To Dr. RONALD E. HUSTWIT, who has dedicated a long and admirable career to raising multiple generations of students at Wooster in the spirit of Philosophy

"Dare to know," wrote Horace, "begin!"—and wait not that the world should cease to become something other than it is. *Sapere aude, incipe!*

These pithy imperatives arrived three centuries too late for poor old Socrates, who gladly took the hemlock out of irreverence for those who—deceived by the world of appearances—thought themselves to possess knowledge of reality. These were the real fools, said he. "Accept that one should have no knowledge of what is ultimately real," a cognitively divided Socrates would say, "but go outside, ask questions, and pursue it nonetheless."

At the same time, they were not too late for Immanuel Kant, who emphasized anew the courage to escape one's own ignorance, for which no one but oneself is responsible. At the eve of a 19th century teeming with promises for science and technology, in the essay *What is Enlightenment?* in which the phrase "sapere aude" is most notably used, he called for "man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity."
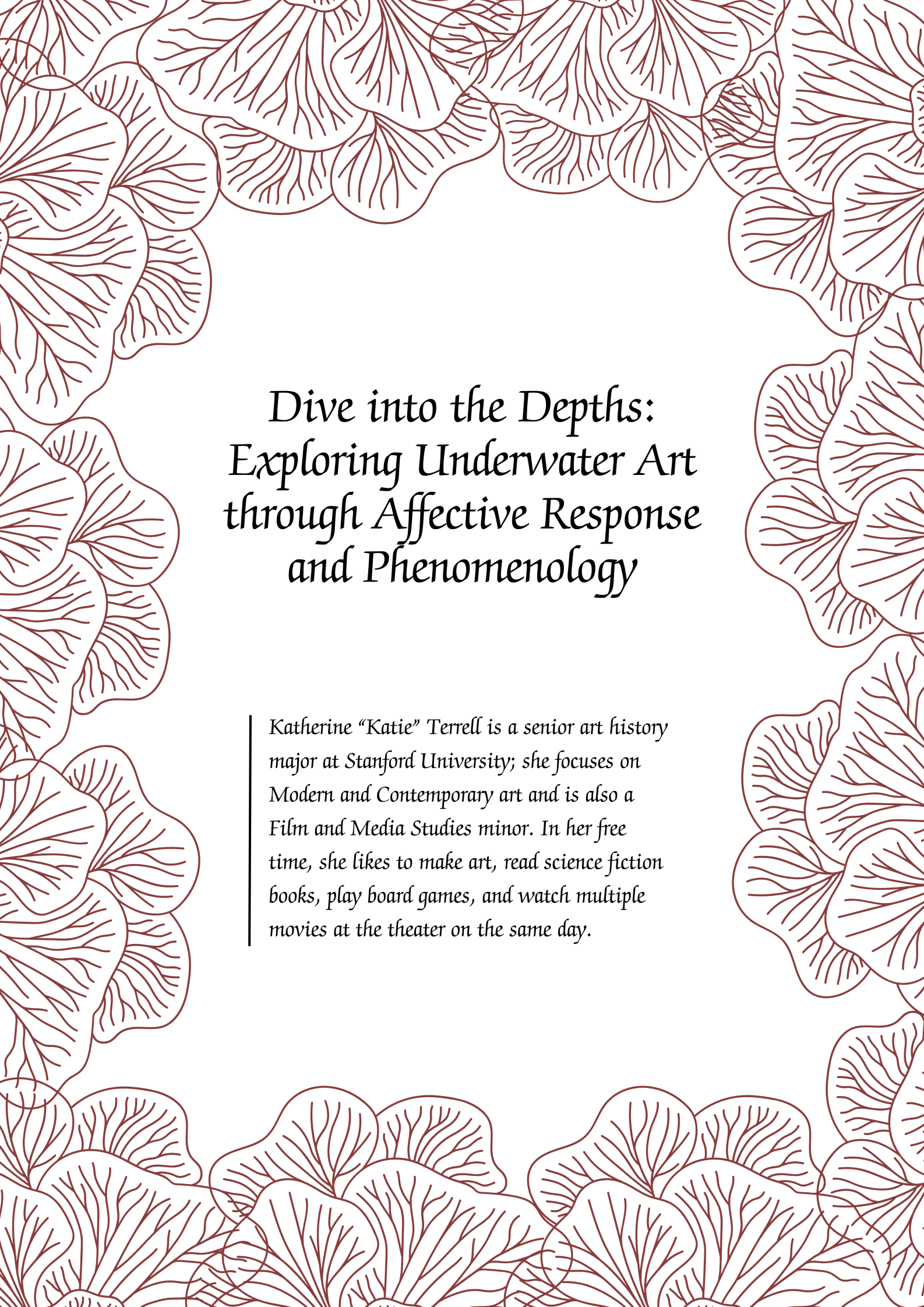
It would lastly be remiss not to mention how this notion was re-echoed by Michel Foucault, who emphasized the dual aspects of the Enlightenment, viz., "both as a process in which men participate collectively and as an act of courage to be accomplished personally."

These two hopes—of a collaborative spirit of reflection, and of a personal courage to explore one's own deeply held beliefs—constitute the mission of *Sapere Aude*, the Undergraduate Journal of Philosophy at the College of Wooster since 2007. They are further upheld, in the judgment of this year's editors, by the five articles selected for publication and their authors. It is our hope that this volume will be thought-provoking and enjoyable for the audience of the journal.

On behalf of our editors,
Nam Son
Editor-in-Chief

Dive into the Depths: Exploring Underwater Art through Affective Response and Phenomenology

Katherine "Katie" Terrell is a senior art history major at Stanford University; she focuses on Modern and Contemporary art and is also a Film and Media Studies minor. In her free time, she likes to make art, read science fiction books, play board games, and watch multiple movies at the theater on the same day.

Don't hold your breath.

With the press of a button, you slowly begin to sink into a much darker world. A cold world. One where breathing is not as easy; it's regulated by the piece of plastic in your mouth, which is attached to thin tubes leading to a large tank on your back. The only thing keeping you alive is that tank and the measure on your waist of how much air you have remaining. Now, you're hyper-aware of your breathing, something you're rarely aware of on land. The faster you breathe, the quicker you'll run out of air. The faster you move, the more oxygen you use (and once again), the faster you'll run out of air. Surrounding you is a thick liquid with higher resistance; it takes more effort to move quickly, so you're better off with slow, decisive movements. As you sink into the water, you watch as the surface slowly fades until it's further, further, and then . . . gone. The first dive is both exhilarating and terrifying. Once you realize you're okay and totally not dying, the underwater world is stunningly beautiful. You begin to discover why so many artists (in various media) have depicted this world that's so different from our own.

Underwater art is a significantly overlooked area of art historical research. As a niche subject, thinking about Underwater art in terms of philosophical ideas can provide a framework for understanding the significance of the art form. This way of understanding the art offers one way of contextualizing it within a broader historical context, which can be especially beneficial for niche subjects that don't fit into the art canon. Since the art is actually crafted under the waves, two philosophical ideas become essential for understanding Underwater art: affective response and phenomenology.

But what is Underwater art?

When considering the category of Underwater art, it's essential to distinguish between art that was created of the underwater, and art that was *crafted* underwater. This essay focuses on art crafted underwater. If you haven't heard of this art historical niche, you're not alone. The traditional art historical narratives prioritize the

classification of art within types and established "schools." Since very few artists have traveled deep beneath the waves to create art below the surface, Underwater art is a unique and tiny category.

a a windows.
b b b b B B weights.
c air-tube.
d level of the water inside the bell.
e boat.
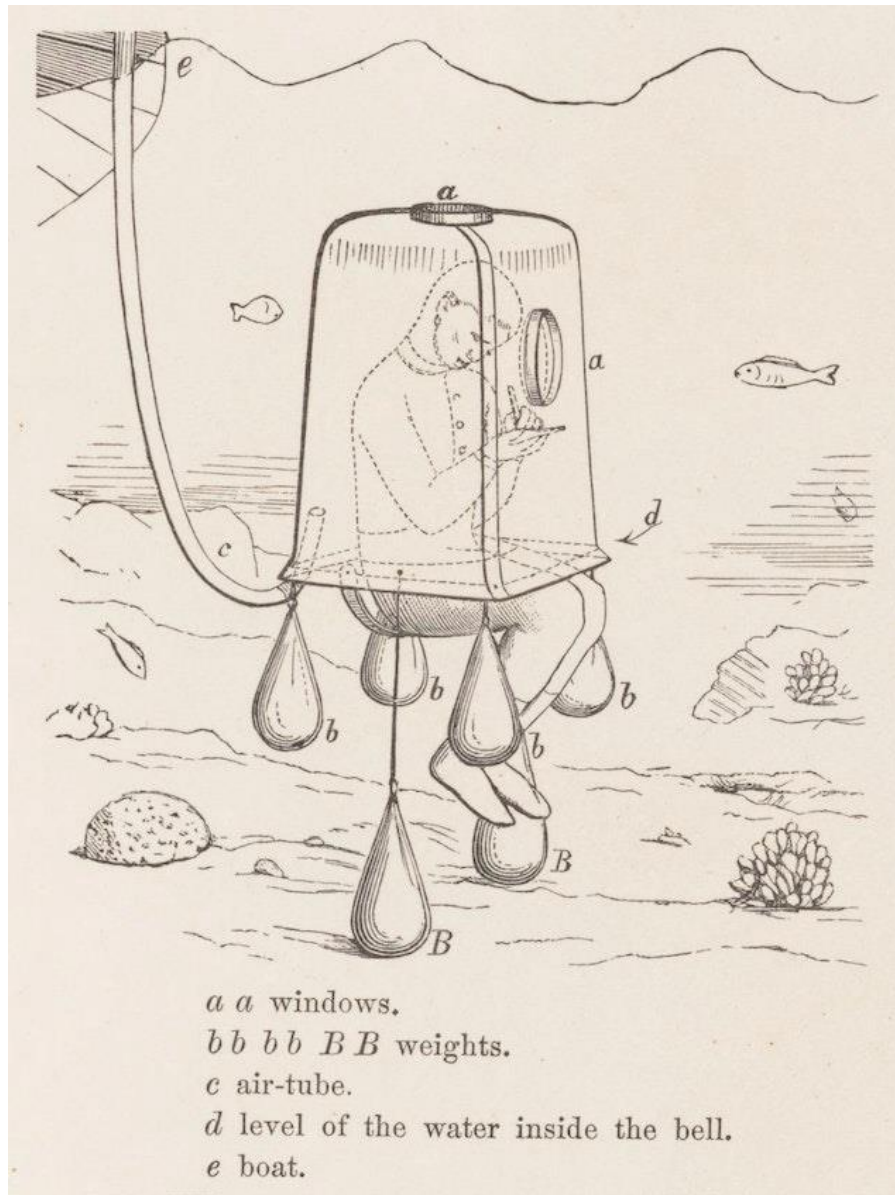
[*Figure 1*. Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez, the diving bell, from *Sketches*, 1867.]

Moreover, as these artists are separated by vast stretches of time, this contributes to their marginalization. It's also worth noting that since this subject is rarely discussed, there's no simple name for it. It could be called sub-marine art, diving art, or, as *Scientific American*

suggested in the early 1900s, "undersea-landscapist."[1] Arguably, any of the proposed titles would work as they emphasize the essential underwater aspect of the artistic creation process. For this essay, I'll be sticking with Underwater art, since that feels the most straightforward.
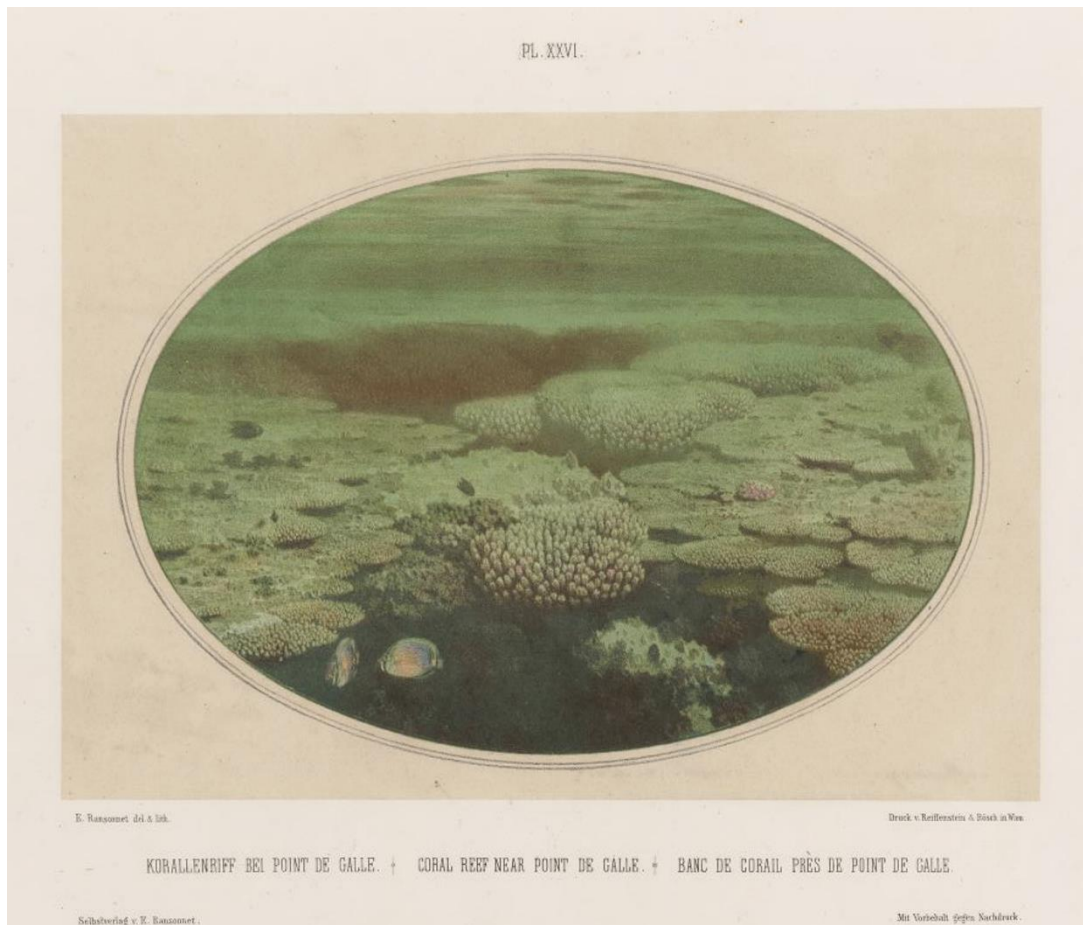
[*Figure 2.* Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez, lithograph made from colored pencil sketches from *Sketches,* 1867.]

As a brief overview of this field, it began in the 1800s with Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez, the first artist to sketch underwater, doing so in a diving bell![2] This structure encloses a person in a small space while pumping air in from the surface. (See Figure 1.) The bell offers

[1] "Painting Pictures Under the Sea," *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*, June 18, 1922.
[2] Melissa McCarthy, "En Pleine Mer: The Underwater Landscapes of Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez." *Public Domain Review.* Accessed December 10, 2023.

the viewer a tiny glimpse (through a small window) of the underwater world. Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez, inside his aquatic cocoon, created sketches of what he saw. Afterward, he returned to the surface with the sketches and created oil paintings in his studio. His first images were published as lithographs in the book *Reise von Kairo nach Tor zu den Korallenbänken des Rothen Meeres* (Journey from Cairo to Tor to the Coral Banks of the Red Sea).[3] The diving bell (of the 1800s) is unique compared to the subsequent diving apparatuses since the bell could only be used at shallower depths.[4] And because of the depth, there's a horizon line present in the created images, much like you'd find in traditional fine art. (See Figure 2.)

After Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez, another Underwater painter entered the scene: Zarh Pritchard. Although he was not the first to create Underwater art, he was the first to paint underwater while wearing a diving suit. (See Figure 3.) But before that, he spent years free diving for his artistic creations, where he would hold his breath, dive deep underwater, and then swim to the surface to create his art from the memory of what he saw. "After having made several descents in this manner, he completes a sketch and takes sufficient color notes to enable him to finish his picture in the studio."[5] Eventually, he gained access to a diving suit, which radically changed his process of artistic creation. Because of the diving suit, Zarh Pritchard could stay beneath the surface for an extended period and create (and finish) the art underneath the surface. As described by the *Arizona Republican*, "Mr. Pritchard left his painting under water until such time as it was finished."[6] Notably, compared with Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez, linear perspective is not present in Pritchard's work; this is likely because Pritchard submerged deeper

---

[3] Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez, *Sketches of the Inhabitants, Animal Life, and Vegetation in the Lowlands and High Mountains of Ceylon: As Well as of the Submarine Scenery near the Coast, Taken from a Diving Bell* (Vienna: Robert Hardwicke, 1867).

[4] John L. Phillips, *The Bends: Compressed Air in the History of Science, Diving, and Engineering* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

[5] Robert H. Moulton, "A Painter Under the Sea," *The Bellman* 24, no. 599 (June 22, 1918): 683–85.

[6] "Artist Paints Under Water," *Arizona Republican*, September 8, 1921.

ZARH PRITCHARD PRÊT A PLONGER.
(Lagune de Papeete, Tahiti).
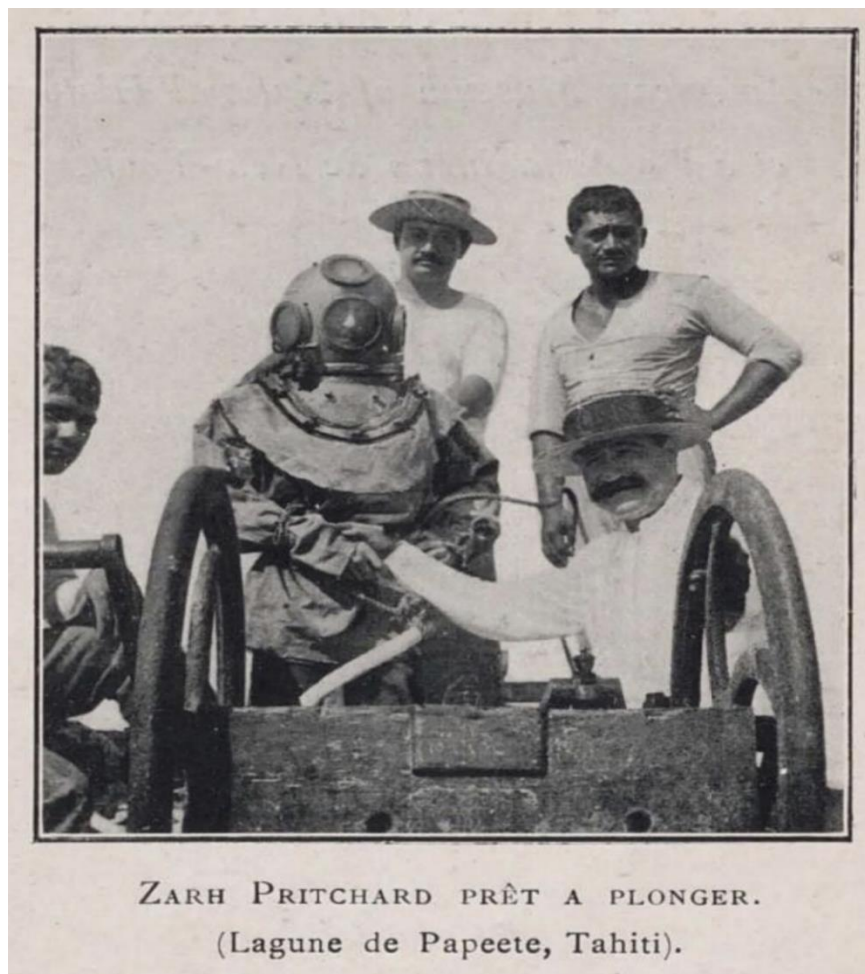
[*Figure 3*. Image of Zarh Pritchard in his diving suit from Galerie Georges Petit. "Exposition de peintures sous-marines par Zarh Pritchard." *Bibliothèque de l'Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art,* collections Jacques Doucet, 1921.]

than von Ransonnet-Villez. Unlike on land, where distance is gauged naturally, the underwater world presents difficulties due to poor visibility.[7] Underwater conditions also contribute to the tonal contrast in Pritchard's images. The low contrast blurs perception, so rocks appear much larger in the dim light.[8] (See Figure 4.) The very environment impacts the artistic creation.

---

[7] Margaret Cohen, "Seeing Through Water: The Paintings of Zarh Pritchard," in *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge*, eds. Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom, and Jos Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[8] Malcolm L. M. Vaughan. "Painting Beauty Under the Sea." *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 1928.

[*Figure 4.* Zarh H. Pritchard, *Bream in 25 Feet of Water Off the West Coast of Scotland*, 1910.]

There are a few later Underwater artists, such as André Leban and Olga Nikitina. Still, when considering Underwater artists, Zarh Pritchard will act as the case study as he was the most popular of the bunch during his era and offers the most to discuss in relation to affective response and phenomenology. (But these ideas can be applied to all Underwater painters.)

Affective response: What is it?

The affective response is the immediate emotional reaction from stimulated senses.[9] For example, this can occur when your favorite food is in the kitchen, and you smell it and smile in response. Here, the sense of smell is stimulated, and you immediately react to it emotionally and physically. At its core, this philosophical idea suggests that our emotions are not cognitive, but instead arise spontaneously from environmental and sensory stimuli. This stimulation is distinct from normal sensations, since the latter deal with physiological processes in which our sensory organs detect the environment and then translate them into neural signals that our brain interprets.[10] This is how we perceive the world: through the reception of information through those senses, such as sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. By contrast, the "affective response" goes beyond the mere reception of sensory information, and involves the emotional (and personal) reaction to those stimuli. This way of thinking aligns with a more instinctual understanding of emotions, emphasizing the direct connection between emotions and the sensory experience. John Locke was one of the earliest thinkers on this, describing pain and pleasure as "simple ideas" learned and understood "only by experience" of "what we feel in ourselves."[11] Without using the term, he distinguishes the affective feeling from normal sensation.

---

[9] "affective response," Oxford Reference, accessed May 20, 2023.

[10] Mahesh Gadhvi, Marlyn J. Moore, and Muhammad Waseem, "Physiology, Sensory System," in *StatPearls* (Treasure Island: StatPearls Publishing, 2023). http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK547656/.

[11] Locke, John, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Rivington, 1689), Book II, Chapter XX.

Affective response and art

Art is not only representation or imitation; artists aren't only depicting what they see visually. Art is fundamentally an act of expression, a manifestation of the artist's inner state.[12] Art is deeply intertwined with the feelings of life. It serves as a medium to convey emotions, ideas, and states of being. This idea adds a layer of complexity beyond the tangible elements on canvas.[13] Artistic creation relies heavily on the affective response. The emotional resonance transforms a mere visual representation into a profound expression of the artist's subjective experience. The affective response also bridges the artwork and the observer, creating a shared emotional experience. (Both between the artist's affective response, which was translated to the canvas, and the viewer's affective response when viewing the art.) However, the way in which the traditional surface environment affects surface art differs from how the underwater world impacts Underwater art.

Affective response and Underwater art

When artists submerge themselves to create, they engage with the environment in a way that goes beyond the visual. Other senses, such as touch and sound, also contribute to a deeply emotional encounter. As this scene, never seen before and starkly different from the land above, evokes emotions, these feelings are then translated to the artistic surface. The term "translate" is employed intentionally, emphasizing the transformation of emotions into a visual language rather than a straightforward transfer. As with translating from one language to another, something is almost always lost in the translation process. The feeling itself is never fully expressible through art. The experience itself is personal, and we don't yet have the power to experience another's experience. The closest thing we have is art.

---

[12] Hospers, J. "Art as expression." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, October 4, 2022.
[13] Canvas or any other artist medium used.

As an example, Charles B. Hudson, an official of the California Academy of Sciences, catches this idea beautifully when he describes the art of the underwater painter Zarh Pritchard. He eloquently described it as "[. . .] its tranquility and utter remoteness from the everyday terrestrial [. . .]. One knows too that you were not only able to see, but to feel."[14] In this quote, Hudson not only acknowledges the visual allure of the underwater scenes but also underscores a crucial dimension—the ability to feel. This suggests that Pritchard's art, painted beneath the waves, offers not only a visual representation of the underwater world but also becomes a conduit for the artist's emotions and their affective response when encountering the mysterious underwater fairyland.

Phenomenology: What is it?

Phenomenology is a philosophical lens that we can use to understand the world. To do this, it's essential to consider our consciousness and the act of experiencing the world in the first-person point of view. This way of understanding the world focuses on how our direct experiences impact our minds and bodies. The term phenomenology originates from the Greek words φαινόμενον (phainómenon, "that which appears"), and λόγος (lógos, "study").[15] The term was introduced into the English language in the early 18th century and gained direct association with Husserl's philosophy[16]. After its initial conception, phenomenology studies have evolved to cover a wide range of experiences ranging from perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and embodied action. Based on Husserl's understanding, these experiences are understood as our thoughts being directed toward things in the world. Husserl termed this "intentionality" (meaning the directed nature of our

[14] Nancy Dustin Wall Moure, *The World of Zarh Pritchard* (Carmel, CA: William A. Karges Fine Art, 1999).
[15] "Phenomenology (philosophy)," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, accessed December 2, 2023.
[16] Edmund Husserl was an Austrian-German philosopher who established the idea of phenomenology. See Christian Beyer, "Edmund Husserl," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.

consciousness toward things in the world). According to this way of thinking, our experience is directed toward things only through particular concepts.[17] Then, these make up the meaning of a given experience. However, this meaning is distinct from the thing that is actually present or from the meaning which the thing is intended to hold. This distinction is because phenomenology emphasizes the first person, personal experience of the object/environment, and not the actual representation or intended meaning. This idea is directly related to art.

Phenomenology and art

In the realm of artistic creation, phenomenology becomes a powerful lens through which to understand the process of making art. This philosophy offers a way to delve into the first-person, subjective experience of the creative act. It asks the viewer to consider how the artist engages with the medium and how they use it to explore their personal experiences. It considers the artist's thoughts and feelings. It offers a view of how their unique perception of the world impacts the art that's created. Husserl's term "intentionality" also applies to art since artists deliberately choose a creative direction in the process of creating art. These decisions directly shape the meaning and content of the work. The artist's emphasis is not only on the representation of an object (or direct mimesis[18]) but on the artist's direct encounter (and the emotional expression of that encounter). So essentially, phenomenology asks us to try and see through the eye of the artist, and in this case, through the eye of the mer-artist.

---

[17] David Woodruff Smith, "Phenomenology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. by Edward N. Zalta.

[18] *Mimesis* comes from Greek, which means to imitate. The mimetic image is one that imitates a visual representation or at least closely resembles its subject. Mimetic images focus on accurate representation, often by using proper proportions, shading, perspective, and by paying attention to tiny details. Phenomenology focuses less on this mimesis and more so on the emotions and how emotions are translated into what's depicted. See the entry, "mimesis," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 22, 2011.

Phenomenology and Underwater art

When submerged in an underwater realm, where everything is radically altered, it's logical to assume that the art produced under those environmental conditions would differ from the art created on the surface. An artist's breathing patterns are more noticeable as every breath of air is precious to their lungs, knowing that anything could go wrong and that, at any second, they could suffocate. Colors are also altered through the eyes of mer-artists since a different spectrum of colors is visible in water.[19] Then there's also the viscosity of water, cloudiness of the water and visibility, the pull of buoyancy against weights, and the constant motion of the ocean. That's only considering normal underwater environmental factors, but there's also the weather and how surface weather affects an underwater environment. Zarh Pritchard discussed in a newspaper article that, "On days when the sea was too rough for descent, he painted in his studio [. . .]"[20] Given the unpredictable nature of the sea, Pritchard had to adapt his approach to artistic creation in a similar manner to plein air painters. So, all of these underwater environmental factors impact the artist and thus alter the art that's produced. The immersive experience (personal to the artist) of the submerged world creates a bodily physicality that transcends the boundaries of studio work.

Additionally, when thinking about Zarh Pritchard directly and how the phenomenological experience impacts his artistic creation, Pritchard himself claimed that painting from the surface is less than ideal: "He holds that it is impossible to catch the colors and what might be called the atmosphere of Underwater scenery, by any

---

[19] For example, the color red very quickly disappears underwater, since it has a long wavelength and therefore, low energy. By contrast, colors at the blue and violet end of the spectrum have shorter wavelengths and higher energy. When submerged in water, colors with lower energy, such as reds, oranges, and yellows, are swiftly filtered out, whereas blue and violet light penetrate water more deeply due to increased energy, and our eyes can still see these shades when submerged. That's why when the art is created at a deeper depth there's a tonal aspect to the works, as only few colors come across to the human eye. See "Light and Color in the Deep Sea," *Deep Ocean Education Project,* accessed December 27, 2023.

[20] Malcolm L. M. Vaughan, "Painting Beauty Under the Sea," *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 1928.

method of observation from the surface [. . .]. Everything appears unnatural and distorted to the beholder."[21] From a phenomenological standpoint, Zarh Pritchard's preference for being submerged in the underwater realm (rather than above it) aligns with the idea that firsthand experience is preferable. The experience itself enriches one's perception of the underwater world.

Moreover, when considering Husserl's concept of the intentionality of the phenomenological experience, Pritchard's emphasis on the impossibility of capturing the colors from above, refers to the directedness of Pritchard's consciousness toward the submerged world. His stance also rejects the detached, objective point of view in favor of, instead, a subjective encounter. This personal experience of an underwater fairyland is depicted on the canvas, inviting the viewer to see through the eyes of the artist. In 1928, William Beebe, an admirer of Pritchard's work, wrote that his art contained an "aquatic perspective" and was something that "no aquarium tank can ever show."[22] That's because an aquarium tank brings the viewer to the underwater world for themselves, one they can see and admire. Pritchard's art offers a unique perspective since the viewer sees the artist's personal experience translated visually onto the canvas. Rooted in the experience, it's truly a perspective that no aquarium tank could ever show.

Conclusion

While Underwater art is an art historical niche, it's valuable and unique as it is rooted in personal experience and the act of creation. As an overlooked area of art history, thinking about it in terms of philosophical ideas can provide a framework for understanding the significance of the art form. Given the underwater aspect, dealing with the philosophical ideas of affective response and phenomenology offers a way to understand the intersection of art, emotion, and the mysterious depths below. This art form is rooted

---

[21] "He Paints at the Bottom of the Sea," *Evening Star,* June 13, 1915.
[22] William Beebe, *Beneath Tropic Seas; a Record of Diving among the Coral Reefs of Haiti* (New York: Putma, 1928).

in the personal experience of the artist and offers something that an aquarium is incapable of capturing. This aquatic realm is captured on the canvas as a loosely mimetic image but, more importantly, offers the artist's immediate reaction and the phenomenological experience of being underwater.

Bibliography

"affective response." Oxford Reference. Accessed May 20, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095354414.

"Artist Paints Under Water." *Arizona Republican.* September 8, 1921.

Beebe, William. *Beneath Tropic Seas; a Record of Diving among the Coral Reefs of Haiti.* New York: Putma, 1928.

Beyer, Christian. "Edmund Husserl." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Winter 2022.

Cohen, Margaret. "Seeing Through Water: The Paintings of Zarh Pritchard." In *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge*, edited by Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom, and Jos Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Gadhvi, Mahesh, Marlyn J. Moore, and Muhammad Waseem. "Physiology, Sensory System." In *StatPearls.* Treasure Island: StatPearls Publishing, 2023. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK547656/.

"He Paints at the Bottom of the Sea." *Evening Star.* June 13, 1915.

Hospers, J. "Art as expression." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, October 4, 2022. https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy-of-art/Art-as-expression.

"Light and Color in the Deep Sea." *Deep Ocean Education Project.* Accessed December 27, 2023. https://deepoceaneducation.org/resources/light-and-color-in-the-deep-sea/.

Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. London:
     Rivington, 1689.

McCarthy, Melissa. "En Pleine Mer: The Underwater Landscapes
     of Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez." *The Public Domain
     Review*. Accessed December 10, 2023.

"mimesis." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 22, 2011.
     https://www.britannica.com/art/mimesis.

Moulton, Robert H. "A Painter Under The Sea." *The Bellman* 24,
     no. 599 (June 22, 1918): 683–85.

Moure, Nancy Dustin Wall. *The World of Zahr Pritchard*. Carmel,
     CA: William A. Karges Fine Art, 1999.

"Painting Pictures Under the Sea." *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*. June
     18, 1922.

"Phenomenology (philosophy)." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*,
     https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Phenomenol
     ogy_(philosophy)&oldid=1213176876. Accessed
     December 2, 2023.

Phillips, John L. *The Bends: Compressed Air in the History of Science,
     Diving, and Engineering*. New Haven, CT: Yale University
     Press, 1998.

Pritchard, Zarh H. *Bream in 25 Feet of Water Off the West Coast of
     Scotland*, Pastel, 1910. Brooklyn Museum.

Smith, David Woodruff. "Phenomenology." In *The Stanford
     Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* edited by Edward N. Zalta,
     Summer 2018.

Vaughan, Malcolm L. M. "Painting Beauty Under the Sea." *Los
     Angeles Times*. July 8, 1928.

von Ransonnet-Villez, Eugen. *Sketches of the Inhabitants, Animal Life,
     and Vegetation in the Lowlands and High Mountains of Ceylon:
     As Well as of the Submarine Scenery near the Coast, Taken from
     a Diving Bell*. Vienna: Robert Hardwicke, 1867.
     https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.51200.

Empathy and Merleau-Ponty

Emily Richael is senior studying philosophy at Brigham Young University. She is interested in philosophy of mind and emotion, particularly as they relate to empathy. She has been published in two other undergraduate philosophy journals: Brigham Young University's Aporia and Rutgers' Areté. In her free time she enjoys exploring the outdoors in her home state of Idaho, reading, and writing.
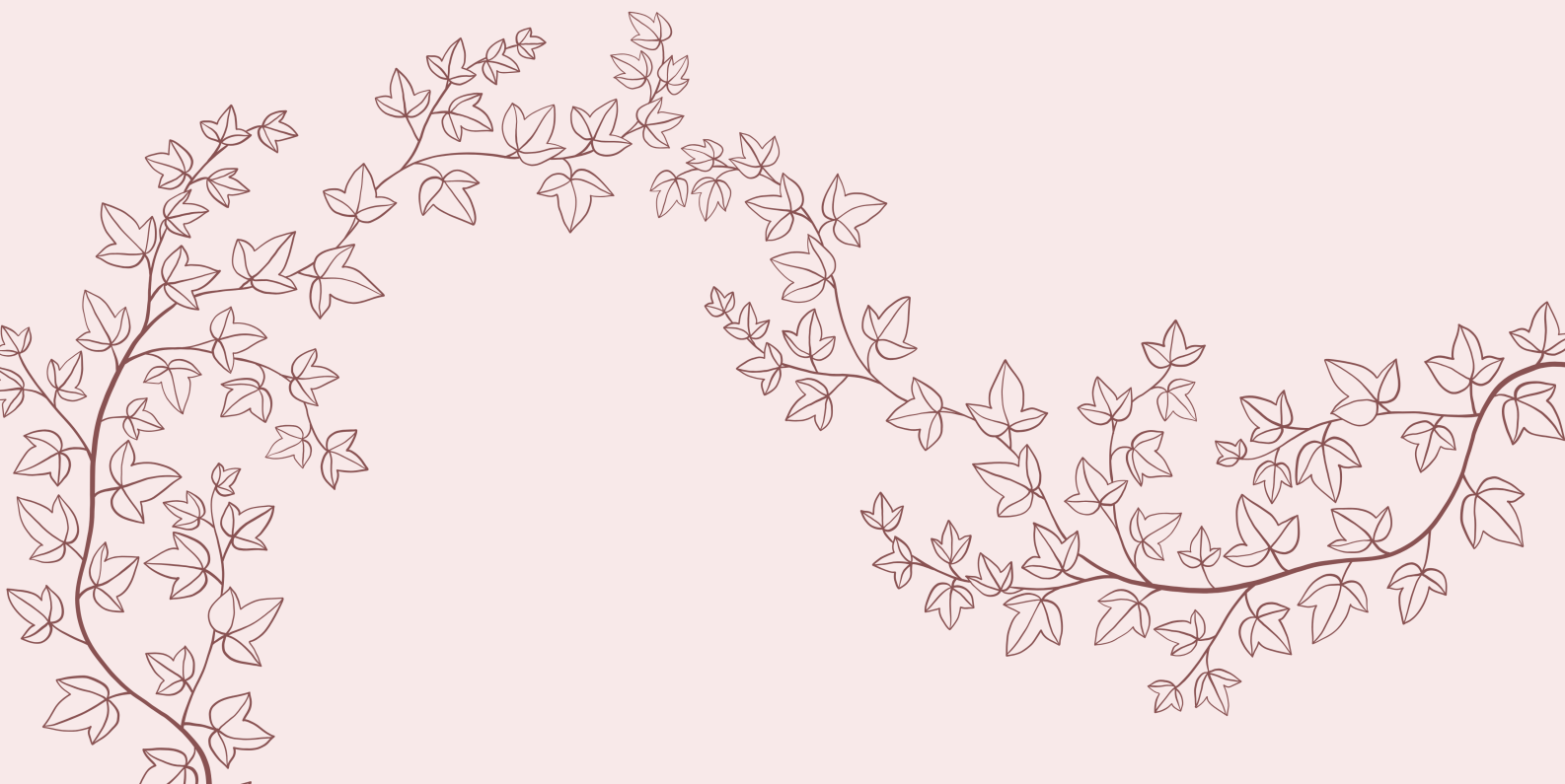
We commonly think of empathy as an epistemic pursuit. When we empathize with someone, we aim to know what they are feeling. But this knowledge is difficult to attain considering the fact that we have no direct access to someone else's private mind. Minds are not observable; they are hidden behind bodies, making bodies one of empathy's biggest hurdles. To know what someone else is feeling, we have to get inside their head. One way in which we might attempt to do this is by imagining what it is like to be someone else. In colloquial terms, we might "put ourselves in someone else's shoes." We attempt to skirt their embodiment by using our imagination. Since we cannot directly access other people's minds, perhaps imagining their situation will afford us knowledge about what they are feeling.

However, Amy Coplan has called into question the epistemic effectiveness of this method. She suggests that putting ourselves in other people's shoes (hereafter called "perspective taking") leads to projection and misrepresentation rather than knowledge of another's emotional state. Trying to transcend the body actually leads us to distort the other person's subjective experience. In light of this concern, I suggest that we think about empathy in a different way. An account of empathy informed by Merleau-Ponty's idea of embodied minds can lead us to knowledge about what other people are feeling. This is because, according to Merleau-Ponty, we should not assume that minds are hidden behind bodies. We can know what other people are feeling because emotions are embodied. We need to abandon the idea that in order to access another person's mind we have to circumvent the body. Our bodies play a central role in empathy; they are the medium through which we communicate our emotions.

The paper will proceed as follows: in section 1, I will describe the process of perspective taking and explain why it fails to grant us knowledge of other minds according to Amy Coplan. Due to this epistemic failure, I suggest that we abandon the assumption that perspective taking operates from, namely, the fact that minds are hidden behind bodies. Instead, we should move towards a picture

of empathy informed by Merleau-Ponty because it can grant us knowledge. In section 2, I will use Søren Overgaard's paper "Other Minds Embodied" to explain why Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea that minds are hidden and inaccessible. Merleau-Ponty argues that minds are embodied and therefore, emotions are perceptible. However, just perceiving someone's emotion does not lead to knowledge. In section 3, I will demonstrate that embodied emotions also need signification in order for us to understand them. Ultimately, we can know what someone else is feeling because emotions are embodied and because body language has meaning. Finally, In section 4, I will outline how this analysis of Merleau-Ponty might inform an improved conception of empathy. Merleau-Ponty saves us from having to try on other people's shoes.

1. *Epistemic Failure of Perspective Taking*

Putting ourselves in someone else's shoes, also known as self-oriented perspective taking, leads us to project our own feelings onto the other. Self-oriented perspective taking involves an empathizer imaginatively replacing the target (i.e., the other person) with themselves. Consider a relatively simple example: if I were attempting to empathize with an actor who forgot their line on stage, I would imaginatively replace the actor with myself and note the emotional state that the situation prompts for me. I would imagine myself forgetting a line on stage—an incident which would likely cause me feelings of anxiety and embarrassment. Then, I assume that my own feelings represent the actor's internal experience.

Amy Coplan objects to this form of perspective taking because when we replace the target with ourselves, we are no longer empathizing with the target at all. We are merely empathizing with ourselves in the target's situation.[1] Earlier, when I imagined how I would respond if I forgot a line on stage, the actor played no role in

---

[1] Amy Coplan, "Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects," in *Empathy, Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, eds. Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 9.

my simulation. Because I was imagining myself in their place, nothing about the actor was incorporated into my simulation besides their situation. When I imagined how I would respond in their situation, I learned nothing about how they would respond in their situation. Self-oriented perspective taking fails as a route to knowledge because a given circumstance will not elicit the same emotional state for everyone (e.g., forgetting a line on stage does not always lead to embarrassment). How I mentally respond to forgetting a line on stage is not necessarily indicative of what the confident actor is experiencing. Therefore, based on my self-oriented simulation, it would be wrong for me to claim that I know what it is like to be the actor in that moment. When I conclude that the actor is embarrassed, I am merely projecting my own feelings of embarrassment onto them.

Take another example demonstrating how two people might have a drastically different mental response to the same situation. Say that my husband is trying to understand what it is like for me, a woman, to walk down the riverside path behind our apartment complex at night. My husband loves night walks, so if he were to imagine himself going on the stroll alone, he would likely report feeling relaxed and rejuvenated after the simulation. This, however, is far from what I would experience alone on the same night walk. My primary feelings would be anxiety at the prospect of being uncomfortably approached or catcalled—the exact opposite of what my husband reported feeling. If my husband were to project his simulated mental state onto me, it would be a gross misrepresentation of my feelings. The exercise fails to grant him knowledge about my mental state because our minds respond differently to the same night walk. Self-oriented simulation leaves him with knowledge about himself in my situation—he now knows that he would enjoy the riverside trail at night—but it does not get him any closer to understanding my emotional state.

If we view the body as an obstacle to be overcome in order to know what people are feeling, then we end up with a distorted picture of their emotional state. We think that the disembodied process of imagination can grant us knowledge about other minds,

but ultimately it leads us farther away from understanding. However, the main problem with perspective taking is not the process; it is the assumption that other minds are private and not directly observable. Merleau-Ponty rejects this solipsistic idea, and demonstrates how minds are, in fact, perceivable. He provides a way for us to think about empathy that does not presuppose the inaccessibility of other minds. An empathetic method that involves bodies rather than trying to avoid them ultimately proves to be much more successful at providing us with knowledge of other people's emotional states.

2. *Merleau-Ponty and Embodied Minds*

Overgaard argues that Merleau-Ponty is not troubled by the idea of other minds. Merleau-Ponty thinks that "what we have said about the body provides the beginnings of a solution to this problem."[2] When we consider the fact that our bodies are an expression of our minds rather than a container for them, the problem of other minds dissolves. Having a mind entails a certain sort of being in the world. Seeing other beings engage in the world in the same manner that we do confirms their mindedness. Merleau-Ponty says:

> If the perceiving subject appears (to me who is reflecting upon perception) as endowed with a primordial arrangement in relation to the world, drawing with it that bodily thing without which there would be no other things for it, then why should the other bodies that I perceive not be equally inhabited by consciousnesses? If my consciousness has a body, why should other bodies not 'have' consciousness?[3]

The scare quotes around "have" indicate Merleau-Ponty's distaste for mind-body dualism. He does not think, as a Cartesian might, that our bodies are fleshy machines housing an immaterial mind. In other words, our minds are not embodied–we are embodied minds. Other minds are not hidden behind bodies, other minds are other

---

[2] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 364.
[3] Merleau-Ponty, 366–7.

bodies.[4] Merleau-Ponty denies the ontological gap between minds and bodies and instead claims, "I am my body."[5]

The upshot of Overgaard's analysis is that emotions are observable. If the activity of other minds is not hidden, then we have immediate access to other people's emotional states. According to Merleau-Ponty, the emotions of other minds are perceptible in at least two different ways. First, Overgaard alludes to the fact that minds entail a certain sort of being in the world. Our world is shaped and colored by affect—a feature of our being that is observable to others. Merleau-Ponty says:

> I perceive the other's grief or anger in his behavior, on his face and in his hands, without any borrowing from an inner experience of suffering or of anger and because grief and anger are variations of being in the word, undivided between body and consciousness, which settle upon the other's behavior and are visible in his phenomenal body, as well as upon my own behavior such as it is presented to me.[6]

How other people feel shows up in the ways that they engage with the world, even if their emotion is not explicit. For example, someone might be engaging with the world as if they are tired without themselves even knowing that they are tired. A child might assure their parents before bedtime that they are not tired even though they are irritable. The parent knows that the child is communicating their tiredness because of the ways it presents itself in their embodiment. The child's emotions still show up in the world and to their parents without the child's awareness.

Merleau-Ponty also makes a crucial point in the same quote about not needing to consult our own experience with an emotion in order to know what someone is feeling. For example, when I see a friend who is grieving the loss of one of their parents, I do not need to imagine myself in their situation in order to know that they

---

[4] Overgaard, Søren, "Other minds embodied," Continental Philosophy Review, 50 (1): 70.
[5] Merleau-Ponty, 205.
[6] Merleau-Ponty, 372.

are in pain. I also do not need to analyze their behavior before concluding that they are sad. As Merleau-Ponty says, "without any borrowing from an inner experience of suffering," I can observe how their engagement with the world changes, and know that they are grieving. I might see that they are unmotivated, less social, and less active. This deviation from their typical mode of being in the world communicates their sadness. However, it is not just that certain behaviors communicate sadness. The sadness is the behavior; the emotion is a way of being in the world.

Another way in which our embodied emotions are observable is through specific body language. As an example, Merleau-Ponty draws on the idea of an angry gesture:

> Consider an angry or threatening gesture. In order to understand these gestures, I have no need of recalling the feelings I experienced while I myself performed these same gestures. I have, from the inside, quite a limited knowledge of the gesture of anger, and so an association through resemblance or reasoning by analogy would be missing a decisive element. [. . .] The gesture does not make me think of anger, it is the anger itself.[7]

The angry gesture is distinct from someone's mode of being in the world because it is a specific movement. It is one position that embodies anger. For example, I might see an angry driver flip the bird to someone who cut them off. I do not know how this driver engages with the world, but from one gesture, I understand what they are feeling. Furthermore, I do not derive my understanding that the driver is angry from analyzing the gesture and pausing to think about what it might mean. I immediately perceive that they are angry. The gesture alone, without any reasoning on my part, communicates the anger. Hence Merleau-Ponty's words: "the gesture does not make me think of anger, it is the anger itself." Anyone who has received a middle finger from an angry driver can validate Merleau-Ponty's claim. Their anger is immediately received without any need to ponder the gesture's meaning. The driver's

---

[7] Merleau-Ponty, 190.

feeling is wholly embodied in the gesture, and thus directly observable.

3. Signification and Knowledge

Up to this point I have only emphasized the importance of the body in knowing other people's emotions. But Merleau-Ponty also acknowledges another crucial aspect of understanding another person's emotional state: signification. W. E. S. McNeill's paper, "On Seeing That Someone is Angry," argues for a similar condition which he calls inference. I will draw on McNeill's paper to help make sense of Merleau-Ponty's argument. McNeill holds that we can only perceive the gesture as the anger itself if we understand that the gesture means anger. The specific position of their middle finger only communicates anger if the receiver of the gesture understands that the gesture is meant to convey anger. We have to understand the meaning of body language in order to grasp someone else's emotion.[8]

For example, say that in another country people use the peace sign much like we use the middle finger. The peace sign is their gesture to communicate anger. If I were to visit their country and see someone make a peace sign, I would be unphased or confused. This demonstrates that the gesture itself is arbitrary, but the meaning must be mutually understood. McNeill argues from this that inference is a necessary component of understanding someone else's embodied emotion. To understand that the peace sign means anger, I first have to connect the gesture to the emotion of anger. Merleau-Ponty makes a similar point using a child viewing a sexual scene:

> If a child accidentally witnessed a sexual scene, he can understand it without having the experience of desire or the bodily attitudes that it expresses, but if the child had not yet reached the degree of maturity at which this behavior becomes a possibility for him,

---

[8] W. E. S. McNeill, "On Seeing That Someone is Angry," *European Journal of Philosophy*, 20: 577.

then the sexual scene will remain merely an unusual and disturbing spectacle, it will not make sense.[9]

The child is not able to perceive the parent's emotion without understanding the significance of their body language. Similarly, our ability to know about other people's emotions depends on both embodiment and inference. Emotions are embodied, but in order for someone else to know what we are feeling, there has to be a mutual understanding of what the body language means. Embodied emotions are perceivable, but they are only comprehensible if they have a shared meaning.

However, this is not to say that every time we perceive someone else's emotion we have to make the inference again. It is not that every time I see the angry gesture I have to recall that the gesture means anger. This would undermine what Merleau-Ponty said earlier that "[we] have, from the inside, quite a limited knowledge of the gesture of anger, and so an association through resemblance or reasoning by analogy would be missing a decisive element.[10] There must be some point when we make the inference that a gesture means anger. We are not born with the knowledge that a middle finger is angry. But after the inference is made, the body language takes on meaning without any further need for inference. After the child reaches an age of maturity where the sexual scene has meaning, he does not have to consciously associate the scene with certain emotions. The emotions arise without having to make any inference. In Merleau-Ponty's view, perception of emotions is not strictly innate or inferential. There is a role for both embodiment and inference to play in helping us understand another person's emotional state.

4. Merleau-Pontian Empathy

Brining this all back to empathy, an empathetic method informed by Merleau-Ponty would look very different from putting ourselves

---

9 Merleau-Ponty, 190.
10 Merleau-Ponty, 190.

in someone else's shoes. According to Merleau-Ponty, understanding other people's emotions arises naturally from the fact that emotions are observable and that there is shared meaning in their embodiment. Knowing what other people feel is much less of a feat when we reject the idea that emotions are hidden behind bodies. In fact, Merleau-Ponty would likely say that asking how we know what other people feel is an ill-formed question. Other people's emotions are already given to us in their embodiment. If we ask how we can know what other people feel, we are assuming that their emotions are hidden. Merleau-Ponty argues that emotions show up in how we engage with the world and in our body language. Empathy, then, is not trying to "access" what someone else is feeling. It is simply being attentive to another's body language and patterns of being in the world. By doing so, we will gain far more knowledge about their emotional state than if we try to imagine it.

To demonstrate how this Merleau-Pontian approach will grant us knowledge as opposed to perspective taking, let us return to the riverside trail example. When my husband tried to imagine how I felt on the riverside trail, he ended up misrepresenting my feelings by projecting his own experience onto me. Merleau-Ponty would say that my husband failed to understand my feelings because he avoided, rather than attended to my embodiment. My emotions are embodied, and are therefore only perceptible through my embodiment. In order to know what I am feeling on the night walk, my husband needs to observe my body language and how I am engaging with the world. My husband might notice that during night walks I am quiet and tense. He perceives my anxiety through the way that my being in the world changed. His attention to my body language is what gives him knowledge about my emotional state. My husband has a much better idea of how I feel from perceiving my embodied emotions than from trying to take my perspective. Obtaining knowledge of other people's emotional states is simple: just exist and perceive. No imaginative gymnastics is needed in order to understand what other people feel. If we can observe emotions as Merleau-Ponty suggests, empathy only requires that we be perceivers of them.

Conclusion

Merleau-Ponty's perspective on other minds can completely change how we understand empathy. Empathy is not a process of bridging the wide gulf between individually encapsulated minds. Nor is it about "accessing" other people's minds. For too long, we have assumed solipsism and prescribed empathy as the antidote. But when we reject solipsism, empathy can be reborn. In light of Merleau-Ponty's idea that emotions are perceivable, empathy is not understanding other people despite our embodiment. Empathy is understanding other people because of our embodiment. As Merleau-Ponty says, "the perception of others and the plurality of consciousnesses no longer present any difficulty."[11] We no longer need empathy to escape the hopeless problem of other minds; our feelings are already perceivable. We can take heart in the fact that we no longer need to put ourselves in other people's shoes.

Bibliography

Coplan, Amy. "Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects." In *Empathy, Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives.* Edited by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, 3–18. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

McNeill, W. E. S. "On Seeing That Someone is Angry," *European Journal of Philosophy*, 20: 575–597.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. New York, Routledge, 2012.

Overgaard, Søren. "Other minds embodied," *Continental Philosophy Review*, 50 (1): 65–80, 2016.

---

[11] Merleau-Ponty, 366.

TACK, and Letter to Ms. Mary Astell

Eva Skinner is a second year philosophy undergraduate student at the University of Queensland, Australia. They have been infatuated with philosophy and all of its related disciplines since they were introduced to the Socratic method by one of their school teachers at the age of eleven, and have been studying it ever since. They are keen to pursue studies in philosophy long into adulthood, in a range of universities across the globe, and aspire to one day write their own philosophical treatise on the role of empathy and compassion in demonstrating the distinction between human soul and body.

TACK, by Evan Skinner

> *The wet tack of sweat on dead skin is a mongrel to the senses*
> *Age cannot explain empty eyes*
> *I ask; is a puppet without human hands deceased?*
> *What is it but a spiritual death*
> *To lose one's own motion*
> *A sickly cleaving from his master*
> *Still, he is now missing something*
> *I wonder*
> *How is it that all his parts remain*
> *And yet it is no longer there*

Author's note

Tack is piece of metaphysical poetry, touching on the incoherence of materialism in the eyes of human emotion. The work covers the loss of the soul in death, and is partially Cartesian in its rejection of materialism, comparing the body to automata, and positing the soul as it's "pilot." Ultimately, it posits that the soul is that which makes body itself distinct from its fellow automata (in the example of the puppet).

Though materialism may maintain some scientific coherence, human emotion cannot reconcile with this. There remains, despite our understanding of the function of the brain in the animation of the body, a disgust at the presence of a cadaver. Once a person, the deceased is fundamentally missing something, a metaphysical presence.

This work too touches on Mary Astell's rejection of materialism; the human inability to reconcile the capacity of thought to body. Within the corpse, all the original "pieces" remain, yet we cannot conceive of the capacity for thought (or that which is "missing") in this body without life. Once dead, these two functions become irreconcilable in the context of the deceased.

To Ms. Mary Astell
Linhope Road, Newcastle upon Tyne
United Kingdom

To the Philosopher Ms. Mary Astell,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing to you on this occasion in regard to your philosophical engagements with fellow academic, Sir John Locke. In this case, your engagements with him on the subject of thinking matter.

While the existence of "thinking matter" remains difficult to indisputably affirm or deny, I believe the metaphysical concept of "thinking matter" to be, at minimum, coherent, inasmuch as it cannot be resolutely disproved. I have conducted thorough analyses of both your arguments as well as those by Sir Locke's regarding the feasibility of "thinking matter," and whilst I find many of your criticisms of his work convincing, I ultimately concede to Locke the difficulty of affirming or denying the possibility of "thinking matter" in its entirety.

I understand this topic to be of considerable relevance to your philosophical period, particularly given the writings of the French philosopher René Descartes, to whom both you and Sir Locke are indebted. Each of your works and arguments on the subject of "thinking matter" has been influenced by, or has responded to, the proposals of Cartesian dualism as well as those of materialists like Thomas Hobbes and mechanists like Spinoza.

I will begin with Locke's arguments in favor of the potentiality for thinking matter, as given in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke summarizes his argument as follows. "We [. . .] possibly shall never be able to know, whether any material being thinks, or no; it being impossible for us [. . .] to discover whether Omnipotency has not given to some System of Matter fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think, or else joined to matter so disposed, a thinking immaterial substance."[1] It is essential to note

---

[1] John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Mary Whiton Calkins (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1962), Book IV, Chapter III, Section 6.

with respect to Sir Locke's argument that he does not argue in complete favor of a materialist approach. His argument, instead, proposes the possibility of thinking matter, arguing that the concept of thinking matter is not entirely contradictory. Additionally, Sir Locke is an empiricist; he believes that one derives knowledge from experience accrued through sense perception.[2]

Locke begins his argument by discussing the origins of thought and matter. Note that, like Descartes, Locke is a property dualist inasmuch as he considers the properties of the material and the mental to be distinct.[3] He proposes that in the case of the first, eternal being, i.e., God, "it must necessarily be a cogitative being."[4] Matter, he argues, cannot produce a thinking, intelligent being, nor can it produce motion. Given that matter is dead and inactive, if we suppose the existence of matter "first and eternal," motion can never begin to be. A traditional materialist may refute that matter has been eternally in motion. Locke counters this; matter may be eternally in motion, however, in this case, it will still never produce anything other than motion.[5] Essentially, if we suppose matter and motion as first and eternal, thought can never begin to be. Therefore, given the existence of thought, we may presume the first and eternal being to be cogitative.

Though we may consider Sir Locke a property dualist in the Cartesian sense, Locke is excluded from those philosophers which we would deem substance dualists. In this case, Locke argues that it is feasible for the first and eternal being to confer a thinking substance upon an extended substance. Thus, Locke gives his case for superaddition. As we may see, matter is a solid, extended substance. However, in the case of matter such as plants, and animals, God confers upon them additional substances, such as motion, life, and sense.[6] In each of these instances, the essence of

[2] Jonathan Bennett, "Locke's Philosophy of Mind, " in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. Vere Chappell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 99.

[3] Bennett, "Locke's Philosophy of Mind," 98.

[4] Locke, *Essay*, Book IV, Chapter X, Section 10.

[5] John W. Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 16.

[6] Yolton, *Thinking Matter*, 18.

matter itself is not destroyed. That is: "the properties of a rose, a peach, or an elephant superadded to matter, change not the properties of matter; but matter is in these things matter still."[7] This, as such, is Locke's principle of superaddition. Stemming from this, Locke queries why we reject the notion of the superaddition of thought to matter when we do not query the addition of motion or life. Locke invokes a general principle in this argument; the superaddition of substances or properties to matter does not destroy its essence insofar as matter remains a solid, extended substance. If the essence of matter was destroyed in the process of superaddition, plants and animals would cease to remain material.

I would like now to examine your response to Sir Locke's argument, as given in your work, *The Christian Religion*. As I understand, your work seeks to refute Locke's proposal for the potentiality for thinking matter entirely, as opposed to the dismissal of such a theory as less plausible than that of the distinctly immaterial mind or soul.

Whilst Locke himself—as we have established—was an empiricist, you refute him in this respect, evident in your proclamation: "Most Men are so Sensualiz'd, that they take nothing to be Real but what they can Hear and See."[8] Your solution, in this debate, is the rejection of empirical sensate knowledge in favor of the contemplation of abstract ideas, accepting as knowledge only what can be clearly and distinctly perceived.[9] Though Locke himself rejected this notion in writing that "the greatest part of mankind have not leisure for learning and logic [. . .] [and] mysterious reasoning,"[10] you provide a markedly clever refutation to his statement, deducing that any considerable gaps in the reasoning powers of the general populace were due to lack of suitable

[7] John Locke, "Mr. Locke's Reply to the Bishop of Worcester's Answer to His Second Letter," in *The Works of John Locke, in Ten Volumes* (London, UK: Bye and Law, 1801), 4: 460.

[8] Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England* (London, UK: R. Wilkin, 1705), 295.

[9] Cynthia B. Bryson, "Mary Astell: Defender of the 'Disembodied Mind,'" *Hypatia* 13, no. 4 (1998): 46.

[10] John Locke, "The Reasonableness of Christianity," in *The Works of John Locke, in Nine Volumes* (London: Rivington, 1824).

education.[11] Certainly, any soul (man or woman) will be weaker than one which has been instructed. Locke does concede to the value of abstract reflection in developing knowledge, particularly regarding the substances. However, contrary to yourself, he still proposed that reflection was impossible without sensate experience to reflect upon. From this, we reach your objections to Locke's concept of Superaddition. As you fitly propose, the concepts of thought and extension may be conceived of as entirely distinct from one another (they may be considered independently). As such, you propose that to be distinct from any one thing is to not be this thing.[12] Consequently, since thought and extension are disparate,[13] to propose that a thinking substance is an extended substance is as ludicrous as the proposition that a triangle is a circle, that motion is a rest, or that a material is both solid and non-solid at once.

An objection to this may be found in Locke's discussion of the connection or repugnancy of ideas in relation to the body. According to Locke, our knowledge concerning corporeal substances will see little progress with any hypothesis until we can see ". . . what Qualities and Powers of Bodies have a necessary Connection or Repugnancy one with another."[14] Thus, it is impossible to discern the necessity of certain qualities to the body given our limited empirical knowledge of this. However, you counter that we can know that a subject cannot possess inconsistent or repugnant qualities assuredly (e.g., that it cannot be both solid and non-solid).[15]

From this principle, you aptly consider Locke's Superaddition. Given there is no part of extended matter capable of thought, Superaddition of thought to matter, as you state, ". . . is neither more or less than the making an Arbitrary Union between Body and

---

[11] Bryson, "Marry Astell," 47.

[12] Kathleen M. Squadrito, "Mary Astell's Critique of Locke's View of Thinking Matter*," Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (1987): 436.

[13] "'Tis' evident that a Thinking Being can't be Extended, and that an Extended Being does not, cannot think, any more than a Circle can have the Properties of a Triangle, or a Triangle those of a Circle." Astell, *The Chirstian Religion*, 250.

[14] Locke, *Essay*, Book IV, Chapter III, Section 16.

[15] Bryson, "Mary Astell," 50.

something that is not Body."[16] Even if God has conferred a thinking substance upon an extended substance, in this respect matter is still not thinking, but the mind or thinking substance united to it. As you deduce, all Locke can potentially demonstrate by the concept of Superaddition is that God can make another substance whose essential property is thought, and unite this substance to an extended body. Locke may counter this suggestion by arguing that matter utilizes the superadded thinking substance to think for itself (i.e., a neurophysical system by which matter may regulate the powers of thought), though I propose you may counter that this still requires an independent substance, and that thought is not an attribute of matter itself.

In your rebuttal, you also consider the Cartesian likeness principles, those which propose that a representation must in turn be like that which is represented, and a cause must be in some way like its effect.[17] If, in fact, matter can think, thought must be either its essence or mode (simply, the thing itself or its manner of being). As it is ridiculous to presume thought may be the essence of body, we must assume it to be its mode.[18] However, given modes' immediate dependence on and inseparability from the "Thing Whose Modes they are," it must then be proposed that God is an extended body, otherwise, "He cou'd not Think".[19] As we can be assured that God possesses the power of thought, despite being un-extended (as far as we may know), we can be certain that thought is not a mode of the body, and thus, that matter is incapable of it.

Though your rebuttal here is clever, it neglects Locke's earlier conception of the origins of matter and thought, in that it remains necessary for God to be solely cogitative. Thought is necessarily the first substance, but this does not consequently limit the capacities of subsequent beings in possessing both extension and thought.

---

[16] Astell, *The Christian Religion*, 161.

[17] Ruth Boeker, "Locke and His Early Critics and Defenders: Metaphysical and Epistemic Differences," in *Locke on Persons and Personal Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 207–45.

[18] Squadrito, "Astell's Critique," 438.

[19] Astell, *The Christian Religion*, 251-2.

From this outset it remains uncertain, as Locke proposes, whether God may confer a thinking substance upon an extended one.

Further, Locke himself consistently writes as though he rejects the likeness principles, thus rejecting the necessity of thought as an essence or mode of the body.[20] Though your argument is strong, it does not definitively respond to Locke's proposal.

You additionally invoke Locke's own language against him, stating, "I will presume to affirm that it is impossible for a Solid Substance to have Qualities, Perfections, and Powers, which have no Natural or Visible Connection with Solidity and Extension; and since there is no Visible Connection between Matter and Thought, it is impossible for Matter, or any Parcels of Matter to Think."[21] Following from this statement, as you affirm, matter cannot be "thinking," as thought and extension hold no similar properties or "Visible Connection." However, Locke does not argue that matter possesses the "powers" for thought, as expressed in his argument for the cogitative nature of God, only conceding the possibility that God may confer upon (or Superadd to) matter, a substance which may think (though you may still consider this superadded substance a "quality, perfection, or power"). Additionally, in your invocation of Locke's statement in his *Essay*, the assumed request for "Visible Connection" between thought and extension may be deemed empirical or materialist in nature, thus invalidating its application in this argument.

Though your refutations to Sir Locke's argument are clever, the uncertainty and ambiguity of his argument for the potential of thinking matter make it a difficult one to disprove in its entirety. We may make the concept of thinking matter appear metaphysically weak, but it is difficult to form any argument on the subject in a manner which is solely abstract without the invocation of empirical knowledge, as this formed the basis of Locke's argument.

Thus, I am conceding to the coherence of "thinking matter," not its existence. Locke's principle of superaddition does not need to be infallible (as you effectively demonstrate it is not), but possible, even

---

[20] Squadrito, "Astell's Critique," 438.
[21] Astell, *The Christian Religion*, 259.

minutely so. Though we may introduce the possibility, or even greater likelihood of a dualist theory, if we cannot, in full confidence, confute Locke's proposal, his argument for the uncertainty of "thinking matter" is unerring. As such, I write to you—not to convince you of the existence of thinking matter—but to convince you of its metaphysical coherence, expressly in the context of Sir John Locke's arguments in favor of its uncertainty.

With regards from your humble admirer and friend,
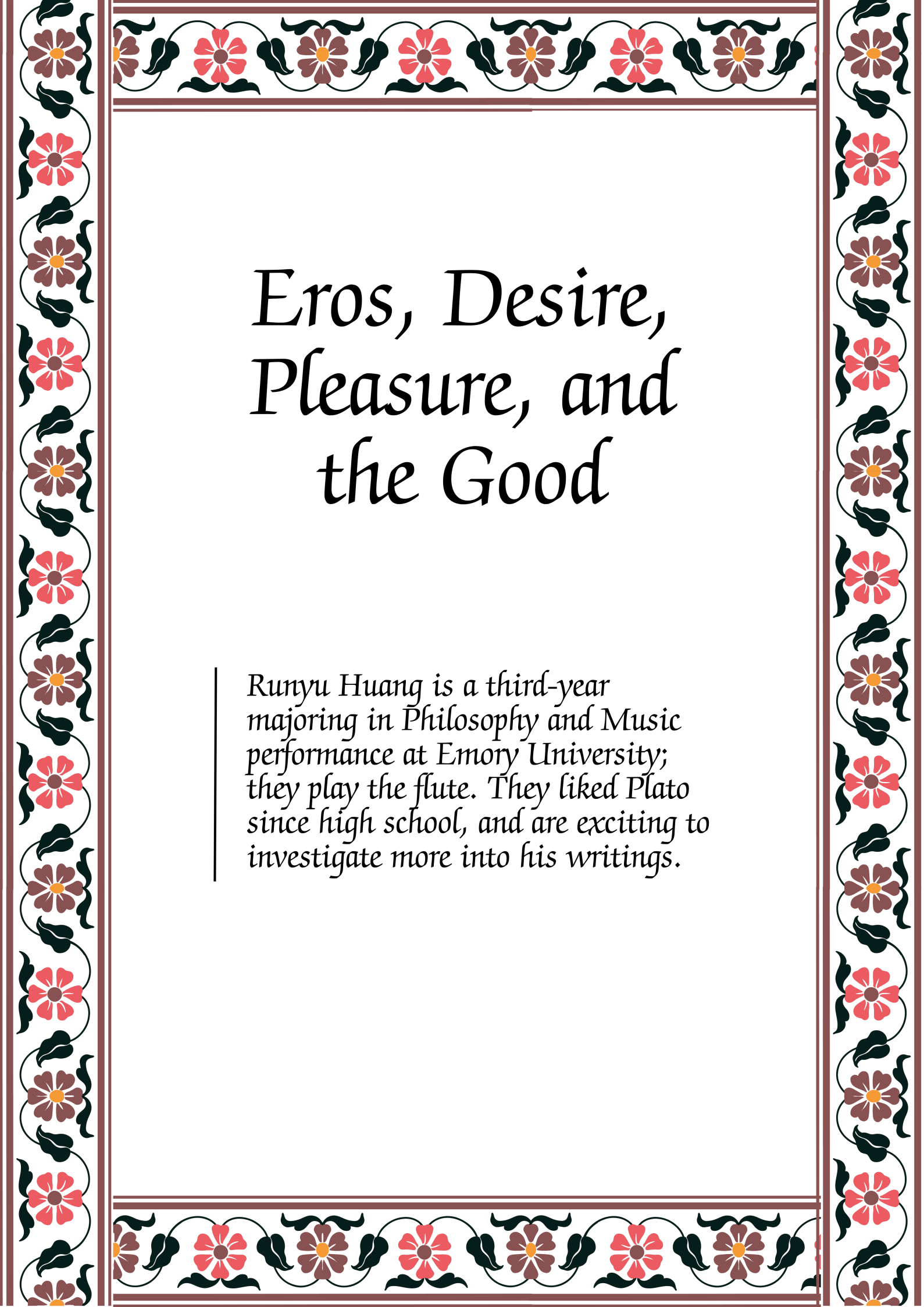*Anonymous*

Bibliography

Astell, Mary. *The Christian Religion, as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England.* London, UK: R. Wilkin, 1705.

Bennett, Jonathan. "Locke's Philosophy of Mind. " In *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, edited by Vere Chappell, 89-114. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Boeker, Ruth. "Locke and His Early Critics and Defenders: Metaphysical and Epistemic Differences." In *Locke on Persons and Personal Identity*, 207-45. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198846758.003.0010.

Bryson, Cynthia B. "Mary Astell: Defender of the 'Disembodied Mind.'" *Hypatia* 13, no. 4 (1998): 40–62. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1998.tb01384.x.

Locke, John. *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Mary Whiton Calkins. La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1962.

Locke, John. "Mr. Locke's Reply to the Bishop of Worcester's Answer to His Second Letter." In Vol. 4, *The Works of John Locke, in Ten Volumes,* 460-62. London, UK: Bye and Law, 1801.

Locke, John. "The Reasonableness of Christianity." In Vol 6, *The Works of John Locke, in Nine Volumes*. London: Rivington, 1824.

Squadrito, Kathleen M. "Mary Astell's Critique of Locke's View of Thinking Matter." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (1987): 433–39. https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.1987.0053.

Yolton, John W. *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth Century Britain.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1983.

Eros, Desire, Pleasure, and the Good

Runyu Huang is a third-year majoring in Philosophy and Music performance at Emory University; they play the flute. They liked Plato since high school, and are exciting to investigate more into his writings.

A central claim across Plato's dialogues is the universally held desire for the Good. Seemingly simple at first glance, this claim suggests a high level of complexity as Plato denies our epistemic possibility toward the Good. In Book VII of the *Republic*, Plato writes explicitly that the Good is beyond Beings,[1] which entails that the faculty of its comprehension is beyond knowledge. If the Good is unknowable, what exactly is the object of our desire? Can we even possess such a desire for the Good, let alone pursue it? And most importantly, how is this desire related to us; why should we accept this articulation of such a desire if the Good is so separate from us? Each question is worth extended discussion, and I cannot address each in thorough detail in the essay. Instead, through examining pleasure, desire, and Eros, I want to open a discussion and provide a proposal concerning their, and ultimately, *our* ontological relationship with the Good.

In the *Philebus*, Plato outlines a detailed distinction between different types of pleasures and their ontologies concerning Beings (Limited) and becoming (unlimited). He especially dwells on intellectual pleasure as a pure but semi-divine one, for it is experienced with the absence of pain but is nevertheless experienced through the filling of a lack in opposed to the most divine pleasures that do not originate from a lack. In the *Symposium*, Plato closely examined Eros and its co-existence with desire, which both are directed toward the Good. In this essay, I use this shared ontological status between the semi-divine pleasure and desire and Eros, both as (and only as) wisdom-oriented, to argue that the Good-in-itself is desirable and pursuable, and this pursuit is necessarily pleasurable. I will first show the distinction between three kinds of pleasures with a focus on the two pure pleasures to argue that the semi-divine pleasure of learning is ontologically placed between the form of Pleasure and the bodily pleasures. I then discuss desire and Eros's ontological correspondence to the semi-divine pleasure in relation to the Good to show that the Good is desirable, pursuable, and relatable (pleasurable). I will also spend a

---

[1] Plato, *Republic* 509b.

section arguing that our desire for the Good is, in fact, pointed toward the Good-in-itself, and this relationship is developed independent of an epistemic commitment. At the end of the essay, I will discuss what this pursuit looks like epistemically by examining knowing (seeing) and philosophizing (smelling).

Pleasure

In this section, I will examine the different kinds of pleasure presented by Plato. In the *Philebus,* Plato uses "godlikeness" to indicate the ontological status of an object: the more "god-like" an object is, the closer it resides to the Good.[2] The two criteria that constitute this assessment are pureness and self-causing (self-sufficiency).[3] Pure/unmixed pleasure is achieved when pleasure is independent of pain (pain-free).[4] When pleasure is experienced as the alleviation of pain, such as an ill person experiencing the pleasure of comfort while recovering from a sickness, this pleasure experienced depends on the pain of sickness. Once the pain ceases to be, say, this person fully recovers, they no longer experience comfort as a pleasure.[5] This pleasure is pain-dependent and, thus, mixed. A self-causing pleasure is achieved when the pleasure is actualized in and for itself, independent of filling a lack (lack-free).[6] When both criteria are achieved, the pleasure is divine. If only one of them is achieved, the pleasure is semi-divine.[7] With these two criteria, we infer four possible kinds of pleasures that reside in four distinct ontological categories: pure and self-causing, pure and not-self-causing, impure and self-causing, and impure and not-self-causing.

Plato hasn't mentioned the self-causing impure pleasure at all. I think this is so because a self-causing but impure pleasure is

[2] Plato, *Philebus*, 51-52.
[3] Plato, 51-52.
[4] Plato, 51-52.
[5] Plato, 47c-d.
[6] Plato, 51-52.
[7] Plato, 51-52.

impossible, as self-causing indicates an ontological category incompatible with impureness. Self-causing, indicating self-sufficiency and an "in-itself-ness," is the property only possessed by the highest ontological category: Beings.[8] In the *Philebus*, Plato also implies that all Beings are pure through an example of the perfect shade of white. Socrates uses the perfect shade of white as an analogy to Truth (Beings), and he concludes with Protarchus that "the pure, unadulterated, and sufficient"[9] is closer to the Truth than their opposites (impure, adulterated, and insufficient) are.[10] This example shows that the closer something gets to Beings, the purer this thing is, indicating that Beings themselves are perfectly pure. Therefore, an impure Being cannot exist, leaving only three kinds of pleasure possible: the Form of Pleasure (the most divine), the pure but not-self-causing pleasure (the semi-divine), and the impure/mixed and not-self-causing pleasure.

Socrates discussed the most divine sort of pleasure and the "less divine" (the semi-divine) together, for both are unmixed[11] (pure, pain-free) pleasures. The distinction between the two kinds of pure pleasures is clearly made at 51d-e, as Socrates describes one kind as "not beautiful in relation to anything else but in and by themselves and that are accompanied by their own pleasures, which belong to them by nature,"[12] and the other kind belongs to a "less divine tribe"[13] which has "no inevitable pain mixed with them,"[14] but is not pleasurable in and by themselves. He also states, at 51e, that these

---

[8] Plato, *Republic*, 508b.

[9] Plato, *Philebus*, 52d-e.

[10] Plato, 52d-e.

[11] As noted by Emily Fletcher, the word "unmixed," along with some other words such as "true," changes its sense throughout the dialogue. Here, "mixed" and "unmixed" means pure and impure; their senses differ totally from the third, "mixed" class of Limited and unlimited that Socrates explains in the *Philebus*, 26a, when he and Protarchus divide the universe into four kinds. See Emily Fletcher, "Plato on Pure Pleasure and the Best Life," *Phronesis* 59, no. 2 (April 2014): pp. 113-142.

[12] Plato, *Philebus*, 51d.

[13] Plato, 51e.

[14] Plato, 51e.

are the "two species of the kinds of pleasures we are looking for,"[15] indicating explicitly that there are two distinct kinds of pure pleasures. The macroscopic categories of mixed and unmixed pleasures are more commonly written on, but this smaller distinction between the two kinds of pure pleasures is not. I will spend most of this section arguing that there is such a distinction, as only by arguing that there exists a form of Pleasure can I relate pleasure to the Good.

A problem of this reading arises at 51b, where Socrates introduces the discussion on pure/unmixed pleasures, where he uses the quality of the less-divine kind to describe the entire category of pure/unmixed pleasures: "[true pleasures][16] *in general* [. . .] are based on imperceptible and painless lacks, while their fulfillments are perceptible and pleasant."[17] This passage makes it seem like there is no form of Pleasure and that all pleasures are necessarily becomings since only becomings are based on lacks, regardless of whether the lack is painful or painless. In addition, at 54c, Socrates says that all pleasures are becomings, hence, not self-causing, because they are all "processes of generation [that] necessarily comes to be for the sake of some Being,"[18] which seems to indicate further that he denies a pure in-itself pleasure (the form of Pleasure).

However, Plato hasn't been precise in his word usage throughout the *Philebus*. One instance of imprecision is found at 55c, where Socrates uses "pleasure" to refer to the mixed kind of pleasure *specifically* without making a distinction on naming.[19] The distinction between mixed pleasure (discussed here) and pure pleasure (not

---

[15] Plato, 51e.

[16] Also noted by Fletcher, "true pleasure" here seems not to be regarding pleasures with correct judgment, as says Socrates in 36c-d. Here, true pleasure is analogous to "pure/unmixed pleasure." An examination on whether correct judgment and pureness are analogous doesn't contribute to the subject of discussion in this essay, so I will not go into it here. See Fletcher, "Plato on Pure Pleasure and the Best Life," 127.

[17] Plato, *Philebus*, 51b.

[18] Plato, 54c.

[19] Plato, 55c.

included here) is frequently made across dialogues[20] and is more commonly recognized among papers that examine the *Philebus*, regardless of their authors' positions on whether Plato accepts hedonism.[21] If we recognize the distinction between mixed and pure pleasures while accepting an imprecise usage of the term "pleasure," we cannot claim a definite exclusion of the form of Pleasure at 54c.

At 55b-c in the *Philebus*, where Socrates says that it is illegitimate to "call the person who experiences not pleasure but pain *bad* while [they] are in pain, even if [they] were the best of all [people],"[22] Socrates refutes Philebus's claim about the equation between pleasure and Good by showing that pain and human virtue can co-exist. "Pain" in this passage is only understood as bodily pain, similar to the pain of a wound or the pain of thirst. For Socrates, the elevation of this kind of pain, though pleasurable, is evaluated separately from virtue, as the former concerns the body while the latter concerns the soul: one can be the most virtuous and yet suffer from extreme bodily pain. The word "pleasure" here, as referring only to the soothing of pain, is clearly only referring to mixed pleasure (as it is pain-dependent), though Socrates hasn't made a distinction. If Socrates is referring to only one type of pleasure using the general term "pleasure" in the same dialogue, then it is not too bold to allow the possibility for him doing the same at 54c, which is only one Stephanus number ahead.

As to the problem at 51b, where Socrates seems to use the

---

[20] In Book IX of the *Republic*, Socrates distinguishes between false pleasures that come necessarily from pain and true pleasures that don't come from pain (584b). In the *Gorgias*, 494c-e, Socrates makes the same distinction by showing Callicles that the pleasure of scratching an itch is false because the person who scratches ceases to experience the joy of scratching after the itch is gone.

[21] Different authors use different names for this distinction of good and bad pleasures, but they nevertheless show acknowledgment of such distinction. Fletcher and Shaw use "psychic" and "bodily," while Frede and Sanday use "true" and "false," "mixed" and "unmixed," etc. Shaw is writing on *Protagoras*, not on *Philebus*. I included him because he is referring to the same two kinds of pleasures. The list of works is included in the bibliography.

[22] Plato, *Philebus*, 55c.

description of the semi-divine pleasure to describe the entire category of pure pleasures, the nature of the problem is slightly different from that of 54c.[23] It is unlikely that Plato is using a term imprecisely here because Plato uses the term "in general," signifying an inclusion of *all* kinds of pure pleasures.[24] Emily Fletcher has addressed this concern in her paper, and she provides an alternative translation. Contrary to Frede's own, which interprets the original ancient Greek as "*in general* [. . .] are based on [. . .] painless lacks," Fletcher suggests that it should be translated to "*however many are based on* [. . .] painless lacks".[25] If this alternative translation is taken, we can infer that Plato is not referring to all pure pleasures but only to *some* pure pleasures, allowing space for two types of pleasures to exist as pure pleasures. Although I cannot comment on this alternative translation's legitimacy because I am ill-trained in reading ancient Greek, the understanding of Frede's reading of *Philebus* as denying both the form of Pleasure and Plato's acceptance of any kind of hedonism presented in her paper, "Rumpelstiltskin's Pleasures: True and False Pleasures in Plato's Philebus"[26] gives insight as to why she may have translated the text this way. If the form of Pleasure is already not considered, then there is only one type of pure pleasure left; hence, there is no need to account for the separation at 51b. According to Fletcher, both translations are possible, and since only hers allows for two kinds of pure pleasure that Plato has clearly expressed but aren't examined by Frede in her reading of *Philebus*, I think reading this passage with Fletcher's translation provides a more wholesome understanding.

---

[23] For context, I provide the quote again: "[true pleasures] *in general* [. . .] are based on imperceptible and painless lacks, while their fulfillments are perceptible and pleasant."

[24] Plato, 54c.

[25] Emily Fletcher, "Plato on Pure Pleasure and the Best Life," 122.

[26] Dorothea Frede, "Rumpelstiltskin's Pleasures: True and False Pleasures in Plato's Philebus," *Phronesis* 30, no. 2 (1985): 151-80. On page 151, Frede writes that "[Plato] refuses to regard [pleasure] as *a good*" and "pleasure is therefore often treated by Plato as a necessary evil." She writes in her footnotes on page 155 that "I am not persuaded by any of the arguments I have seen that Socrates or Plato who were so critical of the pleasures cherished by their contemporaries ever subscribed to an unconditional hedonistic position."

I want to spend the last part of this section discussing the pleasure of learning, which Plato describes as the less divine pure pleasure at 51e of *Philebus*. This type of pleasure is less divine because it exists independent of pain but is nevertheless felt through filling a lack. At 52a-c, where Socrates notes that "there is no such thing as hunger for learning connected with [the pleasure of learning], nor any pains that have their source in a hunger for learning"[27] and that "the lapse of knowledge never causes any pain,"[28] he implies that the filling of knowledge brings pleasure and joy to the learner while it doesn't originate from pain.

At 48e, Socrates and Protarchus agree that ignorance is a vice for the soul, and since all vices are painful, ignorance is painful for the soul. This may seem contradictory to the claim at 52b-c, where Socrates and Protarchus agree that the lack of knowledge doesn't cause any pain. I think these two claims are not contradictory because, at 48e, Socrates talks about double ignorance (ignorance of one's own ignorance), whereas Socrates is only referring to the state of a lack of knowledge at 52b-c. At 48e, Socrates and Protarchus describe three types of ignorance contrary to the Delphi oracle, "know thyself."[29] The three ways in which one can be ignorant of oneself are to think of oneself as having a) more money, b) a more beautiful appearance, and c) more virtuosity than the actuality.[30] All three accounts address a sort of double ignorance that is extensively addressed in the *Apology*, where Socrates realizes he is wiser than everyone he has examined *not* because he has more knowledge than everyone else but because he is the only person who knows his ignorance, thus doesn't regard himself as possessing any more knowledge than he does.[31] This type of ignorance is very different from a lack of knowledge. The former is a vice, and the latter is simply a condition: it is a vice for a person to think they have more money than they have, but it is only a condition for a person to be

---

[27] Plato, "Philebus," 52a.

[28] Plato, 52b.

[29] Plato, 48e.

[30] Plato, 48d-e.

[31] A similar instance can be found in the *Alcibiades*, 117d-118c.

poor. Therefore, the account of ignorance at 48e doesn't contradict the pleasure of learning as a pure (pain-free) pleasure addressed at 52a-c.

In summary, there are three types of pleasures—divine, less divine, and bodily—identified in the *Philebus*. The divine and less divine kinds are pure pleasures, and the bodily is a mixed pleasure. The two pure pleasures are both independent of pain; they are distinct because the divine kind is in-and-for itself, allowing them to reside in the ontology of the Forms. The less divine pleasure and the bodily pleasure, though the former is ontologically superior to the latter because the former is independent of pain, both reside in the ontological category of becomings. Both pureness and self-causing contribute ontologically, but since self-causing makes the distinction between Beings and becomings, it does most of the ontological work. Plato has specially made a connection between the less divine pleasure with the sense of smell, which, considering the significant extent to which Plato draws the parallel between knowing and seeing (vision), provides interesting insights into Plato's account of the epistemological potential of the philosopher. I will return to this point at the end of the essay.

Desire and Eros

In this section, I draw an ontological connection between this type of pleasure and the Eros that takes form in learning and claim that only the philosopher's pleasure and pursuit can transcend one's soul ontologically.

For we are becomings that exist intermediate to Beings and non-being, we cannot experience Beings due to an ontological incompatibility. Since the form of Pleasure is a Being, we do not experience them, meaning that we can only experience two out of the three pleasures: the pure but less divine and the mixed bodily pleasure. In the analogy of the divided line in Book VI of the *Republic*, Plato explains the ontological category of becomings in relation to Beings through a discussion of the intellectual and visible

realm.[32] The intellectual realm consists of Beings/Forms and thus is the ultimate Reality where everything is unchanging and immortal.[33] The visible realm, on the other hand, consists of flux, which comes into being and dies away.[34] In the *Philebus*, Plato uses "Limited" (or "Measured") and "unlimited" (or "unmeasured") to address Beings and becomings, respectively—the descriptions of these dyads of terms are largely identical.[35] For Plato, that which comes into being and dies away doesn't have a defined stable state; therefore, it exists and doesn't exist at the same time, and resides intermediate between what *is* (Beings) and what *is not* (non-beings).[36]

Eros and desire share the ontology as becomings with the less divine and the mixed pleasures because Eros originates from desire, and desire is necessarily dependent on a lack/need, which indicates that both are also necessarily not self-causing/self-sufficient. In the *Symposium*, Plato gives a detailed account of the birth of Eros. As the child of Poros (resource) and Penia (poverty), Eros is "by nature neither immortal nor mortal"[37] and is "always living with Need."[38] Further, Eros is "far from being delicate and beautiful,"[39] and because of his lack of Beauty, Eros "is in love with what is beautiful" and pursues it with "eagerness and zeal."[40] Since Eros exists intermediate between what-is and what-is-not, he exists in the same ontological category, as becomings, as us. Therefore, the conditions of Eros apply to humans. For Plato, Eros and desire is common for everyone and are both directed toward the same

---

[32] Plato, *Republic*, 508-509.

[33] Plato, 508-509.

[34] Plato, 508-509.

[35] Plato, *Philebus*, 16d-17b.

[36] A more detailed account of this topic would be more helpful. However, due to limited space and because this topic and the point that I am trying to use this argument to support, i.e., human beings are becomings and becomings are incompatible with Beings, are both quite commonly agreed upon, I do not plan to go further in-depth.

[37] Plato, *Symposium*, 203e.

[38] Plato, 203d.

[39] Plato, 203d.

[40] Plato, 206b.

thing—the Good.[41] At 205b, Diotima notes that "everyone is in love";[42] at 206a-b, Diotima and Socrates define being in love as "wanting to possess the Good forever,"[43] suggesting that being in love is a condition that must include a desire, which is pointed toward the Good.

Unlike the account of pleasure, there aren't different types of Eros and desires. In the *Symposium*, Diotima describes Eros as a driving force that points to many different things and is actualized through action in many different modalities. In Book IX of the *Republic*, Socrates shows that the different actualized actions will result in large differences using a comparative examination of the philosopher's life and the tyrant's life, as both are the product of love. The pursuits of both the philosopher and the tyrant are identical, as both desire the same thing. In the *Symposium*, Diotima says that the pursuit "is possible one way only: reproduction."[44] However, the subject of reproduction marks the difference in the result of the pursuit, which accounts for the large ontological difference between the philosopher and the tyrant.[45]

The philosopher's pursuit is directed toward Wisdom, and is actualized by intellectual reproduction that moves them ontologically up on the ladder of Love. The love of Wisdom, if we tie it back to the different ontological categories of pleasures, corresponds to the semi-divine pleasure of learning. However, the tyrant pursues their desire through a kind of lawless freedom that, in reality, enslaves the tyrant's soul through the never-ending fulfillment of bodily lack. According to Socrates, the Eros in the tyrant's soul becomes a kind of "madness that [. . .] destroys [the tyrants] [. . .] until it's purged [the tyrants] of moderation and filled him with imported madness."[46] As much as Eros can elevate one's

[41] I will examine whether this target of Eros and desire is the Good-in-itself or the apparent good in the next section.

[42] Plato, 205b.

[43] Plato, 206a.

[44] Plato, 207d.

[45] Plato, 207d.

[46] Plato, *Republic*, 573b.

soul ontologically in the case of the philosopher, it also has the power to destroy one's soul and move it closer to non-being. It is important to note that what marks the ontological difference between the tyrant and the philosopher is directly related to the corresponding kinds of pleasures that follow from their pursuit. The philosopher will not be enslaved by their desire because the lack that they are trying to fill is not painful, so even though the lack is always present, it doesn't cause pain. On the contrary, the lack of a tyrant is a painful one, and the pleasure resulting from the filling of such a lack is mixed. In the latter case, the lack drains all moderation of the tyrant's soul. It can never be filled, and since it is painful, one cannot stand it not being filled. The tyrant is then stuck in their endless pursuit of bodily comfort that shall never come, thus living a miserable life—a living nightmare.[47] As Plato later claims, the differences in the pleasure of the philosopher and that of the tyrant constitute a vast difference in how happy they are: the philosopher is 729 times happier than the tyrant.[48] This note further shows the differences between the philosopher and the tyrant, which yield the same conclusion that it must be the intellectual pleasure resulting from a love of Wisdom for the soul to pursue the Good. And because the pursuit results in happiness, the pursuit of the Good is a pleasurable one.

Do we desire the Good-in-itself?

This section discusses the object of the desire. In the *Symposium* and many other dialogues, Plato claims that all desires are pointed toward the Good. However, a problem arises. How can desire, as something necessarily lacks and thus is a becoming, be pointed toward the Good that is beyond Being? This question is pressing because only if we *can* desire the Good-in-itself can we count the pursuit of Eros as a pursuit of the Good-in-itself.

In Book VII of the *Republic*, Socrates asserts that the Good is

---

[47] Plato, 576b.
[48] Plato, 587e.

beyond Beings.[49] At the end of Book VI, Socrates assigns different faculties of comprehension to each ontological category through the divided line analogy: opinion opines becoming, and Knowledge knows Beings. Since each faculty of comprehension can only be applied to its ontological category, Knowledge cannot be applied to the Good, as the Good is "beyond Beings."[50] This further mean that the Good is unknowable. If the Good is not knowable, how can we be sure that our desire is directed toward the Good-in-itself, not the apparent good (our opinion of the Good)? I think the reluctance on whether we can indeed desire the Good-in-itself stems from two concerns: a) the desire to possess something must share the same ontology as its object, and b) we must know something to desire it. I attempt to address both concerns in this section.

The first concern is very reasonably inferred, as Plato has always been very strict with his assignment of ontological categories and with the insistence that different ontological categories don't interact. One example is again the strict correspondence between the faculty of comprehension and their objects of understanding (epistemology and ontology) presented in the previous paragraph. We can infer the same thing from Socrates's definition of Justice in the *Republic*: "having and doing one's own [work]."[51] This rule of specialization is the foundation of the city and, according to Socrates, prevents the city from failing. If Plato organizes his ontology, epistemology, and politics from the strict correspondence, no-interference rule, then it is very reasonable to infer that he does the same thing with desire. As is explicitly written, all desires originate from a lack; desires are necessarily becomings. There seems to be an ontological incompatibility for the desire to point toward the Good-in-itself, and it seems that the solution to this problem must press us to accept that the desire points only to the apparent good instead of the Good-in-itself.

However, it seems to be the case that desire is a special force that

---

[49] Plato, 509c.
[50] Plato, 507-509.
[51] Plato, 433b.

points not to its own ontological category but to some higher Being because desire intrinsically points *away* from itself to the things that are unattained. In the *Symposium*, Socrates states that we only desire what we don't have and that we want the good things that we currently hold to persist forever.[52] He says to Agathon that "it's *necessary* that […] a thing that desires desires something of which it is in need; otherwise, if it were not in need, it would not desire it."[53] This short excerpt of the dialogue between Socrates and Agathon provides important insights into what the desire we experience looks like. Socrates uses two examples to show that we don't desire what we already have. The first example is time-independent: a short person wants to be tall.[54] I interpret this example as being tall fitting more in the beauty standard: the short person wants to be beautiful, so they want to be tall. Tallness itself is not necessarily synonymous with the Good because it doesn't make sense for a very tall person, say, a seven-foot person, to want to be taller; it is desirable because the person who desires to be tall is shorter than the beauty standard. Therefore, it is not tallness that the person desires; it is Beauty. For Beauty is a Being, this person desires something ontologically superior to their own through their desire for height. The second example is time-dependent: strong and healthy people want to remain in their good states forever.[55] This example conveys its message pointing to the distinction of time-boundedness between the state of presently healthy and the possession of the form of Health. The state of presently healthy is a time-bounded state since one whose present state of health doesn't guarantee that they will remain healthy in the future. Since this state comes into being and dies away, it is between what-is and what-is-not, so it is a becoming. On the contrary, the state of Health that lasts forever signifies that it never dies away, so it exists not as a becoming but as a Being, which the desiring agent doesn't possess. Therefore, a desire for maintenance is also based on a lack and is pointed toward Beings.

---

[52] Plato, *Symposium*, 200a-e.
[53] Plato, 200b.
[54] Plato, 200b.
[55] Plato, 200b-d.

The second concern is also pressing: if we cannot know the object of our desire, how are we sure that the object of our desire is indeed the Good-in-itself, not what appears to us as good? Since desire is necessarily a becoming possessed by becomings (us), even if it can point toward the Good-in-itself, we can never claim this ability by comparing our knowledge of our desires and our knowledge of the Good. I suggest that Knowledge of the Good is unnecessary for our desire to be directed toward the Good.

Since our acknowledgment of the existence of our desire doesn't depend on our epistemic account of it, we cannot deny the possibility of our desires pointing toward the Good-in-itself simply because we do not know the Good-in-itself. In many dialogues, Socrates explores our limited knowledge of our desires by contrasting our desire, i.e., what we *actually* want, with what we *thought* we wanted.[56] Socrates attributes the discrepancy between what one really wants and what one thinks one wants to be caused by a lack of intelligence—it is because one doesn't know what one really wants that causes one to do the alternative, which only causes harm.[57] Therefore, though Plato writes extensively in the *Symposium* explaining that desire is the fundamental reason for all our actions, he doesn't think we know our desires, though we undoubtedly have them.

This claim is not as hard to accept as it seems to be. The desire for Beauty doesn't require us to know Beauty. We desire Beauty because we have a vague feeling that Beauty is a good thing to have, and this reason alone is sufficient for us to desire and pursue Beauty. In addition, as desire pursues only what it lacks and knowing is a permanent fulfillment of the lack, it is impossible for a desire to pursue something that it already has, meaning that not knowing the Good is crucial for it to be desired in the first place. Considering these points, I think we do not desire the apparent good; the object of our desire is necessarily the Good-in-itself. Since our desire is indeed directed to the Good-in-itself and desire shares its ontology

---

[56] Two examples are found in the *Meno,* 88-89, and the *Gorgias,* 477d-e.
[57] Plato, *Gorgias*, 467a.

with Eros, we can say that Eros's pursuit is also directed toward the Good-in-itself. However, not all kinds of pursuits are on the right track of ontological transcendence. Since the pleasure of learning is discovered to be taking form in the highest possible ontological status that becomings can achieve, only the Eros that takes the route of learning can allow one's soul to move closer to the Good.

Conclusion and the philosopher's pursuit

In this essay, I first examined the three kinds of pleasure listed in the *Philebus*, with a focus on the pure but less divine pleasure of learning. Then, I drew an ontological connection between this kind of pleasure and the Eros that actualizes with the love of wisdom to suggest that the philosopher's pursuit of the Good is the only known one that allows for an elevation of one's soul. However, since this hypothesis can only work if our desire's object is the Good-in-itself, not an apparent Good, I tried to show that this is indeed the case in the previous section. If my arguments hold, then I can conclude in saying that it is the Good-in-itself that is desired, pursued by Eros, and that this Good-in-itself is relatable to us because the most seemingly promising pursuit of it generates the best kind of pleasure among the variety of our experiences.

At the end of the essay, I want to open a suggestion on the philosopher's pursuit of the Good. As written by Plato, the pursuit of learning is a semi-divine pure pleasure, and it is connected to the sense of smell.[58] This account gives insight into Plato's account of the epistemological potential of the philosopher because, as opposed to the association between learning and smelling, knowing is associated with seeing. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato writes that the doctrine of recollection is the "recollection of the things our soul saw when it was traveling with god";[59] in the cave allegory, the prisoner who goes out of the cave and *sees* the world *knows* reality;[60] in the divided line, vision is also used as an analogy for the gain of

---

[58] See Plato, *Philebus*, 51e, as well as Plato, *Republic*, 589b-c.

[59] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249c.

[60] Plato, *Republic*, 516e-517a.

Knowledge in the intelligible realm.[61] It is quite explicit that Plato equates knowledge with the sense of sight. What does he mean, then, to say that the pleasure of learning is a pleasure of the sense of smell? I think the most straightforward interpretation of this claim is that Plato denies the epistemic potential of Knowledge for the philosopher, which aligns with similar claims made in many other dialogues: in the *Meno*, Socrates claims that he doesn't know the virtues;[62] in the *Gorgias*, Socrates claims, "My account is always the same: I don't know how these things are;[63] in the *Apology*, Socrates again claims that he knows nothing.[64]

It seems that the philosopher's pursuit is *not* a seeing one but a blind and smelling one. It is important for me to note that, though the philosopher's pursuit does elevate the philosopher's soul ontologically, it is never an elevation so significant that it transcends the soul from becoming to Being. Lastly, I want to suggest that this elevation, though small macroscopically, is huge when applied because the life that one chooses to live according to pure pleasure includes much more joy than the life that results from the otherwise decision. Therefore, though Knowledge may not be guaranteed, the pleasure that results from loving Wisdom is more than adequate for this life to be a desirable one.

Bibliography

Fletcher, Emily. "Plato on Pure Pleasure and the Best Life." *Phronesis* 59, no. 2 (2014): 113–42.

Frede, Dorothea. "Rumpelstiltskin's Pleasures: True and False Pleasures in Plato's Philebus." *Phronesis* 30, no. 2 (1985): 151–80.

Plato. "Alcibiades." In *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and Douglas S. Hutchinson, translated by D. S.

---

[61] Plato, 509-510.
[62] Plato, *Meno*, 58c-d.
[63] Plato, *Gorgias*, 509a.
[64] Plato, *Apology*, 21d-e.

Hutchinson, 557-595. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

Plato. "Apology." In *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and Douglas S. Hutchinson, translated by G. M. A. Grube, 17-36. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

Plato. "Gorgias." In *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and Douglas S. Hutchinson, translated by D. J. Zeyl, 761-869. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

Plato. "Meno." In *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and Douglas S. Hutchinson, translated by G. M. A. Grube, 870-897. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

Plato. "Phaedrus." In *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and Douglas S. Hutchinson, translated by A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff, 506-556. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

Plato. "Philebus." In *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and Douglas S. Hutchinson, translated by D. Frede, 398-456. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

Plato. "Republic." In *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and Douglas S. Hutchinson, translated by G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve, 1077-1155. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

Plato. "Symposium." In *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and Douglas S. Hutchinson, translated by A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff, 457-506. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

Sanday, Eric. "Truth and Pleasure in the Philebus." *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 36, no. 2 (2015): 347–70.

Shaw, J. Clerk. *Plato's Anti-Hedonism and the Protagoras*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Enlightenment and Colonialism: Evaluating the Emancipatory Potential of Modern Rationality in the Face of Postmodern Critique

Rivers Lenholt is an undergraduate senior majoring in Philosophy at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. They are also a Division II student-athlete and member of the Rollins Men's Basketball Team.
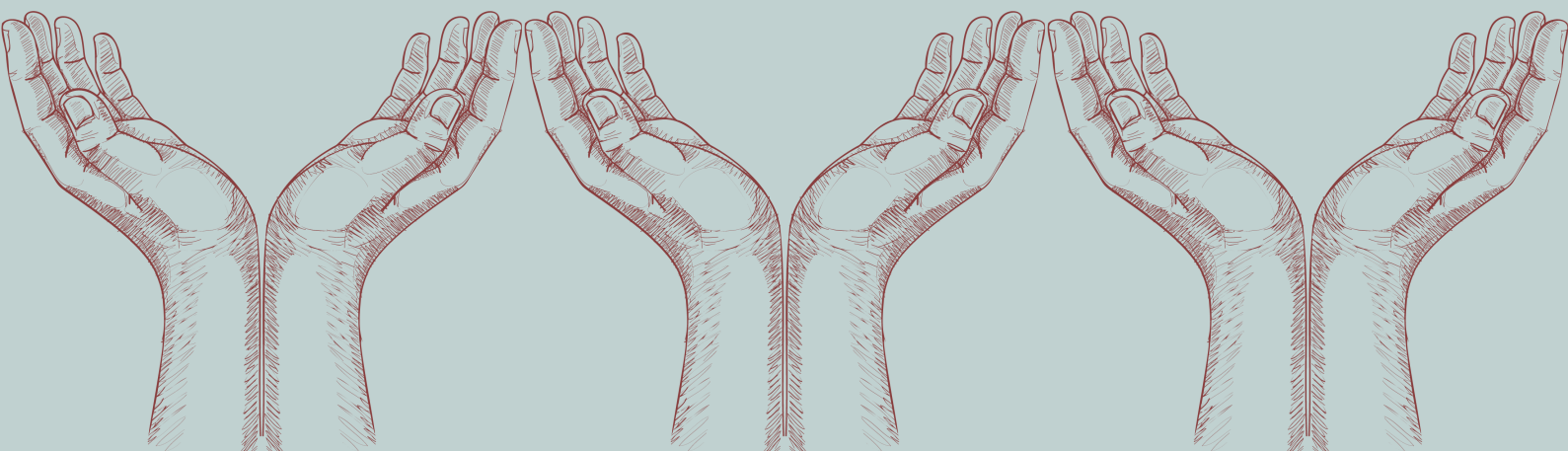
Since its inception, the philosophical project of postmodernism has been deeply rooted in political activism, aiming to deconstruct the notions of reason, truth, and reality which have served to justify and at times facilitate rampant forms of oppression in modern societies. Coming to constitute an "activist strategy against the coalition of reason and power" in this way, postmodern thinkers have been highly critical of the emancipatory promises of the Enlightenment, often illuminating the ways in which modernity has condoned, exacerbated, or created conditions of injustice and challenging the notion of modernization as progress.[1] A cursory examination of the legacy of modern colonialism lends considerable credence to these critiques, as modernity has seen numerous European states pilfer foreign lands, exploit and desecrate native populations, and establish rigid systems of white supremacy around the world despite staking claim to ideals of freedom, equality, and justice. This miserable failure in realizing the liberation heralded by rationality, which has tended to validate rather than eliminate subjugation, substantiates the postmodern assessment that Enlightenment ideals are irreparably poisoned by Eurocentrism and must be dismantled in order to undo modern systems of oppression. However, taking a broader look at history reveals that societies have attempted to expand their borders and impose their cultures on others throughout the course of human civilization for a variety of political, economic, ideological, and religious reasons.[2] This perspective begs the question of whether European colonialism developed directly out of the Enlightenment or merely misappropriated its ideals as justification, the answer to which has implications for the merit of a modernist approach to political activism in addressing current and future injustices. In deconstructing the notion of colonialism as a uniquely modern phenomenon and adjudicating postmodern criticism of the political consequences of modern ideals, this paper will demonstrate how the discourse between Habermas and

---

[1] Stephen R. C. Hicks. "What Postmodernism Is." In *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* (Roscoe: Ockham's Razor, 2004), 3.
[2] Margaret Kohn and Kavita Reddy, "Colonialism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.

Foucault challenges the location of postmodernism outside the inner dialectic of Enlightenment, and in doing so defends the emancipatory potential of reason as a tool to confront and upend oppression.

Although particularly rampant in the age of modernity, the practice of colonialism greatly predates the modern period and transcends the boundaries of the European subcontinent, representing a "transhistorical and unspecific" phenomenon in the context of world history.[3] In scholarship on the subject, the term colonialism has largely come to be associated solely with the modern European colonial project, despite referring to affairs which are "global in scope" and "of relevance to human societies everywhere."[4] In contrast, the term imperialism has primarily been used to refer to instances of societal expansion by non-European cultural groups such as the Manchu, Zulus, or Sikhs and ancient societies such as the Romans. There is an etymological basis for the distinction between these two terms which indicates the presence or absence of settlers on acquired land, but use in the literature tends to obfuscate this definitional divergence by presenting colonialism as a uniquely European phenomenon and imperialism as a uniquely non-European phenomenon.[5] This arbitrary connotational distinction in the use of these concepts obscures the extent to which modern and pre-modern as well as European and non-European instances of sociocultural expansion have been similar.

Comparison of the modern European colonial project with cases of both non-European and ancient imperialism reveals certain differences in scale and technique, but does not uncover dissimilarities which warrant the terminological distinction often employed, ultimately serving to deconstruct the conception of colonialism as a modern phenomenon. Modern improvements in

[3] Rhys Jones and Richard Phillips, "Unsettling Geographical Horizons: Exploring Premodern and Non-European Imperialism," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 1 (2005): 143.
[4] Michael Adas, "Imperialism and Colonialism in Comparative Perspective," *The International History Review* 20, no. 2 (1998): 371.
[5] Margaret Kohn and Kavita Reddy, "Colonialism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.

navigational technology enlarged the scope of colonial and imperialist initiatives, increasing the average degree of cultural difference between colonizer and colonized, but methods of asserting power and establishing domination were largely sustained.[6] In examining the Manchu dynasty as a powerful metropole which exercised colonial power over a plethora of cultural groups in China for centuries, Adas characterizes the exploitation of political, ethnic, and religious differences in conquest as a universal technique of territorial expansion employed in both premodern and non-European contexts.[7] Furthermore, in evaluating the dynamics of the ancient Roman Empire and premodern colonial expansion in medieval Europe, Jones and Phillips advance the contention that the categories of premodern and modern colonialism vary as much within as between each other in regard to both scale and technique, rendering a distinction between the two unwarranted.[8] They especially challenge the notion that modern colonialism uniquely involves the deployment of difference to solidify power structures, while still acknowledging the novel ways in which Europeans constructed difference through the employment of concepts like race. The purpose of these arguments is not to excuse the rigid forms of oppression implemented by European colonial powers or make light of the extent to which native populations were ravaged by modern expansionist initiatives, but merely to locate these horrors in the broader historical context of imperialist domination. This frame of reference weakens the connection between Enlightenment ideals and colonial initiatives by demonstrating the existence of varied expansionist techniques of power both prior to modernity and outside of Western civilization.

With the significance of premodern and non-European colonialism established, Enlightenment ideals can further be

---

[6] Margaret Kohn and Kavita Reddy. "Colonialism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.

[7] Michael Adas, "Imperialism and Colonialism in Comparative Perspective," *The International History Review* 20, no. 2 (1998).

[8] Rhys Jones and Richard Phillips, "Unsettling Geographical Horizons: Exploring Premodern and Non-European Imperialism," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 1 (2005).

vindicated from their purported oppressive colonial consequences by examining the role of modern philosophical thought in the European colonial project. To start, the onset of modern European expansionist practice predates the development of Enlightenment thought and originally operated under the pretense of religious conversion, rather than the more secular mission of "civilizing" foreign peoples which would become a prominent justificatory narrative throughout the modern period.[9] In the early 16th century, Spanish colonization of the Americas was explicitly rationalized by the imperative of spreading Christianity, nearly two centuries before the development of Enlightenment thought. These religious origins provide further evidence against the claim that expansionist policy developed directly out of Enlightenment thought, supporting again the idea that modern ideals were misappropriated as a justification for activities which they inherently contradicted. The stadial theory of historical development did, however, eventually replace religious fervor as the primary rationale of colonialism, employing the modern ideal of progress facilitated by rationality to perniciously frame political domination and economic exploitation as humanitarian assistance. This ideology led to conflations of conquest with the progress of civilization and the growth of European power with the growth of reason, freedom, and humanitarianism.[10] Although this utilization undoubtedly implicates Enlightenment thought in the injustices of European colonialism to some degree, criticism of colonialism continued as modern philosophy developed. Thinkers like Kant and Diderot heavily criticized the inherent contradiction of colonial enslavement and exploitation under the banner of ideals such as freedom and equality.

Postmodern critiques of Enlightenment thought tend to highlight the ways in which its ideals justify or conceal oppression but ignore the ways in which the same ideals were used to construct

[9] Margaret Kohn and Kavita Reddy, "Colonialism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.
[10] Larry L. Langford, "Postmodernism and Enlightenment, or, Why Not a Fascist Aesthetics?" *SubStance* 21, no. 1 (1992).

resistance to power structures and means of liberation. Jonathan Israel levels the critique that postmodern deconstructions often attack a limited conception of the Enlightenment which focuses on politically conservative thinkers such as Locke, Newton, and Hume but ignore more radical thinkers such as Spinoza, Diderot, and Bayle.[11] This characterization is presented as an incomplete evaluation of the intellectual arena of Enlightenment which obscures its true merit in facilitating emancipation from autocracy, intolerance, and prejudice through the promotion of equality, democracy, liberty, and secular morality. Within this Radical Enlightenment, constituted of thinkers who have been relegated to margins of the retrospective characterization of modern philosophy, lies the foundation of anti-colonialism and racial, sexual, and ethnic egalitarianism. Taking this broader scope of the character of Enlightenment thought substantiates the possibility of a progressive politics rooted in modern rationality, demonstrating its capacity to be utilized for programs of both emancipation and domination.[12] This dichotomous use supports a characterization of reason as a tool that can be applied toward different ends, rather than an inherently oppressive notion that relies on a Eurocentric subject.

In analyzing the relationship of Enlightenment thought to the broader historical phenomenon of colonialism, the consequential link between modern ideals and colonial oppression heralded by postmodern deconstructions has been sufficiently addressed, making room for an evaluation of the political merit of modern rationality in addressing colonialism and its aftereffects. With Enlightenment ideals exonerated to some degree from the accusation of directly giving rise to the colonial project, the philosophical discourse on the emancipatory potential of Enlightenment moving forward can now be examined. In dialogue with prominent postmodern thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida, Habermas emerges as a staunch defender of the sustained utility of

---

[11] Jonathan Israel, "Enlightenment! Which Enlightenment?" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 3 (2006).

[12] Larry L. Langford, "Postmodernism and Enlightenment, or, Why Not a Fascist Aesthetics?" *SubStance* 21, no. 1 (1992).

modernism in facilitating equality and freedom in human society. In works such as Modernity: An Unfinished Project and The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity, he considers seriously postmodern critiques of rationality and acknowledges the many failings and contradictions of modernity, but ultimately affirms that the emancipatory potential of the modern project has yet to be realized and therefore should not be abandoned.[13]

Habermas locates the failures of modernity, which would include European colonial domination, in the uneven development of the realms of science, law, and art which became differentiated as a result of modernization, with advancement in the scientific-technological sphere outpacing that of the moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive spheres due to the employment of instrumental reason by capitalism.[14] Distortion in the balance of progress across these areas has allowed for the utilization of reason in the service of the repressive initiatives which have abounded in the modern period and been heavily criticized by the postmodern camp. Habermas asserts that prioritizing the development of communicative rationality and limiting the relative power of instrumental rationality can salvage the promise of modernity by bringing the domains of morality, legality, and art up to speed with science and technology. This development can shorten the gap between expert cultures and the public domain which has resulted from the stunted growth of the moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive spheres, creating

[13] Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project." In *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, eds. Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: The MIT Press), 1997. See also Gunter Zoeller, "Habermas on Modernity and Postmodernism," *The Iowa Review* 18, no. 3 (1988).

[14] Thomas L. Dumm, "The Politics of Post-Modern Aesthetics: Habermas Contra Foucault," *Political Theory* 16, no. 2 (1988). See also Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project." In *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, eds. Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: The MIT Press), 1997.

circumstances in which the "expert culture is appropriated from the perspective of the lifeworld."[15]

The conception of reason that Habermas emphasizes in this assessment concedes to the postmodern deconstruction of the metaphysical status of rationality in a universal autonomous subject, but still proclaims the universality of rational standards as central and necessary to any meaningful intersubjective discourse.[16] In this way, he redeems the merits of reason by characterizing the a-rationality of philosophical postmodernism as a non sequitur from the deconstruction of classical-modernist rationality, modifying reason to be more accommodating of material circumstances. He aligns with the postmodern consensus in rejecting the existence of an a priori rationality grounded in the Cartesian philosophy of the subject, acknowledging the effect which the "contingencies of language, embodiment, and history" have on reason, but denies the sentiment that there are no "criteria by which to judge propositional truth, normative rightness, subjective truthfulness, and aesthetic harmony."[17] To this extent, his general theory of communicative rationality incorporates the critical insights of postmodern deconstructions of reason while simultaneously attempting to reclaim its integral significance in constructing any sort of discursive knowledge. By increasing awareness of the ways in which socio-political forces can shape reason into an instrument of oppression yet maintaining the ability of rational discourse to address these issues and formulate truth through communicative action, this position constitutes a solid argument in favor of the utility of reason in facilitating freedom and combating oppression.

Despite the strength of this formulation, Shaswati Mazumdar attempts to expose undercurrents of naivete and Eurocentrism in Habermas's unrelenting assertion that the development of

[15] Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project." In *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, eds. Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: The MIT Press), 1997, 52.

[16] Gunter Zoeller, "Habermas on Modernity and Postmodernism," *The Iowa Review* 18, no. 3 (1988).

[17] James Schmidt. "Habermas and the Discourse of Modernity," *Political Theory* 17, no. 2 (1989), 317.

communicative reason will realize the emancipatory potential of modernity.[18] In examining the alleged potential of both modern and postmodern thought to justify systems of domination, the criticism is leveled against Habermas that his tunnel vision on the emancipation promised by Enlightenment excludes a consideration of difference and relies on a universal autonomous subject for which there is no practical conception, ignoring the social, economic, and political conditions that constrain the realm of communication. In this way, Habermas's metacritique of postmodern deconstructions of reason and history are portrayed to be redundant reformulations of the ideals being challenged. This criticism seems to ignore the nuanced rejection of subjective reason within Habermas's theory of communicative rationality as a standard of intersubjectivity, underestimating the extent to which this conception modifies the concept of a priori rationality to account for social construction. While the insights of postmodernism certainly warrant a vigilant watch for the pernicious influence of Eurocentric bias in rational endeavors, Habermas's modified conception of reason seems to allow for this awareness without sacrificing the utility of employing rationality in pursuit of improving human circumstance.

Within his general defense of the unrealized liberatory possibilities of rational modernism, Habermas constructs a salient argument against postmodern attacks on rationality by revealing the reliance of these assessments on the very notion which they deconstruct. In this way, thinkers such as Derrida and Foucault "commit a performative contradiction in their critiques of modernism by employing concepts and methods that only modern reason can provide."[19] This metacritique builds on the necessity of reason in intersubjective communication by alluding to the logical pitfalls of a relativism that lacks any standard of adjudication, pointing out "the precarious status of a position that totally rejects privileging any position and therefore cannot account for the

---

[18] Shaswati Mazumdar, "Habermas and the Post Modernist Critique of the Enlightenment," *Social Scientist* 20, no. 12 (1992).

[19] Gary Aylesworth, "Postmodernism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta.

validity of itself."[20] To a certain extent, this line of argumentation locates philosophical postmodernism within the lineage of modernity itself, which via Enlightenment thought has always contained a perpetual clash with itself in the pursuit of eliminating dogma and misunderstanding.[21]

Rather than a static set of abiding principles, the primary characteristic of Enlightenment thought has been portrayed as an internal dialectic which "continually attempts to recreate the conditions of freedom and emancipation."[22] Recognition of this empirical spirit and critical orientation in many ways blurs the antagonistic distinction between modernism and postmodernism, which is "predicated on a reduced and inadequate understanding of philosophical modernism's self-critical potential."[23] Rather than rejecting the merit of postmodern critiques of Enlightenment, there is a case to be made for the incorporation of such critical works into this internal dialectic, preserving optimism toward progress and freedom without falling victim to the naïveté that has allowed the contradictory injustices of modernity to be condoned and facilitated by instrumental reason. Habermas's defense of modernity by means of communicative rationality seems to effectively heed the warning of postmodern insights in a way that recognizes both the dangers and advantages of modern ideals and attempts to limit the former while multiplying the latter.

While Foucault was a direct opponent of Habermas in argumentative exchanges over the merits of Enlightenment throughout the late 20th century, certain Foucauldian positions lend credence to this deconstruction of the characterization of postmodernism as a distinct philosophical approach that succeeds in discarding the tenets of modernity. Despite his position as one of the most prominent thinkers of the philosophical movement

---

[20] Gunter Zoeller, "Habermas on Modernity and Postmodernism," *The Iowa Review* 18, no. 3 (1988), 154.

[21] Larry L. Langford, "Postmodernism and Enlightenment, or, Why Not a Fascist Aesthetics?" *SubStance* 21, no. 1 (1992).

[22] Langford, "Postmodernism," *SubStance* 21, no. 1 (1992), 26.

[23] Gunter Zoeller, "Habermas on Modernity and Postmodernism," *The Iowa Review* 18, no. 3 (1988), 151.

towards postmodernism, as his genealogical works succeed in deconstructing modern metanarratives of progress and notions of the subject, Foucault actively rejected the postmodern label during his lifetime.[24] While this sentiment could merely be indicative of a distaste for constraints of labeling, Foucault's commentary on modernity in the later years of his life exposes a homage to the spirit of Enlightenment thought which tracks with his refusal of the postmodern title. In these later works, such as his 1984 analysis of the seminal Kantian essay on Enlightenment, Foucault advances a conception of modernity as an attitude which entails a permanent criticism of the current historical epoch, representing a state never truly attained but always to be achieved.[25] In this way, the critical lens Foucault applies to the narrative of historical progress facilitated by rationality can be seen as operating within the internal dialectic of Enlightenment.

This blurring of the boundaries between the modern and postmodern can be made to support the unrealized emancipatory potential of Enlightenment thought which Habermas so vehemently defends, allowing for the incorporation of postmodern arguments as a critical component of rational progress. The deployment of rationality in modern societies, despite being intended at least explicitly to facilitate freedom, equality, and justice, has undoubtedly contributed to Western civilization's commitment of atrocities around the world, a reality which one has to look no farther than the extent of European colonial domination to observe. However, while the scale of these exploitative endeavors may have increased with the modern development of instrumental reason, the expansionist subjugation of foreign peoples was not an invention of modernity, and modern reason has been employed as much to criticize these brutalities as to justify them. These realizations serve to frame modernity's relationship with colonial domination within Foucault's conception of Enlightenment as a perpetually critical

---

[24] Jonathan Simon, "Between Power and Knowledge: Habermas, Foucault, and the Future of Legal Studies," *Law and Society Review* 28, no. 4 (1994).

[25] Ehrhard Bahr, "In Defense of Enlightenment: Foucault and Habermas," *German Studies Review* 11, (1988).

attitude whose end is always yet to be realized.[26] The emancipatory promise of Enlightenment was never to rationally construct conditions of freedom, justice, and equality out of thin air, but to apply the tool of reason to bettering the human condition in the direction of these ideals, which may never fully come to fruition. As such, recognition of the ways in which reason has created or exacerbated injustice only aids the Enlightenment project in correcting errors in application.

Habermas defines the modernity born from Enlightenment thought in terms of its opposition to dogmatic tradition and subscription to the ideal of infinite human progress.[27] The combination of these components does not necessarily entail a rational linear progression to utopia, but rather suggests a continual process of criticizing the established practices of the past in order to improve upon or deconstruct them going forward. Under this definition, critical postmodern analyses, such as Foucault's observations of the inevitable structuring of knowledge by power, present themselves as the oppositive mechanism of this characterization.[28] Foucault's examinations of power are critical but never proscriptive and he has claimed to raise "the question of power by grasping it where it is exercised and manifested, without trying to find general or fundamental formulations."[29] As such, his deconstruction does not necessarily condemn the possibility of developing a freer knowledge, but only locates and describes the plethora of ways in which power has shaped and employed truth and reason throughout the modern age. By raising awareness of the pernicious social forces which prevent rational discourse from living up to the ideal of neutrality, this historical critique complements the

---

[26] Ehrhard Bahr, "In Defense of Enlightenment: Foucault and Habermas," *German Studies Review* 11, (1988).

[27] Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project." In *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, eds. Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: The MIT Press), 1997.

[28] Ehrhard Bahr, "In Defense of Enlightenment: Foucault and Habermas," *German Studies Review* 11, (1988).

[29] Jonathan Simon, "Between Power and Knowledge: Habermas, Foucault, and the Future of Legal Studies," *Law and Society Review* 28, no. 4 (1994), 954.

positions of more traditionally modern perspectives on reason, allowing for recognition and confrontation of the intrusion of power on rational discourse. With value-free knowledge as an end always to be attained but never truly achieved, just as the state of Enlightenment, the postmodern constructivist approach can help to eliminate contradictions in the employment of reason and ultimately contribute to the rational improvement of society. In this way, the philosophical commitments of Habermas and Foucault can be seen as interacting counterbalances which drive forward the perpetual struggle inherent to the internal dialectic of Enlightenment.

In conclusion, the incorporation of both modern ideals and postmodern critiques into the internal dialectic of Enlightenment creates a strong foundation from which to construct a progressive politics aimed at eliminating systems of domination such as colonialism. The unification of the "hyper- and pessimistic activism" bred by Foucault's vigilance in detecting the pernicious influence of power and the normative optimism inherent in Habermas's theory of communicative reason combines the utility of both approaches in this respect, avoiding a crisis of motivation without fostering ignorance of the perils which unchecked rationality can create.[30] This formulation affirms the characterization of modernity as an unfinished project and asserts the continued emancipatory potential of Enlightenment reason.
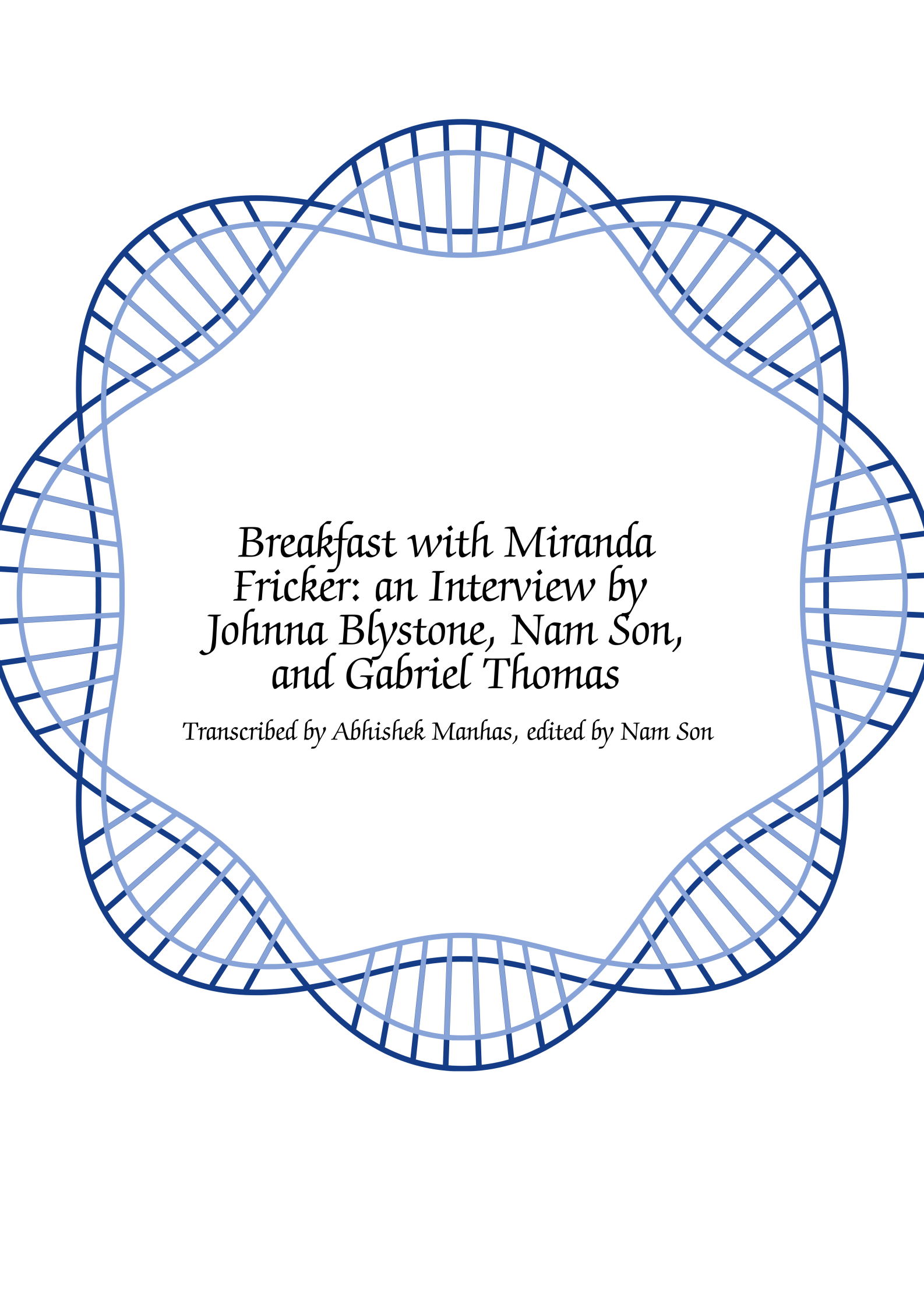
Bibliography

Adas, Michael. "Imperialism and Colonialism in Comparative Perspective." *The International History Review* 20, no. 2 (1998): 371-388.

Aylesworth, Gary. "Postmodernism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta.

Bahr, Ehrhard. "In Defense of Enlightenment: Foucault and Habermas." *German Studies Review* 11, (1988): 97-109.

---

[30] Thomas L. Dumm, "The Politics of Post-Modern Aesthetics: Habermas Contra Foucault," *Political Theory* 16, no. 2 (1988), 218.

Dumm, Thomas L. "The Politics of Post-Modern Aesthetics: Habermas Contra Foucault." *Political Theory* 16, no. 2 (1988): 209-228.

Habermas, Jürgen. "Modernity: An Unfinished Project." In *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Edited by Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves and Seyla Benhabib, 38-55. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997.

Hicks, Stephen R. C. "What Postmodernism Is." In *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault*, 1-22. Roscoe: Ockham's Razor, 2004.

Israel, Jonathan. "Enlightenment! Which Enlightenment?" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 3 (2006): 523-545.

Jones, Rhys and Richard Phillips. "Unsettling Geographical Horizons: Exploring Premodern and Non-European Imperialism." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 1 (2005): 141-161.

Kohn, Margaret and Kavita Reddy. "Colonialism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.

Langford, Larry L. "Postmodernism and Enlightenment, or, Why Not a Fascist Aesthetics?" *SubStance* 21, no. 1 (1992): 24-43.

Mazumdar, Shaswati. "Habermas and the Post Modernist Critique of the Enlightenment." *Social Scientist* 20, no. 12 (1992): 53-66.

Schmidt, James. "Habermas and the Discourse of Modernity." *Political Theory* 17, no. 2 (1989).

Simon, Jonathan. "Between Power and Knowledge: Habermas, Foucault, and the Future of Legal Studies." *Law and Society Review* 28, no. 4 (1994): 947-964.

Zoeller, Gunter. "Habermas on Modernity and Postmodernism." *The Iowa Review* 18, no. 3 (1988): 151-156.

Breakfast with Miranda Fricker: an Interview by Johnna Blystone, Nam Son, and Gabriel Thomas

Transcribed by Abhishek Manhas, edited by Nam Son

One morning in late October when—as the hour neared nine—remnants of the chilly nocturnal breaths responsible for having gilded Wooster's sidewalks in beds of oak foliage the night before were starting to dissipate, the four of us made our way downtown to The Leaf for some food and warmth. Upon our entrance, the restaurant appeared unbusy, its air aggressively perfumed with eggs, coffee, cheese and a low murmur of muted conversations. We sat down in a nice, roomy booth, ordered some food, and began our discussion.

This interview was conducted by Sapere Aude's treasurer and editor, Gabriel Thomas; philosophy major, Johnna Blystone; and the present narrator, Nam Son. Our distinguished interviewee is Julius Silver Professor of Philosophy at New York University and Co-Director of the New York Institute for Philosophy, Dr. Miranda Fricker.

Nam Son. Perhaps we should start with a question about your lecture yesterday . . .

Dr. Fricker had given the 17th annual Lindner Lecture in Ethics at the College of Wooster the evening before in Wishart Hall, on the dynamic historicism of Bernard Williams.

Nam Son. . . . I am wondering how Bernard Williams's defense of internal reasons plays into the following idea from the lecture— that reflection "destroys" ethical knowledge by turning it into historical knowledge. I am also curious to know if the idea rather appeals to an objectivist standard, since it implies the possibility of putting our moral judgments out there for everyone to reflect on and to say, "that's right" or "that's wrong." It seems to me that if this should be the case, then his position might not be a relativist one after all.

Dr. Fricker joked that she might need her steamed milk, which she had ordered as a supplement to her coffee, before she could answer the question.

Dr. Miranda Fricker. There are actually different questions in what you just said, so maybe we can start with internal reasons. And I can hardly believe that I'm doing this before I've had any coffee,

because the concept of internal reasons is one those really difficult things to explain!

Basically, his conception of practical reasons, including ethical reasons, is that there is no such thing as a reason which is a consideration that applies to you externally. From items that either are in your subjective motivational set already—so, things you already care about that motivate you to do or to not do—or those that *would* be there, once you have fixed your beliefs and your practical reasoning in a really minimal way . . .

At this point the waitress interrupted us to bring out our food, smelling hot and tasty. Now armed with her hot latte, Dr. Fricker continued.

Dr. Miranda Fricker. . . . As I was saying, with his conception of internal reason, in order for me to count as having a reason to do anything, there has to be some connection with a motivation that's either already in my motivational set, or that would be there if I corrected the false beliefs or bad reasoning.

Now that *sounds* like a highly subjectivist conception of what your reasons are, and sometimes people read it as if this account were saying, "whatever motivates you is your reason." But Willliams would say that this is not strictly true. Very often, there will be someone who seems to us to have bad practical reasons or bad ethical reasons, and yet it will turn out that they do have some motivations *from which* there would be a sound route to the reasons we think they should have; they are just not seeing it. So we can easily be mistaken about what our own reasons are. It's not just, "my reasons are whatever I want them to be," no. Actually, you do have certain basic motivations, and it can be difficult to discover what they are! You'll have to iron out your false beliefs, get enough information, think it through *imaginatively*—Williams said that too.

And then at the end of the day, if you're talking to someone who just doesn't value x as much as you do and prioritizes something else—if, at the notional end of this very long

discussion, you really both don't have any false beliefs or errors in your practical reasoning—then it turns out, you *are* people who value different things! And it's just hot air to say that, well, there are external reasons for you to value this thing more than that thing. There aren't any. *This* person does not have any reason to behave in *that* way.

But Williams was also ready to say this: evil people—really morally bad people, etc.—what is so bad about them is that they *don't* have any reason to behave better. Most of us when we behave morally badly, we do have reasons to behave better, hence our feelings of shame and so on. But those people don't. And we just have to face that and live up to it, rather than engage in a rationalistic fantasy that there are reasons out there that apply to them anyways. *That* was the fantasy, he thought.

So that was his view of practical reasons in general, including ethical ones. Now, you were asking me, Son, how that relates to the business of rational reflection being capable of destroying ethical knowledge. And I think it *does* relate to it, indirectly, because his internalism about reasons is part and parcel of his overall non-objectivist position about ethical values and values in general.

As I was putting it yesterday, slightly worried that I'm imposing an "-ism" on Bernard Williams that might have annoyed him—so please forgive me, Professor Williams—I basically see it as all of a piece, that our reasons, values, and the concepts we use accordingly to make discriminations in the world, are *all* a social construct. They are all an artifact of human beings living together in a particular time and place. So *if* there were external reasons, that would be a complete misfit with this social constructionist picture, and *if* there were external reasons, it would not be possible for rational reflection to destroy ethical knowledge, because ethical knowledge would be understood as going with objective reasons, external reasons that apply to me regardless of anything I would ever be motivated by.

Furthermore, whatever concepts that we would use to make discriminations in the world according to those reasons *could not* be destroyed—because they would be real and externally given! So, Williams's non-objectivism about values and the internal reason thesis are all of a piece.

I thanked her for the comprehensive answer. The four of us then gave ourselves time to eat and engage in more informal topics, until Gabriel—now newly vitalized by his bowl of fruit—pulled us back into philosophy.

Gabriel Thomas. There is this one piece by Bernard Williams that I am familiar with, *The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality.* I am doing my senior thesis on the idea of Death as a necessary evil, and this piece, needless to say, is incredibly influential. Now, the internal reason that we talked about earlier seems to connect with categorical desires and how they fit into personal identity. Am I right in thinking this?

Dr. Miranda Fricker. Yes, absolutely, that's right. What's interesting is his use of the word, "categorical," in relation to categorical desires, is deliberately provocative, because the word belongs to Kant—and the idea is that there are reasons that apply to you no matter what. They are, exactly, external reasons. They apply regardless of your desires, your interests, your habits, *merely* in virtue of the fact that you're a rational being.

So Williams said: Look, some of our desires are unshiftable. They're part of who we are, and part of what makes our lives make sense, part of what makes my life *my* life, and not your life. In using the word "categorical" there, it's very much provocative and on purpose. He thinks there can be—in the case of reasons too—reasons which he might use the word "categorical" to describe in the sense of *practical necessity.*

One of his long theses that he also argues for is this: Kantianism in the loose sense of the morality system, misreads the nature of practical necessity, i.e., when a human being *just* must do something, or just cannot do something. So if your

conscience makes you hold fast—even though everyone is telling you, you've got to betray this friend because everything hangs on it for you, your whole future, etc., and you say, no; I can't do that; I'm just not going to betray that person—that is functioning for you as a piece of practical necessity. Now, to someone else, it might not be functioning that way. They might be like, whatever, they will get over it, my whole life depends on it anyway. But for you, this is something you can't do, and won't do. So for you, this is functioning categorically. It is a piece of practical necessity.

The Ancient Greek world was full of practical necessity, you know. Ajax comes back from the war, and is humiliated because he has delusions of fighting men when in reality he's just killing all the sheep and becomes a laughingstock, and he kills himself out of practical necessity! Not a happy story. But the idea is that practical necessity was alive and well in the Ancient world and they did not have the notion of categorical reasons that Kant had. We can have the idea of practical necessity, and of the conscience forbidding you to do something, and it functions categorically *for you*. You will not betray this friend. But what we should realize, Williams thinks, is that it's essentially personal. It's essentially *first-personal*, if one can put it this way. It's your reason. So he cheekily used that word, "categorical," about desires, as part of that picture, i.e., that we should not let the morality system mindset distorts where practical necessity comes from for a human being—it really comes from something personal, such as a personal conscience, and from who you are. It's almost existential.

So categorical desires can function in the same way. These projects—these ground projects, as Williams sometimes calls it in his critique of utilitarianism, are what make my life *mine*. They function for me as categorical in the sense that I can't and won't get rid of them; they command my will, because of who I am. So that's a little detour on what he's up to, in using the word "categorical" desires, which is a bit of a nod and a wink, you know.

Gabriel Thomas. Thank you! That was extremely helpful.

Johnna Blystone. I'm not technically part of *Sapere Aude*, but I am interested in you and your career; specifically I would like to know: what would you say are the overarching themes of your particular interests in philosophy? And can you say a little bit about how you came into these specific central interests that you find yourself in?

Dr. Miranda Fricker. Sure! So I had a little bit of an odd way back into philosophy, because I certainly never planned to be a philosopher or any kind of an academic . . . I did an undergraduate degree in Philosophy and French—so French literature and language—and I always loved writing about novels and plays and poems, mainly. But then again, what I really liked was the *combination* of both arguing and writing about texts. So when I took this one course module that was technically in French literature, and it was on Montaigne and Pascal—both of whom were also philosophers, to me, that was a complete turning point.

Up till then, the philosophy I was doing was just talking about the arguments, about the content, whereas the literature I was doing was talking about the content but with a focus on the form. But being asked to write about Montaigne and Pascal in the context of a French literature course, about philosophical content *and* form and how the two interplayed, with someone who was a wonderful expert on them, I couldn't believe my luck! At that time I was like, "this is something I know how to do, and this is something I really enjoy." In some ways, there is not a lot of room for that in traditional philosophy. And although the experience did not make me immediately think, "ah, *therefore* I want to be an academic philosopher!" it did make me fall in love with academic work.

At the same time, I was getting into feminism, and how gender shapes our lives and frustrations. Philosophy, by the way, is still a very male-dominated subject, and it was even more so back

then. So I did a master's degree in Women's Studies at the University of Kent; I wanted to read a lot of feminist stuff and get my head around it. It was reading feminist philosophy in the course of that which made me think, "this is cool! All these people are asking questions about power, prejudice, gender, race, and relating them to issues of knowledge . . ." And that was when I realized there was a dissertation I really wanted to write.

So finally I wrote a DPhil dissertation at Oxford about postmodernist theories of knowledge and why they were false grounds for feminist politics, because feminist politics, or any politics, needs to have a robust everyday sense of what is real or not real, true or not true, what is knowledge and what is not knowledge—pure ideology, for instance, in order to get this politics going. And those ideas are what eventually morphed into this work I did, *Epistemic Injustice*, that came out in 2007, which was an evolved version of that project in some ways. Now we just call that project social epistemology, feminist epistemology, etc., but in those days, the word "social epistemology" hardly existed; it was fighting for its own existence, and epistemology was still super abstracted and really just focused on trying to define the concept of knowledge, trying to think about different forms of justification, to combat skepticism, etc., and it seemed like issues of power and people not being believed because of prejudices and so on were someone else's business, whoever that is, and not that of epistemology—because it's out there in the world. And I was trying to show that it actually *is* the business of epistemology. In various ways, there are conceptions of what we're doing when we're trying to define the concept of knowledge which would require that we should combat prejudice *already*. If you're already talking about prejudice, you're already talking about the world. Somehow, it was very helpful to me that feminist epistemology, virtue epistemology, and other kinds of social epistemology was pushing to be heard—they were always socializing our conception of knowers and inquirers. I came to feel that my project was part of those conversations, whereas before that it just felt like, honestly, I did not know what

conversations this was meant to be part of. These category shifts help a lot when you're trying to form a project, so that you know what you're doing and can explain it to people without difficulty.

And then I kind of have moved much more into working in ethics for the past ten years. I've always done both, and taught both, but I've found myself getting really interested, through Williams's work, in interpersonal responses to wrongdoing: blame, apology, forgiveness. I've been working on that recently and also, as I was saying last night, I am gradually working my way round to feeling that I know how to write about Williams's work—how I *want* to write about Williams's work. And that connects with the literary background.

One of the things with Williams is that he's difficult to pin down for a reason. He thought trying to pin things down and put things into neat boxes was a bad idea; he mistrusted it and thought it led to bad philosophy, bad mistakes, because you become instantly partisan in how you're viewing things. He talked about social construction a lot—he said explicitly that the value of truthfulness is socially constructed as intrinsic—but he would never say, "therefore I am a social constructionist about intrinsic values." So I hope that writing about his philosophy in a way that pays attention to the type of text you produce is just that kind of philosophical conversation. Reading him is just like talking to him; it's completely his voice, it's how he talked. And it's really nice that you read him and you hear his voice. To conserve that is a bit like conserving a character in a novel— there's a kind of personality to this philosophy, a kind of . . . jovial irreverence. He would make fun of things; and you want to conserve that character—that seems like part of the literary project. To write about someone's work and keep their personality in it is a kind of literary project. So I'm looking forward to getting stuck into that.

Johnna appreciated the answer. She had explored similar lines of thought while researching for a research project on feminist identity philosophy, through which

she read about the notion of practical identity by Christine Korsgaard. Johnna said that this sounded to her also like the kind of skepticism about universal moral reasons which has hitherto pervaded our conversation.

Dr. Miranda Fricker. I can totally see that you will get a lot out of Korsgaard, Johnna. Some people say that Korsgaard's Kant isn't really Kant—it's Korsgaard's Kant; and part of what Korsgaard was reacting to was Williams. His idea is that a lot of our ethical reasons are irreducibly personal; and while he wanted to talk about fundamental personal motivations, etc., as we have discussed, she does not want to say that, of course. She wants to conserve the Kantian apparatus of what deliberation looks like and how our reasons command us. But she was trying to show— and I think she did a brilliant job of showing—how you can convert or adapt a Kantian conception of deliberation capable of admitting first-person ethical reasons built into it by the idea of personal identity. "As a mother, I must do this." Lots of our reasons have authority over us, not *merely* because we are rational beings, but also because we are rational beings who have a certain kind of personal identity.

So that's all part of the same conversation. Williams had the utmost respect for Korsgaard. There was a time when there was a buzz in the air, I suppose, when I was a graduate student, and when moral philosophers thought about reasons, the issue of the day was exactly this: Are all moral reasons *impersonal* reasons in the way that the Kantian system requires? Or are some of them, or all of them, radically first-personal in the way that Williams argues for? Or are there any bridges or hybrid positions that can be adapted? And so one might think of Korsgaard as having developed a sort of hybrid position in this direction.

Gabriel Thomas. Earlier you mentioned forgiveness, and I know you've done a lot of work on forgiveness . . . I am really interested in this concept in a philosophical way. It seems to me that how we approach forgiveness presupposes a deontological understanding of morality, so that, if I stepped on someone's toe,

I would say "sorry, I did not mean to." And that seems to suggest an intention, in the way that Kant talks about.

Dr. Miranda Fricker. I see. Let me say something about the idea that there is something deontological about forgiveness, and the idea that people's intention seems an important part of what our reasons might be for, e.g., forgiving them. Particularly their will, let's say—they're very sorry, they feel remorse, they promise not to do it again, etc. That looks like it's all about the moral emotions they're feeling and the intentions they've got, and that's broadly what deontology is all about.

But I will say this: except *perhaps* consequentialists, everyone knows that intentions are important, whatever ethical theory you've got. For instance, from a virtue perspective, obviously whether someone has a good intention or a bad intention is an incredibly important feature of their character and, therefore, of a situation where forgiving them would be *apt* or not. So I would disagree with the idea that there is something intrinsic about forgiveness that encourages a deontological perspective.

However, I do actually think that it is possible to be in a situation where you have a duty to forgive someone. Think of an ordinary instance of wrongdoing. If, for instance, your friend has let you down in some way which is not *too* horrible, but which is nonetheless in the domain of blame and forgiveness and not of "get out of here, it's fine," then it looks like they actually need to apologize for that. And so they do apologize to you, and you see that they're really sorry, and it's good enough for you, etc. Then, if you *don't* at least try to forgive in a circumstance like that, it seems to me like you're being unforgiving—and that's a fault, a vice, holding out on them.

One of the reasons for its being difficult to talk about the duty to forgive is this: we might not be in control of whether we forgive. I can try to forgive, and find that I just can't! In more serious cases of wrongdoing, forgiveness can take a long time. Or you forgive for a while, and then the feelings come back again

. . . So it can be an ongoing process, and it can be hard. People sometimes say, well, you can't have a duty to do something that is not in your control. But I think that we *do* have lots of duties that are not in our control: parents have a duty to be loving towards their children. At least they should try; and when they fail, they have failed at a duty to their children. But the thing to say is that they tried, but they couldn't. And sometimes it's just really sad that they don't love their children as they should. There is an excusing condition there, i.e., that they really tried, but they just did not summon up the resources to be that kind of parent anymore. So I think that we often have duties to do things that are not in our control. If we don't try, then we have failed at our duty; but if we try and we fail, then it's very sad that we have failed, and it is quite a powerful excusing condition. I think that's the case with certain situations of forgiveness.

Another way in which people find it problematic to talk about there being a duty to forgive is if they say the following: that forgiveness is *essentially* a gift, it's essentially elective and voluntary. I have a lot of sympathy for this thought, but I think those two things are compatible [i.e., forgiveness being a duty, and forgiveness being a gift]. Now, I also think forgiveness is essentially a gift; in fact, *unconditional* forgiveness is most certainly a gift, where you just forgive out of the goodness of your heart even though they haven't apologized—there, you don't have a duty to forgive at all. It's totally elective, because nobody's generated a reason which you recognize as sufficient for you to try to forgive. That's obviously just a gift. *However*, even in forgiving someone when you recognize that it is your duty to forgive them—as when your friend apologizes to you and you recognize this—I think that's still a gift. It's all part of the normativity of gift giving that we often have duties to gift things.

Think about birthday presents: If you grow up in a family where you all give each other birthday presents every year, and then one year, none of them gives you a birthday present, then it's like, "you . . . kind of owe me that gift!" But it can be very

uncomfortable to say it, and pointless to demand it in the mode of "where's my gift? I have a right to this gift." There is a curious feature of the normativity of gift giving—I have argued—that you can get quite demanding about what they should be giving you, and yet the demand can be pragmatically self-defeating, when you assert your rights in the mode of entitlement: as soon as you say, "I have a right to this birthday present," you've kind of undone the proper normativity, and it won't be possible for them to give it in the right spirit anymore. It's the same with forgiveness. If you really ought to be forgiving your friend, and they suddenly shift stance and demand, "where is my forgiveness? I've a right to be forgiven," then they're no longer in the kind of humility that an apology requires. They're destroying the grounds on which your duty to forgive them is even based. So it has this self-defeating aspect.

I've tried to argue that this is the reason why we have a very strong intuition that there is something weird or inappropriate about *demanding gifts*, and I've tried to argue that, actually, the weirdness, the inappropriateness, only comes in when the demand takes the form of an entitlement stance, which is more like asserting a right to something and carries the idea that, in principle, I can just take it. So I can just demand that you should say these words owed to me, "I forgive you," and what have I got? Clearly not the real thing. Does that make sense?

Gabriel Thomas. That makes perfect sense.

Dr. Miranda Fricker. So that's sort of the idea. We can have the obligation to forgive, but not the rights to be forgiven. And some people who hold deontological conceptions find that really odd. But there's a long history of broadly Kantians who find that a rather natural thing to say. Onora O'Neill, for instance, in her political philosophy and her interpretation of Kant, thinks that we have special obligations, e.g., an obligation to your own children is special because they are *your* children. Those obligations do not carry rights—your children do not need to

have a right to ask you that you should love them, yet you *do* have an obligation to love them, and it's an obligation that sadly not everyone is able to meet.

Dr. Fricker then asked me what I was doing for my senior thesis. I told her that, at the time, I was a junior, and had not thought about what I wanted to do for such a project. I then mentioned a personal opinion that studying ethics was, for me, more difficult than any other field of philosophy, since the thoughts involved appeared so practical, uncertain, and concrete.

Dr. Miranda Fricker. Absolutely, I'm so glad you said that, Son. I think doing moral philosophy is *really* hard for those exact reasons, because what you're trying to do is so . . . multiple. It's not neat. The subject matter is, as it were, in tension with our philosophical methods, to some extent. Our methods are, viz., make it neat; make it all explicit, put it in a system. By contrast, the values, concepts, and habits we have really are a melting-pot residue of many different moral cultures. No wonder they don't add up! We do all think a bit in terms of virtues, everyone has different religious inputs, etc. But then again, why would they add up? Maybe it's kind of glorious that they don't. Maybe we have so many different resources for our thinking that we just have to learn to draw on what is useful . . . sometimes I think we are just pragmatists about whether to think in a virtue way, or a utilitarian way, etc.

Now perhaps consequentialism is wrong for most of these thinking, but a lot of one's decision making undoubtedly has that structure. A lot of ethical decision making is sort of about distribution of resources. So of course one thinks about these things, and does trade-offs—this is a deeply familiar, useful mode of thought. But it can't be made to embrace the whole, nor—I believe—can deontology. And if virtue theory can, that's because it says less—it's noncommittal. So sometimes it appears to one that ethics is all a bit indeterminate, that there isn't one right answer; other times, there is clearly a right answer and a right way of thinking. So you're right—it's difficult! I personally think we

should embrace that and just see it for what it is. Every attempt to systematize is bound to draw on some aspects of our moral life and leaving others out; there are always going to be abstractions and models, and we shouldn't try to do it all. That's what I think.

I nodded in agreement. As we were finishing up our meals, an amused waitress came up and informed us that a mysterious lady in black had just arrived and offered to pay for our entire bill. Curious, we turned our eyes towards the table gestured at by the waitress, and saw that it was actually Dr. Elizabeth Schiltz, the Department Chair, who had come to offer us a lift back to the College.

Even as we were exiting The Leaf, none of us was able to fully comprehend and appreciate—till has vanished the present moment—what a tremendous honor it was to have breakfast with one of the most celebrated philosophers of our time.