the framework within which we have constituted our self-understanding. It is strange because, upon reflection, it discloses itself as something other than what it claimed to be not a neutral allocation mechanism but a fictional structure that organizes suffering on a vast scale while presenting that suffering as evidence of individual inadequacy.

The uncanny quality of this recognition, the dread that attaches to the moment when the familiar reveals its strangeness, is not a sign that the recognition is incorrect. It is the appropriate affective response to an accurate perception. The feeling of wrongness that many subjects carry about the world they inhabit, which meritocratic discourse perpetually recruits back into projects of individual improvement, may be a more reliable guide to social reality than the cheerful narratives of aspiration and reward that currently dominate public culture. Attending to this wrongness, resisting the imperative to sublimate it into motivation, is itself a form of political practice.

### *vii.ii What Remains: The Work of Collective Reconstruction*

I want to avoid, in conclusion, the triad temptations of apocalypticism, fatal eschatology and false consolation. The analysis I have conducted does not lead to the conclusion that the meritocratic order is permanent or that resistance to it is futile. Complex social structures are historical. They have conditions of possibility that are themselves historical, but they can be changed, although the conditions under which they can be changed are not freely chosen by any individual or movement. The *practico inert* is not eternal inertia. It is the sedimented result of past collective action, which means it is,

[23] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 17 (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 217–56.

in principle, open to reconstitution by future collective action.

What the analysis does suggest is that the form of opposition that is most necessary is not the form that the system most readily absorbs: individual optimization, meritocratic success within the existing order, the use of one's accumulated cultural capital to critique cultural capital from within. What is required, and what the system systematically impedes, is the reconstruction of collective forms of life that provide alternatives to meritocratic self-understanding. This means not only the political project of rebuilding labor and social institutions capable of providing security outside the meritocratic competition, but the more intimate project of reconstituting the forms of mutual recognition through which human worth is experienced and affirmed.

Heidegger's concept of *Mitsein* (being with) names the ontological dimension of this project.[24] *Dasein* is always already constituted through its relations with others. There is no solitary, atomic subject that could then choose to enter social relations. The question is always which forms of being with are actually operative in a given historical formation. The meritocratic order produces a specific form of being-with, the competitive being-with of rivals in a zero-sum field of distinction that systematically obscures the more fundamental forms of mutual dependence and care on which any social life, including the most competitive, actually rests.

The political project of opposition to the meritocratic order must include the work of rendering these more fundamental forms visible and cultivating them as the basis of alternative social arrangements.

### *vii.iii On the Courage and Determination Required*

This is difficult. It requires a kind of courage that is not the courage celebrated by the meritocratic order, the courage to compete, to take risks in the service of individual advancement, to persist in the face of setbacks. It requires, rather, the courage to relinquish the meritocratic self-understanding that structures one's sense of personal worth, to acknowledge the structural character of one's situation without thereby abdicating responsibility to act, and to invest in collective projects whose outcomes are uncertain and whose rewards are not individual. It requires

[24] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §26. For a critical feminist reading of Mitsein and its political implications, see Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

what one might call courage of the common, the willingness to bet on forms of solidarity and mutual recognition that the dominant normative treats as naïve, inefficient, or merely sentimental.

The fictional reality of meritocracy will not be dissolved by philosophical argument alone. But philosophical argument can clarify what is at stake, name the mechanisms through which the fiction reproduces itself, and articulate the contours of what a different social ontology might look like. In a world organized by the hyperreal, even this clarificatory work has value, not because it will change the system directly, but because it refuses the productive opacity on which the system depends, and insists, in the face of that refusal, on the possibility of seeing clearly.

## VIII. Conclusion: The Fiction and the Real

Meritocracy is a fiction that has achieved the status of the real. It does not describe the world; it has replaced a portion of the world with a simulacrum so thoroughly elaborated that the distinction between the image and what it displaces is no longer, in ordinary experience, available. It produces subjects who understand their own worth through its categories, who experience structural outcomes as personal verdicts, and who invest their emotional lives in promises whose structural conditions of fulfillment have been systematically dismantled.

The analysis I have pursued traces this fictional structure through its historical formation (Young, Boltanski and Chiapello), its phenomenological character (Heidegger, Berlant), its ontological status (Baudrillard), its structural function (Marx, Bourdieu, Foucault), and its political implications. The theoretical resources are diverse, but the diagnosis is convergent: the meritocratic order is a mode of social organization that simultaneously legitimates radical inequality, forecloses structural critique, produces individualized self-blame as the dominant response to collective conditions, and perpetuates itself through the affective investments of its own victims.

None of these analyses is, by itself, politically sufficient. The gap between understanding a structure and transforming it is enormous, and the analysis itself has acknowledged the mechanisms by which the structure absorbs critique. But understanding is not nothing. In a social order characterized by productive opacity, the capacity to name the mechanisms of one's own mystification is a minimal condition of political subjectivity. It does not guarantee anything. It is simply where one must begin.

There is, finally, a sense in which the analysis resists its own conclusion. The meritocratic order is so thoroughly constitutive of the philosophical domains in which this essay is written and will be read that no position outside it is available from which to pronounce its final judgment. My essay is itself a performance of a certain kind of attempted distinction, conducted within a credentialing institution, evaluated according to criteria of intellectual merit. To pretend otherwise would be dishonest. What can be said, honestly, is that the analysis attempts to be reflexive about this entanglement, to be clear-eyed about the conditions of its own production without thereby surrendering the critical content that those conditions have also made possible.

The architecture of the fictional real is elaborate. It has been constructed over decades by millions of actors who did not, individually, choose it. It is maintained by billions of daily acts of interpretation and evaluation conducted by subjects who are, for the most part, simply trying to survive within its terms. It is inhuman in the precise sense we have analyzed, for it exceeds any individual intention, any institutional design, any malevolent conspiracy. It simply is, with the terrible impassivity of a geological formation. And yet, because it is historical, because it was made, however anonymously, it can, in principle, be unmade. The conditions of that unmaking are not available to philosophical analysis alone. But philosophical analysis can at least name what needs to be unmade. My essay has attempted to do that, however inadequately, and with full awareness that the attempt is itself a performance within the order it criticizes.

The phenomenological dread that meritocracy produces is real. The suffering it organizes is real. The fiction that legitimates suffering is not. Holding these three propositions together without collapsing the first two into the third, or the third into the first two, is, I would suggest, the philosophical minimum that honesty about the human condition currently demands.

# IV. FICTIONAL REALITY: PRO AND CONTRA THE SACRED REALM

## 18. Ashen Worlds: The Poetics of Apocalypse in Climate Fiction

*Todor P. Todorov, todorpt@phls.uni-sofia.bg*
*(Assoc. Professor, Dr., Department of History of Philosophy, University Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski)*

**Abstract:** This text explores the transformation of apocalyptic imagination from Pauline eschatology to contemporary climate fiction. Beginning with the Christian "already/not yet" tension that shaped Western historical consciousness, it argues that modernity secularized but did not abandon eschatological urgency. After the collapse of revolutionary and utopian horizons in the late twentieth century, transcendence gives way to catastrophe and survivalism. The paper reads climate fiction as a poetics of negative apocalypse, where salvation is replaced by endurance amid ecological and political breakdown. Taking as examples *The Drowned World*, *The Road*, *Energan 22*, and *The Disaster Tourist*, it shows how literary forms register humanity's finitude in the Anthropocene, staging apocalypse as geological regression, sudden annihilation, toxic suffocation, or commodified spectacle.

**Keywords:** apocalypse; climate fiction (cli-fi); eschatology; Anthropocene; dystopia; survivalism; poetics of catastrophe

We are all Paulines, we dream of the end. Since Paul, the experience of history in the West has become eschatological.[1] And in a very special way. Christians were the witnesses-to-be of the end. Thinking the apocalypse has always involved a poetics of imminence. The end of times was a question of utmost urgency. History was thought to be rushing toward a decisive and imminent conclusion. Christ's death and resurrection had already marked the end of this age (*ὁ αἰὼν οὗτος*) and thus inaugurated

[1] Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 58-65

the coming one (*ὁ μέλλων αἰών*), but they had not yet completed it. So, believers lived in an already/not yet tension. This undecidedness between what is already there and what is to come was defining for the apocalyptic imaginary. It is a paradoxical, in-between condition of urgent expectation . All the omens and signs are revealed as if the end already unfolds here and now in a ghostly fashion. What is to come is experienced in advance. The new age has arrived; it just awaits fulfillment. Formally we have crossed the line, the rest is a matter of time. That is to say the decisive moment (*καιρός*) already lies in the past although chronologically speaking we are still waiting for its effects to be accomplished. We are imminently expecting what is already with us. "*The ends of the ages have come upon us*" (1 Cor 10:11).[2] It is a mode of anticipation that is not contemplating the future, but is living within the event. The end has already come upon us. It is to be expected within this same generation: "*We who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord…*" (1 Thess 4:15).[3] The eschatological imaginary was molded in a high-speed velocity form.

In such terms Modernity, which we are used to think as dramatically increasing the pace of time, can be thought of as a slowing down. The Modern Age presented history as immanence. The progressist imaginary was propelled by a constant movement, a perpetual stepping into the future. Utopias became the engines of this frantic race through history and as such they possessed transcendental purpose.[4] They were always already there, shaping the imagination and experience of history, and yet they were never to arrive as a matter of fact. Factual life does not consist in experiencing utopias, but it is structurally dependent on them. This tension and postponement are precisely how historicity becomes possible. But there is one huge difference between modern utopian finitude of history and Paulinian eschatology. Progress needs time, annihilation and rupture are instantaneous. Transcendence is sudden-

[2] 1 Cor 10:11, *New American Standard Bible* (1995): "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come."

[3] 1 Thess 4:15, *New American Standard Bible* (1995): "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep."

[4] Cf. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, Paul Knight (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1986).

ness, while secularity is time-consuming. The former is an interfering break, the latter —a continuity. Yet only in the register of the apocalypse and up to a certain moment. It seems that moment has passed somewhere in the middle of the twentieth century. We are all Paulines again. In expectation of an imminent catastrophe. The end has already come upon us.

But Modernity was also captivated by the end. According to Walter Benjamin and Jacob Taubes[5] modern thought never outgrew theology in terms of eschatological thinking. It only secularized its meaning. The urgency was still there, made possible by the insistence that the end of the current world order is imminent and transformative. The eschaton, far from being a distant end or a religious speculation, is present as a horizon that gives historical action its meaning. It is precisely the gap between what is already there and what is to come, the strange in-betweenness that is only to be experienced as a coincidence, an overlapping of present and future, event and contingency, that opens up the messianic now-time (*Jetztzeit*) —a charged present capable of rupture.[6] This is the necessity of the revolutionary moment which will abruptly and possibly violently overthrow the current order. It is the ultimate utopia of a hidden transcendence - the transfiguration of all social, political and cultural realities. An immanent movement of a grandiose turn. But what happens to the so-called "now-time" after the death of revolution? The revolution (even as a metaphor) was rendered impossible by the social imaginary sometime after the end of the 1960s.[7] While the countercultures of that famous decade went as far as to imagine the transformation of life and consciousness themselves, we are caught now in the paradox of urgency and futility. Being in the condition of emergency and need for change and at the same time being aware of its unattainability. The situation we are facing in terms of environment, according

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5 Cf. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 253–264; Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology* (Stanford, 2009), 1–10; Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford, 2004).

6 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History", *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 395.

7 Cf. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979).

to Yuval Noah Harari[8], resembles the movie *Speed* where a bus is driving with 50 mph—if it slows down, it will explode, yet if it keeps the pace, it will crash anyway.

Of course, Modernity did imagine an apocalypse in slow motion, as a gradual entropy, not explosion.[9] But then again, the atomic bomb, the nuclear meltdown, the rapid spread of a virus, the occurrence of a cosmic event, the accelerated global warming and mass pollution, the use of chemical or biological weapons are all set to trigger irreversible effects in an instant. Suddenness returned. Once more we are facing transcendence. Despair is creeping, closing in on us, as we realize the point of no return has been passed —the end is now upon us. Genuine apocalyptic imaginaries come back to us.

And they always belonged to the realm of poetics. The founding text that flooded the Western imagination with apocalyptic energies was The Book of Revelation, the Apocalypse of John. It is a book of symbolic allegory and sublime terror. The book employs a poetic narrative to reveal a vision, a prophecy. As if in a dream, saturated with horrifying imagery, the last of days are revealed. "*Write in a book what you see*" (Revelation 1:11).[10] The striking epiphany is a literary gift. The excessive vision was always meant to become a book. It belongs by purpose to the field of literature. What is more - it engenders a literary device, if not a whole literary genre. Thinking of the end means engaging in the poetics of apocalypse. So, the understanding of sudden finitude is defined by literary meanings. The apocalyptic imaginary is driven by poetic forms. The history of the end is a history of literature.

Now, as we have seen, after the end of messianism and revolutionism no space is left for salvation. No new heaven and no new earth are possible, there will be no transfiguration. This dying planet is our only home. This is how messianism turns into survivalism. And indeed, since the 60's it is all about survival strategies. *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (1969) by R. Buckminster Fuller[11] presents a rather discour-

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[8] A discussion with Yuval Noah Harari and Kohei Saito at Frankfurt Book Fair, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, October 16, 2024.

[9] Andrew McMurry, "The Slow Apocalypse: A Gradualistic Theory of the World's Demise," *Postmodern Culture* 9, no. 1 (1999), 1–22.

[10] Revelation 1:11, *New American Standard Bible* (1995).

[11] R. Buckminster Fuller, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969).

aging situation: we find ourselves aboard on planet Earth as if on a spaceship, with limited resources, and with no operation manual or any guide to tell us what to do. We are left on our own to find out how to survive. No escape is possible since we are alone in the void, surrounded by dangerous externalities. While commenting on the book, Peter Sloterdijk traces its logic to the true conception of the human condition as life-and-death autodidacticism:[12] learn how to survive on your own or perish.

Since the mid-twentieth century a swift shift in mood appears in literary imagination. The event of rupture is neither a revolution anymore, nor a coming of a new age, but a catastrophe. Surviving is the only option available. Utopias are now deserted in the aftermath of the dialectics of enlightenment. What had once started as a bright project of science and technology, a burst of progress, improving everything, making humanity better, turned out to produce a series of catastrophes: two world wars, the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, the totalitarian regimes and the rationalization of death, the technologies of mass destruction, the annihilation of whole species and a nature in peril, bringing us ever closer to an environmental disaster. On the territory of fiction, the colonization of space and the ultra-modern techno future of humanity, navigating its own destiny, gives way to dystopias, gloomy visions of political oppression, total control, omnipresent surveillance and supervision, absolute subjection through emerging new technologies. *1984* (1949) by George Orwell presents a world in a state of constant war, all-permeating propaganda, a Ministry of Truth and a Thought Police. *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley glimpses into a futuristic World State with biologically engineered citizens thanks to an advanced reproductive technology, a dystopian society dominated by perfidious manipulation and conditioning. In *It Can't Happen Here* (1935) Sinclair Lewis imagines the nightmarish vision of fascism in the United States, today sadly a political reality. The true progenitor of all modern dystopian literature in Europe though, and *de facto* the first work of this kind is undoubtedly Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921) where in a unified state ("The One State") citizens are devoid of names and are instead signified by numbers like technological units. People live in glass houses so that everything becomes an object of surveillance, privacy is impossible.

[12] Peter Sloterdijk, *What Happened in the Twentieth Century?*, trans. Christopher Turner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 25.

Sexual relations are scheduled and bureaucratically managed. Poetry, music, and acts of imagination are viewed as pathologies.

Political and social disillusionment opened the sluice gates through which dystopian climate fiction poured into Western imagination. A fragile, freakish humanity, obsessed by profit and control is doomed to environmental failure. The poetics of apocalypse now takes the shape of a melancholic poetry of catastrophe.

A new sensibility was born out of the harsh realities of the 19th and 20th centuries, yet it also belonged to a much deeper, geological process: the gradual loss of ignorance and naïveté and the growing awareness of humanity's finitude. What started with the understanding of the limits of the subject with Kant (man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity), followed with Nietzsche (the death of God and the rebuttal of all metaphysical comfort) and led to Heidegger's existential analytics of Dasein (being-toward-death) had also broader implications. In 1912, the German chemist Wilhelm Ostwald offered one of the earliest explicit formulations of the finitude of terrestrial resources in *Der energetische Imperativ* ("The Energetic Imperative"). There, he advanced a critique of both industry and the state, insisting that no infinite superstructure can be erected upon a finite base and that humanity must accordingly adopt an alternative ethos in its relationship to nature.[13] In 1920 at the end of his famous essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber claimed that the current economic system holds the human being spellbound within an "iron cage" and "with irresistible force determines the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism… Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt."[14] The realities of the socio-economic and political order, and the corresponding repertoires of human behavior were inevitably linked together with the sickness of the Earth. Werner Sombart recalls that in conversation with him, Weber sometimes remarked that capitalism would not come to an end until "the last ton of iron and the

[13] Wilhelm Ostwald, *Der energetische Imperativ* (Leipzig: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft, 1912).

[14] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2001), 123.

last ton of coal had been smelted."[15] The fate of humanity as a society with all its political monstrosities, the tyranny of an economy based on insatiable, endless loops of consumption and a ruthless production, sucking out all resources, drying up sea and land, literally dismantling the ecosystem, the total rationalization of a suicidal form of life and the impunity of its logic makes it difficult not to recognize that the fate of the planet is now inseparable from politics, from the ugliness of the brave new world. Political dystopia always already presupposes a critique of ecological reason. As early as 1895 in *The Time Machine* H.G. Wells imagined the extinction of the whole of the human species in the distant future. But in the context of the brutal developments of the 20th century, it becomes more a sober projection rather than fiction. Although human extinction was scientifically normalized and rendered unavoidable since Georges Cuvier and Charles Darwin in the 19th century, it still remained just an abstract consideration. The new situation of an imminently impending disaster and environmental catastrophe accompanied by the consciousness of futility and impossibility to change turned us into gloomy Paulines of pessimism, awaiting the end in eager panic. Instead of the gospel we receive bad news. The end is upon us. This updated condition of humanity resulted in depression, indifference, blissful negligence and denial or green radicalism, but it also fueled the literary imaginary which produced a whole web of virtual scenarios. Climate fiction was born. The history of the end is truly a history of literature. So, let's explore a few literary approaches to how the world ends, whether with a bang or a whimper.

Some seven years before *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* appeared, the novel *The Drowned World* (1962) by J. G. Ballard was published. It is considered one of the founding novels of the climate fiction sub-genre, sometimes simply called *cli-fi*.[16] Roughly seventy years before the events of the novel, a series of violent and prolonged solar storms expand the Van Allen radiation belts, severely degrading Earth's ionosphere. Intensified solar radiation bombards the planet, driving up surface temperatures and sea levels and transforming much of the globe

[15] Werner Sombart, *Der moderne Kapitalismus*. Dritter Band: Das Wirtschaftsleben im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus (Munich and Leipzig: Duncker and Humblot, 1927), 1010.

[16] Jim Clarke, "Reading Climate Change in J.G. Ballard," in: *Critical Survey* 25 (2), 7–21.

into a tropical climate. As vast regions of Earth become uninhabitable for humans, the remaining population migrates toward the North and South Poles, which the new planetary climate has rendered suitable for human life. While dismantling anthropocentric narratives, J. G. Ballard provides a deconstruction of human subjectivity which now pursues new modes of existence, driven by unconscious urges. A sweet and fearsome sliding back into the primordial. The apocalyptic scene is already set in Ballard's first novel *The Wind from Nowhere* (1962) where a fierce hurricane sweeps humankind from the surface of the planet:

> Manhattan's under hundred-foot waves, most of the big skyscrapers and office blocks are down. Empire State Building toppled like a falling chimney stack. Same story everywhere else. Casualty lists in the millions. Paris, Berlin, Rome—nothing but rubble.[17]

No explanation is given for the disaster, although as one of the novel's protagonists remarks:

> maybe it's the deliberate act of an outraged Providence, determined to sweep man and his pestilence from the surface of this once green earth.[18]

By contrast *The Drowned World* presents us with a natural, organic disaster. One might call it an ethically benign apocalypse. It is a catastrophe for which humanity bears no responsibility. Yet, what follows is a degradation of the humankind. In the opening scene the main character is observing the apocalypse from a lavishly furnished suite at the Ritz on the beach. Like the hotel itself the "ivory-handled squash rackets" and "hand-printed dressing gowns" (p. 10)[19] seem eerily anachronistic. Their absurdity is amplified by the presence of a giant Anopheles mosquito, now the size "of a dragon-fly" (p. 10); by the "ancient impassive faces" of the iguanas and basilisks (p. 18) that line the window-ledges; by "the countless thermal storms" that "rip through the horse-tails lining the creek" (p. 8) and stir what is now little more "than a garbage-filled swamp" (p. 13); by the "half-submerged white faced buildings of the 20th century" (p. 10) that mark all that is left of a city. "Had it once been

[17] J.G. Ballard, *Wind from Nowhere* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 119.
[18] Ibidem, 55.
[19] J.G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012),

Berlin, or Paris, or London?" (p. 9).[20] London has become a tropical lagoon infested with shady wildlife and gigantic insects. This new environment seems strangely seductive. The planet is reverting to a prehistoric state: Triassic lagoons, giant reptiles, oppressive heat. And humans begin to mentally regress alongside it. According to Adrian Tait a kind of relapse follows as:

> a dwindling band of survivors slowly realize that flood-waters, storms, and rising temperatures are the least of it. Plagued by strange dreams, they begin to experience the withdrawal characteristic "of all animal forms about to undergo a major metamorphosis" (p. 14).
>
> As if anticipating the most controversial claims of those who, today, maintain that human behaviour is still strongly shaped by our evolutionary past, Ballard's characters are about to be reclaimed by long-buried, atavistic forces[21]

It is a world where humanity is slowly declining, fading away into something else, something alien. And there is a certain sad seductiveness in the fall and primordial reduction of the human species. At the end of the book, the main character Dr. Kerans travels south, like "a second Adam searching for the forgotten paradises of the reborn sun".[22]

In *The Burning World* (1964) Ballard already draws a different picture. The novel depicts a global, human-caused drought in which industrial waste forms a thin film on the oceans, impeding evaporation and disrupting the water cycle, thus engendering a post-apocalyptic economy of scarcity. The thin film coating the water surface is reminiscent of the toxic foam we see nowadays covering the Yamuna River in Delhi, comprising a mix of untreated sewage, detergents, and industrial waste.

*The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy is a work of true apocalyptic dark poetry. The catastrophe is brought about by some sudden event that is not explained in the novel. The cause is never named: no environmental disaster, nuclear event, or technological failure is ever specified. Nevertheless, the world is literally covered in ash, devoid of ani-

[20] Adrian Tait, "Nature Reclaims Her Own: J. G. Ballard's The Drowned World," in: *Australian Humanities. Review* 57 (2014): 26.
[21] Ibidem, 28.
[22] J.G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), 192.

mals and vegetation, climatically ruined (it is cold, the sun is blotted out)—a sterile, dead Earth. It is a condition, stripped of history and explanation. A naked, broken reality, where nature is already dead, society is gone, and humans resemble feeble, but bestial ghosts. *The Road* is enframed by the poetics of night, ashes and ontological darkness:

> Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world.[23]
>
> …
>
> The cold and the silence. The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. If only my heart were stone.[24]

It is a world of pain and existential void. Just like in *The Wind from Nowhere* by Ballard, the devastation comes from nowhere. But here nothingness, nowhereness becomes the genuine horizon of being in the world. All meaning is gone, humanity cracks. The whole novel is a postapocalyptic black song telling of the end of humanity. It is a world without a world. All worldliness is corrupted. The event has shattered nature, but also the humanity of humans. Being in such a world hurts. *If only my heart were stone.* At the same time at its core the story is profoundly human, fragile, touching. It is a book of loss and triumph. A father and his son traverse dead lands, ashen cities, ruined, deserted shores, covered with industrial waste. Only to glimpse "the ocean vast and cold and shifting heavily like a slowly heaving vat of slag and then the gray squall line of ash".[25] There seems to be no hope. Society has collapsed into scavenging, slavery, and cannibalism. Nevertheless, it is not a book about saving the world, neither about surviving in a hostile, ontologically rotten reality. It is all about what it truly means to stay alive. What does staying alive mean in a world beyond society, beyond any hope? Is there something that still matters, when nothing matters anymore? It is, after all, a novel about goodness, about love in the face

[23] Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (London: Picador, 2006), 12.
[24] Ibidem, 16.
[25] Ibidem, 143.

of nothingness. That is a story of the sublime absurdity of care and love. Even when all reason is gone, civilization failed, technology faltered, madness and violence become the law, and there is nothing left but endless night, the father urges his child:

> You have to carry the fire.
> I dont know how to.
> Yes you do.
> Is it real? The fire?
> Yes it is.
> Where is it? I dont know where it is.
> Yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it.[26]

It is truly the poetics of salvation, not mere survivalism. And it is not about saving the world in environmental, political or any social sense, but about saving humanity even when everything turns against it. *The Road* is not only a book about ashen worlds and annihilation, but mostly about spiritual triumph.

*Energan 22* (1981) by Haim Oliver is a Bulgarian novel set in a near-future dystopia where cities are suffocating under toxic smog and even oxygen is rationed and sold. The protagonist, a disgraced journalist living in the polluted Amerigo City, stumbles upon a mysterious offer: a substance called Energan-22, an incredibly cheap and powerful fuel that could solve the world's energy crisis. Life in the city is wholly exposed in the poetics of breathlessness, choking, claustrophobia, pollution and existential terror:

> They were hanging me.
>
> I was suffocating, moaning, dying…
>
> I tried to open my eyes, but my eyelids weighed on me like leaden lids; my lungs were bursting with strain; my heart was pounding to the point of tearing apart. And I knew it was a dream—the same nightmarish dream that unfailingly accompanied my morning awakening ever since we reduced the supply of oxygen in the bedroom.
>
> In vain I thrashed beneath the executioner's dead grip; in vain I opened my mouth to gulp the last mouthfuls of air—and I already

[26] Ibidem, 183.

> knew that soon I would wake up and return to the bleak day, with a dizzy head, pain at the nape of my neck, and bitterness in my mouth…[27]

A sick humanity, thrown into a bleak world devoid of breathing. *The last mouthfuls of air.* Living on the edge of oxygen. It seems to be the most logical, the most imminent and realistic of all disasters. The poisoned air makes the head dizzy, the neck hurts, the mouth tastes bitter. Haim Oliver presents a crippled, dying humanity, lost in dust and smog, doomed to suffer. A dystopia of the last gulps of air. And just like at the Delhi airport, there are oxygen booths, where people pay to inhale purified air. It becomes a commodity, a paid service for those who have money. Breathlessness is for the poor. In Delhi this sounds eerily close to reality. But then again, all dystopian literature, all climate fiction is a critique of the present. And is bound to be politically charged.

*The Disaster Tourist* (2020) by Yun Ko-eun is a darkly comic, satirical eco-novel that skewers late capitalism, corporate culture, and media driven fascination with catastrophe. At its center is Yona Ko, a thirty-something female programming coordinator at Jungle, a Seoul-based travel company that specializes in disaster tourism—curated excursions to places ravaged by hurricanes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, war, and other calamities. Here the disaster itself, the catastrophe becomes a commodity. The society of the spectacle, just as described by Guy Debord, is all-inclusive. The tragedy, the pain, the apocalypse is sold on smaller or larger scale, it is branded, advertised, planned and manufactured. There is a whole economy of disaster, an unsatiable consumerism of violence and catastrophes. There is nothing more exciting, spectacular and profitable than cataclysms and calamities. Although we do not see a global apocalypse or environmental demise, we are at the end of ends here. The apocalypse does not belong to the realm of poetry anymore, it is unhinged from imagination, from history. It is not an event but a spectacle. What was once the very condition of historicity is being cut up into pieces and sold like meat. There is nothing to wait for, nothing to expect. We are Paulines without revelation, without event, with no transcendence but a brutally colonized, exploited immanence. Here we are, feverish for new sensations, ready to buy, to consume, never to be bored. There is no suddenness, we fade out slowly. No sal-

[27] Haim Oliver, *Energan 22* (Sofia: Otechestvo, 1981), 3 (English translation is mine).

vation will come, just death bit by bit. Are we gone yet?

These four novels represent different modes of thinking the end. *The Drowned World* points to a natural disaster, a seductive slipping back to primordial forms of life. This is an inevitable, geological, if not even cosmological process, presupposing some way of extinction. *The Road* is a sudden apocalypse, a catastrophe that erased humanity from humans and threw the world into an endless night. A true dark vision of a posthuman, postapocalyptic ontological desert. *Energan 22* brings us closer to actual contemporaneity: energy crisis, polluted cities, toxic smog —a poetics of suffocation and breathlessness, a slow but certain death caused by industry and greed. *The Disaster Tourist* is an ironical approach towards a political critique of a society turning disasters into spectacle and commodity fetishism. Eventually capitalism integrates the catastrophe into an endless series of consumption and marketing.

No matter what happens though we find ourselves in a Pauline situation —the end is upon us. We think of the end as if it has somehow begun. We are there, in the in-betweenness of the last days. The Anthropocene has started an irreversible march. This awareness of being involved in an imminent end, having stepped in an already/not yet situation, triggered a truly apocalyptic stance. Nevertheless, the horizon of this breaking moment in history is not an eschatological opening, a transcendence and salvation, but a catastrophe. We are experiencing a negative apocalypse with no future or transformative meaning. The survivalist mentality is deferring, escapist, it dwells in uncertainty. As Fredric Jameson famously put it, it is easier for us to imagine the end of the world than imagine a different social order, an alternative society.[28] Our inability to imagine a genuine future coincides with an explosion of apocalyptic scenarios. Probably a good first step would be thinking from the basics, not from the complexities of the end. Maybe the way we think and act on the very conditions and forms of life we are constantly reproducing would open a different possibility of understanding our finitude. Since apocalypticism was always about poetry and politics, being the junction point of imagination and social reason.

[28] Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xii: "It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imagination."

# 19. 'Fictional Reality': The Case of Religious Texts in a Secular Context

*John Patrick Giddy, jpgiddy@gmail.com*
*(Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of KwaZulu-Natal)*

**Abstract:** I argue here that religious texts may be fruitfully recast for a secular culture through the frame of "fictional reality." For John Dominic Crossan, the religious tradition confronts the "normalcy" of civilization, referring to compulsive, non-participative ways of being together that override the norms of intelligence and reasonableness in interpreting human society. The default subject–object divide disallows this approach (religious belief being thought of as "simply subjective," thus putting aside its claim to authoritativeness). But this divide is no longer plausible. In contemporary secular culture, identity is "made up," not given, and such constructions may be inauthentic, compulsive, and in need of a critical response. Hence the need to engage self-consciously with the text. And while the texts are written in the prescientific mode of "compact consciousness," which merges metaphor and literal, myth and history, today's differentiation of consciousness speaks to the interior need for responsible appropriation of the text. This recapitulation of the text addresses the shortcomings of the foundation of community, and of its authoritativeness, in liberal secular culture.

**Keywords:** Religious text; secular culture; fictional reality; Crossan; Lonergan; Kojève; differentiation of consciousness

**Fictional Reality: The Case of Religious Texts in a Secular Culture**

## 1. The General Idea

The intention of this paper is to show that the narrative framework termed "fictional reality" can be an authentic vehicle for the continuation of the religious tradition. I take this narrative style as replacing the theoretical standpoint of modernity, with its dogmatic subject–object divide between the facts "out there" and the subjective viewpoint. This mistaken approach would not accept religious texts, taken as narrative

inventions, as reaching the standard of objective truth associated with the tradition. But science—the default standard of objectivity—is today no longer seen as describing reality but rather as applying to reality, as judged by normative standards of reasonableness—that is to say, our "subjective" capacity for reasonableness. In other words, this objection is out of date.[1] There has been a shift from the default framing of our knowledge in terms of theory to a more nuanced differentiation. The theoretical framework had in turn replaced the "compact consciousness" of a prescientific mentality, characterized by narratives—for our purposes, the foundational texts of the religions—that do not distinguish between metaphor and fact, history and myth.

Michel Onfray argues in his book on "the theory of Jesus"[2] that the gospel narratives are illuminating fiction. Why did Jesus not eat couscous, he asks, a typical dish of that time? His point is that the meals described all have immediately accessible symbolic meaning—fish, meat, bread, wine. The narratives are written to speak to us at the level of our deepest longings, including the desire to see meaning in a life that will be cut short by death. Wine, for example: at the start of the narrative of the writer named John, Jesus is depicted as transforming water into wine. "The wine has run out," he is told (John 2:2–3). He is going to make even better wine—the drink that symbolizes our flourishing in common—out of the most ordinary thing, water. The old dispensation, the covenant with Moses that constitutes Judaism, is coming to an end; its time has run out. The new covenant speaks to all persons, to the Gentiles, in their ordinary (rather than special) lifeworld. This is how the writer John sees it, and this incident frames the whole narrative going forward. The narratives of Jesus are gospels, not simply history—narratives of good news for us, answering our questioning.

Much contemporary biblical scholarship would, in part, agree with Onfray. The title of J. D. Crossan's research, *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian*[3], is revealing. Others—the majority of religious people—take refuge in fundamentalisms of various kinds. The text, in a culture that is self-consciously plural and framed by scientific thinking

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1 Cf my discussion: Patrick Giddy. "Objectivity and subjectivity: rethinking the philosophy syllabus" *South African journal of philosophy* 28 (2009):359-376.

2 Michal Onfray, *Théorie de Jésus: Biographie d'une idée* (Bouquins, 2023).

3 John Dominic Crossan, *How to read the Bible and still be a Christian. Struggling with divine violence from Genesis through Revelation* (HarperOne, 2015).

and democratic values, is seen by believers as giving an identity that is under threat in the contemporary context. The meaning of a secular age, as Charles Taylor argues[4], is that identity is forged, not simply given. It follows that the identity thus constructed may be inauthentic, compulsive, unhelpful to human flourishing, "fictional" in a bad sense—one's identity as an Aryan, for example, which was so destructive of human society in the mid-twentieth century. Clearly, however, there is a basic human need for belonging—alongside the perhaps two other existential needs for autonomy and for meaning—an understanding argued for by Mary Clark over a number of chapters in her book *In Search of Human Nature*.[5] This need is going to find expression, one way or another. It is important, then, to sort out the wrong kind of belonging from the authentic appropriation of the religious tradition. The key to this lies in the contemporary sense of fictional reality. This kind of writing can be an authentic continuation of the religious tradition, facing down what Crossan terms the "normalcy" of civilization, what the Norwegian writer Knausgaard calls "the social world"—"the world as it wants to be," a world of pretense.[6] These terms refer to compulsive ways of being together that involve non-participatory belonging or, as Crossan argues, structures of (supposedly justified) violence.

It is important, then, not to confuse the creative aspect of human explanatory narratives with skepticism about any objectivity at all in the matter of religious texts. There is a normativity to fictional accounts of our life together that points to the possibility of storytelling elucidating or reflecting our human reality to our benefit, drawing us into a deeper self-understanding. This is the well-developed thesis of Christopher Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots*[7], an overview of fictional narratives that point to the perennial human task of moving from egocentricity to the achievement of the authentic and generous self. In these narratives—from Homer and then Cervantes through to Jane Austen—there is a surface story depicting success in conventional terms ("above the line"),

4 Charles Taylor, *A secular age* (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap, 2007).

5 Mary Clark, *In search of human nature* (London: Routledge, 2002).

6 Karl-Ove Knausgaard, *The end. My struggle: Book 6*. Trans. M. Aiken and D. Barlett (London: Vintage, 2019): 360-1.

7 Christopher Booker, *The seven basic plots. Why we tell stories* (London: Continuum, 2003).

accompanied by a "below the line" story of a personal journey.[8]

The issue can be seen as important not just for religious believers. "Authority" names the condition for the realization of a community constituted by common beliefs about common values. A basic theme in the religious texts is the possibility of a true community, one of justice and peace. For this reason, those traditions would be misleadingly understood as what is left behind in modernity, defined by its abandonment of previous authority. The key idea in modernity's self-understanding is that of individual autonomy. Secular authority is constituted, it is thought, by the process of election. Yet, as will be argued below—and dissenting from the standard liberal picture of society—the election does not constitute authority but presupposes it. This is not to suggest reverting to a premodern version of authority. Yet only by unpacking the idea of authority in the changed circumstances of contemporary culture can one arrive at an understanding of how a community is to be constructed and affirmed.

To understand the thesis put forward in this discussion, it is useful to draw on Bernard Lonergan's notion of the differentiation of consciousness.[9] This notion allows one to track how cultures develop toward a more nuanced understanding of the world—and of the nature of our understanding. A framework of thinking characteristic of premodern cultures is that of compact consciousness. There is no difference between metaphor and fact, legend and history, alchemy and chemistry. The religious texts are, for the most part, written within this frame of thinking.

In the following section, I will broaden the scope of the basic idea in this presentation to include what is arguably a blind spot in contemporary secular culture. Section 3 clarifies the idea of secular culture. Thereafter, I sketch the key idea of the differentiation of consciousness that points, in the contemporary mindset, to the idea of fictional reality. Section 5 then unpacks some of the examples given in Crossan's deconstruction of the religious text, confronting the sacred text in a way that allows believers an authentic but intelligent appropriation of the text and indeed of the faith—and, importantly, to have a fruitful dialogue with atheists such as Onfray.

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[8] Cf my discussion: Patrick Giddy, "Jack and the beanstalk: The human plot in the narrative traditions and contemporary global culture" *South African Journal of Philosophy* 39 (2020): 361-370.

[9] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in theology*, 2nd Ed. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972).

## 2. The Broader Implications for Contemporary Secular Culture

By "secular context" I refer to a culture in which religious belief is one option among others. This means that the authority attaching to the religious tradition cannot be taken for granted; it has to be justified. This applies to the authority of the religious community's leader or that of the religious text—the Torah, the Bible, the Qur'an, and so on. In fact, the question cannot be avoided—as religion is pushed to re-express itself in changed social conditions—as to what constitutes the authentic tradition. For a century or two, historical biblical criticism—to take one example—has uncovered the narrative intentions of the writers of the Scriptural texts, and these intentions were not primarily a concern with historically verified facts. I am going to suggest that framing these texts in terms of narrative truth or "fictional reality"—clearly a category not available to the writers at the time—will (perhaps surprisingly) bring us closer to the authentic tradition of the religion.

This discussion, I hope to show, is of interest beyond ecclesial circles, to liberal secular culture in general. Torbjörn Gustafsson Chorell (2021) quotes Swedish philosopher Jayne Svenungsson: "to analyse our current political reality without a knowledge of religion" is now almost impossible.[10] "Secular" is a disputed term: in particular, scholars take it either as a complete setting aside of pre-secular religious tradition or else as a transformation of that tradition in line with the developments in culture that we know as "modern." But there is a problem with the former approach, namely that beginning from the supposedly unencumbered autonomous individual obscures the idea and foundational value of freedom. Liberal culture, understood in this way, overlooks the question of whether the ideal of freedom is facilitated to grow into actual freedom. This is the difference between a good intention (say, to be a good father) and the actual set of habits of thought and action that bring this intention to fulfillment. To the extent that the culture fails to facilitate this kind of growth, the authority of its leaders may be judged unauthentic—or, in fact, illegitimate. We are speaking here of a lack of formation for life in common, for *Sittlichkeit*, a lack well brought out, in

[10] Cited in Gustafsson Chorell, "Unsecularizing history and politics: Jayne Svenungsson and Karl Löwith on meaning in history," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, 82 (2021): 176-192, DOI: 10.1080/21692327.2021.1923558 183.

the case of liberal societies, by Alasdair MacIntyre.[11] The ideal of freedom can mask the problem that actual freedom has to be achieved, and this is the task of every individual. There is, then, something not self-evident about human freedom, raising questions that were expressed differently in premodern times but remain central, indeed existential, in secular culture. To bring these questions to the fore—to ask about something more than the abstract idea of freedom—the religious text can help, if interrogated in a way that is intelligible to the contemporary mind. In making this point, I am asking for a measure of suspended belief on matters of religion, which I hope will bear fruit on the part of the secular reader.

What is inevitable in a secular, historically conscious culture is the deconstruction of the religious text. Euripides (438 BCE, some four hundred years before the writers recounted the story of Jesus as they saw it) wrote of *Alcestis*. Alcestis is the wife of a king. For reasons having to do with the laws of the cosmos, the king will die unless someone voluntarily undertakes to die in his place. Alcestis takes this on, and the king lives. At this time, the god Hercules is visiting the court. On hearing of this tragedy, he undertakes to take part in—and win—a contest with Death. The prize is a life, and he chooses Alcestis. She does indeed rise from the underworld—after three days (another cosmic rule, as it were). "Her voice may not be heard / Ere to the Lords of Them Below she pay / Due cleansing, and awake on the third day."[12]

Some of these elements sound familiar to present-day readers. There are, of course, references within the earlier biblical writings to the "three days," for example, Hosea 6:1–2: "After two days He will revive us; On the third day He will raise us up, that we may live in His sight." And Jonah was vomited up from the belly of the whale after three days. The point is simply that the text is largely a narrative composition, written to convey meaning. The allusions to Greek literature widen the net and allow us to see the foundational religious texts in a broader context of the human struggle to make sense of life.

The Graeco-Roman world and its culture formed the wider milieu of the writers of the accounts of Jesus. They drew on material with which they were familiar. Many examples of borrowing are uncovered

[11] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), esp. Ch 1.

[12] Euripedes, *The Alcestis*. Trans. Gilbert Murray (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1915): vv. 1146ff.

in the text I will draw on, namely John Dominic Crossan's already mentioned *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian*. Crossan takes the Bible not so much as a definitive text furnishing the standard for interpreting life in general—particularly for the believer—but as a text accompanying a people of faith, and shot through with expressions that run counter to the central message of the religion. He shifts the idea of its authoritativeness. The text calls for responsible engagement—not blind faith—on the part of the reader. I am encouraged in this by a parallel account of the authoritative status of the foundational Islamic text in Mustafa Akyol's *Reopening Muslim Minds*.[13] I mention just one example of Akyol's approach by way of illustration. Akyol argues that if the situation in Mecca had been less hostile to the new religion of the worship of Allah, the founder of the religion would not have needed to flee to Medina and take up arms. "And in that case the Qur'an we have in our hands would not speak about war and military conquest."[14] It could have been different.

Both Crossan and Akyol take issue with violence when it is portrayed in the religious texts in a positive way. Violence sets aside or overrides questions of legitimate power—that is, of authentic authority. The issue concerns not so much premodern men and women (one is not attempting to read back into history concerns that were not within the thought-framework of that time) as the contemporary person. Once we understand that the religious text is written in a style that does not distinguish between metaphorical and philosophical language, we are compelled to take a stance on references to violence. This shifts contemporary consciousness toward a new view of the authoritative nature of the tradition, whether expressed in the person of the Pope or in Scripture. A new dimension of responsibility comes into play. In a sense, the reader must become, more self-consciously, something of a co-creator of the tradition. The reader must engage with the text in a way very similar to that called for in reading fiction.

There is a tension here between this approach to the text and its role in evoking faith. This is made clear in Crossan's reflections on how one should read Scripture without losing faith. It is also evident in Akyol's subtitle: "Return to reason, freedom and tolerance." We must

[13] Mustafa Akyol, *Reopening Muslim minds. A return to reason, freedom and tolerance* (Forum, 2022).
[14] Ibid., 169.

remember that authority gives expression to the common good and that its legitimacy lies there. This legitimacy is affirmed through persons growing in their capacities for attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, and finally responsibility.

Here Bernard Lonergan's notion of the "dialectic" attaching to any authority is critical.[15] Authority, or legitimate power, is always fragile and dynamic by its nature. Power is legitimate (i.e., authoritative) to the extent that it represents the common understanding of common unifying values of the group in question. But that commonality itself will be authentic only if it arises out of the members' appropriation of their powers of intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility—and similarly in the case of those in authority. The legitimacy of authorities is then freely recognized by subjects, without coercion or the threat of coercion. Through the exercise of their powers of intelligence and responsibility, members of the group reach toward the objective good, and this good is represented by authority in terms of the social good.

It is important to see that this approach does not suggest that everyone has their own purely subjective view of the social nexus. Modern thinking is plagued by this problem because of the idea that subjectivity is opposed to objective truth or value. This unhelpful idea is perpetuated in standard introductory philosophy texts. Thomas Nagel's classic *What Does It All Mean?*[16] is a good example—he poses as basic philosophical questions the following: How do we know anything? How do we know other minds? What is the relation between mind and body? These are questions based on the subject–object divide: how do we get from "in here" to "out there"? But this framing is mistaken. Subjective experience is not a kind of knowledge; it is data to be attended to, interpreted, and judged—true, or more probably only partially true. Understanding the objective good is the fruit of the actualization of one's subjective powers of understanding. This point is crucial if we are to appreciate religious texts through the category of "fictional reality." Any fictional narrative works through the reader's powers of intelligent imagination.

A forced commonality is unauthentic, in every case blocking the flourishing of these powers. Unreasonable and unintelligent ways forward are lauded, and their opposites disfavored. The group becomes

[15] Bernard Lonergan, Dialectic of authority. Unpublished paper. (11 pages) Available at: bernardlonergan.com/archive/23650dte070.

[16] Thomas Nagel, *What does it all mean?* (Oxford University Press, 1976).

fragmented. "Dialectic" refers to linked but opposing ways forward, and here it points to the possibility of recapturing authentic commonality—which will imply opposing unauthentic claims to authority.

The reversal of disorder alerts one to a largely unrecognized problem in modern secular democracies. In a liberal democracy, secular power is seen as legitimated by virtue of a supposed social contract (Rousseau, Locke), with free rational individuals contracting into governing principles for their life in common. But this overlooks the question of whether the resultant social bond is authentic or unauthentic. It overlooks the difference between abstract freedom and actualized freedom. It is thought that a liberal government "should refrain from promoting or taking a stand on what a flourishing human life should be."[17] But this leaves authority without a foundation sufficient to justify its legitimacy. We cannot assume, as liberal secular thought often seems to, that freedom is already actualized. As Molinski notes, we must keep in mind "the real freedom of man which has to integrate the laws of nature into his personality, by autonomous decisions which are not always basically correct."[18] Actualization depends on beneficial interpersonal conditions that enable individuals to grow in freedom, converting it from an abstract capacity into a real habitual power. Solidarity is key to this. It is striking that a recent biblical theologian has suggested that religious faith (*pistis*) should be understood in terms of trust. Trust is "the willingness to put something in someone else's hands," involving a judgment of trustworthiness.[19] Trust can be unpacked in terms of the given possibility of giving one's trust and the psychological impasse that one needs to be trusted in order to develop the breadth of willingness to give trust. It is this problem at the heart of the contemporary social nexus that gives rise to the suggestion that the premodern tradition, reformulated, may have something of value to offer. This motivates the present discussion and calls for the suspension of disbelief mentioned above. The legal provisions implied in the social contract are founded on a common purpose that precedes them. There remains, largely overlooked in secular society, the basic

[17] Rooney, J.D. and Zoll, P. "Introduction". In Rooney and Zoll (eds) *Beyond classical liberalism: Freedom and the good*. London: Routledge, 2024): 1-11, at p.2.

[18] Molinski, W., "Authority". In: Rahner, K. (ed) *Encyclopedia of theology. A concise Sacramentum Mundi*. London: Burns and Oates, 1975): 60-65, at p.65.

[19] Teresa Morgan, *The New Testament and the theology of trust* (Oxford University Press, 2022): 22; cited in Holtzen, W. Review of Teresa Morgan, *The New Testament and the theology of trust. Philosophy in Review* 43 (2023):25-27, at p.25.

human need for solidarity. The Marxist philosopher Alexandre Kojève points out that an election (expressive of the social contract) "confirms rather than engenders authority."[20]

## 3. A Secular Age

A secular culture is one in which religious faith is recognized as one option among others, a point made by Charles Taylor.[21] One opts to identify oneself with a tradition as expressed in a particular institutionalized community of believers; at the same time, other possibilities present themselves in the public sphere. When T. S. Eliot converted to Anglo-Catholicism (he was brought up in the North American Unitarian tradition but had long cast that off), his very good friend, the writer Virginia Woolf, reacted to her "shameful and distressing interview with dear Tom Eliot." "I mean," she commented in a letter to her sister, "there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God."[22] He was not going to convince his peers of his choice. Faith is one option among others.

Secularization has to be distinguished from secularism, that is to say, a worldview that excludes God and, it can be argued, excludes any human transcendence. Since the writings of Hegel, it has been suggested that the Christian religion itself transforms into a secular worldview (for example, in Marcel Gauchet).[23] A secular culture, in other words, may be seen as bringing out the best of the religious tradition, even if this is not explicitly recognized by members of secular society. Albert Keller, in his article "Secularization" in the *Encyclopedia of Theology*, points to Bonhoeffer as a key figure here. He quotes H. Zahrnt, describing a "true secularity" as resulting "directly and authentically from the kernel of

[20] Alexandre Kojève, *The notion of authority. (A brief presentation).* Trans. H. Weslati (London: Verso, 2020): 35.

[21] Op.cit., 3.

[22] Letter to Vanessa Bell, cited in Robert Crawford, *Eliot. After The Waste Land* (Vintage, 2024): 112.

[23] Marcel Gauchet, *The disenchantment of the world. A political history of religion*. Trans. O. Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). See my discussion, Patrick Giddy, "Three secularisation theorists – Voegelin, Gauchet, Taylor – and the implications for secular public policy". In: Bark, A. et al (eds) *Eric Voegelin studies yearbook IV*. (Brill, 2025): 219-238. DOI: 10.30965.9783846769607_010.

Christian revelation itself."[24] The basic idea of secularity is that "there is nothing in the world which is too 'holy' to be accessible to a worldly approach and must be reserved for religion… There is no mystery in the world from which science is barred, on the ground that it can be explained only on 'religious' terms."[25]

## 4. Shifts in Consciousness

Scripture is, by and large, written in a narrative form that speaks through metaphor ("my God is a rock"), parable, legend, and so on. We have called this the framework of a "compact consciousness." There is no differentiation between legend and history, myth and fact, alchemy and chemistry. In this framework of thinking, it is not important (as it is for us) to distinguish an epistle written by Paul from one simply bearing the name of Paul.

At the same time, under the influence of the Graeco-Roman cultural "discovery of mind," documented in Plato's dialogues and in Aristotle's *Logic*, there emerged a concern with internal coherence—defining the form or nature of something in order to posit one's beliefs as of universal import. Seen in Hebrew and Palestinian culture as messiah, lord, saviour, the question of Jesus' "nature" could also be asked—divine, or human, or half-divine and half-human? These debates issued, finally, in the dogmatic formulations of the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon.

This framework of thinking is no longer ours. A further "differentiation of consciousness" (Lonergan's term) has long been in the making, shifting the focus from theory to the way any theory is applied to a particular situation—to the structure of the actualization of a person's powers of intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility. Lonergan calls this the framework of interiority. He is concerned to show that we no longer think about ourselves in the third person, as if surveying "man" from a point outside the universe. Rather, he says, we approach ourselves from within. In the introduction to his classic book on the appropriation of our powers of intelligence and reasonableness, *Insight*, he

[24] Cited in Keller, A. "Secularisation". In: Rahner, K. (ed) *Encyclopedia of theology. A concise Sacramentum Mundi* (London: Burns and Oates, 1975): 1554-1561, at p.1560.

[25] Ibid., 1560.

remarks that the subject matter is not to be thought of "as though it described some distant region of the globe, which the reader never visited, or some strange and mystical experience, which the reader never shared."[26] In another context, he notes that asking about "the nature of man" does not issue in a "what" question but in a "who" question. "Who is to be a man? The answer is 'I,' 'We'… What has to be a man is not just any instance of rational animal…"[27] He quotes the saying *L'homme s'est défini par une exigence*—we are defined by a demand—that we make something of ourselves. This fits very well with the project of seeing the religious text as "fictional reality."

In the previous framework of thinking, the norm—human nature—would be something clearly objective, an individual being simply one instance of the category "man." Normativity would come "from above," in accordance with our nature—below the angels, above the beasts. Now normativity attaches to the demand to make something of oneself. For Lonergan, it takes the form of transcendental precepts: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible. It is a normative journeying, a journey of self-discovery. It is not that the tradition and traditional formulations are being discarded in favour of subjectivism. Rather, it is the recognition that the norm cannot be spelled out in abstract terms and then simply applied. The norm is becoming oneself through oneself. The authoritative summons to faith is authoritative only to the extent that it recognizes the subject's own discovery of such authoritativeness. If this authority is expressed in a way that bypasses the subject's participation as responsible, it will be seen as power that is not legitimate.

If religion is to speak at the level of our times—if it is to be seen as a power that is legitimate (generating a call to assent to its authority)—it must adopt the latter frame of reference. As Lonergan says:

What is authentic for a lesser differentiation of consciousness will be found unauthentic by the standards of a greater differentiation. So there is the sin of backwardness, of cultures, authorities, and individuals that fail to live on the level of their time.[28]

In parenthesis, this throws light on a problem about Islam raised by

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[26] Bernard Lonergan, *Insight. A study of human understanding*. 3rd Ed. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1970): xix.

[27] Bernard Lonergan, *Topics in education. Collected works of Bernard Lonergan, vol 10*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993): 81.

[28] Bernard Lonergan, Dialectic of authority, op. cit.

Rémi Brague.[29] Brague has argued that such openness to ordinary human inquiry and judgment is largely excluded in Islam. Whereas the Bible is inspired by God—motivating those receiving the revelation while retaining their normal historical determinants—the Qur'an is dictated by Allah, through the intermediary of the angel Gabriel, to Mohammed, his envoy. Hence, no recourse to the particular historical circumstances of the writers is deemed appropriate.[30] But this viewpoint may overlook the fact that "authoritativeness" is part and parcel of a cultural framework and changes as that framework changes. An authentic summons to faith will therefore take a different form in a different cultural milieu. The way the foundational text was accorded authority at that time ("dictated by God") may not be appropriate in our own very different culture. A writer like Akyol is clearly advocating a changed understanding of religious authority—one that encompasses the values of reason, freedom, and tolerance.

The idea of free individuals contracting into society is an outgrowth of this shift in how we see ourselves, recognizing individual responsibility as a key value. There is no doubt that religious bodies have often failed to keep up with these cultural changes. Authority, to return to this once more, speaks to "the recognition of the justification or necessity of the group in question, and then the recognition of the authority serving this organisation… real authority exists for the subjects in so far as they accept willingly the necessary social order."[31] But in the case of religious bodies, the understanding of this social order has changed with the rise of an educated middle class. The Roman Catholic Church can no longer assume unquestionable correctness in its dealings with ordinary members, as if it were "franchised" from above—the term is Mackey's.[32] J.-P. Gallez points out that the model for exercising authority derives from a world in which the Christian religion was taken for granted. But now, "in a democratised society which has left religion behind, the way authority is practised in the Church is felt as non-egalitarian."[33]

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[29] Rémi Brague, *Sur la religion* (Paris: Flammarion, 2018).
[30] Ibid., 231-232.
[31] Molinski , op.cit., 62.
[32] James Mackey, *Christianity and creation* (New York: Continuum, 2006): 20.
[33] Gallez, J-P. "Refonder l'église: l'appel de J. Moingt à tous les baptisés." Talk to CCBF (2017) [Online, my translation]. Available at: http://www.baptises.fr/sites/default/files/document/ccbf-21.10.17-jp_gallez.

## 5. Crossan: How to Still Be a Christian

Crossan begins by making a point—already canvassed in our discussion on the legitimacy of power—that there can be a "tension between being a faithful reader and being a faithful Christian."[34] The central point of his approach is that the New Testament text must be understood against the background of the first-century Jewish homeland of Jesus, and in particular "its matrix of both violent and nonviolent resistance to Roman power and imperial oppression."[35]

The norm presupposed here is that of basic human freedom of self-determination. It is not clear, however, that the text we have always expresses this norm, bound up as it is with a social way forward that must be participatory rather than compelled by force or threats of force. For there are threats in the New Testament message: the Book of Revelation is steeped in visions of bloody vengeance for those who oppose the rule of God. What Crossan calls the "normalcy of civilisation" (the term "civilisation" being used sociologically rather than normatively) operates through threats of retribution; yet central passages in the Bible point to a justice of redistribution rather than retribution.

Crossan's central examples show how the biblical text draws on its surrounding culture. Time and again, he suggests to the reader the extra-biblical origins of key expressions long thought to be unique to the revealed text. Crossan asks the reader to notice how contradictory approaches are suggested within the narrative and to bring into play our own sense of the authentic message.

I take as a first example the account in Isaiah of Israel's confrontation with Assyria (700s BCE). Sennacherib is touted in the Assyrian texts as "King of the World, King of Assyria," implicitly affirming Ashur not just as God of Assyria but as God of the world. Countering this, Isaiah insists that it is Yahweh, God of Israel, who is God of "the whole earth" (Isa. 10:14; 14:26).[36] Crossan's point is that the social, cultural, and political milieu ("matrix") will always impact the biblical account—and the reader should approach the text with due caution. Thus, the Assyrian approach to power is clearly not in keeping with the biblical tradition of a God of history and authority (a power that calls for

[34] Op.cit.,3.
[35] Op.cit., 7.
[36] Cited in Crossan, op.cit., 114.

faith). Rather, this is what we read in the Assyrian texts:

> I filled the plains with the bodies of their warriors, like grass. Their testicles I cut off, and tore out their privates like the seeds of summer cucumbers.[37]

Now Isaiah, speaking in the voice of the biblical God, affirms: "Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger—the club in their hands is my fury" (Isa. 10:5). Crossan comments: "Far too much of Assyrian imperial theology entered Israelite covenantal theology."[38]

In contrast, Crossan points to Psalm 82, where power is challenged to couple itself with justice:

> How long will you judge unjustly
> And show partiality to the wicked? (Ps. 82:2)

In many cases, the problem goes unrecognized by those in power: "they walk around in darkness" (Ps. 82:5). But instead of a "solution" of vengeance or retribution, these powers simply reap their own destruction. Their power is seemingly divinely sanctioned (they are seen as lesser gods in the divine council), yet:

> Nevertheless, you shall die like mortals
> and fall like any prince. (Ps. 82:6–7)

No violent intervention is needed or called upon.

A second example comes from the New Testament, discussed by Crossan in his chapter "Rome and the Challenge of Caesar." The matrix here is the rule of the Roman Emperor Octavian, declared "Augustus" by the Senate in 27 BCE. His victory over Antony in 29 BCE brought about the end of civil war and issued in peace. The poet Horace sees this peace as redemptive; within a religious framework, fault underlying disorder in the state is corrected, and peace is thus redemptive. Octavian, Caesar Augustus, is declared the Redeemer.

The temple to the goddess Athena Polias in Turkey reveals further cultural context. Begun by Alexander the Great, the temple was originally dedicated to Athena Polias, but some three hundred years later, in 27 BCE, the new dedication includes: "To Emperor Caesar,

[37] King Sennacherib, cited in Crossan, op.cit., 115.
[38] Ibid.

Son of God, God Augustus."[39]

Augustus could be regarded as divine by virtue of four factors: ancestry, conception, adoption, and decree of the Senate. The first two are mythological; the third is historically true—Julius Caesar had adopted him in his will, revealed after his assassination in 44 BCE. He became *divi filius*, son of the divine Julius Caesar. At his death in 14 CE, the Senate declared his divinity. He was now "God from God."

His divinity was fully entangled with his status as "Emperor," that is, rightful ruler—through victorious conquest—over an empire; as Crossan puts it, the "All-conquering One." Finally, the proconsul Paulus Fabius Maximus, governor of Asia Minor, proposed Caesar's birthdate as the new calendar starting point, the New Year. Augustus' life signaled a cosmic new creation, bringing redemption from chaos and disintegration. The League of Asian Cities supported the proposal. Caesar, they said, had by his epiphany outdone the benefactors of the past, "but also allowing no hope of greater benefactions in the future"—this was the date when "the God first brought to the world the good tidings residing in him."[40]

Replace Caesar or Augustus with Jesus or Christ, "and you can understand Pauline Christian theology as counterpoint to and confrontation with Roman imperial theology."[41]

If we move forward to the reign of Nero (from 54 CE), the same themes recur. The poet Calpurnius Siculus writes of the new Golden Age, of "this youth… sent us from heaven" as "God in person," and he prays that whether the Emperor is Jupiter himself in disguise or another power above "under an assumed mortal semblance," he may rule the world forever.[42]

To this, Paul, in his final testament—the Letter to the Romans—responds with what he sees as the Christian Judaic view of the world's destiny. The key point is that Christians have been baptized into the death of Jesus, and as he was raised from the dead, so we "if we have been united with him in a death like his… will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom. 6:3–5). Crossan suggests we think of this passage in this way: "Rome had officially, publicly, and legally

[39] Cited in Crossan, op.cit., 191.
[40] Cited in Crossan, op.cit., 196.
[41] Crossan, op.cit., 195.
[42] Cited in Crossan, op.cit.,204.

executed Jesus, but God raised him from the dead. Jesus was therefore dead to Rome and alive to God." And we too are dead to all that Rome represents and reborn to the values of God's kingdom.

The narrative here follows the pattern of the European novel: the surface plot ("above the line") is accompanied by a drama about growth as a human person ("below the line"). On the surface, a teacher and spiritual leader is executed as a common criminal. But his followers interpret the event differently. The scriptural authors frame this in terms that may not have purchase in secular culture, but that is not a reason to reject the premodern tradition in toto.

## 6. The Religious Text in a Secular Culture

What are the implications of this for understanding the authoritativeness of the religious text? It is this: our reading, as members of a secular culture, of the religion's foundational text can summon us to trust in a spiritual power as the motor of authentic community. Through this trust, our powers of intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility are released. As Crossan shows, the terms in which this summons is issued reveal it as a counterpoint to the authority claimed by the "normalcy of civilisation."

The values of Roman civilisation, for Crossan, are "patriarchy, slavery, hierarchy and victory—especially violent victory on which those other three values depend."[43] In each case, the power structure excludes. This is most evident in victory through violence. Violence is therefore not justified as resistance to exclusionary values of this kind of civilisation. On the other hand, Paul's addendum—that one should rather leave violence to God, "never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God" (Rom. 12:19)—subverts simplistic notions of divine retribution in Christian understanding.

Crossan's analysis can be situated within a secularised society searching for a foundation of commonality. Here we may turn to Alexandre Kojève. Kojève is immersed in the secularization trajectory of modern European culture and is best known for his lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.[44] In his introduction to Kojève's text, François

[43] Ibid., 206.

[44] Alexandre Kojève. *Introduction to the reading of Hegel. Lectures on The Phenomenology of Spirit.* Trans. J. Nichols (London: Cornell University Press, 1947/1980).

Terré remarks: "In a world driven by an anguished quest for its bearings, Kojève's reflection marks a renewed return to reason."[45]

The bearings have been lost, as Hannah Arendt argues,[46] because the foundational blocks of European society—tradition, religion, and authority—have eroded. With the disappearance of tradition and the loss of religion, authority easily slips into authoritarianism.

Very briefly, Kojève categorizes authority into four types: the authority of the father, the master, the leader, and the judge.[47] In each case, there must be something "natural" about authority if it is to be accepted as legitimate. The father generates the subject. The master risks his life in the struggle for recognition (drawing on Hegel's master–slave dialectic), particularly where mutual trust is absent. The leader projects the future. The judge has authority by virtue of the call of justice.

We must recall the basic idea of authority as residing in authentic cooperation among members animated by developed capacities for intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility. Kojève is speaking of persons representing the authoritativeness of the community. To the extent that his categories fail to capture the dynamism or dialectic inherent in authority, they will mirror the "normalcy of civilisation" described by Crossan.

Kojève's categories correspond to the disvalues of the "normalcy of civilisation." To patriarchy corresponds the authority of the father, now reframed by understanding God as transcendent creator. The father is wrongly taken as the absolute origin of the child. It is the incommensurability of God as Creator and world that undercuts identification of any natural cause with authority—patriarchy included. To slavery corresponds the authority of the master, now inverted by Paul. In the struggle for recognition, the endless master–slave dialectic is overturned by trust in the one who wins through defeat. To hierarchy corresponds the authority of the leader, now seen as first among equals, embodying shared aspirations—overcoming the idea of a "natural" hierarchy of Jew over pagan. It presupposes a community of colleagues sharing common beliefs and values. To victory corresponds the authority of the just judge, where "just" indicates authority not imposed through violence or its threat.

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[45] Terre, F. Introduction to the French edition. In Kojève, *The notion of authority*, ix-xxxiv, at xxxiv.

[46] Cited in Terre, ibid., xix.

[47] Kojève, *The notion of authority*, 14-30.

All this points toward authentic authority rather than power masked with legitimacy. This is what we seek in religious authority.

In each case, there is both an authentic and a degraded version. For Kojève, the authority of the father is unpacked in Christian thought in terms of God "causing" the being of the subject. The authority of the master is undercut by Christian resistance through non-violence; a new kind of mastery emerges. The authority of the leader includes rather than excludes—affirming that every person has the capacity for transcendence and flourishing as the image of the transcendent God.

Recognising the ambivalence within Scripture toward legitimate power makes us aware that the religious tradition nudges us toward secularity in the sense explained above. If the text portrays authority as tied to violence or threats of violence, representatives of the faithful community must push back. This is already happening. A simple example—not mentioned by Crossan—is Psalm 137. It begins, "By the rivers of Babylon / there we sat down and wept," but what is usually omitted is the final verse: "A blessing on him who takes and dashes / your babies against the rock!"

The framework of interiority affirms history as the proper matrix for understanding faith, proceeding from within, from our experience as historical beings. Historical research is not merely academic; it reflects how we now inhabit the world. Whereas compact consciousness did not sharply distinguish between historical fact and metaphor, we do.

Thus, while agreeing with Crossan's main thesis, one might suggest greater convergence among seemingly contradictory texts. Consider the differing images of a nonviolent Jesus entering Jerusalem on a mule and of "Christ the conqueror" (cf. Rev. 6:2) on the white horse of the Apocalypse. In light of varying "differentiations of consciousness," we can see how, within compact consciousness, expressing the decisiveness of Jesus' message required symbolic forms available at the time. Crossan notes that we are "dealing here with metaphors and symbols, of course," but appreciating the vastly different expressive tools available to our culture compared with those available to the biblical authors is instructive. The readers of the text then were not to take it literally in our sense, because the literal–metaphorical distinction was undeveloped.

Reading the text in its context—rather than simply as a message from above—opens insight into an authentic religious vision appropriate to our time. We can recognize how the gospel counters the "normalcy of

civilisation"—Roman then, global now, with its structures of injustice. The vision is of building commonality that resists violence and retribution, especially where such approaches appear in the authorized canon. It is important to acknowledge that our secular culture has brought this aspect of religious faith to the fore.

# 20. Myth After Metaphysics in The Birth of Tragedy

*Anany Mishra, anany.m@iitb.ac.in*
*(Doctoral Candidate, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay)*
*and P. G. Jung (Professor of Philosophy, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay)*

**Abstract:** This paper offers a plausible understanding of the notion of "myth" and its systemic role in Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). This is carried out against the backdrop of interpretations that evince aporia or irony in Nietzsche's invocation of the notion of myth, arguing that many alleged aporias arise precisely due to a lack on the part of Nietzsche to provide a sufficiently articulated account of the notion. Towards this end, it proposes that the notion of myth operates in two registers of meaning: first, "myth" as a hermeneutic structure that provides a narrative about reality; second, "Myth" as an "unconscious metaphysics" which is *not* a doctrinal account of reality, but a pre-reflective horizon and as the condition of possibility of rendering experience intelligible, distributing evaluative weight and thus essentially grounding *forms of life*. This distinction enables a nuanced reassessment of Nietzsche's typology of artistic, tragic, and theoretic myths as competing axiological configurations that project their own (metaphysical) worldviews. This paper further argues that Nietzsche's critique of Socratism targets not the falsity of its claims but rather its axiological architecture by denying the necessity of illusion and subordinating existence to theoretical justification. Thus, our paper argues that for Nietzsche, the Socratic myth undermines the conditions of affective attachment, perspectival inhabitation, and belief itself.

**Keywords**: Nietzsche; The Birth of Tragedy; myth; illusion; Socratism

> Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to *live*. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial–*out of profundity*.
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*[1]

## Introduction: Situating the Text

When it comes to *The Birth of Tragedy* (hereafter, *BT*), we are at a juncture where we can finally "forget a few things about it", as Nietzsche suggests, and approach the text with greater interpretive fairness.[2] The biggest hurdle towards appreciating the singularity of BT had been the baggage of Schopenhauerian metaphysical premises that it was seen as carrying. However, a recent interpretative strand of the scholarship on *BT* argues that its framework is innovative enough to be incompatible with the metaphysics of the Schopenhauerian kind. According to proponents of this reading, *BT* is best read as an exercise in myth creation (mythopoesis) rather than as advancing a set of metaphysical commit-

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge University Press, 2001), Preface, §4.

[2] *Ecce Homo*, *Why I Write Such Good Books*, *BT*, §1. Abbreviation of Nietzsche's works with their translations used are as follows: *BT*= Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy or: Hellenism and Pessimism," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, 3rd ed. (Modern Library, 1968), 1–144, *BGE*= Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, 1st ed. (New York, United States of America: Vintage Books, Random House Inc, 1966), *EH*= Friedrich Nietzsche, "Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are," in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 69–152, *WEN*= Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings From the Early Notebooks*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Alexander Nehamas, trans. Ladislaus Löb (2009; repr., Cambridge University Press, 2010), *GM*= Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality and Other Writings*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge University Press, 2017), *TL*= Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 139–52, *TI*= Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophize with a Hammer," in *Nietzsche: The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 153–230.

ments contra Schopenhauer. Thus, with the rise of the mythopoeic reading, the battleground of interpretation has shifted from the metaphysics presented in the text to the notion of 'myths' insofar as their precise nature, role, and value are concerned. These concerns in the mythopoeic scholarship on *BT* manifest themselves in two broad interpretative trends. Either Nietzsche's invocation of the notion of myth is seen as foregrounding the futility of its invocation, or that though the invocation is intended as a serious systemic notion, it fails to work as intended, thereby rendering Nietzsche's innovation of the notion inconsistent.

An example of the former trend can be found in James Porter's claim that *BT* is ironic in its metaphysical commitments since it is "an inexorable attack on the credibility of all myths" wherein "myths counteract myths and all but cancel each other in overwhelming dubiety."[3] Situating the notion of myth in a self-defeatist posture in the framework of *BT* allows Porter to read Nietzsche as strategically mobilising the notion of myth to displace metaphysical commitments without necessarily escaping metaphysical thinking. This is thereby argued as enabling Nietzsche to produce a text whose conceptual framework is intentionally unstable. In variance with this trend, but still broadly adhering to it, Melanie Shepherd argues that it is precisely the presence of multiple narratives, or "perspectival myths," of Apollo and Dionysius in *BT* that is indicative of Nietzsche's perspectivism in its pragmatico-normative aspects, though in its primitive form. Subsequently, these aspects are fleshed out in greater nuance in his *On The Genealogy of Morals*, III, §12 (hereafter, *GM*).[4] Shepherd's thesis, however, is crucially premised on the assumption that Nietzsche essentially adopts a *theoretical* posture towards myth as a false story or *Wahn*.

Instantiating the other trend in the scholarship, Peter Poellner treats the notion of myth in *BT* as integral to its framework by arguing that myths are best seen as illusions (*Wahnbild*) that restore our affective attachment to life.[5] However, despite a sympathetic understanding of the

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[3] James I. Porter, *The Invention of Dionysus: An Essay on The Birth of Tragedy* (Stanford University Press, 2000), 148.

[4] Melanie Shepherd, "Myth, Perspective, and Affirmation in Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy," *History of European Ideas* 44, no. 5 (March 7, 2018): 576.

[5] Peter Poellner, "Myth. Art and Illusion in Nietzsche," in *Myth and the Making of Modernity: The Problem of Grounding in Early Twentieth-Century Literature*, ed. Peter Poellner and Michael Bell (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 75–77.

role of myth in *BT*, Poellner concludes—on grounds of conceptual inconsistency—that *BT* ends aporetically because the function that myth is supposed to perform is foreclosed by the text's commitment to the "Wisdom of Silenus" as its definitive myth. In a more sympathetic tone, Béatrice Han-Pile portrays the notion of myth in *BT* as conceptually consistent in its invocation as "*symbolization* of the meaning of life."[6] This is accomplished according to Han-Pile by transferring this meaning to the participants of the myth. But if so, then as argued by Han-Pile the notion of myth in *BT* entails an operational difficulty because "the symbolization performed by myths relies on the implicit claim that although the mythical narrative may seem ungrounded from an empirical perspective, it presents a correct symbolization of the ontological state of affairs", which results in the impossibility of being "convinced by [a myth] unless we already have had the kind of experience symbolically conveyed by the myth, in which case the myth is not truly needed".[7] Consequently, even in Han-Pile's charitable reading, *BT* ends up begging the question due to the displacement of the efficacy of the notion of myths. Han-Pile's problematisation is picked up by Callum Blake, who asserts that the myth's claim to universality and the consequent inducement of life-affirming affects cannot help but succumb to the *particularity* of the initiated spectator of the tragedy, making it impracticable.[8] This leads Blake to argue that the framework of *BT* presupposes that a spectator is already a participant in the *form of life* wherefrom tragedy employs symbolic (mythic) forms. Consequently, this eventually dooms *BT*'s project of the rebirth of tragic myth in the then German zeitgeist, given the claim of universality intrinsic to the notion of myth, while retaining the particularity of its embeddedness in the present.

In tune with this trend, but emphasising the theme of continuity in Nietzsche's intellectual career, Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes argue that there is virtually no difference between the positions of *BT* and *GM* as in both instances Nietzsche's invocation of the notion of myth is a cali-

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[6] Béatrice Han-Pile, "Nietzsche's Metaphysics in the Birth of Tragedy," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (November 9, 2006): 395. Emphasis in original.

[7] Han-Pile, "Nietzsche's Metaphysics in the Birth of Tragedy," 395–96.

[8] Callum Blake, "Myth and the Problem of Initiation in The Birth of Tragedy," *The Agonist*, 2018, 130.

brated response to the perennial problem of meaning.[9] For Gemes and Sykes, "myth is a literally fictive narrative encompassing symbolical archetypes that help provide a structural unity to experience", which is necessary for cultural flourishing.[10] This also resonates with Douglas Burnham's assertion that the unity of myth implies the unity of a culture's hermeneutic horizon, and that a unified myth implies a unified culture.[11] Such readings reinforce the view that myths are necessary not just individually but collectively.

Following this trend of reconstructively reading *BT*, this paper argues that the notion of myth in the text is best read as switching between two registers of meaning. First, as a narrative about reality that falsifies the flux of becoming through the deployment of an axiological framework that *specifically structures* the flux *as* reality. Second, as a pre-reflective horizon that grounds the narrative about reality in distinct *forms of life*. We denote the former as 'myth' and the latter as 'Myth'. The incentive of such an aspect-reading of M/myth in *BT*, apart from addressing the lacunae in the scholarship, is that we can better understand the full scope of Nietzsche's intervention in the zeitgeist as a *Kulturkritiker*, particularly through his critique of Socratism.[12] In this, our paper reads *BT* as articulating the modality in which culture fundamentally shapes our existence by not only furnishing illusions through which life can be affirmed, but, more importantly, fostering the *ability* to believe in illusions irrespective of their content. Essentially, this orientation towards the notion of culture anticipates and encapsulates the thrust of the critique of modernity that is offered in *BT*—that is, in a zeitgeist dominated by Socratism (just as much in our own time as in

[9] For a discussion of a striking proximity between early and later Nietzsche's views on tragedy, see Aaron Ridley, "Nietzsche on Tragedy: First and Last Thoughts," *The Monist* 102, no. 3 (March 19, 2019): 316–30.

[10] Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes, "Nietzsche's Illusions," in *Nietzsche on Art and Life*, ed. Daniel Came (Oxford University Press, 2014), 82–83.

[11] Douglas Burnham, "Apollo and the Problem of the Unity of Culture in the Early Nietzsche," in *Nietzsche as a Scholar of Antiquity*, ed. Anthony K. Jensen and Helmut Heit, vol. Bloomsbury Studies in Philosophy (Bloomsbury, 2014), 92.

[12] This paper understands the influence of Socratism, following Gianni Vattimo, in "represent[ing] the entire way of thinking characteristic of the history of Western philosophy up to Nietzsche, its scientific-technical reasoning and the instrumentality of its many forms (modern technology, political economy, etc.)." Robert T. Valgenti, "Vattimo's Nietzsche," in *Interpreting Nietzsche: Reception and Influence*, ed. Ashley Woodward (London: Continuum, 2011), fn 5.

Nietzsche's), we are dangerously close to losing our ability *to believe* in anything at all.

Towards that end, the first section of the paper explicates Nietzsche's portrayal of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Here, the paper exegetically argues for a reading that broadens the purview of these portrayals. This enables us to flesh out the locus of the notion of the 'myth' within the text. Our reading is further complemented with formulations from the *Nachlass* and Nietzsche's essay *On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense,* contemporaneous with *BT*. In the second section, the paper builds on the idea that myth operates in two registers of meaning in the text by explicating the three kinds of myth articulated there. This explication is done by elaborating on the axiological topography of each of these myths. Finally, the third section of the paper deploys the description from the preceding sections to capture the deviant nature of the theoretic myth. The paper argues that this deviancy is most evident in the form of life this myth engenders, in which the productive relationship between suffering and life is rendered pathological. The paper concludes by briefly emphasising Nietzsche's critique of Socratism in light of its hegemonic grip over the interplay between Myth and myths.

## Apollonian-Dionysian Binary and the Grounds of Myth

In Nietzsche's own estimation, the first two sections of *BT* claim to contribute to the "science of aesthetics". He intends to do so through the formulation of his thesis that the production of all art can be explained through the duality (*duplicität*) of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The text informs us that the Apollonian and the Dionysian are designations for *impulses* animating two opposing spheres of art. As explicated in *BT*, for Nietzsche, the former is exemplified by the art form of sculpture (visual-plastic), while the latter is taken to be exemplified by the non-representational art form of music (auditory). However, considering the operational logistics of these drives in the context of the theory of aesthetics put forth in *BT*, we can map their manifestation beyond the narrow confines of 'aesthetics'. As indicated by Burnham and

Jesinghausen,[13] these drives are rather fundamental to existence itself, in that their operation can be mapped onto the levels of bodily states, human existence, cultural anthropology, and, finally, onto ontology itself. Initially, to understand them, Nietzsche asks us to "conceive of them as the separate *art* worlds [*Kunstwelten*] of dreams and intoxication."[14] At multiple junctures in the text, he identifies the Apollonian with the *principium individuations*, or the principle of individuation, which simultaneously represents the condition of possibility/*production* of appearances (*Schein*) and their subsequent *reproduction* (hermeneutics).[15] Thus, the currency of the Apollonian is the *form* or *limit* through which the phenomenal world of appearances is constituted, akin to the transcendental apparatus of Immanuel Kant.

It is in the logistics of production of appearances that the Apollonian betrays its ontological commitments because hermeneutics (intelligibility) is premised on the coagulation of the principle of individuation, into the "principle of identity: the authority of language, of the code, of the institution" and the "reality principle: consciousness, the subject, the ego, substance".[16] It is this that coagulation commissions in the production of the functioning notion of 'particulars' and that of stability and permanence. Thus, the Apollonian commits itself to an ontology of Being, since its operation presents reality as always-already interpreted and intelligible. This ontology is further corroborated by Nietzsche's assertion that sculpting is the Apollonian art form par excellence. Seen thus, the Apollonian drive is the grounds for the epistemic freezing of the flux of appearances and their subsequent hermeneutic deployment. It is because of such a deployment that Apollonian drive forms the basis of all identity.

Furthermore, Nietzsche describes the Apollonian and the Dionysian drives "as artistic energies which *burst forth from nature herself*,

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[13] Cf. Douglas Burnham and Martin Jesinghausen, *Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy: A Reader's Guide* (A&C Black, 2010), 28: "In any case, it turns out that the implications of the pairing of these two 'drives', named after mythological gods, extend far beyond the remit of art, or rather, the significance of art is widened to such an extent that it encompasses the whole of human life. The two art drives can therefore also be regarded as the two most fundamental life drives."

[14] *BT*, §1. Emphasis added.

[15] *BT,* §1-2, 4, 16, 21. Also, prominently identified in his essay *The Dionysiac Worldview*.

[16] Keith Ansell Pearson, "[Review of Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle by Pierre Klossowski and D.W. Smith]," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 18 (season-03 1999): 85.

without the mediation of the human artist—energies in which *nature's* art impulses are satisfied [...]".[17] This is indicative of the fact these drives are traceable back to nature in form of their operation on the level of human existence, through the entailment of their respective spheres on this level for the *operative* ontologies to which each of these drives would be committed. From the analogy of separate art-worlds and the degenerative effect of the Socratic privileging of the Apollonian intelligibility over the Dionysian on instincts asserted later in the text (§§13-15), we can infer that the Apollonian concerns the 'hermeneutic', whereas the Dionysian concerns the 'physiological' aspect of our existence. The physiological aspect of our existence concerns our constitution as being-in-the-world, which, like every other organism, is fundamentally attuned to the nature of reality as one of perpetual change. That is, the Dionysian is designated by an ontology of absolute Becoming. The *absoluteness* of Becoming endows *excess* as the currency of the Dionysian since it is always-already prior to any attempts of imposition of *form* to generate intelligibility and thereby defies the sanctity of conceptual limits, foreclosing the possibility of any neat articulations. Therefore, Nietzsche asserts that the Apollonian maxims are "'Know thyself' and 'Not too much!', whereas getting above oneself [transgression] and excess [...] true hostile demons of the non-Apolline sphere", i.e, the Dionysian sphere.[18] We can simplify the matter by stating that, generally in *BT*, the Apollonian deals in the currency of form and is driven towards perpetual (de)limitation of the flux of becoming, whereas the Dionysian deals in the currency of excess and is driven towards the perpetual transgression of the imposed forms. Moreover, since the flux of reality, i.e., *becoming*, is prior to its individuation as a multiplicity of appearances, therefore "the Dionysian is seen to be, compared to Apollonian, the eternal and the original artistic power that *first* calls the world of phenomena into existence."[19] This reinforces the idea that (Dionysian) flux is, in a sense, always-already ahead of (Apollonian) imposition of forms, or simply put, reality, as such, at any given moment always exceeds whatever is intelligible about it.

When framed thus, the intelligibility-generating hermeneutical op-

[17] *BT*, §1. Emphasis added.
[18] *BT*, §4. Cf. P.G. Jung, *Three Formulations of Autonomy: Kant, Sade and Nietzsche* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 2024), 164.
[19] *BT*, §25. Emphasis added.

eration of the Apollonian functions by freezing the flux of reality through a schema that pivots on the demarcative principle of individuation. The intelligibility generated by the Apollonian drive has the status of an *illusion*, not just because the state of affairs it makes intelligible is always-already altered the next moment, but, more importantly, the intelligibility it generates is an individuated *perspectival* falsification of the non-static nature of *reality*. This cardinal feature of the Apollonian is what Nietzsche seeks to underline while professing that:

> Knowledge, quite strictly speaking, has merely the form of tautology and is empty. Any knowledge that advances us is an identification of the non-identical, the similar, i.e. it is essentially illogical. [...] That a unity, e.g. a tree, appears to us as a multiplicity of properties and relations is anthropomorphic in two ways: firstly this circumscribed unity 'tree' *does not exist*; it is arbitrary to isolate a thing in this way (according to the eye, according to the form); every relation, rather than being the true absolute relation, is tinted with anthropomorphism.[20]

Interpreting this assertion from within the framework of *BT*, we can argue that not only does the Apollonian drive create stable, though ultimately arbitrary realities, but more importantly, the underlying principle of identity that can afford the propensity of drawing equivalences is the key to the operation of the Apollonian drive. Consequently, he clarifies that "philosophy can only stress the relativity and the anthropomorphic character of all knowledge, as well as the *power of illusion* that prevails everywhere."[21] This exemplifies Nietzsche's early position that all *forms* of intelligibility fall under the category of illusion, given our inability to access the state of affairs directly. This position is best articulated in *Truth and Lies in Extra Moral Sense* (henceforth *TL*), where Nietzsche argues that all we call truth is but a socially fabricated illusion. In this essay, Nietzsche asserts that language functions by means of an "allusive transference, a stammering translation", i.e., by "making equivalent that which is non-equivalent."[22] The possibility of arbitrary entities generated by the Apollonian drive from the flux of reality being juxtaposed in the same context is actualised through the interfacing done by meta-

[20] *WEN*, 156–57 Emphasis added.
[21] *WEN*, 104. Emphasis added.
[22] *TL*, 145.

phors that stand proxy for those entities. Furthermore, Nietzsche claims that the logistical space of metaphors that enables language by originally standing proxy for two unequal entities *needs* to be forgotten because only by "forgetting this primitive world of metaphor" and our status as "*artistically creative subject*" can we function in our day-to-day activities.[23] Alternatively stated, the operation of language and human dwelling are simultaneously premised on the necessary (unconscious) privation of the logistical space of metaphors and our de facto creative nature. Burnham draws our attention to a crucial consequence of this position in terms of the fact that our forgetting of the logistical space of metaphors simultaneously entails losing sight of the axiological topography that fundamentally constitutes any language: "Language belongs to a people, and the particular 'truths' that it embodies are primarily values—a sense of good and bad, right and wrong—those that serve (or appear to serve) the people in terms of survival and prosperity."[24] However, notwithstanding the fact that such forgetfulness, rather than hindering our linguistic ability, is the very condition for the possibility of language itself.

Analogous to how language functions by drawing equivalences between unequals, *BT* talks about the myth as a "concentrated image of the world" constituted by "the condensation of phenomena."[25] We can take this articulation to mean that a myth presents a hermeneutic enterprise of casting diverse realities, akin to how universals subsume all emergent particulars. That is, a myth essentially provides us with an *orientation* vis-à-vis the flux of absolute *becoming* by offering a mode of construing it. A myth provides a narrative that enables a vision of what constitutes reality. However, an alternate notion of myth is operative in the text, characterised by Nietzsche as the "unconscious metaphysics" of a culture. Here Nietzsche seems to provide us with a distinct articulation of the myth as something which is indispensable for the collective dimension of existence, since "any people—just as, incidentally, also any individual—is worth only as much as it is able to press upon its experiences, the stamp of eternal."[26] Consequently, this brings out a cardinal

[23] *TL*, 148. Original emphasis.
[24] Douglas Burnham, "Apollo and the Problem of the Unity of Culture in the Early Nietzsche," in *Nietzsche as a Scholar of Antiquity*, ed. Anthony K. Jensen and Helmut Heit, vol. Bloomsbury Studies in Philosophy (Bloomsbury, 2014), 86.
[25] *BT*, §23.
[26] *BT*, §23.

feature of Nietzsche's aspect-reading of the Apollonian in relation to the notion of "myth", which is invoked by him in *BT* to perform two distinct though interrelated functions. Its invocation encompasses both the functioning of myth on the concrete level (hereafter 'myth') and its functioning on the collective level (hereafter, 'Myth'). In this, the force of cohesion between the two invoked senses of myth lies in the modality in which the flux of appearances is *affectively* and existentially accounted for through an interplay between the two. It is this interplay of dependency and manifestation that ensures that an illusion (a myth), even though contingent, nevertheless sustains and functions as a stable ground of meaningfulness and signification. For instance, to the form of life underneath the aegis of the Greek myth, "even the immediate present had to *appear* to them right away *sub specie aeterni* and in a certain sense as *timeless*."[27] This *appearance* of the present as the eternal concerns the cardinal affective-existential nature of *indwelling* in the flux of appearances that the healthy interplay between Myth and myths enables. This is, in part, similar to Gemes' and Sykes' articulation of myth, as a "literary fictive narrative" that grants "structural unity to experience" by arranging the appearances.[28] However, we depart from Gemes' and Sykes's claim in our assertion that these fictive narratives (myths) are not to be taken as subjective innocent flights of imagination but are rather fundamentally grounded by the "unconscious metaphysics" (Myth). The former is illusory insofar as they grant us an axiological structure[29] that orients and commits us to a 'specifically structured' articulation of the flux of becoming. The latter is the "prereflective" ground that opens up the very possibility of such an articulation (myth). That is to say that the 'unconscious metaphysics' (Myth) is what embeds us within specific forms of life constituted by a language and a shared paradigm of activity (culture), which is made possible only as "reality *sanctioned* by myth".[30] Therefore, Nietzsche writes that, "without myth every culture loses the healthy natural power of creativity: only a horizon defined completes and unifies a whole cultural movement."[31]

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[27] *BT*, §23. Emphasis added.
[28] Gemes and Sykes, "Nietzsche's Illusions," 82–83. Poellner gives three definitions of myth.
[29] Used interchangeably with hermeneutic structure.
[30] *BT*, §7. Emphasis added.
[31] *BT*, §23.

Moreover, one particular dimension remains absent in Gemes and Sykes's account of Nietzsche's invocation of the notion of myth. Let us recall the claim from *TL*, wherein we must necessarily forget both the aforementioned primitive world of metaphors and our *de facto* nature as "aesthetically creative beings". Similarly, in our everyday coping, we need to forget the myth as the hermeneutic structure that actively parses the flux of reality as *an* interpretation of the world. More importantly, in forgetting the existence of the hermeneutic structure that we deploy, we also forget the axiological topography that fundamentally underpins the narrative about reality (myth) by constituting the logic of parsing *becoming*. This axiological topography of a myth is the value constellation through which reality is falsified as a world with a disynchronous gradient of significance distribution. This is to say that a myth presents the world as already evaluated in terms of specific coping modalities, which are connoted as noble and worthwhile, while other modalities are looked down upon.

But what exactly is the problem with forgetting the axiological topography of the myth? Losing sight of the axiological topography of the hermeneutic structure implies forgetting its status as *an* illusion, which, though necessary for the production of significance, is nevertheless contingent in itself. Thus, forgetting the genuine nature of an illusion risks an unwitting overcommitment to it precisely because it lulls us into forgetting its contingent nature. This effectively implies a conflation between the illusion and existence that catastrophizes into the acceptance of the illusion's untenability as the untenability of existence itself. The next section articulates three kinds of myths present in *BT* while using their axiological topographies to gauge their sensitivity to the predicament of overcommitment to an illusion.

## Cultural Paradigms as myths: the Artistic, the Tragic and the Theoretic

Gemes and Sykes instructively suggest that *BT*'s argument is not critically reliant on premises yielded by substantive metaphysics but is rather on facts attested by empirical reality.[32] For them, the prime suspect here for committing to substantive metaphysics as an essential premise is the *Wisdom of Silenus*. Like Gemes and Sykes, we can argue

[32] Gemes and Sykes, "Nietzsche's Illusions," 88.

that the text commits only to the *perceived* existential asymmetry of suffering to which humans are subjected, given their finitude. This suffering is an outcome of the fact that the primordial flux is not governed by the dictates of the logic of intelligibility and the subsequently generated axiological structure imposed on it. This non-compliance and the consequent suffering emerge from the fact that the flux of reality is indifferent to our imposition of meaning on it. Suffering must therefore be understood as an experience that necessarily follows the primordial encountering of the unintelligibility of Becoming *qua* Becoming (traditionally understood as Being *qua* Being), and the subsequent realisation that our construal of reality intrinsically bears with it the omen of its untenability as an eternal, and a stable, structure of signification. Within the text, this *perceived* existential asymmetry, which one necessarily draws between Becoming and Being, is referred to as the tragic or the "terrible truth" of our existence, given that any attempt towards this end is always-already an imperfect approximation.[33] The tragic truth denotes the breakdown of human coping due to the inevitable transgression of the axiological structure that is imposed as an account of the flux. The caustic nature of this truth leads to a loss of affective entanglement with life, wherein the prospect of further existence is attenuated. Therefore, art becomes a necessity for survival, since it is in and through art that the wound inflicted by the tragic truth is embalmed. For Nietzsche, it is through art that the axiological topography of a myth comes to be perpetually reappropriated in order to reinvigorate the possibility of its futural existence. When viewed thus, the Wisdom of Silenus is ultimately no more than a sobering Greek myth about the *perceived* existential asymmetry of suffering. It does not, therefore, commit Nietzsche to any substantive Schopenhauerian metaphysics. Nonetheless, for Nietzsche in *BT*, the realisation of the tragic truth for the 'nobler natures' does elicit three distinct strategies of coping with existence. Given the inevitability of suffering, Nietzsche delineates three distinct paradigms for moulding human activities (culture): the *artistic*, the *tragic*, and the *theoretic*.

Within the paradigm of the artistic myth, we are convinced of the possibility of life under sublime illusions.[34] Here, the recognition of the tragic truth becomes a site of deferment of suffering through the positing of alternate illusions (hermeneutic structures). The artistic myth thus af-

[33] *BT*, §7.
[34] *BT*, §3.

fords one to distance oneself from suffering as construed within a particular illusion. This awareness results in the synonymity of the site of the tragic truth's realisation with the particularity of that hermeneutic structure. Here, *BT* makes a claim, through recourse to the phenomenology of dreams, that the awareness of dream qua dream or the lack thereof determines one's affective stance towards it as either joy or horror, respectively. The artist's encounter with primordial flux qua illusion within the artistic myth incites a dream-like stance towards the unfolding of appearances, wherein, irrespective of the sublimity or wretchedness of the appearances' contents, the only investment is in the *enframing* itself. Here, the affective attachment to life in light of suffering is preserved through an emphasis on the bounty granted by the fact of coterminousness of the hermeneutic possibility of projecting new illusions to enframe suffering and the truth of the eternal flux of becoming. Therefore, the loss of affective attachment to life induced by the attunement to existential asymmetry of suffering is *transfigured* into an enchantment towards life itself through the postulation of a new illusion. Nietzsche articulates this as "Apollo [overcoming] the individual's suffering by his luminous glorification of the *eternity of appearance*; here beauty gains victory over the suffering inherent in life; in a certain sense, a lie is told which causes pain to disappear from the features of nature."[35] That is to say that the artistic myth offers the possibility of affirming existence underscored by tragic truth through a magnification of the *prospect* of joy in life, to the point that the existential weight of suffering is not only rendered bearable but even enjoyable.

For Nietzsche, the Homeric Greeks were the champions of this modality of coping with existence because their attitude towards suffering was one of delight at the transfigurative prospects it offered their gods and heroes alike. Nietzsche asserts that for someone who participates in the Homeric Greek culture, engendered by the paradigm of the artistic myth, even the Wisdom of Silenus appears reversed since "the very worst thing for them was to die soon, the second worst ever to die at all."[36] In resonance with Burnham's thesis of the unity of the culture as grounded upon the unity of the myth, we could now argue that a myth engenders a form of life from which culture emerges as a paradigm of human activity, unique to the people who share the myth. As we can see

[35] *BT*, §16. Emphasis added.
[36] *BT*, §3.

from the example of the Homeric Greeks, the axiological topography of the myth underpins the very contours of the form of life in which they are embedded. The artistic myth (paradigm) gave Homeric Greeks access to a nexus of signification that enabled a particular orientation towards the fact of becoming, as instantiated by the multiplicity of narratives that express the contours of the shared myth, for instance, the narrative of Oedipus or Prometheus. In summa, the artistic myth engenders a form of life in which the *perceived* existential asymmetry of suffering foregrounds a paradigm of human activity such that it is not merely life-affirming but rather a transfigurative confrontation with suffering as the basis of cultural flourishing.

For Nietzsche, the paradigms of the tragic and artistic are distinct insofar as the former affirms the metaphysical unity underneath the ephemerality of individuation. Within the tragic myth paradigm, one comes to treat individuation as the primary source of suffering. Here, however, metaphysics concerning the reality underlying individuation is not conceived by Nietzsche as a Schopenhauerian *Will* that is fundamentally structured by a lack.[37] Rather, the artist's metaphysics (*Artisten Metaphysik*) holds that reality is a productive force that continually generates and dissolves individuated forms. Since appearances (i.e., occurrences) of suffering and joy are taken as the creative outpourings of the underlying reality itself, the acceptance of either induces ecstasy because even the ultimate reality "can attain salvation *only* in appearance", i.e., through individuated beings.[38] The tragic myth thus reconciles the affirmation of life with the recognition of suffering by embedding individuated existence within a metaphysical unity. Contra Schopenhauer, the tragic myth legitimises suffering without negating it and restores our belief in existence by dissolving the fundamental urge to justify the fact of suffering.[39] Nevertheless, the tragic myth is still considered an illu-

[37] *BT*, *Attempt at a Self-Criticism*, §5.

[38] *BT*, *Attempt at a Self-Criticism*, §5.

[39] For Nietzsche, the form of life engendered by this myth comes to be manifested in the form of festivals that displayed "extravagant sexual licentiousness, whose waves overwhelmed all family life and its venerable traditions". As Nietzsche sees it, these festivals were the sites where "the most savage natural instincts were unleashed, including even that horrible mixture of sensuality and cruelty", which he deems to be "the true witches' brew" *BT*, §2. As an example of the tragic culture, Nietzsche mentions "Indian Buddhism". However, Walter Kaufmann tells us that from the second edition of the text, this example is changed to "an Indian (Brahmanic) cul-

sion because it affords us a narrative for orienting ourselves in the flux of becoming. The axiological topography of the tragic myth strategically privileges the participation in the unified whole over the inviolability of individuated existence. This thereby renders suffering legitimate, unavoidable, and endurable rather than eliminable or condemnable.

Distinct from the paradigms of the artistic and the tragic, Nietzsche construes the defining feature of the theoretic myth in terms of its treatment of suffering as a rupture of the hermeneutic structure. It thus treats suffering as a product of a hermeneutic defect that necessitates correction. In doing so, within the theoretic paradigm, myth is no longer positioned as *illusion* and conversely is taken up as an attempt to provide an accurate and objective description of reality itself. Consequently, its strategy consists of normatively recasting illusion itself as error. In doing so, it necessarily denies the status of an illusion, as an illusion, while simultaneously craftily erasing its status as itself illusory. Consequently, this covers up the very primordial ground (Myth) from which any affective entanglement with existence can be sustained, thereby foreclosing the possibility of any alternative illusion. For Nietzsche, this foreclosure is also an affective modality of ceasing the interplay between Myth and myths. Thus, any human activity that grounds and structures itself along this myth is operating within the *theoretic* paradigm "attribut[es] to knowledge and understanding the power of a panacea."[40] In Nietzsche's analysis, the strategy that this paradigm employs to make existence seem worthwhile is to "confine the individual within a limited sphere of solvable problems,"[41] wherefrom a scientific justification of existence can be achieved by the *theoretic* man. For Nietzsche, the first articulation of the theoretic paradigm is the Socratic myth. Thus, within the Socratic myth, existence is approached through the grand project of correcting it and eradicating suffering through the deployment of science

ture" in the Grossoktav edition of Nietzsche *Werke* (1905). This correction is apparently "based on 'a pencilled correction in Nietzsche's own hands in his copy of the *second* version.'" *BT*, §18, fn 2. Even though Kaufmann dismisses both the examples on the grounds that they do not make sense, the invocation of the Indian Brahmanic culture is much more apt given its metaphysical commitment to non-dualism between *atman* (illusory individuated existence) and *Brahman* (our nature as the underlying reality devoid of ignorance about its true nature).

40 *BT*, §17.

41 *BT*, §17.

(*wissenschaft*). Therefore, 'knowledge' becomes the primary currency employed towards that end by foregrounding "*dialectic* as the single path, induction (ἐπαγωγικοὶ λόγοι) and definition (ὁρίζεσθαι)."[42] This is to say that human activities organised under the rubric of Socratic myth render the congenital relationship between individuation and suffering as something pathological. Herein, suffering comes to be seen as a cancerous outgrowth of existence that ought to be surgically removed through knowledge. It is this Socratic stance towards existence that leads Nietzsche to label it as *delusional*, given that its leitmotif is harboured by a denial of its own finitude.[43] That is to say that in the form of life engendered by the Socratic myth, the only legitimate strategy to cope with tragic truth is premised fundamentally on providing us with existential comfort by crusading against ignorance, and therefore, against illusions. Thereby, it craftily portrays illusions, i.e., our only modality of coping with the tragic truth as the site of error itself and consequently the ground of our suffering as well. That is to say, the Socratic paradigm curtails our hermeneutic nature and redefines who we are as hermeneuts. Within the Socratic myth, our hermeneutic prowess is reduced to operating under the garb of 'truth-seeking' beings.

## Axiological Architecture of the Socratic myth

In its attempt to eradicate illusions altogether, the Socratic myth destroys the very medium through which existence can be meaningfully affirmed, given that what ultimately collapses in the Socratic myth is the necessary interplay between myths and Myth. The axiological topography of the Socratic myth is structured by the absolute privileging of knowledge and the resultant optimism to penetrate the very fabric of reality. For Nietzsche, it is this optimism that is characteristic of Socratic myth. It is precisely as a consequence of this naïve optimism that suffering is rendered pathological and illusion is disqualified as an error. This thereby makes the affirmation of existence conditional upon the progressive elimination of illusion as such. But in doing so, it undermines the very conditions under which any *affective* entanglement with existence is possible.

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[42] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, ed. and trans. Greg Whitlock (University of Illinois Press, 2001), 145. Emphasis in original.

[43] *BT*, §18.

Consequently, the axiological topography of the Socratic myth forecloses the plurality of illusions or perspectives on existence. Instead, it privileges its own hermeneutic structure and the illusions it casts as *non-illusions* and as the only viable modality of encountering existence. It is with this hegemonic posturing that it precludes *any* possible illusion or perspective other than itself. Simply put, the Socratic myth is structured in a way that it projects itself as Myth. For Nietzsche, the catastrophic entailment of this architecture of the Socratic myth is that the metempsychosis of all existing myths into the Socratic myth. For Nietzsche, "He who recalls the immediate consequences of this restlessly progressing spirit of science will realise at once that *myth* as annihilated by it."[44] Consequently, any approach towards existence must incorporate the theoretic convictions heralded within the Socratic myth for ascription of legitimacy, irrespective of the scope of one's affective indwelling. Therefore, under the Socratic myth, our theoretic convictions cease to appear as illusions because the fact that they are "illusions *we* have infused into the nature" is concealed.[45] Due to this architecture of the Socratic myth, suffering translates into our inability to be rational enough, and thus becomes a self-legitimising mechanism that further reinforces the sanctity of the Socratic myth.[46] However, the virtue of a singular perspective, oriented by 'truth', within the Socratic myth implies that its project is to supplant the aesthetic-affective modalities of coping with existence with the theoretic-intellectual modality. In doing so, it denies the fundamental perspectival nature of our existence.

If we take Gemes and Sykes's claim that Nietzsche's interest in the ancient Greeks is not in the content of their metaphysical claims but rather in their *ability* to believe them to be true, then *BT* seems concerned with the blueprint for the conditions necessary for human flourishing. This blueprint for cultural flourishing is hinged on fostering the conditions for an honest confrontation with existence, given one's finitude. The upshot of the recognition of my finitude leads to the realisation of my nature as a hermeneut and, subsequently, to the awareness of

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[44] *BT*, §17. Emphasis in original.

[45] Jung, *Three Formulations of Autonomy: Kant, Sade and Nietzsche*, 166.

[46] Cf. *TI*, *Problem of Socrates*, §10: "Rationality was seen as the saviour, neither Socrates nor his 'patients' had any choice about being rational, — it was *de rigueur* [...] people were in danger, they had only one option: be destroyed or—be *absurdly rational*". Emphasis in original.

my agentiality in terms of my affective entanglement, i.e., the *indwelling* within the world afforded by hermeneutic structure. More importantly, the recognition of my finitude simultaneously leads to the recognition of the possibility of construing existence differently. That is to say, for Nietzsche, recognition of one's finitude is at the same time the recognition of one's agentiality as a hermeneut. The perspectivity that entails our nature as a hermeneut is the "fundamental condition of all life", and the theoretic myth encroaches on this very condition by projecting itself as Myth.[47] In opposition to this, the paradigm of human activity in the form of life begetted by the Hellenic myth allows for a plurality of perspectives that are diverse and often discordant. This enables a plurality of perspectives through which one can approach existence on the basis of one's constitution and affective inclinations, thereby rendering *one's* relationship to suffering as one's own. Subsequently, it enables one to transfigure the very experience of suffering, given the ideality of one's affective entanglement or indwelling within one's perspective or hermeneutic structure.

## Conclusion: Socratism Today

Interestingly enough, as some scholars observe, a text like *BT* is possible only in a zeitgeist dominated by the Socratic myth. Only when all myths with their own logic of normativity have been transmuted into a myth that projects itself to be the Myth, thus bearing upon them its criteria of normativity, can 'objective' claims about the nature of existence *as such* be made. Judging by the fact that the text's first sentence commits itself to a "*science* of aesthetics" (*aesthetische Wissenschaft*), but by §20 it begins to rejoice at the deconstruction of Socratism in the hands of Kant and Schopenhauer, Nietzsche seems to be aware of this predicament that made *BT* possible. This awareness is also reflected in the diagnosis of modernity that *BT* provides in the image of a "Music-Driven Socrates [*musiktreibenden Sokrates*]" that translates into a conception of science that recognises its true nature *as* art. That is a science that does not take itself too seriously—the *gay* science.[48]

[47] *BGE*, Preface. Cf. *GM*, III *What do Ascetic Ideals Mean?*, §12: "There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival 'knowing'; the *more* affects we are able to put into words about a thing, the *more* eyes, various eyes we are able to use for the same thing, the more complete will be our 'concept' of the thing, our 'objectivity'." Emphasis in original.

[48] *BT*, §15.

Furthermore, as Silk and Stern show, the text was motivated in part by Nietzsche's own struggle with the conception of traditional enterprise of philology as a science professed as disinterested inquiry into the past (*Altertumswissenschaft*).[49] The broader point we want to convey with this brief biographical digression is that Nietzsche's critique of his zeitgeist is motivated by his inner discord and dissatisfaction experienced during the gestation of *BT*. The recognition of the hegemony of Socratic myth underlying Nietzsche's dissatisfaction with it remains the same for us in the 21st century. The existential threat posed by the Socratic myth concerns, prima facie, the state of homelessness induced by the successful projection of the Socratic myth as Myth. With the hegemonic dominance of the Socratic myth, the possibility of harbouring diverse perspectives on becoming, to make existence meaningful, has been buried as well. In its projection as Myth itself, the Socratic myth postures itself as an articulation of the 'unconscious metaphysics', thereby rendering it as thus falsifiable and consequently uninhabitable. But more importantly, owing to perpetual homelessness, we have forgotten what it means to have a home. Alternatively stated, we have made a home out of homelessness, a ground out of groundlessness. Therefore, even when modernity is desperate for a horizon or a ground of meaning, it is "doomed to exhaust all possibilities and to nourish itself wretchedly on other cultures" by *absorbing* and *assimilating* them into its culture and condition of homelessness because it does not *know* what a home looks like.[50] It is because of this perpetually unsatiated nature of the form of life engendered by the Socratic myth that Nietzsche describes Socrates as "the *vortex* and turning-point of so-called world history."[51] This is but to say that, as Socratic subjects, we can only have an intellectual relationship to things that matter to us the most, even existential threats. Essentially, the Socratic myth has convinced us that our survival is coterminous with the picture of reality that it has fossilised for us. The dissatisfaction that one has today with the Socratic myth is that it presents itself to us as the final culmination of art itself.

[49] Michael S. Silk and J. P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 38.
[50] *BT*, §23.
[51] *BT*, §15. Emphasis added.

# V. Clinical Practice and Medical Science Contribution to the Study of Fiction

## 21. Lateral Frontoparietal Network (L-FPN) and Midcingulo-insular Network (M-CIN) Activation in Truth vs. Delusion Discrimination Processes within Psychopathology

*David Tomasi, david.tomasi@yahoo.it*
*(Assoc. Professor, University of Vermont / Vermont Academy of Arts & Sciences / Vermont State Colleges / Champlain College)*

**Abstract:** What is the role of the human brain in perceiving reality? This is one of the most complex and researched questions in the scientific community. It is a question which starts —full pun intended— in the *minds* of the researchers, proceeds in laboratories and examination rooms, is modulated by computers and similar devices, and is then (albeit not necessarily in this order) analyzed from a theoretical and epidemiological perspective. Of course, whether this perspective is based on inductive or deductive reasoning, or whether it follows a dialectical framework, it is nevertheless appropriate to take into full account brain activity to frame the question. This also means considering the possibility of a drift, of an outlining pattern, of a variation from the baseline, from the norm. A change in observable areas such as the usual clinical triad emotion-cognition-behavior, and modulated by neural underpinnings such as the Lateral frontoparietal network (L-FPN) and Midcingulo-insular network (M-CIN) activation is, in this sense, a very useful tool to determine such variations between the "normal" baseline and the outliers, which can thus be analyzed as clinically relevant, and possibly warranting a psychiatric diagnosis behind the true vs. false perception and interpretation of reality.

**Keywords:** Neuroscience, Medicine, Philosophy, Neuropsychology, Perception, Neurology, Identity, Personality, Bias, Reality, Truth, Distortions

## Neurophysiological and Neurofunctional considerations

In neuroscience, neuropsychology, neurology, and related fields, the salience network (SN) indicates a system of interconnected brain regions constituting a large-scale brain network, also referred to as an intrinsic brain network. This system is often referred to as Midcingulo-insular network (M-CIN) or Cingulo-Opercular network (C-ON) including the anterior insula and dorsal anterior cingulate cortex, responsible for detecting and orienting attention to the most relevant stimuli, whether internal or external. More in detail, the M-CIN, acting as a salience network switching between networks, detects relevant stimuli, whereas L-FPN, acting as a central executive control network, initiates cognitive control.

This system integrates sensory, cognitive, and emotional information to guide behavior, playing a key role in self-awareness, emotional regulation, and reward processing. In fact, the Lateral frontoparietal network and the Midcingulo-insular network are better understood in juxtaposition -not in reductionist negative terms- to the Default Mode Network or DMN. This is because the DMN is active during internally focused thought, often on a spectrum of activities comprising sinking in one's own thoughts or mind-wandering, all the way to self-reflection and introspection, albeit in the latter case one could certainly argue for the relevance —in ontological terms— of the very spectrum/mirror which this activity should underlie and stimulate. More specifically, cognitively demanding tasks require increased activity in the Lateral frontoparietal network and in the Midcingulo-insular network and decreased activity in the Default Mode Network. It is also inferred that these processes imply that the M-CIN acts as a mediator of such inverse relationship via processes of down-regulating the DMN and up-regulating the L-FPN, in the context of a task requiring external focus. The relevance of those processes and structures becomes even more evident when analyzing the negative impact of abnormalities in the salience network on multiple mental health and identity vs. perceptual issues such as disorders including depression (the frontostriatal salience network is expanded nearly twofold in the cortex of most individuals affected by this psychiatric presentation), as well as psychiatric diagnoses such as anxiety disorders (in these subjects, the anterior insula node of the salience network has been observed to be hyperactive)[1], post-traumatic stress disor-

[1] Weixiong Jiang, Gang Li , Huasheng Liu, Feng Shi, Tao Wang, Celina Shen, Hui Shen, Dewen Hu, Wei Wang, and Dinggang She, "Reduced Cortical Thickness and

der, schizophrenia, dementia, Alzheimer's disease (all with observable structural and functional abnormalities), as well as autistic spectrum disorders, body dysmorphic disorders, gender dysphoria, and psychotic states[2]. For instance, in subjects affected by autism, the relative salience of social stimuli, such as face, eyes, and gaze, appears to be diminished. This in turn leads to a diminished understanding of external vs. internal realities, poor social skills, and difficulties in being and feeling understood by oneself and others[3]. Of course, even beyond the extremely high-level of certainty approximation of the empirical data and the strong corroboration of neurosci-

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Increased Surface Area in Antisocial Personality Disorder," *Neuroscience* 337 (2016): 143; J. C. Friedl, C. Rafling, C. M. Siegl, K. M. Reisinger, and R. M. Bonelli, "Sexualität bei psychiatrischen Erkrankungen: Ein Vergleich zwischen Borderline Persönlichkeitsstörung, Angst- und Panikattacken und Schizophrenie," paper presented at ÖGPP 2008, Toscana Congress, Gmunden, April 23–26, 2008; M. Taddei, S. Bulgheroni, D. Riva, and A. Erbetta, "Task-Related Functional Neuroimaging Contribution to Sex/Gender Differences in Cognition and Emotion during Development," *Journal of Neuroscience Research* (2022), https://doi.org/10.1002/jnr.25143; F. Olearo, *Quando il Gender Diventa Ideologia* (Milano: AGESC, 2017), http://www.agesc.it/cm-files/2017/01/04/file_1_4258.pdf; C. Rafling, J. C. Friedl, C. M. Siegl, K. M. Reisinger, and R. M. Bonelli, "Sexuality in Psychiatric Inpatients: A Comparison of Patients with Borderline Personality Disorder, Schizophrenia and Anxiety Disorder," paper presented at the 48th INPC, Pula, June 18–21, 2008; Bonelli, RM (2008): *Sexuality in psychiatric inpatients:A comparison of patients with Borderline Personality Disorder, Schizophrenia and Anxiety Disorder*. 48th INPC Pula 2008; JUN 18-21, 2008; Pula, 2008.

[2] A. Garcia-Falgueras and D. F. Swaab, "A Sex Difference in the Hypothalamic Uncinate Nucleus: Relationship to Gender Identity," *Brain* 131 (2008): 3132–3146, https://doi.org/10.1093/brain/awn276; M.-L. Vollbrecht, *Geschlecht ist nicht (Ge)schlecht – Sex, Gender und warum es in der Biologie zwei Geschlechter gibt*(Berlin: Humboldt-Universität, 2022).; S. M. Barr, D. Roberts, and K. N. Thakkar, "Psychosis in Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Individuals: A Review of the Literature and a Call for More Research," *Psychiatry Research* 306 (December 2021): 114272; B. Becker et al., "Strategies and Methods for Research on Sex Differences in Brain and Behavior," *Endocrinology* 146 (2005): 1650–1673, https://doi.org/10.1210/en. 2004-1142.

[3] Akiki, Teddy J.; Jubeir, Jenna; Bertrand, Claire; Tozzi, Leonardo; Williams, Leanne M. (January 2025). "Neural circuit basis of pathological anxiety". *Nature Reviews Neuroscience. 26* (1): 5–22.; Wright et al., 2025; Zhou R, Sun C, Sun M, Ruan Y, Li W, Gao X. "Altered intra- and inter-network connectivity in autism spectrum disorder". *Aging* (Albany NY). 2024 Jun 10 ;16(11) ; Lin, HY., Perry, A., Cocchi, L. et al. "Development of frontoparietal connectivity predicts longitudinal symptom changes in young people with autism spectrum disorder". *Transl Psychiatry 9, 86* (2019).

entific investigation to determine the causal factors in the aforementioned areas, it remains evident how the very conclusions-and thus, the self-determining powers, also in a postmodernist sense- can wildly differ in both the observed and the observer, between the subjects *affected vs. identified*[4]. In other words, we will have to ask ourselves whether recent phenomena such as the ontological development, rise, prevalence, and justification of *neurodivergence* can be understood, in a clinical sense, as a problem, issue, disease, or disorder or (not necessarily conversely or in opposition) as another form of existence, on a spectrum of (Equally valid? Equally worthy?) possibilities[5]. Scientific research has shed light on the role that the Lateral frontoparietal network plays in cognition, learning, and understanding reality and truth. Frontoparietal structural connectivity in childhood predicts the development of functional connectivity and reasoning ability[6], in turn impacting academic and social skills and performance levels. This is due to the observable fact that human reasoning skills are dependent on the communication between the lateral prefrontal and parietal cortices. Furthermore, given the strong association between areas such as academic achievement, social roles and perception, communication skills and relationships, identity and self-understanding in the social set-

[4] Raphael Bonelli. *Persönlichkeit - Geschlecht - Sexualität*. Demo für Alle, Stuttgart, D. 2016; A. Collazzoni, G. Ciocca, E. Limoncin, C. Marucci, D. Mollaioli, S. Di Sante, G. Di Lorenzo, C. Niolu, A. Siracusano, M. Maggi, et al., "Mating Strategies and Sexual Functioning in Personality Disorders: A Comprehensive Review of Literature," *Sexual Medicine Reviews* 5 (2017): 414–428, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sxmr.2017.03.009; Lisa Littman, "Parent Reports of Adolescents and Young Adults Perceived to Show Signs of a Rapid Onset of Gender Dysphoria," *PLoS ONE* 13, no. 8 (August 16, 2018): e0202330, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0202330; see also erratum in *PLoS ONE* 14, no. 3 (March 19, 2019): e0214157.

[5] D. F. Deegan and N. Engel, "Sexual Dimorphism in the Age of Genomics: How, When, Where," *Frontiers in Cell and Developmental Biology*, September 6, 2019, https://doi.org/10.3389/fcell.2019.00186.

[6] Margaret M. McCarthy and Gregory F. Ball, "Tempests and Tales: Challenges to the Study of Sex Differences in the Brain," *Biology of Sex Differences* 2 (April 28, 2011): 4, https://doi.org/10.1186/2042-6410-2-4; W. Wendelken, Emilio Ferrer, Simona Ghetti, Stephen K. Bailey, Laurie Cutting, and Silvia A. Bunge, "Frontoparietal Structural Connectivity in Childhood Predicts Development of Functional Connectivity and Reasoning Ability: A Large-Scale Longitudinal Investigation," *Journal of Neuroscience* 37, no. 35 (August 30, 2017): 8549–8558.

ting, and psychological problems such as anxiety and depression[7], the relevance of the salience network and related neuroanatomical-neurofunctional areas is even more apparent. For instance, the partial disruption of the structural and functional connectivity of the frontoparietal network underlies symptomatic anxiety in late-life depression (LLD)[8]. More specifically, late-life depression-affected patients present lower functional connectivity in the right frontoparietal network, and impaired white matter integrity in tracts to the right frontoparietal network[9]. Moreover, the analysis of the same patient population was indicative of the fact that frontoparietal network alterations were negatively correlated with anxiety severity, also shedding light on the assumption that the right Inferior Frontal Gyrus might be a crucial hub underlying the neuropathology of this type of depression[10]. From the perspectives gained through psychotherapeutic frameworks such as the cognitive triad in cognitive-behavior(-al) therapy and more loosely related areas within behaviorism or psychodynamic therapy, clinicians often infer that there are multiple intersecting levels of reality distortion, from a more basic level of cognitive distortions, toward more reality-challenging misunderstandings, misinterpretations, misperceptions,

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[7] Baeken, C., G.-R. Wu, R. De Raed. 2018. "Dorsomedial frontal cortical metabolic differences of comorbid generalized anxiety disorder in refractory major depression: a FDG PET brain imaging study". In: *J. Affect. Disord., 227* (2018), pp. 550-553; Taylor, W.D., J.R. MacFall, M.E. Payne, D.R. McQuoid, J.M. Provenzale, D.C. Steffens, K.R.R. Krishnan. "Late-life depression and microstructural abnormalities in dorsolateral prefrontal cortex white matter".*AJP, 161* (7) (2004), pp. 1293-1296; Marcus M, and Tomasi, D. 2020. "Emotional and Cognitive Responses to Academic Performance and Grade Anxiety". *Journal of Medical Research and Health Sciences, 3*(4), 919-925.

[8] Eva Reininghaus, Barbara Reininghaus, Wolfgang Fitz, Karl Hecht, and Raphael M. Bonelli, "Sexual Behavior, Body Image and Partnership in Chronic Illness: A Comparison of Huntington's Disease and Multiple Sclerosis," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 200, no. 8 (August 2012): 716–720.

[9] L. Hui, L. Xiao, S. Sizhen, Y. Zh., W. H., J. Q., et al., "Disruption of the Structural and Functional Connectivity of the Frontoparietal Network Underlies Symptomatic Anxiety in Late-Life Depression," *NeuroImage: Clinical* 28 (2020).

[10] D. Tomasi, *Neuropsychology: Neurological Basis, Clinical Evaluation, and Assessment* (Moscow: MPEI University / National Research University "MPEI," 2024), MPEI University / Национальный исследовательский университет «МЭИ» in: XII Всероссийская конференция и XXII Всероссийская школа-семинар / "Интеграция университетов России в мировое образовательное и научное пространство с учетом региональных особенностей."

which -in combination with other psychological problems such as depression, trauma, or anxiety, then proceed (clinically-diagnostically speaking) all the way to distorted, paranoic ideation, persecutory traits and even full psychosis or schizophrenic presentations[11]. This is the case of the observed disruptions in the left frontoparietal network as underlying resting state endophenotypic markers in schizophrenia[12], or that such alteration in network functional connectivity (FPN-fc) has been associated with neurocognitive dysfunction in individuals with risk for psychotic disorder[13]. It is also relevant to observe that such psychiatric presentations are further negatively impacted by the presence of other psychological factors such as personality disorders in combination with reality distortions, cluster-B traits such as narcissistic or hedonistic traits and BPD. In this sense we can understand the strong connectomics evidence for narcissistic and Antisocial Personality Traits as encoded in the Triple Network[14]. This is of fundamental importance in analyzing, as we will see below, the strong con-

[11] L. Q. Uddin, B. T. T. Yeo, and R. N. Spreng, "Towards a Universal Taxonomy of Macroscale Functional Human Brain Networks," *Brain Topography* 32, no. 6 (2019): 926–942. D. Tomasi, *Medical Philosophy* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag / Columbia University Press, 2016); D. Tomasi, *Critical Neuroscience and Philosophy: A Scientific Re-examination of the Mind-Body Problem* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Teddy J. Akiki and Chadi G. Abdallah, "Mapping the Depressed Brain Under Stress Using Multimodal Neuroimaging," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 181, no. 7 (July 2024): 578–580.

[12] G. Chahine, A. Richter, S. Wolter, R. Goya-Maldonado, and O. Gruber, "Disruptions in the Left Frontoparietal Network Underlie Resting State Endophenotypic Markers in Schizophrenia," *Human Brain Mapping* 38, no. 4 (April 2017): 1741–1750.

[13] S. Peeters, S. Van Bronswijk, Van de Ven, et al., "Cognitive Correlates of Frontoparietal Network Connectivity 'at Rest' in Individuals with Differential Risk for Psychotic Disorder," *European Neuropsychopharmacology* 25, no. 11 (September 2015), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroneuro.2015.08.007.

[14] E. Jauk, E. Weigle, K. Lehmann, M. Benedek, and A. C. Neubauer, "The Relationship between Grandiose and Vulnerable (Hypersensitive) Narcissism," *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017): 1600; E. Jauk and P. Kanske, "Can Neuroscience Help to Understand Narcissism? A Systematic Review of an Emerging Field," *Personality Neuroscience* 4 (2021): e3; K. Jornkokgoud, T. Baggio, R. Bakiaj, P. Wongupparaj, R. Job, and A. Grecucci, "Narcissus Reflected: Grey and White Matter Features' Joint Contribution to the Default Mode Network in Predicting Narcissistic Personality Traits," *European Journal of Neuroscience* 59, no. 12 (2024): 3273–329; D. Glidden, W. P. Bouman, B. A. Jones, and J. Arcelus, "Gender Dysphoria and Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Sexual Medicine Reviews* 4, no. 1 (2016): 3–14.

nection between socially influenced and narcissistic-motivated self-identification with specific psychiatric diagnoses as labels re-representing a new (or perceived as "newly-found," "re-discovered") identity[15]. Similar considerations are to be made in examining cognitive distortions or automatic, non-analyzed thought processes such as black/white thinking, in which the left hemisphere "can get obsessive"[16], thus changing from "(hyper)focused" to "(hyper)fixated". In the sense that if there is damage to the right hemisphere, this could result in an increase of delusional content by the individual experiencing it[17].

To provide further examples, the L-FPN is strongly associated with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) through altered L-FPN connectivity[18] sometimes involving decreased connectivity in certain areas, which can relate to challenges with cognitive control, executive functions, and language, as well as through broader malfunctions in both DMN and SN[19]. Furthermore, the Midcingulo-insular network is consistently observed to play a fundamental role in psychiatric disorders related to misperception, misinterpretation and misunderstanding of reality, from psychosis to body image problems to body dysmorphia / body dysmorphic disor-

[15] S. Villapol, D. J. Loane, and M. P. Burns, "Sexual Dimorphism in the Inflammatory Response to Traumatic Brain Injury," *Glia* 65 (2017): 1423–1438.

[16] Iain McGillchrist. *How Our Brains Tricked Us*. Andrew Gold: Heretics, 2024.

[17] Michael S. Gazzaniga, *The Consciousness Instinct: Unraveling the Mystery of How the Brain Makes the Mind*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018); Dragica Bogetić and Aleksandar Jugović, "Teorijski Model Socijalnog Razvoja u Objašnjenju Nastanka Seksualnog Prestupništva Adolescenata," *Specijalna Edukacija i Rehabilitacija* 18 (2020), https://doi.org/10.5937/specedreh18-24643.

[18] M. L. Dixon, A. De La Vega, and C. Mills, "Heterogeneity within the Frontoparietal Control Network and Its Relationship to the Default and Dorsal Attention Networks," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 115, no. 7 (2018): E1598–E1607, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1715766115; L. Kupis, C. Romero, B. Dirks, S. Hoang, M. V. Parladé, A. L. Beaumont, S. M. Cardona, M. Alessandri, C. Chang, J. S. Nomi, and L. Q. Uddin, "Evoked and Intrinsic Brain Network Dynamics in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder," *NeuroImage: Clinical* 28 (2020): 102396; J. Reuter, "Geschlecht 2022," in *Handbuch Körpersoziologie 2*, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-33298-3_11.

[19] H. Y. Lin, A. Perry, L. Cocchi, et al., "Development of Frontoparietal Connectivity Predicts Longitudinal Symptom Changes in Young People with Autism Spectrum Disorder," *Translational Psychiatry* 9 (2019): 86; L. Q. Uddin, B. T. T. Yeo, and R. N. Spreng, "Towards a Universal Taxonomy of Macroscale Functional Human Brain Networks," *Brain Topography* 32, no. 6 (2019): 926–942.

der[20], more specifically in the formation of delusions due to its involvement in detecting and filtering important salient stimuli and switching between other major brain networks. In other words, malfunction / dysfunction in the M-CIN can lead to the inappropriate assignment of salience to otherwise irrelevant stimuli, which is a key mechanism underlying the development of delusional beliefs, and their strengthening over time, thus resulting in a false-yet-persistent affirmation of wrong beliefs about oneself and the environment[21]. Moreover, solid and consistent scientific evidence has emerged to indicate a strong connection between autism and gender dysphoria, from systematic reviews[22], which first identified unexpectedly high autism rates among youth with gender dysphoria diagnoses[23] to clinical studies such as the one by Hisle-Gorman et al.[24] which found that children with autism diagnoses were over four times more likely to receive a gender dysphoria diagnosis[25]. The re-

[20] L. Kupis, C. Romero, B. Dirks, S. Hoang, M. V. Parladé, A. L. Beaumont, S. M. Cardona, M. Alessandri, C. Chang, J. S. Nomi, and L. Q. Uddin, "Evoked and Intrinsic Brain Network Dynamics in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder," *NeuroImage: Clinical* 28 (2020): 102396.

[21] L. Palaniyappan and P. F. Liddle, D. D. Aguilar and J. M. McNally, "Subcortical Control of the Default Mode Network: Role of the Basal Forebrain and Implications for Neuropsychiatric Disorders," *Brain Research Bulletin* 185 (July 2022): 129–139; G. A. Light, J. L. Hsu, M. H. Hsieh, K. Meyer-Gomes, J. Sprock, N. R. Swerdlow, and D. L. Braff, "Gamma Band Oscillations Reveal Neural Network Cortical Coherence Dysfunction in Schizophrenia Patients," *Biological Psychiatry*60, no. 11 (2006): 1231–1240.

[22] D. Glidden, W. P. Bouman, B. A. Jones, and J. Arcelus, "Gender Dysphoria and Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Sexual Medicine Reviews* 4, no. 1 (2016): 3–14.

[23] S. M. Barr, D. Roberts, and K. N. Thakkar, "Psychosis in Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Individuals: A Review of the Literature and a Call for More Research," *Psychiatry Research* 306 (December 2021): 114272; Friedl, J. C., C. Rafling, C. M. Siegl, K. M. Reisinger, and R. M. Bonelli, "Sexualität bei psychiatrischen Erkrankungen: Ein Vergleich zwischen Borderline Persönlichkeitsstörung, Angst- und Panikattacken und Schizophrenie," paper presented at ÖGPP 2008, Toscana Congress, Gmunden, April 23–26, 2008.

[24] E. Hisle-Gorman, C. A. Landis, A. Susi, N. A. Schvey, G. H. Gorman, C. M. Nylund, and D. A. Klein, "Gender Dysphoria in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder," *LGBT Health* 6, no. 3 (2019): 95–100.

[25] Hisle-Gorman et al., "Gender dysphoria in children with autism spectrum disorder."

search by Warrier et al[26]. confirmed elevated rates across five large independent datasets. Furthermore, a broader meta-analysis synthesizing 47 independent scientific studies was published in 2023 by Kallitsounaki & Williams[27]. This meta-analysis found that 11% of individuals with gender dysphoria have autism diagnoses, compared to 1% in the general population, and showed statistically significant differences in autism traits between those with gender dysphoria and control groups (g=0.67), with the authors noting the rising number of publications on this overlap[28]. Furthermore, another piece of scientific research[29] analyzed 919,898 youth across eight U.S. hospital systems. The study showed that 0.05% of the individuals had diagnoses of both autism and gender dysphoria. More specifically, the study showed that the probability of having a gender dysphoria diagnosis was 0.019 for those with autism, compared to 0.006 for those without, thus representing three times higher odds (aOR=3.00). Solid scientific research also indicates overlaps beyond autism, and another relevant example in the scientific literature is the high-risk factors for developing psychosis and strong preva-

[26] V. Warrier, D. M. Greenberg, E. Weir, C. Buckingham, P. Smith, M. C. Lai, and S. Baron-Cohen, "Elevated Rates of Autism, Other Neurodevelopmental and Psychiatric Diagnoses, and Autistic Traits in Transgender and Gender-Diverse Individuals," *Nature Communications* 11, no. 1 (2020): 3959; S. Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference: Men, Women and the Extreme Male Brain* (New York: Penguin/Basic Books, 2003).

[27] S. Peeters, Van Bronswijk, Van de Ven, et al., "Cognitive Correlates of Frontoparietal Network Connectivity 'at Rest' in Individuals with Differential Risk for Psychotic Disorder," *European Neuropsychopharmacology* 25, no. 11 (2016), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroneuro.2015.08.007; Wendelken, et al., 2017; K. A. Phillips, A. S. Hart, H. B. Simpson, and D. J. Stein, "Delusional versus Nondelusional Body Dysmorphic Disorder: Recommendations for DSM-5," *CNS Spectrums* 19, no. 1 (2014): 10–20; A. Kallitsounaki and D. M. Williams, "Autism Spectrum Disorder and Gender Dysphoria/Incongruence: A Systematic Literature Review and Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 53, no. 8 (2023): 3103–3117.

[28] A. Kallitsounaki and D. M. Williams, "Autism Spectrum Disorder and Gender Dysphoria/Incongruence: A Systematic Literature Review and Meta-Analysis,"

[29] N. F. Kahn, G. M. Sequeira, M. M. Garrison, F. Orlich, D. A. Christakis, T. Aye, and L. P. Richardson, "Co-Occurring Autism Spectrum Disorder and Gender Dysphoria in Adolescents," *Pediatrics* 152, no. 2 (2023): e2023061363.

lence of schizophrenia in transgender (trans-identified) individuals[30]. These scientific facts should guide as in our analysis of the relationship between proper brain functioning and the processes to determine truth vs. delusion, with particular reference to psychopathology.

## Theoretical constructs and cognitive discrimination processes in the human perception of reality: The example of gender identity disorder (GID)

As it is widely known, in 2019, the World Health Organization removed the diagnostic label (and therefore the concept) of "gender identity disorder" from the classification of mental disorders in its International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). This diagnosis has since been classified under sexual health as "gender incongruence" to reflect the new perception according to which such presentation should be viewed as part of physical health, instead of mental illness[31]. Aside from the scientific fact that physical health is not completely disconnected from psychological health (unless one were to take a negationist approach to the claim that our bodies, more specifically our brains, play indeed a fundamental role in our psychological wellbeing or lack thereof), the problem of defining a disorder still remains. It is also widely known that until 2013, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) classified the condition *representing* a mismatch between one's biological sex and *perceived* internal identity as Gender Identity Disorder (GID). This meant that this diagnosis recognized GID as a psychological disorder, rooted in psychological internal conflict, which war-

[30] K. A. Phillips, A. S. Hart, H. B. Simpson, and D. J. Stein, "Delusional versus Nondelusional Body Dysmorphic Disorder: Recommendations for DSM-5," *CNS Spectrums* 19, no. 1 (February 2014): 10–20; S. M. Barr, D. Roberts, and K. N. Thakkar, "Psychosis in Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Individuals: A Review of the Literature and a Call for More Research," *Psychiatry Research* 306 (December 2021): 114272.

[31] A. Mendrek and A. Mancini-Marïe, "Sex/Gender Differences in the Brain and Cognition in Schizophrenia," *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 67 (2016): 57–78; I. E. Sommer, A. Aleman, M. Somers, M. P. Boks, and R. S. Kahn, "Sex Differences in Handedness, Asymmetry of the Planum Temporale and Functional Language Lateralization," *Brain Research* 1206 (2008): 76–88; S. Hodgetts and M. Hausmann, "Sex/Gender Differences in Brain Lateralisation and Connectivity," in *Current Topics in Behavioral Neurosciences* (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/7854_202.

ranted psychotherapeutic treatment aimed at helping the individual understand their distress and, ideally, resolve it[32]. In this sense, any further medical-surgical intervention was strongly discouraged and always viewed as a last-resort, "treatment-resistant" (another label which warrants thorough examination, as it does not clearly resolve the question on whether the problem was with the therapy or the therapist itself v. himself/herself, respectively) option[33]. While the labeling and diagnosing problems remained, the newer version of the DSM published in 2013 (5, followed by DSM-5-TR in 2022) replaced Gender Identity Disorder with Gender Dysphoria, in order to clearly make the inferential statement that "the identity itself was no longer considered disordered, only the distress it caused"[34]. This implied, that the American Psychiatric Association (and other associations in the US, such as WPATH) believed that if people believe they are the opposite sex and experience no distress, they are considered mentally well, and therefore -in this very (il)logical order, which is in itself a very problematic assumption- *correct*, thus displaying a personal *truth*, no longer an opinion (which would be -potentially- falsifiable). This view had a groundbreaking (in a very negative sense, if we may state this) effect in both diagnostics and therapy, and even more so from the perspective of the proper understanding of truth in society at large. The outcome was the view according to which if those affected individuals above were distressed, the recommended treatment would no longer be psychological, but fully physi-

[32] Harald Schulze, ed., *Gender Studies: Wissenschaft Oder Ideologie*, edited by Harald Schulze-Eisentraut and Alexander Ulfig (2019); J. S. Stevens and S. Hamann, "Sex Differences in Brain Activation to Emotional Stimuli: A Meta-Analysis of Neuroimaging Studies," *Neuropsychology* 50, no. 7 (2012): 1578–1593; Stella O'Malley, *Understanding the Drive to Medically Transition as a Mental Disorder* (Genspect, 2025).

[33] T. F. Beek, P. T. Cohen-Kettenis, and B. P. Kreukels, "Gender Incongruence/Gender Dysphoria and Its Classification History," *International Review of Psychiatry* 28, no. 1 (2016): 5–12; A. D. Fisher, G. Castellini, J. Ristori, H. Casale, E. Cassioli, C. Sensi, E. Fanni, A. M. Amato, E. Bettini, M. Mosconi, et al., "Cross-Sex Hormone Treatment and Psychobiological Changes in Transsexual Persons: Two-Year Follow-Up Data," *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism* 101 (2016): 4260–4269, https://doi.org/10.1210/jc.2016-1276.

[34] T. F. Beek, P. T. Cohen-Kettenis, and B. P. Kreukels, "Gender Incongruence/Gender Dysphoria and Its Classification History," *International Review of Psychiatry* 28, no. 1 (2016): 5–12.A; D. Fisher et al., "Cross-Sex Hormone Treatment and Psychobiological Changes in Transsexual Persons: Two-Year Follow-Up Data."

cal. In other words, the person (and thus, the medical-clinical provider) would no longer have to work with the mind, but with the body, which eventually meant surgical interventions to alter a perfectly functioning body. While the personal choice (whether truly free or not), opinion, or aesthetic preference could still warrant some discussions (think of the "artistic" works of Herman Nitsch, Orlan, and others), it is also obvious, dare we say even to a first year philosophy student, that when these types of pseudoscientific medical treatments are offered without a proper understanding of the theoretical constructs behind them[35], or even worse (as it is unfortunately the current case in many university hospitals in the USA) without solid scientific and medical understanding[36], they not only cease to be therapeutic and healing, but also represent an unprecedented case of iatrogenic experimentation on the broad population. This is of course corroborated by the WHO statement that "trans-related and gender diverse identities are not conditions of mental ill-health, and that classifying them as such can cause enormous

[35] Tomás Bogardus, "Evaluating Arguments for the Sex/Gender Distinction," *Philosophia* 48, no. 3 (2020): 873–892; S. Luraghi, "The Origin of the Feminine Gender in Indo-European: An Old Problem in a New Perspective," in *Grammatical Change in Indo-European Languages*, ed. V. Bubenik, J. Hewson, and S. Rose (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Benjamins, 2009), 3–13; C. Louis, "Interview mit Frau Prof. Nüsslein-Volhard – Viele Geschlechter? Das ist Unfug!" *Emma. Blein Mutig!* 2002, https://www.emma.de/artikel/viele-geschlechter-das-ist-unfug-339689.

[36] B. Adam-Radmanić and E. Voland, "Debatte: Zwischen 'Biologismus' und 'Gender-Wahn'?" *Humanistischer Salon Nürnberg* (Nürnberg, Germany, 2018); S. A. Berenbaum and A. M. Beltz, "Sexual Differentiation of Human Behavior: Effects of Prenatal and Pubertal Organizational Hormones," *Frontiers in Neuroendocrinology* 32 (2011): 183–200, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yfrne.2011.03.001; Jun Won Lee, Martin Profant, and Chao Wang, "Metabolic Sex Dimorphism of the Brain at the Gene, Cell, and Tissue Level," *Journal of Immunology* 208, no. 2 (January 15, 2022): 212–220; J. C. S. Mapplebeck, S. Beggs, and M. W. Salter, "Sex Differences in Pain: A Tale of Two Immune Cells," *Pain* 157, suppl. 1 (2016): S2–S6; M. Lotze, M. Domin, F. H. Gerlach, et al., "Novel Findings from 2,838 Adult Brains on Sex Differences in Gray Matter Brain Volume," *Scientific Reports* 9 (2019): 1671; M. Hines, "Sex-Related Variation in Human Behavior and the Brain," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 14 (2010): 448–456, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2010.07.005; J. E. Ippolito, A. K.-Y. Yim, J. Luo, P. Chinnaiyan, and J. B. Rubin, "Sexual Dimorphism in Glioma Glycolysis Underlies Sex Differences in Survival," *JCI Insight* 2 (2017): e92142; L. A. Hutton, G. S. Gu, and R. B. Simerly, "Development of a Sexually Dimorphic Projection from the Bed Nucleus of the Stria Terminalis to the Anteroventral Periventricular Nucleus in the Rat," *Journal of Neuroscience* 18 (1998): 3003–3013.

stigma"[37]. Of course, this statement and the view contained therein are in themselves stigmatizing and hurtful. They represent both a low level and a high level of hurt. The first level is waged against professionals in the medical-therapeutic-scientific field, as they assert that psychological research, therapy, and diagnoses are not as important as physical ones (as if, yet again, those are completely distinct and separated[38]) and result in prohibiting or banning proper forms of clinical therapeutic interventions, labeling everything as "conversion therapy" and subsequently labeling the latter as intrinsically evil, which is humorous in a way, as a field which would like to present itself as scientific (as in the case of the American Psychiatric Association) ends up banning "conversion" by utilizing intrinsically moral-theological terms such as "evil," also completely forgetting (or quite possibly ignoring) the references of conversion to *μετατροπή* and *Μετανοείτε*[39]. The second level of the hurt the WHO statement provides is far worse, as it not only undermines medicine and science, but also promotes psychological and physical harm to those affected[40], as they prevent them from obtaining proper therapy, thus implying that mental disorders are "inherently shameful and best avoided altogether"[41]. As we discussed elsewhere[42] the very conceptu-

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[37] World Health Organization - WHO, Gender and Health Statement 2013; David Tomasi. Transgender Ideology Literature in Elementary Schools: An Open Letter from a Professor, Researcher, and Psychologist. Sofia, BG: *Sofia Philosophical Review 15(2),* 2023.

[38] Christiane Nüsslein-Volhard, *Von Genen und Embryonen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2004); Ulrich Kutschera, *Das Gender-Paradoxon: Mann und Frau als evolvierte Menschentypen* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2016); Christiane Nüsslein-Volhard, *Wann ist ein Mensch ein Mensch?* (Stuttgart: C. F. Müller, 2003).

[39] David Tomasi, *Gender: Science or Ideology?* (Rome: Accademia Tiberina, 2022); Alexander Korte, "Trans-Identität bei Kindern und Jugendlichen: Therapeutische Kontroversen – Ethische Fragen," in *Forum Bioethik*, Deutscher Ethikrat, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Leibniz-Saal, 2020.

[40] E. Hisle-Gorman, C. A. Landis, A. Susi, N. A. Schvey, G. H. Gorman, C. M. Nylund, and D. A. Klein, "Gender Dysphoria in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder," *LGBT Health* 6, no. 3 (2019): 95–100; S. T. Gal-Oz, B. Maier, H. Yoshida, K. Seddu, N. Elbaz, C. Czysz, O. Zuk, B. E. Stranger, H. Ner-Gaon, and T. Shay, "ImmGen Report: Sexual Dimorphism in the Immune System Transcriptome," *Nature Communications* 10 (2019): 4295; T. A. LeGates, M. D. Kvarta, and S. M. Thompson, "Sex Differences in Antidepressant Efficacy," *Neuropsychopharmacology* 44 (2019): 140–154.

[41] Stella O'Malley, 2025 *Understanding the Drive to Medically Transition as a Mental Disorder*. Genspect

alization of labels such as Disease, Disorder, Condition, Syndrome, Illness, Issue and similar terms underlies the understanding of the role medicine, care, treatment, and therapy play, especially in taking into account the scientifically demonstrable fact that the perception of them informs, in both diagnostic and prognostic terms the outcomes of these problems and their relation to efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness[43]. In this sense, it is of utmost importance to clearly establish the parameters according to which we ought to view these neuroscientific, psychological, and medical problems. One of the very first questions one might ask, is which ideas or perspectives are in dire need of proper definition?[44] In other words, how can we describe their validity or truthfulness, in the sense of objectively true, or at least truthful?

In both diagnostic and realistic terms, if we were to discuss such parameters, we might quickly realize that they rely on pre-established hierarchies, at least at face value. This would of course "move the post one step further," in which case a question on their origin might be warranted. Beyond the realm of neuroscientific research, this is obviously the case of society and politics, as well as of philosophy, and even religion. However, the assumption here is that all these areas are, or ought to be, separated. In other words, "those who believe that they are not one and the same, at least in the sense that they originate from the same core, and are thus so deeply interconnected, that taking them apart would nullify them, would remove the very foundations upon which they are based, thus making them impossible to follow". [45] From a strictly neuroscientific perspective, it is important to apply Occam's razor to labora-

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[42] David Tomasi, *Medical Philosophy: Philosophical Analysis of Patient Self-Perception in Diagnostics and Therapy* (New York: Ibidem Verlag / Columbia University Press, 2016).

[43] Tomasi, "*Medical Philosophy: Philosophical Analysis of Patient Self-Perception in Diagnostics and Therapy*", 78

[44] M. F. Steger, "Meaning in Life and Wellbeing," in *Wellbeing, Recovery and Mental Health*, ed. M. Slade, L. Oades, and A. Jarden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 75–85; D. Tomasi and M. Stenico, *Gli Effetti Neuropsicologici dell'Utilizzo Compulsivo della Pornografia* (Trent, Italy: Scuola Filosofica di Fornace, 2025), 10/13(25).

[45] David Tomasi, "*The importance of Objective Truth*" (EdX / HarvardX / Harvard University, 2025). *Aesthint 15 Rhetoric: The Art of Persuasive Writing and Public Speaking.*

tory experimentation, and I would suggest that a similar approach should be taken in discussing ontological aspects of truth, when discussing the role that the brain plays in mediating our perception of reality[46]. Thus, if the causal markers of the assumptions of external truth, as stated above, are to be found in something external to all parameters we utilize to perceive truth. From a neuroanatomical perspective, this would be akin to saying that those determinants should go beyond sensorimotor perception, apperception and sensory gating, pure perception and proprioception. They "go beyond" in the sense that their ontological existence is not limited to those neuroanatomical functions, but at the same time they don't -because they can't- contradict them. Thus, the parameters of truth have to be universal, as well as external to any personal, subjective, or culturally and/or socially dependent context, and independent from personal opinions[47] which is to say that they must be this way, they are the way they ought to be, and if they are not, they would not satisfy their own parameters. Moreover, if they are representative of the truth, they necessarily must be external, objective and universal. In simplistic terms, if they represent universal truth beyond subjective, sensorimotor perception, this truth must be "the" Truth, and not just "a" or "this" or "that" truth.

Of course, theories of truth are as varied and diverse, as they are prone to multiply and disagree with one another on exponential levels since the beginning of philosophy, I dare say since the beginning of our separate existence as human beings on this earth. Among many criticisms one could offer against the defense of an external and universal Truth, one could criticize the idea that the premises above are fully independent from an external, universal, and objective Truth, offering (just to provide one example in the myriad of possible criticisms) the position according to which all premises are personal and subjective. In this sense, all these truths are indeed subjective and personal opinions.

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[46] David Tomasi, "Sensory Transduction from the Epithelium through the Piriform Cortex in Human Olfaction: Neuroscience and Artificial Intelligence," *VICA* 11 (2025): 25 (Burlington, VT: Il Messaggio).

[47] Debra Soh, *The End of Gender: Debunking the Myths about Sex and Identity in Our Society* (New York, NY: Threshold Editions); Boghossian; David Tomasi, *Critical Neuroscience and Philosophy. A Scientific Re-examination of the Mind-body Problem* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

But, as we have seen elsewhere[48] this claim has, again, two further implications. The first aspect is that the statement that there must be an external, objective and universal truth underlying all other parameters must in itself be respected as one of the many opinions (one of the many truths, in this context) there are. This does not necessarily imply that my opinion, or any other, for that matter, has more validity than another one, but this too could cause a logical fallacy, as claiming that someone's opinion is "more valid" or "matters more" than someone else's is to claim that the judgement would have to rest again on an external, objective and universal parameter. Furthermore, one will have to recognize that the statement that "all rules and principles, and therefore all truths are subjective and personal," is in itself a personal opinion, which is -by definition- not the truth everyone must agree on, given that the intrinsic disagreement is what this claim attempts to defend. This would be the case even if one were to say that someone's opinion is "Truer" (as opposed to "valid" as in the previous case) than someone else's. It would have to rest again on an external, objective and universal parameter.[49]

## Conclusion

When analyzing brain structures and function, we must always pay attention to those areas, mechanisms, and processes which operate in a statistically predictable way, which is to say that they present essential elements of normal functioning, the variability of which is truly indicative of non-optimal functioning, in itself implying a variation from the norm, which would best exemplify possible malfunction, dysfunction, or damage. In this sense, from a neurofunctional perspective, it would indeed be possible that someone's opinion might appear (thus, present itself in neurofunctional modulating manners) "Truer" than someone else's, but this would be possible if and only if the "internal" element of such subjective opinion

[48] David Tomasi, "Neuroscience & Artificial Intelligence," presented at *Science, Technology, and Business (STB) Days at the Festival of Italian Creativity*, Consulate General of Italy, Boston, MA, 2025, with Alberto Ascheri, Paolo Bonato, Carmelo Nucera, and Michela Fagiolini, CNR Institute of Neuroscience (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche) / Harvard Medical School / Boston Children's Hospital.

[49] Chabrun F., X.Dieu, G.Rousseau, S.Chupin, F.Letournel, V.Procaccio, D.Bonneau, G.Lenaers, G.Simard, D.Mirebeau-Prunier, et al 2020. "Metabolomics reveals highly regional specificity of cerebral sexual dimorphism in mice". *Prog. Neurobiol*. 184: 101698.

is better at approximating the "external" element of the objective truth. Thus, from this perspective there cannot be "my truth" and "your truth." These considerations, in combination with solid neuroscientific research corroborate the idea that, in order to ascertain whether one or more perceptions we might have of ourselves and others, also in the broader context of social environments, self-image and identity, and further appreciation of our role and meaning in life, it is necessary to evaluate the proper functioning of brain activity, especially in those areas, such as the Lateral frontoparietal network (L-FPN) and Midcingulo-insular network (M-CIN), which underlie our abilities to detect truth vs falsehood, to discriminate between reality and delusion, and ultimately to find peace and purpose in our life, precisely because "seeing reality as (it) is" is shown to promote overall wellbeing, happiness in multiple areas of human functioning[50]. In this context, we are not suggesting utilizing neuroscientific research as the only way to investigate reality or the perception of reality. We have consistently addressed the need for an open conversation when discussing the proper and most effective investigation method in multiple disciplines, and the need for a multidisciplinary approach in investigating reality[51]. For example, we would not advise resorting to basic chemistry alone, in discussing the quality of Renaissance painting, or the mystical elements in Orthodox iconography, as we do not think that a full knowledge of the chemical composition of pigments or gold leaves could ultimately satisfy the complex and beautiful profound aspects of making, sharing, and experiencing art[52]. In this sense, we must be open minded, although we find ourselves in agreement with Prof. Walter Kotschnig in

[50] E. Diener, D. Wirtz, W. Tov, C. Kim-Prieto, D. W. Choi, S. Oishi, and R. Biswas-Diener, "New Wellbeing Measures: Short Scales to Assess Flourishing and Positive and Negative Feelings," *Social Indicators Research* 97 (2010): 143–156.

[51] Stella O'Malley, *Understanding the Drive to Medically Transition as a Mental Disorder* (Genspect, 2025); Steger, 2017; Diener, Seligman, Choi, & Oishi, 2018; Wong, 2010; David Tomasi, *Medical Philosophy: Philosophical Analysis of Patient Self-Perception in Diagnostics and Therapy* (New York: Ibidem Verlag / Columbia University Press, 2016).

[52] David Tomasi, *Between Empirical Evidence and Theoretical Frameworks: The Concept of Free Will at the Intersection of Philosophical Understanding, Psychological Analysis, and Neural Correlates* (Moscow: MPEI University / National Research University "MPEI," 2022), presented at MPEI University / Национальный исследовательский университет «МЭИ» in: XI Всероссийская конференция с международным участием «Энергосбережение – теория и практика».

stating that "students should keep their minds open, but not so open that (their) brains fall out"[53]. This is, we would strongly argue on the basis of all the premises above, the case of the perception of reality filtered through the human experience, with human sensory, motor, perceptive-perceptual, cognitive, memory, emotional mechanisms and processes, each of which is modulated by the brain. Since reality is perceived in a significant, profound, and intrinsic manner by the brain, we should pay more attention (and in doing this, we would most certainly utilize our brain, for neurologically obvious reasons) to the very way our perceptions might match reality or, on the contrary, might contradict reality. This is also because, as we have seen, reality itself -at least those elements which can indeed be perceived via those electro-magneto-chemical (etc.) mechanisms above- contains "the very same ingredients" as our bodies and behaves according to the same natural laws of physics as our bodies do. This is not necessarily a call for an overextension or application of disciplines and schools of thought such as embodied cognition, but it is a *real*ization (pun fully intended) that aligning our perceptions of reality with reality itself, will indeed make us more precise, attentive, and objective, while at the same time making us more perceptive, properly sensitive, empathetic, and ultimately positive, if not fully content and happy[54]. While the latter two terms should also be analyzed from the perspectives of fields, disciplines and perspectives incorporating, one could argue, philosophy, spirituality, ethics and morality, religion, and mysticism, this is not in contradiction or opposition with our emphasis on the importance of the scientific method to investigate reality. In this sense, we could certainly agree with Aquinas, in that "aligning our reality with God is the path to perfect happiness, which is achieved through a supernatural union with God *in the afterlife*"[55], but *in the meantime* (whether this "time" is an *Aion*, *Chronos*, or *Kairos*) and in this world, we strongly advocate for a perception of reality that matches scientific evidence.

[53] Walther Kotschnig, Lecture at Holyoke College, 1936.

[54] L. C. Walsh, J. K. Boehm, and S. Lyubomirsky, "Does Happiness Promote Career Success? Revisiting the Evidence," *Journal of Career Assessment* 26, no. 2 (2018): 199–219.

[55] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*, III-56.

# 22. Fictional Reality in Addiction

*Eleftherios Sarantis, esarantis@gmail.com*
*(Post-Doctoral Fellow, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski)*

**Abstract:** Addiction is not only a neurobiological, psychological condition, but also a philosophical predicament: it often involves living in a kind of fictional reality. An individual caught in addiction frequently develops beliefs or narratives that defy objective evidence, thereby enabling the destructive behavior to continue. This self-created illusion has profound implications for the philosophy of medicine, as it blurs the line between reality and fiction in the lived experience of the addict. Two theoretical frameworks can shed light on this phenomenon. Cognitive dissonance theory from psychology explains how people reconcile contradictions between their knowledge and behavior, often by unconsciously altering their perception of reality. And the differentiation of self from family systems theory describes a person's capacity to maintain a stable, independent identity under emotional pressure, a capacity that, when lacking, may leave one more vulnerable to self-deception. This paper synthesizes these perspectives to explore how the addict's fictional reality is formed and sustained, and how it might be dismantled. I define cognitive dissonance and examine how it operates in addiction to create an internally consistent but false reality. Then I define differentiation of self and consider how a poorly differentiated self can facilitate the maintenance of these fictions. Finally, I discuss therapeutic implications: how increasing an individual's self-differentiation could be key to resolving the fabricated illusion that delays addiction recovery.

**Keywords:** philosophy of medicine, addiction, cognitive dissonance, differentiation of self

## Cognitive Dissonance: The Architect of Fictional Reality

Cognitive dissonance, first formulated by Leon Festinger in the mid-twentieth century, was a pivotal moment in the psychological sciences as a classic theory of motivation. It operates at the boundary where thought becomes narrative, where reality is retrofitted to maintain co-

herence in the self. Festinger defined cognitive dissonance as a form of psychological discomfort that arises when a person holds two or more inconsistent cognitions.[1] These inconsistencies might exist between beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors, and the dissonance they produce generates a motivation to resolve the discomfort. This motivational drive is akin to physiological needs: just as hunger compels one to eat, dissonance compels a person to either change their beliefs, behaviors, or the perceived relationship between the two to restore internal harmony.

The impact of this insight was amplified in a groundbreaking experiment by Festinger and Carlsmith, which demonstrated the counterintuitive finding that individuals paid only a small amount ($1) to lie about enjoying a boring task were more likely to internally adopt the false belief than those paid a more substantial sum ($20).[2] Individuals paid only $1 to lie about a boring task later convinced themselves the task was enjoyable, whereas those paid $20 felt no such need. The smaller incentive was insufficient to justify the behavior externally, leaving internal rationalization, changing one's own belief, as the only route to dissonance reduction. This foundational study illustrated its transformative potential: people change their mental world to preserve a consistent sense of self.

Other early studies strengthened the empirical basis of the theory. Brehm showed that after choosing between options, people come to value their chosen option more and devalue the rejected option, as if to reassure themselves they made the right choice.[3] Likewise, Aronson and Mills found that people tend to increase their liking for a group when they had to endure a severe initiation to join it.[4] The discomfort of the initiation clashed with the trivial nature of the group; to reduce dissonance, participants elevated the group's value in their own minds.

These findings converged on a central point: human beings are not passive reflectors of reality but active editors of it. When beliefs and ac-

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1 Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957).

2 Leon Festinger and James M. Carlsmith, "Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 58, no. 2 (1959): 203–10.

3 Jack W. Brehm, "Postdecision Changes in the Desirability of Alternatives," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 52, no. 3 (1956): 384–89.

4 Elliot Aronson and Judson Mills, "The Effect of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 59, no. 2 (1959): 177–81.

tions misalign, the mind may warp the world, through reinterpretation, minimization, or denial, to fit beliefs or decisions already made. In this way, dissonance produces a fiction, but one that functions as reality for the individual. The self bends its own ontology to avoid the rupture of incoherence.

A theoretical refinement by Cooper and Fazio further focused on the theory, arguing that dissonance is most likely to occur when a person believes they have freely chosen to act in a way that causes an undesirable consequence.[5] The individual, now cast as the author of a contradiction, must resolve the psychic tension, not just for internal consistency but for moral coherence. What emerges here is a structure of meaning-making. Dissonance narrates. It transforms incoherent facts into coherent stories, in which the protagonist (the self) is never entirely at fault, always seeking resolution. These stories often involve distortions, justifications, and ideological reframing, what might be called narrative fiction. But they are not experienced as such. Rather, fiction becomes lived reality.

Cognitive dissonance is an existential imperative to sustain the unity of the self through the fabrication of meaning. The very capacity to experience guilt, self-deception, or moral rationalization implies the operation of dissonance as a subjective sculptor of reality. This operation becomes particularly stark in addiction, where dissonance is a chronic state. Addicted individuals often sustain themselves in a suspended world of beliefs that conflict with observable facts, believing they are in control when they are not, believing the harm is minimal when it is not, believing they will stop tomorrow though in in fact they do not. These beliefs, however contradictory, are not delusions. They are self-authored realities enacted in the face of overwhelming truth.

Dissonance theory exposes the mechanism by which the mind defends the integrity of the self by authoring a reality in which inconsistency is neutralized. This fictional reality, stabilized by emotion, memory, belief, and defense, is the terrain upon which addiction takes hold. It is the psychic ecology in which compulsion flourishes, buffered from rupture by a fiction too consistent to feel false. The addicts, then, do not lie to others or even to themselves; they inhabit a world created to make

[5] Joel Cooper and Russell H. Fazio, "A New Look at Dissonance Theory," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 17, ed. Leonard Berkowitz (New York: Academic Press, 1984), 229–66.

sense of the senseless, a world built, paradoxically, from the need for coherence.

## Addiction and the Self-Constructed Fictional World

Addiction is not only the repetition of a harmful behavior; it is a sustained rewriting of one's reality. If dissonance functions as a narrative mechanism that transforms inconsistency into coherence, then addiction presents a particularly intense and chronic condition under which this mechanism operates. The dissonance between what the addicted individual knows to be true and what they continue to do creates an ongoing need for rationalization. Over time, these rationalizations congeal into an internally consistent, but factually inconsistent worldview, a fictional reality. The addict's belief system may begin as conflicted, "I know this is bad for me, but I can't stop". If the behavior persists, the mind cannot tolerate sustained dissonance. It begins to reconstruct belief, perception, and even memory in ways that support the continuation of use. Fiction grows with the habit.

Numerous empirical studies reveal how addicted individuals create justificatory narratives that sustain use despite recognizing its harms. Markowitz found that many smokers hold "self-exempting" beliefs: they acknowledge that smoking is dangerous in general but maintain that their own risk is lower.[6] These beliefs are rarely based on medical evidence. Instead, they are supported by anecdotal reasoning, "My uncle smoked and lived to 90" or illogical distinctions, "I smoke light cigarettes." These are not random thoughts but dissonance-reduction strategies: they allow the behavior to persist without destabilizing the self-image of being rational or health-conscious.

Similarly, Mäkelä identified the majority fallacy as a dissonance-avoidance tactic in those who engage in heavy drinking.[7] Individuals often overestimate the degree to which others drink, thereby reducing the perceived abnormality of their own behavior. This act of social comparison serves a stabilizing function: "I may drink too much, but not more than most people I know." The logic is rooted in social fiction, con-

[6] Lawrence J. Markowitz, "Smokers' Perceived Self-Exemption from Health Risks," *Psi Chi Journal of Undergraduate Research* 5, no. 3 (2000): 119–24.

[7] Klaus Mäkelä, "Drinking, the Majority Fallacy, Cognitive Dissonance and Social Pressure," *Addiction* 92, no. 6 (1997): 729–36.

structing a hypothetical norm that justifies the deviation.

Fotuhi et al. analyzing beliefs among smokers across four countries, described a range of cognitive distortions: minimizing the risk, expressing distrust in scientific studies, or redefining addiction as a manageable lifestyle choice.[8] These beliefs often emerge after a failed quit attempt, serving as emotional buffers against the shame and frustration of relapse. The fiction becomes thicker as reality becomes harder to bear.

In each of these cases, the individual confronts the dissonance between knowledge and behavior. The gap cannot remain indefinitely. The path of least resistance is usually not behavioral change which is arduous, emotionally taxing, and almost always entails persistent withdrawal symptoms, but belief change. The addict modifies perception to reduce pain, creating a new belief-world in which the clash is softened or disappears altogether.

Pickard reframes addiction as a failure of knowledge, sustained by motivated cognition that blocks recognition of the causal harms of one's own behavior.[9] Denial functions as a cognitive shield that preserves agency while simultaneously distorting self-understanding, allowing individuals to continue choosing to use without fully confronting its personal costs. This shows how addiction is sustained through selective blindness rather than false belief alone, positioning addiction as a disorder of cognition as much as it is a disorder of desire.

The addict is selectively blind, both author and inhabitant of a fictional world. That world has layers; there is the first layer of denial ("It's not that bad"), then rationalization ("It helps me function"), and then reification ("This is who I am"). Each layer builds upon the last, forming a scaffold that insulates the self from the catastrophic dissonance that would result from direct confrontation with the truth. Understanding addiction in this way reveals the existential stakes of the condition. The addicted person starts from seeking pleasure or escape, but at the same time seeks coherence. When the world addicts inhabit cannot deliver that coherence, they build one, and once believed, it becomes indistinguishable from reality. What we here call *fictional reality* becomes the habitat in which the

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[8] Omid Fotuhi, Geoffrey T. Fong, Mark P. Zanna, Ron Borland, Hua Hie Yong, and K. Michael Cummings, "Patterns of Cognitive Dissonance–Reducing Beliefs among Smokers: A Longitudinal Analysis from the International Tobacco Control (ITC) Four Country Survey," *Tobacco Control* 22, no. 1 (2013): 52–58.

[9] Hanna Pickard, "Denial in Addiction," *Mind & Language* 31, no. 3 (2016): 277–99.

addict survives, at least until collapse or intervention.

**Differentiation of Self: Identity versus Enmeshment**

Where cognitive dissonance theory explains how the mind resolves internal contradictions, the concept of differentiation of self illuminates why some individuals are more vulnerable to such contradictions in the first place. Rooted in Bowen Family Systems Theory, differentiation of self (DoS) is a psychological and relational construct that measures the ability of a person to maintain their autonomous sense of identity while remaining emotionally connected to others. In the context of addiction, it offers a profound lens through which to understand how one's selfhood becomes compromised, and how recovery might be structured around reconstituting the self.

Murray Bowen, the originator of the concept, conceptualized the self as an entity forged within emotional systems, particularly family systems. In his landmark work *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, Bowen defines DoS as the capacity to maintain emotional objectivity and self-regulation in the presence of anxiety while remaining meaningfully connected to significant others.[10] More precisely, it is the ability to distinguish thinking from feeling at an intrapersonal level, and to maintain autonomy especially within close relationships. A highly differentiated individual can maintain a stable identity without being swept away by emotional reactivity or the opinions of others. In contrast, someone with low differentiation tends to be emotionally fused, either conforming to or cutting off from others in reactive ways.

Kerr and Bowen further elaborate that a poorly differentiated person lacks a solid "I-position", a clearly defined sense of self that can guide decision-making under stress.[11] Instead, such individuals often oscillate between dependency and emotional cutoff, neither fully autonomous nor genuinely connected. This fusion with others' emotions makes them highly susceptible to anxiety, social pressure, and relational dysfunction.

Skowron and Friedlander operationalized the concept through the Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI), a psychometric tool designed to

[10] Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1978)

[11] Michael E. Kerr and Murray Bowen, *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988).

quantify levels of differentiation across four dimensions: Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with others.[12] They find that higher differentiation correlates with better psychological adjustment, lower anxiety, and stronger relationship stability. These findings lend empirical weight to Bowen's theory and open the door for its application in clinical contexts, including addiction treatment.

Addiction is often described as a failure of self-regulation: the inability to resist impulses, manage emotions, or sustain long-term goals in the face of short-term cravings. From a differentiation perspective, this failure can be reinterpreted as the result of a fragile or underdeveloped self-structure. The poorly differentiated person, overwhelmed by emotional reactivity and unable to separate thought from feeling, turns to substances or behaviors as compensatory mechanisms for emotional regulation. Empirical evidence supports this view. Johnson and Stone have shown that individuals from families with high emotional fusion or dysfunction, especially those with a history of addiction, often score lower on differentiation measures.[13] In such families, children may learn to suppress their own needs, adapt to others' emotional states, or dissociate entirely from emotional life. This environment cultivates a fragile selfhood that is easily overwhelmed by life stressors, rendering the individual more susceptible to using substances as a means of escape or pseudo-autonomy. Thorberg and Lyvers (2006) also studied individuals in addiction treatment and found a consistent pattern: low levels of differentiation, high emotional reactivity, and insecure attachment styles.[14] They reported that individuals in addiction treatment showed lower self-differentiation and more insecure attachments relative to controls, indicating that addicts often struggle with maintaining a stable identity and emotional autonomy, either as a risk factor for or outcome of substance use disorders (or both).

One of the most destructive patterns in low differentiation is fusion

[12] Elizabeth A. Skowron and Myrna L. Friedlander, "The Differentiation of Self Inventory: Development and Initial Validation," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 45, no. 3 (1998): 235–46.

[13] Paul Johnson and Richard Stone, "Parental Alcoholism and Family Functioning: Effects on Differentiation Levels of Young Adults," *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2009): 3–18.

[14] Fredrik A. Thorberg and Michael Lyvers, "Attachment, Fear of Intimacy and Differentiation of Self among Clients in Substance Disorder Treatment Facilities," *Addictive Behaviors* 31, no. 4 (2006): 732–37.

with others, where an individual loses the boundary between their own emotional state and that of another. Within families, this can manifest as codependency: a compulsive emotional attunement to the addict that suppresses the caregiver's own needs, often enabling the addiction. Conversely, in the addict, fusion may manifest as hypersensitivity to social norms, emotional contagion, or the inability to tolerate disapproval. This fusion generates enormous internal pressure. The individual does not know where they end and others begin and as a result, addictive behavior can emerge as a misguided assertion of selfhood: "This is the one thing I do for me," or "No one can control this part of me." The substance becomes a tool for symbolizing autonomy, even as it erodes real autonomy over time.

Low differentiation also underpins the difficulty many addicts have in sustaining recovery. They may remain abstinent in structured environments but relapse when re-exposed to relational stressors, family conflict, romantic rejection, or peer pressure. Their emotional regulation is still externally oriented; sobriety achieved in isolation or under supervision does not equal internalized self-differentiation. Without developing a stable I-position, their identity is still contingent on others' emotions and behaviors.

The relevance of differentiation to the philosophy of medicine lies in its rejection of a simplistic, individualist model of selfhood. Instead of assuming that people have stable selves who make rational choices and then sometimes fail to act accordingly, differentiation theory suggests that selfhood itself is a developmental achievement, not a given. Under conditions of chronic stress, familial dysfunction, or emotional underdevelopment the self can fail to differentiate, producing a person who appears to make irrational choices but is in fact acting from a structurally fragmented position. This insight destabilizes the moralizing lens often applied to addiction. It encourages clinicians, philosophers, and policymakers to see addiction as a relational-structural condition rooted in the development (or underdevelopment) of the self. The philosophical implications extend even further. If we accept that the self is not a monadic entity but a product of emotional and relational systems, then recovery cannot be achieved solely through willpower or pharmacological intervention. It must involve the reconstruction of a differentiated self: a self that can withstand conflict, tolerate emotional intensity, and act in alignment with internally chosen values.

In this way, the concept of differentiation offers a bridge between psychological theory and philosophical anthropology. It invites us to consider what kind of self is required to live without fiction, in the sense of not needing illusion to function. A differentiated self can acknowledge painful truths without collapsing. It can grieve, suffer, doubt, and still choose to act with integrity. This resilience is precisely what addiction undermines, and what recovery must aim to restore.

## The Interplay: Differentiation, Dissonance, and the Fictional World

Addiction emerges as a philosophical breakdown of the self, wherein reality is reframed to accommodate unbearable inconsistency, and autonomy is lost in the confusion between feeling and thinking, self and other. Cognitive dissonance presumes the existence of a self who can experience contradiction. One must believe "I am doing X, but I believe Y," and furthermore, care about the conflict for dissonance to be felt. However, the structure of that self, whether integrated or fragmented, autonomous or enmeshed, determines whether the conflict leads to change or deeper entrenchment.

In individuals with **high differentiation**, dissonance is unpleasant but tolerable. These people can hold opposing ideas in mind, reflect on them, and adjust either belief or behavior with some degree of coherence. They have what Bowen calls a stable "I-position," which acts as an internal axis around which cognitive conflict can be resolved. The self is strong enough to absorb the disagreement without needing to construct a fictional reality to deflect it.

By contrast, in people with **low differentiation**, dissonance becomes intolerable. The emotional reactivity that defines low differentiation means that even mild contradictions feel threatening, triggering defense mechanisms like denial, distortion, or projection. Instead of resolving the inconsistency, the individual must rewrite reality. In this sense, fictional reality is an adaptive misrepresentation required by a poorly differentiated self that cannot withstand dissonance.

Consider again Festinger and Carlsmith's experiment, where participants lied about a boring task and were paid either $1 or $20.[15] Those paid only $1 experienced greater dissonance and changed their attitudes

[15] Leon Festinger and James M. Carlsmith, "Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 58, no. 2 (1959): 203–10.

to match their behavior. But what leads some people to change their attitude while others do not? What governs this psychological flexibility? Differentiation offers a possible answer. The more emotionally fused or reactive an individual is, the less likely they are to integrate the dissonant experience. They may suppress it, avoid thinking about it, or rationalize it through distortions that prevent growth. Conversely, those with higher differentiation can endure the discomfort of dissonance without collapsing into defense. This has enormous implications for addiction. People suffering from substance use disorders often face glaring dissonances: "I value my children, but I missed their recital because I was drunk," or "I want to be healthy, but I keep using heroin." In theory, such dissonances should catalyze change. In practice, they often do not, because the self required to metabolize dissonance is missing or impaired. Instead of confronting the contradiction, the person constructs a *fictional reality* in which the clash is resolved by reinterpreting the terms. "My kids will understand someday," "I'm just taking the edge off," "I can quit anytime"; these are semantic reconfigurations of reality that reduce dissonance without changing the behavior. These rationalizations are effective precisely because the person lacks the internal capacity (DoS) to deal with the raw inconsistency.

The addict's rationalizations are social performances, reinforced by family, peers, even therapists, who may also be caught in their own fusions and dissonances. Here, low differentiation across the system (not just in the individual) allows fictions to take root and flourish, normalizing the addiction. The system colludes to protect itself from dissonance, rather than encounter it. This is why interventions that target only the addict risk failing long term. Without addressing the emotional system surrounding the person, partners, parents, social narratives, the fictional reality remains intact. The addict may stop using, but the underlying emotional fusion and dissonance-avoidant patterns remain, setting the stage for relapse or symptomatic substitution (e.g. replacing drugs with compulsive relationships or gambling). The treatment should aim to restructure the emotional system that sustains fictions, by promoting differentiation of self across the family, helping all members develop the capacity to tolerate dissonance, hold differing positions, and sustain emotional boundaries.

Instead of demanding that addicts "face the facts," we must recognize that their fictions are structurally necessary. The goal, then, is to

help the person gradually build the inner structure (differentiation) required to withstand reality without dissolving. It also suggests that addiction recovery is a process of ontological reformation, a slow reconstruction of the self's relationship to truth, meaning, and agency. Differentiation then becomes also a philosophical aspiration: to become a self who no longer needs fiction to live, because one can tolerate complexity and emotional friction without caving in.

## From Fiction to Freedom: Therapeutic Implications

Addiction treatment often assumes that recovery is achieved by aligning the person's behavior with an objective truth, e.g., that substance use is harmful, or that sobriety is better. But such formulations overlook the central insight of both cognitive dissonance theory and Bowen's differentiation of self: people do not change because they know the truth. They change because their inner structure becomes able to withstand the dissonance between who they are and who they wish to be, between their lived reality and their internal values.

Traditional treatments for addiction have focused on behavior change, relapse prevention, or cognitive restructuring. These are important tools, but often miss the deeper existential work that must occur for recovery to be lasting. Differentiation-based therapy would offer a framework for this deeper work. The therapist should help the addict develop a stronger "I-position." This involves learning to distinguish thought from feeling, reducing emotional reactivity, resisting fusion with others, and learning to assert values without hostility or withdrawal. The work is slow, nonlinear, and often painful, because it involves deconstructing the very patterns that have kept the person emotionally afloat.

Yet this very process is what restores freedom in the philosophical sense. A highly fused person lives reactively, governed by others' moods or expectations. The differentiated person, by contrast, becomes capable of choice. They may still feel cravings, pain, or dissonance, but they are no longer enslaved by them. Recovery, then, is freedom from fiction, the false narratives, inherited anxieties, and impulsive responses that once governed the self. Only then can dissonance become the therapeutic catalyst. The role of the therapist, educator, or clinician is to engineer dissonance in ways that provoke change without overwhelming the person's capacity to respond. However, these techniques only suc-

ceed when the person is able to metabolize dissonance. This is why differentiation must precede or accompany dissonance-based work. A client with low self-definition will respond to dissonance with shame, evasion, or relapse. One with a more differentiated self will use dissonance as a guide, a signal that something important needs attention.

Therefore, the sequence of effective intervention may follow this arc:

1. **Stabilize emotion through differentiation** (reduce reactivity, foster self-awareness).

2. **Introduce dissonance deliberately** (highlight incongruent beliefs, behaviors).

3. **Support meaning-making and choice** (reinforce agency, values, autonomy).

4. **Integrate changes systemically** (shift relational patterns, solidify new self-definition).

This arc aligns with a philosophy of medicine that sees the patient as a meaning-making subject. It treats addiction as a signal of an unresolved conflict in the self's reality structure, a pathology that can be healed through philosophical integration.

Ironically, the path out of fictional reality may still involve the use of fiction. In recovery, people often adopt aspirational identities ("I'm a survivor," "I'm a new person") that may initially feel false. These identities function as semi-fictions, constructs that, while not yet fully real, help organize experience and behavior toward a better reality. Thus, the goal is to transform the function of fiction from being a shield against dissonance to **becoming** a bridge toward integration. It ceases to mask incongruence and begins to guide the self toward coherence.

What, then, does this mean for the philosophy of medicine? First, it compels a shift from purely empirical models of addiction toward ontological and phenomenological inquiry. The question is no longer just "What causes addiction?" but "What kind of self is vulnerable to addiction, and why?" This moves addiction discourse into the realm of existential philosophy, asking what it means to be a person, to be free, to know truth, and to withstand emotional conflict. Second, it redefines healing as more than symptom reduction. In many cases, people stop using substances but remain undifferentiated. They relapse into new addictions, unhealthy relationships, or existential despair. Genuine healing involves the reconstruction of a self that is integrated, autonomous, and able to relate to reality without distortion. This approach aligns with

phenomenology and existentialism, in which illness is a crisis of meaning. Values are incoherent and the self dispersed. Treatment must therefore be philosophical as well as clinical, helping the person rebuild their sense of world, self, and truth.

In conclusion, fictional reality in addiction is a complex construct born of cognitive dissonance, emotional underdevelopment, and relational enmeshment. It is a defensive architecture, protecting a fragile self from psychological rupture. The way out is the slow development of a differentiated self, one capable of facing internal conflict without crumpling into fiction. When deliberately wielded, cognitive dissonance becomes a compass and differentiation the vessel of a partially philosophical recovery. It is the emergence of a self who can tell the truth, feel pain, act with integrity, and relate to the world without illusion. If addiction is a failure of being, healing is the achievement of personhood.

# 23. Concealed and Explicit Fictions in Biomedical Research: From Animal Models to In Vitro Systems

*Francesco Giorgi, Francesco.Giorgi@liverpool.ac.uk*
*(PhD Student, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski)*

**Abstract:** Biomedical research has long been structured by fictional realities. Animal models exemplify this: a mouse is not a human, yet research proceeds as if it were. This fiction of similarity is not a falsehood but a productive device, enabling discoveries that have shaped modern medicine. Still, it operates as a concealed fiction, one that presents itself as continuity with the entity it tries to model while differences are nonetheless evident. Such animal-as-human equivalence is useful but limited both epistemically and ethically, since it obscures the gap between biological analogy and human specificity. A transition is now emerging toward *in vitro* and organ-on-chip systems, which embody a different fictional reality. These models do not masquerade as natural organs; they openly declare themselves as engineered constructs designed to reproduce selected physiological functions. Their value lies not in equivalence but in their status as transparent fictions: partial yet rigorous stand-ins that clarify what can and cannot be inferred. This represents an epistemological shift: knowledge is no longer grounded in assumed similarity but in explicit construction, where the fiction itself is acknowledged as the condition of discovery. The aim of this paper is to analyze this ongoing transition in biomedical research through the lens of fictional reality, showing how both animal models and *in vitro* systems can be understood as fictions that act. By framing biomedical progress as the refinement of fictions, from concealed similarity to transparent construction, the paper argues that these models are not distortions to be overcome but epistemic tools to be cultivated. Such a perspective highlights the deeper philosophical stakes of current biomedical practices: fictions, when made explicit, become the very medium of knowledge, discovery, and ethical responsibility. To recognize this is to see medicine itself as a field where representations do not merely simulate reality but generate

it, where fictions act not as distortions of truth, but as the conditions of its emergence.

**Keywords**: Biomedical research, animal testing, animal model, in vitro model, fictional reality

## Introduction

The concept of fictional reality has been used in philosophy to describe entities, structures, or representations that do not coincide with reality as such, yet nonetheless operate as real within specific practices. Fiction, in this sense, is not synonymous with falsehood or illusion. Rather, it designates a mode of construction through which reality becomes intelligible, manageable, and actionable. Philosophical discussions of fiction have long emphasized that human understanding relies on entities that are feigned for the purpose of discourse[1], yet once introduced, function as if they were real. Such fictions may organize perception, guide action, and shape institutions, even while their constructed status remains partially or fully acknowledged.

Across different philosophical traditions, fictional realities have been understood as mediating structures between the world and our access to it. In critical philosophy, fiction appears as a regulative element of knowledge, an idealized construct that cannot be realized empirically but nonetheless orients cognition[2]. In phenomenology, fiction plays a methodological role in distinguishing between what is given as real and what is imaginable, without reducing the latter to mere unreality[3]. In social and political philosophy, fictions have been described as entities that stabilize practices and norms while concealing their own constructed nature, thereby acquiring the force of reality[4]. More recently, analyses of hyperreality have emphasized how representations can cease

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1 Jeremy Bentham, "Of Ontology," in *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, vol. 8, ed. John Bowring (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1843), 193–211.

2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

3 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982).

4 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127–186.

to refer to an underlying original and instead become operational realities in their own right[5]. What unites these perspectives is the recognition that fictional realities are not distortions external to truth, but internal conditions of how truth, meaning, and action are produced. Fiction does not merely accompany reality; it participates in its constitution. This insight acquires a specific epistemic significance in the context of scientific modeling. Scientific models do not provide unmediated access to their target systems; they operate as constructed stand-ins that mediate between theory, evidence, and the world. In this setting, fiction does not denote arbitrariness or invention detached from empirical constraint, but the deliberate construction of entities, systems, or relations that are not literally instantiated in the world, yet function as epistemic mediators within scientific practice. Such constructions are constrained by theory, evidence, and purpose, and derive their legitimacy from their capacity to enable reliable inference under conditions where direct access to the object of study is limited or impossible. Whether models are described as fictional, representational, inferential, or engineered artifacts, they share a mediating function within scientific practice. Recent philosophical debates on fictional models highlight this plurality of roles, showing that the fictional status of a model does not undermine its representational or inferential capacity, but clarifies how such capacities are epistemically secured, by rendering otherwise inaccessible domains scientifically tractable through structured substitution[6]. This mediating function becomes particularly important in domains where direct experimental access to the object of study is structurally constrained.

Biomedical research constitutes a paradigmatic case of this mediating dynamic. The human body is not directly available for experimental manipulation in most contexts, and knowledge of human health and disease must therefore be generated through models. These models are not neutral mirrors of reality, but constructed stand-ins that function within research practice as if they were representative of the human condition. In this sense, biomedical research is structured by fictional realities that are epistemically productive rather than epistemically defective. Traditionally, animal models have played a central role in this process. They operate

[5] Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

[6] Lisa Zorzato, "The Puzzle of Fictional Models," *Journal for General Philosophy of Science* 55, no. 1 (2024): 1–20.

through a fiction of similarity: non-human organisms are treated as sufficiently analogous to humans to allow inference about human physiology and pathology. This fiction is neither naïve nor accidental. It is a methodological assumption that enables experimentation under controlled conditions and has supported major advances in medicine. At the same time, it remains largely implicit. Animal models are often presented as a natural continuation of human biology, even though the gap between analogy and specificity becomes evident when translation to human outcomes fails or when ethical concerns are raised. In recent decades, biomedical research has increasingly incorporated *in vitro* and organ-on-chip systems. These models instantiate a different form of fictional reality. Rather than relying on implicit biological equivalence, they are explicitly constructed to reproduce selected human physiological functions. Their fictional status is transparent: they do not claim to be organs or organisms, but engineered systems designed for specific investigative purposes. The fiction here is not concealed but declared, and its limits are articulated as part of the model's epistemic role. This shift reflects more than a technological innovation. It marks an epistemological transition in how biomedical knowledge is generated and justified. The basis of inference moves from assumed similarity to explicit construction, and fictional reality becomes a visible and deliberate component of scientific practice rather than an implicit background condition.

The aim of this paper is to analyze this ongoing transition in biomedical research through the concept of fictional reality. By examining animal models and *in vitro* systems as two distinct modes of fictionality (one grounded in similarity, the other in construction) the paper argues that biomedical progress does not consist in eliminating fiction, but in transforming and refining it. From this perspective, fictional realities are not obstacles to scientific knowledge, but the epistemic medium through which biomedical research operates. The paper proceeds by first clarifying the epistemological role of fiction in scientific modeling, before turning to animal models and *in vitro* systems as contrasting fictional realities within contemporary biomedical research. It then examines how the transition between these models reflects a broader reconfiguration of epistemic responsibility, transparency, and justification in the life sciences.

## Fictional Reality and Scientific Knowledge

To understand the role of fictional reality in biomedical research, it is first necessary to clarify how fiction functions within scientific knowledge more generally. In the philosophy of science, fiction does not denote invention detached from reality, but a specific epistemic strategy: the construction of entities, systems, or assumptions that do not fully correspond to the world, yet enable reliable knowledge about it. Scientific practice routinely relies on such constructions, particularly where direct access to the object of study is limited, ethically constrained, or technically impossible [7]. A useful starting point is the distinction between fiction, idealization, and approximation, which has been widely discussed in the philosophy of scientific modeling. Idealizations deliberately distort features of a system, such as frictionless planes or perfectly rational agents, in order to isolate relevant variables[8]. Approximations, by contrast, aim to remain close to empirical reality while tolerating a quantifiable degree of error. Fiction differs from both as it introduces entities or relations that are not merely simplified versions of reality but stand-ins that function *as if* they were real within a specific epistemic context[9]. Fictional entities are not expected to be corrected into reality, and models should not be understood as mirrors of reality but as epistemic tools that reorganize phenomena into forms amenable to investigation[10]. From this perspective, fictional reality refers to the domain in which such models operate: a space where constructed systems acquire operational reality within scientific practice, despite their partial or non-literal relation to the world. Their epistemic value does not depend on literal correspondence, but on their capacity to support robust inference across contexts, allowing the generation of understanding, prediction, or

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[7] Hans Vaihinger, The Philosophy of "As If" (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1924); Nancy Cartwright, *How the Laws of Physics Lie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[8] Ernan McMullin, "Galilean Idealization," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 16, no. 3 (1985): 247–273.

[9] Hans Vaihinger, The Philosophy of "As If" (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1924); Mauricio Suárez, "Fictions in Scientific Practice," in Fictions in Science: Philosophical Essays on Modeling and Idealization, ed. Mauricio Suárez (London: Routledge, 2009).

[10] Mary S. Morgan and Margaret Morrison, *Models as Mediators: Perspectives on Natural and Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

control. This view challenges a residual realist assumption according to which scientific progress consists in the gradual elimination of fictional elements. Instead, fiction appears as a permanent and necessary feature of the production of knowledge. Scientific understanding advances not by removing mediation, but by refining it, by designing fictions that are increasingly explicit, constrained, and purpose-sensitive[11]. The epistemic question is therefore not whether science employs fictions, but how these fictions are structured, acknowledged, and justified within scientific practice.

In this context, a crucial distinction emerges between concealed and explicit fictions. Concealed fictions operate by presenting themselves as natural continuities with reality. Their fictional status remains implicit, often stabilized by disciplinary convention or habitual use. Explicit fictions, by contrast, openly declare their constructed nature and delimit in advance the scope of their applicability. This distinction has important epistemological consequences. When fiction remains concealed, its limits tend to emerge only retrospectively, for instance when predictive or translational failures occur. When fiction is explicit, its limits are integrated into the logic of inference from the outset, allowing for more controlled interpretation and validation[12]. Scientific knowledge thus depends not only on the presence of fictional constructions, but on how these constructions are positioned within epistemic practice. Transparency about fictionality does not weaken scientific claims; rather, it clarifies the conditions under which those claims hold. Fiction becomes an epistemic resource precisely insofar as it is recognized as such, rather than tacitly naturalized. This framework is particularly relevant in the life sciences, where the objects of interest, organisms, organs, and physiological systems, are complex, dynamic, and ethically constrained. In biomedical research, fictional realities take the form of models that substitute for the human body while enabling experimentation. These models do not aim to reproduce the human organism in its entirety; in-

[11] Nancy Cartwright, *How the Laws of Physics Lie*; Roman Frigg and Stephan Hartmann, "Models in Science," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, last modified September 30, 2020, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/models-science/.

[12] Mauricio Suárez, "Fictions in Scientific Practice," in Fictions in Science: Philosophical Essays on Modeling and Idealization, ed. Mauricio Suárez (London: Routledge, 2009).

stead, they selectively reconstruct aspects deemed relevant to specific research questions. Their fictional character lies not in their inaccuracy, but in their status as constructed surrogates that mediate access to human biology.

Understanding biomedical models as fictional realities therefore allows for a more precise analysis of how knowledge is generated in this domain. It shifts attention away from a binary opposition between realism and artificiality and toward the epistemic functions of substitution, construction, and mediation. This perspective prepares the ground for examining how different modeling strategies, specifically animal models and *in vitro* systems, instantiate distinct modes of fictionality, and how the current transition between them reflects a broader reconfiguration of epistemic assumptions in biomedical research.

## Animal Models as Concealed Fictional Realities

Animal models have long occupied a central position in biomedical research. Their use is grounded in the assumption that non-human organisms can serve as reliable proxies for human biological processes, an assumption supported by evolutionary continuity, genetic homology, and shared physiological mechanisms. From an epistemological standpoint, however, animal models do not function as direct representations of the human body. Rather, they operate as constructed stand-ins that mediate access to human biology through a logic of substitution. Animals are not treated as identical to humans, but as sufficiently similar for specific experimental purposes. This sufficiency is not an empirical fact given in advance, but a methodological commitment that allows experimentation to proceed under controlled conditions. In this sense, animal models instantiate a fiction of similarity: they function as if the biological processes under investigation could be extrapolated to humans within a scope that is rarely fully articulated in advance.

This fiction is epistemically productive. Animal models have supported major advances in biomedical knowledge, including the development of vaccines, pharmacological treatments, and surgical techniques. Their epistemic legitimacy does not rest on perfect predictive success, but on their capacity to generate mechanistic insight, guide experimentation, and delimit the space of possible biological responses. Translational failure does not negate this productivity; it reveals the bounded domain within which the fiction of similarity operates. For this

reason, the scientific value of animal models is not in question. What requires scrutiny is not their legitimacy, but the epistemic status of the fiction through which they operate. Although scientists are fully aware that animals are not humans, the substitution performed by animal models is commonly treated as a natural biological continuation rather than as a constructed epistemic strategy. Similarity functions as a default background assumption, sufficient to justify inference unless and until empirical evidence demonstrates otherwise.

This naturalisation is reinforced by modeling language itself: mouse models are routinely described as "models of Alzheimer's disease" or "models of Parkinson's disease," despite the fact that these conditions are defined in humans not only by molecular mechanisms but also by cognitive, behavioural, and experiential dimensions that cannot be reproduced in animals. The animal system is thus framed as instantiating the disease itself, rather than as selectively reproducing particular features of it. The concealment of this fiction has important epistemological consequences. Divergence between animal and human outcomes is typically addressed retrospectively, following translational failure. Compounds that prove effective or safe in rodents but fail in clinical trials are explained *post hoc* in terms of species-specific metabolism, immune response, or signalling pathways. Such explanations acknowledge difference only after expectations of relevance have already been established. The limits of inference are therefore revealed after the fact, rather than integrated prospectively into the model's epistemic design. This pattern is well documented in fields such as oncology and neuropharmacology, where extensive preclinical validation frequently fails to translate into clinical efficacy. Routine experimental practice further stabilizes this concealed fiction. Animal models are embedded in standardised pipelines for drug development and regulatory approval, where their use is often presupposed rather than epistemically re-justified for each research question. Once a particular model (such as a transgenic mouse line) becomes established, its relevance is rarely interrogated at the level of epistemic construction. Instead, it functions as a taken-for-granted reference point within common scientific practice. In this context, the fictional character of the model becomes methodologically invisible, not because it is denied, but because it is absorbed into disciplinary conventions.

This epistemic concealment also shapes how uncertainty is managed. Species-specific differences are acknowledged, yet treated as

sources of variability or noise rather than as indicators of the model's fictional structure. The animal model thus retains the status of a quasi-natural reference point even as its limits are repeatedly encountered. The so-called translational gap reflects not merely technical insufficiencies, but an epistemological tension inherent in the fiction of similarity itself: the model enables translation to be attempted while simultaneously delimiting the conditions under which it can succeed. Ethical considerations further illuminate the significance of this concealment. Ethical justifications of animal experimentation frequently appeal to scientific necessity and predictive value. Yet these appeals presuppose the reliability of the fiction of similarity on which animal models operate. When that fiction is treated as natural rather than constructed, ethical evaluation risks resting on unexamined epistemic assumptions. In this sense, ethical responsibility in biomedical research cannot be separated from epistemic responsibility: to clarify the fictional status of a model is also to clarify who bears the consequences of its limitations. The persistence of this concealment is not accidental, nor does it primarily reflect individual oversight or bad faith. Rather, it emerges from the convergence of epistemic, institutional, and ethical pressures within biomedical research. Treating similarity as a natural biological continuation stabilizes inference, allowing experimental results to circulate without continuous renegotiation of their scope. Institutional frameworks for funding, regulation, and publication further reinforce this stabilization by presupposing the relevance of established animal models. Ethical justification, in turn, often relies on claims of scientific necessity and predictive value that are easier to sustain when the fictional status of the model remains implicit. In this way, epistemic concealment and ethical justification mutually reinforce one another: the more natural the substitution appears, the less its assumptions are scrutinised, and the more ethical responsibility is deferred until translational failure renders those assumptions visible.

Within this perspective, understanding animal models as concealed fictional realities does not undermine their scientific value. Rather, it situates that value more precisely. Their authority derives not from direct representation of human biology, but from a historically stabilized mode of substitution that has proven productive under specific constraints. Recognising this allows animal models to be understood not as imperfect mirrors of reality, but as epistemic tools whose fictional structure both enables biomedical knowledge and delimits its scope. This analysis prepares

the ground for examining emerging alternatives in biomedical research. As *in vitro* and organ-on-chip systems gain prominence, they do not eliminate fiction from scientific practice. Instead, they reorganize it, making explicit what has long remained implicit. The contrast between animal models and *in vitro* systems is therefore not one between fiction and reality, but between different ways of constructing, managing, and acknowledging fictional realities within biomedical research.

## *In Vitro* and Organ-on-Chip Systems as Explicit Fictional Realities

*In vitro* and organ-on-chip systems have emerged in biomedical research as models designed to investigate human physiology under controlled and ethically constrained conditions. Unlike animal models, these systems do not rely on interspecies similarity. Instead, they are deliberately engineered constructs that reproduce selected biological functions, cellular architectures, or dynamic interactions relevant to specific research questions. From an epistemological perspective, they instantiate a distinct form of fictional reality, one grounded not in analogy, but in explicit construction. The fictional status of *in vitro* and organ-on-chip systems is epistemically foregrounded rather than naturalised. Their relevance to human physiology is established through explicit design choices, such as the selection of cell types, mechanical cues, or biochemical gradients, each justified in relation to a defined research aim. As a result, these models are not presented as embodiments of diseases or organs themselves, but as platforms for investigating specific mechanisms or interactions. Divergence from human outcomes is therefore not framed as an unexpected deviation, but as an anticipated limitation inherent to the model's construction. This explicitness has important epistemological consequences. The scope of inference is specified prospectively as part of the model's design, and constraints are articulated in advance rather than discovered retrospectively. When *in vitro* systems fail to reproduce human responses, failure is typically attributed to identifiable aspects of construction, such as missing cellular components, oversimplified architectures, or unmodeled interactions. Failure thus functions as a diagnostic of design, guiding iterative refinement rather than retroactive reinterpretation. The fictional character of the model remains visible throughout this process, operating not as a concealed background condition, but as an explicit and revisable feature of biomedical inquiry. The fictional reality embodied by *in vitro* systems lies

in their selective reconstruction of biological processes. These models do not aim to replicate the human organism in its entirety. Instead, they isolate and reassemble components according to experimentally defined priorities. Decisions about inclusion, exclusion, and idealization are made explicitly and justified with respect to the intended epistemic goal. The resulting system is not a reduced version of the organism, but a purpose-built surrogate whose limits are constitutive of its epistemic role. Because the fictional status of these models is acknowledged from the outset, inference proceeds through controlled functional correspondence rather than naturalised similarity. Knowledge generated within this framework is therefore conditional by design: it is evaluated with respect to the specific features that have been constructed and the domain of validity that has been defined in advance. Fiction here is not something to be corrected away, but something to be managed, refined, and made epistemically productive.

This explicit mode of construction also carries ethical implications. Because *in vitro* and organ-on-chip systems openly declare their limits, ethical responsibility is assumed at the level of design rather than deferred until translational failure. Decisions concerning which biological features are included, which are omitted, and which forms of variability are bracketed become epistemic choices with ethical significance. Ethical concern thus arises not from concealed substitution, but from deliberate construction and omission, embedding responsibility prospectively within the modeling process itself. The increasing adoption of organ-on-chip technologies extends this logic without abandoning it. By integrating microfluidics, mechanical stimulation, and multicellular organisation, these systems introduce greater physiological complexity while remaining explicitly constructed environments. Their epistemic role is not to replace the human body, but to provide experimentally accessible spaces in which specific hypotheses about human biology can be tested under known and articulated constraints.

Understanding *in vitro* and organ-on-chip systems as explicit fictional realities clarifies their place within biomedical research. They do not represent a departure from fictional modeling, but a reconfiguration of it. Fiction becomes visible, engineered, and epistemically articulated. This contrasts with the concealed fiction of similarity characteristic of animal models, not by eliminating substitution, but by redefining how substitution is justified, managed, and held accountable within scientific practice.

## The Transition as an Epistemological Shift

The growing incorporation of *in vitro* and organ-on-chip systems into biomedical research is commonly framed in technical, ethical, or regulatory terms. From the perspective developed in this paper, however, this development is more fundamentally an epistemological shift in how biomedical knowledge is produced, justified, and limited. The transition does not mark a movement from fiction to reality. Rather, it reflects a reconfiguration in how fictional realities are constructed, positioned, and epistemically managed within scientific practice.

As the preceding analyses have shown, animal models and *in vitro* systems exemplify two distinct modes of fictionality. In animal models, inference is grounded in an implicit fiction of similarity, historically stabilized through evolutionary continuity, genetic homology, and shared physiological mechanisms. This fiction is empirically productive, but its constructed status remains largely unarticulated. As a consequence, the limits of inference tend to surface retrospectively, most visibly in cases of translational failure or ethical controversy, when divergence between animal and human outcomes must be explained after expectations of relevance have already been established. *In vitro* and organ-on-chip systems, by contrast, instantiate a fiction of construction. They do not rely on presumed biological equivalence, but on deliberate design choices through which selected human functions are reconstructed under controlled conditions. The relationship between model and target is specified through functional criteria rather than inferred from shared origin. Crucially, this fiction is explicit. Assumptions, constraints, and intended domains of validity are articulated in advance as part of the model's epistemic design. Knowledge claims generated within this framework are therefore conditional by construction rather than conditional by hindsight.

The epistemological significance of this shift lies in how uncertainty, limitation, and failure are conceptualised and handled. In animal-based research, uncertainty is typically absorbed into the background of biological variability, and failure is addressed *post hoc* through further experimentation or model refinement. In *in vitro* systems, uncertainty is foregrounded as a design parameter. Failures are more readily attributable to identifiable aspects of construction, such as missing cellular components, oversimplified architectures, or unmodeled interactions, and thus function as epistemic feedback guiding iterative redesign. The fiction does not recede in the face of failure; it becomes the object of

systematic refinement.

This difference reshapes the logic of justification in biomedical research. Inference grounded in similarity relies on analogical reasoning whose scope is difficult to delimit in advance and is often stabilized through use rather than explicit specification. Inference grounded in construction, by contrast, proceeds from clearly defined functional correspondences. While neither approach guarantees successful translation to human outcomes, the latter renders the epistemic conditions of inference more transparent. Fiction is no longer a tacit background assumption, but an articulated component of the knowledge-generating process.

From an ethical point of view, this epistemological shift should be evaluated in terms of responsibility. When fictional substitution remains implicit, ethical responsibility tends to be deferred until translational failure makes epistemic limits visible. When fictional construction is explicit, responsibility is assumed prospectively, at the level of design. Decisions concerning inclusion, omission, and simplification thus become epistemic choices with ethical significance.

Philosophically, this kind of transition is not without precedent. Scientific knowledge has repeatedly advanced through changes in how fictional constructs are deployed and understood. Classical mechanics relies on idealized entities such as point masses or frictionless planes, explicit fictions whose epistemic value lies precisely in the fact that their non-reality is acknowledged and controlled. Similarly, contemporary economic modeling constructs agents with explicitly defined preferences and constraints rather than treating rationality as a natural property of real individuals. In both cases, epistemic progress does not arise from eliminating fiction, but from making it explicit, constrained, and revisable. The transition unfolding in biomedical research follows this same pattern.

It is worth noting that this epistemological shift does not entail a linear replacement of one model by another. Animal models continue to play a role in biomedical research, just as idealized models coexist with empirical observation in other sciences. Nor do *in vitro* systems eliminate uncertainty or guarantee translational success. The shift is therefore not a narrative of progress toward greater realism, but a reorientation in how fictional realities are organised, justified, and integrated into scientific practice. Seen in this light, the increasing prominence of *in vitro* and organ-on-chip systems signals a broader, though uneven, reconfiguration of biomedical epistemology within parts of contemporary re-

search practice. Knowledge production moves away from reliance on concealed substitutions toward a mode of inquiry in which fictional construction is explicit, deliberate, and revisable. Fiction is not removed from science, but transformed, from an implicit condition of practice into an articulated epistemic resource. Understanding this transition clarifies why debates about biomedical models cannot be reduced to questions of accuracy or efficiency alone. What is at stake is how biomedical research conceptualises its own access to human biology. Fictional realities do not obstruct this access; they enable it. The transition currently underway thus reflects a deeper transformation in the epistemic self-understanding of biomedical research itself.

## Fictional Reality and the Future of Biomedical Knowledge

Understanding biomedical research through the concept of fictional reality has implications that extend beyond the specific comparison between animal models and *in vitro* systems. More broadly, it invites a reconsideration of how biomedical knowledge is framed, evaluated, and communicated in domains where direct access to the object of study is structurally constrained. From a philosophical standpoint, this reinforces a long-standing insight in the philosophy of science: fiction is not an accidental or transitional feature of scientific practice, but a constitutive element of how knowledge is generated under conditions of complexity and uncertainty[13].

First, recognizing fictional realities as epistemic conditions rather than epistemic defects reframes debates about model validity. Biomedical models are often assessed primarily in terms of accuracy, predictive success, or translational efficacy. While these criteria remain essential, they do not exhaust the grounds of epistemic legitimacy. Scientific models do not derive their authority from correspondence alone, but from their capacity to mediate between theory and world under explicitly stated assumptions[14]. Seen in this light, fictional reality is not opposed to objectivity; it is one of its operational forms. The epistemic

[13] Hans Vaihinger, The Philosophy of "As If" (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1924); Mary S. Morgan and Margaret Morrison, *Models as Mediators: Perspectives on Natural and Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[14] Nancy Cartwright, How the Laws of Physics Lie; Roman Frigg and Stephan Hartmann, "Models in Science,", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta, last modified September 30, 2020, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/models-science/.

question shifts from whether a model is realistic to how its fictional structure enables, constrains, or redirects particular forms of inference.

Second, this perspective reshapes how uncertainty and responsibility are distributed within biomedical research. When fictional constructions remain implicit, their limits tend to surface only retrospectively, often after translational failure and at significant scientific, ethical, and economic cost. By contrast, models that explicitly foreground their constructed status integrate uncertainty into their epistemic design. This aligns with philosophical accounts that treat scientific knowledge as inherently conditional and revisable rather than cumulative and complete[15]. Epistemic responsibility thus shifts away from defending claims of realism and toward articulating the assumptions, constraints, and design choices under which knowledge is produced.

Third, an epistemology of fictional reality supports a pluralistic understanding of biomedical modeling. Rather than organising models along a single hierarchy ordered by presumed realism, different models can be understood as distinct fictional realities, each tailored to specific questions, scales, and mechanisms. This resonates with philosophical defenses of model pluralism, according to which scientific understanding often emerges from the coordinated use of multiple, non-reducible representations[16]. From this perspective, the future of biomedical research is not defined by the replacement of one model with another, but by the deliberate orchestration of multiple fictional constructions whose domains of validity are explicitly specified.

Finally, acknowledging fictional reality as a constitutive feature of biomedical knowledge has implications beyond the laboratory. Public trust in biomedical research often rests on implicit expectations of realism and direct representation. Yet philosophical analyses of representation and hyperreality have shown that representations can acquire operational reality without mirroring an underlying original[17]. Making the fictional character of biomedical models explicit does not undermine trust; rather, it aligns scientific communication more closely with actual re-

[15] Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[16] Sandra D. Mitchell, *Unsimple Truths: Science, Complexity, and Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[17] Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

search practice, fostering more realistic expectations about translation, efficacy, and risk.

These considerations suggest that the transition examined in this paper is not merely a local methodological adjustment, but part of a broader transformation in the epistemic culture of biomedical research. Fictional realities are becoming increasingly explicit, engineered, and revisable. This transformation does not signal a retreat from scientific realism, but a refinement of epistemic strategy, one in which fiction is no longer concealed as a background assumption, but articulated as a central resource for knowledge production.

## Conclusion

Biomedical research does not primarily operate in direct contact with human biological reality. Access to the human body has always been mediated by models that stand in for what cannot be directly experimented upon. Such mediation is not a temporary limitation to be overcome, but a constitutive feature of biomedical knowledge. Animal models and *in vitro* systems do not differ in their reliance on fiction; they differ in how that fiction is constructed, acknowledged, and epistemically managed. Interpreting animal models as concealed fictional realities and *in vitro* systems as explicit ones reveals that the ongoing transformation in biomedical research reflects an epistemological shift rather than a simple methodological upgrade. The transition underway does not move science closer to an unmediated reality, nor does it eliminate uncertainty or failure. Instead, it reconfigures the role of fiction itself, from a background assumption stabilized by practice to an articulated and revisable condition of inquiry. This shift invites a reconsideration of how biomedical knowledge understands its own limits. When fictional substitutions are naturalised, their constraints emerge only retrospectively, often at significant epistemic and ethical cost. When fiction is made explicit, limitation becomes a design parameter rather than a surprise. Knowledge does not become less provisional; it becomes more self-aware. In this sense, epistemic responsibility is redistributed: not toward defending claims of realism, but toward clarifying the assumptions under which knowledge is produced.

This perspective challenges a persistent narrative of scientific progress as the gradual elimination of fiction. Across the history of science, advances have often coincided with the refinement of fictional con-

structs rather than their disappearance. Biomedical research appears to follow this pattern. The increasing prominence of engineered, transparent fictional realities does not mark a retreat from truth, but a maturation in how truth is pursued under conditions of complexity, uncertainty, and ethical constraint. From this perspective, progress in biomedical research lies not in converging on a single privileged model, but in the careful coordination of multiple fictional realities, each suited to different epistemic aims.

Seen through the lens of fictional reality, the future of biomedical research is not one in which models finally coincide with the human body, but one in which the distance between model and reality is more carefully designed, explicitly acknowledged, and epistemically productive. Fiction, in this context, is not the opposite of reality, but the means through which reality becomes knowable at all. Making fictional construction explicit also clarifies how responsibility is distributed across scientific, clinical, and institutional contexts. To recognise this is not to weaken biomedical science, but to take seriously the conditions under which it has always, and will continue to, operate.

# VI. A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO HYPERREALITY

## 24. Hyperreality and the Authentic Nuance of the Fake Self

*Shervin Mirzaeighazi, shervin.mirzaeighazi@gmail.com*
*(PhD Alumnus, Lund University)*

> …, semblances, things that only seem and never are, things all surface and no depth, pure gestures, and even the gesture muddled by an effort of will, …
>
> Semblance proliferated in the salons of the industrialist and in the underworld. It sets rules, it rebelled against its own rules (in uprisings that could be bloody, but didn't therefore cease to be semblances), it set new rules. –Roberto Bolaño, 2666

**Abstract:** In this paper, I identify a *phenomenological problem* and propose a possible resolution. The issue concerns a feeling in which every encounter, or even experience, seems fake, as if life itself were a poorly acted movie. I distinguish this feeling from simple cynicism and describe it as a phenomenological disorientation, where lived experience feels muted and unreal compared to the heightened and real emotions of cinema. The central thesis is that this experience is a critical symptom of a *Platonic Inversion*. In this inversion, the very *metric* for *the real* has been compromised and replaced by its industrially perfected, mass-distributed simulation—the *Formula* and *Style* of the *Culture Industry*. The solution to this Platonic inversion is to reframe this perceived fakeness. I argue that this *bad acting* in real life is not a *failure* to imitate the simulation. Rather, it is, paradoxically, the *only authentic trace* of the complex, unresolved, and Nietzschean battleground of the human subject, a richness that the simplistic, perfected simulation must necessarily elide.

**Keywords:** real, absolute fake, simulacra, hyperreality, performance, culture industry

## I. Introduction

The idea of this paper originates from a recurring phenomenological observation: the noticeable sense of performativity in daily life. This experience is different from a suspicion of dishonesty (mere cynicism) and is more like an aesthetic judgment of social interaction; a feeling that lived reality resembles a poorly executed amateur film. Even when the actors are presumed to be genuine, their gestures and mannerisms often seem to be scripted and lacking in delivery. Consequently, this creates an issue where cinematic fiction appears to possess a higher degree of realism than tangible reality.

While I recognise that not everyone may have experienced this feeling, a quick look at social media, literature, or even personal discussions suggests that it goes way beyond an idiosyncratic perception and reflects a broader cultural issue. It is crucial to note that this phenomenon extends beyond a perception of behavioural 'fakeness.' In its most abstract form, it manifests as a fundamental intuition of absence: a lingering sense that something is missing or intrinsically 'off' in the other's expression. In this specific context, however, my focus is on the distinct perception of behavioural inauthenticity, the feeling that people's actions are fundamentally fake.

Moreover, the inauthenticity I am addressing here is not a matter of duplicity—the gap between a person's inner state and their outward expression, as found in cynicism. Rather, I am concerned with inauthenticity as an aesthetic phenomenon, arising from the comparison between our lived performances and the 'hyper-reality' of cinema. In this context, a problem emerges: a subject may be entirely authentic in intent (their expression genuinely matches their inner state), yet simultaneously appear inauthentic in execution, simply because their clumsy performance fails to measure up to the reality of the movies.

Andy Warhol, for example, challenged the dichotomy between mediated fiction and lived reality. After he was shot, Warhol remarked:

> Before I was shot, I always thought that I was more half-there than all-there – I always suspected that I was watching TV instead of living life. People sometimes say that the way things happen in movies is unreal, but actually it's the way things happen in life that's unreal. The movies make emotions look so strong and real, whereas when things really do happen to you, it's like watching

> television – you don't feel anything. Right when I was being shot and ever since, I knew that I was watching television. The channels switch, but it's all television.[1]

Here, Warhol clearly expresses the detachment and strange *unreality of reality* that can be experienced in everyday life. In this state, the simulation (television, cinema) is no longer just a representation of life but has become the main way of understanding it. The intense and clear emotions of cinema are seen as real, while lived experience feels muted, distant, and inauthentic. It seems we are faced with a phenomenological disorientation that characterises a key aspect of late-modern consciousness: the experience of perceiving the social world and its inhabitants as fake. In this paper, I argue that this experience is a critical symptom of a cultural logic in which the very metric for the real has been compromised and replaced by its simulation.

To do this, I begin by acknowledging the initial, cynical hypothesis: that most people are mainly acting performatively, and because they are bad at acting, they seem fake. However, this interpretation proves to be insufficient. I then claim that the reason for this phenomenological disorientation is that a "Platonic inversion" has taken place. The real issue is not that people are bad actors, but that the ideal of good acting (the codification of expressive behaviours) has been industrially perfected and widely distributed through realistic movies--a part of what Horkheimer and Adorno called the "culture industry." This process has created a Simulacrum or hyperreality, in the terms of Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard, which now sets the standard for all expression.

Finally, I will propose a resolution that reclaims the fakeness of real life as a marker of its authenticity. I conclude that the perceived bad acting is nuanced acting. The imperfect or flawed execution of a real-life expression is, paradoxically, the only genuine trace of the internal conflict between drives and desires within the human subject; a richness and complexity that the idealised simulations of cinema necessarily overlook. In this way, this paper presents an epistemological and existential escape route from cynicism. It finds a way to rehabilitate authenticity by re-signifying the very symptom of the crisis (the perception of fakeness) as its cure (an authentic sign of the real).

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[1] Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (1975/2007; repr., New York: Penguin, 2007), 91.

## II. The Performative Surface

To understand the perception of fakeness, it's important to first recognise that all social life is, in a functional sense,[2] a form of performance.[3] According to Erving Goffman, social interaction is similar to a "theatrical performance." Individuals, as "performers," cannot directly access each other's true intentions; instead, they must interpret signs such as cues, gestures, and appearances to understand the interaction. Goffman states that "the individual will have to act so that he intentionally or unintentionally expresses himself, and the others will in turn have to be impressed in some way by him."[4]

The performer's goal is to control the conduct of others, "especially their responsive treatment of him". They do so by projecting an image that influences the "definition of the situation"; in this way, they can guide others to "act voluntarily in accordance with their own plan".[5] Regardless of its real (or cynical) underpinnings, for an interaction to proceed, all participants must achieve a "working consensus," or "surface of agreement," that allows the performance to continue.

This framework may directly support the initial cynical hypothesis: we are all managing impressions. However, this projection is not merely functional; it is a deeply moral act. As Goffman notes,

> Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in a correspondingly appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second, namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought to have this claim honoured by others and ought in fact to be what he claims he is. In consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular

[2] Functional here means how social life operates practically to achieve social order, regardless of whether it feels real or fake inside.

[3] Crucially, the term 'performance' should not be interpreted in its extravagant, theatrical sense. Instead, it refers to the micro-sociological management of everyday life, where even a polite smile before a work meeting constitutes a performance.

[4] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, Social Sciences Research Centre, 1956), 2.

[5] Ibid., 3.

> kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect.[6]

These performances are not random, as Goffman explains, performances "will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society".[7] Performers present an idealised version of the self, a best-case scenario that aligns with communal moral values. According to him, this is why,

> [t]o the degree that a performance highlights the common official values of the society in which it occurs, we may look upon it, […] as a ceremony—as an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community. Furthermore, in so far as the expressive bias of performances comes to be accepted as reality, then that which is accepted at the moment as reality will have some of the characteristics of a celebration. To stay in one's room away from the place where the party is given, or away from where the practitioner attends to his client, is to stay away from where reality is being performed. The world, in truth, is a wedding.[8]

To maintain this "ideal front," the performer must hide "inappropriate conduct" or "secret indulgences" that would contradict the projected self.

If all social life is a performance, its fakeness, or the feeling that it is fake, becomes most apparent when it fails. Goffman emphasises that this entire "impression of reality" is incredibly "fragile".[9] Because the audience depends on minor cues, any small mistake (a "trifling flaw," an "unmeant gesture," a "single note off-key") can "disrupt the tone of an entire performance"[10] and shatter the shared reality.

This fragility highlights the core conflict in social life: the struggle between our "all-too-human selves" and our "socialized selves." We are naturally creatures with variable impulses, but the social roles we assume require us not to exhibit these ups and downs. This contradiction forces us to implement a "bureaucratization of the spirit", a way of man-

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6 Ibid., 6.
7 Ibid., 23.
8 Ibid., 23.
9 Ibid., 36.
10 Ibid., 33.

aging our internal state so we can consistently deliver a uniform performance when expected.[11] When this bureaucratisation fails, and a disruptive event occurs, the entire interaction can suddenly halt, which causes confusion and embarrassment. The performer feels ashamed, and the audience feels uncomfortable or hostile. The fakeness perceived by the observer is, therefore, the phenomenological experience of witnessing this Goffmanian fragility: the visible and embarrassing failure of the self to embody the socialised self.

The question I tried to answer in this section was: "Why do we perform at all?" This provides the *sociological mechanism* for the argument. We saw that we can consider Erving Goffman's "moral demand" for an idealised self as the *functional* basis for all social interaction. This section establishes the *demand* side of the market for ideal scripts and, crucially, identifies the fragility of this performance as the site of the perceived fakeness. Now we face a critical question: in a mass-media society, where do these "officially accredited values" and the "idealised scripts" we are failing to perform *come from*?

## III. The Industrialisation of the Script

The demand for an idealised script finds its industrial supplier in the "Culture Industry". Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's critique in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* explains that the *officially accredited values* described by Goffman are no longer negotiated within a community; in late capitalism, they are mass-produced and dictated by the system of film, radio, and magazines. The Culture Industry, on an industrial scale, hijacks the universal human need to perform.

This is achieved through the triumph of the Formula. While great bourgeois art once maintained a painful tension between the whole (the form) and the parts (the details), the Culture Industry "crushes equally the whole and the parts" (*ibid*., p. 99).[12] The formula--the happy ending, the inevitable romance, the successful career as a "leading idea"--is a rigid "filing compartment".[13] Any unruly details or idiotic events are

[11] Ibid., 36.

[12] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (1947; repr., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 99, hereafter cited in the text as DE.

[13] Ibid.

subdued and "guaranteed in advance" to fit this artificial harmony.

This formula *is* the idealised script for social life, which is stripped of all messy and disruptive elements, like the sanitised mind of Winston Smith in the final pages of *1984*, where all unruly resistance has been scrubbed away. The Culture Industry not only produces the scripts but also the very style of their performance. The style is not authentic expression but a reproducible formula: "the vocal jargon of the crooner" or "the adept grace of the film star".[14]

Horkheimer and Adorno argue that in the industry's hands, style is distorted into an "aesthetic equivalent of power" whose "secret is obedience to the social hierarchy".[15] However, unlike the culture ministries of the Nazi and Soviet regimes, or Orwell's Ministry of Truth, which enforced this style aggressively by banning other forms, the Culture Industry uses a gentler, more sneaky form of coercion. It does not need to ban dissent; instead, it saturates the world with the formula until obedience feels like a natural choice. Still, despite this difference in method, the result remains the same. In the final pages of 1984, Winston's tearful love for Big Brother is the ultimate realisation of this obedience.

This industrialisation of style provides the pre-fabricated masks for our Goffmanian performances. While Goffman, quoting Robert Park, noted that the "mask is our truer self",[16] Horkheimer and Adorno reveal that this mask is a mass-produced item. Their concept of "pseudo-individuality"[17] describes how the Culture Industry provides a range of pre-fabricated roles ("the rebel," "the girl next door") that feel unique but are, in fact, standardised products. Our choice of a self is merely an act of obedience to a style we have consumed.

This system explains *why* the movies seem to feel more real. The Culture Industry's goal, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is to duplicate empirical objects so perfectly that "life is to be made indistinguishable from the sound film".[18] This creates a continuous extension of reality, where the "moviegoer... perceives the street outside as a continuation of

[14] Ibid., 103.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, Social Sciences Research Centre, 1956), 12.
[17] DE, 125.
[18] Ibid., 99.

the film".[19] The film is not a reflection *of* reality; it is a *perfected* reality. Crucially, this perfection is "precensored". Horkheimer and Adorno argue that "Hollywood has consciously put into practice" a system where "images are precensored during production by the same standard of understanding which will later determine their reception by viewers".[20]

The industry simultaneously produces the perfect product and trains the audience to accept it as the standard for the real. When media perfectly imitates reality, it tricks us into believing that the real world is just as flawless and continuous. This conditioning dulls our imagination and prevents us from thinking critically.[21] This leads to the exact perceptual inversion that Warhol describes: the observer now compares the fragile and all-too-human performance with the industrialised, precensored, continuous style of the Culture Industry. The film seems real because it is an ideal free of all embarrassment and failure.

This industrial Formula succeeds because it taps into a deep existential problem, which is playfully depicted in Shel Silverstein's poem, "Zebra Question." When the narrator asks the zebra if it is "black with white stripes / Or white with black stripes," the zebra flips the question back onto the human: "Are you noisy with quiet times? / Or are you quiet with noisy times? / Are you happy with some sad days? / Or are you sad with some happy days?" The zebra's questions capture the genuine and chaotic essence of the authentic self, a self that is a battleground of conflicting forces. The narrator, overwhelmed by this abundance of qualities and drives, ultimately steps back and declares, "I'll never ask a zebra / About stripes / Again."

The Culture Industry alleviates this existential problem by unifying and abstracting the self. This abundance of qualities is exactly what the Enlightenment, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, aims to eliminate. For the Enlightenment, "only what can be encompassed by unity has the status of an existent."[22] They argue that this systemic demand for unity "subdues the abundance of qualities"[23] that is found in nature. When this logic is applied inward, "the all-powerful self becomes a mere having, an abstract identity".[24]

[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., 65.
[21] Ibid., 100.
[22] Ibid., 4.
[23] Ibid., 6.
[24] Ibid.

This abstract identity is the fictional unified subject that Nietzsche warned against. According to him, the unified subject, the "ego" or "I," is a fiction;[25] the body is a multiplicity of conflicting drives.[26] The unity of the self is not a natural state but a *creation*, an interpretation, and a simplification that is imposed by social norms. This fictional unity is created through pain and punishment, which are used as tools to forge a selective and socially convenient memory to make the subject responsible.[27]

The Culture Industry is the new, industrialised tool, which replaces pain with the pleasure of the Formula to achieve the same end. It provides the pseudo-individuality that allows us to choose a pre-fabricated, unified mask. The "adept grace of the film star" is the ultimate image of this fictional unity: an abstract identity stripped of the abundance of qualities and the multiplicity of forces that Nietzsche identified. The Culture Industry sells us a perfected, pre-censored identity that has subdued all the chaotic and conflicting desires of our authentic selves. The simulation feels real because it perfectly achieves the Enlightenment's ideal of a non-contradictory subject, an ideal our messy, real-life performances can only fail to imitate.

This section answers the question posed at the end of the previous one: "Where does this ideal script come from?" We saw that there is a connection between Goffman's abstract "officially accredited values" and the concrete mass-producer: the Culture Industry. This is the supply side of the market. The Formula and Style are the perfected,

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[25] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 177-178, hereafter cited in the text as TI; Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), 119, hereafter cited in the text as GM.

[26] Nietzsche does not discuss drives systematically, and his claims are scattered throughout his various works. See (BGE, 12; D 26; 119; GS 360). Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 12, hereafter cited in the text as BGE; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 26, hereafter cited in the text as D; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 225, hereafter cited in the text as GS.

[27] GM, 57-60.

pre-censored products that meet and shape the demand for an ideal self. The following section analyses the ontological consequences of this event. The question is: "What happens when the supply (the perfect copy) becomes the standard for the demand (the real performance)?"

## IV. The Platonic Inversion

This modern crisis is, in fact, a radical reversal of the classical problem of representation. We can find an early prediction of this issue in Plato's book ten of *The Republic*, which established a hierarchy of reality. At the top was the "Form" (The Real): the true, perfect, transcendent "idea" of a thing. Below this was the "Copy" (The Craftsman): a physical object, a good copy of the Form. At the bottom was the "Copy of a Copy" (The Artist): a representation, an illusion two times removed from the truth.

Plato's concern was that we would mistake the shadow for the real thing. But his objection was not only metaphysical; it was deeply political. Plato banned poetry not just because it's an illusion, but because it can be a subversive one. In book three of *the Republic*, Socrates suggests censoring offensive passages from Homer exactly because they promote disrespect for authority. For example, he calls for censorship of the speech where Achilles criticises King Agamemnon.

Plato believed that the goal of art was to instill *sophrosyne* (self-control) in the population, which he explicitly defined on two levels: (1) obedience to their rulers and (2) mastery over their own bodily appetites. This reveals an interesting connection: Plato's ideal (a censored, centralised art that removes discrepancies and promotes social cohesion) is functionally similar to the product of the Culture Industry. Plato's emphasis on obeying rulers is a direct philosophical ancestor to the Culture Industry's "style's secret: obedience to the social hierarchy." Plato, as the archetypal idealist, was the first major theorist of the pre-censored image. The Platonic inversion is that the Culture Industry finally achieved Plato's political goal, not by referencing a transcendent Form, but by industrialising the Form itself as a commercial product.

It is important to acknowledge here that the term "Platonic Inversion" or "reversal of Platonism" has a history in continental philosophy. It can be associated with Friedrich Nietzsche's entire project, which aimed to invert the Platonic hierarchy by prioritising the sensuous, "be-

coming," and the body over the transcendent, "Being," and the soul.[28] This philosophical tradition was further developed by thinkers like Martin Heidegger,[29] who viewed Nietzsche's inversion as the culmination of Western metaphysics, Gilles Deleuze examined the reversal as a central philosophical issue,[30] and Michel Foucault carried out an anti-Platonic inversion by stating that "the soul is the prison of the body".[31]

Deleuze, in his *Plato and the Simulacrum*, for example, called for a reversal of Platonism by affirming the simulacrum and allowing it to stand independently without referencing a higher original.[32] At first glance, this affirmation of the simulacrum might seem to oppose my claim that it causes a phenomenological disorientation that makes life feel inauthentic. However, this is not the case. We are actually arguing against the same thing: Platonism. Deleuze opposed Classical Platonism (where the Form oppresses the Copy) and supported the simulacrum as a philosophical tool to challenge the old hierarchy of Plato's Form. I oppose Industrial Platonism (where the perfected simulation dominates flawed real life). The key factor is who or what controls the simulacrum. The issue is that the Culture Industry took the victorious simulacrum and industrialised it. This is the main idea of Platonic Inversion (as I use the term): the industrial simulacrum did not liberate us. It merely *became the new Form*.

The Culture Industry's Absolute Fake is now just as rigid, precensored, and oppressive as Plato's original Form. It is a fictional unity that suppresses the abundance of qualities found in real life. Therefore, contrary to the above thinkers, I argue that the Platonic inversion was not merely a *philosophical* proposal but an *industrial* and *cultural* event. The agent of this inversion is not a philosopher, but the *Culture Industry*, and the new dominant Form that replaced Plato's transcendent Idea is not a metaphysical concept (like "the body" or "the will to power")

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[28] TI, 171; BGE, 3-25.

[29] Martin Heidegger, "Nietzsche's Word: 'God Is Dead,'" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, ed. J. Glenn Gray and Joan Stambaugh, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

[30] Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (1962; repr., New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

[31] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (1977; repr., New York: Vintage, 1995), 30.

[32] Gilles Deleuze, "Plato and the Simulacrum," trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October* 27 (1983): 45-56, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/778495].

but a *commercial product*: the *Formula* and *Style*. Our messy, real lives are now the *imperfect shadows*. We are still in Plato's Cave, but we are no longer watching shadows of a *true* Form; we are watching the *perfected Form* of the simulation, and judging our *own lives* as the flawed, inferior shadow of that simulation.

In other words, Plato's philosopher-king, who has access to the Forms and banishes the imitative poets and artists to protect the citizens from lies, is now replaced by the Culture Industry that creates what Eco called the Absolute Fake.[33] It is the industry, not the philosopher, that now controls the truth. Hollywood *is* the new Platonist: it pre-censors all art according to its Form (the Formula, the style). It has successfully banished all great artists, those who "have been mistrustful of style" and used art to express "suffering."

Umberto Eco explains how reproductions become more desirable than the original. This bridges the gap between Horkheimer & Adorno's "perfected copy" and Baudrillard's "preferred reality."[34] Eco called this state of hyperreality the "Absolute Fake," where the real and the fake merge. The Absolute Fake is created to act as a sign that replaces the original object and makes it irrelevant.[35] Its core principle is to provide a copy so satisfying that the original is no longer needed.[36]

Eco argues that we actively want this new reality. The process starts with us "idolizing" the original, but we soon prefer the copy because it's more reliable and programmable. He uses Disneyland as an example: real nature is unpredictable (a crocodile might be hiding in nature), but "faked nature" provides exactly what we "daydream" about. This is why a disappointing real-world experience (like seeing no alligators on the Mississippi) can make us "homesick for Disneyland," where the fake animals always perform. Eco's conclusion is that "technology can give us more reality than nature can".[37]

Jean Baudrillard radicalises this inversion and argues that the world described by Plato, where a copy could still be compared to an original, is over. Baudrillard argues that the Real has been destroyed and replaced by

[33] Umberto Eco, *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality* (New York: Vintage, 1998).
[34] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (1981; repr., Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994).
[35] Umberto Eco, *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 7.
[36] Ibid., 18.
[37] Ibid., 44.

the simulation. He distinguishes between dissimulation (hiding a truth) and simulation (faking a non-truth). Dissimulation does not challenge reality; the truth is still there, it is just masked. Simulation, however, fundamentally threatens the distinction between what is true and what is false. By producing symptoms of an illness, the simulator blurs the line and disrupts our understanding of reality. This leads to the strange conclusion that a perfectly faked madness is indistinguishable from real madness: "If he is this good at acting crazy... it's because he is".[38]

This lack of distinction defines the hyperreal. We now live in a world where the models and simulations come first, and reality is then shaped to fit them. Baudrillard argues that we are no longer in a state of ideology (a false representation of reality), but in a state of complete simulation. Baudrillard takes the ideas of Plato and Goffman and pushes them to their postmodern extreme: he suggests that the issue they identified has now completely consumed our reality. For Goffman, there was an authentic self in the backstage. For Baudrillard, there is no backstage. The front stage has swallowed everything; the mask has fused to the face. Disneyland is "presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest of [America (Los Angeles)] is real".[39] For Baudrillard, this is the ultimate deception: LA is just as hyperreal, a simulation of an idealised, cinematic real America.

Our ontological analysis of the question posed at the end of section 3, "What happens when the supply (the perfect copy) becomes the standard for the demand (the real performance)?", resulted in the Platonic Inversion. This is a state of hyperreality where the Absolute Fake is preferred for its reliability, and the Simulacrum precedes and generates the real. In the next section, we will explore if there is a resolution to this issue. The question is: "If the real is now fake, how can we ever find authenticity?"

## V. The Bad Actor as Authentic Subject

Now that we have established the theoretical framework for the Platonic Inversion, we can return to the source of the fakeness and suggest a solution. As we saw, the root of this fakeness is the inherent chal-

[38] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (1981; repr., Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 4.
[39] Ibid., 12.

lenge of expressing our inner emotional lives. Translating complex internal states into words or actions is far from easy; it is a skill many lack. We are bad actors, forget our lines, our masks slip, and we end up embarrassing ourselves. Our real-life romances are awkward, our moments of heroism are clumsy, and our grief is messy. This creates a gap between internal intention and external manifestation--the feeling of trying to paint a masterpiece with unsteady, unresponsive hands.

Stendhal's novel *The Red and the Black* masterfully portrays this tragedy of human interaction: how we can be inept at expressing ourselves, yet simultaneously so sensitive to the smallest gestures and behaviours of others. The protagonist, Julien Sorel, embodies this divide; he uses calculated performances while his true feelings remain hidden. This Stendhalian Gap is the all-too-human self that Goffman described as disruptive. It is the "chaotic expression of suffering" that Horkheimer and Adorno argued "great art" must capture, but which the Culture Industry's style erases.[40] The "adept grace of the film star" is appealing *because* it presents an expression with no gap.

This understanding allows us to re-evaluate realism itself. The movie *Crimson Gold* provides an example. The director's deliberate use of non-professional actors results in awkward, almost *fake* performances. Yet, this is deeply insightful and realistic *because* it captures the exact form of *fakeness* found in real life.[41] *Crimson Gold* functions as great art in the Horkheimer and Adorno sense: it "mistrust[s] style." By emphasising bad acting, it *rejects* the Formula and the Style. Instead, it makes the Stendhalian Gap and the Goffmanian fragility the actual *content* of the film. It bypasses the hyperreal simulation (Baudrillard's perfect copy) to capture the *awkwardness of the real*.

In Horkheimer and Adorno's critique, "Works of art are ascetic and shameless; the culture industry is pornographic and prudish."[42] For them, the Culture Industry is pornographic because it "constantly ex-

[40] DE, 103.

[41] In his reflections on his films, including Crimson Gold, Panahi has argued that the non-professional actor, by "not accepting the accepted logic" of the script, "can change what would appear on the screen." This intervention, where the actor questions the narrative, is precisely what makes the film "more real," serving as a "sign of returning to the truth". Michael Mahan, "The Subversive Effects of Defamiliarization in *This Is Not a Film*, Directed by Jafar Panahi," *Spectator* 40, no. 1 (2020), 11.

[42] DE, 111.

hibit[s] the object of desire" (the perfect romance, the star's body) but prudish because it suppresses any real gratification (reducing it to a safe, formulaic romance). True art, on the other hand, is ascetic because it denies this easy fulfilment, and shameless because it displays the "chaotic expression of suffering" and "fulfilment in its brokenness."[43]

Vladimir Nabokov, in his afterword to *Lolita*, clearly distinguishes this point. He describes pornography by its adherence to "mediocrity, commercialism, and certain strict rules of narration".[44] He suggests that pornography, much like a formulaic detective story, must follow strict rules to give the viewer a sense of satisfaction--a clear echo of Horkheimer and Adorno's prudish formula. In this formula, "Style, structure, imagery should never distract the reader" from their "tepid lust". In contrast, *Lolita*, by rejecting the formulaic "rising succession of erotic scenes" and striving for "aesthetic bliss," is ascetic and shameless: it exposes the discrepancy that the Culture Industry's pornographic formula must suppress.

This is the only moment where truth can be found in art. As Horkheimer and Adorno write,

> The moment in the work of art by which it transcends reality [...] does not consist in achieved harmony, in the questionable unity of form and content [...] but in those traits in which the discrepancy emerges, in the necessary failure of the passionate striving for identity.[45]

This necessary failure is the Stendhalian Gap.

This section proposes an *aesthetic and epistemological solution* to the question raised earlier: "If the real is now fake, how can we ever find authenticity?" We saw that this authenticity can be located in the Stendhalian Gap: the *failure* of the performance, the discrepancy, the awkward gesture that the perfected Formula must *hide*. Bad acting of real life *is* the result of the abundance of qualities and conflicting desires. The *failure* of the performance to achieve a fictional unity is the *proof* of its authentic complexity.

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[43] Ibid.
[44] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (1955; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 313.
[45] DE, 103.

## VI. Conclusion

In this paper, we have traced the genealogy of a perception. It began with a *phenomenological problem*: life feels fake while movies seem real. This was explained via *sociology*: all social life is a fragile performance of an ideal (Goffman). This ideal was shown to be *industrialised*: movies are the perfected, pre-censored script (Horkheimer & Adorno). This led to an *ontological consequence*: the perfect script became the new Form, which reverses Platonism and creates a hyperreality where the "map precedes the territory" (Baudrillard). This was *resolved* by identifying the fakeness of life as the authentic gap between intent and expression (Stendhal), a gap the simulation must erase.

When the Culture Industry's Form is considered as the standard, our own inability to imitate the movie star (our own spontaneity and imagination) is repressed. We are trained to see our own authentic lives as failures. This is the ultimate "obedience to the social hierarchy"—obedience to the *image*. However, this fakeness we perceive in real life is not a sign that we are failed simulations; it is the ultimate proof that we are *not* simulations.

The realness of the movie, which Warhol admired, is an idealised expression of a single emotion or drive. A performance in a film is too similar to what it aims to represent and is therefore too typical. It is a simplistic reduction, the fictional unity of the abstract identity. Real life, by contrast, is much richer and more nuanced. Every person has many different, often conflicting desires and wishes. Even when one of these drives wins, this does not eliminate the others. Therefore, every real-life action, every expression of affection or hate, is the battleground of our inner commitments, values, desires, and everything else that makes us who we are. The perceived fakeness (the flawed execution, the awkward gesture, the bad acting) is the visible, authentic sign of this internal struggle.

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# 25. Phenomenology as Philosophy of Mind: Scientific Theories as Fictional Realities

*Alexander Muss, albertwanderer@gmail.com*
*(Senior Lecturer, Department of General Psychology, Dr., St. Petersburg State University)*

**Abstract:** Among the numerous approaches to the study of consciousness, phenomenology occupies a special place. Firstly, phenomenology is an approach to the study of consciousness that emerged in continental philosophy in opposition to mainstream analytical one. This applies primarily to transcendental phenomenology, which is based on ideas of F. Brentano and E. Husserl. In contrast, the phenomenologies of K. Jaspers and M. Merleau-Ponty, as well as other phenomenological and post-phenomenological conceptions, can be integrated into the analytical tradition.

Secondly, phenomenology generates a different philosophy of science, placing subjective experience at the foundation of all human knowledge. This primacy of subjective experience is an entirely atypical position for the analytical tradition and it provides a different perspective on scientific knowledge. If subjective experience is the basis for all other knowledge, any scientific knowledge becomes an attempt to conceptualize a specific domain of the subjective experience. This approach transforms any scientific theory into a fictional world or fictional reality. And this reality is aimed at and also is limited by subjective experience, simultaneously ignoring the possessor of this experience. As a result, the typical neurocognitive model of human beings as an embodied brain in a specific body becomes a literary alter ego of the possessor of subjective experience, while phenomenological approach provides several intuitions about the relationship between consciousness and scientific knowledge and is able to reinterpret the existing puzzles without its destruction.

**Keywords:** Philosophy of Mind, Problem of Consciousness, Phenomenology, Neurophenomenology, Transcendental Phenomenology, Naturalism, Antinaturalism

## Introduction

As the answer to the question of how the brain produces subjective experience, the Hard problem of consciousness became the real multidisciplinary fundamental problem of the XXI Century. The explanatory gap[1] between our knowledge of how the brain and nervous system works (data from the third person perspective) and our subjective experience and its reflexive accessible features such as unity, intentionality and privacy (data from the first person perspective) become a great puzzle for numerous researchers: there is a continuum of the possible solutions from stating the Hard problem as a pseudoproblem (and denying the existence of the subjective experience[2]) through reinterpreting this problem (by stating subjective experience and its features as illusions[3] or by reducing consciousness to information or integrated information[4]) to recognize the existence of this problem beyond the limits of human knowledge (like transcendentalists view[5]). However, there is no consensus among these solutions.

This continuum of solutions has been developed by many philosophers and scientists around the world. Thus, the Hard problem of consciousness is a multidisciplinary problem that spans different philosophical and scientific disciplines, paradigms, and traditions. As for philosophy, I mean the continental and analytical tradition. Nowadays analytical philosophy of mind is both the main source of the Hard problem of consciousness and a mainstream approach to studying consciousness and its problems in general[6].

Nevertheless, mainstream approach does not mean the only ap-

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1 Joseph Levine, "Materialism and Qualia, the Explanatory Gap," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (1983): 354–61.

2 Daniel C. Dennett, *Sweet dreams: Philosophical obstacles to a science of consciousness* (MIT press, 2006).

3 Keith Frankish, "Illusionism as a theory of consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 23. no. 11–12 (2016): 11–39.

4 Larissa Albantakis, et al. "Integrated information theory (IIT) 4.0: Formulating the properties of phenomenal existence in physical terms," *PLoS computational biology* 19, no. 10 (2023): e1011465.

5 Diana E. Gasparyan, "Phenomenology without a transcendental subject: neurophenomenology and enactivism in search of a first-person perspective," *The Philosophy Journal* 13, no. 1 (2020): 95.

6 David J. Chalmers, *The conscious mind: in search of a theory of conscious experience* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

proach. There are no rigid boundaries between analytical and continental philosophers, and this could be proven by the existence of neurophenomenology – the approach to study consciousness that combines both philosophical traditions as well as scientific methodology[7]. Moreover, the prevalence of analytical philosophy does not mean that continental philosophy of mind is useless. According to I. Lacatos, any research programme could be progressive or degenerative in concrete historical circumstances[8].

And one of the key continental schools that study consciousness is phenomenology from its predecessors in the XIX Century to contemporary representatives. In this article, I would like to discuss several unexpected consequences of phenomenology as an approach that is aimed to be an alternative to the naturalistic and psychological view on consciousness, because taking these consequences seriously could shift our understanding of the Hard problem and its ontological and epistemological status.

## Phenomenology as the philosophy of mind

Among the numerous approaches to the study of consciousness, phenomenology occupies a special place. Firstly, phenomenology is an approach to the study of consciousness that emerged in continental philosophy in opposition to mainstream analytical one. This applies primarily to transcendental phenomenology, which is based on ideas of E. Husserl[9]. Moreover, since its occurrence between the end of the XIX and the beginning of the XX Centuries, phenomenology became a philosophical alternative to naturalistic study of consciousness.

In 1874, the E. Husserl's mentor F. Brentano published the monograph "Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt" [Psychology from empirical standpoint][10], in which he criticized W. Wundt attempt to develop psychology in between philosophy and physiology and to solve mind-body

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7 Mirko Di Bernardo, "Neurophenomenology and intersubjectivity: An interdisciplinary approach," *Axiomathes* 32, Suppl 2 (2022): 95-111.

8 Imre Lakatos, "History of science and its rational reconstructions," *PSA: Proceedings of the biennial meeting of the philosophy of science association.* Vol. 1970 (Cambridge University Press, 1970).

9 Diana E. Gasparyan, "Phenomenology without a transcendental subject: neurophenomenology and enactivism in search of a first-person perspective," 95.

10 Franz Brentano, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt* (Duncker & Humblot, 1874).

problem combining philosophical reflection and scientific methods as inner and outer observation[11]. The main idea of Wundt's physiological psychology was to find elements of consciousness and connect them to separate neurons. However, at the end of the XIX Century this attempt could be executed only theoretically. In contrast, Brentano tried to explore psychological or mental phenomena in themselves and study their main features via his own philosophical reflection, literary sources and conversation with other people. This approach allowed him to discover the intentionality of consciousness as the main difference between physical and psychological phenomena. According to Brentano, intentionality is the focus of our consciousness on an object, and every psychical phenomenon like imagination, judgment, and love is intentional[12].

Using these premises, phenomenology continued to discover the laws and structures of the subjective experience itself. This approach distinguished mental phenomena from both Lebenswelt [life-world] as external conditions of experience and cognition and pure consciousness as the result of transcendental reduction. According to Husserl, phenomenological study needs a series of reductions that help researchers to study consciousness. One of these reductions is the phenomenological reduction that includes epoche, a thought procedure that excludes every bias about subjective experience and its nature. These biases could be both everyday ideas about consciousness and scientific knowledge about it[13].

In other words, this procedure left any previous theories and conceptions about consciousness beyond the scope of phenomenological research. As a result, subjective experience was placed at the foundation of knowledge, and the value of scientific knowledge to phenomenological study was challenged. This led to a fundamental incompatibility of approaches. On the one hand, such a distinction made it possible to focus on the laws of consciousness itself. It allows Husserl and the other phenomenologists to conceptualize the pure consciousness and to distinguish between the knowable and the unknowable aspects of human consciousness[14]. On the other hand, not all phenomenologists were prepared to ignore the obvious progress of

[11] Wilhelm M. Wundt, *Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie* (Engelmann, 1874).
[12] Franz Brentano, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*.
[13] Edmund Husserl, D*ie Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie* (Felix Meiner Verlag, 2012).
[14] ibid.

scientific and humanistic knowledge: they tried to utilize this knowledge in their work. For example, philosophical anthropologists (especially H. Plessner) concluded that both subjective experience and bodily organization as a fundamental properties of human being[15].

So, this distinction between phenomenology and the other philosophical and scientific approaches to the human mind was both fruitful and full of limits that the later philosophers tried to overcome. Simultaneously, this overcoming allowed us to take a different look at the relationship between established philosophical traditions. For example, phenomenology (phenomenological psychiatry) of K. Jaspers and M. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception are used in contemporary collaboration of continental and analytical study of consciousness – neurophenomenology[16].

## Phenomenological philosophy of science

As an alternative approach to studying consciousness, phenomenology also generates a distinct philosophy of science that was developed independently of positivist and postpositivist ones. Husserl transcendental phenomenology placing subjective experience at the foundation of all human knowledge. This primacy of subjective experience is an entirely atypical position for the analytical tradition, which is based on the primacy of scientific knowledge. Moreover, phenomenological philosophy of science provides a different perspective on scientific knowledge.

In his "Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie" [The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy], Husserl criticized the mathematisation of sciences, stating that using mathematical laws in their fields, scientists lose laws of their sciences. In contrast to mathematisation, Husserl claimed that his transcendental phenomenology should be the primary field of knowledge[17]. M. Merleau-Ponty continued to develop this idea concluding that scientific knowledge is the result of sensory data and its' following mental processing[18].

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[15] Helmut Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch: Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie* (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2019).

[16] Mirko Di Bernardo, "Neurophenomenology and intersubjectivity: An interdisciplinary approach," 95-111.

[17] Edmund Husserl, D*ie Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie*.

[18] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, et al. *Phenomenology of perception* (Routledge, 2013).

These theses lead us to the key difference between analytical and phenomenological philosophy of science: analytical philosophy of science concludes that scientific knowledge is primary in relation to subjective experience and seeks to identify the key features of this knowledge. In this way, subjective experience could be regarded as a product or epiphenomenon of the world governed and explained by the laws of science. A striking exception here would be various positions close to scientific anti-realism, for example, conventionalism and/or empiriocriticism, for which scientific knowledge is not objective but an agreement among researchers[19]. In contrast, phenomenological philosophy of science defended the primacy of subjective experience, that raised scientific knowledge. This idea also leads us to a strong version of scientific anti-realism, for which the real world remains transcendent[20], while various scientific theories are only a useful but an incomplete interpretation of the causes that give rise to the diversity of our sensations. In other words, phenomenological philosophy of sciences consider scientific knowledge as fiction, so K. Popper's 3-rd world as a world of scientific theories becomes a fictional world.

## Scientific theories as fictional realities

As has been noted above, if subjective experience is the basis for all other knowledge, any scientific knowledge becomes an attempt to conceptualize a specific domain of the subjective experience, for example, sensations. This approach transforms any scientific theory into a fictional world or reality, that was created by possessors of subjective experience to explain the causes of such an experience. These statements could be mistakenly interpreted as a form of Luddism and as a devaluation of scientific knowledge.

However, this form of scientific anti-realism does not deny scientific knowledge or takes him seriously. Putting subjective experience first inverts the usual hierarchy of knowledge and experience, but does not exclude any elements from it. Scientific knowledge or scientific theories, as products of human cognition, remain well-founded and ac-

[19] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

[20] In Kant's terminology, transcendental is something unable to be cognized. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of pure reason* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

curate, but they lose their objective status. There are only intersubjective human beings, and these theories, these fictional realities, become part of our subjective experience, something we can share with each other.

It is also important to note that such theories as fictional realities are aimed at and also are limited by subjective experience, simultaneously ignoring the possessor of this experience[21]. This becomes possible because the primary source of our scientific knowledge (according to phenomenology and its philosophy of mind) is our senses. On the one hand, this allows us to conceptualize not only the objects and phenomena we experience, but also the experience itself, the process of its possession, but not the possessor, which becomes only an erroneous homunculus in XIX Century neuroscience[22]. In contrast, phenomenology allowed such a research by examining the possessor of experience as something transcendental, which is partly represented in our consciousness as the ego[23].

So, if we conceptualize scientific theories as fictional realities that arise from our attempts to understand the causes of our sensations, these theories reveal nothing about the possessor of subjective experience that lies beyond sensations and their possession. The aforementioned transcendence of the ego prevents us from formulating a reliable and convincing conception of our essence. In turn, the typical neurocognitive model of human beings as an embodied brain in a specific body becomes a literary alter ego of the possessor of subjective experience, which cannot be related to our key features that lie beyond the scope of our subjective experience. In other words, such aspects of our cognition prevent any theory of consciousness, which is formulated via analytical tradition, to be compared with our consciousness. Such theories remain only descriptions, without any connection to what they describe.

## Consequences for the consciousness research

To sum it up, the phenomenological approach turns the Hard problem of consciousness inside out. In order to reconsider the Hard problem, we need to take subjective experience and scientific knowledge seriously[24].

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[21] Konstantin V. Anokhin, "Cognitome: in search of fundamental neuroscience theory of consciousness," *Zhurnal vysshey nervnoy deyatel'nosti* 71, no. 1 (2021): 39–71.

[22] ibid.

[23] According to Sartre, Ego itself is also transcendental. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The transcendence of the ego: A sketch for a phenomenological description* (Routledge, 2004).

[24] David J. Chalmers, *The conscious mind*.

However, taking seriously does not mean taking seriously in an equivalent role. From an analytical point of view, scientific knowledge stays in first place, and subjective experience stays in second place. This could result in considering subjective experience as non-existent or illusory. From a phenomenological point of view, subjective experience stays at the first place. This view corresponds to M. Velmans' view on public and personal experience, according to which we usually dismiss[25].

Phenomenology also reinterprets the Hard problem as the problem of the insufficiency of the biological or neurocognitive model of human beings to fully explain consciousness in all of its aspects. As a part of scientific knowledge any third person view on consciousness becomes something less than subjective experience itself. This insufficiency is rooted in the place where phenomenology placed any scientific knowledge. The primacy of subjective experience makes every scientific theory only part of an individual's phenomenal experience and the product of researcher's transcendental ego. In turn, this insufficiency is based on both limits of human knowledge, which are obvious to transcendental philosophy and phenomenology, but not to analytical philosophy. Moreover, this insufficiency is also based on the limits of the naturalistic worldview that, according to phenomenology, fundamentally ignores inner aspects of subjective experience. According to the phenomenological point of view, this ignorance comes from the fact that scientific theories are based on sensation, ignoring the transcendental nature of human essence. Moreover, this highlights the scientific anti-realism of phenomenology.

As a result, consciousness in the first place and scientific theories in the second place do not ruin both experience and knowledge but provide an alternative hierarchy of data. In this hierarchy scientific theories lose their objective character, but obtain their place as the result of mental processing or the search for external causes of sensations. Therefore, this hierarchy legitimizes both first-person and third-person perspectives. From this point of view, third-person perspective becomes the incomplete but necessary part of the first-person perspective. And this revision provides a new perspective on the Hard problem of consciousness.

[25] Max Velmans, *Understanding consciousness* (Routledge, 2009).

# 26. Simulacrum as Nichtseyende. Baudrillard and Schelling on the Effectiveness of What Is Not

*Enrico Schiro enrico.schiro.25@um.edu.mt*
*(Dr., University of Malta)*

**Abstract:** This paper proposes a Schellingian interpretation of Jean Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum. It advances five interconnected claims: (1) that Baudrillard's engagement with Schelling has left recognizable textual and conceptual traces in his work; (2) that Baudrillard's figures of transvestism, illness, obesity, and speed operate according to a Schellingian logic in which things manifest themselves in their contrary, or non-identity; (3) that Baudrillard employs Schellingian concepts from a logical rather than an ontological point of view; (4) that Baudrillard and Schelling share a common philosophical engagement with the problems posed by Plato in the Sophist, from which Schelling derives his notion of the simulacrum; and (5) that this intertextual relation clarifies Baudrillard's philosophy of simulacra by explaining how what is not can nonetheless produce real effects.

## Introduction

This paper proposes a Schellingian interpretation of four conceptual figures in Baudrillard's thought: transvestism, psychosomatic illness, obesity, and speed. Little has been written on the relationship between Baudrillard and Friedrich W. J. Schelling.[1] However, the Schelling scholar Ana Carrasco-Conde has advanced a suggestive hypothesis. Reflecting on a "logic of the phantom" — that is, of what is not, but nevertheless has real effects — she pointed out a conceptual convergence between Baudrillard's simulacrum and Schelling's "non-entity" (*Nichtseyende*). Both share a negative, fictional, parasitic ontological status,

[1] *For an initial insight into this correlation, see Iain Hamilton Grant, "Schellingianism and Postmodernity,"* The Paideia Archive: Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, no. 27 (1998), 32–38.

which is nevertheless capable of producing positive ontological effects.[2]

Carrasco-Conde's hypothesis is fascinating. However, pursuing this development exposes it to two reasonable objections. The first objection is textual: there is no evidence that Baudrillard ever made any reference to Schelling. The second one is theoretical: whereas Schelling's concept of "non-entity" originates from an ontological tradition that goes back to Plato's *Sophist*, Baudrillard's concept of "simulacrum" arises from a reflection on the semiological status of the sign. Developing the comparison between the two concepts would tend to "over-ontologize" Baudrillard.

In this paper, I respond to both objections. On the one hand, I show that there is evidence of direct and indirect references to Schelling in Baudrillard's work. On the other hand, I show that Baudrillard uses Schellingian ontological concepts—essence/existence, potency, *Steigerung*, doubling—and that he demonstrates an interest in the problematic posed in Plato's *Sophist*, from which Schelling derives his concept of non-entity.

I argue however, that he employs them not ontologically but logically. The comparison is more productive if it starts from the Schellingian perspective according to which things manifest themselves by reversing into their opposite, that is, into their non-identity. This entails a shift from ontology to logic. In Schelling, these dimensions are not distinct: *non*-entity is the *non*-identity of the entity. Baudrillard however, speaks of an "other logic" when referring to Schellingian conceptual operators, suggesting that he drew a logic from Schelling without embracing his ontology—a logic that clarifies how his fictional realities operate.

In each of the four figures re-examined, it will emerge that for Baudrillard what is at stake each time is a reversal of the identity of something into its non-identity, that is, its capacity to manifest itself and to behave as what it is not—and therefore as a simulacral reality, a fictional reality. On this basis, a Schellingian interpretation opens a new angle on Baudrillard's conception of the effectiveness of what is not.

[2] Ana Carrasco-Conde, "Schelling, Žižek, Baudrillard: la lógica del fantasma." *Anales del Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía*, vol. 30 no. 2 (2013), 505-525.

## 1. Transvestism, woman / non-woman

Contrary to what one might think, Baudrillard's concept of the "feminine" *does not* denote women. He considers it as the principle of uncertainty applied to sexual/gender difference. Consequently, he argues that it manifests more where the certainty of the feminine itself—woman's sexual identity—is called into question: in transvestism. For Baudrillard, transvestism is a "challenge to woman/woman through woman/sign."[3] If woman/woman is the woman identical to herself, woman/sign is the putting at stake of this identity. This occurs through a staging of makeup, maquillage, adornment, and semiotic parody characteristic of cross-dressing performances, which is consistent with Baudrillard's semiocentric interpretation. The very formula "woman/sign" adds to a whole series of similar formulas Baudrillard has accustomed us to: object/sign, function/sign, value/sign, exchange/sign, etc.

On the other hand, when speaking of transvestism, Baudrillard does not emphasize the traits of hyper-resemblance or hyper-simulation of the "woman" model (breasts, high heels, makeup), but rather the opposite traits. He emphasizes that "the Barcelona *travelos* keep their mustaches and display hairy chests."[4] Transvestism is a manifestation of the opposite of what one is. On the contrary, for Baudrillard it is a feminine manifesting as *non*-feminine. It is no coincidence that Baudrillard pairs the more famous definition of "woman/sign" with another, less explored and more fascinating definition: that of "woman/non-woman."

He writes: "a woman/non-woman, self-moving in signs, is more likely to go to the limits of seduction than a real woman already justified by her sex."[5] This definition highlights an aspect that "woman/sign" obscures. The two formulas are equivalent in the economy of Baudrillardian discourse and mean the same thing: the calling into question of the truth of woman, justified in her sexual identity. But they do so in two very different ways. The formula "woman/sign" valorizes the semiological side. The formula "woman/non-woman" elicits a logical problematic: the blatant violation of the metaphysical principle of identity. This expression is literally nonsensical. Whereas one may more or less agree on the anti-realist consequences of Baudrillardian semiocentrism,

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[3] Jean Baudrillard, *De la séduction* (Paris: Galilée, 1979), 24.
[4] Ibid., 27.
[5] Ibid., 25.

one cannot deny that the expression "woman/sign" makes sense and the issue is interesting for two reasons.

The first is: if the two formulations are equivalent, it follows that they are interchangeable. The formula "/*sign*" can therefore be replaced with "/*non*-identity." This suggests rereading Baudrillard's formulations such that object/*sign* corresponds to object/*non*-object, function/*sign* to function/*non*-function, and value/*sign* to value/*non*-value. Baudrillard does not employ this formula only in reference to the feminine, but has also extensively spoken of *non*-response, *non*-reciprocity, *non*-equivalence, *non*-ambivalence, *non*-communication, *non*-events, and *non*-place. Baudrillard's conception of the sign—and thus his simulacra—rests on an overlooked philosophical issue concerning the relation between identity and *non*-identity. The second is more compelling, as it brings Schelling into play.

## 2. Existence, essence, potency

The key to understanding the formula "woman/non-woman" and solving this enigma lies in Friedrich W. J. Schelling, an author almost never associated with Baudrillard. How can this be argued? By noticing that, in explaining the reason why his concept of "femininity" *does not* denote women, Baudrillard resorts to the Schellingian distinction between essence and existence. In *Philosophie der Kunst*, Schelling states that "we say that a thing *endures* because its existence […] is *inadequate* to its essence."[6] In *De la séduction*, Baudrillard writes: "As it is said that a thing endures because its existence is inadequate to its essence, one must say that the feminine seduces because it is never where one thinks it is."[7] Therefore, Baudrillard's text incorporates Schelling's thesis and uses it as a comparative term to characterize his conception of feminine seduction. But to understand why "the feminine seduces because it is never where one thinks it is," that is, in women—the reference/denotation we would immediately associate with the term "feminine"—we must decipher the Schellingian reference.

In his Doctrine of the Potencies (*Potenzenlehre*), Schelling subtracts essence from its conventional reduction to identity to rethink it as

[6] Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke* (Stuttgart–Augsburg: Cotta, 1856–1861), I,5,376.

[7] Jean Baudrillard, *De la séduction*, 17.

the potency of being-other. The premise to the quote from Schelling is: "the feminine is elsewhere, it has always been elsewhere. That is the secret of its potency (*puissance*)."[8] Therefore, as we can see, Baudrillard places his seduction under the Schellingian sign of "potency," but also gives it an idiomatic twist. For Schelling, essence is the potency of being-*other*; for Baudrillard, seduction is the potency of being-*elsewhere*. Thus, in Baudrillard's comparison, seduction stands to essence as women stand to existence.

This reference to Schelling allows us to decipher the "woman/non-woman" definition. Indeed, one of the most characteristic theses of *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* is the idea that "everything can become manifest only in its contrary, therefore identity in non-identity."[9] Schelling made extensive use of this formula throughout his writings, speaking not only of *non*-entity or *non*-identity but also of *non*-reality, *non*-freedom, *non*-movement, *non*-act, *non*-expansion, *non*-necessity, *non*-unity, and even *non*-God. This constitutes, in other words, a stylistic hallmark of his philosophy, correlated with his central thesis concerning the absolute identity of the ideal and the real, that is, of two contrary dimensions, each of which, taken separately, is the *non*-identity of the other: the ideal as the *non*-real, and conversely the real as the *non*-ideal. My hypothesis is that this problematic of the reversal of identity into *non*-identity underlies the question of the simulacral status of the sign in Baudrillard.

Furthermore, if transvestism calls a woman's identity into question, it is not because, as "woman/sign," it achieves a hyper-resemblance of the feminine. On the contrary, it is a woman who manifests herself by displaying the outward traits of her masculine opposite (mustache, hairy chest, and the like). Consequently, its "sign" status consists precisely in behaving and manifesting as a "*non*-woman." Then Carrasco-Conde's intuition concerning the simulacrum as "*non*-entity" (*Nichtseyende*) in the Schellingian sense appears more plausible from a logical point of view.

### 3. Illness, ill/non-ill

In bringing Baudrillard's simulacrum closer to Schelling's *non*-entity (*Nichtseyende*), Ana Carrasco-Conde focuses on the question of evil and illness. In order to show that evil is not simply *privatio boni*—and thus a

[8] Ibid., 17.
[9] Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, I,7,424.

pure non-being—Schelling turns to illness, drawing on the theories of Franz von Baader. In relation to the body, illness has a negative ontological status. Carrasco-Conde speaks of a "parasitic" status, insofar as illness depends on the body that hosts it in order to produce its effects.[10] Yet it would be absurd to regard the effects of illness as *unreal*. Illness is not pure nothingness; rather, it is a "*non*-entity" (*Nichtseyende*). It is the *non*-entity of the body, that is, the *non*-identity of bodily being. If the body is an organic balance, as von Baader maintains, then illness is its imbalance, that is, its *non*-balance.

As Carrasco-Conde explains, Schelling's concept of "*non*-entity" (*Nichtseyende*) derives from Plato's *Sophist*. It is in fact a reworking of the Platonic *symplokē* of being and non-being. In the *Weltalter*, Schelling explicitly acknowledges this Platonic derivation and regards the recognition of this hybrid of being and non-being as the greatest merit of Platonism. At the same time, he claims for himself its rediscovery and revaluation within German Idealism. Precisely because it derives from the *Sophist*, Schelling also refers to this concept using another Platonic term, "appearance" (*Scheinbild*). It is worth noting that Schelling himself uses the concept of "simulacrum" (*simulachrum*) in other works to refer to this appearance.[11]

The point is that this appearance/simulacrum that constitutes the "non-entity" (*Nichtseyende*) is not a mere illusory semblance, but something that is not and yet nonetheless produces real effects. From this perspective, a convergence with Baudrillard's problematic emerges—one that Carrasco-Conde develops through a rereading of key passages from Baudrillard's 1978 essay *La précession des simulacres*, later included in *Simulacres et simulation*. Here, the simulacrum's distinctive feature lies precisely in its capacity to substitute itself for the real while nonetheless producing real effects. This raises the following question: if Schelling's "non-entity" is a simulacrum, can Baudrillard's simulacrum in turn be a "non-entity"?

This hypothesis already finds support in a passage from Baudrillard's 1978 essay that Carrasco-Conde does not discuss, but which moves precisely in the direction she indicates. Baudrillard also addresses the issue of illness, discussing psychosomatic pathologies on the basis of the distinction between dissimulation and simulation. Dissimulation

[10] Ana Carrasco-Conde, "Schelling, Žižek, Baudrillard", 523.
[11] Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, I,7,164.

leaves intact the distinction between reality and fiction: to feign symptoms is to conceal a distinction that remains operative in itself. Illness is either present or absent; the patient is either ill or not. In simulation, by contrast, this distinction collapses: even in the absence of illness, real symptoms appear, and it becomes undecidable whether illness is present or absent. As Baudrillard writes: "One can treat him neither objectively as ill nor as *non*-ill."[12]

Psychosomatic illness thus appears to constitute a paradigmatic example of the Schellingian "non-entity" as the reversing of the identity in *non*-identity: it possesses an undecidable ontological status and yet produces real effects of its opposite. To clarify the point, one might say that a psychosomatic patient is a *non*-ill person who becomes manifest as ill, just as an asymptomatic patient is an ill person who becomes manifest as *non*-ill. So too in transvestism: the woman who manifests herself as a *non*-woman.

We should not forget that Schelling's conception of illness is indebted to the theories of Franz von Baader. It is therefore interesting to note that Baudrillard also refers to von Baader when discussing two other pathologies—cancer and obesity—introducing the philosophical concept of *Steigerung*.

## 4. Steigerung, Doublierung, Aufhebung

When Baudrillard speaks of obesity, he introduces the concept of *Steigerung*. He writes: "obesity would thus be a fine example […] of this revolution in things that no longer lies in their dialectical overcoming (*Aufhebung*), but in their potentiation (*Steigerung*), in their elevation to the power of two, to the power of *n*."[13] The concept of *Steigerung*, which derives from the German verb *steigern*, has a rich semantic range (to increase, to intensify, to amplify, to raise to a potency, to transform a comparative into a superlative), which Baudrillard fully deploys. Yet the term also has a philosophical history that passes through Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*. The way Baudrillard employs this concept has three features which, taken together, can be found only in Schelling. The first is its explicit opposition to Hegelian *Aufhebung*. The second is its articulation as an exponential process, an elevation to a numerical power ($A^2$,

[12] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), 12 (italics mine).
[13] Jean Baudrillard, *Les Stratégies fatales* (Paris: Grasset, 1983), 49.

$A^n$). The third is its relation to the concept of "doubling." What Baudrillard seeks to outline through these features is: "this other logic, this exponential strategy in which things […] double themselves in a kind of *jeu en abyme*."[14]

This logic is "other" than Hegelian logic. When Baudrillard advances the well-known thesis that critical theory must be replaced by a fatal or ironic theory, and introduces the distinction between the irony of the subject and the irony of the object, he draws precisely on doubling and exponential logic to account for this shift:

> Critical theory must be replaced by a fatal theory, one that accomplishes this objective irony of the world. […] No longer the irony of the subject confronting an objective order, but the objective irony of things caught in their own play—no longer the work of the negative, but the work of doubling and ascent to potency.[15]

If the irony of the subject is based on the Hegelian logic of determinate negation, the irony of the object is based on the logic of doubling and exponentiation. Schelling presents this opposition with clarity when he advances the thesis according to which everything manifests itself by overturning into its *non*-identity. Aware that this thesis may be confused with Hegel's position, he adds: "this passage has very often been understood […] as a sublation (*Aufheben*) of identity, but […] it is instead merely a duplication (*Doublirung*) of essence and thus a potentiation (*Steigerung*) of unity."[16]

This conception is then developed in the 1813 version of *Weltalter* but also in the *Münchner Vorlesungen*, where he elaborates the doctrine of *reduplicatio* or "reduplicative identity," which constitutes its logical basis.[17] Schelling's problem is that the Hegelian conception of becoming-other through determinate negation applies only to the conceptual realm, and is incapable of accounting for the complexity of the natural process. Schelling thus elaborates a conception in which a thing manifesting itself as its other does not imply the negation of identity, but rather its doubling or duplication, and hence its exponentiation or elevation to a higher potency. In other words, for Schelling, A manifests itself

[14] Jean Baudrillard, *Les Stratégies fatales*, 49.
[15] Jean Baudrillard, *L'autre par lui-même* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), 72.
[16] Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, I,7,424-5.
[17] Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, I,10,103.

or behaves as B, overturns into B, only because it doubles itself as A · A ($A^2$). The difference with Hegel is that when A manifests itself as B, it does not lose its identity (¬A), but instead doubles (A · A) and potentiates itself ($A^2$).[18]

## 5. Obesity, body/non-body

Baudrillard presents obesity as an example of this (Schellingian) logic of doubling and exponentiation. To understand this, we must clarify the reference to Franz von Baader. He mentions the essay *Über den Begriff der Ekstasis als Metastasis*.[19] The concept of metastasis later acquires a theoretical value in Baudrillard's lexicon. In *La Transparence du Mal* he introduces a fourth order of simulacra, beyond the three orders distinguished in his classical genealogy. What characterizes the simulacral status of reality at this further level is metastasis, fractality, and dissemination.[20] It is also worth noting that Schelling makes use of this Baaderian concept of "metastasis," with the same connotation of metonymic transfer and fractal decomposition of a whole into parts, arguing once again—as in the passage cited in *De la séduction*—that, as a result of metastasis, things are no longer adequate to their idea.[21]

The concept of metastasis serves Baudrillard to reveal a logical similarity between cancer and obesity. Both are characterized by an excess of bodily organization that overturns into dis-organization. It is well known that cancer cells develop, just as healthy cells do. Yet whereas the development of healthy cells has limits, determination, and a physiological purpose, that of cancer cells is metastatic: it has no limits and is not indeterminate. It is hyper-determined, Baudrillard argues—which means that its determination is not negated but doubled—and its purpose therefore becomes hyper-telic: a purposiveness without purpose. Cancer grows, but it grows too much; it is an excrescence no longer commensurate with the physiological ends of the body. Yet this growth is not con-

[18] For a detailed and systematic account, see Manfred Frank, *Reduplikative Identität: der Schlüssel zu Schellings reifer Philosophie* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2018). See also Xavier Tilliette, *L'Absolut et la philosophie. Essais sur Schelling* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987).

[19] Jean Baudrillard, *Les Stratégies fatales*, 46. See Franz von Baader, *Sämtliche Werke* (Leipzig: Hermann Bethmann, 1853), Part 4, vol. 4.

[20] Jean Baudrillard, *La Transparence du Mal* (Paris: Galilée, 1990).

[21] Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, II, 4, 285.

ceptually distinguishable from physiological growth; it is not its determinate negation but the *same* growth, doubled and exponentiated. Cancer is more body than body: it behaves so perfectly as body—so fully executing the cellular program—that it ultimately comes to behave as what body is not.

Baudrillard argues that the body has a form, a delimitation which precisely disappears in obesity. By comparing cancer and obesity under the sign of metastasis, Baudrillard does not mean that obesity is a (social) cancer, an epidemic, or something that spreads in a way analogous to metastatic cells. The relation is not metaphorical but literal: obesity literally behaves like cancer. Just as in cancer, the process of tissue growth exceeds its own limits. "In obesity this process does not come to a halt. Losing its specific traits, the body continues the monotonous expansion of its tissues."[22] For this reason, Baudrillard also defines it as "the more massive than massive (the obese)."[23] Unlike cancer however, in obesity this doubling or potentiation is more visible. It is clear that the obese body is something like more body than body. Accordingly, Baudrillard states that "through the indivision of the full body […] it does not separate the body from the *non*-body."[24]

These two dimensions are not separated but collapse into a single "indivision"—a term with clear Schellingian resonance (*ungetheilte*)—into, once again, undecidability. Just as the transvestite is a woman who manifests herself as non-woman, and the asymptomatic patient is an ill person who manifests as non-ill, the obese subject is a body that manifests itself as non-body. Here we can see how deeply the correlation with Schelling's conception of illness resonates. For Schelling, illness is a "non-entity," an "appearance," a "simulacrum," because it is the *non*-identity of the body understood as organic equilibrium. In Baudrillard's analyses of cancer and obesity, we likewise encounter a body that manifests itself as *non*-body, an organization that overturns into disorganization—cellular or lipidic—an organic balance that turns into an organic imbalance. A simulacrum in the Schellingian sense.

[22] Jean Baudrillard, *Les Stratégies fatales*, 46.
[23] Jean Baudrillard, *L'autre par lui-même*, 71.
[24] Jean Baudrillard, *Les Stratégies fatales*, 44 (italics mine).

## 6. Speed, movement/non-movement

Obesity is not the only example of *Steigerung* discussed by Baudrillard. There is another: speed. He writes: "In the image of speed, which alone is the perfect expression of mobility, because—unlike movement, which has a meaning—it no longer has one, goes nowhere, and therefore has nothing more to do with movement: it is its ecstasy." The concept of "ecstasy" is also linked to Franz von Baader, and is likewise taken up by Schelling. Baudrillard develops this idea in his theory of "ecstatic" qualities, according to which "every characteristic elevated to a superlative potency and caught in a spiral of doubling"[25] can pass into ecstasy, provided that it ceases to be relative to its opposite by absorbing its energy—its effectiveness—and thereby comes to behave like the quality it is not. As in Schelling's philosophy.

Baudrillard argues that speed is the perfect, ecstatic form of movement because it displays the traits of its opposite. Whereas movement has a meaning, a direction, a purpose, speed behaves otherwise: it has no determinate direction, goes neither here nor there, and has neither meaning nor purpose. Speed is thus also hyper-telic. It performs its purpose beyond its own finality. For all these reasons, it no longer has anything to do with the identity of movement. Speed, therefore, is likewise simulacral, because it is a movement that manifests itself as the opposite of movement: a non-movement.

Not by chance, Baudrillard states that "movement does not so much disappear into immobility"—that is, into the determinate negation of the identity of movement, according to a dialectical logic—but rather disappears "into speed and acceleration," that is, into a doubling and potentiation of the identity of movement. Into what he calls "something more mobile than movement itself, so to speak." It is worth noting that in the *Erlanger Vorlesungen* Schelling uses almost the same formula: "more mobile than every single movement" (*beweglicher als jede einzelne Bewegung*).[26]

This theory of speed has a significant precedent in Baudrillard's work. It appears for the first time in his doctoral dissertation on objects in the section devoted to the automobile, where Baudrillard for the first time refers to the German philosopher: "Movement, says Schelling, is

[25] Ibid., 11.
[26] Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, I, 9, 244.

nothing other than the search for rest."[27] Baudrillard does not provide the source of this quotation, but comparison with Schelling's works shows that it derives from the 1813 version of the *Weltalter*.[28]

In the passage from the *Weltalter* cited by Baudrillard, Schelling addresses an extremely dense metaphysical problem, also derived from Plato's *Sophist*: the problem of movement and quietness (or rest) and of the first principle. Against Fichte, Schelling maintains that the First (*das Erste*), the Beginning (*der Anfang*), cannot be an act, an activity, or an unconditioned action, because every act stands out against a background of will at rest (*der ruhende Wille*). For "rest is its nourishment" (*die Ruhe ist ihre Speise*), in the sense that movement tends toward rest: "every movement exists only for the sake of rest," Schelling says, or, more precisely, "every movement seeks only rest" (*alle Bewegung sucht nur die Ruhe*).[29] Rest must therefore, in a certain sense, precede all action.

Baudrillard cites Schelling to discuss speed as that which brings the world and its becoming—that is, movement—back to a kind of "sublime immobility" that "presupposes eternity." This eternity appears in the corresponding version of the quoted passage in the 1815/1817 redaction: "Every movement has only eternal immobility as its end." (*Alle Bewegung hat nur die ewige Unbeweglichkeit zum Ziel*).[30] Baudrillard also registers Schelling's guiding idea according to which rest is the nourishment of movement, which therefore presupposes it. This presupposition of eternal immobility constitutes "the nourishment of automobile euphoria," that is, the motive force of automotive displacement.

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[27] Jean Baudrillard, *Le système des objets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 94.

[28] The 1813 version cited by Baudrillard is not included in the *Sämmtliche Werke* and had not yet been translated into French. This suggests that Baudrillard, trained as a Germanist, may have consulted the edition assembled by Manfred Schröter (*Die Weltalter. Fragmente*, Munich: Biederstein und Leibniz Verlag, 1946). At the same time, his reception of Schelling may have been mediated by contemporary French scholarship, notably Vladimir Jankélévitch's *L'Odyssée de la conscience dans la dernière philosophie de Schelling* (Paris: Alcan, 1933) and, above all, Xavier Tilliette's "Schelling contre Hegel," *Archives de Philosophie*, vol. 29, no. 1 (1966), 89–108. Written in 1965 and published the following year—when Baudrillard completed and defended his dissertation, in which he mentions Schelling—Tilliette's article explicitly foregrounds "the law of *Steigerung* or *Potenzieren*."

[29] Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *Die Weltalter/Le età del mondo* (Milano: Bompiani, 2013), 292-295.

[30] Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *Die Weltalter/Le età del mondo*, 494-495.

Schelling maintains that this motive is not an act, an activity, or an unconditioned action, and Baudrillard acknowledges that it "has nothing of an active drive." Rather, it is "a passive satisfaction," just as the will at rest of which Schelling speaks is passive.[31]

To sum up, all four figures—transvestism, psychosomatic illness, obesity, and speed—respond to a single logic of reversal, whereby each thing overturns into its contrary. This logic refers to the philosophical thesis that Schelling considers distinctive of his thought: everything can become manifest only in its non-identity. The "non-entity" (Nichtseyende)—Schelling's simulacrum—is one case of this logic. Non-woman, non-ill, non-body, and non-movement are further instances of the same logic, insofar as it rests on the conceptual and speculative operators of doubling and exponentiality shared by Schelling and Baudrillard. We have also addressed the textual objection by tracing Baudrillard's engagement with Schellingian philosophy back to its first explicit mention in *Le système des objets* (1968). The next section turns to the second objection introduced at the outset.

## 7. Baudrillard and the Sophist

The theoretical objection is that developing Carrasco-Conde's hypothesis "over-ontologizes" Baudrillard. This objection makes sense as long as Baudrillard remains unassociated with Schelling and the intertextual relations between their works remain unexplored. There is still much to be understood about this, of course. However, now that we know more about Baudrillard's use of Schellingian ontological categories—essence, potency, metastasis, indivision, doubling, exponentiality, and non-identity—the objection must be reconsidered. Perhaps the issue is not that bringing Schelling closer to Baudrillard over-ontologizes him, but that Baudrillard's work has so far been under-ontologized by precisely missing this Schellingian resonance.

Commenting on the *Sophist* Ana Carrasco-Conde notes a "curious correspondence" between Plato and Baudrillard. She writes: "thus, in a curious correspondence with what Baudrillard affirms about simulacra, it is stated that 'when the false exists […], everything necessarily becomes filled with images, figures, and appearances."[32]

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[31] Jean Baudrillard, *Le système des objets*, 94.
[32] Ana Carrasco-Conde, "Schelling, Žižek, Baudrillard," 523.

This correspondence, however, is not so "curious" if one considers that in *L'échange symbolique et la mort* Baudrillard engages critically with Julia Kristeva precisely regarding the Platonic *Sophist* passage from which Schelling derives the notion of "non-entity." As reported by Kristeva, Plato writes: "what we say is truly an image, a semblance, is that which, without being truly non-existent, nevertheless does not exist. […] It may well be that such an interweaving is that in which Non-Being is interwoven with Being, and this in a thoroughly derouting way."[33] Here one can recognize, in the *semblant*, Schelling's simulacrum: that which, without being truly non-existent, nonetheless is not and—reversibly—despite not being, nevertheless produces real effects.

Baudrillard's position with respect to Kristeva is clear: she is right to locate the poetic precisely in the "derouting interweaving" of being and non-being, but she is wrong to treat this topology (the Platonic *symplokē*) as a "topic," that is, as a space of locatable unconscious instances (identities) between which a Hegelian dialectic of determinate negation can be established.[34] It is therefore worth recalling that seduction seduces precisely because it is not locatable, not identifiable in women, and for this reason it stands in relation to Schellingian essence as the potency of being-elsewhere, that is, as the potency of having no place. Not by chance, Baudrillard defines the poetic as "utopical," in the literal sense of what is non-topical, without localization. The poetic therefore, is not a "space," since space is by definition topical and composed of separate or separable, locatable instances—that is, of identities that will end up negating one another through determinate negation. In other words, Baudrillard agrees with Kristeva on the decisive Platonic point—also the Schellingian one—but rejects her topical reading insofar as it risks falling back into a dialectical logic.

On the other hand, Carrasco-Conde is not entirely wrong in describing this correspondence as "curious." While it is true that interpretations of Baudrillard have rightly emphasized his contribution to the reversal of Platonism,[35] it is equally clear that the philosophical underpinnings of this reversal—and its connection with the *Sophist*—have not been made fully

[33] Julia Kristeva, "Poésie et négativité." *L'Homme. revue française d'anthropologie*, vol. 8, no. 2, 40.

[34] Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 317.

[35] See Vanessa Freerks, "Nietzsche's Reversal of Platonism and the Simulacrum," *Sofia Philosophical Review*, vol. XII, no. 2 (2019), 33-56.

explicit. Otherwise, one might think that these intertextual and theoretical convergences with Schelling would have emerged earlier.

It is well known that the critical reception of Baudrillard's work initially developed through a series of misunderstandings—concerning Marxism, postmodernism, and related issues—which later Baudrillard studies have worked extensively to clarify. A decisive turning point in Baudrillard criticism is represented by the work of Rex Butler, who proposed a precise and compelling methodological principle: reading Baudrillard "on his own terms."[36] The issue, however, is that some of these "own terms" of Baudrillard are in fact Schellingian terms. And a philosophical interpretation of Baudrillard cannot avoid reckoning with this.

On the other hand, Butler's interpretation remains one of the most fascinating to this day, even though it rests on the counterintuitive assumption that Baudrillard's thought revolves around a Platonic paradox—articulated by Plato in the Cratylus and commented on by Derrida—that Baudrillard *never* refers to in his own work. Although I fully share the deconstructionist background of Butler's reading—since I take Baudrillard's use of Schelling to be itself a gesture of deconstruction—I nevertheless wonder why one should look to the Cratylus for what can be found in the Sophist, to which Baudrillard *does* refer.

The more general problem is that philosophical readings of Baudrillard have been highly selective in their choice of texts to comment on. An interpretation however, should aim at the whole. Even if it cannot reconstruct the whole in its entirety, it cannot arbitrarily choose what to interpret and what to leave aside, at the cost of producing a partial and one-sided account. Consequently, if reading Baudrillard "on his own terms" also means recognizing that these terms are not entirely his own, but rather the result of appropriation and intertextual "theft," I would add a different methodological criterion, one that reverses Butler's proposal: reading Baudrillard "within his own text"—that is, foregrounding the resources embedded in his textuality, such as his references to Plato's *Sophist* and to the Schellingian concept of *Steigerung*.

## Conclusions

This paper has proposed a Schellingian interpretation of four key figures in Baudrillard's thought: transvestism, psychosomatic illness, obesity,

[36] Rex Butler, *Jean Baudrillard. The Defense of the Real* (London: Sage, 1999), 13.

and speed. Starting from a hypothesis advanced by Ana Carrasco-Conde, it has re-examined, expanded, and supported it with new textual and conceptual evidence. What emerges is that, contrary to the prevailing view in Baudrillard Studies and in continental philosophy more broadly, the relation between Baudrillard and Schelling is far more complex and significant than has so far been acknowledged.

The paper has addressed two main objections. Textually, it has shown that Baudrillard's work contains direct and indirect references to Schelling, as well as sustained engagements with Schellingian conceptual operators. Theoretically, it has been argued that Baudrillard's use of notions such as essence, potency, doubling, and *Steigerung* is logical rather than ontological. This allows one to avoid "over-ontologizing" Baudrillard while nevertheless taking his philosophical apparatus seriously.

Finally, the paper has challenged the assumption that Baudrillard lacks a genuine ontological problematic by showing his sustained interest in the Platonic question articulated in the *Sophist*, from which Schelling himself derives the concept of non-entity. Read through this lens, Baudrillard's simulacra appear less as purely semiological effects than as figures of non-identity endowed with real efficacy. A Schellingian perspective thus offers a new way of understanding the effectiveness of what is not in Baudrillard's thought.

# 27. Sincerity After Authenticity: Ethical Life Under Conditions of Fictional Reality

*Taimoor Farouk, taimoorfarouk@gmail.com*
*(PhD Student, University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski)*

**Abstract:** The ethical ideal of authenticity has long been understood as fidelity to an inner identity that precedes and grounds its expression. This paper argues that authenticity no longer works as a reliable ethical guide in a world shaped by performance, media saturation, and blurred lines between reality and simulation. Drawing on Judith Butler's critique of the metaphysics of substance, Jean Baudrillard's account of hyperreality, and Saul Kripke's distinction between metaphysical and epistemic possibility, I argue that even if a "true self" exists at some metaphysical level, it cannot serve as a practical or accessible foundation for ethical life. Authenticity thus persists as a metaphysical fiction—conceptually intelligible but normatively inoperative. In its place, this paper develops sincerity as an alternative ethical framework. Through the Spectrum of Sincerity—defined by coherence, aspirational orientation, and non-instrumentality—it establishes sincerity as the ethical virtue appropriate to fictional reality.

**Keywords:** Authenticity; Sincerity; Fictional Reality; Ethical Identity; Performativity; Hyperreality; Normative Ethics; Spectrum of Sincerity

## 1. Introduction

Authenticity has become one of the defining ethical ideals of modernity.[1] To live authentically is widely taken to mean that one's actions, expressions, and commitments genuinely reflect who one "really is." Across philosophical, political, and cultural discourse, authenticity operates as a guiding norm: we are told to discover our true identities, resist pressures that distort them, and bring our outward lives into alignment with our inner sense of self. Yet this ideal depends on a particular metaphysical picture of the self, one in which identity exists as a stable inner

[1] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1991), 15.

core capable of grounding action. In other words, the moral force of authenticity depends on a coherent and meaningful distinction between inner identity and outward appearance.

This paper argues that this distinction can no longer ground ethical life. Consequently, authenticity should not be treated as an achievable moral ideal but as a metaphysical fiction. Authenticity depends on the assumption that we have access to a stable ontological core, an assumption that cannot bear the normative weight placed on it. Importantly, this diagnosis does not require denying the metaphysical possibility of identity. By drawing on Saul Kripke's distinction between metaphysical and epistemic possibility,[2] I argue that even if determinate metaphysical facts about identity obtain, they cannot function as actionable grounds for normative orientation.

Normative guidance depends not merely on what may be metaphysically true, but on what is epistemically accessible as a basis for action. Ethical life necessarily unfolds under conditions in which identity is available only through its enacted forms. This distinction has become increasingly difficult to sustain in a world shaped by mediated selfhood. Digital self-presentation, proliferating social roles, and technologically structured identities all destabilize the idea of a single, stable self that exists prior to its expression. Individuals now move across multiple, partially overlapping performances of selfhood in different social contexts.[3] Professional identities, online personae, and interpersonal roles do not simply express a unified core; they help constitute what the self becomes. In such conditions, the injunction to "be authentic" begins to lose its clarity. The difficulty is not that authenticity is hard to achieve, but that the metaphysical assumptions it relies on no longer provide a basis for ethical orientation.

Philosophical work in the late twentieth century brings this instability to the fore. Judith Butler's critique of the metaphysics of substance undermines the assumption that identity expresses a pregiven interior essence, arguing instead that the subject emerges through performative repetition.[4] Jean Baudrillard's account of simulacra further destabilizes the distinction between appearance and reality, suggesting that contem-

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2 Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Harvard University Press, 1980), 38.

3 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Anchor Books, 1959), 22.

4 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990), 25.

porary social life unfolds under conditions of hyperreality, in which signs no longer refer to an underlying original.[5] In what Baudrillard describes as conditions of hyperreality, contemporary social life increasingly takes on the structure of what I will call fictional reality: a condition in which identity no longer refers to an epistemically accessible ground. Taken together, these analyses dissolve the ontological structure on which authenticity depends. If identity is constituted through performance, and if performance no longer refers to an independent ground, then the ideal of aligning expression with essence loses its object.

The collapse of authenticity's metaphysical foundation does not dissolve the ethical problem it was meant to solve. We remain accountable for our actions, commitments, and ways of presenting ourselves, even if there is no stable inner essence to anchor them. The question, then, is not whether ethical selfhood is still possible, but how ethical judgment must be rethought once metaphysical identity can no longer serve as a knowable foundation for action.

The constructive claim of this paper is that sincerity, not authenticity, provides the ethical framework appropriate to such conditions. Unlike authenticity, sincerity does not depend upon access to an inner essence. It evaluates selves at the level of their enacted commitments: their coherence across contexts, their aspirational orientation toward normative ideals, and their resistance to purely instrumental optimization. Sincerity, in this sense, consists in the responsible inhabitation of one's enacted commitments, rather than their correspondence to a metaphysically prior identity. Under conditions of fictional reality, sincerity emerges as the ethical virtue appropriate to normative life when identity is no longer available.

The argument proceeds in four stages. The first section examines the historical emergence of authenticity as a moral ideal, drawing on Lionel Trilling and Charles Taylor to clarify its metaphysical presuppositions. The second analyzes how Butler's theory of performativity and Baudrillard's account of simulation destabilize the distinction between inner identity and outward expression. The third reframes the problem using Saul Kripke's modal distinction between metaphysical and epistemic possibility and addresses a central objection defending authenticity as a regulative ideal. The fourth develops the constructive alternative,

[5] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.

introducing the Spectrum of Sincerity as a framework for normative evaluation under conditions of fictional reality. By replacing authenticity with sincerity as the central ethical virtue, this paper does not abandon the modern concern with selfhood and responsibility. Instead, it relocates ethical life within the only domain in which it can operate: the enacted, mediated, and epistemically constrained conditions under which contemporary selves are constituted.

## 2. Authenticity and the Metaphysics of Inner Truth

The rise of authenticity as a moral ideal is perhaps most clearly articulated in Trilling's ***Sincerity and Authenticity***, where he traces a shift in how selfhood is morally understood. Trilling distinguishes authenticity from the older ideal of sincerity, which structured moral life before the modern turn inward. In its classical sense, sincerity required alignment between avowal and belief: to be sincere was to mean what one said and to say what one meant.6 Its ethical force operated within a shared social world organized around recognizable roles and conventions. It did not require access to a hidden metaphysical essence, but only fidelity to one's declared commitments within established practices of communication.

Authenticity, by contrast, introduces a deeper and more demanding standard. It requires not merely that a person's words reflect their beliefs, but that their entire mode of life express an identity understood to exist independently of its social articulation. Where sincerity regulates the relation between people, authenticity regulates the relation of the self to itself. It presupposes a layered view of the self, in which outward appearances can misrepresent a deeper interior reality. Ethical life becomes not just a matter of consistency in public conduct, but of fidelity to an inward ground that may conflict with socially recognizable roles.[7]

This shift reflects a broader change in how moral authority is understood in modernity. Beginning with Rousseau's critique of social artifice, moral worth increasingly became tied to inwardness rather than conformity. When Rousseau writes that social man "knows how to live only in the opinion of others," he draws a sharp line between the socially

[6] Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1972), 2.
[7] Ibid., 11.

visible self and the self taken to possess moral authority.[8] Although Rousseau does not use the term "authenticity" in its modern sense, he lays the groundwork for it. He advances the idea that moral authority rests not in publicly defined roles, but in fidelity to an identity taken to exist prior to, and independent of, social expression.

Twentieth-century philosophy pushes this line of thought further. Existentialists such as Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre treat authenticity as central to ethical life. For Heidegger, authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) consists in taking responsibility for one's own existence and owning the possibilities that arise from it, not retreating into socially prescribed identities.[9] For Sartre, authenticity demands acknowledging one's radical freedom rather than living in what he calls "bad faith." Bad faith is the refusal to accept responsibility for one's existence, the attempt to hide behind fixed roles or socially defined identities.[10] Despite their differences, these accounts rest on a shared assumption: ethical life turns on how one relates to one's own existence, whether by taking responsibility for it or evading it. Authenticity becomes the name for living in light of that condition instead of conforming unreflectively to externally imposed definitions.

Taylor's defense of authenticity represents a more recent attempt to preserve this ideal against charges of narcissism and relativism. He argues that authenticity is not a license for arbitrary self-invention but a demand to articulate and remain faithful to one's moral orientation within a horizon of shared significance.[11] For him, authenticity remains ethically serious because it binds individuals to sources of meaning that transcend mere preference. Yet Taylor's reconstruction, while protecting authenticity from trivialization, leaves its basic metaphysical picture intact. Even in its dialogical form, authenticity assumes that identity is something to which one can be faithful, rather than something brought into being through the very act of articulating it.

This shared commitment reveals the metaphysical structure that

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[8] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Donald A. Cress (Hackett, 1987), 81.

[9] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (State University of New York Press, 1996), 357.

[10] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003), 82.

[11] Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 37.

unites otherwise divergent accounts of authenticity. Authenticity presupposes that identity exists as a relatively stable ground that precedes and legitimates its expression. Ethical failure, within this framework, occurs when conduct fails to reflect this ground. The moral task becomes one of alignment: bringing one's enacted life into correspondence with an identity understood as ontologically prior to its articulation.

The difficulty is not merely that such alignment is difficult to achieve, but that its intelligibility depends upon conditions that cannot be secured. Authenticity assumes that identity is stable enough to serve as a point of moral reference and accessible enough to guide action. It depends on a meaningful distinction between who one is and how one appears. If that distinction collapses, authenticity can no longer function as an ethical ideal.

Trilling himself recognizes the instability of this ideal. His genealogy suggests that authenticity emerges at the moment when sincerity becomes insufficient to secure moral trust— when social roles and conventions no longer guarantee the moral credibility of one's avowals.[12] As inherited social frameworks lose their taken-for-granted authority under conditions of modern individualism, moral legitimacy shifts inward. Yet this shift introduces a new form of uncertainty. If identity is understood as interior and potentially opaque even to the subject, then authenticity becomes an aspiration without clear criteria.

Contemporary conditions deepen this instability. Mediated identities, digital self-presentation, and socially distributed forms of subjectivity make it harder to believe that there is a single, stable self to which one could remain faithful. The ethical demand for authenticity persists, but the assumptions that support it grow increasingly fragile. Authenticity begins to function less as a workable ethical norm and more as a metaphysical fiction—a concept that shapes moral aspiration without offering anything clearly accessible to anchor it.

Recognizing this clarifies the stakes of the present inquiry. If authenticity depends upon a metaphysical distinction between identity and its expression, then any philosophical account that destabilizes this distinction will necessarily undermine authenticity's authority as a normative ideal.

[12] Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 5.

## 3. Performativity and Hyperreality

Two influential strands of late twentieth-century philosophy provide precisely such destabilization. Judith Butler's theory of performativity undermines the assumption that identity precedes its enactment, while Jean Baudrillard's analysis of hyperreality dissolves the conditions under which enactment could be contrasted with an independent reality. Taken together, their arguments do not merely challenge authenticity; they dismantle the ontological and epistemic structure on which it depends.

Judith Butler's critique begins with what she calls the "metaphysics of substance": the humanist assumption that the subject exists as a stable entity that possesses attributes—gender, identity, character—rather than being constituted through them.[13] Against this view, Butler argues that identity is not the outward manifestation of an inner essence but the effect of historically and socially regulated practices. Gender, in her canonical formulation, "proves to be performative"—not because it is freely chosen or theatrically staged, but because it is brought into being through repeated acts that cite and reenact normative structures.[14]

This performative account has implications that extend beyond gender. Butler explicitly rejects the idea that there must be a pre-existing subject who performs identity.[15] The subject does not precede its enactment; it emerges through it. What appears as an inner ground of identity is, on this view, a retroactive stabilization—a conceptual effect produced to render patterns of repetition intelligible. The distinction between identity and its expression, far from grounding ethical evaluation, is itself an effect of normative practices that demand coherence.

For the ethics of authenticity, this poses a decisive challenge. If identity does not exist prior to its enactment, then there is no independent ground against which enactment can be evaluated for its fidelity. The demand to "be true to oneself" presupposes precisely the structure Butler calls into question. Butler's argument does not deny subjectivity or agency; it shifts how we understand them. Agency is not something that exists prior to social practice; it emerges within historically situated forms of life. On this view, the self is not a pre-existing substance expressed through performance, but something that takes shape through it.

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[13] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 25.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

Authenticity's expressive model fails, then, not because it aims at the wrong ideal, but because it depends on a picture of identity that no longer holds.

If Butler unsettles the priority of identity over performance, Baudrillard pushes the problem further. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, he argues that contemporary social life is no longer organized around the opposition between representation and the real.[16] Under conditions of hyperreality, signs no longer refer to an independent reality; they refer only to other signs. Simulation does not distort the real—it precedes and structures what counts as real. The distinction between original and copy, depth and surface, thus ceases to function as a meaningful ontological hierarchy.

Baudrillard's analysis extends beyond media and representation. In a hyperreal environment, identities, roles, and values circulate as self-referential structures. Appeals to authenticity proliferate precisely at the moment when the idea of an independent ground has become unstable. The demand to "be authentic" becomes itself a simulation: a performance that presupposes the existence of a ground it cannot access. Authenticity persists not because it corresponds to an ontological reality, but because it functions as a stabilizing narrative within a system of mediated identities.

Crucially, Baudrillard is not merely saying that reality has disappeared. His stronger claim is that the distinction between reality and simulation no longer functions as a meaningful way of knowing.[17] There is no standpoint outside mediation from which the authenticity of identity could be independently verified. Attempts to recover a "real self" under these conditions do not escape simulation; they reproduce its logic by positing an inaccessible ground whose existence cannot be independently established.

Taken together, Butler and Baudrillard dismantle the two conditions required for authenticity's intelligibility. Butler shows that identity does not exist as a metaphysical ground prior to its enactment. Baudrillard shows that enactment does not occur against the backdrop of an independently accessible reality. Authenticity depends upon both assumptions simultaneously. Once they are withdrawn, authenticity becomes not merely difficult to realize, but conceptually incoherent as a normative ideal.

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[16] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.
[17] Ibid., 2.

What follows from this collapse is not the disappearance of ethical evaluation, but the need to clarify the relationship between metaphysical identity and its epistemic availability. Even if identity persists in a metaphysical sense, ethical life unfolds under conditions in which it is accessible only through its enactment. To clarify this distinction, the next section turns to Saul Kripke's analysis of the relationship between metaphysical reality and epistemic accessibility.

## 4. Metaphysical Fiction and Epistemic Constraint

If authenticity fails because the metaphysical self it assumes cannot function as a knowable foundation, one might ask whether this means abandoning the idea of selfhood altogether. Two responses follow: either the self is an illusion, or ethical evaluation must proceed without reference to identity. This paper rejects both. The failure of authenticity does not mean that identity disappears; it reveals a confusion about the relationship between metaphysical identity and our access to it.

Saul Kripke's distinction between metaphysical and epistemic possibility helps clarify that relationship. Properly understood, it explains why authenticity remains morally compelling even as it proves untenable as a stable normative framework. In *Naming and Necessity*, he argues that metaphysical necessity must be distinguished from epistemic accessibility. Metaphysical necessity concerns what could not have been otherwise, independently of our knowledge of it. By contrast, epistemic possibility concerns what remains open given the limits of our knowledge and description.[18]

The two do not coincide. Some truths are necessary even though we cannot recognize them as such, while others appear contingent from our perspective despite being metaphysically fixed. Identity, in particular, does not depend on our ability to specify the criteria that secure it. We can refer to an individual across possible worlds even when we lack epistemic access to the structures that secure their identity.[19]

This distinction has implications beyond the philosophy of language. Authenticity assumes that identity is both metaphysically real and epistemically accessible—that it exists independently of its enactment and can, at least in principle, be discovered and followed. The de-

[18] Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 38.
[19] Ibid.

mand to "be oneself" rests on the idea that identity is available as a point of moral reference. Kripke's framework unsettles this assumption. Metaphysical identity does not guarantee epistemic access. Even if identity persists as a metaphysical fact, it does not follow that it can guide action.

Under conditions of performativity and hyperreality, this epistemic limitation becomes decisive. Identity, if it exists metaphysically, is accessible only through its enactment. There is no independent standpoint from which competing enactments could be adjudicated for their fidelity to an underlying ground. The persistence of authenticity discourse thus rests on what may be called a metaphysical fiction: the conflation of metaphysical possibility with epistemic accessibility. Authenticity presupposes that metaphysical identity is available as an ethical standard, when in fact it is not. Its failure lies not in the nonexistence of identity, but in its inaccessibility as a normative ground.

This reframing also clarifies how the present argument relates to constructivist critiques like Judith Butler's. Butler does not deny subjectivity; she rejects the idea that it exists as a pregiven foundation independent of its enactment. Her critique weakens the claim that identity can serve as a moral reference point by showing that identity takes shape through performative practices rather than existing prior to them. Read through a Kripkean lens, Butler's performative subject is best understood as epistemically primary: identity becomes accessible only through its enactment, not in advance of it.

This interpretation does not attribute to Butler a commitment to metaphysical realism about identity, nor does the present argument depend upon affirming or denying such realism. Its claim is instead epistemic and ethical: whatever metaphysical facts may obtain about identity, they cannot function as actionable grounds for normative orientation. Butler's performative account suffices to establish this conclusion by showing that identity becomes available only through its enactment. Kripke's modal distinction clarifies the implications of this epistemic limitation without presupposing any substantive metaphysical theory of

the self.[20] Authenticity fails, therefore, because it presupposes that metaphysical identity is epistemically accessible as a guide to action, when in fact ethical orientation is possible only through the enacted forms in which identity becomes intelligible.

At this point, a defender of authenticity might object that ethical ideals need not depend upon epistemic certainty. Authenticity could function as a regulative ideal—a commitment to fidelity to oneself—even if the self remains partially inaccessible. On this view, the ethical force of authenticity lies not in providing a fully determinate standard, but in orienting agents toward self-integrity under conditions of uncertainty.

This objection correctly recognizes that ethical orientation often operates under conditions of incomplete knowledge. However, it fails to preserve authenticity as a viable ethical framework. For an ethical ideal to guide action, it must operate within the domain of epistemic accessibility. It must provide standards that agents can meaningfully apply. Authenticity, understood as fidelity to an inaccessible metaphysical identity, cannot fulfill this role. It demands alignment with a ground whose content cannot be specified independently of the enactments it is meant to evaluate. Appeals to authenticity inevitably rely upon enacted commitments, practices, and interpretations to determine what counts as fidelity to oneself. The metaphysical self performs no independent normative function; it is invoked to authorize judgments already grounded in enacted identity.

This point also clarifies why analytic debates about personal identity, while philosophically rigorous, do not resolve the ethical problem at issue here. Theories such as Derek Parfit's theory of psychological continuity[21] or Noonan's criteria of persistence[22] attempt to spell out the

[20] This argument does not deny the phenomenological reality of self-experience. Phenomenological accounts emphasize that subjectivity is given through a pre-reflective first-personal perspective rather than through access to a metaphysical essence. Dan Zahavi describes this as the intrinsic "mineness" of experience (see Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 19). Similarly, Paul Ricoeur's account of narrative identity understands the self as constituted through temporally extended patterns of commitment rather than as a fixed ontological substrate (see Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], 114).

[21] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 279.

[22] Harold W. Noonan, *Personal Identity*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 2.

conditions under which identity endures over time. Yet, as Kripke reminds us, identity does not depend on our ability to articulate those conditions.[23] More importantly, ethical life does not pause until metaphysics is settled. We must act, commit, and assess ourselves even when identity remains epistemically indeterminate.

Once this is recognized, the ethical significance of enactment becomes clear. Ethical evaluation must attend to enacted commitments rather than to metaphysical identity. The question is no longer whether actions correspond to an inaccessible metaphysical core, but whether the commitments we enact sustain coherence and accountability. The ethical demand does not disappear under conditions of metaphysical uncertainty; it simply relocates.

This relocation makes visible the ethical framework that replaces authenticity. If metaphysical identity cannot function as an epistemically accessible ground, then ethical life must be oriented toward the enacted structures through which identity becomes intelligible. Sincerity, understood as fidelity to one's enacted commitments under conditions of epistemic constraint, provides such an orientation. Unlike authenticity, sincerity does not presuppose access to a metaphysical identity independent of enactment. It evaluates identity as it becomes available in practice, rather than as it exists in itself. By distinguishing metaphysical identity from its epistemic availability, Kripke's framework allows us to relinquish authenticity without relinquishing ethical responsibility.

This prepares the constructive turn that follows. Once authenticity is recognized as a metaphysical fiction—an appeal to an inaccessible ground—ethical evaluation must instead operate at the level of the enacted commitments through which identity is sustained. The next section develops sincerity as the ethical framework appropriate to fictional reality, where identity is constituted not by metaphysical essence but through accountable enactment.

## 5. From Authenticity to Sincerity: An Ethics for Fictional Reality

If authenticity fails under conditions of performativity and hyperreality, the ethical consequence cannot be the abandonment of normative evaluation altogether. What collapses in the contemporary condition is not the need for ethical judgment, but a specific ontological assumption

[23] Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 38.

underwriting it: the belief that moral evaluation must be grounded in access to a stable metaphysical identity. Once this assumption is relinquished, the ethical problem is transformed. The question is no longer how to live in accordance with an inaccessible inner ground, but how to evaluate lives that are necessarily mediated, enacted, and constituted through representation. Under these conditions, sincerity—properly reconceived—emerges as the ethical virtue appropriate to fictional reality.

Unlike authenticity, sincerity does not presuppose epistemic access to a metaphysical identity whose truth must be discovered and expressed. Historically, as Lionel Trilling observes, sincerity concerned the alignment between one's avowed commitments and one's enacted roles.[24] It regulated ethical life at the level of intelligible conduct rather than metaphysical self-disclosure. While modern authenticity displaced sincerity by relocating ethical authority within an inward ground, this paper argues that sincerity must be reclaimed—not as a return to premodern conventionalism, but as an ethical orientation appropriate to conditions in which identity is accessible only through its enactment. In fictional reality, sincerity names the ethical demand to inhabit one's enacted commitments responsibly, rather than appealing to an inaccessible metaphysical ground as their justification.

To render this ethical orientation philosophically tractable, this paper introduces what may be called the Spectrum of Sincerity. The spectrum is not a binary distinction between sincerity and insincerity, nor a moral ranking of persons. Rather, it provides criteria for evaluating enacted identity under conditions in which metaphysical identity cannot function as a normative reference point. These criteria—coherence, aspirational orientation, and non-instrumentality—make ethical evaluation possible without presupposing the metaphysics of authenticity.

This shift from authenticity to sincerity is not merely terminological but structural. Authenticity assesses enactment by reference to a presumed metaphysical ground; sincerity assesses it in terms of its immanent normative features. The difference is decisive because only the latter remains available under conditions of epistemic constraint. Coherence, aspirational direction, and non-instrumental commitment are features of enacted identity itself, not speculative claims about an inaccessible interior. Sincerity therefore offers an ethical framework that re-

[24] Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 2.

mains viable once metaphysical identity can no longer serve as a final point of justification.

### 5.1. Coherence: Intelligibility Across Enactment

The first criterion, coherence, asks whether a person's enacted identity holds together across contexts and over time. Coherence does not require identical behavior in every situation. Rather, it means that one's enacted commitments form a recognizable and accountable pattern. Multiplicity of roles is not itself an ethical failure. Ethical concern arises when enacted commitments shift in ways that undermine their coherence or their authority as commitments. A sincere enacted identity exhibits continuity of normative orientation even as it adapts to distinct environments.

Contemporary digital self-presentation provides a clear illustration. Individuals routinely inhabit multiple enacted identities across platforms—professional, personal, anonymous. From the standpoint of authenticity, such multiplicity appears as fragmentation or falsity. The Spectrum of Sincerity, by contrast, asks whether these enactments remain intelligible as expressions of sustained commitments. Do they reflect a coherent normative trajectory, or do they shift in response to external incentives?

Coherence, in this sense, does not mean metaphysical unity; it means normative intelligibility. It does not demand transparency or perfect consistency, but it does require that enacted commitments remain answerable to one another over time. When enacted identities systematically contradict one another in ways that undermine accountability, sincerity breaks down—not because a metaphysical essence has been violated, but because normative answerability has collapsed.

One might object that this requirement either reintroduces authenticity under another name or treats the ordinary multiplicity of social roles as a moral failing. But the Spectrum of Sincerity does not treat multiplicity as an ethical defect. Its concern is not with occupying different roles, but with opportunistic incoherence—performances that invoke identity claims as normative credentials without sustaining them as commitments, or that are abandoned when their instrumental value disappears. Coherence here is not metaphysical unity but practical answerability: the minimal condition under which enacted identity can remain a locus of ethical responsibility.

### 5.2. Aspirational Orientation: Ethical Direction Without Essence

The second criterion, aspirational orientation, asks whether enacted identity displays a sustained normative direction over time. Authenticity assumes that ethical life consists in expressing a pre-existing self. Sincerity, by contrast, understands ethical identity as something that takes shape through commitment across time. Enacted identity is oriented not toward uncovering an inner ground, but toward living out the commitments one affirms.

This distinction becomes especially clear in contemporary ethical and political life. People often commit themselves to ideals that exceed their present capacities or settled dispositions. From the perspective of authenticity, such enactments can appear hypocritical or inauthentic, since they do not reflect a stable underlying identity. Within the Spectrum of Sincerity, however, the question is different: do these enactments express a sustained normative orientation? Aspirational sincerity treats identity not as a hidden essence to be uncovered, but as a trajectory formed through accountable commitment.

This criterion makes ethical development possible even under conditions of epistemic constraint. Agents are evaluated not by their fidelity to an inaccessible metaphysical ground, but by how durable and serious their enacted commitments remain over time. Ethical judgment therefore turns on the direction and stability of one's normative orientation rather than on correspondence to a pre-existing identity.

### 5.3. Non-Instrumentality: Commitment Beyond Strategic Advantage

The third criterion, non-instrumentality, asks whether enacted commitments genuinely bind the person who makes them, rather than functioning merely as tools for advantage. Ethical failure occurs when commitments are adopted or abandoned solely for strategic gain. A sincere enacted identity sustains its commitments even when doing so is difficult or costly, rather than treating them as instruments for external ends. This does not require purity of motive. It does require that enacted commitments continue to carry normative weight even when they cease to be advantageous. Their force lies not in their utility, but in their capacity to obligate conduct over time.

Corporate ethical discourse offers a clear illustration. Organiza-

tions often enact commitments to ethical values as elements of brand identity. When those commitments are discarded at the first sign of cost, their instrumental character becomes visible. The failure is not enactment itself, but the absence of binding commitment.

Non-instrumentality thus establishes the minimal condition under which enacted identity can function as a locus of ethical responsibility. Without this condition, enacted identity becomes indistinguishable from strategic adaptation, and ethical evaluation loses its object.

### 5.4. Sincerity as the Ethical Orientation of Fictional Reality

Taken together, these criteria show why sincerity—not authenticity—fits the conditions of fictional reality. Authenticity measures identity against an inaccessible metaphysical ground. Sincerity evaluates enacted identity through normative coherence, aspirational orientation, and non-instrumental commitment. Where authenticity looks backward toward essence, sincerity demands accountability within action.

This shift does not weaken ethical responsibility; it clarifies where it actually operates. Ethical life unfolds not through correspondence to a hidden metaphysical core, but through sustained answerability to the commitments one enacts. In fictional reality, identity does not stand behind performance as its silent guarantor. It becomes intelligible through enactment itself. Sincerity provides the terms on which enacted identity can be judged without appeal to foundations we cannot access.

Sincerity therefore appears not as a weakened substitute for authenticity, but as the form ethical seriousness takes under contemporary conditions. It preserves the possibility of evaluation while relinquishing the metaphysical picture that authenticity requires. What remains is not moral relativism, but a disciplined practice of coherence, orientation, and commitment enacted over time.

## 6. Conclusion

The ethical ideal of authenticity has long promised moral clarity grounded in fidelity to an inner truth. To live authentically, on this view, is to align one's enacted life with an identity that stands behind it and authorizes it. This paper has argued that such an ideal can no longer function as a workable ethical framework—not because contemporary subjects are uniquely fragmented, but because the metaphysical and epistemic condi-

tions that sustain authenticity no longer hold. The distinction between identity and its expression, on which authenticity depends, cannot serve as a stable normative foundation in a world where identity is formed through performative enactment and mediated representation.

The philosophical developments examined here illuminate the structure of this breakdown. Butler shows that identity does not exist as a pregiven substance independent of its enactment, but emerges through normatively structured practices. Baudrillard further unsettles the picture by challenging the distinction between enactment and reality itself, describing a social world in which appeals to an independent ontological ground lose their force. Kripke's distinction between metaphysical and epistemic possibility explains why authenticity nevertheless retains its appeal: metaphysical identity may remain conceivable, but it does not follow that it can guide ethical life. Authenticity thus functions as a metaphysical fiction—not necessarily false, but unable to serve as an operative normative ground.

Yet the failure of authenticity does not entail the collapse of ethical responsibility. Ethical life does not depend on access to a hidden metaphysical core, but on the commitments through which identity becomes intelligible. Once identity is understood as accessible only through enactment, ethical evaluation must take place at that level. The question shifts: not whether action corresponds to an inaccessible essence, but whether enacted commitments sustain coherence, aspirational orientation, and non-instrumental commitment over time.

The Spectrum of Sincerity developed here provides the terms for that evaluation. By assessing enacted identity through coherence, aspirational orientation, and non-instrumental commitment, sincerity offers standards of judgment that do not rely on unverifiable claims about metaphysical essence. It treats enacted identity not as a distortion of some deeper reality, but as the only domain in which responsibility can meaningfully operate. In fictional reality, where identity is always mediated and enacted, sincerity replaces authenticity as the form ethical seriousness takes.

This reorientation also reshapes the familiar demand to "be oneself." What matters is no longer fidelity to an inaccessible inner ground, but fidelity to the commitments one sustains in practice. Responsibility arises not from correspondence to essence, but from accountability within enactment.

Fictional reality does not signal the end of ethical seriousness. It marks a shift in where seriousness resides. The loss of metaphysical certainty does not dissolve normativity; it clarifies where normativity actually operates. Ethical life unfolds not through the discovery of an inner truth, but through the steady enactment of commitments that make identity intelligible and answerable over time.

Sincerity, in this sense, is not a substitute for authenticity. It is the form ethical responsibility takes in a world where identity can no longer ground itself. This possibility also opens a dialogue with traditions that have long understood identity as constituted through enacted and relational commitments rather than metaphysical essence. On that view, sincerity is not merely a contemporary alternative to authenticity, but a structural feature of ethical life under present conditions.

# VII. BOOK REVIEW

## Werner Bätzing, *Homo Destructor. Eine Mensch–Umwelt–Geschichte. Von der Entstehung des Menschen zur Zerstörung der Welt*, 2023, München C.H. Beck Verlag, 463 pp., €32, ISBN 9783406806681

*Ulrich Arnswald, arnswald@ulrich-arnswald.de*
*(PD, Dr., Universität Innsbruck)*

The observation that humans are by nature "Homo Destructor" is neither new nor surprising. It is also not limited to the relationship between humans and the environment, but rather a truism that emerged already with twentieth-century catastrophes in the form of murders, mass murders, terrorist attacks, and wars—in other words, everything that exceeds the destruction of the environment. Whether humans will become a misguided product of evolution, as Werner Bätzing asks,[1] seems unlikely: the strange creature that is humankind is also known as a "Homo Constructor" or "Homo Creator," which shows that humanity's destructive nature is only one of its many facets.

However, Bätzing also argues against this view, pointing out that the first human societies, which were farming societies, had not yet destroyed nature,[2] raising the question of how they managed without causing environmental damage. This is where the author comes in. In his book, Bätzing aims to show that we can only overcome the current environmental crises if we understand the course of human history. The book therefore attempts to identify and understand the important turning points in the history of the relationship between humans and the environment, starting not from the end, but instead at its origins.[3]

[1] Werner Bätzing: *Homo Destructor. Eine Mensch–Umwelt–Geschichte. Von der Entstehung des Menschen zur Zerstörung der Welt* (München: C.H. Beck Verlag), 36. All translations from the German are by the reviewer.
[2] Ibid., 37.
[3] Ibid., 39.

In accordance with this objective, the author traces the history of humankind and the environment from its beginnings to the present day, focusing on human intervention into nature and the environment. He covers everything from hunter-gatherer societies to farming societies, city-states and large empires, right up to modern industrial society and today's service-based societies. This narrative begins with a description of how people lived in their respective eras and how they earned a living. Later, the author adds economics, politics, society, space, and culture. This "networked overall perspective," as the author calls it, is based on findings drawn from various fields of expertise.

In broad terms, human development can be summarized as follows:

At the beginnings of evolution, around three million years ago, humans were deficient creatures that were not specialized in any habitat and therefore made very few changes to their environment. This meant that humans were not dependent on a specific habitat but instead lived as hunters and gatherers in the transition zone between the tropical rainforest and the humid savannah, practicing subsistence farming. The situation slowly changed with the advent of settled life and the beginning of agriculture in the form of crop cultivation and livestock breeding. This marked the beginning of agriculture as well as the beginning of a surplus economy. Step by step, the environment became changeable, and nature was transformed into cultivated landscapes for use. Man created his own products: culture, fields were cultivated, houses were built, animals were domesticated. A kind of "second nature" emerged. Nevertheless, even during this period of agrarian societies, there was hardly any destruction of nature or the environment, as people were dependent on nature's ability to reproduce itself. Even the era of cities and large empires hardly altered this arrangement, even though it marked the first time that humans detached themselves from the observation of nature and began exploiting it by consuming natural resources without reproducing them. With the cities came material abundance and the emergence of property ownership. This led to hierarchies and the domination of some people over other people, and violence, including warfare, became a means of domination. Even though city dwellers became dependent on the surrounding countryside for food and raw materials, their impact on nature and the environment was still marginal and unproblematic in terms of environmental history.

In all three phases, people only hunted, gathered, and cultivated as much as they needed or could consume themselves, practicing a kind of "cultural self-restraint." According to Bätzing, the major turning point in the history of the relationship between humans and the environment occurred with the Enlightenment, which promoted the systematic application of scientific research and rational methods.[4] This led to a way of thinking and acting at the beginning of industrialization that exploited nature and the environment without considering the consequences for the future. The Enlightenment led to the Industrial Revolution, which in turn led to the exploitation of nature and the massive use of fossil fuels. At the same time, the Industrial Revolution changed the economic system: instead of self-sufficiency in essential material goods, a focus on unlimited economic growth emerged, driven by the interest-based monetary system.[5] Self-sufficiency was thus replaced by the constant pursuit of greater prosperity through the acquisition of goods.

Consumption replaced active engagement in the world. The ideal of instant gratification prevailed, consumption became a source of identity, and needs grew constantly. Nature lost "all meaning and (inner) value" and became an infinitely available material that people could use, exploit, and consume at will.[6] This led to a compulsion to grow, which for the first time in human history resulted in the economy becoming independent of society—a trend that has accelerated significantly since around the 1950s, as the economy would otherwise have been threatened with contraction,[7] leading to a steady increase in the use and consumption of resources. Money and material goods gradually replaced people's sense of self and their relationship to the world.[8]

The author perceives a further phase in the twentieth century, starting around the 1970s, in the shift from an industrial society to a service society, even though industrial production continued. Since then, the service sector has grown massively. As a result, more potential areas for services are emerging. This change further exacerbates the exploitation of nature and the environment, as it affects all sectors of the economy and ultimately the entire world. Economic growth becomes an end in it-

4 Ibid., 263.
5 Ibid., 262.
6 Ibid., 248.
7 Ibid., 269, 279.
8 Ibid., 329.

self. Due to their belief in infinite growth, today's societies reject any limitation as an "unacceptable restriction of their possibilities."[9] Nature is seen as a source of energy and raw materials that can be used at will. The exploitation of nature continues to increase. This step marked the birth of today's modern consumer, whose needs constantly grow and know no bounds, inevitably leading to ever greater ecological problems, rooted in humanity's increasing appropriation of nature.

In the course of human development, mankind's motto has changed dramatically. For the first humans, it was "Hunt as much as you need"; today's motto is "Consume as much as you can." In our present-day societies, nature appears as an infinite resource that can be exploited following the principles of reason. In this phase, which Bätzing refers to as the current service society, environmental pollution has reached a new level: traffic congestion, enormous energy consumption, consumption of raw materials, pollution from plastic waste, the sharp rise in carbon dioxide concentrations in the Earth's atmosphere, nuclear radiation, genetic engineering, global warming, increase in extreme weather events, damage to ecosystems, noise and light pollution. In addition, the health and nutritional well-being of many people is also affected. The author sees a new quality in the relationship between people and the environment, above all as some harms cannot be reversed. His thesis is that we are destroying our livelihood because we no longer see ourselves as a part of living nature. If we did, we would preserve our natural resources.

However, since only humans are capable of developing unlimited needs on the one hand and adapting to different habitats on the other, Bätzing remains optimistic. He believes that we can overcome the current environmental and climate crisis if we follow the fundamental concept of cultural self-restraint that he proposes. To do this, we must discover the starting point for a new way of dealing with nature, one that aims at an economy that primarily serves to provide people with essential goods and use energy mindfully. This is the only way we can reconcile our way of life with ecological sustainability.

Bätzing's negative conclusion follows from his view that the development he has traced cannot be halted by mitigating the effects of human activity on the environment or by leaving a small part of the

[9] Ibid., 357.

Earth unused and returning it to nature. In a finite world, it is not possible to live and do business without boundaries. "Green growth" cannot therefore solve the problems.

However, an optimistic conclusion lies in the answer to the book's central question: are humans inherently destructive to the environment? According to Bätzing, Homo Destructor does not have to have the last word. The boundless growth of the economy and our personal needs must be limited so that we can treat nature and the environment in an ecologically sensible way. If they limit themselves, humans can change nature without destroying it. This is a necessity, especially since the Earth is known to be a limited space.[10]

Bätzing draws another positive aspect from this perspective: a society without environmental destruction would integrate individuals more strongly into community tasks than our present societies do. It is imperative to understand the environment and nature, as well as the use of their resources, as public goods that affect everyone.[11]

The fundamental insights of Bätzing's history of humanity and the environment are that environmental problems correspond to the basic principles of the economy, society, and land use, and that there is no alternative to this economic system, even though it is based on false assumptions that will inevitably force it to change in the future.[12] The fact that the massive destruction of nature has only been happening for a very short period of time, beginning around 1950, gives Bätzing hope that the environmental crisis can still be brought under control despite all the escalations. To prevent humans ultimately becoming Homo Destructor, the destroyer of their own existence, self-restraint and finding the right balance are the urgent tasks of our time.

Werner Bätzing manages to connect the many different aspects of a complex topic so that the problems currently facing humanity, and their causes, become comprehensible. The book is insightful, often in-

[10] Cf. Hans Lenk and Matthias Maring, *Natur – Umwelt – Ethik* (Münster; Hamburg; London: LIT Verlag, 2002).

[11] Cf. Ulrich Arnswald, "Öffentliche *versus* private Güter. Philosophische Gedanken zur ökonomischen Theorie der öffentlichen Güter und zu Gemeinschaftsgütern als politische Güter," in Matthias Maring, ed., *Globale öffentliche Güter in interdisziplinären Perspektiven* (Karlsruhe: KIT Scientific Publishing, 2012), 267-298.

[12] Cf. Hans Lenk, *Umweltverträglichkeit und Menschenzuträglichkeit. Die neue Verantwortung für unsere Umwelt und Zukunft* (Karlsruhe: Universitätsverlag Karlsruhe, 2009).

structive, and provides readers with the necessary historical background. The work is particularly noteworthy for its skillful integration of facts from various fields of knowledge, presenting and connecting them in a way that is understandable even to non-specialists.

# VIII. 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 Tirkish-Bulgarian Bilateral Cultural Agreement. For more information, contact the Tirkish 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-tme registration fee of €980
   extramural: €2,440 per school year.
2) For non- EU/EEA & Swiss students:
   in residence: €4,950 per school year.
   extramural: €3,300 per school year.

**Other Fees**

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

**Duration of Studies**

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

**Financial Aid**

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

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