

Volume VI

Number 1



Fall 2018



*Northern Plains Ethics Journal*

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*Published by Northern Plains Ethics Institute  
North Dakota State University  
Fargo, North Dakota*

<http://www.northernplainethicsjournal.com/>

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***Northern Plains Ethics Journal***

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Scholar Section







## *Monumental Questions*

Daniel John Sportiello, Ph.D.

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### **Abstract**

*In recent years, there has been renewed controversy about monuments to the Confederacy: these monuments, their detractors insist, are instruments of white supremacy—and, as such, ought to be lowered<sup>1</sup> immediately. The dialectic is by now familiar: though some insist that these monuments are mere sites of memory, others note the relevant memory is that of the Confederacy—and that, because of this, the monuments are inevitably racist. Worse, the monuments were raised by racist individuals for racist ends; no surprise, then, that so many experience them as racist—that is, as instruments of white supremacy. For all of these reasons, the monuments ought to be lowered.*

*And probably it is so. But what does one do when the instrument of white supremacy is a mountain? What does one do, moreover, when it is less than clear whether that mountain is an instrument of white supremacy? What does one do, in other words, when that mountain is a monument to a regime only ambiguously racist? What does one do when it was raised by a racist individual for a racist end—but has since that time come to be seen as a monument to precisely the opposite ideals? What does one do, in other words, when it is experienced by most not as a symbol of white supremacy but as a symbol—indeed, as the symbol—of freedom and equality?*

*What does one do, in short, with Mount Rushmore at this moment—that is, in the wake of the Charleston shooting and the Charlottesville rally? And can the experience of those who saw the mountain prior to its status as a monument—that is, the Lakota—illuminate this question? In this essay, I examine these monumental questions. I ask them—and try to answer them—first as a consequentialist, second as a deontologist, and third as a virtue ethicist.*

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<sup>1</sup> Some may object—not without reason—to the descriptors "raised" and "lowered." I was trying to come up with a matching set of metaphors that would apply not only to statues but also to monuments of other sorts. (The only way to "lower" Mount Rushmore would be to blow it up.) These terms are awkward, but no better pair comes to mind.

## *Monumental Questions*

**Keywords:** *Mount Rushmore, Confederacy, Monuments, Gutzon Borglum, Lakota*

### **Introduction**

Consider your passport. If it was issued by the United States—and if it was issued recently enough to remain valid—then it features, on every page, a photograph. In these photographs are some of our monuments—the Liberty Bell, for example, and the Statue of Liberty—as well as more generic scenes of rivers, mountains, farmers, and ranchers. Each of these is, of course, meant to represent America; any doubt on this point is removed as soon as one sees the enormous bald eagles inserted into several of the photographs.

We may complain about the tackiness of all of this. But noteworthy is what is at the heart of your passport: across two pages—and without the insertion of any bald eagles—is a photograph of Mount Rushmore. Like the other photographs in your passport, this one features no caption; those who designed your passport apparently assumed that you would recognize Mount Rushmore as easily as you recognized the Liberty Bell and the Statue of Liberty.

My guess is that those designers were right about this.<sup>2</sup> For Mount Rushmore is, in every sense, at the heart of America. One journalist, Sam Anderson, puts the point well:

Rushmore is...tattooed on the inside of every citizen's eyelids.<sup>3</sup>

Another journalist, John Taliaferro, indicates the reason for this:

To millions...Rushmore symbolizes all that is fine and noble in America, joining the Liberty Bell and the Statue of

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<sup>2</sup> As Taliaferro notes of *North by Northwest*, “Hitchcock pays Mount Rushmore the supreme compliment, for at no point during the film does he actually call it by name. He assumes that his audience knows exactly what Rushmore is, where it is, and what it means.” See John Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers: The Story of the Obsessive Quest to Create Mount Rushmore* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 337.

<sup>3</sup> Sam Anderson, “Why Does Mount Rushmore Exist?” *New York Times Magazine*, March 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/22/magazine/why-does-mount-rushmore-exist.html>.

Liberty as the nation's most luminescent beacons of democracy.<sup>4</sup>

It is plausible that Mount Rushmore has become, since it was raised, *the* representation of our liberal democracy.<sup>5</sup> It has only one real competitor, our flag—but what we call our “flag” is merely an abstraction that our various flags only imperfectly imitate. Mount Rushmore, by contrast, is one mountain. Its materiality means that it can do what our flag cannot: it can serve as our one site of commemoration.

Mount Rushmore represents freedom and equality *by* representing Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt; the community that gathers there to honor them simultaneously honors those ideals. The abstract and the concrete thereby reveal themselves as two sides of the same coin. If one wants to see this miracle occur—if one wants to see the incarnation, so to speak, of our liberal democracy—then one must travel to the northern plains.

And therein lies my worry. For Mount Rushmore is, as a monument, more problematic than it seems initially. For there is an argument to be made that, as are monuments to the Confederacy, Mount Rushmore is an instrument of white supremacy. Unfortunately, this argument is ambiguous; in what follows, I work to resolve this ambiguity.

## Deontology

According to one criterion, a monument is racist whenever it was meant to be racist by those who raised it:

A given symbol-display *d* has meaning *m* if and only if those originally responsible for *d* intended *d* to have *m*. The special case...that interests us here is this: a given symbol-display *d* is racist if and only if the communicative intentions of those originally responsible for *d* are racist.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Taliaferro notes that, just as the Statue of Liberty took this role in the First World War, so did Mount Rushmore take this role in the Second. He implies that, in war, the cynicism with which we interpret our monuments evaporates—forever, it seems. See Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 238.

<sup>6</sup> Torin Alter, “Symbolic Meaning and the Confederate Battle Flag,” *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 7, nos. 2–3 (2000): 2.

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Torin Alter calls this the “historical-intentions principle”; he attributes it to George Schedler.<sup>7</sup> Though Alter rejects this criterion, it is nonetheless worth consideration—not only as it applies to Confederate monuments but also as it applies to Mount Rushmore.

### *Confederate Monuments*

Schedler argues that most Confederate monuments were not meant to be racist; rather, they were meant to honor the bravery and loyalty of those involved in the Confederacy—and race is irrelevant to this intention.<sup>8</sup> This is obvious, according to Schedler, when one considers a particular Confederate monument in South Carolina. This monument, raised by Samuel White in Fort Mill, honors the loyalty of many slaves to their masters—and so, Schedler argues, it cannot be racist:

By recognizing that African Americans displayed the same virtuous conduct of which they were capable, southern whites recognized a fundamental equality between the races.<sup>9</sup>

This is, to say the least, an odd interpretation of this monument.<sup>10</sup> But it is certainly not the right interpretation of most Confederate monuments—for these were, quite obviously, meant to be racist. Travis Timmerman states well the case for this conclusion:

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<sup>7</sup> Note that Schedler rejects this criterion as a caricature of his position; nonetheless, it seems that Alter is right to attribute it to him. See George Schedler, “Minorities and Racist Symbols: A Response to Torin Alter,” *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, 7, nos. 2–3 (2000): 7.

<sup>8</sup> This is, of course, wildly implausible. But we need not adjudicate this issue: there are issues even more serious to come.

<sup>9</sup> George Schedler, “Are Confederate Monuments Racist?” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (2001): 297.

<sup>10</sup> Insofar as one is a slave, one *cannot* be loyal; one can only be submissive—or rebellious. (This is not to say that some slaves were not loyal to the men and women who enslaved them: the relation of slavery does not exhaust the relations between one who is a master and one who is a slave. For humans are...well, complicated; perhaps some slaves even came to love those who had enslaved them. But they would have been loved as equals, not as masters—which means that, so long as they were *also* masters, the love would have been more or less inauthentic.) Insofar as the monument in question ignores this, it is a monument to white supremacy; to his credit, Schedler raises this objection—but he fails to really answer it. See Schedler, “Are Confederate Monuments Racist?” 298–299.

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What is particularly surprising (and depressing), however, is that the majority of Confederate monuments appear to have been created long after the Civil War for distinct explicitly racist reasons. The majority of Confederate monuments were erected in one of two periods: the portion of the Jim Crow era between the early 1900s and 1920s and the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>11</sup>

Of the former period, Timmerman notes this:

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jim Crow voting laws were passed to disenfranchise African-American voters. A number of advocates in Southern towns erected Confederate statues because the Confederate mythologies seemingly helped justify the Jim Crow laws.<sup>12</sup>

Of the latter period, Timmerman notes this:

Confederate memorials during the 1950s...were examples of the same power play tactics that were used during the Jim Crow era. The rise in Confederate monuments at this time was, at least in part, the product of a backlash among segregationists.<sup>13</sup>

Really, there is no mystery in any of this. Those who deny that most Confederate monuments were meant to be racist speak falsely.

If Confederate monuments were *meant* to be racist, then, by the historical-intentions principle, they *are* racist. Because of this—all else equal—they ought to be lowered.

### *Mount Rushmore*

There is a deontological tone to this argument: it is the intention of the raising of the monuments that matters, not the consequences thereof. But what were the intentions of the man who raised Mount Rushmore, Gutzon Borglum? Unfortunately, this is ambiguous.

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<sup>11</sup> Travis Timmerman, “A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments,” forthcoming in *Ethics Left and Right: The Moral Issues that Divide Us*, ed. Bob Fischer (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Timmerman, “A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments,” 2.

<sup>13</sup> Timmerman, “A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments,” 2.

## *Monumental Questions*

On the one hand, it seems that Borglum was a racist. Consider his work on Stone Mountain, a monument in Georgia. Near Atlanta, Stone Mountain is *the* monument to the Confederacy; it features Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Stonewall Jackson—enormous men carved into an enormous mountain. If any monument to the Confederacy was meant as an instrument of white supremacy, certainly this one was.

Worse, it was at Stone Mountain—and at this time—that the Ku Klux Klan was reborn; though Borglum did not technically become a Klansman, he nonetheless welcomed the rebirth of the Klan and its involvement with Stone Mountain. For he had been at least somewhat racist for many years:

Borglum's biases were not born of convenience and delivered simply to win favor from his friends in the Klan. He labeled immigrants "slippered assassins," and well before his arrival in Atlanta, he had warned that America was becoming an alien "scrap heap." If the Klan is to be blamed for anything, it is guilty of hardening Borglum's already active prejudices. Careful review of his personal papers reveals that the shrillness and frequency of his long-festering anti-"isms" increased markedly once he embraced the Klan in 1923. It is also worth noting...that the animosities Borglum gave rein to in Georgia did not subside once he left the South and moved to the West.<sup>14</sup>

Borglum did not complete his work at Stone Mountain; in a fight with his employers, he was fired, and the monument was completed only in 1972. But it seems clear that Stone Mountain was a dry run for Mount Rushmore. For, materially speaking, it was at Stone Mountain that Borglum invented the methods whereby Mount Rushmore was raised.<sup>15</sup> And, formally speaking, it seems that Borglum intended Mount Rushmore, at least at first, to be no less racist than Stone Mountain. For both were meant to be, at least in some sense, monuments to white supremacy:

The message of Mount Rushmore...would be...the triumph of manifest destiny; the unity of east and west, of north and

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<sup>14</sup> Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 192–193.

<sup>15</sup> Whatever else they are, Stone Mountain and Mount Rushmore are astonishing technical achievements. For more on this point, see Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 178–180, 229–231.

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south; and of course the glory of Anglo-Saxon achievement.<sup>16</sup>

At least initially, what mattered to Borglum as he raised Mount Rushmore was not only that America had been tamed but also that *whites* had done this. Indeed, it is plausible that Borglum was obsessed with raising a monument that would last millennia precisely because he was afraid that, with the arrival of millions of immigrants, white supremacy was coming to an end.

On the other hand, it may be that Borglum had a change of heart. Certainly it seems that, in his years raising Mount Rushmore, he started to speak of it in a new way—less as a monument to white supremacy and more as a monument to freedom and equality:

More and more, he chose to downplay the image of the Rushmore presidents as conquerors. They remained Great Mean, to be sure, but now he stressed the principles they embodied over their cult of personality. America's "Puritan chrysalis," he told a radio audience, had given birth to an immaculate, inalienable truth: "Man has a right to be free and to be happy." With this in mind, he concluded, "We are not creating a monument to Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt, but to the meaning of these eleven words."<sup>17</sup>

If we take him at his word, then it seems that Borglum was altered by his work on the mountain—that, over time, he came to see it more and more as most of us see it today. No more was it meant to honor a relation of exploitation; indeed, no more was it meant to honor anything concrete at all. Rather, it was now meant to honor freedom and equality; indeed, it honored Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt only insofar as they had made these abstractions concrete in our own community.

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<sup>16</sup> Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 127. Prior to his work on either Stone Mountain or Mount Rushmore, Borglum expressed his desire to raise a monument—enormous men carved into enormous rocks—at the Panama Canal; in his letter to the Interstate Commerce Committee, Borglum was explicit that this was to be a monument to white supremacy. See Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 126. Also worth mention is his odd preoccupation with his Scandinavian heritage; Borglum insisted that the Greeks—not coincidentally, the best sculptors in history—must have been partially Scandinavian. See Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 72–73.

<sup>17</sup> Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 239–240.

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Did Borglum undergo a sort of conversion? Or did he see freedom and equality as somehow *white*—in other words, as abstractions that only whites could render concrete?<sup>18</sup> Even were Borglum to have asked this question of himself, it may be that the answer would have been less than obvious to him; with us asking it of him—and with him rather less than alive—the answer is far less than obvious.

Perhaps Borglum was merely trying to make Mount Rushmore less controversial—so that he could, in the midst of the Great Depression, secure the money to raise it. In any case, it seems that the historical-intentions principle implies that Mount Rushmore is *probably* racist—even if, for empirical reasons, we cannot obtain certainty about this. Of course, we may not care *what* the historical-intentions principle implies:

There is no such thing as the symbol's "true meaning" as distinct from its actual meaning. And its actual meaning is determined by what people generally associate with it.<sup>19</sup>

Alter is speaking here of flags, but it seems that his point applies no less well to other symbols: at least most of the time, the meaning of a symbol is established by the relevant interpretive practice—and this practice is inevitably that of a particular community. More colloquially, the meaning of a symbol is, at least most of the time, the way that a particular community uses it—and therefore its meaning is not established by the *intention* of anyone in particular. Certainly this seems to be so of words: the word "plus" means what it does, for example, because of how the relevant community does addition—even if, on some occasion, someone somehow *intends* for it to mean something else.<sup>20</sup> But monuments are symbols no less than words—and so the intention of one who raises a monument may be irrelevant to its meaning.

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<sup>18</sup> Though this is an absurd doctrine—and an odious one—many have seen it as obvious; perhaps most of those alive in the time of Borglum—most of those who called themselves "whites," anyway—assumed that it was true. By the way, this seems to me to absolve Borglum not at all—but we need not adjudicate this issue.

<sup>19</sup> Alter, "Symbolic Meaning and the Confederate Battle Flag," 4.

<sup>20</sup> This doctrine is, of course, that of Ludwig Wittgenstein—and this example is, of course, that of Saul A. Kripke. (By the way, I doubt that this doctrine has the relativistic, or even the reductive, implications that it is sometimes assumed to have.) See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, ed. and trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), and Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, revised edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).



Perhaps what we need is another criterion.

### **Consequentialism**

Fortunately, Alter states another criterion. According to this criterion, a monument is racist whenever it is perceived as racist by those who experience it:

If the association of a symbol *s* with a connotative meaning *m* is strong, widespread, and long-standing, then *s* has *m*...Most relevant to our concerns is the special case...regarding racist connotative meaning: if the association of a symbol *s* with a racist connotative meaning *m* is strong, widespread, and long-standing, then *s* has *m*.<sup>21</sup>

Alter calls this the “public-association principle”; certainly it is worth consideration—not only as it applies to Confederate monuments but also as it applies to Mount Rushmore.

### *Confederate Monuments*

In his “A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments,” Timmerman states...well, a case for removing such monuments:

1. If the existence of a monument *M* unavoidably harms an undeserving group, then there’s strong moral reason to end the existence of *M*.
2. Public Confederate monuments unavoidably harm an undeserving group, which include *at least* those who suffer...as a result of (*I*) knowing the racist motivation behind the existence of most Confederate monuments or as a result of (*II*) having the horrors of the Civil War and the United States’ racist history made salient when they see public Confederate monuments.
3. Therefore, there’s strong moral reason to remove public Confederate monuments.<sup>22</sup>

Note that, though Timmerman states that one can be harmed by knowing the intentions of those who raised the relevant monuments, he states also

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<sup>21</sup> Alter, “Symbolic Meaning and the Confederate Battle Flag,” 3. Though Alter speaks of connotative meaning, it seems plausible that denotative meaning also works in this way.

<sup>22</sup> Timmerman, “A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments,” 2–3.

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that one can be harmed without this knowledge. Later, Timmerman explains this:

Seeing the monument can non-voluntarily make salient America's racist past and the horrors of one of the darkest periods in American history. Having these facts made salient can clearly cause one to suffer *even if we grant that the monument itself... was not created for racist reasons.*<sup>23</sup>

One can be harmed by a monument to the Confederacy even without knowledge of the intention of those who raised the relevant monument because, according to Timmerman, *it does not matter* what was the intention of those who raised the relevant monument. The implication is that the relevant monument means what it does because of *how it is experienced*; in other words, Timmerman implicitly assumes the public-association principle. But perhaps he does so too quickly:

Suppose there arose a racist group which began terrorizing Arab-Americans. They always scrawled a Star of David wherever they committed their crimes, and they conducted parades in which they carried the Israeli flag. Suppose further that most Americans, but not a small group of American Jews, developed a strong, widespread, and long-standing association between the Star of David and racism.<sup>24</sup>

Schedler means this counterfactual scenario as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the public-association principle. Surely, he implies, the Star of David would not become racist just because the public came to associate it with racism! But if the Star of David could be perceived as racist without becoming racist, then the public-association principle is false.

I admit that, where Schedler is tempted into a *modus tollens*, I am tempted into a *modus ponens*: since the public-association principle is true, the Star of David *would* become racist just as soon as it came to be perceived as racist. Indeed, my suspicion is that any intuition otherwise is the product

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<sup>23</sup> Timmerman, "A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments," 3–4.

<sup>24</sup> Schedler, "Minorities and Racist Symbols," 5. Of course, the harshest critics of the Israeli treatment of Palestinians may say that the Star of David, or at least the Israeli flag, *has* come to represent racism. As a matter of public perception, this seems likely to be false; however, we need not adjudicate this issue.

of the counterfactuality of this scenario. But we need not adjudicate this issue, for monuments to the Confederacy have *always* been perceived as racist—not only when they were raised but also now. Again, there is no mystery in any of this. Those who deny that Confederate monuments have always been perceived as racist speak falsely.

If Confederate monuments are *perceived* as racist, then, by the public-association principle, they *are* racist. Because of this—all else equal—they ought to be lowered.

### *Mount Rushmore*

There is a consequentialist tone to this argument: it is the consequences of the raising of the monuments that matters, not the intention that led to their raising. But what are the consequences of the raising of Mount Rushmore? In other words, how is the monument experienced? Unfortunately, this is no less ambiguous than is the intention of the man who raised it.

On the one hand, it may seem obvious that Mount Rushmore is not *experienced* as racist. Consider again a point made earlier in this essay: Mount Rushmore is, it seems, *the* representation of our liberal democracy. But if most of those who go to Mount Rushmore go in order to honor freedom and equality, then most of those who go to Mount Rushmore do *not* go in order to honor a relation of exploitation. On the other hand, at least some *do* experience Mount Rushmore as racist:

Over the past thirty years, Rushmore has continued to be a major sore point among many Native Americans—because it is built on land that Indians claim still belongs to them and because the Great White Fathers who watch over the Black Hills personify a government that has betrayed and injured Indian people repeatedly.<sup>25</sup>

For many Lakota, Mount Rushmore is—in both its essence and existence—a racist monument. The reason is not mysterious: the United States has treated the Lakota with extraordinarily injustice. Though no doubt this is true of every tribe, the story of the Lakota is particularly sinister: the United States violated the Treaty of Fort Laramie, which stated that the Black Hills were owned by the Lakota. Motivated by his sympathy for the Northern Pacific Railroad—and perhaps by rumors that the Black Hills contained

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<sup>25</sup> Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 344–345.

## Monumental Questions

gold—General George Armstrong Custer led an invasion of the territory. Though his army was beaten and Custer killed at the Battle of Little Bighorn, this proved only a temporary setback; soon, the Lakota were made to sign a new treaty surrendering the Black Hills. Technically, this treaty was illegal—which, at this point, even the United States admits: in *United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians*, the Supreme Court instructed that the Lakota be paid millions of dollars for their land. The Lakota, for their part, have refused to take this money: their land, they insist, is not for sale.<sup>26</sup>

This story indicates two reasons that many Lakota experience Mount Rushmore as a monument to white supremacy. First, for many Lakota, Mount Rushmore is in its essence a racist monument: what could be more insulting than a monument featuring Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt—chosen by Borglum as the four presidents most responsible for the territorial expansion of the United States? That Borglum seems not to have *intended* to offend the Lakota is irrelevant. Second, for many Lakota, Mount Rushmore is in its existence a racist monument: the Black Hills are sacred to the Lakota, so the carving of *anyone* into Mount Rushmore was arguably a desecration. Again, that Borglum seems not to have *intended* to offend the Lakota is irrelevant. Either reason by itself would be problematic; together, they are rather more than problematic.

Of course, the Lakota are a minority within our society. But the public-association principle leaves ambiguous how many must associate a certain meaning with a certain symbol for that symbol to have that meaning. On the one hand, surely not *everyone* in a society need associate the two; if this were required, then probably no symbol would have any meaning. On the other hand, it seems implausible that a certain symbol would have a certain meaning when only a *few* associated the two; if this were required, then far too many symbols would have opposite meanings simultaneously. Either way, language would probably never have gotten off the ground.

Is it enough for a majority to associate a certain meaning with a certain symbol? For example, if most of us associate Mount Rushmore with freedom and equality, then are the Lakota wrong to associate it with white supremacy? This seems not only implausible but also sadistic. To his credit, Schedler sees this:

In any society in which racist oppressors outnumber their victims, the general principle of association would dictate

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<sup>26</sup> See Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 5–11, 23–43, 365–367.

the symbol of oppression could never be racist, so long as the oppressors themselves do not make the association.<sup>27</sup>

But how many Lakota need to experience Mount Rushmore as racist in order for it to *be* racist? It seems absurd to try to answer this question in a way that is not arbitrary. Perhaps the best answer, therefore, is “some”—an answer as honest as it is unsatisfying.

In any case, it seems that the public-association principle implies that Mount Rushmore is *probably* racist—even if, for conceptual reasons, we cannot obtain certainty about this. For now, let us say only this: so long as some Lakota continue to experience Mount Rushmore as racist—whether in its essence, in its existence, or both—we ought to worry that it is.<sup>28</sup>

### Virtue Ethics

I do not mean to imply that the historical-intentions principle and the public-association principle are the only two worthy of consideration; no doubt there are others. Perhaps the most obvious is what we may call the “combined principle”: a monument is racist whenever *either* it was meant to be racist by those who raised it *or* it is perceived as racist by those who experience it. But, whatever principle we adopt, the racism of monuments to the Confederacy seems more obvious than does the soundness of any argument to the contrary.

But what about Mount Rushmore? Whether we adopt the historical-intentions principle, the public-association principle, or the combined principle, it seems that the monument is *probably* racist, even if—for empirical reasons, conceptual reasons, or both—we cannot be certain. Yet this conclusion seems to miss something: if Mount Rushmore—the representation of our liberal democracy, *the* site where we honor freedom and equality—is racist, then can *any* monument fail to be racist?

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<sup>27</sup> Schedler, “Minorities and Racist Symbols,” 7.

<sup>28</sup> Though less than satisfying, this conclusion does resolve an interesting objection. It seems plausible that the monuments of Rome—the Arches of Titus, Septimus Severus, and Constantine, for example, and the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius—were monuments to the supremacy of a particular race; should these, all else equal, be lowered? For better or worse, it seems to me that they should not; it seems relevant that anyone who *experienced* the oppression of Rome is gone—so there is no one to associate the monuments with racism. In any case, for this objection, I am grateful to those who attended the Northern Plains Philosophy Conference, which was hosted by North Dakota State University and Concordia College in Fargo on 15 September 2018.

## *Monumental Questions*

Unlike consequentialism and deontology, virtue ethics is not a decision procedure; this is a point in its favor only if virtue ethics allows us to think outside the box. In what remains, let us try to do that.

When we go to Mount Rushmore, we tell ourselves that we are honoring freedom and justice—and not, therefore, any relation of exploitation. But, as Anderson notes, it is not so easy in reality to disentangle the two. Why, he asks, was it so important to us that these enormous men be carved into this enormous mountain? He worries that there is in this something sinister:

There is something childish about this fantasy—the way it tends to conflate virtue and size. Why does goodness have to be huge? It is a dangerous belief, and one that inevitably causes stress and confusion when—as it must—it runs up against reality. Inevitably, there will be a shift in scale; the dominant thing (nation, culture, religion, demographic) will begin to shrink. Does it lose its virtue with its dominance? If we truly believe that, then what virtue will we not be willing to sacrifice to make ourselves feel big again?<sup>29</sup>

It is tempting to confuse the justice of our community with its power: our power is obvious—whereas we aspire to, but never entirely achieve, justice. The only issue is that, sooner or later, power inevitably fails; at that point, we have either our aspirations to justice or we have nothing.

Perhaps the meaning of Mount Rushmore is ambiguous because the meaning of America is ambiguous. Is our story one of freedom and equality or of exploitation? The only real answer—as honest as it is unsatisfying—is “both”: our story seems to be one of perpetual, and traumatic, acknowledgement of our failures. Indeed, it is this that makes membership in our community so exhausting: it would be easier were America to reveal itself, once and for all, as good—or, for that matter, as evil. But every time we suppose that it has, it proves us wrong.

Perhaps the question we ought to be asking is not whether Mount Rushmore is racist but rather how we can use it to acknowledge two aspects of our heritage: on the one hand, our heritage is racist—but, on the other hand, it is that heritage that allows us to see and work to overcome that

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<sup>29</sup> Anderson, “Why Does Mount Rushmore Exist?”

racism. It would be foolish to expect that we'll ever entirely do this—just as it would be foolish to expect that we'll ever stop trying.<sup>30</sup>

Mount Rushmore merely renders this point particular. Consider Thomas Jefferson, a slaveowner—and a philosopher whose work allows us to see just how wrong it was for him to own slaves. Condemnation and celebration reveal themselves, in this example, as two sides of the same coin.

## Conclusion

I saw Mount Rushmore only this year. I had been expecting tackiness—but, whatever else it is, Mount Rushmore is not tacky. As usual, Taliaferro puts the point well:

Mount Rushmore...is a true piece of sculpture, not a building, not in the least architectural...Like all great figurative sculpture...and unlike more mediocre sculpture, such as the Statue of Liberty...the faces of Rushmore have expressions: Washington is stern, Jefferson is bemused, Roosevelt is avuncular, and Lincoln is resolute.<sup>31</sup>

Mount Rushmore is, like America, better than one would have guessed. And, like America, it deserves better than unreflective patriotism.

Of course, Mount Rushmore also deserves better than destruction. And, even if it did deserve destruction, this would not mean that we should destroy it:

Deciding which monuments should be removed by appeal to rational principles...is unlikely to mollify enough disgruntled citizens to matter...Every people needs its heroes, and any people with a developed material culture will remember them with monuments. This is why...efforts to cleanse the landscape of racist monuments are unacceptably damaging to civic cohesion and will ultimately frustrate antiracist goals.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Really, *this* is what separates the United States of America from the Confederacy; *this* is the reason that, all else equal, we ought to raise monuments to George Washington and lower monuments to Jefferson Davis.

<sup>31</sup> Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 17, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Dan Demetriou and Ajume Wingo, "The Ethics of Racist Monuments," forthcoming in *The Palgrave Handbook of Philosophy and Public Policy*, ed. David Boonin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 12–13, 15.

## Monumental Questions

In this essay, I have repeatedly stated that, *all else equal*, monuments to the Confederacy ought to be lowered. Of course, all else is *not* equal: as Dan Demetriou and Ajume Wingo note, the backlash to the removal of monuments to the Confederacy has been traumatic. And even if we did conclude that monuments to the Confederacy—most of which are obviously racist—ought to be lowered, this does not answer the question of what to do with Mount Rushmore: not only would it be harder to lower, it also seems that, in lowering it, we would lose something that cannot be replaced.

So what *does* Mount Rushmore deserve? What does one do, in other words, with that monument at this moment—that is, in the wake of the Charleston shooting and the Charlottesville rally? My tentative suggestion is this: Mount Rushmore ought to become the site where we commemorate the tension at the heart of America. For example, rather than two rows of flags—reminders merely of the breadth of our power—we could install two rows of exhibits. On the one side would be our injustices—slavery, genocide, internment, torture, and so on—while on the other side would be our attempts to correct those injustices. Jim Crow would be countered by the Civil Rights, Voting Rights, and Fair Housing Acts; Hiroshima and Nagasaki would be countered by the United Nations.

Whatever we do, though, let Mount Rushmore become a site of education. It deserves as much from us.

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## ***“The Equivocal Essence of the Home”: Levinas on Dwelling and Its Implications for the Plight of Homelessness***

George Connell

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### **Abstract**

*Central to Emmanuel Levinas’s Totality and Infinity is an analysis of dwelling. That analysis, though relatively ignored in the secondary literature, makes the case for home as an integral basis for human existence. By showing that home is crucial to human existence, Levinas indirectly shows why it is so important to respond urgently to the plight of people experiencing homelessness. After briefly looking at more standard rights-based arguments for responding to homelessness, this essay 1) shows how Levinas’s analysis of the self’s separation from totality in the earlier sections of Totality and Infinity sets the stage for his account of dwelling, 2) presents Levinas’s account of home as constitutive of human existence, and 3) concludes by drawing from Levinas’s analysis the moral necessity of responding to homelessness.*

**Keywords:** *Levinas, Heidegger, dwelling, home, homelessness, right to housing, interiority, separation, spatiality, enjoyment, the element*

### **Is there a right to housing?**

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development’s 2017 Point in Time survey estimates that on any given night approximately 550,000 American’s are experiencing homelessness.<sup>1</sup> What are our obligations, collectively and individually, to this population? How best should we think about our responsibilities to people experiencing lack of secure housing? A dominant way in which Western ethical and political philosophies have addressed such questions is in terms of rights. Do people experiencing homelessness have a right to housing that obligates us collectively and individually to respond to their pressing need?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a United Nations charter adopted shortly after WWII, names adequate shelter as a fundamental human right. Article 25, Section 1 of that Declaration reads,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2017-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>

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Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

There is something fundamentally right about that declaration. Any decent society will meet the basic needs of its members, and housing is certainly a basic need. But is the idiom of rights as the best way to articulate this obligation? As a number of philosophers have argued, the source and status of these somewhat mysterious properties are dubious, especially in a secular and anti-metaphysical age.

In “Home Is Where the Heart Is: Homelessness and the Denial of Moral Personality,” David Schrader points us in a promising direction that circumvents such doubts. Rather than arguing directly for a universal natural right to shelter, Schrader argues that having a home is a necessary precondition for realizing our moral, political, and legal status as citizens within specific states such as the United States or Great Britain. While the source and status of a universal human right to shelter is disputed, the rights spelled out in the Bill of Rights or in English Common Law are rooted in a concrete political reality and have institutional mechanisms available to back them up. Many of those specific rights presuppose that the rights-bearing citizen has a home. Law of real property is central in the development of English Common Law, and Schrader argues that the development of that law “has moved gradually, but inexorably, in the direction of recognizing for each person a locus of authority and autonomy in the place where he or she lives.”<sup>2</sup> That is, the rights prescribed by law, recognizing each person’s title to a zone of self-determination, takes form concretely as “recognition of a strong set of privileges and immunities held by all people in the places where they live.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, many of the rights laid out in the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the US Constitution, assume that citizens have homes. This is especially evident in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, prohibiting the government from quartering soldiers in

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<sup>2</sup> David Schrader, “Home Is Where the Heart Is: Homelessness and the Denial of Moral Personality,” *The Ethics of Homelessness: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. G. John M. Abbarno (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999) 66.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

private homes without consent of the owner, and in the 4<sup>th</sup> Amendment which establishes “The right of people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures.” The notion of home as a protected sphere of autonomy also guides Constitutional jurisprudence as in “*Griswold vs. Connecticut*,” which, citing six of the ten amendments in the Bill of Rights, recognizes a right to privacy as implicit in the US Constitution.<sup>4</sup> Further, not only do we register to vote by giving an address but location of residence determines which elections we are eligible to vote in. So, our legal and political rights as US citizens only have “life and substance” (to quote Justice Douglas from *Griswold*) insofar as we have a place to live, a home. If housing is a precondition of enjoying our rights as citizens, and if protection of our rights is a primary responsibility of our government, then it follows that the government has a duty to see that its citizens are housed. We recognize a government responsibility to provide public education to all citizens since full participation in a democratic society presupposes such education. An equally good case can be made for housing as a precondition of full citizenship.

As sympathetic as I am to Schrader’s argument for housing as an indispensable condition of rights and citizenship, I still have misgivings about approaching home and homelessness in this manner. Rights, whether the natural, universal rights of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the specific legal rights of English Common Law and US Constitutional Law are typically conceived as properties of individuals, as endowments belonging to the social atoms out of which society is composed. But if, as I believe, radical resource inequality in general and homelessness in particular grows out of a problematic individualism, then an appeal to rights is potentially implicated in the very mindset that contributes to homelessness.

In what follows, I will turn away from a rights-oriented approach to homelessness toward the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas is especially interesting in two regards: 1) he offers an account of ethical obligation profoundly different from rights-oriented ethical and political philosophies that have been prominent in the modern era,<sup>5</sup> and 2) in his first great work, *Totality and Infinity*, he offers a rich analysis of how

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Morgan writes, “Levinas can be read...as an alternative critic, not concerned to protect the subject as the locus of rights and dignity but rather oriented to humanity in a different way.” Michael L. Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 118.

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fundamental home is to human existence. In a manner parallel to Schrader, Levinas shows how home is a precondition of full human existence. As William Large puts it in his commentary on *Totality and Infinity*, “Everything we think of as the highest achievement of humanity, what distinguishes us from animal existence, has its source in the home.”<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, like Schrader, Levinas’s analysis of home allows us to appreciate more deeply how great a deprivation it is to lack a home. By deepening our understanding of what home is and what it means within human life, philosophy can make us appreciate more profoundly the plight of homelessness. As Schrader puts it,

If our homes are our central bastions of autonomy, then to lack a home is to lack the recognized kind and level of autonomy that a home is uniquely able to provide. Likewise, if autonomy defines both civic and moral autonomy, then anyone without a home also lacks the place in civil society that civic autonomy establishes and recognizes through our possession of a home. Therefore, to be without a home is to lack one of the central features of our society, public recognition of moral personality. In sum, the homeless are the chief non-persons of contemporary America.<sup>7</sup>

Large, commenting on Levinas’s view of the importance of home, makes a similar point in more succinct and brutal terms: “Homelessness is not one calamity among many. It is the self reduced to almost nothing.”<sup>8</sup> But where Schrader only stresses the positive contribution of home to human existence, Levinas offers an ambivalent philosophy of home, highlighting what he terms “the equivocal essence of the home.”<sup>9</sup> Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* supports two strikingly different assertions: 1) that home is

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<sup>6</sup> William Large, *Levinas’ “Totality and Infinity”* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) 55.

<sup>7</sup> Schrader, 63.

<sup>8</sup> Large, 55. Both Schrader’s and Large’s claims are problematic as they stand. To speak of people experiencing homelessness as “non-persons” as does Schrader or as having “their self diminished to nothing” as does Large seems to deny the humanity of those experiencing homelessness. Schrader makes it clear that he is speaking of a social failure to recognize personhood when he speaks of those experiencing homelessness as “non-persons.” I take Large as somewhat hyperbolically stating that the sense of self of those experiencing homelessness is placed under extreme pressure.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 170. Henceforth cited as TI.

fundamental to human existence far beyond its role in offering shelter from the elements, and 2) that home is a dangerous thing, prone to isolate occupants from their fellow humans, unless the cozy enclosure of home is shattered by the ethical demand of the other in need, opening the home up as a site of hospitality. The following essay is devoted to developing and applying the first claim. The second claim will be the work of another essay.

**Levinas's Discussion of Separation and Interiority as Preparatory to his Discussion of Dwelling**

Levinas's most developed account of home and habitation is a 23 page section, titled "The Dwelling" [*La Demeure*], which is literally central to his first masterwork, *Totality and Infinity*. What precedes "The Dwelling" in the first half of *Totality and Infinity* is an analysis of psychological interiority, which Levinas variously terms separation, egoism, atheism, the "as-for-me" [*quant-à-soi*] and (strikingly) "the 'at-home'" [*le chez soi*]. Thus, something over half of *Totality and Infinity* is devoted to interiority of both the psychological and the domestic kinds as well as their connections.

Despite its centrality in the text, there is surprisingly little discussion of interiority or of dwelling in the scholarly literature on Levinas. Rather, it is overwhelmingly Section III of *Totality and Infinity*, "Exteriority and the Face," that has drawn readers' attention. There Levinas lays out his highly distinctive ethical philosophy that articulates obligation not in terms of rules or results or virtues but as the authoritative demand that others in need – the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the body "naked and indigent" – impose on me when I encounter them. Levinas describes "the face to face" – his term for the asymmetrical relationship between oneself and the other in need – in such hyperbolic terms that it naturally draws more attention than earlier sections on dwelling and interiority. Given Levinas's agenda of redirecting philosophy away from its traditional amoral emphasis on ontology as first philosophy (a Greek orientation) towards the primacy of ethics (a Jewish orientation), the priority of Section III is understandable.

While the discussions of interiority in the first half of *Totality and Infinity* are not the main point of the text, they are essential preparation for Levinas's primary theme, infinity, which is his shorthand for an encounter with the absolutely other, for having an idea whose ideatum (intentional object) exceeds the idea's capacity of representation, for confronting the face of the other who shatters my self-enclosed happiness by imposing on me an absolute, non-reciprocal demand. Infinity is exteriority in all its forms. But exteriority is only possible in reference to interiority.

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Repeatedly, Levinas writes that only a subject with an interior life can hear the summons of an exterior other.

The alterity, the radical heterogeneity of the other, is possible only if the other is other with respect to a term whose essence is to remain at the point of departure, to serve as an *entry* into the relation, to be the same not relatively but absolutely. A term can remain absolutely at the point of departure only as I. (TI 36)

The I is identical in its very alterations. It represents them to itself and thinks them. The universal identity in which the heterogeneous can be embraced has the ossature [underlying structure] of a subject, of the first person. (TI 36)

Alterity is possible only starting from *me* (TI 40).

Before turning to Levinas’s section on Dwelling itself, it is important to survey his preceding development of interiority in Section I, “The Same and the Other,” and in Section II, “Interiority and Economy.” Both sections develop accounts of the self as separate. In “The Same and the Other,” separation is resistance to totality; in “Interiority and Economy,” separation is emergence out of our original immersion in the element. Since both “totality” and “the element” are used by Levinas in highly specific, technical senses, understanding what he means by separation requires unpacking the two terms.

*Separation as Breach [Rupture] of Totality*

Levinas signals the importance of totality by including the term in the title of *Totality and Infinity* and by defining the other title term, infinity, in opposition to it. As the text unfolds, it becomes clear that Levinas uses the term, “totality,” to designate any whole which subsumes without remainder its parts, any condition in which the whole is real and apparent parts are merely epiphenomenal. Totality is the absorption of the other by the same, the triumph of unity over distinction. This can take epistemological form as a rationalism that purports to comprehend all, “where the opposition between I and non-I disappears, in an impersonal reason” (TI 87). It can also take metaphysical form as in the monisms of Parmenides, Spinoza, and Hegel. Reductive naturalism, the view of nature



as a single system of material objects governed by a single set of natural laws, is another theoretical version of totality. But Levinas does not open *Totality and Infinity* with a technical definition of totality or with a focus on totality as a type of theory. Rather, he frames totality in practical, moral, and political terms, tightly linking war and totality and labeling war as an amoral zone of force that levels all difference, that obliterates all distinction. He writes,

War does not manifest exteriority and the other as the other;...

The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy.  
(TI 21)

Why this connection between totality and war? In his notorious vindication of war, Hegel argues that war, by demanding that citizens give their lives for the state, reminds those citizens that their individual lives are secondary to their membership in the collective. What Hegel theorized, Levinas experienced during a life spanning the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He survived two world wars, grinding uncouneted millions to dust (and during which he spent years in a German POW camp); he survived the Holocaust, which replaced human names with numbers and industrialized the killing and cremation of additional millions (including many of Levinas's family members). As he published *Totality and Infinity* in 1961, the Cold War was dangerously close to turning hot in a nuclear Armageddon which would have been a final statement of the nullity of individual human lives.

Like Kierkegaard, who feared that Hegel's theoretical effacement of the individual corresponded to a social-political effacement of the individuals by forces of Christendom, mass media, and political movements, Levinas offers his account of separation as "a defense of subjectivity" (TI 26), as a dogged insistence on the reality and importance of particular persons. The thrust of Section 1, "The Same and the Other," is that, "The separation of the Same [of a self that maintains itself, that establishes an identity] is produced in the form of an inner life, a psychism...The *cogito*...evinces separation...Separation is not reflected in thought, but [is] produced by it" (TI 54). That is, personal, conscious existence as an I is uniquely able to breach totality, to give rise to an existence that is not reducible without remainder to its part in the whole. What is it about the I, the subject of consciousness, that makes it uniquely resistant to totality?

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According to Levinas, the first personal character of sensory experience resists subsumption into an impersonal whole. Levinas writes, “Sensation breaks up every system” (TI 59), meaning that each individual’s sensory experience of the world is unique, distinctive, her own. As Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich poignantly puts it as he tries to come to terms with his impending death:

Had Caius [a generic name used in the syllogism that since Caius is a human and all humans are mortal, Caius is mortal] ever known the smell of that striped leather ball Vanya had loved so much? Had Caius ever kissed his mother’s hand so dearly, and had the silk folds of her dress ever rustled so for him?<sup>10</sup>

While interiority seems to be a spatial designation, Levinas also articulates the self’s separateness, its interiority, in temporal terms. To evoke a sense of the self as distinct from totality, he juxtaposes the objective, universal time of the historians (totality) with the personal experiences of time of particular individuals (separation):

Separation designates the possibility of an *existent* being set up and having its own destiny to itself, that is, being born and dying without the place of this birth and death in the time of universal history being the measure of its reality. Interiority is the very possibility of a birth and a death which do not derive their very meaning from history. (TI 55)

What is it that distinguishes universal, objective, historical time from the personal time of the separated self? Levinas turns to Descartes’ 3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation, noting the divergence there between the order of being and the order of knowledge. The first certainty of the Meditations is, of course, the meditator’s own being. On the basis of that foundational self-certainty, the meditator proceeds to prove the existence of God. But God is the eternal cause of the self, existing before that self. By means of what Levinas calls, “the posteriority of the anterior,” that is, the reversal of objective temporal order in the sequence of thoughts of the subject, a fundamental cleft opens

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<sup>10</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Ronald Blythe (New York: Bantam, 1981) 93.

up between totality and the individual self: “That there could be a chronological order distinct from the ‘logical’ order,...here is separation” (TI 54). What concerns Levinas is not Descartes’s argument *per se* but asserting the significance of the moments of personal lives, even (or especially) those lives that disappear without notice in the scheme of world history. As quoted above, he insists, “Interiority is the very possibility of a birth and a death which do not derive their very meaning from history” (TI 55). The griefs and joys, the struggles and triumphs, of countless people are not registered within the grand narrative of world history (totality), but those moments have their meaning and importance within the personal histories of those individuals (separation).

### *Separation and Enjoyment*

Working within the phenomenological tradition, Levinas shares that tradition’s abiding focus on intentionality, that is, on the relation between the conscious subject and the objects of that subject’s awareness.<sup>11</sup> While there is consensus among phenomenologists on the central importance of intentionality, there is deep division as to which mode of intentionality is fundamental. Like his teacher, Heidegger, Levinas criticizes his teacher’s teacher, Husserl, for “excessive attachment to theoretical consciousness” (TI 123). But Levinas goes on to critique Heidegger’s analysis of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world as itself a secondary, derivative mode of awareness. Heidegger’s *Being and Time* sets out to show that a disinterested cognitive awareness of objects (awareness of things as present-at-hand) is derivative from a more basic, everyday engagement with objects in terms of our concerns and projects (awareness of things as ready-to-hand). Heidegger’s famous illustration of this distinction: a worker on the job doesn’t just stare at a hammer, disinterestedly noting its features, but instead sees the hammer as the means to achieve a desired end. Levinas, in turn, critiques Heidegger’s emphasis on practical, instrumental engagement with objects as itself a secondary mode of awareness, dependent on a yet more primordial relation to the world: enjoyment. “Heidegger does not take the relation of enjoyment into consideration. The implement has entirely masked the usage and the issuance at the term – the satisfaction” (TI 134). Levinas argues that *Dasein*’s busy engagement with the ready-to-hand, with tools, remains unmotivated unless that engagement ultimately grounds itself

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<sup>11</sup> While Levinas clearly works within the phenomenological tradition, he also presses beyond its inherent limitations as when he argues that the face to face, the relation to the other, the metaphysical relation, defies analysis in terms of intentionality. See TI 109.

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in satisfaction. And that satisfaction can't be articulated in terms of the instrumental networks Heidegger makes fundamental to *Dasein's* being in the world. As Levinas mockingly notes, “*Dasein* in Heidegger is never hungry” (TI 134). Against Heidegger, Levinas sees our primordial relation to the world as enjoyment. “Enjoyment [*Jouissance*] – an ultimate relation with the substantial plentitude of being, with its materiality – embraces all relations to things...To enjoy without utility, in pure loss, gratuitously, without referring to anything else, in pure expenditure – this is the human” (TI 133).

To get at Levinas's distinctive understanding of enjoyment, it is useful to attend to the images that guide his analysis. Each of the three modes of intentionality mentioned above – representation, practical engagement, and enjoyment – correspond to distinctive metaphors. Husserl's emphasis on noetic intentionality is captured in visual metaphors, in which we contemplate objects from a distance. Heidegger's emphasis on practical engagement lends itself to metaphors of grasp, of taking a tool in hand in using it. Levinas describes the intentionality of enjoyment via metaphors of eating. He glosses enjoyment as “living from [*vivre de*],” and, while he names many things alongside food as that from which we live, he highlights the relation to food: “Nourishment, as the means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of enjoyment...All enjoyment is in this sense alimentation” (TI 110-111). Levinas is accentuating a mode of awareness more basic than representation or utilization in which we, as embodied material beings, directly engage the material world in its full reality. As he puts it,

This sinking one's teeth into the things which the act of eating involves above all measures the surplus of the reality of the aliment over every represented reality, a surplus that is not quantitative, but is the way the I, the absolute commencement, is suspended on the non-I. (TI 129)

Already in this exposition of the metaphor of eating, Levinas points beyond it to another metaphor. When I eat, I take an exterior object into myself, making it part of myself. But in the passage above, Levinas describes the self as “suspended on the non-I.” It would be hard to be suspended on that which is entirely within me! While I take parts of the material world into myself, enjoying them and nourishing myself, the fund or reserve from which those particular “aliments” are drawn is never itself

made interior. Rather, it surrounds me, immerses me, encompasses me. If in eating I take food within me, I, in turn, am within the material world from which the food comes. Levinas describes this immersion as “bathing in the element” (TI 132). These two distinctive, even contradictory metaphors – eating and bathing – lead Levinas into two variant but complementary accounts of separation.

The metaphor of eating suggests separation as an inward movement, a movement that gives rise to the self:

Enjoyment is a withdrawal into oneself, an involution. What is termed an affective state does not have the dull monotony of a state, but is the vibrant exaltation in which dawns the self. (TI 118)

In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other, I am alone without solitude, innocently egoist and alone. Not against the Others, not “as for me...” – but entirely deaf to the Other, outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate – without ears, like a hungry stomach. (TI 134)

But if eating suggests an “involution,” a movement of turning in on itself, separating itself from its environing world, “bathing in the element” suggests just the opposite. It is not that the self turns out instead of in (as in the case of representation) but that environing nature inundates the self, overwhelming ego boundaries:

To-be-in-the-element...differs from a thought making its way outward. Here on the contrary the movement comes incessantly upon me, as the wave that engulfs and submerges and drowns – an incessant movement of afflux without respite, a total contact without fissure or gap from which the reflected movement of thought could arise. It is to be within, to be inside of...” (TI 135)

To follow Levinas here, we need to understand his distinctive concept of “the element” and its connection to enjoyment. Levinas draws on the Greek notion of the elemental as the diffuse, indefinite, eternal material principles from which particular things arise: “It [the elemental] is wind, earth, sea, air” (TI 132). Elsewhere, he invokes Anaximander, naming it “the *apeiron* [the unlimited, the indefinite]...[which] presents itself a

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quality refractory to identification” (TI 141). He also invokes Aristotle’s notion of “prime matter,” the utterly unformed and indeterminate stuff of which things are made (TI 159). Why is it that Levinas says that enjoyment puts us in contact with the element, the source from which things come, rather than things themselves? For Levinas, a world of definite things takes shape only for representational consciousness and for practical engagement. Through language, by naming things, through labor, by shaping things, through ownership, by making things property, we (temporarily) place limits on and give definition to the indefinite material that surrounds us.

Appropriation and representation add a new event... Things have a name and an identity... The world of perception is thus a world where things have identity... The identity of persons and the continuity of their labors project over the things the grill through which they find again identical things. An earth inhabited by men endowed with language is peopled with stable things. (TI 139)

In enjoyment, an intentionality more basic than thought or work, the self gets back beneath and before this grid of individuation to engage the element as element. And that engagement is delicious, for the self loves its life in the world. Against Heidegger’s description of existence as a grim domain of anxiety and labor, Levinas proclaims “life’s joyous access to life” (TI 145):

The elements do not receive man as a land of exile, humiliating and limiting his freedom. The human being does not find himself in an absurd world in which he would be *geworfen* [thrown]. (TI 140)

At its origin there is a being gratified, a citizen of paradise... Far from putting the sensible life in question, pain takes place within its horizons and refers to the joy of living. Already and henceforth, life is loved...  
*The gnosis of the sensible is already enjoyment.* (TI 145)

Enjoyment then, in Heideggerian lingo, is ontological, not ontic. Enjoyment is not, first and foremost, enjoyment of this or that but of life, of being, of our materiality in communion with the materiality of nature, of our immersion in the element.

But if enjoyment is the first mode of our relation to being, anxiety follows close on its heels. Because enjoyment puts us in touch with the indefinite source out of which particular objects of enjoyment arise, it undercuts our faith in a world of stable, reliable, definite things, revealing that things are ever haunted by their origin and destination in the element. This awareness manifests itself as anxiety. “Enjoyment is without security...[I]nsecurity menaces an enjoyment already happy in the element, rendered sensitive to disquietude only by this happiness” (TI 142). Anxiety is typically understood as a concern for the future, and Levinas states that the self, even as it enjoys life, is troubled by an awareness that that enjoyment will cease:

[T]he happiness of enjoyment...can be tarnished by the concern for the morrow involved in the fathomless depth of the element in which enjoyment is steeped. (TI 144)

The separation that is accomplished by egoism would be but a word if the ego, the separated and self-sufficient being, did not hear the muffled rustling of nothingness back unto which the elements flow and are lost. (TI 146)

This overtly temporal anxiety also manifests itself as a spatial anxiety akin to Kant’s analysis of the sublime. While things, the definite, discrete objects we create through language and labor, are entirely bounded by sides, when we immerse ourselves in the element, we engage a reality beyond such limits:

To be affected by a side [face] of being while its whole depth remains undetermined and comes upon me from nowhere is to be bent toward the insecurity of the morrow...

The element I inhabit is at the frontier of a night. What the side of the element that is turned towards me conceals is not a “something” susceptible of being revealed, but an ever-new depth of absence, an existence without existent, the impersonal par excellence...

We have described this nocturnal dimension of the future under the title *there is [il y a]*. The element extends into the *there is*. Enjoyment, as interiorization, runs up against the very strangeness of the earth. (TI 142)

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Thus enjoyment, as delightful as it is, exposes the self to two levels of anxiety: the joy it experiences is temporally limited, it will end; the source of that joy, the element, is boundless, both spatially unlimited and temporally without being or end.

As noted above, Levinas’s two metaphors governing his analysis of enjoyment seem to point in two discrepant directions. The eating metaphor, with its focus on the self turning in on itself in enjoyment, fits obviously with the theme of separation that is a main focus of the first half of *Totality and Infinity*. But the metaphor of “bathing in the element” runs counter to separation as the self loses itself in enjoyment, dissolves in the element, drowns in the unbounded sea of the materiality that precedes discrete, separate things. For Levinas, this is not a contradiction. Rather, to be human is to find a way to live in this tension. Specifically, the challenge is to find a way to bring two modes of interiority – the interiority of egoism and the interiority of immersion in the element – together. According to Levinas, this reconciliation happens uniquely in the home.

Man has overcome the elements only by surmounting this interiority without issue [that is, inundation by the element] by the domicile [a new type of interiority], which confers upon him an extraterritoriality [an embassy, though entirely enclosed within a host country, operates as a bit of the territory of the home country]. [In the domicile,] He is *within* what he possesses, such that we shall be able to say that the domicile... renders the inner life possible. The I is thus at home with itself. Through home our relation with space at a distance and extension is substituted for the simple “bathing in the element.” (TI 131-2)

Already here in the sub-section, “Enjoyment and Separation,” Levinas sketches out main lines of the exposition of home that he will develop more fully in the next section, “The Dwelling.”

### **“The Dwelling”**

Levinas’s exposition of the home can be read as a sort of phenomenological commentary on Aesop’s fable of the grasshopper and the ant. The grasshopper gives itself over unreservedly to enjoyment of the summer – its plenteous food, its mild weather, its long, delicious days. Avoiding labor, the grasshopper fiddles the summer away, content to live joyously in the moment. As if speaking for the grasshopper, Levinas sums



up enjoyment in the motto, “To live is to play” (TI 134). In contrast, the ant, attuned to its anxiety, knows deep down that “the plentitude of its instant of enjoyment is not ensured against the unknown that lurks in the very element it enjoys,” realizes that “what life lives from can come to be wanting” (TI 144). The ant takes to heart the portentous mantra of “Game of Thrones”: “winter is coming.”

Just as with Aesop’s ant, so Levinas’s I responds to the uncertainty that menaces enjoyment by laboring. Through work, raw material is modified and collected against a future when it will be needed. In the process, it undergoes a fundamental ontological transformation. In place of the indefinite, unreliable element, matter is stabilized and appropriated as possession. “The labor that draws the things from the elements in which I am steeped discovers durable substances, but forthwith suspends the independence of their durable being by acquiring them as movable goods, transportable, put in reserve, deposited in the home” thereby establishing “a world to be possessed, to be acquired” (TI 157).

Just as the ant’s labors are oriented by the subterranean nest from which it emerges and to which it returns, so the I’s labors make essential reference to the home. Here, however, Aesop breaks down as our guide. According to Levinas, home is not just a useful warehouse, a place to put and protect the products of our labor. Rather, he sees home as the *precondition* of the very possibility of labor and possession. To labor is take up a fundamentally different relation to nature. It is to step back from immediate enjoyment, to achieve distance from the element. This distance is both spatial and temporal. Rather than abandoning itself to enjoyment of the matter immediately before it, *homo faber* engages in circumspection, seeing that matter in relation to a wider instrumental context. Rather than abandoning itself to the now of enjoyment, *homo faber* defers gratification, working to provide for future needs. How does the self achieve this distance from the here and the now in which it is immersed? Levinas asserts that the basis of this distance is nothing other than the home which “is set back from the anonymity of the earth, the air, the light, the forest, the road, the sea, the river... With the dwelling the separated being breaks with natural existence” (TI 156).

As with labor, possession is also dependent on a break with the element for the element itself is “essentially non-possessable, ‘nobody’s’” (TI 131). The home, as an enclosed, separated space, creates the possibility for the fundamentally new relationship to things involved in possession. In order to possess a thing, in order for it to become *mine*, it has to become a

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part of my being, that is, interior to me in some sense. According to Levinas, the home, as an interior space, “establishes [a relationship] with a world to be possessed, to be acquired, to be rendered *interior*” (TI 157). As a precondition of possession, the home cannot itself be a possession according to Levinas. “The home that founds possession is not a possession in the same sense as the moveable goods it can collect and keep.” Rather, the home is a locus of “essential interiority” (TI 157). The essentially interior space of the home allows for the interiorization of things within my being that possession implies.

As in the case of labor and possession, Levinas says that the very possibility of thought, as he puts it, of representation, depends on the home. He writes, “the dwelling cannot be forgotten among the conditions for representation...[T]he subject contemplating the world presupposes the event of dwelling, the withdrawal from the elements” (TI 153). Only by stepping back from total immersion in enjoyment can the self achieve a cognitive, representational perspective on the objects of its enjoyment.

Levinas brings these three distinctive features of human existence – labor, possession, and representation – together under one category: recollection. In recollection, the self gathers itself together, forging rather than discovering its identity, establishing itself as a self that maintains itself [*se tenir*] within space and across time. In so doing, the self ceases to be an animal interacting with nature to become a human inhabiting a world. And all that depends on home. “The recollection necessary for nature to be represented and worked over [and then possessed], for it to take form as a world, is accomplished as the home” (TI 152).

Clearly, Levinas attributes enormous significance to the home, naming it as the basis of distinctly human existence. As he puts it, “within the system of finalities in which human life maintains itself the home occupies a privileged place...The privileged role of the home does not consist in being the end of human activity but in being its condition and in this sense its commencement...” (TI 152). But how to understand this distinctive and fundamental role? So far, I’ve pointed to two aspects of home to account for its centrality for Levinas: 1) its being “set back” from the element, giving the self a distance from nature, and 2) the distinctive quality of its space as “essentially interior.” As suggestive as those themes are, the question remains: what makes home the indispensable basis for labor, possession and thought, in short, for all that is distinctly human? To get a deeper understanding of the centrality of home for Levinas, we need to keep in view the phenomenological basis of his philosophy. Levinas

argues for a *sui generis* awareness of home, a distinctive mode of intentionality linking the subject and its dwelling, that shines light on the fundamental ontological role it plays in our lives. That is, beyond arguing that home is essential for transcending enjoyment to achieve labor, possession, and thought, Levinas further argues that there is a distinctive mode of awareness of home over and above enjoyment, practical engagement, and representation, an awareness that lies at the very base of our sense of ourselves as separate, individuated beings. He proposes a fourth, entirely distinctive mode of awareness, “a specific intentionality of concretization,” which he describes as “the outpouring of consciousness in things” (TI 153).

“Intentionality of concretization” is, for Levinas, an indirect self-consciousness whereby the self becomes aware of itself as separate, as interior, by seeing those traits reflected in its living space. In a manner that recalls Hegel on the self’s discovery of itself by seeing itself reflected in the objects of its awareness, Levinas argues that the spatial enclosure of the home allows the dweller in that home to both achieve separation and become conscious of itself as separate. He writes,

The whole of the civilization of labor and possession arises as a concretization of the separated being effectuating its separation. But this civilization refers to the incarnation of consciousness and to inhabitation – to existence proceeding from the intimacy of a home, the first concretization. (TI 153)

The feat of having limited a part of this world and having closed it off...realizes extraterritoriality and the sovereignty of thought. (TI 169-70)

Levinas turns to a variety of expressions to capture what he has in mind by “intentionality of concretization”: it is an “outpouring of consciousness into things,” an “incarnation of consciousness,” an “effectuating” and a “realizing” of the psychological state of separation in a set of physical circumstances. One is tempted to turn to a term of literary criticism, the “objective correlative,” to speak of this relation, but that seems not quite adequate. The objective correlative is a literary device for conveying an emotional state by way of a description of physical circumstances, but, for Levinas, it is not just a means of expression. Rather, he describes the psychological condition of interiority as inextricably bound up with the its

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physical, architectural double such that the former is only real and recognized insofar as it is housed in and reflected by the latter. James Mensch nicely describes such doubling in noting that the privacy of first personal experience is given concrete reality in the opaque walls and curtained windows of the home:

[T]he home manifests on an extended level the privacy of our interiority. The Other can see a person’s body. He cannot see the seeing that takes place within it. Similarly, he sees the outside of a person’s home, but neither its interior nor the person who looks out from it is available to his gaze. In an extended sense, then, “interiority [is] concretely established in the home” (TI 154).<sup>12</sup>

Levinas makes the case for his bold claim concerning “the intentionality of concretization” by describing how the dwelling fundamentally shapes and orients the self’s relations with space, time, things, its own body, and, finally, other persons.

### *Space*

In the first page of his discussion of dwelling, Levinas describes the self as ever moving between two fundamentally different spaces: one interior and the other exterior:

Man abides in the world as having come to it from a private domain, from being at home with himself, to which at each moment he can retire...Simultaneously without and within, he goes forth outside from an inwardness [*intimité*]. (TI 152)

With these evocative words, Levinas breaks with the regnant Euclidian – Newtonian tradition of thinking of space as singular, unitary, and homogeneous, as a sort of neutral matrix within which things and events are located. He posits instead two radically heterogeneous spaces between which we pass when we cross through doors, much as C.S. Lewis’s wardrobe is a portal between our familiar world and the magical world of Narnia. This comparison lets us grasp what Levinas means when he says that the home

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<sup>12</sup>James R. Mensch, *Levinas’s Existential Analytic: A Commentary on Totality and Infinity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015) 95.

is “set back” (TI 156) from the natural world. Normally, to be set back from something involves increasing distance between objects occupying a common space. But the “set back” Levinas associates with dwelling is removal to a qualitatively different interior space, as Raoul Moati puts it, a “radical elsewhere,” that nonetheless retains access to the exterior space of the natural world.<sup>13</sup> Herein lies the profound significance of doors and windows – the *only* specific features of the home (other than walls) that Levinas mentions. He writes,

The dwelling remains in its own way open upon the element from which it separates. The ambiguity of distance, both removal and connection, is lifted by the window...(TI 156)

The feat of having limited a part of the world and having closed it off, having access to the elements I enjoy by way of the door and the window, realizes extraterritoriality and the sovereignty of thought...(TI 169-70)

To grasp what Levinas is saying, it helps to refer to the Transcendental Aesthetic of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. There Kant asserts that space and time are not independent objective realities but rather pure forms of sensibility, that is, the grids of our sensible intuitions. Kant says that our intuitions of outer sense, that is, our sensory intuitions of things beyond ourselves, are deployed on the grid of space, whereas our intuitions of inner sense, our awareness of our own internal states, are deployed on the grid of time. For example, my experience of my copy of *Totality and Infinity* places it over there, just to the right of my keyboard, while my experience of perplexity at an especially opaque passage in Levinas is placed at a *when*, not a *where*.

Despite Kant’s radical departure from objectivist understandings of space, he describes space in terms quite consistent with the dominant tradition. Vindicating Euclid as describing perfectly the character of space, Kant insists that space is singular, unitary and homogeneous. As noted, Kant locates the fundamental cleft that runs through human experience between our outer and inner intuitions, the former deployed in space, the latter in time. Levinas, in contrast, shifts the inner/outer divide out into space itself, with space riven by the threshold of the home into two radically

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<sup>13</sup> Raoul Moati, *Levinas and the Night of Being: A Guide to Totality and Infinity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017) 93

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heterogenous zones, the interior of the dwelling on the one hand and the world beyond the dwelling on the other.<sup>14</sup>

Against the common sense notion that places the space of the home squarely and unproblematically within the space of the world, Levinas stages his own “Copernican Revolution,” interestingly parallel to Kant’s, prioritizing the interior space of the home over the exterior space of the world.

But this belongingness [the existence of the home within the world] does not nullify the bearing of the fact that every consideration of objects, and of buildings too, is produced out of a dwelling. *Concretely speaking the dwelling is not situated in the objective world, but the objective world is situated in reference to my dwelling* [my italics]. (TI 152-3)

The *somewhere* of dwelling is produced as a primordial event relative to which the event of the unfolding of physico-geometrical extension must be understood – and not the reverse. (TI 168)

Levinas is asserting here that for each person, their home, their dwelling, their domain of interior space, is their *axis mundi*, the reference point in terms of which location in exterior space is determined. I leave my home, I go out into the world, perhaps far away from home. But my home is ever-present in my consciousness as I navigate that outer world, serving as my basis for understanding where I am and orienting my movements. Levinas thus gives the lived interior space of the home priority in two regards. First, lived interior space has priority over lived exterior space, the former serving as the reference point for the latter. Second, like Husserl and Heidegger before him, Levinas gives priority to lived experience over objective reconstructions of experience embodied in theoretical knowledge, such as the natural sciences. Only on the basis of the lived space of the home can the self construct and utilize depersonalized reconstructions of space such as maps or gps coordinates.

### *Time*

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<sup>14</sup> As James Mensch puts it, “[The home] extends the ego’s interiority to a part of the objective world: the home becomes the extended 0-point.” Mensch, 95.

Levinas asserts that the dwelling shapes our experience of time just as profoundly as it shapes our experience of space. As discussed above, Levinas regards enjoyment as an immersion of self in the element, as an unrestricted abandonment of self to delight in the material stuff of nature. In such an immersion and self-abandonment, experience is all about the here and now of the immediate present. For Levinas, such experience does not rise to the level of consciousness. Rather, true experience involves a distance from the present achieved through the “deferred gratification” implicit in work and ownership. And those relations to the material world depend on the home for their possibility. Levinas writes that “ecstatic and immediate enjoyment...is adjourned and delayed in the home” (TI 156), thereby “open[ing] the very dimension of time” (TI 165). For Levinas, our very existence as temporal beings is grounded in the home.

### *Things*

For the naïve realism of the “natural attitude” (our unproblematic and unselfconscious engagement with the world), things, the furniture of the world, are objectively there independent of our awareness of them. For Levinas, both things and the world in which they take their places are accomplishments, that is, fundamental ontological transformations of brute nature, the element, the *il y a* (the *there is*). As we have seen in discussing enjoyment, the element is unlimited, lacking the defined sides characteristic of a thing. One enjoys as one plunges into the ocean – one enters a plenum that stretches out endlessly before one. Only through labor, possession, and representation (ie naming and thinking about things) does the self carve off a portion of the element from the whole, transfigure it into a humanly meaningful and useable entity, replace its Heraclitean instability with the reliability and permanence, and give it a name and a place within the world. As quoted above, Levinas writes,

Appropriation and representation add a new event... Things have a name and an identity... The world of perception is thus a world where things have identity... The identity of persons and the continuity of their labors project over the things the grill through which they find again identical things. An earth inhabited by men endowed with language is peopled with stable things. (TI 139)

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Since home, for Levinas, is the condition of labor, possession and representation, and since labor, possession, and representation are conditions for the existence of things, home is the precondition of things.

*Body*

Of all the things in the world, one stands out as uniquely intimate and significant: the self’s body. Any number of theorists of home have postulated some sort of homology between home and body: the walls of the home that separates the exterior from the interior are a double of our skin; windows are like eyes; the door is like the mouth, etc. Those who take the home as the double of the body naturally give priority to the body, the natural basis for the cultural copy. Surprisingly, Levinas denies that we can fully be said to have bodies apart from dwelling. Against Boutroux, who sees possession of objects as an extension of our primordial possession of our bodies, Levinas argues,

But the body as naked body is not the first possession; it is still outside of having and not having. We dispose of our body inasmuch as we have already suspended the being of the element that bathes us, by *inhabiting*. The body is my possession according as my being maintains itself in a home at the limit of interiority and exteriority. *The extraterritoriality of a home conditions the very possession of my body* [my italics]. (TI 162)

Levinas explains this remarkable claim by returning to the equivocal character of enjoyment. On the one hand, enjoyment is an involution, a taking of something into oneself and making it part of oneself. This is a moment of independence. But on the other hand, the self loses itself in its dependence on the element. For Levinas, the body *is* this simultaneous dependence and independence: “*To be a body* is on the one hand *to stand [se tenir]*, to be master of oneself, and, on the other, to stand on the earth, to be in the *other*, and thus to be encumbered by one’s body...their simultaneity constitutes the body” (TI 164-5). As noted, Levinas asserts that the “naked body,” that is the body in its purely natural modality is “outside having and not having.” Levinas writes, “The dwelling, overcoming the insecurity of life, is a perpetual postponement of the expiration in which life risks foundering” (TI 165). That is, only by circumscribing the body’s dependence on and vulnerability to the vicissitudes of the element does it



become properly a body I can call my own. In that sense, “*home conditions the very possession of my body* [my italics]” (TI 162).

### *Others*

To this point, my discussion of Levinas on home has “bracketed” reference to other persons, proceeding as if the dwelling could be understood simply as enclosed space separated off from the world beyond its walls, doors and windows. In fact, other persons were already implicitly present in discussions of ownership and thought as modes of relationship to things opened up by habitation. Levinas writes, “A thing does not resist acquisition; the other possessors – those whom one cannot possess – contest and therefore can sanction possession itself” (TI 162). That is, possession is inherently social. My ownership of a thing depends on recognition of that ownership by other potential users of the thing. Also, deeply entwined with possession are notions of right of exchange, either through barter or for money, with other persons.

In a similar manner, representation – the cognitive having of things – involves placing particular things under concepts, that is, categorizing individuals as tokens of general types. For Levinas, concepts arise out of language, the application of shared, mutually understood words to things. And language is essentially social. Levinas writes, “Signification arises from the other stating or understanding the world, which precisely is thematized in his language or his understanding” (TI 97). As he puts it even more succinctly, “the locus of truth is society” (TI 101). So, in presenting the home as the basis of possession and representation, the social context of home was already implicitly present.

Recognizing this, however, still doesn’t come to terms with the fundamentally social character of dwelling for Levinas. As noted, home for Levinas is a qualitatively distinctive space, a “radical elsewhere,” separate from though connected to the space of the exterior world. What makes domestic space distinctive is not just the walls, windows and doors that enclose it; after all, architecture in general encloses interior spaces but not all buildings are homes. What makes home a distinctive “privileged place” (TI 152) for Levinas is that it is always already transfigured by a human presence, by a welcoming other, whose hospitality transforms the mere physical edifice into a proper home. Controversially, Levinas identifies this welcoming other as “the feminine,” as “feminine alterity,” as “the woman.” He writes, “This peaceable welcome is produced primordially in the gentleness of the feminine face” (TI 150). For Levinas, the self comes to

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itself, recollects itself, within the intimate space of home, and this is only possible because of the restrained, silent presence of “the woman” whose mode of relationship is radically different from the face-to-face presence of the other who confronts the self with obtrusive ethical demands.

For the intimacy of recollection to be able to be produced in the oecumena of being the presence of the Other must not only be revealed in the face which breaks through its own plastic image, but must be revealed simultaneously with this presence, in the withdrawal and in its absence... And the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy is the Woman. The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation. (TI 155)

Long before Levinas published *Totality and Infinity* in 1961, Simone de Beauvoir had already called him to task for earlier writings in which he similarly framed woman as man’s other and assigned her an essentially domestic role supporting masculine forays into the public world beyond the home.<sup>15</sup> Levinas’s statements hew so close to gender stereotypes that discomfort with his view of woman remains evident to this day. That said, many interpreters, more specifically, many feminist interpreters of Levinas resist de Beauvoir’s dismissive critique. Some defenders note that Levinas distinguishes between the feminine as a quality defining domestic space and specific female persons: “the empirical absence of the human being of the ‘feminine sex’ in a dwelling nowise affects the dimension of femininity which remains open there, as the very welcome of the being” (TI 158). Such a “metaphorical” reading (to use Claire Katz’s label) plays down the significance of gender, neutralizing (or even neutering) Levinas’s use of the term, “feminine.” Some interpreters, such as Tina Chanter, turn de Beauvoir’s critique on its head, acknowledging that Levinas does define woman as the other of man but insisting that Levinas is valorizing, not subordinating, the feminine:

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<sup>15</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1952) xix. Cited by Tina Chanter, “Feminism and the Other,” in *Provocation of Levinas: Thinking the Other*, ed. R. Bernasconi and R. Wood (New York: Routledge, 1988) 52.

Levinas's account of the Other provides feminism with a voice that many feminists have already begun to seek: the voice of the radically Other...I simply point to a certain insistence in his work upon otherness, an insistence which appeals to what have traditionally been conceived as non-male values: gentleness, tenderness, welcome.<sup>16</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this essay to sort out whether Levinas's comments on the feminine are a baleful gender essentialism or a salubrious reversal of patriarchal values (or both). What is crucial for my project of understanding Levinas on dwelling are two key points:

First, home is always already a social space. That is, what marks home as home, what transfigures the four walls, windows and doors of a house into a home, is a human welcome, a nurturing presence of others.

Second, the specific sociality of home is distinct from the sociality of the wider world. Levinas writes,

The Other who welcomes in intimacy [ie in the home] is not the *you* [*vous*] of the face that reveals itself in a dimension of height, but precisely the *thou* [*tu*] of familiarity: a language without teaching, a silent language, an understanding without words, an expression in secret. (TI 155)

As noted, Levinas is justly famous for his searing account of the face-to-face, of the imperious demand the other-in-need, which is the focus of Section III of *Totality and Infinity*. What is less appreciated is that Levinas views the gentler, nurturing sociability of the home as the basis for the demanding sociability of the face-to-face. Only as a housed being, with all that that entails, is the self authentically capable of the ethical encounter. For the ethical encounter is, at its core, hospitality, the separated being's opening of its home and thus of itself to the other in need:

The 'vision' of the face as face is a certain mode of sojourning in a home, or – to speak in a less singular fashion – a certain form of economic life. No human or interhuman

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<sup>16</sup> Tina Chanter, 52.

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relationship can be enacted outside of economy; no face can be approached with empty hands and closed home. Recollection in a home open to the Other – hospitality – is the initial fact of human recollection and separation; it coincides with the Desire for the Other absolutely transcendent. (TI 172)

To translate this into less distinctive terminology, Levinas is saying that the nurturing, supportive sociability of the home is an essential precondition for the challenging, demanding sociability of the broader ethical sphere. Developing in the context of the former makes possible the latter. Home, in other words, makes possible our development as moral selves.

### **Implications for Our Understanding of Homelessness**

Though this essay began with the issue of homelessness, more specifically, with the question of our duty to people experiencing homelessness, its focus has been overwhelmingly on Levinas’s distinctive philosophy of home. What does that philosophy have to say of relevance to the issue of homelessness?

Insofar as Levinas establishes home as fundamental to human existence, he indirectly makes the case that homelessness is indeed a profound deprivation, one demanding a response from those able to make it. It is obvious that people need shelter. But all too often we think of that shelter exclusively in terms of physiological need – a place to stay warm, dry, and safe from both natural and human threats. Levinas helps us understand the more profound role that home plays in our lives, giving human shape to our relations to space, time, things, our bodies and others. While it is beyond the scope of this essay, it is clear from my readings on homelessness and from my personal encounters with both homeless people and those who work with them that lacking a home does indeed disrupt human lives in these very domains. While Levinas’s philosophy of home proceeds at an extreme level of abstraction, empirical study of the effects of homelessness confirms his central claims.<sup>17</sup>

The relevance of Levinas to the issue of homelessness becomes even more obvious when we call to mind what follows his discussion of home and dwelling: his analysis of obligation as the claim of the other in need –

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<sup>17</sup> See especially Robert Desjarlais, *Shelter Blues: Sanity and Selfhood Among the Homeless* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

the widow, the orphan, the stranger – on the ethical agent. Breaking with standard theories that lay out ethics in terms of results, rules or virtues, Levinas centers his ethical philosophy on the insistent need of the other. An appreciative reading of his analysis of dwelling goes a long ways to heightening our sense of how insistent the homeless other’s need really is. And that makes the demand that we respond all the greater.

For Levinas, the coziness of existence at home, the self-contained contentment *chez soi*, sets the stage for the incursion of the other in need from beyond, from the exterior: “The possibility for the home to open to the Other is as essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows” (TI 173). That is, hospitality is as much constitutive of home as is its separation and enclosure. Home, as the site of hospitality, enables the ethical response to the other in need.

But if home makes possible ethical response to the other, it also can be the way we keep the inconvenient needs of the other out of sight and out of mind. At the opening of his discussion of dwelling, Levinas noted that *a la* Heidegger, the home can be seen as a tool, an implement, sheltering us from “the inclemencies of the weather” as well as hiding us from “enemies or the importunate” (TI 152). “The importunate” – others in desperate need who threaten my contented domestic tranquility – are precisely the focus of Section III, *Exteriority and the Face*. If the self must be housed to be ready to welcome “the importunate,” the home can equally be the means by which the self shuts itself off from the cries of the stranger, the widow and the orphan.

But the separated being can close itself up in its egoism, that is, in the very accomplishment of its isolation. And this possibility of forgetting the transcendence of the Other – of banishing with impunity all hospitality...from one’s home, banishing the transcendental relation that alone permits the I to shut itself up in itself – evinces the absolute truth, the radicalism of separation. (TI 172-3)

Early in this essay, I asserted that Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* supports two strikingly different assertions: 1) that home is fundamental to human existence far beyond its role in offering shelter from the elements, and 2) that home is a dangerous thing, prone to isolate occupants from their fellow humans. Having made the case for the first point by going through the ways in which the home fundamentally shapes our experiences of space, time, things, our bodies, and other persons, I have come to the second point:

*“The Equivocal Essence of the Home”: Levinas on Dwelling and Its Implications for the Plight of Homelessness*

our homes, rather than always being sites of hospitality, of welcoming openness to others, are all too prone to be cocoons of amoral self-satisfaction, capsules of comfort safe from the demands of “the importunate.” Herein, I take it, lies what Levinas calls “the equivocal essence of the home” (TI 172). The task of developing that second, admonitory message lies ahead as the work of another essay.

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## ***Homesteading the Noosphere: The Ethics of Owning Biological Information***

Bob Wadholm

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### **Abstract**

*The idea of homesteading can be extended to the realm of biological entities, to the ownership of information wherein organisms perform artifactual functions as a result of human development. Can the information of biological entities be ethically “homesteaded”: should humans (or businesses) have ownership rights over this information from the basis of mere development and possession, as in Locke’s theory of private property? I offer three non-consequentialist arguments against such homesteading: the information makeup of biological entities is not commonly owned, and thus is not available for homesteading; the value of the individual biological entity extends to the information whereby it is constituted, and includes inalienable rights of an entity over itself and its information; and use of life as an information artifact makes an organism an unending means to an end rather than an end itself. I conclude that the information space of biological entities is not open for homesteading, not liable to private ownership, and should not be available for perpetual exploitation.*

**Keywords:** *Bioethics, information ownership, private property, non-consequentialist, biological information*

### **Introduction**

Property rights seem to imply that if I own a whole thing, I also own its parts, granted that those parts can be owned. If a whole is constituted by its parts, it would be constituted by all and each of its parts for at least as long as these are parts of the whole. For example, if I own my whole house, I own the exterior siding; if I own my whole car, I own the tires; if I own a whole book, I own all the words. But I do not own the informational content of the words in the book: the publisher owns this. I do not own the tire tread technology: the tire company exercises intellectual property rights. I do not own the formula for the composite exterior siding: a business owns this information, a part of the whole thing that I own—this part is not owned by me. Each of these wholes is an inorganic human artifact—what if we change the focus to living organisms? If I own the yard in front of my house, I also seem to have property rights over a blade of grass in the yard; if I own the

blade of grass, I must also own the biological information in that blade of grass. But that blade of grass is perhaps part of a genetically modified organism: the grass seed company that created this information owns it, and thus owns that kind of grass, even if the whole plant can be said to be a part of my property. I subsequently cannot legally sell the grass seed when the organism tries to reproduce itself, even though it is my grass.

The previous examples focus on information that is said to be owned privately and exclusively outside of material property rights (I own the material, someone else owns the information; for instance, I own the building, and someone else owns the rights to the blueprints). But is the last example of the same kind as those preceding it, with the exception that this latter information happens to be part of what makes up a biological entity? Do intellectual property rights hold for the information makeup of living things? One current trend in the West is to say: “Yes, you can own this information”; biotech, a \$43 billion a year industry, is by-and-large built on exclusive patent rights to just this kind of biological information (Roberts, 2018, 1108).<sup>1</sup> Can the information of biological entities be “homesteaded”, that is, do humans (or businesses) have ownership rights over biological information on the basis of mere development and possession, following Locke’s theory of private property? This is a global problem with political and social ramifications (Powledge, 2001; Roberts, 2018), and how we answer it may affect not only the future of food, but the future of life on this planet (Shrader-Frechette, 2005). While most arguments in information ethics tend to be consequentialist in outlook (Fallis, 2004; Spinello, 2004; Macilwain, 2013; Roberts, 2018), judging or justifying information policies based on their effects, real or possible, I offer three non-consequentialist arguments against the homesteading of biological information: first, the information makeup of biological entities is not commonly owned, and thus is not available for homesteading. Second, the value of an individual biological entity extends to the information whereby it is constituted. Third, use of life as an information artifact makes an organism a means to an end rather than an end itself.

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<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Constitution (1.8.8) gives Congress power to “promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries”; such patenting for exclusive rights to inventions and creations has been extended to organisms and their information over the years.



## Homesteading the Noosphere

In the present argument I discuss the ethics of “homesteading the noosphere”, a phrase coined by information technologist Eric Raymond (2000) in an essay of the same name in which he provides an account of the ethics of information development in open source contexts, defining the noosphere as the “territory of ideas, the space of all possible thoughts” (9). Raymond (2000) suggests—based on Locke’s (1952) theory of property—three ways of acquiring ownership of information entities: homesteading (common ownership plus work equals private ownership), transfer of title, and loss or abandonment of title and possession through a kind of pseudo-homesteading. Homesteading is made the act whereby common ownership of the total information space (referred to here as the noosphere) is transformed into private ownership of the part of the information space developed by those who perform the knowledge work—free intellectual space is claimed for personal ownership through the act of development.<sup>2</sup> The term “homesteading”, with reference to biological information, may be appropriate given key similarities between land and biological information (Roberts, 2018). Biological information, for example, is unique to an entity, as land is unique,<sup>3</sup> and both may be inherited, giving each potential familial and hereditary links with the past and future (Roberts, 2018, 1169-1170). The idea of homesteading may thus extend to the realm of biological entities, to the ownership of information that helps organisms perform artifactual functions as a result of human development, such as through breeding practices or advanced genetic manipulation.<sup>4</sup> Plants, animals, and human biological materials are made to take on traits and characteristics considered beneficial (to engineers) as a result of knowledge work, and this is said to result in the private ownership of the new biological information. But can the information of biological entities be homesteaded: do humans (or businesses) have ownership rights over this information from the basis of mere development and possession?

Information is an intangible; Adam Moore has argued that the ownership of information counts as intangible property rights (2000, 98-99; 1998; 1997). Moore clarifies his position by stating that “intangible

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<sup>2</sup> For a more complete and nuanced account of the steps in this process, see Moore (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Even identical twins do not share identical genetic profiles (Roberts, 2018, 1169).

<sup>4</sup> The present paper does not address the ethicality of genetic engineering directly, but only the ownership of biological information. For treatments of the ethics of genetic engineering, see West (2006), Lucassen (1996), Hettinger (1995), Polambi (2013), Shrader-Frechette (2005), and Ormandy, Dale, and Griffen (2011).

property rights surround control of physical tokens, and this control protects rights to types or abstract ideas” (2000, 99), that is, it protects rights over the ideas behind those individual tokens. Ownership of these abstract ideas, or “intellectual objects”, in the words of Hettinger (1989, 35), is often justified by entitlement to the fruits of one’s labor. As Hettinger points out, however, the right to own and use intellectual objects based on one’s own labor is distinct from the right to prevent others from also possessing and using the intellectual object or creating tokens of it for their own use: the right to possess and personally use one’s own property is distinct from the right to exclude others from benefiting from it (40). Additionally, Hettinger (1995) argues that while labor may extend the rights of a person to ownership of a token (personal use and possession of a specific thing), it does not extend the rights of a person to ownership of a kind (exclusion of others from possessing or using that kind or other tokens of that kind) (280). Ownership of an apple by laboring for it does not extend to owning not only all apples but the kind “apple” as a result of that same labor.

It seems that Locke’s formula for homesteading does not cover or justify the exclusive ownership of biological entities as a kind through labor, nor of their biological information. Hettinger concludes that “it is *prima facie* irrational for a society to grant monopoly rights to something that all could use at once” (1995, 279).

Locke, in his *Second Treatise of Government*, argues that after common property becomes private property through labor, there must be no substantive loss to the common property, and no loss to others as a result of the acquisition, or in Locke’s own words, there must remain what is “enough, and as good, left in common for others” (Ch. 5, section 27).<sup>5</sup> This seems to entail a limit to homesteading: homesteading must not detract from the rights of others or the common property of all. If intellectual objects are obtained as private property through homesteading, this process must not exclude others from the good of the commons, nor should it harm the commons itself. If the commons is the space of all possible thoughts, as in the noosphere, and privatizing a portion of the commons detracts from the total of all possible thoughts or excludes others from enjoying it, Locke’s theory regarding privatization through labor is no longer applicable as a justification for such privately owned intellectual objects, that is, these

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<sup>5</sup> For Locke, this responsibility of the owner is not an indefinite state of affairs, but is concluded at the privatization of the common property: there must be enough and as good left over at the moment after the property becomes private.

intellectual objects may no longer be acquired through such homesteading. Locke's theory of property, then, is misapplied to the cases of homesteading biological information: such ownership detracts from the biological information available (some of the possible ideas are no longer available because they are owned), or it excludes others from enjoying it (biological information ownership claims are usually exclusive). It is not the noosphere, the territory of all thoughts, that can be homesteaded with biological information, if we are to follow Locke's limits, but instead the actual biological information tokens, so long as such privatization does no harm to either the commons of biological information, or every other human's enjoyment of that commons. Physical tokens that instantiate intellectual objects might be ownable, but intellectual objects themselves might or might not be able to be owned through homesteading because ownership of intellectual objects might substantively detract from the commons of the noosphere or other's enjoyment of it, and thus break Locke's limits for homesteading.

### **There is No Common Ownership of Biological Information**

For biological information to be privately owned through homesteading, the information must be commonly owned. Common ownership requires common access or the ability for common use, but biological information is not accessible by all (we address here the information of a biological entity, not the biological entity itself), nor is it available for common use or appropriation, even if the material itself is. In an analysis of the possibility of the common ownership of biological information, we must be clear about the nature of common ownership, we must have some notion of information—and biological information in particular—and we must recognize problems related to the process of homesteading in this natural information space.

The nature of common ownership includes subtractability and non-excludability (Hess & Ostrom, 2006, 9). Commonly owned resources may or may not be subtractable (that is, there may or may not be limited resources or rivals for those resources), but they are necessarily non-excludable. First, let us address subtractability: One person's knowledge or use of a bit of naturally occurring biological information is not subtractive from the whole information space available, that is, such knowledge or use does not "use up" the resource so that others are barred from knowing or using the information. Because of this, naturally occurring biological

information resources are non-rivalrous:<sup>6</sup> there is no natural competition for limited biological information. But these information resources are excludable, that is, some people may be excluded from accessing or using the resources by their very nature, and this reintroduces the problem of rivalry and subtractability. We might ask: what naturally excludes people from biological information? The information is hard to come by and requires advanced and expensive technologies, skills and knowledge, and the information itself is complex and therefore difficult to understand or to synthesize. Because of this exclusivity and the costs involved in access and use of the information, people become rivals for access and use (as long as there are perceived benefits). While the resources do not dwindle with use (as in traditional subtractability), the value of having the resource (the already known information) dwindles with greater access and use and makes the limited amount of previously unknown biological information more valuable. New (unknown) naturally occurring biological information grows in value as it becomes more limited.

In our analysis of exclusion, it would be well also to address definitions of terms related to information. Following Machlup (1983, 641), we take data to be “raw bits” (atomic facts) of what is given in the world, information is “organized data in context”, and knowledge is the “assimilation of the information and understanding of how to use it” (Hess & Ostrom, 2006, 8). Information in biological entities exists as data, becomes information for humans through scientific inquiry and analysis, and becomes knowledge for humans when it is understood and assimilated with other knowledge. Unfortunately, most humans have no access to the raw information in biological organisms; if they had access, most humans would not understand it because they lack the prerequisite scientific education and training; if they understood the information, most humans would not have the wherewithal to make use of it. In sum, most humans have insufficient access to biological data, insufficient understanding of biological information, and insufficient abilities to use or assimilate the biological knowledge. A remedy to this problem would be to provide free public access to all natural biological data, training and education regarding biological information, and adequate resources by which to access and use the information. Without this remedy, the barriers to access, understanding,

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<sup>6</sup> Non-rivalry is a general characteristic of intangible works of all varieties (Moore, 2000, 99; Roberts, 2018, 1168).

and use of biological information make this information exclusive: biological information is not commonly owned.

Although raw biological information is not common property, it is not to be considered private any more than the moon (which is also not common property). Rather, it seems to be a resource enjoyed by few, and owned by none, rather than being owned by all. Common ownership requires common access or the ability for common use, both of which are not satisfied with biological information. If private ownership requires common ownership as its basis (as in homesteading), there can be no rightful private ownership except with previous common ownership. Note that this does not bar common ownership of biological information in the future, but it does bar private ownership through homesteading until and unless there is first common ownership, which would include open access, understanding and use. Practically speaking, this would mean that before homesteading could occur with specific biological information, that same information would be required to be openly accessible, understood and used.

But let us suppose that at some time in the future such open access, understanding and use, either in part or in whole, is enjoyed by the public: would this constitute common ownership of biological information? Common ownership can only occur if ownership is possible. Is it possible to own natural information states? Natural information states are forms of naturally occurring organization, and not merely the bits or data of which they are composed. To own such a state, a person would own a natural kind, that is, a kind of organization of information that occurs naturally.

Let us take the example of a forest: many people, as groups or as individuals, are said to own forests and the trees that grow in them. In this case, notice that it is the particular forest (or the land) or the biological entities in it that are commonly or privately owned or that are public goods, rather than the kinds of things they are, for instance, a forest, flower or tree. While a forest may be ownable, forest is not, nor is flower or tree. As natural kinds, or forms, or information states, they can neither be commonly nor privately owned. This is, in part, because natural information states cannot be owned. If this is true, then natural biological information cannot be owned, even commonly. If private ownership requires common ownership plus homesteading, then naturally occurring biological information cannot be privately owned.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This may seem at first to be a misdirected defense—who would think that humans could own and exercise exclusive rights over naturally occurring biological information? In the

If natural information states cannot be owned, can artificial biological information states (biological information developed or synthesized by humans) be owned? Using our previously defined terms, can the noosphere of biological information be homesteaded, that is, can the space of all possible biological information states (non-actual or un-dreamt of) be developed from a commons for personal or corporate ownership? Of what would this commons—this noosphere—be composed: actual biological information or as-yet-unthought-of ideas, or both? If composed of actual biological information (naturally occurring), this cannot be owned even commonly, as was concluded earlier, and therefore cannot be part of the noosphere that is open to homesteading. If, as Eric Raymond argues, this noosphere is “the space of all possible thoughts” (2000, 9), the “commonly owned” property may not be actual; but we cannot own what is only possible unless we can exercise ownership over it. For instance, we can sell something we might own in the future before it exists (for instance, we might sell a house for which we have not yet completed the purchase process, or we might sell a right to inheritance we have not yet come into for a bowl of stew), but we may only do this if we have the right to sell it. If the noosphere was commonly owned, the public would be able to exercise ownership over it; they would be able to access it, use it, understand it, etc. But the public is not able to exercise ownership over it, so that it seems false that the noosphere (that is, every possible idea we have not yet had) is commonly owned. If the noosphere is not common property, it cannot be homesteaded, and thus cannot be privatized in that way.

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United States, until the Supreme Court decision in 2013 *American Molecular Pathology v. Myriad Genetics* which overturned 30 years of patenting practice and precedents (Palombi, 2013), it was the case that “genes and other DNA can be patented, whether natural, recombinant, or synthetic.... One can also patent specific *uses* of any biological agent, whether the agent is novel or preexisting” (Hettinger, 1995, 277). The recent Supreme Court decision ruled that isolated natural biological materials are not patentable.

## **The Value of a Living Thing Extends to Its Biological Information**

Another approach to this issue focuses on value: the value of the individual biological entity extends to the information whereby it is constituted. A biological entity has natural rights not only to its own material states, but also to its internal informational states; these rights are inalienable, as they are intrinsic to its value.<sup>8</sup> The ownership of living things is fundamentally different than the ownership of non-living, in that living things continue to exercise natural rights over their own material and informational states separate and distinct from the rights of their external owners. The information of a biological entity cannot be homesteaded because the entity (and perhaps its kind) already exercises natural rights over this content,<sup>9</sup> and external ownership does not extend to ownership of this information. A seed can be owned, but not its information.

What is it that makes a specific living organism valuable? The extrinsic value of living things is typically in view when assessing the development, use and ownership of biological information, that is, we look at what organisms and their information can do for us (West, 2006). But it is the intrinsic value of the information that makes it extrinsically valuable: living organisms carry out specific functions which are beneficial to themselves by means of biological information, and these functions are well-ordered unities, complex workings of the life of the thing. Part of the intrinsic value of the biological information is that it goes into making up the disposition by which the entity acts and performs changes in the world through time, that is, by living. If life is valuable, that by which life is carried forth in the world is valuable (at least for that entity), and this is a value not only intrinsic to the entity (it is part of what makes the entity itself valuable)

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<sup>8</sup> A significant number of people believe they own their personal biological information, including our past President Barack Obama (Roberts, 2018, 1150). Legally, five states (Alaska, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, and Louisiana) recognize personal ownership over one's own genetic information (Roberts, 2018, 1128). "Casting DNA as the source of our individuality supports the proposition that genetic information might rightfully—perhaps exclusively—belong to the person from whom it came" (1150), that is, perhaps one reason for the general intuition that we own our own biological information is that this information is a part of our very selves.

<sup>9</sup> The biocentrism argued for here finds precedents in Indian *ahimsa* (non-violence to all life forms) found in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism; Albert Schweitzer's arguments surrounding reverence for all life; Hettinger's (1995) arguments concerning the natural ownership rights of all living things over their bodies and their futures, as well as the rights to non-harm (280-282); and the arguments from recent environmental ethics (Ortiz, 2004; Rollin, 2003; Verhoog, 1992) and progressive property (Roberts, 2018).

but is a value also intrinsic to the information (the information itself is a well-ordered organic unity that is complex).

How is this value related to the natural rights of an entity? Whether an entity's biological information is beneficial, neutral, or harmful to other entities (through knowledge and use or through natural functioning), the information is of value to the entity itself for the entity itself. Because the value of the information makes up part of the value of the entity as a part of its natural physical whole, it can properly (and naturally) be said that the biological entity exercises rights over its information as exercising rights over itself (because its information is part of itself, part of what makes it itself, and is not merely part of the things it owns).<sup>10</sup> The entity does not come by its biological information artificially but naturally—it exercises natural rights because the information is natural to itself.<sup>11</sup> This is unlike the case of a book and its words: the book may or may not exercise rights over the words of which it is composed; this is closer to the case of a person and their own thoughts: one's thoughts are part of what makes a person that person, as with the book and its words, but additionally the person has some sense of responsibility for the thoughts, some agency, some causality, some inalienable rights over these thoughts.<sup>12</sup> But even closer is the case of a person and their own genetics: the person has a natural right to this genetic information, not because this information is hers or his but because it is her or him, part of who the person is, not merely property. As a small subset of biological entities and their information, humans exercise natural rights over their own genetics (though not necessarily ownership rights), not because they caused this information or even because they know about it, but because it is part of who they are as a specific human; it is part of how they participate in human being. These rights are not mere ownership rights, but are personal rights, and more fundamentally, they are rights of an entity to itself. These rights are not specific to humans: every living thing has a right to itself and a right to its biological information as part of how the thing participates in its specific kind of being by living. However, as Jessica

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<sup>10</sup> See McLochlin (2001) and Roberts (2018, 1150-1153) for a further discussion of this point.

<sup>11</sup> Moore (2000, 107) suggests that “ownership of a token does not entail ownership of a type” in reference to owning one's own genetic information.

<sup>12</sup> Lysander Spooner comments: “Nothing is, by its own essence and nature, more perfectly susceptible of exclusive appropriation, than a thought. It originates in the mind of a single individual. It can leave his mind only in obedience to his will. It dies with him, if he so elect” (1855; qtd. in Moore, 2000, 115).



Roberts argues, even though biological information raises identity concerns, “one need not adopt the position that genetic information is determinative of identity to adopt the position that it is relevant to identity” (2018, 1158).<sup>13</sup> Ownership of such information may be tantamount to commodification of an entity’s body or self, as being a commodification of part of the body or self (1154).

This argument, by itself, does not conclude that the rights of a biological entity over its material and informational self may not in turn be under the rights of some other entity or group of entities, or responsible in some way to them or to its own kind, or part of a larger organic whole, but it does include the idea of inalienability: there are rights that cannot be taken away from a biological entity, and these include the rights to itself and to the information of which the thing is composed (Roberts, 2018, 1168). The private ownership of a living thing’s biological information through homesteading would trespass against this right of the living thing over itself, sacrificing the rights of the entity to the rights of the owner, imposing an agency other than that of the entity to make the entity something it was not, without regard to these previous rights. This would be akin to owning the votes of a democratic country, or owning the constitutional rights of citizens, or owning the galloping of a horse, or owning the blossoming of a flower. While humans may have rights that counteract or are over the rights of other entities (for instance, the right to cut my grass), and material ownership rights over these same entities (for instance, I may be said to own my grass), humans do not have direct and absolute ownership of the rights of an entity over that entity’s own being or functioning (we do not own the grass’s right to grow or to be green—these are inalienable to the grass because they are part of what makes it itself).

It may be wondered whether humans overstep these rights every time we kill or eat a living organism. In those cases, the organism has a natural right to live and grow, and our killing and eating impinges on that right, but does not take it away—we do not own the life of the organism that we eat, and we do not alienate it from its right to live, or from its right to its own information. We take its life, not its right to life (which is inalienable). This right to itself is not a property right, which is the focus of this paper, but is instead a right to be what it is, informationally speaking (and

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<sup>13</sup> While Roberts’ focus here is specifically about genetic information, the argument seems to fit the case of all biological information, which is part of what makes biological entities themselves (that is, there are identity concerns, even though biological information might not be wholly “determinative” of an entity’s identity as itself).

otherwise). But is killing and eating not still wrong? There might be several justifications for killing or eating living organisms even in view of such inalienable rights. One approach is that there might be a value ordering such that one entity's life (or information) is justifiably taken to support the life of another even if its rights are inalienable. One might wonder what these values are, and how we might order them or might come to know the proper order. It might be that rational animals are of a different order of value, complexity, and being (as the intuitions of some show) such that use of non-rational animals or vegetative life in this way is permissible or even good if it promotes the unity and complexity of the entire biosphere, if it promotes the well-being of rational animals, and if it promotes the well-being of the entity or kind of entity so used (and this could be justification for lower order beings eating and killing other biological entities as well). Wheat might be an example of an entity whose well-being as a kind might possibly be promoted through eating, if this were also accompanied by care of the kind out of interest for its welfare even if also motivated by self-interest. Apples are another example, as it seems that part of the purpose of fruiting is for the fruit to be eaten in order to propagate the seed. Overpopulated wildlife or cattle might be additional examples; human decomposition might be another. An alternative (or additional) justification for killing and eating is that the purpose of some entities might actually be to serve the life of others by being what they are and living and dying (and perhaps even being eaten) as they are—the purpose of the being might include its being in relation to other entities and their lives. This would include rational animals as part of the cycle of life, as we might be purposed to eventually provide food and life to other creatures (such as worms or bacteria). A third justification might be that there is a creator who commands, allows, or creates biological entities to kill or eat other organisms. This reason would be in keeping with the common beliefs of most humans throughout history, including adherents to many world religions. In this case, the rights and value of entities, kinds, and information would trace back to the design of the creator(s), and the purpose of the entities, kinds, and their information would come about as the result of the actions of this same being

While the human right to require consent and compensation for use of one's own biological information is generally acknowledged even outside of ownership (Roberts, 2018, 1147), plants and animals cannot so consent or choose compensation, nor may they freely enter into contractual agreements—to commodify a plant or animal's biological information would be to do so without regard for its right to itself and its information,

and would constitute exploitation, as I discuss in the next section. How could we “own” biological information without overlooking this silent value, this quiet right?

### **Ownership of the Means of Biological Entities is Perpetual Exploitation**

A third approach to the problem of homesteading biological information focuses on exploitation: use of life as an information artifact makes an organism a means to an end rather than an end itself. The heart of this argument is that lives are not mere tools; biological entities are not technologies. The engineered functions of a living thing should always serve to benefit the thing itself, and not harm it or limit its proper biological functioning. Ownership of biological information tends to place greater value on the intents and goals of the engineer or owner and replaces benefits to the entity with benefits to the owner, sometimes to the detriment of the entity. For instance, organisms have been genetically modified to disallow reproduction based on the supposed ownership rights of engineers. This design choice made on the basis of private ownership is to the detriment of the entity itself: the entity has been deprived of the right of being a viable species, of carrying on the natural functions for which it exists.<sup>14</sup> Even when this does not occur, to own the information of an organism that passes on their new information would be to own rights to that kind in perpetuity: it is not like owning an apple, but rather more like creating an apple from a pear, and then owning all apples now and for the coming decades, to the point of owning “apple”. Such ownership would amount to perpetual exploitation of a kind, even if ownership of the patent only lasts for twenty years—the kind itself is a result of exploitation, and all future instances bear the mark of this exploitation in the very information of which they are composed. Ownership of the means by which a biological entity is itself—

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<sup>14</sup> As another instance of purposeful harm, Harvard received U.S. Patent No. 4,736,866 for “any transgenic nonhuman mammal all of whose germ cells and somatic cells contain a recombinant activated oncogene sequence introduced into said mammal, or an ancestor of said mammal, at an embryonic stage”; Harvard supposedly owns *any nonhuman mammals* genetically modified in embryonic stage to increase the probability of getting cancer as well as all of the descendants of such an animal that are similarly at high risk because of this modification (<https://patents.google.com/patent/US4736866A/en>).

that is, ownership of its functions through its information—is perpetual exploitation of the entity or kind through technologizing its own self or its kind.<sup>15</sup>

What if we isolate the material that contains the new biological information from its natural state, or synthetically create this new isolated material in a lab—can we own it then, without this counting as exploitation? This isolated biological information would still be information, which includes (in the very concept) organization as a kind. This would mean ownership of a natural or artificial kind that is biological in nature, an information state that is addressed above in earlier arguments.

### **Conclusions on Homesteading Biological Information**

Jessica Roberts argues that “theory informs the most foundational question of property law: who should own what” (2018, 1108). It is not merely laws that are needed to protect the rights of entities, it is morality and a foundation for that morality, it is discussion and thought about natural rights, it is recognition and respect for the value of every living thing, it is careful stewardship of resources that are much more than resources, that are alive, and that therefore exercise inalienable rights over their own information. Locke’s theory of property seems ill-fitted to the area of biological information: homesteading is a concept not appropriate to biological information. My argument here is that the information space of biological entities is not open for homesteading because it is never commonly owned and so is not liable to private ownership; biological entities have intrinsic value that extends to their biological information, and such information is relevant to their identities, and this provide bases for

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<sup>15</sup> One might ask whether breeding is similarly exploitative. If the breeding is to such an extent that it harms the biological entity, such as through causing it pain, diseases, or sterility, it may in fact be just as exploitative, especially if these characteristics of the entity are not reversible in the kind, are unnatural, and/or result from goals of the breeder opposed to the well-being of the entity. Such instrumentalizing of life is not unique to modern technologies.

inalienable rights of the entity to itself; and biological entities deserve respect as ends in themselves, and should not be available for perpetual exploitation.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, we do not own biological information; indeed, we cannot own it. And because it cannot be owned, it cannot be commonly owned. Because it cannot be commonly owned, it cannot be homesteaded. Because it cannot be homesteaded, it cannot be owned by me, or you, or any other thing. We cannot own the being of an organism, or the organization or functions of that being, that is, the biological information, and we ought to stop acting as if we do.

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<sup>16</sup> The approach I have outlined here responds only to explicitly Lockean property bases, and not to neoclassical approaches or progressive property, in both of which private property has different grounds than homesteading. In the economic neoclassical approach of Demsetz (1967), for instance, “property rights arise when it becomes economic for those affected by externalities to internalize benefits and costs” (347). People are rational decision-makers who seek to maximize utility through cost-benefit analysis (Roberts, 2018, 1112). Private property only exists because it engenders more welfare than otherwise, welfare being the sum of all material wealth in a society (1113). Such neoclassical property theory does not ground private property rights on homesteading, and thus is not directly open to my critiques on Locke’s system applied to biological information. However, among the two, neoclassical and progressive property, the latter seems more fitting to actual circumstances of biological information ownership (Roberts, 2018), though even here, the second and third arguments offered above may continue to resist such concepts of ownership based on intrinsic value and perpetual exploitation of a kind.

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## *Postmodern Emerson: How the Non-Duped Can Not Err*

Richard Gilmore

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### **Abstract:**

*A postmodern problem we all face today is the Scylla and Charybdis of being duped—by metanarratives, ideology, capitalist ruses—and becoming simply cynical about all values. I see tools for finding a way out of this dilemma first in Emerson, especially his essay *Nature*, and then, second, in Žižek’s analysis of how the non-duped can not err.*

**Keywords:** *Postmodernism, Hermeneutics of Suspicion, (Ralph Waldo) Emerson, (Slavoj) Žižek*

The earliest association of Emerson with postmodernism that I know of is by Cornell West in his *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (1989). West does not directly say, “Emerson is a postmodernist,” but he does describe the time of his writing as “our postmodern moment” and American pragmatism as a useful response to it. As he says, “The distinctive appeal of American pragmatism in our postmodern moment is its unashamedly moral emphasis and its unequivocally ameliorative impulse. In this world-weary period of cynicisms, nihilisms, terrorisms, and possible extermination, there is a longing for norms and values that can make a difference....”<sup>1</sup> What must be added to this is that West finds the origins of American pragmatism in the writings of Emerson: “The fundamental argument of this book is that the evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy—from Emerson to Rorty—results in a conception of philosophy as a form of cultural criticism....”<sup>2</sup> West describes Emerson as a cultural critic who “devised and deployed a vast array of rhetorical strategies in order to exert intellectual and moral leadership over a significant segment of the educated classes of his day.” Furthermore, West says, that “We can no longer afford or justify confining

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<sup>1</sup> Cornell West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1989), 4..

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Emerson to the American terrain. He belongs to that highbrow cast of North Atlantic cultural critics who set the agenda and terms for understanding the modern world.”<sup>3</sup>

I take West here to be referring, in his reference to “that highbrow cast of North Atlantic cultural critics,” to the great hermeneuts of suspicion identified by Paul Ricoeur: Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud<sup>4</sup> (West directly identifies Nietzsche and Marx, but leaves out Freud). I understand these great hermeneuts of suspicion to be largely responsible for, along with economic, technological, and political developments, the emergence of postmodernism. There have been many things written about postmodernism, but for my purposes Jean François Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* works quite well: “I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.” Lyotard, in the very next sentence, makes a very important point vis à vis the remark I make above that it is the hermeneuts of suspicion as well as economic, technological, and political developments that gave rise to postmodernism: “This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it.”<sup>5</sup> I take this to be a statement that ideas matter, a statement I agree with, although my own account will problematize that statement.

Postmodernism brings with it some real progress with respect to many issues of justice. Postmodernism has not eliminated sexism and racism and nationalism and classism and the various phobias of Others, but it has made some headway on all these fronts and made it at least socially awkward and largely unappealing to openly avow the traditional Western viewpoints, owned by the hegemonic, dominate class (white men), in all of these areas. It has done this, in part, by problematizing our insider/outsider group identities. The downside of postmodernism is the way it problematizes our insider/outsider group identities. Our identities are constructed out of our group identifications. If our group identifications get problematized, our identities become destabilized. The one identity we are politically and socially allowed without, or with less, censure is our identity as consumers. We become what we buy. Shopping has become less about acquiring necessities to live, than about constructing an image of ourselves.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 32.

<sup>5</sup> Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), xxiv.

The question, then, is, is this a desirable, a workable, a sustainable source for identity. Postmodernism, postmodern theory, with its strong roots in Marxist theory, will say that it is not. This, too, is in Emerson.

Emerson, however, has some non-Marxist strategies for repairing our damaged sense of our self and for founding a new sense of self. One of the primary themes of all of Emerson's writings is the idea of developing an authentic, individual self. The ultimate foundation for the self for Emerson is not social or societal, which, for us, is late stage capitalism, but nature. Emerson is a philosopher of nature. His basic strategy is that if we can figure out how nature works we can understand how we should work in nature. This is a paradoxical concern since we are born into this world and are, each of us, a part of nature, we each have our own natures, so what is there to study or to understand? And yet, we feel ourselves incomplete. We feel the absence of some satisfaction that seems to us promised yet unrealized. Emerson, as a philosopher of nature, is a philosopher of that promise and how it might be realized. Capitalism offers itself as the promise and as the possibility of its realization, but has failed to deliver on that promise. Emerson does not critique capitalism, per se, as Marx does. What Emerson critiques is the idea that capitalism is the promise, or the possibility of its realization. Emerson critiques the idea that capitalism will provide us with the materials we need for constructing an authentic self.

Our postmodern dilemma is that we feel lost, we do not know who we are, the old metanarratives that told us who we are have more or less collapsed and we find nothing to replace them to tell us who we are. How are we to find a way to know who we are, who we can be, how we can go forward? In the essay *Nature* Emerson says, "Every man's [sic] condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put."<sup>6</sup> Emerson suggests that this problem is not as new as it may seem. Identity, to understand who one is, has always been a problem for people. Metanarratives or no metanarratives, each person's uniqueness poses the question of who one is to be that no metanarrative can really answer. What Emerson sees is that the solution to this problem is contained in the very terms that pose the problem. The problem arises from our "condition." Our condition is comprised of who we are, by nature, and where we find ourselves, in nature. Our lost-ness to ourselves can be described in terms of a sense of disharmony between who we feel we are, by nature, and the nature, the condition, we find ourselves in. It is an ancient Stoic principle

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<sup>6</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, edited by Joel Porte (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 7.

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that the way to happiness is to find, to recover, the harmony between our inner nature and outer nature.

Here is a beautiful quotation from Emerson's *Nature* that describes the problem and the solution:

The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty, is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look to nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is, because man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist, until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit. Love is as much its demand, as perception.

It is a beautiful formulation of postmodern despair, that "the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps." The diagnosis is also very postmodern: "man is disunited with himself." The solution is at once explicit and hieroglyphic: satisfy "the demands of the spirit," and, furthermore, for the spirit, "love is as much its demand as perception." What this means can only be said on the other side of an analysis of the concept of the duped and the non-duped, but I will make just one remark in passing. Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* is dealing with similar postmodern problems. He is arguing for a philosophy without essences, which is a postmodern philosophy. He sees a similar problem of feeling lost and without reference points to guide us. His language in describing what is needed echoes Emerson's version. Wittgenstein says, "One might say: the axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need."<sup>7</sup> Wittgenstein does not say what the fixed point of our real need is, but I take it is a part of our condition in hieroglyphic.

Emerson did not appear to be particularly postmodern when he was writing his essays and giving his lectures, but, retrospectively, reading him through a postmodern lens, he appears radically postmodern, more postmodern than many postmodernists. Emerson, in his way, competes with the great hermeneuts of suspicion Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, the classic sources of postmodernism. Emerson is, in some ways, as critical of capitalism as Marx, as religiously heretical as Nietzsche, and has a

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<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), §108.

pervasive subtext that is as sexual as Freud. For all that, Emerson is not doing a hermeneutics of suspicion. He is doing a hermeneutics of joy.

Emerson wears a guise of nineteenth century decorum and Victorian-esque moral sobriety, but what he is really engaged in is ecstasy, what the postmoderns call *jouissance*. Further, he claims his right to it, without apology or guilt. He claims this right not just for himself but for everyone. It is the joy of being alive, of being human, of having a mind, of bearing witness to the world for whatever brief time, for a moment, for a life. Against this joy Oedipal urges, class struggle, religious conformity or non-conformity pale. They are not irrelevant, and Emerson will energetically address these issues, but in moments of ecstasy, these issues, and their attendant outrage, confusion, complaint, slip from consciousness. They are outshined by what is experientially possible, by what one actually experiences in such moments of joy.

For Emerson, there are complaints that serve justice, but the real gift to another is not simply justice, though that must be declared, but joy. One does not give this gift as an object. It is already in all of us as a potential in every moment. We have it by nature. One gives it by making space for another to experience his or her own joy. The space that Emerson gives he calls an "essay." In an essay, he models how joy works. It emerges from his thinking, which is nature working in him. When he is thinking, as he says in *Self-Reliance*, "all I know is reception." He is receiving and passing on what he receives, like the objects in a gift economy as opposed to capital in capitalism. And the form of his passing his gift on is as provocation. He provokes via obscurity. As one of his best friends described what it was like to listen to Emerson lecture, he said it was like being immersed in "a golden fog." As William James says of Emerson in his "Address at the Emerson Centenary in Concord", "...this is Emerson's revelation: The point of any pen can be an epitome of reality..." What I understand James to be saying is that Emerson's essays are performative. He is not writing about nature, he is enacting nature through his pen. In the process of his performing thinking he invites us to think along with him. Performative writing is very postmodern and one of the "vast array of rhetorical strategies" to which West refers.

Emerson is criticized for not being more politically active, for not being more demonstrative, for example, in his opposition to the institution of slavery. It is a serious criticism, yet from Emerson we will not get a Stalin or a Chairman Mao, we will not get dogmatic atheists and proliferating phallic symbols. What we get are pathways to joy that anyone can follow if they only learn how to follow the signs that Emerson leaves to mark the way. Sometimes it is time for political activism, to make changes in the

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world, and sometimes it is time to think, to reflect, to receive and change oneself rather than to work at changing other people. That seems to be the message of perhaps the greatest book on politics every written, Plato's *Republic*, where in Book IV Socrates defines justice in just these terms, "justice is doing one's own work and not meddling with what isn't one's own" (*Republic*, 433a). Emerson was much more an advocate of the latter activity than the former. That can be read as a sign of his privilege, or that also can be read as his postmodernism, a prescription that is not about him but is about us.

In the 1990 article "How the Non-Duped Err" Slavoj Žižek writes the word "duped" precisely once. Here is what he says, "the only way not to be deceived is to maintain a distance toward the symbolic order, i.e. to assume a psychotic position—a psychotic is precisely a subject who is not duped by the symbolic order." This is not much to go on for unpacking the sense of the phrase, which Žižek takes from Lacan, that "the non-duped err." What follows is my attempt at a more complete and complex unpacking. The claim that the non-duped err suggests three levels of duped-dom: the duped, the non-duped who err, and the non-duped who do not err. At first glance, this would seem to identify an increasing order of desirability. The worst is to be duped, the best to be the non-duped who do not err, but that is not quite right. The worst is actually to be the non-duped who err.

The duped are those who do not get ideology. They may have gone to college, but they did not take any philosophy classes. When they shop they just shop, when they love they just love, when they speak they mean what they say, they think they are in control of what they choose to do. The non-duped are those who have read the great hermeneuts of suspicion, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud. They know that it is all ideology. They know that religion is really just will to power and that God is dead, that capitalism is really just the triumph of the oligarchs, and that love is really Oedipal or Electral, and that there is no sexual relationship. They get that nothing is as it appears to be, or, more specifically, as it appears to be to the duped. So, when they shop they are not really shopping, they are participating in the circulation of capital that ensures the triumph of the rich over the poor. When they love they know that the person they love is really just a projection of an infantile desire to have sex with their parent. When they speak they do not really mean what they say except ironically. They see how nobody really chooses what they are doing but are merely manifesting the behaviors dictated by the big Other. They get it, so how do they err?

They err because they think that because they can see the ideology at work that they are not subject to the ideology. They think that the poor dupes are stuck in the ideology and that they, the non-duped, are not, but they are. This is what Žižek says, now from his book *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*,

we effectively *become* something by pretending that we *already are* that. To grasp the dialectic of this movement, we have to take into account the crucial fact that the “outside” is never simply a “mask” we wear in public but is rather the symbolic order itself. By “pretending to be something,” by “acting as if we were something,” we assume a certain place in the inter-subjective symbolic network, and it is this external place that defines our true position. If we remain convinced, deep within ourselves, that “we are not really that,” if we preserve an intimate distance toward “the social role we play,” we double deceive ourselves. The final deception is that social appearance is deceitful, for in the social-symbolic reality things ultimately *are* precisely what they *pretend* to be.<sup>8</sup>

The double deception that the non-duped who err suffer from is that they think they are not (really) what the symbolic network says they are (deception one), and, in thinking that, that they have achieved some kind of power or freedom, but they have not (deception two). The consequence is that they are alienated from the symbolic network, and also from themselves. The duped simply think they ARE what they think they are, they think they are the role that they play in the symbolic network, a teacher, a sales-person, a police person, a business person, and that is, in fact, what they have become.

If they (we) really are what they (we) have become, then are they (we) really duped at all? If they are duped, is there a way to be non-duped but also not to err? The answers to these two questions are, first, yes, they are duped and that is bad, although not as bad as being non-duped and erring, and, second, yes, there is a way to be non-duped and not err. The duped are still duped because they do not know what they do not know about what they do not know and that leads to a kind of seriousness. This seriousness is bad not just because it is seriousness, but because it prevents

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<sup>8</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 74.

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them from every getting what they really want, happiness., although, in truth, they will be much closer to happiness than the non-duped who err are.

What about the final alternative, how can one become one who is non-duped but does not err? This is how Žižek describes the relation between the non-duped who err and the non-duped who do not err *vis a vis* the interpretation of the films of Hitchcock:

...it should be clear how one should answer those who reproach Hitchcockian *aficionados* with the ‘divinization’ of their interpretive object—with the elevation of Hitchcock into a God-like demiurge who masters even the smallest details of his work: such an attitude is simply a sign of transferential relation—[*sujet suppose savoir*]—and is it necessary to add that there is more truth in it, that it is theoretically far more productive, than the attitude of those who lay stress on Hitchcock’s fallibility, inconsistencies, etc.? In short, here, more than ever, the Lacanian motto *les non-dupes errant* is in force: the only way to produce something real in theory is to pursue the transferential fiction to the end.<sup>9</sup>

The critics who critique Hitchcock, who point out his inconsistencies, are the critics who see through the transferential relation that catches up the (apparent) dupes, and so are not duped by it, but, they err. They are doubly deceived. They have nothing but their own non-dupedness, which really is nothing. They are not right about Hitchcock and they are not right about the *aficionados* who interpret Hitchcock. The *aficionados* are the non-duped who do not err. They pursue the transferential relation to the end. The non-duped who do not err look to the non-duped who err like the duped, but they are not. The duped are the people who think that Hitchcock just makes entertaining films, thrillers and romances. There is no transferential relation for the duped and so the films are just mild entertainments, nothing more. For the non-duped who do not err, the films contain endless mysteries that generate proliferating interpretations. The place of passionate enjoyment is precisely the place where people go all the way with the transferential relation. It is their MacGuffin. The MacGuffin, as everyone knows (who is not a dupe), is what drives the plot of every Hitchcock film, but has no actual importance by

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<sup>9</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Everything You Wanted to Know about Lacan... But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock* (New York: Verso, 1992), 10.



the end of the film: government secrets, who is George Kaplan, what happened to Mrs. Thorwald. It is an empty signifier that can take on any meaning. It is, in its essence, just our response of interest in the world. As Hans Blumenberg says, “Curiosity is the disturbance of boredom. The MacGuffin is its epiphany.”<sup>10</sup>

Let me take a slightly different approach to the question of how the non-duped can not err. I will use a different vocabulary, it is still the vocabulary of Lacan and Žižek, but it is not about being duped or erring but about desire versus drive and how these inflect our happiness. Desire is associated with hysteria and drive with perversion: “The opposition here is between perversion and hysteria: if desire ‘as such’ is hysterical, drive ‘as such’ is perverse.”<sup>11</sup> What characterizes desire is the experience of, as Žižek says, *ce n’est pas ça*, ‘that’s not it.’ Drive, on the other hand does find satisfaction, but in something that one does not desire, in something, as it were, that is unpleasant. The word that Žižek and the Lacanians use for pleasure is *jouissance*. This is one way that Žižek describes the relation of desire and drive: “desire reflexively desires its own unsatisfaction, the postponement of the encounter with *jouissance*—that is, the basic formula of the reflexivity of desire is to turn the impossibility of satisfying desire into the desire for non-satisfaction; drive, on the contrary, finds satisfaction in (i.e. *besmirches* with the stain of satisfaction) the very movement destined to ‘repress’ satisfaction.”<sup>12</sup>

Here is another formulation of the relation of desire and drive:

“Desire is defined by this *ce n’est pas ça*: that is, its most elementary and ultimate aim is to sustain itself as desire, in its state on non-satisfaction. Drive, on the other hand, stands for the paradoxical possibility that the subject, forever prevented from achieving his Goal (and thus fully satisfying his desire), can nevertheless find satisfaction in the very circular movement of repeatedly missing its object, of circulating around it: the gap constitutive of desire is thus closed, the self-enclosed loop of a circular repetitive movement replaces infinite striving. In this precise sense, drive equals *jouissance*, since *jouissance* is, at its most elementary, ‘pleasure in pain’, that is, a perverted pleasure

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<sup>10</sup> Hans Blumenberg, “Being—A MacGuffin: How to Preserve the Desire to Think.” *Salmagundi*, No. 90-91, (Spring-Summer 1991), 193.

<sup>11</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), 351.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 351-2.

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Can Not Err*

provided by the very painful experience of repeatedly missing one's goal."<sup>13</sup>

Desire is created in us by the big Other, which is to say, ideology. We love to shop because we are programmed by the ideology of capitalism to love shopping. We shop for the object of our desire. When we have found something, we buy it, and by the time we get home with the object we recognize that *ce n'est pas ça*, that's not it. Drive, on the other hand, is a behavior that we do not desire, but, in doing it, we find real satisfaction. Drives make us socially successful. People love it when they see people chasing their desires. Drives tend toward socially unacceptable behavior. Drinking and drugs are drive behaviors. I see the Dude in *The Big Lebowski* as one who disdains desire and lives for drive. He is a dropout from society and the only real happy person in the movie. He knows *jouissance*. But walking through the woods is also drive behavior—socially useless, in itself, pointless, yet profoundly satisfying: never going anywhere, endlessly repeatable, pure *jouissance*.

The duped pursue their desires. The non-duped who err renounce their desire because they recognize that their desires are ideologically constructed and not really *their* desires. The non-duped who do not err embrace their desire in the form of a drive, that is, they fully embrace the transferential relation to the end. They never get there. They endlessly circulate around some unreachable core, but, in the very circulating activity, they find a kind of joy, *jouissance*. The duped, in pursuing their desires directly experience social success, but live with a quiet desperation because they experience no *jouissance*. The non-duped who err renounce their desires, but in renouncing their desires they forgo being anything in particular and having nothing but their own bitterness, their own conviction about their non-dupedness, to sustain them. These are the postmodern nihilists.

The non-duped who do not err embrace, with a passion, their desire and go to the end with it. I take Socrates to be the paradigmatic exemplar of the life of drive, the life of the non-duped who does not err: endless repeating the idiotic question “What is x?”, never getting a satisfying answer, and experiencing the process as pure *jouissance*. Emerson, too, is, in my estimation, a non-duped who does not err. His drive is the essay, the attempt to say what nature is, repeated over and over again, always incompletely, always unsuccessfully, and always joyfully. The hieroglyphic

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 359-60.

of our condition is the secret source of drive. It is the axis of our real need. To say it is hieroglyphic is to say that it is written in an unfamiliar language, but really, it is our own language, the language of our own nature to be attracted to some activity that is endlessly fascinating, literally, and hence has no end.

This is the idiotic joy, the *jouissance*, of drive at its purest: “Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear.” This is Emerson in his great essay *Nature*, and, I believe, the joy, the *jouissance*, returns to him in the act of writing of his experience in the common. It is a joy unknown to the duped and the non-duped who err alike. It is known only to the non-duped who do not err.

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Fall 2018

Community

Section





## *Science and Theism*

Ken Koehler

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### **Abstract**

*Science and Theism are often pitted against each other, even to the point of sometimes being considered incompatible. The primary conflict is not with present day observational science, but rather with assumptions rooted primarily in a commitment to a common decent evolutionary model. This commitment normally also assumes that there can be no non-natural involvements, even when the scientific evidence strongly suggests created design. Building on the November 28, 2018 presentation to the Science and Religion Luncheon Seminar by Professor Brad Morris (*The Ethics of Belief: Some Reflection on Procedure*), I wish to share a current example of how, rather than being at odds with each other, scientific evidence strongly points to a theistically created model. I will also briefly share my belief in the identity of this Creator.*

**Keywords:** *Cosmological/Design arguments, justified belief, science*

In the spirit of “*foster(ing) thoughtful, accessible dialogues on religion and science*”, I offer this response to the 28 November 2018 Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminar held at NDSU.

I thank Professor Brad Morris for his presentation: “*The Ethics of Belief: Some Reflection on Procedure*”. His abstract stated:

I want to discuss the presumed incompatibility between a secular and a religious worldview and suggest that what accounts for the tension is more about the believers than the beliefs. I want to claim that both points of view share the same fundamental epistemic situation and both would benefit if the participants took that situation seriously. Doing so will generate some familiar procedural rules that can help change the attitudes that drive the antagonism between the worldviews.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Editor’s note:* This presentation’s Powerpoint is available at

I now wish to share a further example of these reflections.

As briefly mentioned during the discussion following the presentation, my primary take-away was the 3<sup>rd</sup> point of Locke's procedure, that being "*adopting a level of confidence*" in our (and others) beliefs. This becomes increasingly important as we recognize not only the variance in worldviews, but the degree to which these views are held important - and perhaps even assimilated into one's identity. Yes, how we go about attempting to understand each other's beliefs, as well as how we then interact with one another, also involves a matter of "ethics".

The presentation began with a statement that both science and religion (more precisely, theism) have the same objective - that being "*the pursuit of truth*". I agree! It went on to mention that "*theism may or may not accept scientific evidence*". Again I agree; and it is precisely at this very point where so much of the "presumed incompatibility" between these worldviews arises. Just as not all theists or all scientists agree on all of theism's claims; neither do they agree on all of the claims of science. As a result, theism is often treated as being in direct opposition to science. Such a general and automatic oppositional assumption of a theistic/scientific conflict is in error and the cause of much misunderstanding and unnecessary tension.

I believe rather that theism and science work hand in hand, and that it was these same convictions that led many of the fathers of modern science to publicly declare their belief in a Creator God. Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton all believed that the universe was the product of a mind, of an intelligent being - and they were on a theological quest of uncovering God's handiwork! Copernicus further verbalized that his scientific motivation was his desire to comprehend what he called "*The mechanism of the universe, wrought for us by a supremely good and orderly Creator...the system (that) the best and most orderly artist of all framed for our sake.*" The same remains true for many scientists and theists today.

One of Morris' presentation slides asks: "*Why the conflict?*" Though certainly not a new thought, I believe that the primary cause of this conflict began when science started to be equated with abiogenesis and common descent evolution. I contend rather that observational scientific evidence actually supports a biblically theistic creation world



view - including that of magnificently designed and fully functional life forms right from the start!

Today I wish to briefly share just two examples of this. I use these only because they happen to be a very timely snapshot which will hopefully help others better understand my creation world view. The day before the presentation I had read the article: “*Logic Mechanisms Direct Creatures’ Innate Adaptability*”,<sup>2</sup> and later that evening I read the short articles “*Separate Studies Converge on Human-Chimp DNA Dissimilarity*”<sup>3</sup> and “*My Journey Back To God*”.<sup>4</sup>

The first two articles reported on new scientific studies, which provide me with an ever increasing “*level of confidence*” for my belief in an intentionally designed creation - as opposed to the more currently accepted view that all life is the result of abiogenesis followed by common-descent evolution. And, though not scientific in nature, the third article is a good description of why I and many have come to this conclusion. Unlike Mr. Ell, my story does not include a time of “drifting from God...into atheism”; however, I can identify with the rest of his narrative explaining how through his ongoing scientific investigation and life observations he began to “see design” and “found creation everywhere”!

God has not left us without evidence of His existence and His creation! From a Christian theistic point of view, Romans 1:20<sup>5</sup> states:

*For since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.*

In addition, Psalm 19:1 states: “*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*” From Bible times to Copernicus and up to this very moment, I too see intelligent design and creation everywhere!

The presentation also included many references to faith - what it is, and how it relates to our beliefs. There are of course volumes that have

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<sup>2</sup> Pages 17 & 18, <https://www.icr.org/i/pdf/af/af1811.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> “*Acts & Facts*”, Institute for Creation Research, [www.icr.org](http://www.icr.org) p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> “*Acts & Facts*”, Institute for Creation Research, [www.icr.org](http://www.icr.org) p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Scripture taken from The Holy Bible New International Version, Copyright 1973, 1978 and 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

been written about faith, including that there is an aspect of a spiritual mystery involved with its reception. The Bible also describes faith as a “*gift of God*”, but one which can be rejected by the very free will that the Creator has given to His creation of mankind.

Contrary to a misunderstanding held by many, a Christian’s faith in God is not “blind” - but rather both informed and rational - and not just from what we behold in the created world, but also from a proper understanding of the Bible’s Christocentric gospel message of redemption through the evidential life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This latter aspect involves a sure hope and trust based on the past and present faithfulness of God! The Christian faith is both a spiritual work of God in His special creation of mankind - and at the same time the result of being cognitively informed by the evidences of God’s creation and redemption. Entire volumes have been written on this subject of course, and so to attempt to here summarize this paradox of faith’s origin and content is impractical. Nevertheless it is a tremendously important subject because our world views have such a major influence on our lives and our understanding of life’s purpose!

Perhaps a look into the reaction of a disciple of Jesus may be helpful here - as it has been to me. In the Gospel of John, chapter 20, we read the account of Jesus appearing to his disciples following His resurrection. When Jesus first appears to them, Thomas was absent. When the disciples tell Thomas that they have seen the resurrected Lord, he declares: “*Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe*” (John 20:25). A week later when Jesus again appears to his disciples, this time with Thomas present, Jesus tells Thomas: “*Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe*” (John 20:27). Thomas responds: “*My Lord and my God!*” to which Jesus declares: “*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*” (John 20:29).

Did you catch what is being declared here? Jesus commends the faith of “*those who have not seen and yet believed*”; but he also declared that Thomas too “*believed*”, even though in his case Thomas needed to see the evidence. Yes, faith has aspects of both an unseen spiritual sureness AND an evidentially informed one.

Back to the snap-shot example of the first two articles.<sup>6</sup> These, like so many similar articles are not theistic sermons; but rather examples of scientific studies using scientific principles and written by authors with the same advanced degrees in their respective disciplines from well-respected secular universities. These particular articles are of course non-technical summary versions written for the general population. Nevertheless they are examples of a point made earlier - that not all scientists agree on the conclusions drawn from the scientific evidence we have.

With every new scientific discovery of incredible design, the converging witness of both the theistic and scientific evidences give those like Mr. Ell and I *an ever-increasing reason to have adopted an extremely high “level of confidence” in the existence of a Creator and a supernaturally designed origin and purpose of life!*

And yes, Mr. Ell and I certainly realize that many others have their own levels of confidence in different explanations of such matters - and thus the importance of the presenter’s reminder that we are all called upon to employ procedures of ethical interaction as we continue to dialogue and present our understandings of the evidence.

For those who may be interested in further exploring the interaction of both the scientific and theological evidences for a Creator/Designer, I encourage you to begin by checking out the resources provided by the “Institute for Creation Research” ([www.icr.org](http://www.icr.org)), and “Answers in Genesis” ([www.answersingenesis.org](http://www.answersingenesis.org)). Here you will find reference to both technical papers and non-technical summaries, along with references to their biblically theistic compatibility.

And, as helpful as I believe these resources will be in providing evidences, I can’t emphasize enough the even more important evidences found in the Bible when it comes to the “pursuit of truth” regarding life’s origin and purpose! It is there that I came to my own sure confidence in Jesus, of whom the claim is made that: “*All things have been created through him and for him*” (Colossians 1:16), and who Himself claimed: “*I am the way and the truth and the life*” (John 14:6). And so I appeal to anyone genuinely seeking truth about these matters to go to the source of that truth. If you are interested in hearing and studying these claims and evidences further, I encourage you to start by reading (or perhaps re-reading) the New Testament Gospels, before going on to other portions

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<sup>6</sup> I respectfully ask that you please read in full in order to fairly understand my point.

of the Bible.

For those who have read this far, I extend my sincere appreciation. Once again, I thank both the organizers and other participants of our SRLS forum for this intentionally designed opportunity to foster thoughtful dialogue on matters of such importance to our lives!

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## *New Atheism: A Critique by way of Marxian Materialism and Scientific Skepticism*

Ronald Gaul

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### **Abstract**

*In the mid-2000s, a new form of atheistic polemic hit the world stage. It came by way of the works of the scientists Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, social and political critic Christopher Hitchens, and many others. I come to this topic as a layman, and a longtime student of Marx's materialist philosophy as outlined in his writings in the 1840s. I will also apply scientific skepticism, as defined by scientist and humanist advocate, Carl Sagan, who coined the term, yet its methodology predates him.*

*The critique will center on three aspects of New Atheism: idealism, scientism, and pseudo-science. The scope of this paper, while broad, doesn't touch on the political questions that that often get embroiled with New Atheism. There are arguments that can be made from a leftist perspective against New Atheism's pro-capitalist, racist, and misogynist characteristics. These debates are best handled in political fora. Using Marx as a philosophical guide certainly touches a political nerve, but no specific invocations on class struggle are needed in this article to make use of his historical materialism. New Atheism also introduces scientism into its debate with religion. It takes the form of dismissing philosophy as a serious intellectual pursuit. The third component of my argument concludes that New Atheists engage in science denialism. This especially egregious New Atheism purports to excel in scientific analysis.*

*This paper is not meant to deny, apologize for, belittle, or otherwise delegitimize those who suffer from, or have survived, physical and/or emotional abuses in any religious institution, or from any extremist theology. Examples of this dominate our news on nearly a daily basis. My point is to show that belief in a deity, or any supernatural force alone, does not ordain any crimes and travesties from the get go. Any closed organization or society runs this danger, (e.g., the military, penal institutions, etc.), and a separate social-psychological phenomenon is at play in that instance.*

**Keywords:** *Atheism, Dawkins, Marxism, scientific skepticism*

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and Scientific Skepticism*

## **Idealism**

*“Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”<sup>1</sup>*

There was a time, (and maybe still for some), that this was the clarion call to abolish religion. This quote, especially the last sentence, was a specter that haunted the anticommunist world during the Cold War. Yet in proper historical context, it is not the condemnation of religion that it seems to be. This is notwithstanding the atrocities against the religious and religious institutions under Stalin and other dictatorships. Marx never advocated for crimes against religion to be done in his name. He wanted religion heartily critiqued, but then to move on from there into a deeper materialist analysis. Similarly, the biblical Gospels did not compel the Crusades and countless inquisitions, albeit they were also done in Jesus’ name.

Let’s contrast Marx with Christopher Hitchens, who claims that “people of faith are in their different ways planning your and my destruction, and the destruction of all the hard-won human attainments that I have touched upon. Religion poisons everything.”<sup>2</sup> Marx’s view of religion is the opposite of Hitchens and the other New Atheists. Marx saw religion as a *reflection and consequence* of human suffering. Hitchens, et. al., see it as a *predominate cause* of humanity’s misery. The usage of the metaphor "opium" vs. that of "poison" tells us much. Religion is relief from pain, not the *injury* that requires painkiller.

Digging deeper into Hitchens’s logic:

God did not create man in his own image. Evidently, it was the other way about, which is the painless explanation for the profusion of gods and religions, and *the fratricide both between and among faiths, that we see all about us and that has so retarded the development of civilization...Religion is man-made.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Marx, Karl. “Introduction.” *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, 1844.

<sup>2</sup> Hitchens, Christopher. “Religion Poisons Everything.” *Slate Magazine*, 25 Apr. 2007.

Compare again to Marx:

Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man...But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. *This state and this society produce religion.*<sup>1</sup>

Both Hitchens and Marx use the word “Man” when they refer to the progenitor of religion, but they mean completely different things. When Marx says “Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion,” he means the material conditions that constitute society, the technology, the productive forces, factories and tools that spring from that, and the class relations that are layered over that. This gives humanity the leisure time to build a legal, philosophical, and theological infrastructure, they spring from those material conditions. This is how “man makes religion.” To Hitchens, “man” is a prophet or a messiah, and the proselytizers who succeed or flank them. Then the ideas and written words that spring from the minds of this small group go forth, and then those ideas are primarily responsible for the transformation of the material world of humanity, it’s economy, state, jurisprudence, and class relations.

New Atheism sees written scripture as key to this fabrication of the material world of man. Sam Harris has accused the *Quran* of having words that especially inspire violence:

We are at war with Islam. This is not to say that we are at war with all Muslims, but we are absolutely at war with the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran...the fundamentals of Islam are a threat to us. Every American should read the Koran and discover the relentlessness with which non-Muslims are vilified in its pages.<sup>3</sup>

Yet there are many passages in the *Quran* that say the following: "God does not forbid you from being good to those who have not fought you in the religion or driven you from your homes, or from being just towards them. God loves those who are just."<sup>4</sup> Muslim societies throughout history have

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<sup>3</sup> Harris, Sam. ‘Mired in a religious war’. *Washington Times*. 2004.

<https://m.washingtontimes.com/news/2004/dec/1/20041201-090801-2582r/>

<sup>4</sup> *Quran* 60:8

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had periods of very tolerant and advanced caliphates, much more so than contemporaneous kingdoms in Christian Europe. There were swings during the centuries between enlightenment and fundamentalist darkness in Islam. Yet throughout all that time, the wording of the *Quran* remained unchanged.

This is idealism, albeit a crude idealism, not a sophisticated Hegelian idealism that Marx so definitively “turned on its head.” This idealism is replicated in the broader world of New Atheism. It is the staple of their vocal and visible internet community. Litanies of horrors are recounted online, with the sole blame laid upon words in a holy scripture or the ideas from the heads of the holy. Nary is there a mention of a society’s level of technology, economy, or other customs and norms that predate said religion, and which, in turn, shape the character of any religion overlaying it. For them, belief in the divine or supernatural is the primary trigger for war, misery, and persecution.

## **Scientism**

“the fact that the secular basis [atheism] lifts off from itself and establishes itself in the clouds as an independent realm can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis.”<sup>5</sup>

“atheism, the last stage of theism, a negative recognition of God.”<sup>6</sup>

As a participant in the Christian apologist online forum, *Reasonable Faith Forums*, I have read many wonderful proofs, disproofs, and syllogisms on all manner of arguments for and against the existence of a deity. Many of the site’s participants, both atheist and theist, show remarkable elan in the language of philosophy and logic. It’s good fun. Even though an atheist myself, I enjoy sifting through, critiquing, and evaluating various kinds of theology. The body of Christian theological thought through the centuries is complex, nuanced, and sophisticated. I usually evaluate a theology based on its internal logic, and compatibility with methodological naturalism, historical materialism, and scientific skepticism.

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<sup>5</sup> Marx, Karl. *Theses on Feuerbach*, 1845

<sup>6</sup> Marx, Karl. *The Holy Family*, 1844



New Atheists are in a perpetual state of critiquing theologies. The problem is that they evaluate every species of theology as a testable hypothesis, to be torn down by the sledgehammer of falsifiability. This is a good thing when theological assertions actually posit a testable hypothesis. The best known of these are Intelligent Design and Young Earth Creationism. Scientific Skepticism comes into play appropriately in these instances. But New Atheism wants to dismiss all theology, all religion, with scientific skeptical inquiry. This is a symptom of scientism. Many types of theology are dependent on personal revelation, or in a moment of creation beyond the observable Cosmic Microwave Background. These areas of theology are not testable or falsifiable.

A positive view of the natural world and human history is an important stage in any intellectual journey. A materialist analysis of history and a naturalist view of the evolution of life and the cosmos can, and should, stand on its own. Marx and Engels left behind their focus on religion after the 1840s. They moved on to economic and historical analyses. Besides Marxian materialism, there are other positively asserted non-religious creeds, humanism being one. It overlaps with the Marxian worldview, but diverges in many other areas. For the most part, Humanism also avoids debunking religion.

Consequently, New Atheism is stuck on religion, yet refuses to engage theology outside of science. A constant refrain from the New Atheist chorus is that they are not a movement, not a religion (of course), not a grouping, they just don't believe in a deity. They deny accountability in representing any coherent philosophy, other than some unspecified naturalism. They want to tear down ideas, yet they do not come up with any enlightened ones of their own. In turn, the New Atheist polemic does away with delving into the intricacies and particularities of various theologies. *They refuse to even pass through "the last stage of theism"*. Religious apologists as a result get frustrated that the atheists they encounter don't posit a cogent positive argument that they can critique. The New Atheists in turn solidify their refusal to engage theology in a philosophical context. Their debates on the Reasonable Faith Forums devolve into straw man vs. straw man.

As a part of New Atheism's eschewal of philosophy, they dismiss the arguments of great theologians, "These mighty scholars may have written many evil things or many foolish things, and been laughably ignorant of the germ theory of disease or the place of the terrestrial globe in

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the solar system, let alone the universe, and this is the plain reason why there are no more of them today, and why there will be no more of them tomorrow. Religion spoke its last intelligible or noble or inspiring words a long time ago: either that or it mutated into an admirable but nebulous humanism, as did, say, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a brave Lutheran pastor hanged by the Nazis for his refusal to collude with them.”<sup>7</sup> Holding any theologian or philosopher to the standards of science is, again, scientism. It is the New Atheists’ denial that philosophy can “solve problems.” It is at heart a form of anti-intellectualism. It is an anti-humanist creed that denies humanity’s search for meaning, except as something that can only be solved by science. Hitchens begrudgingly gives Bonhoeffer a nod for bravery, as he surely exhibited. But to dismiss his theology as “nebulous” is unfair. Certainly, the Nazis did not see it as being too nebulous, it was sharp enough to give them a reason to kill him.

The website *Existential Comics* points out the essence of New Atheism’s rejection of philosophy: “if philosophy was solved, then we probably wouldn’t need philosophy. Philosophy, however, has not been solved. Furthermore, if it is going to be solved, it certainly won’t be solved by a bunch of people who don’t even read or engage in philosophy.”<sup>8</sup> Sam Harris, who should know better as a neurologist, goes as far as to invoke MRI scans to explain away philosophy. He does this by comparing opinions with known facts, as they light up in the same region in the brain:

[T]he physiology of belief may be the same regardless of a proposition’s intent. It also suggests that the division between facts and values does not make much sense in terms of underlying brain function...This finding of content-independence challenges the fact/value distinction very directly: for if, from the point of view of the brain, believing ‘the sun is a star’ is importantly similar to believing ‘cruelty is wrong,’ how can we say that scientific and ethical judgments have nothing in common?<sup>9</sup>

Scientism meets reductionism. Their baby is pseudoscience. This assertion is a non-sequitur, devoid of any exhaustive studies of other subjects

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<sup>7</sup> Hitchens, Christopher. “Religion Poisons Everything.” *Slate Magazine*, 25 Apr. 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Mohler, Corey. “The Philosophy Force Five vs the Scientismists.” *Existential Comics*

<sup>9</sup> Harris, Sam. *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*. Simon and Schuster, 2011.

scanned, or done with a double-blind peer-reviewed study, with negative and positive controls. Christopher Hitchens did have a wonderful aphorism which is applicable here, it is his take on the Burden of Proof requirement: that which is asserted without evidence, can be dismissed without evidence. But as we see in the next section, New Atheism commits deeper errors than idealism and scientism. Misrepresenting neurology is a relatively minor offense in their forays into pseudoscience.

### **Pseudoscience: Mental health**

Infantilizing theology is the most commonly seen form of pseudoscience in New Atheist polemics, and a corollary of their scientism. This is a staple in the broader internet critiques of religion by New Atheists, repeated in untold numbers on blogs, posts, and articles. Belief in a deity is equated with believing in the tooth fairy, Santa Claus, etc. Firstly, this kind of magical thinking by children is seen by some professionals as healthy. Many consider it a natural part of a child's psychological development. Child psychologist Vanessa LoBue points out, in defense of Santa Claus:

fantasy in general is a normal and healthy part of child development. Children spend a large amount of time pretending, especially between the ages of five and eight. They are also constantly exposed to media in which animals can talk, people can fly, and objects magically appear out of thin air. Why should a group of flying reindeer be any more fantastical than a talking mouse or a singing snowman?<sup>10</sup>

She later points out that children grow out of this rich fantasy life by about nine years old. The New Atheists insinuate that there are perhaps billions of humans who don't grow out of a normal childhood phase. You would think psychology researchers would notice this aberration. Add to this the contempt New Atheism holds for the nuances of a mature, adult theology, it is no wonder they cannot distinguish it from childhood fairy tales.

But it gets worse: pathologizing religious belief. "Religion is a mental illness" is a claim touted and insinuated by a broad range of a loud (minority) of atheists. David Silverman, former president of American Atheists states in a Facebook post: "We must recognize religion as

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<sup>10</sup> LoBue, Vanessa. "Why It's OK for Kids to Believe in Santa Claus." *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 2016.

brainwashing. We must recognize the (hyper) religious as mentally damaged.”<sup>11</sup> Sam Harris opines: “it is difficult to imagine a set of beliefs more suggestive of mental illness than those that lie at the heart of many of our religious traditions.”<sup>12</sup> This from a neurologist, at that. In his 2008 movie, *Religulous*, Bill Maher called religion a “neurological disorder.”<sup>13</sup> Richard Dawkins calls it a “hereditary mental illness.”<sup>14</sup> There are many more articles and blogposts from lesser known authors asserting the same theme. Some with a laundry list of “symptoms” that religious believers have that suggest schizophrenia and other mental illnesses. There are two problems with this: 1) the authors are for the most part untrained in the mental health professions, and 2) even if they were experts, armchair diagnoses are unprofessional, and widely condemned by all psychiatry and psychology boards and associations.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), is the standard classification of mental disorders used by mental health professionals in the U.S., and is published by the American Psychiatric Association. It is updated regularly and is the best available science on mental health and personality disorders. Nowhere, absolutely nowhere in the DSM is religious belief mentioned as a condition. It never has. Again, like with the infantilization argument, you would think mental health professionals would push the panic button if billions of people were so mentally ill. It is true that certain types of psychoses or paranoia may involve religious topics, but these disorders aren’t reliant on religious belief. In fact, in the modern era, secular entities are replacing religious ones in these paranoid and hallucinatory disorders, e.g., space aliens, corporate and government spies, etc. Those who purport to be “skeptics”, and in many cases involved elsewhere in debunking pseudoscience, (as many New Atheists do), should be especially ashamed of their blatant hypocrisy here.

### **Pseudoscience: social-psychology**

In the final section of this paper I will rely primarily on an excellent article, entitled “Would the World Be Better Off Without Religion? A

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<sup>11</sup> Silverman, Dave. *Facebook*, 2014

<sup>12</sup> Harris, Sam. *The End of Faith*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2004: p. 72.

<sup>13</sup> Wolpe, David. “Maher’s Mockery Misses the Point.” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 Oct. 2008

<sup>14</sup> @richarddawkins. *Twitter*, 27 July 2014, 2:17 a.m.

Skeptic’s Guide to the Debate” from the magazine *Skeptical Inquirer*<sup>15</sup> The authors are: Scott O. Lilienfeld, PhD, a professor of psychology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, and Rachel Ammirati, PhD, a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Psychiatry also at Emory University. In the article, both writers disclose that they are atheists.

Would society be better if there were no religion? The body of work on this, both by scientists, journalists, and bloggers is voluminous. It is not an issue that sociologists and psychologists have reached a scientific consensus on, yet. But what is clear is that New Atheists misrepresent data, and make false equivalencies, so as say with certainty: Religion = Bad. There are many limitations to a scientific study on this, as noted in the article:

In practice, the question posed here is probably not answerable with certainty because a genuine experimental test of the question is impossible. For both pragmatic and ethical reasons, we could never randomly assign individuals to a condition in which they were raised in a religious environment and randomly assign others to be raised in a nonreligious environment.<sup>16</sup>

Some may point to North Korea as an example of a religion-free society, but the state mandated veneration of the Kim family dynasty says otherwise. The ruling Kim family are imbued with supernatural powers. They are associated with ancient Korean symbols of their nation’s origin, like the dormant volcano, Paektu Mountain. In fact, North Korea could be mistakenly used as an argument for the harm religion does. The vibrant reemergence of religion in China and Russia shows that it was never eradicated there, despite heavy repression and persecution of religious institutions.

But what is “better” is hard to quantify in any scientific study. For the purposes of the article the authors define it in two ways: “(a) lower levels of criminal and antisocial behavior, including violence, and (b) higher levels of prosocial (altruistic) behavior than a world with religion.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lilienfeld, Scott O. and Rachel Ammirati. “Would the World Be Better Off Without Religion? A Skeptic’s Guide to the Debate.” *Skeptical Inquirer*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Lilienfeld, Scott O. and Rachel Ammirati. “Would the World Be Better Off Without Religion? A Skeptic’s Guide to the Debate.” *Skeptical Inquirer*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2014.

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This is notwithstanding the clearly institutional harm that some religious denominations or churches may inflict on individuals within it. There are plenty of examples of crimes committed by church hierarchy, both sexual and otherwise, and the resultant coverups of these crimes. But these dynamics happen in many closed organizations, like the military, or psychiatric or penal institutions. It's not an ideology-dependent phenomenon. There are also certain theologies that instill shame and harm congregants who are LGBTQ. Or, many times those who suffer real mental illness, like depression, are discouraged from medical care, and told to "pray more". But other non-religious political groups and trendy self-help "psychotherapies" might also make the same errors in each case. This article instead speaks to overall societal impacts of believers. "It should perhaps go without saying that the question of whether the world would be better off without religion has no logical bearing on the ontological question of God's existence."<sup>16</sup> In the above quote, and in following passages in their article, the authors point out logical fallacies of conflating the two questions. One is a testable hypothesis, the other a philosophical question, beyond the scope of scientific inquiry. The article goes to illustrate how New Atheist philosopher, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Dawkins completely ignore studies on the correlation, or lack thereof, between violence and religion. Furthermore, New Atheists do not take up the atrocities by regimes not motivated by religion, e.g. China under Mao, USSR under Stalin.

In an interview conducted by Laura Sheahan, Richard Dawkins is asked if he sees any benefit from religion. "It's true that some kind, nice, sympathetic people are also religious, and they might say that their kindness is motivated by religion. But equally kind people are often not religious. I really don't think I can think of anything; I really can't."<sup>17</sup> Leading New Atheist and prominent philosopher, Daniel Dennett admits there is no consensus, but lapses into intellectual laziness over the question of any societal benefit of religion:

Nothing approaching a settled consensus among researchers has been achieved, but one thing we can be sure of is that if there is a significant positive relationship between moral behavior and religious affiliation, practice, or belief, it will soon be discovered,

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<sup>17</sup> Dawkins, Richard. Interview by Laura Sheahan. *Salmon River*, 2007.

Ron Gaul

since so many religious organizations are eager to confirm their demonstration underlines the suspicion that it just isn't so.<sup>18</sup>

Well maybe it is to Dennett's chagrin that it took two scientifically skeptical atheists to do the job he so negligently tried to outsource to a theologian, or religious institutions.

Lilienfeld and Ammirati continue:

Indeed, the question of whether religion increases or decreases the risk of genocidal and other large-scale violence may never be answered to our satisfaction. Nevertheless, the more circumscribed question of whether belief in God specifically, and religiosity more generally, are correlated—statistically associated—with criminal and antisocial behavior, including violence, has been investigated in dozens of studies.<sup>19</sup>

The authors cite many studies. And while not a slam dunk, they tend to show a slight benefit of religion in society.

In conclusion, New Atheism has ironically suffered from the very same pitfalls it sees in religion. The wishful thinking of idealism, the dogmatism and anti-intellectualism of scientism, and from that flows pseudoscience. Their insistence on being "skeptics" brings an unseemly arrogance to their public debate. This, in turn, has turned away a vast majority of non-religious professionals, writers, and laity from any affinity for, or identification with, New Atheism. Unfortunately, fundamentalist religious polemicists and apologists latch onto New Atheism, using it as a strawman in their arguments against science, "moral relativism," secularism, "post-modernism," and "cultural Marxism." New Atheism's dogma makes their arguments and fear-mongering all too easy.

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<sup>18</sup> Dennet, Daniel. *Breaking the Spell*. Penguin, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Lilienfeld, Scott O. and Rachel Ammirati. "Would the World Be Better Off Without Religion? A Skeptic's Guide to the Debate." *Skeptical Inquirer*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2014.

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**Ronald Gaul** was born and raised in LA. Gaul was radicalized as a communist and atheist at the tender young age of 13. He took a sabbatical years later and delved into Buddhism, Zen, and Taoism, which he still studies. Gaul now trains in Aikido, studies the post-Soviet implications of historical materialism, and the features of emerging post-religious thought and religious deconstructivism. Gaul is now retired, but he is an older retired dad of a nine year old, and nanny to his three year old brother from another father.



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Fall 2018

Student Section





## *Essential Features of Men and Women*

William O. Deeken

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### **Abstract**

*The natures of men and women is a common theme found throughout philosophy and literature. Quite often, this dichotomy rests upon some essence that exists within the genders, and just as often, these essences are simply given without much critical thought. This paper explores the notion of essence in the context of gender, giving consideration and ultimately reproval to the anthropological, biological, and radical-subjectivist attributes that are commonly used to define genders. The anthropological attributes are the first to be tested against a strict set of criteria that must be met to be deemed essential, but they fail for their ambiguity and lack of objectivity. This motivates a change of focus to biological sex. However, this fails for the same reasons. Finally, we are brought to the human psyche and its possible relation to gender. Upon careful analysis of a private definition of a gender, we are led to unresolvable logical quandaries. Thus, the attributes of these three paradigms of thought fail to satisfy fundamental requirements of well-defined essences. Furthermore, these three categories encompass all possible cases, covering the social, biological, and psychological aspects of an individual. This enables us to make an even stronger conclusion: there exists no essential features to men and women.*

**Keywords:** *gender, essence, biological sex, manhood, womanhood*

From our fluid sense of fashion to the near-stable composition of our own bodies, we are constantly reminded of a distinction between men and women. Throughout history and across cultures, distinctions recur in various shapes and forms, often categorized as differences of nature or differences of culture. By their apparent omnipresence, we may be inclined to deem some of these distinctions as immutable essences. As will become clearer in the following paragraphs, this would be a mistake. The title of essence is a hallowed one, given only to those properties that are completely

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free from ambiguity and whose absence from some object would unequivocally partition it from those objects that do harbor this essence. All the features of men and women, whether they be cultural or biological, will fail to fulfill this high standard for essence. Every feature that can be conjured up will show to discriminate between men and women in hazy and uncertain degrees rather than giving us the satisfaction of a final and uncontroversial statement on the requirements of each label.

To begin this discussion on the features of men and women, we will consider those properties that are most ubiquitous to public and private life. These features would be those such as the norms of behavior, the style of dress, and the roles that each man or woman is expected to conform to in some specific society. The vast number of cultures spread out across the world would require us to survey each one and determine through some means which features are properly essential to men and women. If the reader is put off by this daunting task, there is one alternative. All these conventions, though liable to alterations over time and discrepancies between cultures, has a profound effect on the minds of those living in their midst. The mythological story that gives men and women their proper place and their proper behavior are taken as unshakable truth, handed down by some divine authority whose view of how the world functions is far wider and far clearer than any one individual's. To question this truth would be like to question the existence of gravity in our own day and age. Thus, we may alter our investigation so as to inquire only into those properties that are essential *relative to a particular culture*. This changes the question from one that is meant to be answered objectively, as if the essence existed the same way for every person, to one whose answer is as fluid and variable as the explanations of reality by the human mind. So, there exists two alternatives if we are to accept any cultural conventions as the essence of man and woman. One would be the anthropological route, accepting every variety of gender-normative behavior as an essence relative to some specific culture. The other would be to simply identify two overarching sets of behaviors, culled from the vast multitude of existent cultures, that constitute the essence of manhood and womanhood. We will take the latter alternative and see where it leads.

Suppose that we have undergone an extensive study of the gender-defining traits of men and women in all societies and have gathered together a preliminary set of features. Whether this is feasible, and whether we can come to an agreement about what makes a feature truly essential, have been

hypothetically answered in the affirmative. Now, suppose we take two generic human beings and endow them with all the cultural norms and behaviors that we have deemed essential for each gender. Presumably we would then have before us the ideal images of manhood and womanhood. And since we are serious in our pursuit of these essential features, we will demand the utmost clarity and rigor when handling our essences. If we have indeed found our essence, it should be clearly recognizable as such. As soon as our essence can no longer be predicated of our subject, our subject ceases to become a man, or a woman.

Now, take our woman and shed her of one of the features in the set. Suppose that the feature we have chosen is some manner of behavior. Instead of simply ridding her of this way of acting, we could perhaps lessen it by degrees. This should not be in least bit objectionable. Any sort of demeanor or action has some sense of intensity, which is surely what we have in mind when we judge two people by their friendliness, or by their abrasiveness, or by the force of their personality. Now, upon dialing back this behavior, we may find that our woman is no longer as much of a woman as she was before. If we are to admit this, our choice of essence has been a bad one. The requirements that we laid out for any candidates for essential features forces us to give a precise division between a woman and not a woman. Any “shades” of woman will be unacceptable, since this would imply that what we have identified as essence is not the simple and unambiguous predicate that we demand. Even if we forbid any gradients in our own description of behavior and personality, we must still be able to identify the precise point that a behavior ceases to be the essential behavior. Determining this point will depend upon an entire host of accidental features, such as other aspects of their personality or their body structure. In short, anything that either amplifies or dampens the effects of behaviors must be considered when judging whether someone is acting in a certain way, and our own finite ability will certainly preclude us from translating this behavior into the closed form of a predicate. An essential feature of men and women must, above all, be perceptible to us. If it is not perceptible, it must have no clearly-defined role in determining our classifications of men and women. And if it plays such a flimsy part in this, how can it be an essence?

After seeing the above problem, it is not difficult to recognize that this same issue will transfer over into any effort that identifies the essential features as physical adornments or styles of dress. This simply pushes any

difficulties in discerning between modes of behavior over to an ill-fated effort to discern between physical objects. Keeping the same standards as before, we require that our essential feature has a clear and distinct dividing line, and that any alteration that we perform on the essential feature will either cause the person to remain or cease to be the gender they were before. Now, suppose that we choose one essential feature from this category, such as hair style or an article of clothing. By our requirements, we will need to identify the extent of alteration needed to destroy the essential status of our article of clothing, or to set some bounds in which a hair style can vary. Here, just as before, the finitude of the human mind will never be able to comprehend the vast network of accidental features that shape our perception of these one or two essential features. Hence, this route will end the same as any other attempt to christen cultural features as essential. Cultural features exist on a scale of intensity, and our inability to give precise bounds to these features means that they fail to satisfy the requirements laid out for essences.

Now, we will consider the case where we wish to give the essential features of men and women a significance only in the context of a specific culture. This case will not need the same treatment as the first; here, will only need to defer to the requirements laid out at the beginning of the paper. What we call essence must be objective. It must be discernable by anyone that has any knowledge of cultures outside their own. If we were to define essence on such a shaky ground, we would have to accept the absurd possibility that a woman from one society would lose her womanhood the moment she stepped foot into a foreign land. To define essence in this new way would be to give it an entirely different meaning from the conventional one used by speakers of English.

The difficulty encountered in attempting to find an essence for man and woman in the cultural realm stems from the failure of the human mind to grasp a cultural attribute as a simple, discrete whole. Behavior is difficult to see in this way, as well as articles of clothing and other objects. These things are liable to vary, and it is precisely this variation that keeps us from grasping it as a determinate property. Essence must be grounded in something far more secure if it is ever to be found at all. We do not have to look far for a good candidate. Biological sex is the closest thing we can get to having a common characteristic to manhood and womanhood, without much variation among cultures.



The biological sex of a person determining whether a person is a man and a woman is a common method found in almost every civilization. This may seem at first glance to be a prime candidate for our essential features, but the complexities of the human anatomy make it difficult to place the essence on any one specific bodily feature.

At birth, most humans have clearly distinguishable sex organs, and we may be inclined to take these as our essential feature of men and women. However, there are abundant examples that shows this choice to be far from ideal. Suppose that a biological male, having lived most of his life fulfilling every cultural guideline concerning men, became the victim in some unfortunate accident to a partial castration. If we were to stick by our essence, this poor victim is no longer a man. However, if were to view this accident in slow-motion, we should be able to point to the exact moment our man ceased to be a man. This would inevitably degenerate into a fruitless search into what degree, or what amount of a bodily feature a person must have to be properly labeled a man.

If the above example doesn't sour our taste for continuing down this path, we may dig deeper to something that is not as susceptible to the chance forces of nature. Suppose that we instead identify manhood and womanhood with the sex hormones. Here, we run into another difficulty. It is common knowledge that these hormones exist in both the male and female body. Then comes the similar question that cropped up in the previous paragraph: what is the right proportion of the sex hormones that defines man, and what is the right proportion that defines woman? This question will demand an answer if we are to remain true to the definition of essence. The feature that we identify with essence must be clear and distinct; it must be a single predicate, or the conjunction of predicates. If we were to allow any ambiguity into our predicate, we may run the risk of it being true for one person at one time, and false for the same person at another time, even if all other features pertaining to the context remain the same. Thus, a precise number is needed. Here, we encounter the same issue as when we attempted to identify essential features with cultural features. The indefinite boundary between the proportion proper for men and the proportion proper for women is further muddied by the innumerable list of accidental features that will need to be considered when calculating these precise numbers. The best characteristics that we could give men and women, based on their biological sex, would be vague tendencies each seem to have, and this would hardly satisfy the stringent requirements needed to be classified as

essential. Chromosomes, while more promising than other biological features, still fail to meet our standards for an essence, as there are cases where the karyotype does not align perfectly with the biological features that develop. Most of the features of biological females are present in the body of a person with Turner's syndrome, despite the person missing a X chromosome<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, most of the features of biological males are present in the body of a person with Klinefelter's syndrome, despite the person having an extra X chromosome<sup>2</sup>.

Having investigated the two routes above and finding nothing there worthy of being titled essential, the reader may criticize our focus on only the public faces of manhood and womanhood. Instead of looking for visible features, our critic may propose that we should be looking into an individual's self-image, or into their own private understanding of their gender. While this approach may remedy some of the issues that come from trying to discern boundaries between physical objects, it amplifies the issue that arose with allowing features to be essential relative to a culture. Here, as elsewhere, we demand consistency between every individual's conception of manhood and womanhood. If it is essential to womanhood to understand oneself to be a woman, an individual must have a preconceived definition of what a woman is. If everyone's image of a woman differs, even in the slightest degree, then they do not all want to be the same woman. Hence, the individual's consciousness as a woman cannot be the same as another individual's consciousness as a woman, and this supposed essential feature of women is actually an essential feature for nothing at all. There is a certain sense of circularity here that renders the term "woman" meaningless. Women, or men, are not given their defining features until someone wills to be one, and they could not possibly know what to be since women and men have not been given their features yet. While we rejected the other essential features as ambiguous, we will reject this one on account of its self-referentiality.

The reader may object to this judgement, declaring that an essential feature here is not to be understood, and hence not to be placed under the same restrictions, as the essential feature of publicly visible phenomenon. We should recognize two distinct meanings of any specific gender, one that is assigned a public meaning, and another assigned a private meaning. The

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<sup>1</sup> "Turner's Syndrome." *Black's Medical Dictionary*. Scarecrow Press, 2006, p. 735.

<sup>2</sup> "Klinefelter's Syndrome." *Black's Medical Dictionary*. Scarecrow Press, 2006, p. 394.

public meaning and its essentials were the ones used hitherto, while the private meaning we introduce here is to be defined freely by the individual. Thus, what is essential to womanhood or manhood is the desire or belief that one is a man or woman as defined by the semantics of their own personal language. While this sounds similar to what we previously considered and rejected, this formulation does not bind the separate occurrences of the gender in the definiens and definiendum to the same meaning. The only thing these two occurrences have in common is the same spelling and pronunciation. While this may clear up the problem of self-referentiality found above, there arises a new question as to what the consequences are of allowing these two separate meanings into our essence.

Concerning the notion of a personal definition, we notice that it successfully evades the uncertainty of the essential features considered before. An individual, as the author of their own language, is free to define their personal man and personal woman as they please. The complete freedom afforded to the individual would allow them to give a definite length of hair, or a specific proportion of sex hormones, or any of the other previously-rejected features as a perfectly valid definition. However, this freedom is curtailed by the fact that the person who holds this definition must also hold some subjunctive attitude towards the defining conditions. It is not enough that the individual has a personal definition of man or woman, the individual must actively desire or believe that this is the true and correct definition of the gender, and that they are in possession of these properties. There is certainly no leap of faith involved in believing in the correctness of your own personal definitions, but there is an uneasiness in our acceptance of others' mere belief as the essence of something for which we have formulated a proper definition. An individual is supposed to hold a private set of essential features and actively believe that this is the final, authoritative word on their gender, and simultaneously suspend these beliefs to embrace yet another set of essential features that involve only having some emotion about the matter. To hold a private definition in good faith would clearly undermine the essential feature of men and women as a desire and a belief.

After we have found all these possible essential features lacking, the reader may finally take offense to the high standards we require essences to hold. Unfortunately, if we were to loosen these rules even the slightest, we could not tell the difference between what is essential and what is accidental. Suppose that we did decide that the essential feature of women

is a tendency towards a specific constitution of the reproduction system. Then, under what category of feature would we classify, say, the lack of facial hair? We would be reluctant to give it essential status, but since we classified womanhood as a tendency, the ancillary effects of the sex hormones do not have a strict separation from the mere existence of the sex hormones in the body. If it is a tendency that we are after, all we need is something that is typical of this physical constitution, and the lack of facial hair fits this requirement perfectly. Furthermore, the sex hormones are themselves are not part of the physical body per se; they themselves could be considered an accidental feature of having ovaries. This cascading of essential features into accidental ones is the result of not giving clear definitions to the essential features in the first place. Hence, we have no choice but to place these onerous requirements on any prospective essences.

As the preceding paragraphs have shown, the nature of essence is a difficult one. We are required to state the essential feature precisely, but this precision is impossible to achieve when dealing with such notions as manhood and womanhood. Any cultural conventions that we wish to identify essential features with turn out to be too fluid and indeterminate to fulfill our demands. We find no respite in biological sex, as the physical constitution of the human body is much too variant to find any definitive features there. And finally, any alternatives that attempt to give essence a meaning relative to a specific culture or to give it an entirely personal significance will fail for similar reasons. Hence, we are forced to conclude that no viable feature exists that can lay claim to being essential for either men or women.

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## ***Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling***

Preston Hoepfner

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the philosophical work of Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling through his concept of the Knight of Faith and genuine behavior divorced from duty. Kierkegaard sought genuine religious faith, but what if we are to apply his existential examination to the contemporary world? What does it mean to behave congruent to our genuine existence and not simply out of the sense of duty or obligation? Its message is still clear, but we might loath what we find. Though we might not be living such a genuine existence, we nevertheless can benefit from Kierkegaard's call to rip ourselves from the absurdity of it all. We might still find our inner Knight of Faith, but we must do so ourselves.*

**Keywords:** *Existence, Existentialism, genuine, Kierkegaard, self.*

Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*<sup>1</sup> is presented to the readers in two divided texts, each approaching a perceived crisis within Christianity which Kierkegaard intends to rectify in the readers. For our purposes, we shall examine each work independent of one another, as each text seeks to examine a different subject despite having similar subject matter within Christianity and overlapping premises. We will begin sequentially with Kierkegaard's first entry, *Is There a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical*, and continue on to the second entry, *Is There an Absolute Duty to God*. Kierkegaard toiles to enlighten the individual to the personal duties of self-reflection and renewal of one's faith, yet Kierkegaard may have unintentionally, at least to the contemporary reader, highlighted our dark and seemingly hopeless modern lives while keeping his intended purpose relevant.

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric*. Translated by Robert Payne. Oxford UP, 1939.

Kierkegaard's first text in the pair revolves around our suspension of our moral and ethical duties towards the enactment of the religious doctrine of the Christian faith. He highlights a fatal paradox which faith emplaces the faithful within during spiritual tests and acquiescence to the divine. The biblical story of Abraham and his son Isaac are the main focal point Kierkegaard presents which exemplifies this paradox. This is the paradox of placing the single individual higher than the universal. By *universal*, Kierkegaard is referring to the common good or society. He is postulating how religion can sometimes, paradoxically, elevate the individual above universally accepted morals and ethics in order to do his dogmatic and divine intentions. This is antithetical to a structure of morals and beliefs which is intended to benefit society at large and not allow individuals to break social norms and ethics. He specifically uses the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham to highlight this paradox – the idea that Abraham is performing an action which would unquestionably be considered unethical and immoral, yet he nonetheless intends to carry out the act to conquer his spiritual trial. Abraham, via the command of the divine, has been elevated above the universal and emplaced in a position to commit an act of murder.

This example reveals the a shockingly “means justifies the end” type ideology which appears to be antithetical to the intended benefit of religious dogma. However, Kierkegaard most likely intends this as a cautionary tale of blind and unconditional obedience to the church (or more generically, authority). He often references the “tragic hero” – one who is enduring similar trials and tribulations as that of Abraham, but does not seek pity and stoically suffers the consequences of such horrors. The tragic hero does this at the behest and benefit of the universal and is not elevated above them; he is a victim for the many. This is the act of personally, at one's will, reaffirming the personal commitment to his/her faith, devoid of the encumbrance of blind willingness to acquiesce to religious authority, and empowers the single individual *within* the universal. This is Kierkegaard's allegory for the individual breaking free from the absurdity of the masses and empowering oneself through the reaffirmation of their faith and willfully benefitting the universal through one's own free will and personal accountability.

Kierkegaard's second text approaches the duty one has to the divine and approaches it in much the same way as the former – via blind obedience without intelligent and willful purpose. Kierkegaard presents the idea of

performing God's will and tenets, yet being gloriously misguided and, as the above paradox signifies, missing the intended benefit of religious dogma. We are presented with the idea that many will pursue the wishes of the divine for simply that; for religion's sake. One does what one does because one is told, not due to willful pursuit and enactment of glorious benefits to those around. Kierkegaard repeats the former paradox of the individual being higher than the universal, and one can see the paradox permeated within these acts as well. A person does not, as per an example via Kierkegaard, love their neighbor because they truly love their neighbor, it is because God told them to do so. This action is being done to ensure that the individual can attain salvation, a personal and self-benefitting goal, and not a mutually benefitting, blessed and fulfilling neighborly friendship.

Kierkegaard likens these actions to one's duty. He expresses the absurdity of one's love for God being transferred into love for one's neighbor. Our duty, he explains, is that we *do* love our neighbor, and that we are performing these acts of the divine not explicitly because we are told to do so. Kierkegaard references the "knight of faith" as a metaphorical character which is to represent the intended action, or messenger if you will, of faithful acts. He is likened to the conscientious and self-aware version of Abraham - one who does an act with intelligent purpose who wishes to benefit the many out of a personal commitment. As *Fear and Trembling* comes to a close, we are left with the challenge of the individual – the call to break free of the blind servitude to authority while conscientiously, out of a personal and willful obligation, pursue the benefit of the universal. Kierkegaard challenges us to *be* the individual, but with purpose, and that we should perform the commands of the divine, but not simply for the sake of God – but because we, in our heart of hearts, wish to perform these honorable deeds.

Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is undoubtedly effective, and the main message fits quite comfortably within the historical and religious context of Kierkegaard's life and endeavors. Taken generically, his warnings of the blind, unconditional, obedience to authority is an ever-present footnote which should always be a contributing factor into the evaluation of our daily lives, government processes, and grandiose international events. However, Kierkegaard's intentions of renewing religious devotion may resonate differently in the ears of contemporary readers. An unintended dark side of the nature of this discourse materializes in the subconscious of the ordinary citizen. It is an effective piece of

literature which, rather than invoke a renewed sense of self and religious devotion – it may very well awaken us in our day and age.

As to retain the connection to religion for as long as we can, what of present-day religion? With our ever-more busy and consumed lives, how many truly “religious” people are, in fact, religious? With the cute and ineffectual religious youth groups to the weekly bible studies, how many are simply going through conditioned and robotic behavior of maintaining their comfortable routine and pursuing religion simply for, subconscious and individual, personal salvation? How many truly read the Bible or attend church services? How many perceive the morals and messages of the Bible in a way simply because they were exposed to these ideas, while never having spent the time to study it themselves? How many are contemporary renditions of Kierkegaard’s Abraham?

We can also apply this to our current political events as well. Many are emplaced within a system of politics which is binary; either left or right, liberal or conservative – with little outside thought to enable them to make conscientious and intelligent observances about political concepts which are never presented in our mainstream political culture. We could compare this to Abraham’s lack of questioning on his intent to murder Isaac - done so with little thought or question. What of the current War on Terror? Why is there a lack of meaningful conversation about its intent and effects? How many are caught up within the *absurdity* of system which only bottlenecks questions and thought, preventing us from being the Knight of Faith or the Tragic Hero? How many young people enlisted into the military in order to “fight for our freedoms” or “democracy” simply out of the sake of doing so – effectually attempting to will the Knight of Faith to transpose their efforts into something they themselves did not personally invest into, similar to Kierkegaard’s concept of loving thy neighbor. How many of those who enlisted did so for personal gain, devoid of the connotations of the liberated individual – and with no conscientious and intelligent purpose to the universal?

What of our daily lives and jobs? Certainly, Kierkegaard’s narrative can be applied to this as well, though critique of our current capitalist, corporate, system has almost become so cliché that any further talk on the matter seems to be toothless. But alas, there are undoubtedly countless individuals who have succumbed to relentless business authority, or those who are pursuing business policies which are, while claiming or aiming to aid the universal, are only self-serving.



While this is possibly not the intention of Kierkegaard's text of *Fear and Trembling*, it nonetheless retains its relevance within contemporary society when we use it to critique our current lives and the structures which confine them. And this, while seemingly bleak and depressing, can be hopeful and empowering. We can hope that it can teach us to see the personal agendas which place the universal at its whim. Maybe it can create a moment of anxiety within us and help us wrench away from the absurdity in this world – leading the person who is currently sitting in their car somewhere during rush hour traffic, on the way to their dead-end job, to wake up and say, “what the hell am I doing?” We can use these lessons to find a renewed sense of self in a world where our identities are further being defined by the products we purchase and the braindead cable television shows we watch. We can be aided in making decisions and valuing those decisions, not just performing them out of obligation. Hopefully, we can use Kierkegaard's ideals as a country to make decisions that truly benefit the universal, rather than pursuing policy which marginalizes the world for our exclusive benefit; ala the War on Terror. For these above reasons is why Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is effective and can still resonate in contemporary society. Ironically, his dour and bleak outlook can help create a hopeful tone for our future endeavors within the world.

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