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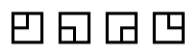


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SAPERE AUDE

dare to know



‘*Sapere Aude*’, as used in Immanuel Kant’s essay, ‘What is Enlightenment?’ means ‘Dare to Know.’ This phrase exemplifies the mission of *Sapere Aude*. Our aim is to facilitate intellectual discovery by encouraging undergraduate students to reason independently and to explore unfamiliar philosophical territory.

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We are grateful to have engaged with so many brilliant pieces this submission cycle.

Special thanks to the many committed undergraduate students that dedicated themselves to turning in incredibly rigorous and philosophically interesting pieces to Sapere Aude and to the supportive faculty in philosophy departments everywhere who dispersed our call for papers.

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Deweyan Conduct & Confucian Li (Ritual): A Comparative Analysis

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曾子曰：“吾日三省吾身：爲人謀而不忠乎？與朋友交而不信乎？傳不習乎？”

己所不欲，勿施于人。

子曰：“學而時習之，不亦說乎？有朋自遠方來，不亦樂乎？人不知而不愠，不亦君子乎？”

Introduction

It has been said that the philosophical projects of both John Dewey and Confucius are to establish philosophy as a way of life. That being said, the philosophies of Dewey and Confucius are similar in a variety of ways. In this paper, specifically, my goal is to elucidate the similarities in the ways in which they both depict the development of the individual through the context of one's social interactions – a process that is done primarily through the practice of ritual (*li*) or conduct. In addition, I argue that there are striking parallels in Confucius and Dewey's characterizations of community and communal life, and these portrayals offer rich insights into the question of how communities ought to function and thrive. These similarities mainly involve the social characterization of human psychology, as both Dewey and Confucius discuss the important role of social relations with respect to topics such as moral education and general human development. Even more specific and unique to their philosophies, however, is their focus on the practice of ritual and conduct in social life; namely, Dewey and Confucius both assert that proper conduct is essential to fulfilling and maintaining appropriate social and moral standards of one's community.

Structurally, this paper is divided into several distinguished sections. To begin, I will offer a concise literature review of the sources which will be referenced to throughout this essay. Next, I will spend a considerable length explaining Dewey's notion of conduct and Confucius' concept of ritual in extensive detail. I will then briefly cover what I understand to be the subtle difference between these two ideas. Following this, I will discuss Dewey's idea of dramatic rehearsal in comparison to the role-playing aspect of Confucian ritual. Finally, I will consider the social quality of moral education, as it is expressed in the philosophies of both Dewey and Confucius.

Literature Review

There has been an innumerable amount of scholarly work produced in the field of comparative philosophy on the connections between John Dewey's pragmatism and Chinese Confucianism. This essay is concerned with the portion of literature that applies to Deweyan and Confucian insights into the ways in which individuals interact and develop in a social context. With the help of these sources, I will establish a connection between the Confucian idea of *li* with the Deweyan notion of conduct.

Thus, this portion of my essay comprises a literature review of some of the published works pertaining to these topics.

With respect to this paper's topic of inquiry, Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct* is a necessary starting point for understanding the psychological, social, and moral aspects of his pragmatic philosophy. In this book, Dewey explores several topics that he claims are interlinked, such as the evolution of human habits, the nature of social institutions, and the concept of morality. The central thesis of Dewey's book is that human nature, sociality, and morality are grounded in a dynamic and interactive relationship with one another. Dewey ultimately believes that customs, which he defines as "widespread uniformities of habit," are the primary sources of social institutions and normativity in a successful society (58). More importantly, Dewey's notion of custom relates to the Confucian concept of *li*, which is typically interpreted as "rites" or "rituals" (Van Norden, 25). In her essay, "Dewey and Confucius: On Moral Education," May Sim states that "ritual proprieties (*li*) are the social norms that regulate conduct" (86). Moreover, in *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, Van Norden explains that philosophical Confucianism interprets ritual in a functionalist sense, meaning it is seen as an expression of "emotions and dispositions that are necessary for the maintenance of communities" (26).

On a separate note, it's worth mentioning that David Hall and Roger Ames are some of the world's foremost authorities on the comparisons between John Dewey and Confucius. For this reason, their book, *The Democracy of the Dead*, as well as their essay titled "A Pragmatist Understanding of Confucian Democracy," serve as cornerstone pieces to this body of literature. Their work that appears in these particular sources are the most relevant to my thesis, and therefore they will be referenced to consistently throughout the remainder of this paper. The overall project of Hall and Ames can be summed up as an attempt to analyze and interpret Confucianism or Confucian democracy through a Deweyan-pragmatic lens. The work of Hall and Ames provides the most sophisticated comparisons between the thoughts of Dewey and Confucius, and as such, their sources are essential to my overall project.

Though some of these sources focus only on Confucian ritual, the implicit similarities to Dewey's notion of custom are easily identifiable. For example, Van Norden mentions that "rituals," in

the Confucian sense, “remind us of how we are connected with and dependent on other humans” (27). This point is consistent with Dewey’s conception of the social self; according to Hall and Ames, Dewey maintains “a sense of the self as irreducibly social” (126). Similarly, in a different source, Sor-hoon Tan mentions Dewey’s social conception of the self as it relates to custom as an embodiment of social and moral consensus (478). Furthermore, in a broader sense, it would be reasonable for one to interpret Confucius as a pragmatist. Though he does not write about pragmatism or Dewey, author Michael Puett suggests that Confucianism is distinguished from traditional philosophical inquiry in a similar way as the former. Namely, Confucius doesn’t focus on “great big philosophical questions,” but rather, he is concerned with simple, pragmatic questions that pertain to how we live our lives on a daily basis; this then leads to the Confucian emphasis on ritual and proper social conduct (2).

A major theme underlying this body of literature is that Confucius and Dewey both maintain that proper social conduct and relations are indispensable components of human development and moral cultivation. Even so, there remains some degree of disagreement about the extent to which Dewey’s pragmatism and Confucianism are in fact reconcilable. Hall and Ames argue that American pragmatism, and John Dewey in particular, offers a “productive cultural perspective” for engaging with Confucius and Confucianism, primarily in the context of understanding their insights into the topics of sociality, culture, morality, and democracy (125-126). On the other hand, certain authors focus equally on the inconsistencies between the philosophies of Dewey and Confucius. For instance, May Sim is skeptical as to whether Dewey’s philosophy is the best candidate for explaining Confucianism, arguing that there are significant differences between the two with regards to the specific topic of moral education (85). In a similar approach, Leonard J. Waks discusses both the similarities and the differences in the educational models within the Deweyan and Confucian traditions. Waks concludes his analysis in a complimentary style, however, asserting that “despite their differences, Confucian and Deweyan scholars and educators can engage in fruitful dialogue regarding educational renewal” (20).

Nevertheless, there are many similarities between Dewey’s idea of conduct and the Confucian principle of *li* that are mentioned throughout this literature. For example, May Sim notes that Dewey and Confucius are in agreement about “the importance of moral education for self-development, and

about the importance of social relations for moral education” (86). That is to say, they both believe that the morally cultivated self is one whose own good is identified with the good of others, or of society at large (Sim, 86). For Dewey, human conduct is more than simple behavior, it often involves reflection and reason. Moreover, custom serves as a principle of social organization, consisting of the various ways in which relationships are regulated (Tan, 468). Sor-hoon Tan explains that, for Dewey, customs are “social norms embodying the group’s judgment that certain rules are to be followed for the sake of the group’s welfare” (475). Thus, human habits and customs often necessitate a level of reflection, as this allows us to approach social relationships and interactions with appropriate levels of conduct. On the topic of Confucian ritual, Michael Puett discusses this same idea: “When we have learned to refine our responses, we can start to respond to people in ways that we have cultivated, instead of through immediate emotional reaction. We do this refining through ritual” (3). Ultimately, Confucius and Dewey both maintain that moral self-cultivation is directly tied to human conduct and character in the social realm.

The literature I have reviewed is made up of a collection of diverse and professional sources. Dewey’s own work, *Human Nature and Conduct*, provides an original avenue into his philosophy of social and moral conduct. Similarly, Michael Puett’s *The Path* and Van Norden’s *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy* are ample sources for understanding Confucian ritual. These foundational sources in the literature act as a primer for the remaining sources, which are comparative in nature. May Sim’s “Dewey and Confucius: On Moral Education” and Waks’ “John Dewey and Confucius in Dialogue: 1919-2019” both contribute critical thoughts to the discussion of moral education in Dewey and Confucius. Tan’s essay, “The Dao of Politics: *Li* (Rituals/Rites) and Laws as Pragmatic Tools of Government,” takes more of a political approach to evaluating the relationship between Dewey’s notion of conduct and Confucian *li*. Lastly, Hall and Ames’ work in “A Pragmatist Understanding of Confucian Democracy” and *The Democracy of the Dead* offer useful insights in to the question of how a Deweyan pragmatist perspective can enlighten an interpretation of Confucianism.

Deweyan Conduct (Impulse, Habit, & Deliberation)

The purpose of Dewey's work in *Human Nature and Conduct* is to extend his pragmatic philosophical method into the fields of developmental and social psychology. Additionally, it constitutes Dewey's moral theory of development, as he essentially claims that the purpose of our value judgments is to guide human conduct. Through the attunement of our character to our moral values, humans are able to cultivate and even change their nature. Dewey proposes that there are three levels of conduct: impulse, habit, and deliberation. The first of these two aspects of conduct are referred to by Dewey as unreflective, while the third is characterized as a reflective mode of conduct.

To begin, as individuals begin life as babies, their sources of activities are made up entirely of impulses. Our impulses, which includes things like instincts, drives, reflexes, and appetites, are also referred to by Dewey as "native activities" (90). Humans are born into the world with a set of impulses, but in these early stages of their lives, they are wholly dependent beings. Adults, who have formed and established habits out of their impulses, are responsible for transferring those habits to future generations. In Dewey's own words, "the meaning of native activities is not native; it is acquired. It depends upon interaction with a matured social medium" (90). Dewey's emphasis on impulse as the original source of human conduct is essential to his theory of developmental psychology. The impulses of humans can be directed and shaped into ends that suit the values of one's social environment, chiefly through moral education. According to Dewey, "impulses are the pivots upon which the re-organization of activities turn, they are agencies of deviation, for giving new directions to old habits and changing their quality. Consequently whenever we are concerned with understanding social transition and flux or with projects for reform, personal and collective, our study must go to analysis of native tendencies" (103). The plastic nature of the ends and means of our moral development is possible because, as Dewey says, impulses are the original form of human conduct. Impulses require some direction from external sources, though; namely, they require socially refined habits that are derived from one's environment.

Habits, in the Deweyan sense, are socially shaped standards of behavior in the forms of activities or ways of responding to the conditions of the environment. However, while habits are construed on the basis of purposeful and socially valuable ideas, they still operate on an unreflective

and subconscious level. According to Dewey, the most meaningful habits are the ones that are shared amongst social groups, which Dewey refers to as customs. When impulses are successfully refined into socially acceptable habits, they eventually develop into customs which are generally recognized by the whole community. In the following passage from *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey concisely explains how social customs come to be accepted:

To a considerable extent customs, or widespread uniformities of habit, exist because individuals face the same situation and react in like fashion. But to a larger extent customs persist because individuals form their personal habits under conditions set by prior customs. An individual usually acquires the morality as he inherits the speech of his social group. The activities of the group are already there, and some assimilation of his own acts to their pattern is a prerequisite of a share therein, and hence of having any part in what is going on (58).

In other words, human beings acquire their senses of morality and social conduct by learning from others who are already accustomed to communal life. Custom, Dewey says, is attained through the eventual replacement of impulses with habits. According to Dewey, impulse and habit are conflicting notions, and this conflict is embodied in the form of combat between the impulses of children and the habits of adults (99). Thus, this point of Dewey's brings to light his emphasis on the social aspect of moral education. Moreover, custom, as it is established and derived from widespread habits, sets the general tone for the expectations of human conduct and behavior in many areas of our lives.

Yet, habit remains an unreflective mode of conduct, and so it operates subconsciously as a kind of automatic response to conditions posed by one's environment. Habits do not involve thought on behalf of the actor, and although they are essentially refined reflections of impulses, they become second-nature to our behaviors and operate instinctively. Thus, the need for reflective thought on one's conduct arises when the usual use of habit or impulse appears to be inconsistent with the circumstances in question. When actions made on the basis of impulse or habit are not appropriate to our situations, Dewey says people are led to deliberate on the problem that's been posed on them. In the ensuing statements, Dewey explains how this mode of reflective thought plays an essential role in developing moral values and norms:

Morality is an endeavor to find for the manifestation of impulse in special situations an office of refreshment and renewal. The endeavor is not easy of accomplishment. It is easier to surrender the main and public channels of action

and belief to the sluggishness of custom, and idealize tradition by emotional attachment to its ease, comforts and privileges instead of idealizing it in practice by making it more equably balanced with present needs... Thought is born as the twin of impulse in every moment of impeded habit (169-171).

The challenge of deliberation in human conduct is as such: There is a need to overcome certain habits through thought experiments that consist of judgments about the actions needed to resolve one's quandary. In other words, deliberation allows one to transcend the often-insufficient thoughts which are restricted to habit and impulse. Indeed, habits become negative limits to our thoughts because they are at first, in fact, positive agencies (Dewey, 175). Given this quality of habit, the goal of reflective thought is therefore to increase the range and variability of our habits. The more flexible our habits are, Dewey says, the more we are able to identify their discriminatory natures and present our thoughts with the help of deliberative imagination (175-176). While habit gives us a general framework for which to act in terms of conduct, it is the reflective mode of deliberation that allows us to appropriate our conduct with respect to the changing and unexpected situations we find ourselves in.

Confucian *Li* (Ritual)

The Confucian concept of *li* (ritual) was briefly elaborated on in the literature review portion of this paper, but it will be helpful for us to establish a thorough understanding of the term, prior to further demonstrating the ways in which it is comparable to Dewey's notion of conduct. To begin with, however, it will be useful for us to understand a little bit of Confucian philosophy in general, as well as the philosophical methodology of Confucius himself. Confucius' magnum opus is the *Analects*; this classical Chinese text is widely accepted as the most reliable source of Confucius' doctrines (Chan, 14). As Wing-tsit Chan points out in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, the primary concern of Confucius is a respectable society based on satisfactory government and harmonious human relations (15). The latter point, in particular, is most relevant to our current discussion of ritual. For society in general, Confucius stresses the need for proper conduct within our interpersonal and social relations. In *The Democracy of the Dead*, Hall and Ames offer an excellent summarization of the concept of *li*: "*Li*, often translated as 'rites' or 'propriety,' is an enduring yet always malleable syntax through which the human being can pursue refined and appropriate relationships" (35). Thus, in Confucianism, *li* encompasses the standards that are required to maintain social order and a sense of community.

The Chinese character *li* originally referred to rites of sacrifice, but Confucius expanded the scope of its application to include other things, such as the norms that govern one's expected behavior toward others. In fact, the use of *li* is even more broad in the *Hsun Tzu*, in which *li* appears to be used almost interchangeably with *li-yi* at times (Shun, 458). In this text, *li-yi* is often used to refer generally to the social standards and norms governing human conduct, relative to one's social position (Ibid). According to Kwong-loi Shun, what unites the variety of notions that have come to be included in the scope of *li* is the Chinese term *ching*, which is typically translated as "reverence" (458). It is not entirely clear what the precise scope of *li* is in the *Analects*, but it is evident that *li* (ritual) is often accompanied by *ching* (reverence); for example, Confucius says one is supposed to have reverence toward spirits when performing sacrificial rites, and toward other people when observing the norms of polite behavior and the responsibilities one has with regards to the treatment of others (Ibid). For the purpose of this comparative essay, *li* will be interpreted more narrowly than broadly; specifically, *li* will be hereto after understood and referred to as ritual.

There is much more to be said about *li*, particularly with respect to how it characterizes ritual. At this moment, we might take a step back and consider what we think of when we hear the term "ritual." Rituals are typically thought of as involving formal activities or ceremonies, ones that are often held for special occasions such as marriage or funerals. However, the Confucian notion of ritual goes beyond this; ritual also includes matters of what we would describe as etiquette, such as the appropriate manner in which to greet or say farewell to a guest (Van Norden, 25). That is to say, the importance of ritual can be found in everyday instances of custom or propriety, even though we may not realize it. Moreover, at the communal level, rituals encompass social and political institutions; it has even been asserted by Hall and Ames that rituals are the language through which Chinese culture is expressed (205). Ultimately, for Confucius, the significance of ritual is captured in what it does for the people performing it, in a beneficial sense, for all parties involved.

Confucian Ritual and Deweyan Conduct: A Subtle Contrast

Before continuing further, it is worth elucidating the subtle difference between Deweyan conduct and Confucian ritual. To do so, I suggest that we appeal to a distinction made by Freya Mathews between two fundamental modes of cognition: theory (*theoria*) and strategy (*strategia*).

Mathews says that theory consists of abstract and universal representations of reality, constructed in the human mind and presented solely for the subject as an internal viewer (5:30). Strategy, on the other hand, focuses on the immediate experiences and concrete particularities that are received from one's interactions with their environment (Mathews, 9:00). In the context of conduct and ritual, Dewey and Confucius both imply that the moral growth and developmental psychology associated with these concepts involve both theory and strategy in cooperation. The way in which they differ on this note, though, really boils down to a matter of emphasis. Dewey's notion of habit (an unreflective mode of conduct) appears to fall in the cognitive category of strategy, while deliberation (the reflective mode of conduct) involves the method of theory. That is to say, Dewey sees deliberation (i.e., theory) as a way to reconstruct habit (i.e., strategy). Confucius, in slight contrast, seems to imply that humans start off with ritual habits (i.e., strategy) and then are eventually led to establish deliberative thought (i.e., theory) as a result of performing the rituals with sincerity. All things considered, Confucius and Dewey are mainly in agreement that both strategy and theory are needed for the full development of proper moral and social conduct.

Dramatic Rehearsal and the "As-if" Mindset

For both Dewey and Confucius, reflective and imaginative thought is absolutely necessary to one's moral development. In Dewey's philosophy, he claims that deliberation is the mode of conduct that ties together impulses and habits with intelligence. When deliberative thought is applied to any given representation of customary habit, one's general conduct is continuously refined and improved through this ongoing process. As habits are subject to deliberation, they in turn grow into more flexible and adaptive versions of their original forms, ones which have taken into account our imaginative thoughts. Moreover, Dewey's notion of deliberation is built on his idea of dramatic rehearsal, which is concisely summarized in the following passage from *Human Nature and Conduct*:

Deliberation is a dramatic rehearsal (in imagination) of various competing possible lines of action. It starts from the blocking of efficient overt action, due to that conflict of prior habit and newly released impulse to which reference has been made. Then each habit, each impulse, involved in the temporary suspense of overt action takes its turn in being tried out. Deliberation... is an experiment in making various combinations of selected elements of habits and impulses, to see what the resultant action would be like if it were entered upon (190).

In characterizing deliberation as a dramatic rehearsal of potential outcomes of action, Dewey is effectively arguing that proper conduct is attained largely through the conscious practice of imagining various versions of future situations. In our movements into unknowable situations, preexisting habits provide vague expectations of what we are going towards; when those habits are organized and focused through intelligent deliberation, however, the confusion of the unknown is cleared up and those situations are more suitably approachable (Dewey, 180). Thus, in order to fulfill the expectations for proper conduct, Dewey argues that we must become comfortable with escaping the rigidity of our habits in order to accommodate for unfamiliar and unknown conditions.

The emphasis on reflective thought with respect to one's conduct is equally as important in Confucian ritual, too. Confucius believes that we must ask ourselves why we engage in the actions we perform – including actions that constitute ritual practice. Rituals often come across as customs, or social conventions that we've been taught to adhere to, and as such, they are often taken for granted and performed beneath the levels of our conscious minds. In regards to the Chinese character of *li*, Confucius describes ritual in a novel and distinguished manner; namely, he believes that rituals allow us to create short-lived alternate realities that return us to our regular lives in slightly altered ways (Puett, 5). Rituals are significant in this regard because, much like with Dewey's notion of deliberation, they provide a way for us to take on imaginative roles and momentarily adopt different perspectives on situations.

Drawing on some particular Confucian phrasing as it appears in the *Analects*, Michael Puett posits the idea that practicing ritual allows us to live in an "as-if" world for a brief moment (5). In early China, Puett explains, people believed that spirits of deceased ancestors roamed around the world with resentment toward the living (5). To combat the persistent negative energies of the dead, people created ritual acts – the most important of which was ancestral worship – to satisfy the haunting ghosts (5). For Confucius, whether the rituals actually affected the ghosts, or if the ghosts were even there at all, was hardly relevant. Rather, the ritual act was significant because of what it did for those participating in it, since even acting *as if* the ancestors were really there brought about a change in the participants of the practice (6). The ritual of sacrificial rites is not only a way for people to imagine

what it would be like to be someone else, but is also a way to imagine what an ancestor would say if they were still amongst the living.

More importantly, the ritual practice of ancestral rites also positively changed the feelings of the living toward one another (6). Broadly speaking, this is true for all types of ritual practices, not just those which are formal or traditional. Of course, rituals – as well as the role playing associated with them – always end, but each time the rituals are returned to and practiced, they gradually help improve relationships and create healthier connections among family members. In addition, these effects go beyond just familial bonds; the practice of ritual has implications for the strength of the community as a whole. For Confucius, ritual plays an essential role in the advancement and maintenance of community. The Confucian notion of ritual as a communal discourse is all-embracing, consisting of all the various roles, relationships, and institutions that bind and foster community (Hall and Ames, 204). Participating in ritual gives one the opportunity to adopt uniquely personal perspectives, and those in turn can be reflected into the workings of society in general. That is to say, ritual action involves an ongoing re-creation of community from the unique perspectives and judgments of each individual coming together as members of the collective.

Indeed, Puett acknowledges that the ritual of ancestral rites does not offer any real-life direction for how to behave in the real world, but that is not its purpose (6). For Confucius, ritual is a social and communal activity; its value is found in the fact that each participant plays a role different from the one that they normally occupy. Although the Confucian example of ritual in terms of ancestral worship and sacrificial rites is distinct from Dewey's notion of deliberation, the underlying point is the same in both ideas: Ritual and deliberation help cultivate one's conduct, because the person performing these practices imagines what situations would be like from perspectives outside of one's own.

Social Quality of Moral Development

One important point that links the philosophies of Dewey and Confucius is their assertions that conduct and ritual, specifically in relational terms of morality and sociality, plays an essential part in the process of fine-tuning human nature. For Confucius, humans become generally better in a social

context through the practice of proper conduct in their relations with other human beings. Likewise, Dewey maintains that humans are capable of modifying their impulses and developing them into habits, which thereby enhances the conditions for ideal social and moral life. Both Dewey and Confucius see human nature as plastic and malleable, and they both consider the cultivation of the individual as vital to overall societal betterment. As Hall and Ames point out, “the Confucian sense of social order assumes that personal and communal realization are mutually interdependent” (209). Confucius does not entertain the notion of the individual being separate from the collective social body; rather, the individual is grounded and intertwined in the social sphere, primarily through the various roles associated with one’s obligations to the groups which they belong to.

As Dewey illustrates in the following excerpt from *Human Nature and Conduct*, he also finds the isolation of the individual to be problematic:

Settled and regular action must contain an adjustment of environing conditions; it must incorporate them in itself. For human beings, the environing affairs directly important are those formed by the activities of other human beings... The traditional psychology of the original separate soul, mind or consciousness is in truth a reflex of conditions which cut human nature off from its natural objective relations. It implies first the severance of man from nature and then of each man from his fellows (84-85).

Dewey is critical of both the traditional dualism between mind and body, as well as the distinction between the individual and the community. Indeed, American pragmatists such as John Dewey part from the classical liberal notion of individualism, instead offering a distinctly *social* characterization of experience (Hall and Ames, 126). Dewey believes that the experience of the individual can only be satisfied in full by participating in the community of which they are a part of. Thus, Dewey’s communal understanding of experience suggests that the actions and moral obligations of individuals must contribute to the betterment and overall harmony of the community. For Dewey, this sense of moral development in a social context is ultimately achieved through proper conduct and presentation of character toward others.

On the whole, Confucius and Dewey both consider the social roles one adopts to be an indispensable and necessary part of their moral development. In May Sim’s words, “[Dewey and Confucius] agree that a cultivated self is an expanded self who identifies his own good with the well-

being of others. Dewey sees moral development as an expansion of one's ends and the reconstruction of his character. Everyone is a social being who occupies various social positions that call for certain modes of action" (86). Both Dewey and Confucius believe that the boundaries between the individual self and others are nuanced and not easily distinguishable, contrary to the way tradition would have it. More notably, the importance of propriety and conduct directly attests to these points, as this is ultimately what holds together the relationship between the individual and other members of society. In short, Dewey's notion of conduct and the Confucian concept of ritual appear to be nearly identical, precisely in the sense that they both hold morality and sociality in an interconnected relationship with one another.

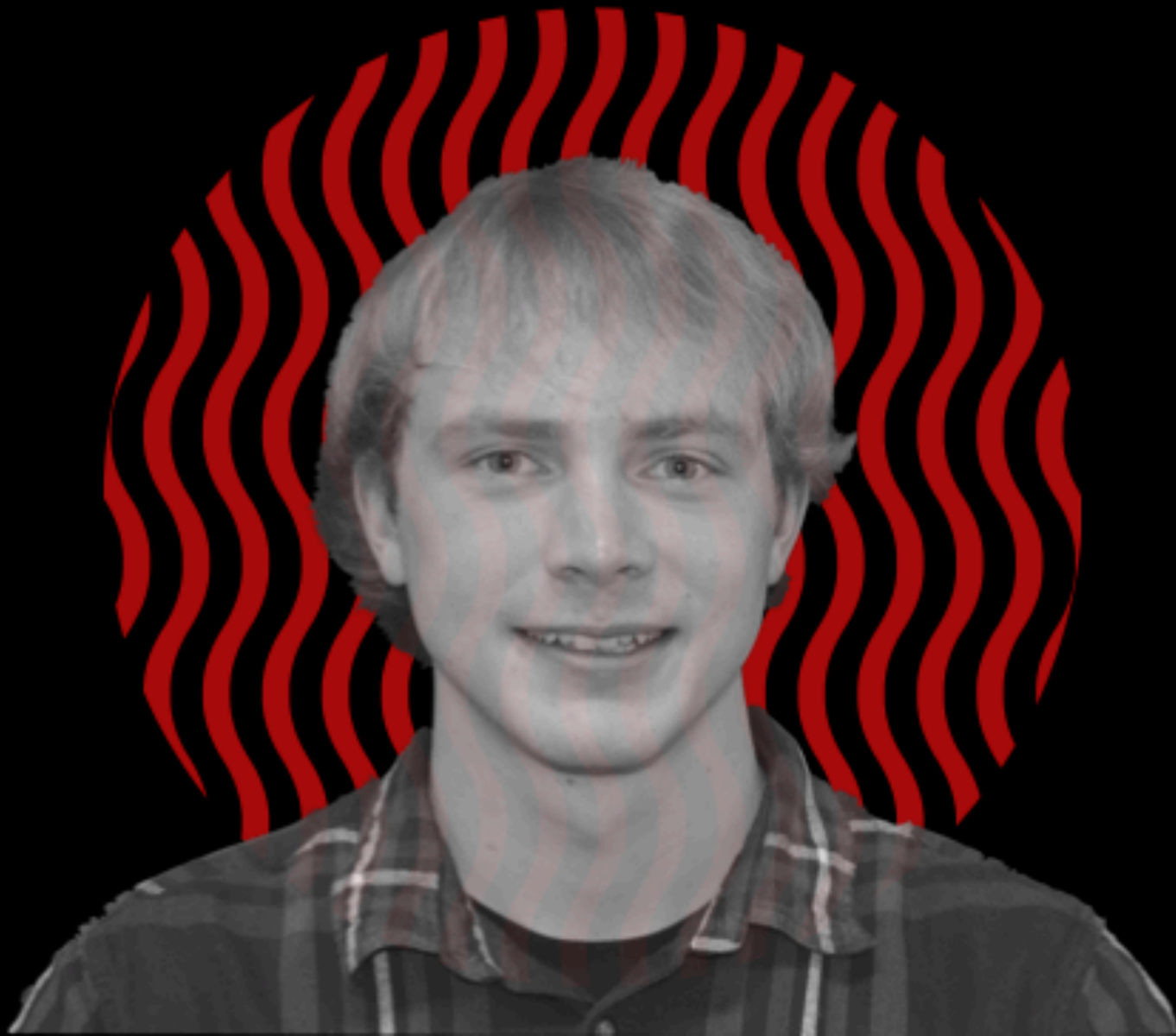
Conclusion

In conclusion, the Confucian concept of *li* and the Deweyan notion of conduct are remarkably comparable. Both Confucius and Dewey seek to ground the importance of moral education and self-cultivation in the context of sociality. In both philosophies, the notion of the individual is deeply connected with and reliant on communal relations. Likewise, the social roles that humans occupy play an essential part in the social and moral development of both the individual and the community as a whole. For Dewey, these roles are understood in terms of conduct; for Confucius, they are expressed in the form of ritual. In both schools of thought, human psychology is social; the customary habits and rituals we adopt are grounded in our social interactions with others. Furthermore, Confucius and Dewey both avoid the pitfalls of mind-body dualism in which thought and action are separate, suggesting instead that our outward demonstrations of conduct are intertwined with our internal selves. On a reflective level, then, the conventional behaviors we develop through deliberation and role-playing help establish the normative standards and expectations for human conduct in the social realm. In the last analysis, the comparable insights of John Dewey and Confucius highlight the importance of conduct and ritual in the context of our social and moral development.

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Kaleb McCalden will be receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree from Eastern Washington University in June 2023 with a double major in Philosophy and Political Science as well as a minor in Psychology. Kaleb's main academic interests are in Chinese philosophy, applied ethics and moral psychology, and political philosophy. Kaleb's current future plans are to pursue an advanced degree in either philosophy or law.





**I am He as You are He
as You are Me and We
are All Together: A
Critical Analysis and
Comparison of J.G.
Fichte and G.W.F.
Hegel's Theories of
Self-Consciousness**
Rebekah Locke



Introduction

Within German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a section which is perhaps one of the most important chapters of not only the *Phenomenology* but the whole of Hegel's corpus. That chapter is "Self-Consciousness." Though this discussion is only one fifth of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "Self-Consciousness" is one of the most widely debated sections of the text. In it, Hegel gives an exhaustive, progressive examination from consciousness to self-consciousness, going through stages of desire, recognition, and the famous Lord and Bondsman dialectic.¹ "Self-Consciousness" is also the section of the text in which Hegel makes a thinly veiled criticism of Johann Gottlieb Fichte when he speaks of the simplistic "I am I" conception of self-consciousness. Hegel calls this view a "motionless tautology" and implies that Fichte's explanation of self-consciousness is somehow stunted and incomplete. In fact, Hegel begins his discussion of self-consciousness with this "motionless tautology of 'I am I'" theory of self-consciousness only to reject it and move on to a more complex understanding. But while Fichte and Hegel's theories of self-consciousness are vastly different, they are not as different as one may have originally thought, especially when Hegel is read in a specific way, such as John McDowell's heterodox reading of the text.

Fichte's Self-Consciousness

To begin the discussion of Hegel's critique of Fichte's theory of self-consciousness it is important to have a firm grasp of Fichte's theory on its own. Hegel describes Fichte's basic conception of self-conscious as "I am I" self-consciousness, a description which focuses on the self-sufficiency of the intellect in Fichte's theory. Fichte argues that the intellect—or the "I" as he deems it—is experienced solely through consciousness:

The published presentation of the first principles of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* commences with the proposition, "the I posits itself;" more specifically, "the I posits itself as an I." Since this activity of "self-positing" is taken to be the

¹Hegel's discussion of self-consciousness does not end with the Lord and Bondsman dialectic. In fact, Hegel goes on to explain three more movements self-consciousness must go through in order to be fully self-conscious: Stoicism, Skepticism, and Unhappy Consciousness. For the purpose of this paper, though, I will end my discussion with Lordship and Bondage.

fundamental feature of I-hood in general, the first principle asserts that “the I posits itself as self-positing.”²

Fichte believes that a person can become self-conscious by thinking about his or herself thinking about some object in the world, such as you thinking about yourself thinking about the things written on this page or me thinking about myself thinking about what I am writing.

This process, called abstraction³, is the focal point of Fichte’s self-consciousness argument: “... the ‘absolute I’ is a mere abstraction and that the only sort of I that can actually exist or act is a *finite, empirical, embodied, individual self*.”⁴ Fichte argues that self-consciousness is derived from abstracting from the objective world in order to come to the intellect. The intellect—the “I” for Fichte—is what is ontologically independent; whereas the object exists “in itself” but for another (the intellect), the intellect exists “for itself”: “[F]or Fichte, the subject just is—is nothing more or other than—its own spontaneous, substrateless activity of self-positing.”⁵ The intellect takes primacy over objects, which means that the intellect determines its properties for itself, independently from an “outside world.” Because one takes one’s consciousness to be one’s own, one is determining something about the intellect through the intellect itself. The intellect is thereby self-determining and self-sufficient: “[I]n Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, the activity of ‘self-positing’ is the fundamental feature of the I-hood. In fact, Fichte takes the position...that the concept of self-consciousness contains the thought of a groundless subject spontaneously generating knowledge of its own existence.”⁶

However, as man lives in the objective world, one can never fully explain a singular self-consciousness without reference to physical objects or other self-consciousnesses in the world. The “I” may know itself from the beginning, but all of its experiences and perceptions are mediated through the objective world:

² Dan Breazeale, "Johann Gottlieb Fichte," In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022), ed. Edward N. Zalta. URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/johann-fichte/>>.

³ J.G. Fichte, *Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings*, trans. Daniel Breazeale, (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 1994), 11.

⁴ Breazeale.

⁵ Frederick Neuhauser, “Desire, Recognition, and the Relation between Bondsman and Lord,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Kenneth Westphal (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 40.

⁶ Marina Bykoa, “Kant’s ‘I Think’ and Fichte’s Principle of Self-Positing,” *Anuario Filosófico* 52, no. 1 (2019): 147, doi:10.15581/009.52.1.145-165

This same “identity in difference” of original self-consciousness might also be described as an “intellectual intuition,” in as much as it involves the *immediate* presence of the I to itself, prior to and independently of any sensory content. To be sure, such an “intellectual intuition” never occurs, as such, within empirical consciousness; instead, it must simply be presupposed (that is, “posited”) in order to explain the possibility of actual consciousness, within which subject and object are always already distinguished. The occurrence of such an original intellectual intuition is itself inferred, not intuited.⁷

Even though the “I” is self-positing and prior to sensible perceptions, because persons are finite, empirical, and embodied, the “I” will always be situated within the world at large.

Fichte’s theory of self-consciousness is also based largely on the claim that the intellect is an act, a kind of doing, and not a thing.⁸ Fichte calls the intellect a *Tathandlung* (fact/act) and *Gesetzein* (positing being). *Tathandlung* comes from the idea that the intellect is something one does *and* something one is: “In Fichte’s systematic philosophy, ‘the self-positing I’ expresses both the I’s act of positing itself and the fact that the I has been thus self-positing.”⁹ The intellect—the “I”—is not a thing. Rather, the “I” is the action of thinking about oneself thinking, the abstraction from objects to self-consciousness. Roughly translated, *Gesetzein* means “positing Being,” and it is another way of describing how the intellect is an action and not a thing. The intellect posits its own being rather than gaining being from some outside source. *Gesetzein* refers to Fichte’s inner eye idea of self-consciousness, or the idea that being comes from the intellect’s ability to grasp itself:

A fundamental corollary of Fichte’s understanding of I-hood (Ichheit) as a kind of *fact/act* is his denial that the I is originally any sort of “thing” or “substance.” Instead, the I is simply what it posits itself to be, and thus its “being” is, so to speak, a consequence of its self-positing, or rather, is co-terminus with the same.¹⁰

The intellect is also, as Fichte calls it, the immediate unity of Being and Seeing:

The intellect, as such *observes itself*, and this act of self-observation is immediately directed at everything that the intellect is. Indeed, the nature of the intellect consists precisely in this *immediate* unity of being and seeing. Everything included within the intellect exists *for* the intellect, and the intellect

⁷ Breazeale.

⁸ Fichte, 26.

⁹ Bykova, 160.

¹⁰ Breazeale.

is *for itself* everything that it is; only insofar as this is true is the intellect what is *qua* intellect.¹¹

For Fichte, the nature of the intellect lies in the immediate unity of what he calls “a double series within the intellect.”¹² What he means is that the intellect both experiences what is real—the objective world (seeing)—and what is ideal—itsself (being). These two objects of consciousness cannot be separated within the intellect. Rather, they will always be joined and experienced together and immediately. Furthermore:

Fichte claims that previous accounts of self-consciousness given by Descartes, Locke, and even Kant are “reflective,” regarding the self as taking itself not as subject but as object... But this reflective form of self-awareness, Fichte argues, presupposes a more primitive form since it is necessary for the reflecting self to be aware that the reflected self is in fact *itself*. Consequently, according to Fichte, we must possess an immediate acquaintance with ourselves, “the self exists and posits its own existence by virtue of merely existing.”¹³

Fichte’s theory of self-consciousness opposes “reflective self-consciousness” because he believes, like Hegel, that self-consciousness requires mutual recognition of two self-consciousnesses: “Self-consciousness, however, is not achieved simply through a single subject’s free activity, but requires two subjects freely engaging with each other through a reciprocal interaction.”¹⁴ This interaction Fichte calls a summons, and it encapsulates one self-consciousness’ expectations of the other self-consciousness. As man cannot exist without other men, all individuals must act in a way that supports others’ freedom and ability to become a self-positing “I.” Therefore,

There are two conditions on the I: 1) an *external condition* in which another subject initiates consciousness of one’s self-activity through the summons; and 2) an *internal condition* according to which the subject becomes aware of its determinability (its capacity to act in any number of ways) and transitions into self-consciousness by determining itself to act. ¹⁵

Man’s social nature requires a level of reciprocity from at least one other self-conscious being to uncover its “reasons responsiveness capacity.”¹⁶ However, the “I” is still ultimately self-positing; this

¹¹ Fichte, 21.

¹² Fichte, 21.

¹³ Joel Smith, “Self-Consciousness,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020). Ed. Edward N. Zalta. URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/self-consciousness/>>.

¹⁴ Gabriel Gottlieb, “Fichte’s Developmental View of Self-Consciousness,” In *Fichte’s Foundations of Natural Right: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016): 117.

¹⁵ Gottlieb, 123.

¹⁶ Gottlieb, 125.

reciprocity between two self-consciousnesses is a condition of *practical* self-consciousness and not *pure* self-consciousness: “Fichte considers the pure I to possess a type of reality, even if that reality is distinct from the reality of objects experienced in space and time.”¹⁷ It is only a requirement when man is placed within a society, which is something Fichte argues must always be the case: “[T]he individual has to come to a vision of himself as integrated into a larger life shared with others, and that Spirit must somehow be fleshed out in this collective social order of which the individual is a part...”¹⁸

Furthermore, as Gunnar Beck points out:

Fichte’s views clearly echo those of Rousseau and Herder who, too, had recognized that man’s “humanization” and his “socialization” were interrelated processes and that all distinctively human faculties, i.e. thought, understanding, and moral judgment, while latent in every man, could be developed only in society.¹⁹

The reciprocity between two self-consciousnesses, Fichte argues, is what makes an “I” an individual and not just any self-positing being: “The attitudes, thoughts, and comportment of the two subjects constitute the very concept of individuality and the normative standing of a subject as an individual.”²⁰ But the fundamental nature of the “I” is as a self-positing, self-reverting, and self-reflecting *subject* and not the object of any other self-consciousness.

Hegel’s Self-Consciousness as Desire

The section of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled “Self-Consciousness” has had a great and lasting impact on the world of philosophy. It is one of the most widely discussed parts of Hegel’s entire corpus²¹ and for good reason. In this section, Hegel lays out an extremely detailed progression from sense-certainty to self-consciousness, explaining all of the different “moments” one must go through in order to come to a complete understanding of self-consciousness. He starts this discussion with the transition from the previous section, “Consciousness,” to self-consciousness. Self-consciousness, Hegel maintains, is consciousness whose object is life. This is what is known as the

¹⁷ Gottlieb, 121.

¹⁸ Gunnar Beck, “From Kant to Hegel—Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s Theory of Self-Consciousness,” *History of European Ideas* 22, no. 4 (1996): 285.

¹⁹ Beck, 280.

²⁰ Gottlieb, 126.

²¹ Axel Honneth, “From Desire to Recognition: Hegel’s Account,” In *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit: A Critical Guide*, ed. Dean Moyar and Michael Quant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 76.

first moment of self-consciousness. It is in this moment that Fichte's theory of self-consciousness fits. Hegel ultimately rejects this moment because it does not address the problem of otherness. This leads to the second moment, which can loosely be described as the unity of self-consciousness with itself, or self-consciousness as desire. Hegel also rejects this second moment, coming to the third moment of self-consciousness, his famous Lord and Bondsman dialectic.

Hegel rejects the first moment of self-consciousness—the idea that self-consciousness is simply a type of consciousness—when he criticizes Fichte's "motionless tautology of 'I am I.'" As explained earlier, Hegel finds this conception too subjective; he believes that the "I" is both in-*and*-for-itself. Hegel's second step in the chain of self-consciousness seeks to remedy this problem by progressing to the unity of self-consciousness with itself.²² This moment, known as "Self-Consciousness as Desire," explains self-consciousness as a form of desire. Hegel argues that the object of self-consciousness cannot be only itself because self-consciousness must have a connection to the objective world. Without objects to be conscious of, there would be no self-consciousness. After all, even Fichte's "overly simplistic" formalist self-consciousness emerges only after abstracting from the objective world. But self-consciousness must be related to the objective world in a special way. Hegel finds this connection by explaining self-consciousness as desire, especially the desire for unity.²³

Hegel's desire model strives to solve the problem of a subjective self-consciousness' interactions with an objective world. Self-consciousness seeks to be an autonomous force—it desires complete unity and self-sufficiency. It must therefore destroy everything that is not itself.²⁴ The desire for unity springs from the need of self-consciousness to consume what is not it because it sees itself as primary and solitary.²⁵ Put more succinctly, self-consciousness is what is left after abstracting from the objective world; thus it only knows itself insofar as it knows objects. This stage of Hegel's self-consciousness is very similar to Fichte's self-consciousness. However, Hegel's self-consciousness

²² Hegel ¶167, 104-5.

²³ Scott Jenkins, "Hegel's Concept of Desire," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 47, no. 1 (2009): 106, URL = [https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/16894/JenkinsS_JHP_47\(1\)103.pdf?sequence=1](https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/16894/JenkinsS_JHP_47(1)103.pdf?sequence=1)

²⁴ Neuhaus, 43.

²⁵ Neuhaus, 38.

wants to be a simple whole, so it seeks to destroy or consume the objective world instead of just abstracting from it.²⁶ This desire model also explains how Hegel conceives of self-consciousness as practical as opposed to theoretical; desire is the basic drive to be autonomous and self-sufficient.²⁷ At this stage, self-consciousness is not merely conceptual—the theoretical “I” thinking about itself thinking—but is a real desire. This desire characterizes the fundamental nature and defining aim of the self-conscious subject: the need to be autonomous.²⁸ Hence the practical nature of desire. The object of self-consciousness at the stage of desire is twofold:

Consciousness, as self-consciousness, henceforth has a double object: one is the immediate object, that of sense-certainty and perception, which however for self-consciousness has the character of a negative; and the second, viz. itself, which is the true essence, and is present in the first instance only as opposed to the first object. In this sphere, self-consciousness exhibits itself as the movement in which this antithesis is removed, and the identity of itself with itself becomes explicit for it.²⁹

Self-consciousness’ object has—at the same time—qualities of its negative and of itself.³⁰ Because self-consciousness controls the nature of the thing it desires by desiring it, its object is in some ways itself. Self-consciousness’ object must also be its negative because it constitutes everything that self-consciousness is not.³¹ This is precisely why self-consciousness desires to consume its object. As self-consciousness is thought of as entirely subjective, its negative must be entirely objective. Therefore, the second object of self-consciousness is life, or the totality of the objective world. According to Hegel, life—as an organic totality—is necessarily a living thing, which means that the object of self-consciousness is a living thing—life.

It is important here to take a moment to explain how Hegel conceives of life, as it plays a large role in how self-consciousness understands itself.³² According to Hegel, life is not only the totality of things in the objective world but is also itself a living thing. Life is simple infinity, comprised not of

²⁶ Neuhouser, 42.

²⁷ Neuhouser, 38.

²⁸ Neuhouser, 39.

²⁹ Hegel ¶ 167, 105.

³⁰ Paul Redding, “The Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: The Dialectic of Lord and Bondsman in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*,” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Hegel and Nineteenth Century Philosophy*, ed. F. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.

³¹ Hegel ¶ 168, 106.

³² Honneth, 79.

just relata or relations but of the infinite cycle between the two. Life is also movement—the constant movement from individual things to the totality of concepts and back again.³³ The long discussion on life in the *Phenomenology* is significant because self-consciousness is trying to understand itself as the opposite—and therefore superior—of life. Because self-consciousness is different from and superior to its object, it can therefore consume it without problem.³⁴ Furthermore, there exists a unity in life different from the immediate unity self-consciousness first took as its being. This new unity is what Hegel calls universal unity or simple genus, and it is in this unity that life exists for self-consciousness:

It is the *simple genus*, which in the movement of life itself does not *exist for itself as this “simple.”* Rather, in this *result*, life points towards something other than itself, namely, towards consciousness, for which life exists as this unity, that is, as genus.³⁵

Self-consciousness’ realization that life is a living thing marks a turning point in desire. It begins to see the world as being developed by and dependent on its own cognition. Self-consciousness no longer sees itself as existing in a senseless, placeless vacuum but as relating to a living, organic reality.³⁶

A problem arises here, though, because self-consciousness seeks to consume the very object that it depends on for sovereignty.³⁷ The self-conscious subjects tries to prove its independence and self-sufficiency by completely negating and sublating its object, but without an object, there is nothing of which self-consciousness can be conscious.³⁸ This is an observation Fichte also notes: “To be conscious of oneself, therefore, always and necessarily implies simultaneous awareness of something else. ‘No subject, no object; no object, no subject.’”³⁹ Another problem of the desire model comes from the fact that self-consciousness does not yet realize that it is itself part of that organic whole that is life.⁴⁰ Because life is the totality of both relata and relations, self-consciousness is a part of life and thereby part of its own object. This means that self-consciousness is ultimately trying to destroy itself, which simply cannot be done. No matter how much self-consciousness “consumes” life, life will still

³³ Hegel ¶ 169, 106-7.

³⁴ Neuhausser, 41-2.

³⁵ Hegel ¶ 172, 108.

³⁶ Honneth, 80.

³⁷ Neuhausser, 43.

³⁸ Hegel ¶ 175, 109-10.

³⁹ Beck, 277.

⁴⁰ Honneth, 84.

exist.⁴¹ The object of self-consciousness cannot solely be life because self-consciousness is a part of life, whether it realizes this or not. Therefore, it must also be something different than itself. In order for self-consciousness to maintain its self-sufficiency its object must be lower than itself so that self-consciousness can negate it.⁴² Equally, self-consciousness' object must also be capable of long-lasting satisfaction of desire's need to consume; it must not disappear once negated. This leads to the conclusion that the object of desire—the object of self-consciousness—must necessarily be another self-sufficient self-consciousness: “*Self-consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.*”⁴³ This prompts Hegel to turn to the third moment: “Self-consciousness as Recognition.”

Hegel's Self-Consciousness as Recognition

The object of self-consciousness must be another self-consciousness because only another self-consciousness—another subject or “I”—can negate itself and in doing so become *for* another.⁴⁴ Subsequently, only a self-sufficient “I” can exist once negated; because it negates itself, it remains self-determining and can therefore still exist.⁴⁵ This concept of recognition solves the problem of how self-consciousness can exist both in-and-for-itself. It exists in-itself insofar as it exists for another consciousness to be conscious of, and for-itself because it is autonomous and self-determining even after it negates itself. The first self-consciousness recognizes this other self-consciousness as more than a mere object and so must seek recognition from this new object: “*A self-consciousness exists for a self-consciousness. Only thereby does self-consciousness in fact exist, for it is only therein that the unity of itself in its otherness comes to be for it.*”⁴⁶ The process of recognition is not an immediate one, though. There are several stages within this moment.

When the self-conscious subject is confronted with another self-consciousness, a strange thing happens. The first subject sees the second as an object, as the second subject is something other than

⁴¹ Honneth, 85.

⁴² Neuhauser, 45.

⁴³ Hegel ¶ 175, 109.

⁴⁴ Hegel ¶ 177, 110.

⁴⁵ Neuhauser, 45.

⁴⁶ Hegel ¶ 177, 110.

the first subject's self. Yet the first subject also sees itself in the second self-consciousness. Self-consciousness, therefore, seeks to sublimate the other in order to be sure of its own self-sufficiency. Self-consciousness thus seeks to sublimate itself, as the other *is* itself.⁴⁷ Moreover, the same process is happening in the other self-consciousness; it is a two-sided phenomenon which Hegel calls doubling.⁴⁸ It is at this moment of doubling that the self-conscious subject begins to realize that it is not its own genus but is, in fact, related to other things, related to life.⁴⁹ It realizes that it is not absolutely or completely self-sufficient. This initial confrontation is the beginning of the self-conscious subject's awareness of itself in the grand scheme of things, though it fights to the death to preserve its original conception of itself as autonomous. Once each self-consciousness realizes that it is being used as an object by the other, "They *recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing each other*."⁵⁰ More importantly, each subject begins to see the other subject as like itself, as self-conscious.⁵¹ This process of mutual recognition is very similar to Fichte's theory of practical self-consciousness as determined by the mutual recognition of one self-consciousness by another. But as Fichte's self-consciousnesses do not seek to completely sublimate and consume one another, his view of mutual recognition is slightly but importantly different. Furthermore, when two self-consciousnesses, in Fichte's theory, mutually recognize each other they each *both* become at the same time an object-in-itself and an object-for-itself, unlike Hegel's conclusion of this moment of self-consciousness.

In paragraph 184 of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he continues to explain how the process of mutual recognition initially works through the use of middle and extreme terms. Each subject is, at the same time, the *merely recognized* term and the *merely recognizing* term (the extremes) as well as the middle term. Each self-consciousness begins the process as merely recognizing, taking the other as an object. But because the object of this self-consciousness is in fact another self-consciousness, the first self-consciousness realizes that it is also being used by the other, so it adjusts its view of itself as

⁴⁷ Hegel ¶ 180, 111.

⁴⁸ Hegel ¶ 182, 111-12.

⁴⁹ Honneth, 80.

⁵⁰ Hegel ¶ 184, 112.

⁵¹ Victoria Burke, "Hegel's Concept of Mutual Recognition: The Limits of Self-Determination," *The Philosophical Forum* 36, no. 2 (2005): 215, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9191.2005.00201.x

merely recognized. Both subjects go through this process, though, so each self-consciousness is a middle term because it is used by the other self-consciousness as an object.⁵² This is what is referred to as “mutual recognition.” What is significant about mutual recognition is that the subject becomes aware of itself as a consciousness through the awareness of another consciousness. This leads each subject to the realization that it is self-conscious and not merely conscious,⁵³ which progresses to Hegel’s further explanation of recognition in his Lord and Bondsman dialectic.

Hegel’s Lord and Bondsman Dialectic

To completely understand the Lord and Bondsman dialectic, one must first understand the aside Hegel makes in paragraph 187 of the *Phenomenology* concerning the fight to the death between the two self-consciousnesses of recognition: “Thus the relation of the two self-conscious individuals is such that they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle.”⁵⁴ To prove their worth both to themselves and to each other, the two self-consciousnesses must engage in a fight to the death.⁵⁵ Hegel argues that neither of the self-consciousnesses will easily concede its sovereignty to the other. Instead, each of these two self-consciousnesses will “fight to the death” to negate the other and maintain its own self-sufficient status. Hegel calls the search for recognition a matter of life and death because to continue to be the self-sufficient subject self-consciousness wants to be, it must negate and consume the other, effectively killing it. Further, each self-conscious subject is risking its sovereignty in asking for a second self-consciousness to recognize it. This is where the Lord and Bondsman dialectic adds to Hegel’s theory of self-consciousness. Hegel claims that eventually, fearing complete negation—death—one of the self-conscious subjects will negate itself and become the Bondsman to the other subject’s role of Lord.⁵⁶ This is different from Fichte’s use of mutual recognition in his theory of self-consciousness because in his explanation, the two self-conscious subjects co-exist as both subject and object; neither self-consciousness “kills” the other. In Hegel’s mutual recognition, the

⁵² Hegel ¶ 184, 112.

⁵³ Burke, 215.

⁵⁴ Hegel ¶ 187, 113-14.

⁵⁵ Hegel ¶ 187, 113-14.

⁵⁶ Hegel ¶ 189, 115.

Bondsman is the self-consciousness that negates itself and is used as an object—being *in-itself*—and the Lord is the self-consciousness that maintains its sovereignty and self-sufficient identity—being *for-itself*.⁵⁷ Hegel never fully explains what exactly makes one subject choose to become a Bondsman as opposed to a Lord, only that the Bondsman-subject is the subject most afraid of death and so eventually capitulates, and that act of self-negation is a choice, allowing the Bondsman self-consciousness to stay self-determining.

The Lord and Bondsman relationship works thusly: the Lord gains recognition of itself through the Bondsman's recognition of it, but the Lord does not recognize the Bondsman as a *subject*. The Lord does, however, recognize the Bondsman as an *object* and mediates himself through this otherness. Therefore, the Lord remains a subject while the Bondsman becomes an object through the act of self-negation, which it commits to save its life.⁵⁸ The Lord uses the Bondsman to satisfy his desire of dominating his object while the Bondsman submits to the Lord as something higher than himself. The Bondsman follows the orders of the Lord, which allows the Lord to remain sovereign and autonomous. It is important to remember that the Lord is still connected to the Bondsman:

Rather, it [the Lord] is consciousness existing for itself which is mediated with itself through an *other* consciousness, namely, through an other whose essence includes its being synthetically combined with self-sufficient *being*, that is, with thinghood itself.⁵⁹

It is through the Bondsman that the Lord connects to life as well. The Lord does not deal directly with the objective world. Instead, he forces the Bondsman to work within the world for him.⁶⁰

It would seem, then, that the “winner” in this dialectic—the true self-consciousness—is found in the Lord or Master. This is not the case. It is actually the Bondsman that represents the fullest model of self-consciousness.⁶¹ Hegel explains this by appealing to a variety of reasons. First, the Bondsman has some idea of what freedom is while the Lord does not.⁶² Because it sees the Lord as trying to freely relate to objects, the Bondsman has more of a conception of freedom than the Lord himself. Second,

⁵⁷ Redding, 12-3.

⁵⁸ Redding, 13.

⁵⁹ Hegel ¶ 190, 115-16.

⁶⁰ Hegel ¶ 190, 115-16.

⁶¹ Hegel ¶ 193, 117.

⁶² Hegel ¶ 194, 117.

the Bondsman is the self-consciousness that actually has contact with the objective world. In order to be tied to the objective world in the fullest sense, one must live in the world; one must have a picture of oneself in the world doing things. The Lord does not have this picture. Furthermore, the Lord does not progress past the faulty desire model. Because the Lord does not recognize the Bondsman as a self-sufficient self-consciousness, he continues to act as if he is the only sovereign self-conscious subject there is.⁶³ The Bondsman, on the other hand, through working in the objective world, has a fuller conception of life than the Lord. Also, the Bondsman is ultimately more self-sufficient and sovereign than the Lord because the Bondsman negates himself instead of being negated by an outside force, remaining self-determining.⁶⁴

Additionally the Bondsman is ultimately more self-sufficient and sovereign than the Lord because the Bondsman works, and work leads to individuality.⁶⁵ This is because, in working, the Bondsman has a specific function within a more complex structure. In becoming “desire held in check” as Hegel calls it,⁶⁶ the Bondsman has learned to master both the objective world and himself.⁶⁷ In serving the Lord, the Bondsman learns to control his own desires and act on behalf of something higher, leading the Bondsman to become Master or Lord over himself.⁶⁸ It is in this way that the Bondsman is the fullest self-conscious subject. Lastly, because the Bondsman has experienced the fear of death—the fear of complete negation—he can grasp the concept of absolute separation from the objective world, something the Lord cannot do. Through his fear of death and ability to keep his natural desires in check, the Bondsman becomes master over both himself and the world, making him the true self-consciousness.

McDowell’s Heterodox Reading of Hegel’s “Self-Consciousness”

It is extremely important to note here that there is a very big difference between Hegel and Fichte’s theories of self-consciousness. Fichte’s “pure I,” or simple self-consciousness, is a fully

⁶³ Redding, 13-14.

⁶⁴ Burke, 220.

⁶⁵ Hegel ¶ 195, 118.

⁶⁶ Hegel ¶ 195, 118.

⁶⁷ Burke, 220.

⁶⁸ Neuhauser, 51.

independent, self-determining subject. Hegel's self-consciousness, on the other hand, can only become fully self-conscious and fully sovereign through some other self-consciousness. Yet Hegel and Fichte's views become more similar when Hegel's "Self-Consciousness" is read in a specific way. Most Hegelian scholars take the view that the "other" Hegel refers to—the second self-consciousness in the moment of mutual recognition—is literally another person. John McDowell disagrees. In his article "The Apperceptive I and the Empirical Self: Towards a Heterodox reading of 'Lordship and Bondage' in Hegel's *Phenomenology*," McDowell argues that the "other" that self-consciousness confronts is otherness inside itself. McDowell begins his criticism of the conventional reading of "Self-Consciousness" by raising the question of how the relationship of Lord to Bondsman is related to self-consciousness' original goal of sublating the otherness between the subjective and objective.⁶⁹

In his article, McDowell reinterprets the chapter "Self-Consciousness," following as closely to the original text as he can. He explains the first two moments of self-consciousness and finds no problems with the customary reading of them. It is when McDowell comes to the third moment of self-consciousness—that of mutual recognition—that his interpretation differs. Ordinarily, the other self-consciousness Hegel refers to is taken to mean another individual, or a second self-conscious being. McDowell rejects this. The problem he has with this reading of the text lies mainly in the question he asked at the beginning of his critique. According to McDowell, the otherness that must be sublated by the self-conscious subject must be the totality of the objective world.⁷⁰ The "another self-consciousness" that Hegel refers to must be the first of the doubled object of self-consciousness in the desire stage—life. As the object of self-consciousness, McDowell argues, life returns to itself and is then revealed to be consciousness, which is necessarily self-consciousness.⁷¹ The "other" self-consciousness is merely the part of consciousness that is still in the movement of overcoming the

⁶⁹ John McDowell, "The Apperceptive I and the Empirical Self: Towards a Heterodox Reading of 'Lordship and Bondage,'" In *Hegel's Phenomenology*, *The Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 47-8 (2003):5.

⁷⁰ McDowell, 8.

⁷¹ McDowell, 8.

difference between the two moments: “So ‘another’, in ‘another self-consciousness,’ reflects how things seem to consciousness at the stage of its education, not how things actually are.”⁷²

This may at first seem counter-intuitive, but McDowell further explains why he believes the text to read this way. The otherness presented to self-consciousness is not another self-conscious person but the otherness that is that first subject’s life.⁷³ There exists a disconnect between self-consciousness as a subject and the empirical life that that subject leads because self-consciousness wants to see itself as entirely independent from the objective world. It is this life lead in the empirical world, McDowell claims, that becomes revealed as the other “self-consciousness” that the primary self-consciousness must confront. The struggle to the death that Hegel describes in the beginning of the treatise on Lordship and Bondage is not a struggle between two living beings but instead an allegorical struggle of a single self-consciousness to prove its independence from the otherness of the objective world and its own life.⁷⁴ One subject is attempting to rid itself of any connection to the life it lives in the objective world, which has become the otherness that it does not yet recognize is in fact itself.⁷⁵ This is a struggle of life and death for both “subjects” in that self-consciousness is trying to disconnect itself from life, but that life is in fact its own. Killing that life would therefore also kill the self-conscious subject.⁷⁶ As for how McDowell’s conception of self-consciousness fits with the Lord and Bondsman dialectic, he finds no problem. This dialectic is simply a continuation of the allegory used in the fight to the death; the enslaving of another individual who negates itself for fear of death is symbolic of self-consciousness realizing the indispensability of, yet refusal to identify with, a life lived in the empirical world.⁷⁷ Ultimately, both the Lord and Bondsman are part of the same self-consciousness, but it does not yet realize that they both are actually one and the same.

⁷² McDowell, 9.

⁷³ McDowell, 9.

⁷⁴ McDowell, 10.

⁷⁵ McDowell 10.

⁷⁶ McDowell, 10.

⁷⁷ McDowell, 11.

Conclusion

Hegel ends his discussion of the Lord and Bondsman dialectic with the concession that it is the Bondsman in the Lord and Bondsman dialectic of recognition that has the fullest conception of self-consciousness. He makes this claim after going through, in prolific detail, the moments of desire and recognition as well as the life and death struggle between the Lord and Bondsman. Hegel explains that the Bondsman is the true sovereign self-consciousness because he affects negation in himself, keeping his desires in check, and becoming master of himself. In many ways this is not all that different from the Fichtean conception of self-consciousness. Hegel says that the Bondsman is ultimately sovereign because he determines his own negation, effectively remaining self-determining. Fichte himself makes a similar claim in the introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*, that the intellect is self-determining.

Fichte's functionalist self-consciousness is, as Hegel argues, too simplistic and underdeveloped. It does not account for the objective world; it claims to abstract the intellect from the object, which amounts to bad Idealism. Hegel's doctrine of mutual recognition is also faulty. The idea that one cannot become fully self-conscious until recognized by another self-consciousness seems a bit excessive. I am skeptical of the ability of any person to fully recognize another being as self-conscious, at least on a level such as Hegel suggests. That is why I find John McDowell's heterodox reading of Hegel the best explanation of self-consciousness explored in this paper. McDowell's argument that the mutual recognition of Hegel's self-consciousness is not that of two independent beings but of an otherness inside one subject solves the problems I have with both Fichte and Hegel. McDowell's theory accounts for the objectivity that is missing from Fichte's "I = I" self-consciousness while removing the reliance on a second being that caused hesitation towards Hegel's concept of self-consciousness. McDowell presents a happy medium between Fichte and Hegel, and I find it to be the most convincing of the arguments that I have come across.

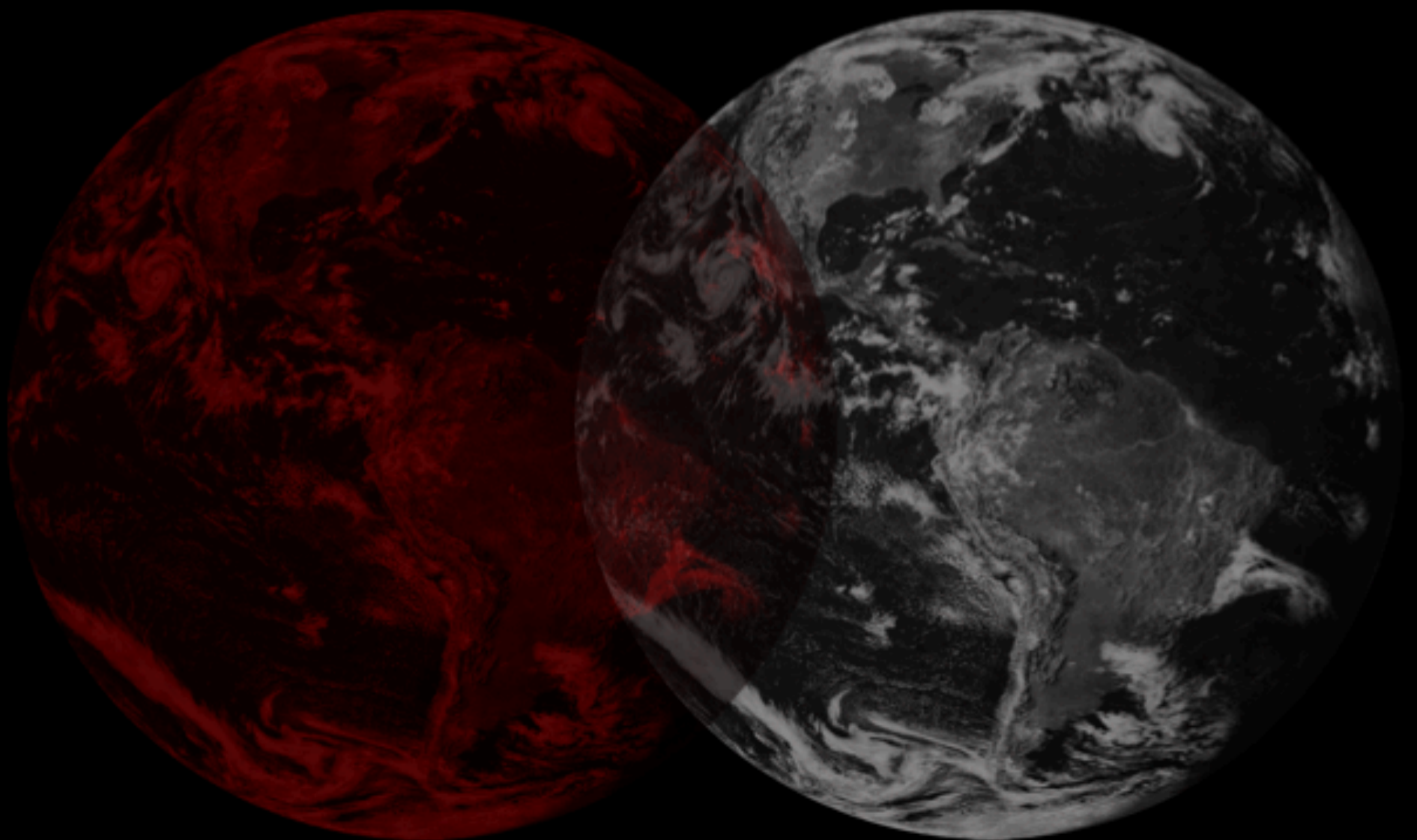
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Rebekah received a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy and English Writing from Loyola University New Orleans. Rebekah graduated summa cum laude with University Honors, Philosophy Honors, and English Honors. Rebekah's plans for the future are to apply to Philosophy graduate programs strong in Philosophy of Mind and Psychology.



**Baptizing 'Water': A
Conventionalist
Challenge for Putnam's
Twin Earth
J.C. Ward, Jr.**



In the “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’,” Hilary Putnam (1975) uses his Twin Earth thought experiment to argue that “‘meanings’ just ain’t in the head” (p. 141). In this paper, I argue that Putnam’s argument is invalid; moreover, strengthening the premises to make the argument valid renders it unsound. The stronger premises required imply that members of baptizing communities can be wrong in a way that conventionalists about meaning—Putnam among them—cannot accept.

I proceed as follows. First, I reconstruct Putnam’s argument, deeming the original to be invalid; then I will show that while Putnam’s argument can be made valid, it cannot be made sound. Second, I offer a thought experiment on baptizing communities to serve as a counterexample to Putnam. Third, I will discuss where Putnam deviates from conventionalism making the counterexample possible. Fourth, I will consider Sterelny’s (1983) defense of Putnam, showing it too suffers from the same counterexample. Lastly, I will conclude by considering and replying to objections.

Putnam’s Argument

Putnam asks us to imagine a Twin Earth, *very much* like Earth except that on Twin Earth, the liquid that English-speaking Twin Earthers call ‘water’ has a complicated chemical structure abbreviated as ‘XYZ’. For the average person the liquid that Twin Earthers call ‘water’ is indistinguishable from what on Earth we call ‘water’, even though on Earth what we call ‘water’ has the chemical composition H_2O . Where Earth’s lakes and snow are called ‘water’ and are H_2O , on Twin Earth, their lakes and snow are called ‘water’ but are XYZ.

Let the language spoken on Twin Earth be called ‘Twin English’. The only difference between the languages is that in English ‘water’ means H_2O , while in Twin English ‘water’ means XYZ. Putnam (1975) asks us to consider the “typical Earthian speaker of English” and his Twin Earth counterpart” (p. 701). We will call the typical Earthian ‘Oscar’ and his counterpart on Twin Earth ‘Twoscar’. Putnam explains: if we asked Oscar for water, he would bring H_2O , whereas Twoscar would bring XYZ.

Now, consider Earth and Twin Earth in 1750—before either substances’ chemical composition is discovered. No one on Earth knew their streams flowed with H_2O ; no one on Twin Earth knew they steeped their tea with XYZ. Putnam asks us to suppose this:

- (1) Oscar and Twoscar have the same psychological state as it relates to 'water' in 1750.

That is, Oscar and Twoscar had identical beliefs associated with 'water', identical dispositions associated with 'water', identical internal deliberations associated with 'water'. He then asserts:

- (2) The extension of the term 'water' was just as much H₂O on Earth in 1750 as in 1950 (p. 141).
- (3) The extension of the term 'water' was just as much XYZ on Twin Earth in 1750 in 1950 (p. 141).

From (2) and (3), Putnam reasons:

- (4) Oscar and Twoscar unbeknownst to them "understood the term 'water' differently in 1750" (p. 141).

Finally, from (1) and (4), he concludes:

- (C) The extension of the term 'water' is not a function of the psychological state of the speaker by itself (p. 141).

Call this the 'Original Argument'. Anticipating objections to (2) and (3), Putnam asks us to suppose that he points to a glass of water and says, "This liquid is called 'water'." He says that this ostensive definition of water presupposes that "the body of liquid I am pointing to bears a certain sameness relation (say, *x is the same liquid as y*, or *x is the same_L as y*) to most of the stuff I and other speakers in my linguistic community have on other occasions called 'water'" (p. 141). Putnam is right to say this is the presupposition of such statements uttered today and likely in 1750 as well. H₂O dominates "most of the stuff" that Oscar and his linguistic community (other English speakers on Earth) call 'water'. This means if Oscar points at a glass of XYZ on Twin Earth and utters "this liquid is called water," Oscar would be wrong.

Nonetheless, the inference from premises (1) and (4) to the conclusion is invalid. These steps, including their premises, speak only of Oscar and Twoscar in 1750, while the conclusion generalizes to 'water' writ large and an unspecified "speaker." Admittedly, Putnam could be using Oscar and Twoscar as individuals whose properties can be generalized without loss; however, despite this not being at all obvious, he never makes this explicit. Thus, everything Putnam says in the premises about Oscar and Twoscar in 1750 could be true, while there still are other cases where the extension of the term 'water' is (in part) a function of *a* speaker's psychological state.

There are two options moving forward to save the argument's validity: either weaken the conclusion or strengthen premises. To consider those options it will be helpful in either case when reconstructing the arguments to have time-flexible Oscars and Twoscars. We need to be able to speak of two people (one on Earth, the other on Twin Earth) who have the same psychological state as it relates to 'water' at their time. Let 'Oscar_{*t*}' name Oscar at time *t* and let 'Twoscar_{*t*}' name Twoscar at time *t*. Thus, in the Original Argument, Putnam is speaking of Oscar₁₇₅₀ and Twoscar₁₇₅₀. To avoid confusion with technicalities, consider the only details that matter: Oscar_{*t*} is a person on Earth at time *t*, Twoscar_{*t*} is a person on Twin Earth at time *t*, and Oscar_{*t*} and Twoscar_{*t*} have the same psychological state as it relates to 'water' at the same time *t*. This will allow us to narrowly tailor our weakened conclusion to the temporal context Putnam's original premises pertains to. As for the option to pursue stronger premises, this notation will allow us to talk about Putnam's premises beyond the 1750 to 1950 comparison and instead consider different time scales, all while maintaining the structure of his argument.

Let us now examine that first option: a weaker conclusion. As mentioned before, the premises of the Original Argument only pertain to Oscar₁₇₅₀ and Twoscar₁₇₅₀. Thus, we can only infer from those premises to the new, weaker conclusion:

(C'') The extension of the term 'water' is *not* a function of the psychological states of Oscar₁₇₅₀ and Twoscar₁₇₅₀ by themselves.

This conclusion seems plausible. (I accept it under certain circumstances discussed in the Objections and Replies.) There is no question Putnam would accept this weaker conclusion; however, he needs the original conclusion to reach his claim that "cut the pie any way you like, 'meanings' just ain't in the *head!*" (p. 141). Thus, we need the stronger premises.

Let us now examine that second option: stronger premises. Since the conclusion of the Original Argument concerns a generalized "speaker," the premises must broaden to support such a generalization, as follows:

(1') For all times *t*, Oscar_{*t*} and Twoscar_{*t*} have the same psychological state as it relates to 'water'.

- (2') For all times t , the extension of the term 'water' was just as much H₂O on Earth at t as in 1950.
- (3') For all times t , the extension of the term 'water' was just as much XYZ on Twin Earth at t in 1950.
- (4') For all times t , Oscar _{t} and Twoscar _{t} understand the term 'water' differently.
- (C) The extension of the term 'water' is not a function of the psychological state of the speaker by itself.

Call this the 'Strong Argument'. I argue: while—contrary to the Original Argument—the Strong Argument *is* valid, it is not sound. I reject (2') and (3'). Since the arguments against (2') on Earth and (3') on Twin Earth are similar, I will focus on (2') to avoid repetition. For (2') to be false, there must be a time t , where the extension of the term 'water' was not H₂O on Earth.

Baptizing 'Water'

Premise (2') has certain unpalatable consequences.

To simplify matters, suppose modern English has been spoken on Earth ever since the beginning of human language. (To complicate matters, suppose that modern English is one link in a chain of languages tracing to the first human language spoken on Earth.) English is not spoken by all first linguistic communities but is spoken by at least one. This English-speaking community is also causally connected to the English-speaking communities we know of today. The language has been passed on to new peoples all the way to those today who speak English. The very first form of this English is not exactly the same as the English spoken today in that some words were not yet coined. We have the word 'automobile', while they did not. Nevertheless, they have all of the terms the actual first linguistic communities had, but in a modern English dialect.

Now, let us consider this English-speaking community when they begin coining terms like 'water'. Imagine that this community baptizes objects as 'water' in a descriptivist manner. Instead of "Let 'water' be *this*!" they pronounce: "Let 'water' be an odorless, colorless, tasteless, potable liquid!" The original baptizing community was certainly unaware of and likely unconcerned with the essence of what they baptize as 'water'—much less a chemical essence.

If while still on Earth the original baptizers were presented a sample of XYZ transported from Putnam's Twin Earth, they would consider their baptism as follows. Is it odorless? Yes. Colorless? Yes. Tasteless? Yes. Potable? Yes. A liquid? Yes. They would conclude, "Why, yes, this is water!"

Despite the baptism of these English-speaking Earthians, Putnam's modified (2') requires that when members of the original Earthian baptizing community gesture towards a sample of XYZ and state "this is water" they are flat-out wrong. Putnam's conclusion requires that those who *coin the term* 'water' be wrong in this way. This is the unpalatable consequence of Putnam's view.

You may say: surely the original baptizers can be wrong in their use of the term they have coined. I agree. Certainly, if one of the original baptizers was in a low visibility environment and were unable to check a sample's colorless-ness and went ahead and called a substance 'water' that did not satisfy their baptism, they indeed would be wrong. To say the baptizers are wrong in this attribution seems perfectly acceptable consequence for a theory of language. Similarly, if a baptizer were to believe themselves to have checked all the conditions of their baptism for 'water' and yet was experiencing a lapse in their sense of smell and taste, then they could misattribute the name 'water' to something else. It would be permissible for a theory to say that the original baptizers are wrong in these cases. Note, however: none of the ways for the original baptizers to be wrong hinge on the essences of anything. They hinge simply on the application of their descriptivist baptism.

Nevertheless, there are clear cases where it would be unacceptable for a theory to count a baptizer wrong in the attribution of their word. Consider one of the initial baptizers. If they baptize in the descriptivist manner above and they have a justified, true belief (and whatever other properties might be required for knowledge) that a particular thing satisfies their description, they simply *cannot* be wrong (in a truth-bearing way) in ascribing the name to that thing. Baptisms are stipulations; they are vacuously true. When the baptizers above pronounce "Let 'water' be an odorless, colorless, tasteless, potable liquid!", they are simply setting out a linguistic convention. In this way the strengthened (2') has this unpalatable consequence; applying (2'), the baptizer is wrong in ascribing 'water' to XYZ.

Therefore, (2') is incompatible with conventionalism about linguistic meaning. This is the well-accepted view that the connection between words and reality is by convention. Putnam (1981) himself takes this position elsewhere saying: a system of representation does "not have an *intrinsic*,

built-in, magical connection with what it represents—a connection independent of how it was caused and what the dispositions of the speaker or thinker are” (p. 5).

Accepting conventionalism, we can reject (2') and also the original conclusion, which requires it for support. The extension of the term 'water' does seem to be a function of the psychological state of the baptizer. And insofar as baptizers are also speakers, the extension of the term 'water' can be the function of the psychological state of a *speaker*. This is one way to cut the pie!

Where Putnam Goes Astray

Where does Putnam go astray? Let us consider where the conflict between Putnam's view and conventionalism actually lies. After offering the Original Argument Putnam (1975) “leans heavily on the work of Saul Kripke” and his notion of rigid designation (p. 148):

Words like “water” have an unnoticed indexical component: “water” is stuff that bears a certain similarity relation to the water *around here*. Water at another time or in another place or even in another possible world has to bear the relation same_L to *our* “water” *in order to be water*. (Putnam 1975, p. 152)

To be clear: conventionalism does not eliminate the possibility for rigid designators. It is up to the baptizers, however. The original baptizers from above very well could have instead asserted something like: “Let 'water' be everything bearing the relation same_L to *this* in every possible world!” while gesturing towards a sample of Earth's H₂O. Setting aside skepticism for the essential properties of natural-kinds for now, let us grant that this sameness relation does, in fact, tag the sample's chemical essence—namely, H₂O. If this is the baptism set out by the original baptizing community, then this use of 'water' does rigidly designate H₂O.

However, Putnam does not engage with (or seem to care for) any historical analysis of baptizing communities and simply insists that 'water' rigidly refers to H₂O. Since the *kind* of baptism is irrelevant to his view of rigid designation, it seems: even if the baptizers did say, “Let 'water' be an odorless, colorless, tasteless, potable liquid!,” Putnam would still maintain that 'water' rigidly designates H₂O. Thus, Putnam's view makes it possible for 'water' to rigidly designate H₂O *unknownst* to the original baptizing community. Even if the original baptizers were descriptivist in their baptism of 'water', Putnam must insist that the meaning of 'water' is rigid to H₂O. This commits

Putnam to something beyond linguistic convention constraining baptizers *contra* conventionalism about linguistic meaning.

We more clearly see Putnam's tension with conventionalism when he considers the application of his view to other natural-kind terms like 'gold'. In "Meaning of 'Meaning'," Putnam (1975) says:

On the view I am advocating, when Archimedes asserted that something was gold (χρυσός) he was not just saying that it had the superficial characteristics of gold ...; he was saying that it had the same general *hidden structure* (the same "essence," so to speak) as any normal piece of local gold. (p. 153)

On the view I am advocating, what Archimedes means by 'χρυσός' is going to hinge on a further examination of the relevant conventions and baptisms. If Archimedes used 'χρυσός' in accordance with a rigid designator baptism, then what Putnam has to say afterwards does seem to follow. If, however, Archimedes used (and meant) the term in accordance with a descriptivist baptism, then he *was* referring to only "superficial characteristics" and *not* "hidden structure"—whether rigid or not.

Nevertheless, Putnam seems unconcerned with this nuance, suggesting he would still demand an understanding of Archimedes' idiolect of 'gold' as a rigid designator and referring to a hidden structure rather than superficial properties, regardless of which convention Archimedes was following.

Sterelny's Grounding Defense of Putnam

Sterelny (1983) seeks to clarify and defend Putnam's theory against common objections like those of Zemach (1976) by focusing on the role of original baptizing communities (or grounders, as he calls them). Thus, insofar as my objection to Putnam pertains to original baptizers Sterelny's project is of utmost relevance. I worry, however, that Sterelny's defense continues Putnam's transgressions against conventionalism.

Consider Sterelny's view of natural-kind terms (NKTs). Sterelny treats ostensive baptisms, e.g., "Let 'water' be *this!*," as paradigm cases but believes there are ways of strengthening (or constraining) those cases to avoid objections. According to Sterelny, NKTs are grounded in relation to their causal powers. In order to ground (or baptize) an NKT one must have some "knowledge about the causal powers of the kind" and "typically ... a cluster of beliefs" (Sterelny 1983, p. 104). The simplest formulation of Sterelny's (1983) view is this:

A predicate “F,” grounded in object *a* with respect to a set of causal powers P1, applies to all objects with the *same structure* as that in *a* responsible for *a*’s having P1 (or most of P1). (p. 112)

Applied to H₂O, the grounders of ‘water’ grounded the term in a sample (or samples) of liquids on Earth believing the substance they were dubbing ‘water’ to have a certain set of causal powers, “a certain causal role, a role in virtue of which water boils at 100°C, is colorless, etc.” (Sterelny 1983, p. 112). How, then, does ‘water’ not refer to XYZ as well since it too bears all those same properties? For Sterelny, ‘water’ tags everything with those properties owing to the same underlying structure as the sample(s) *a*. The extent to which XYZ manifests these properties is due to a *different* underlying molecular structure than H₂O. Since we are only “connect[ed] systematically” with samples of H₂O, ‘water’ tags the underlying structure of H₂O.

How well, then, does Sterelny defend Putnam against the conventionalist critique I have levied? Reconsider the hypothetical original baptizers from the first counterexample. They said: “Let ‘water’ be an odorless, colorless, tasteless, potable liquid!” Fitting into Sterelny’s picture, these original grounders are associating ‘water’ with the set of causal powers P1 = {lacking odor, lacking color, lacking taste, potability}. Presumably, they too have samples of *a*—in this case, H₂O—that they appropriately associate with P1. In this case, the grounders do not make explicit Sterelny’s point about ‘water’ tagging the underlying structure of *a*. Rather for these grounders the extension of ‘water’ picks out odorless, colorless, tasteless potable liquids, without regard to underlying structures. Would Sterelny, then, still insist that their grounding of ‘water’ tag *a*’s underlying structure? Would Sterelny (like Putnam) insist that *unknownst* to the baptizers their term ‘water’ refers to objects in the world differently from what their baptism makes explicit? To the extent that this is the case Sterelny (like Putnam) is committed to something beyond linguistic convention constraining grounders *contra* conventionalism about linguistic meaning.

The grounding in my thought experiment does pick out XYZ as part of the extension of ‘water’ since it lacks the caveat about structural sameness. As shown before, due to conventionalism these original grounders cannot be wrong in using ‘water’ to describe XYZ since it is in accordance with their baptism. Thus, Sterelny still leaves Putnam defenseless against the original baptizers

counterexample motivated by conventionalism. Sterelny makes the same error as Putnam just with greater detail.

Sterelny (1983) notably empowers baptizers more than Putnam, saying “our semantic theory links P1 to ‘F’ because the grounder did” and later, “P1 ... only [includes] the powers those who ground the term link with F-ness” (p. 105). Nevertheless, the original baptizers counterexample still affects Sterelny. Where, then, does Sterelny go astray? All while being deferential to original baptizers, Sterelny never clarifies to what extent grounders are cognizant of the full *scope* of their grounding. While Sterelny’s view does clearly require grounders to be cognizant of the batch of casual powers P1 they associate with “F,” it does not require that grounders be cognizant that their grounding is tagging the *structure* that brings about P1 in the substances they have contact with. This is precisely the gap the conventionalist critique is able to exploit.

Some may worry that the objection I have raised makes the same mistake Sterelny (1983) alleges against Zemach: ‘water’ “ceases to be an NKT” (p. 100). The worry goes: original grounders ought to be restricted in their ability to set conventions regarding NKTs. If ‘water’ is an NKT, then the term better refer to things that satisfy our conception of natural kinds. There is no general violation of conventionalism; NKTs are a special type of term, so they are reasonably constrained.

I concede that last point, but this does not mean our theory of NKTs can simply ignore conventionalism. It seems true that if ‘water’ picked out both H₂O and XYZ, it would no longer be an NKT. Nevertheless, if there were descriptivist baptisms that had this consequence because they made no reference to underlying structure, these baptisms would still clearly be related to and connected to our use of ‘water’ today as an NKT. While Sterelny’s view seems well-equipped to account for the coinage of contemporary NKTs, it nevertheless has limitations when it comes to terms with longer histories prior to modern science. A more robust view of NKTs informed by conventionalism ought to have a smoother picture accommodating such imperfect transitions. All of this said, a full response to this worry (and Sterelny generally) may involve a further examination of NKTs that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

So far it has been argued that Putnam's Original Argument is logically insufficient in reaching its conclusion; it is invalid. Some of the premises of the valid Strong Argument, however, have implications which counter conventionalism about linguistic meaning. Putnam insists on rigid and essentialist baptisms in a way that constrains the ability of baptizers to set out linguistic conventions in accordance with conventionalism. Furthermore, attempts to defend and clarify Putnam by Sterelny fail the conventionalist challenge. I now close by considering a couple of general objections.

First, one of the great virtues of Putnam's view is the rigidity it provides our scientific terms. "One of the advantages of a causal theory is its ability to give an account of reference stability through theory change and belief change" (Sterelny 1983, p. 106). Pinning scientific terms, such as 'water', to an essence has great benefits. As science advances, old hypotheses are replaced by new hypotheses; old descriptions are replaced by new descriptions. If our scientific terms mapped onto descriptions, we would be out of luck! The very meaning of our words would unhelpfully fluctuate with scientific progress.

I concede (and surely accept) all of this. Nevertheless, I do not think we are forced to choose between rigid scientific terms and conventionalism. As discussed before, the conventions themselves in some cases may be rigid. One can set out a rigid baptism using a description, since a baptizer may say, while gesturing at a glass of H₂O, "Let 'water' be all the liquids with the same (chemical) essence as this liquid!" Applying this convention, the term 'water' is rigid and fixed as Putnam suggests to a chemical essence. We would now only need to be clear which convention we are following.

This is precisely why I am comfortable accepting the premises of the Original Argument and the narrowed conclusion (C'') under *certain* circumstances. If Oscar and Twoscar understand 'water' as marking an essence, rather than a bundle of descriptions, they are likely using something like the rigid convention laid out immediately above, rather than the descriptivist convention of the first linguistic communities. This is true even if they are unaware of the *particular* chemical essences in question.

Second, some may worry the thought experiment concerning original baptizing communities is particularly detached from history and reality in such a way that it ought to have no bearing on our

philosophy of language. Actual baptizers are far more likely to be ambiguous in their baptisms. They do not rattle off descriptivist properties, but instead say “Let *this* be called ‘water’!” while gesturing towards a sample. They baptize ambiguously and demonstratively.

For starters, I would contend that our thought experiments need not conform to history or reality in order to expose flaws in a view by exploiting conceptual gaps. Philosophers (and certainly Putnam among them) should be no stranger to obscure thought experiments. A descriptivist baptism is most certainly logically possible; thus, the unpalatable consequence—a rejection of conventionalism—stands to bear.

Further, the objection depends on a strictly empirical question. How were these early baptisms performed? Were they descriptivist or referentialist, were they essentialist or not, were they Sterelnyian in spirit? While I do not have the answer, it is worth noting that early baptizers in question would have lived millennia before modern science and chemistry. Nevertheless, philosophically informed research in historic linguistics and the history of science is ultimately required to evaluate these questions. Such a research program would investigate the history of essentialism well before, not only the development of modern chemistry, but also our earliest philosophical texts on essentialism.

Finally, the ambiguous, demonstrative baptism, i.e., “Let *this* be called ‘water’!”, requires further interrogation outside this paper. While I do not think Putnam’s (nor Sterelny’s) analysis works perfectly for the ambiguous case, such an issue requires closer attention that is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, as defended above the logical possibility of the descriptivist baptism is sufficient in resisting Putnam (and his defenders).

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**What, if anything, of
philosophical value, can
we take from Weil's
work on attention?**

Mathilde Nielsen



Introduction

I shall in this essay argue that we can extract a philosophical value from Weil's work on attention if we see her work as an instruction⁷⁸ to philosophy as a praxis. This shall be demonstrated in the following manner: first, I outline Weil's concept of attention and contrast it with her concept of force as this is presented in Weil's *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force*. Second, I consider and settle objections to how Weil's concept of 'attention' is of philosophical value. I conclude that we can extract a philosophical value from Weil's work on attention which instructs and preserves philosophy as an intellectual endeavour. Finally, I suggest along with Bourgault (2017, 270) and many others that attention as an instructive practice is particularly valuable in the context in which this essay is written and read⁷⁹. In doing so, I take on a practical approach, focusing entirely on philosophy as a praxis and Weil's work on the concept of attention as an instruction to this praxis. The thesis I set out to defend is this: Weil's work of attention has a philosophical value of a practical kind: it instructs and preserves philosophy as an intellectual praxis. On this practical approach, I take any instruction which improves, develops, or protects this praxis to be of philosophical value and any instruction which hinders, threatens, or corrupts it to be of no philosophical value. For instance, I take censorship to be of no philosophical value. However, on a non-practical approach censorship might indeed be of philosophical value because philosophical analyses which could contribute to philosophy as an intellectual discipline could be made on the concept of censorship. However, in this essay, I focus on the concept of attention as an instruction. More specifically, I focus on how it instructs the philosophical agent in her intellectual pursuit of truth, thus focusing on contemplation⁸⁰ and the relationship to truth. In sum, I argue that attention is philosophically valuable as an instructive practice that preserves philosophy as an intellectual endeavour since "intelligence [...is] largely a matter of attention" (Bourgault 2017, 255-6) and since "attention can reveal" (Snively 2017, 112).

1. Attention

I understand Weil's concept of attention to be a mental practice in which an agent refrains from letting her will or desires be projected onto the object of her thought in order that the object can penetrate the agent's thought rather than the agent's will or desires penetrate the object (thereby

⁷⁸ A 'prescription rather than a description' (Snively 2017, 109)

⁷⁹ A "neo-liberal temporal regim[e]" (Rozelle-Stone 2017, 169)

⁸⁰ I take contemplation to be important if not crucial to philosophical enquiry, 'attention' to be preserving of and instructive for contemplation, and 'force' obstructive to it.

producing a misconception of it) (WFG 62, 112-113), (Snively 2017, 110). The aim⁸¹ of this practice is then a “suspended, patient openness” relying on the agent renouncing her will in order to see the object in its purest form⁸² (Jesson 2017, 158). To reach this state of patient openness in which the agent can contemplate the object of her thought, attention is practised by quietly⁸³ making oneself open to the world and thereby receptive to it (WFG 50, 68-9, 96). If practised correctly, attention can give the agent a better chance of understanding the world⁸⁴, since with it the agent “can penetrate the kingdom of truth reserved for genius” (WFG 64) and ‘acknowledge [her] cognitive limits’ (Rozelle-Stone 2017, 186⁸⁵). Despite its seemingly ‘passive tunes’, attention is not passivity. Rather, it is a “negative effort” or a refraining from doing something (WFG 111). For instance, when Weil instructs us to “suspend thought” (WFG 111), she is not instructing us to do nothing, but to do something, namely, to suspend something. Attention is then a form of “inactive action” (GG 45), whereby the agent makes one effort to not make another effort. The best example of attention successfully employed is Weil herself. Compared to her brother she was no genius⁸⁶, but with attention, she could acknowledge her cognitive limitations and cross these and enter the same “kingdom” as him (WFG 64), (Bourgault 2017, 261). Importantly, Weil argues that it was not her alone who could or can use attention in this way, but that it was a capacity available to “any individual who desires truth” (Bourgault 2017, 261). It is this understanding of Weil’s concept of attention that I argue⁸⁷ is of philosophical value because it instructs philosophy the praxis in way that preserves it and particularly so today. In fact, it does so in at least two senses. First, it allows any relevantly interested individual access to “the kingdom of truth” and second, it allows privileged access, because the attentive agent, unlike the willing or forcing agent, receives the object of contemplation unaltered or more perfect (Jesson 2017, 160).

This is seen in the example of a girl solving an arithmetic problem (Thomas 2020, 150). According to Weil, “if she fails, the error bears the mark of her personality” whereas if she succeeds “her person is absent from the whole operation” (Weil 2015, 108). Attention then is a practice that

⁸¹ Ultimately, attention is aimed at prayer and religious revelation, yet it can be practised for non-religious ends as well (GG 59, 132), (Snively 2017, 109, 112-3, 120) and is instructive “of all human life, philosophical life included” (Snively 2017, 122).

⁸² i.e., without prejudices, will, desires, etc. smudging it.

⁸³ She does not utter ‘I will make myself open’ whether publicly, privately, or entirely privately (in her mind).

⁸⁴ And whatever it contains (people, thoughts, objects, etc.)

⁸⁵ Thus bringing to mind the motivation for Locke’s Essay that men did not “exten[d] their Enquiries beyond their Capacities” (Locke, Essay, I, 1, 7, 47). Such connections stress that while Weil’s philosophy might be “subterranean” it is philosophy nonetheless (Thomas 2020, 146).

⁸⁶ Weil’s own verdict (WFG, 38-39, 64)

⁸⁷ Along with Bourgault and Rancière (Bourgault 2017, 261)

instructs, preserves, and supports philosophical praxis, since when practised correctly, it gives the agent the capacity “to seize hold of its object [of thought]” (McCullough 2017, 303) in a clear view that something like force does not. Force is not the opposite of attention⁸⁸, but an unpreferable alternative to it. Force corrupts, obstructs and ultimately “kill[s]” the ability to think (Weil 2007, 379-80, 386, 388-90). For instance, Weil writes that “the possessor of force” lacks “the tiny interval that is reflection” (Weil 2007, 380) and that it is only when Hector is stripped of “force, [that] he discovers” (Weil 2007, 384). Compare this to attention which enables “a refined and honest perception of what is really the case” (Murdoch 1970, 37), (WFG 68-9) and it becomes apparent that attention preserves philosophical praxis whereas force threatens it.

I now turn to consider two sets of concerns that might be made to my argument that Weil’s concept of attention is valuable as an instruction to the praxis of philosophy. First, I consider a set of Sartrean concerns that attention as instruction is confused and inauspicious. Second, I consider the objection that Weil’s suspicion of intellect and language effectively makes philosophy as a praxis impossible.

2. Sartrean Concerns

2.1. According to Murdoch, someone sympathetic to Sartre’s philosophy will favour those instructions that instruct and involve “a solitary, omnipotent, will” and connect “the meaning and being of action with the publicly observable” (Murdoch 1970, 8-9). The Sartrean will accordingly be antipathetic to Weil’s instruction since Weil specifically instructs that when paying attention, the agent should not aim at a solution (WFG 112-3, 196). This does not sound promising to the Sartrean. Where Weil’s instruction is ambiguous, Sartre’s is straightforward¹²: “every action must be intentional; each action must, in fact, have an end” (Sartre 2001, 181). Prima facie, Sartre’s instruction sounds preferable to Weil’s because it includes an intentional will and is less ambiguous. Indeed, why prefer an ambiguous notion (Weil’s) to an unambiguous one (Sartre’s)?

⁸⁸ This is reserved for ‘contempt’ (Weil 1973, 153) ¹² Not simple.

2.2. To this concern, I would concede that Weil's instruction is not as clear as Sartre's. However, I would argue that its lack of clarity does not provide us with any good reason for preferring Sartre's instruction to Weil's, because if we follow Weil's instruction, then not only will a solution eventually offer itself, but a more perfect solution will do so (recall the girl and the arithmetic problem)(Weil 2015, 108). According to Weil, not paying attention leads to rushed decisions which in turn lead to faulty outcomes (Weil 2007, 388). That, however, might sound like an obvious point. Who would deny that rushed decision-making is at a higher risk of producing non-optimal outcomes than a decision-making process that has not been rushed? No one would deny this. Yet, the objection misses the point and thereby illustrates Weil's point rather nicely: Weil is not making the obvious point objected to above, but the more radical⁸⁹ point that whenever we try to find solutions by beginning to look for solutions rather than to look at the problem⁹⁰ in need of a solution, we misconceive the problem and therefore end up offering misguided solutions. If we start by looking at what we can do, as Sartre instructs (Sartre 1946, 33), then we start by bringing 'the mark of our personality into the problem' and thus we start by aiming at failure. Contra Sartre, Weil's work instructs us to put ourselves as problem-solvers out of focus and the very problem back into focus⁹¹(GG 49). Finally, I suggest that we prefer Weil's instruction to Sartre's because not only does following Weil's instruction shift the problem back into focus⁹², but it guarantees us that if we follow it then a solution will offer itself to us (Murdoch 1970, 36), (WFG 106), (GG 48). Since if we pay attention, then we can gain a full understanding of a problem and its needs, and when we have such an understanding, we cannot help but try to satisfy these needs⁹³. For Weil, if one pays "the fullest possible attention" to a problem, seeing the problem in full, then 'one sees the problem which one has obligations to' (WFG 73-4). In short, where x is 'needs' action follows from attention, because attention to x leads to the acknowledgement of x which entails obedience to satisfy x.

⁸⁹ In the original sense of radix.

⁹⁰ Whether it be ethical or arithmetical.

⁹¹ Not to mention how Weil would object to the objection's squeaking 'low-cost-high-profit' ring.

⁹² Or least keeping it there.

⁹³ This is connected to Weil's theology and her understanding of the concepts of 'affliction', 'obedience', and 'necessity' (GG 43-51, 80-85)

- 2.3. Nevertheless, the Sartrean might press on, attention as instruction remains unclear. How do you do it? How do you ‘open yourself’? Weil is far from presenting a clear method. Granted that she offers the method of grace and adds that “[g]race alone can do it” (GG 10). Yet, ‘be graceful’ is still unclear and uninformative. What does it mean?
- 2.4. To understand what it means I refer to Weillienne metaphysics and psychology in which grace and gravity are the primary principles and each other’s opposite (GG 1). Crudely put, gravity pulls you down towards your baser instincts e.g., selfishness whereas grace pulls you up towards the more graceful, ideal, and ethically preferable e.g., self-effacement. Grace, however, is not the method by which you practice or achieve attention. On the contrary, “attention properly directed lifts you up” (Snively 2017, 112), that is, attention is the method or practice through which you can receive grace. Being graceful means practising self-effacement and using attention to shift yourself out of focus and the problem back into focus. Being graceful means not letting oneself be pulled down by gravity to one’s baser instincts. Yet, this hardly satisfies the Sartrean demand for clarity. To satisfy it, I think Weil would agree to the following: imagine a soldier who has not eaten for three days and finally comes in possession of a loaf of bread. Just as she is about to set her teeth into it, she sees a child and instantly recognizes the wild look in her eyes: the child has starved as well. Here the soldier could be pulled by gravity towards egoism: she could devour the bread herself or she could, as she should, pay attention to the child’s eyes’ wild look, be graceful⁹⁴ and share the bread with her, even though eating all of it herself would provide her with more satisfaction. In this case, ‘be graceful’ means sharing the bread.
- 2.5. Say the Sartrean agreed to this level of clarity. He might still complain that Weil’s instruction is unattractive, not because it is unclear, but because it is inauspicious. If we follow Weil’s instruction and pay attention, which is done only at great pains, as is clear from the example with the soldier, Weil admits that despite these pains we cannot be sure to receive grace because “[i]t is not in our power to travel in a vertical direction” (WFG 36). Why, then, go through these

⁹⁴ And in this order precisely. She first pays attention, then she is graceful. ⁹⁵ Indeed, they are given to the agent not taken or invented the agent.

pains, which Weil makes sure to stress are many and severe, if the promise of success is not even made?

2.6. To which Weil would reply that if we “look heavenward for a long time, God comes and takes us up” (WFG 36). That is, just as the solution to the problem will offer itself if we patiently pay attention, so too grace will be given. Weil should grant the Sartrean that solutions, as well as grace, are given in a different manner¹⁹ and perhaps later than the Sartrean would prefer. Yet, I suggest that the Sartrean should still prefer Weil’s instruction to Sartre’s, that is, he should go through the pains and put himself in a position where he can receive grace because the alternative to it (to be pulled down by gravity and use force or, what Murdoch calls Sartre’s “giddy empty will” (Murdoch 1970, 35)) is worse: he would become a thing rather than a human being: since force per Weillienne definition “is that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing” (Weil 2007, 378).

2.7. Thus, I reject the Sartrean concerns that attention as instruction is unclear and inauspicious to an extent that should make it unpreferable to the philosopher or indeed invaluable to philosophy. I now turn to consider the concern of whether philosophy can even be done from contemplation or this “suspended, patient openness” that Weil instructs us to aim for.

3. A Practical Concern

3.1. In part, practising attention is avoiding the use of intellect and language, since “the intellect and its expression in language [...] obscures our relationship to truth” (Thomas 2020, 152), (WFG 72). However, the somewhat obvious objection could run, how does one do philosophy without the use of intellect and language? Arguably, intellect and language are substantial parts of doing philosophy, i.e., arguing points, building up dialectics, etc. Whilst philosophy might be present in different literary genres⁹⁵ it is still manifested in language. Indeed, in Weil’s view, this very essay is not philosophy given its dialectic form, language, and intellect²¹ (Thomas 2020, 150).

⁹⁵ Arguably in poetics. At the very least, essays may vary across institutions, publishing houses, etc. ²¹ If I may be so bold.

3.2. To which I would reply that first, it is indeed arguable that Weil would not think that this essay is philosophy (Snively 2017, 114). Yet, to concede that “[an essay] is about philosophy, but it is not philosophy” does not exhaust Weil’s point (Snively 2017, 114). Instead, I suggest that Weil is making a more delicate point than the one objected to (i.e., that philosophy either takes place with or without language and intellect). Weil is not arguing that there is no room for intellect and language in our pursuit of truth. Rather, she is arguing that we should listen before we speak, receive truth rather than construct it and in doing so obstruct it (Weil 2015, 108). The first point is that if we listen before we speak, we might receive information otherwise unavailable to us. This rather obscure point becomes clearer when Handke writes that it is when we listen before speaking that we might experience that “the world narrates itself [...] absolutely without words, to [us]” (Rozelle-Stone 2017, 177). In other words, refraining from expressing ourselves in the language in which we usually express ourselves makes us receptive to information mediated in other languages. The second point, that we should receive truth rather than construct, it might not suit the secular reader too well. If so, I suggest that he takes Weil to say the following: the answer is already there. You do not have to intervene with your intellect to make up an answer. Rather, you should pay closer attention to your problem. Understanding it fully entails understanding what it needs and when you understand what it needs, you have received your solution from the problem rather than from yourself. On the final point of the intellect, however, Weil does bite a bit into the bullet. Weil is critical of the tasks that we assign to the intellect⁹⁶, yet she is not arguing that we should sign off intellect – only that we reassign it. “The intelligence has nothing to discover, it has only to clear the ground” (GG 13). The intellect should serve the practice of attention, its efforts should be negative, and we should prefer this reassignment since it is attentive reception that makes wisdom available to us (Thomas 2020, 152) for it is “the groundwork of our decision-making” (Murdoch 1970, 36).

⁹⁶ Intervening rather than receiving

Conclusion

I have thus argued that we can extract some philosophical value from Weil's work on attention and that this philosophical value is a preserving and instructive kind, in short, a practical kind. It is instructive because it tells us which mental practice (attention) is furthering for contemplation⁹⁷ and which is not (force) and how to obtain and avoid each. It is preserving because having such work available to us provides us with a language for talking about contemplation, where it prospers and where it withers, and methods for ensuring its prosperity and avoiding its withering. Finally, I suggest that since much philosophical enquiry today takes place in "neo-liberal temporal regimes²⁴" (Rozelle-Stone 2017, 169) where contemplation is at a particularly high risk of withering, why Weil's work on attention is of an increased philosophical value.

⁹⁷ This "suspended, patient openness" in which the proper solutions are received. ²⁴For instance, London universities.

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Mathilde Victoria Prietzel Nielsen is a 2023 graduate of King's College London with a Bachelor of Arts degree in philosophy. Mathilde's research interests include continental philosophy, aesthetics, virtue ethics, phenomenology, and philosophy that intersects with literature. Mathilde's dissertation (presented at Warwick Continental Philosophy Undergraduate Conference 2023) focused on the late Heideggerian notion of dwelling read through the work of Danish poet Inger Christensen. Outside Sapere Aude, Mathilde has published in DANSK Magazine and Dagbladet Information and Kulturo. Finally, Mathilde has participated in King's College London's Undergraduate Research Fellowship and hopes to pursue an MPhil in King's Philosophy Department.



