NORTHERN PLAINS ETHICS JOURNAL

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Scholar Section

Querying Nature: A Queer and Trans Interrogation of "Male and Female He Created Them."
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Abstract:

In 2019, the Congregation of Catholic Education published "Male and Female He Created Them": Toward a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory. The document fomented anti-trans and anti-intersex rhetoric, politics, and theology through recourse to the specter of "gender theory," which they determine to undermine the anthropological foundations of the family, school, and society. This article is a queer and trans interrogation of the document. It asserts the document proposes its own theo/logics that justify its position against all forms of anthropology incongruent with its own formations. This justification takes specific at transgender and intersex people, and a significant portion of this article is dedicated to counter the claims forwarded by "Male and Female". This article is concerned with the ethical implications when a theological body has rationalized and philosophized some human bodies as no longer categorically human. Finally, I end by noting how the authors of "Male and Female" have established their own ideology of gender at the expense of transgender and intersex people. Not also is this a theologically and ethically problematic foundation, it also plays a participatory role in "gender theory," which the authors sought to dethrone.

Keywords: transgender, intersex, queer, theology, sex, gender, race, prosthesis, anthropology

Introduction

This article begins with a teaching, but not a big-T Teaching often associated with Catholic Social Teaching (hereafter, CST); here the concern is an educational teaching. While coming from the Congregation of Catholic Education[1], this article is less concerned with these origins. The scope of this exploration is to conduct a critique of the theo/logics present within the 2019 educational teaching document *"Male and Female He Create Them": Toward a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender*

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[1] Since publication, the Congregation of Catholic Education has merged with the Pontifical Council for Culture to form the Dicastery for Culture and Education.

Theory in Education (hereafter, *MF*).[2] "Theo/logics" points toward etymological breaks; theology may simply be construed as words or discourse about God, it may be the discrete discipline that resides in the academy, or it might be a socio-political imposition that seeks to emplace a particular juridical mandate upon the human body. "Theo/logics" acknowledges that these boundaries and interpretation of the word are not hard, and claims can slip and slide into one another.

As a document that proposes theo-cultural justification of the anthropological foundation and totality of sex/gender dimorphism, attendant with cultural (read: ideological) inscriptions concerning the family dependent upon this dimorphism, this article proposes the impossibility of this anthropology. This critique serves to uncover the operative theo/logics. In other words, this anthropology—even for sex/gender dyads—fails to address the multiplicity of human expression and sexual desire. While much of the criticism is derived from inaccurate portrayals around transgender and intersex people, it should be noted that heterosexual people are not exempt from the exclusionary theo/logics present within *MF*. It is, therefore, ideological.

When published, this document was distributed to schools and dioceses across the world, for if it is to be taught, people must have the information in their hands. Now, before you flip to the next article because you may have no interest in Catholic (denominational) matters, I ask you to pause and consider the catholic (universal) implications of such a document. While I do not contend such documents are "theology" *à la lettre*, it cannot be denied the proximity such documents possess in the theological imaginations of people. Some people may think of theology along the lines of theologians like Karl Rahner, or—if we want to go more classic—Thomas Aquinas (though this also predates some important reformations of theological thought).

Here, these "people" are not necessarily theologians or those versed in theological training. "People" could be understood as the laity—those who, through no fault of their own, are oftentimes consumers of theology and not *doers* of theology. "People" could also be understood as all those who are swept up into all that theology touches—and it touches a lot in various capacities and intensities. For example, medical care received through a Catholic healthcare network will be experienced

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[2] Congregation for Catholic Education, *"Male and Female He Created Them": Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education*, February 2, 2019, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20190202_maschio-e-femmina_en.pdf, sec. 39.

differently than receiving a verdict from the omnipotent judge who has replaced the Church as lawgiver.[3] This understanding of "people" is crucial, because *MF* is proposing a theological anthropology.

This is, certainly, a Christian anthropology, but it is also a human anthropology—a universal assertion of the human person. Within the first paragraph of the text, readers encounter, "In many places, curricula are being planned and implemented which 'allegedly convey a neutral conception of the person and of life, yet in fact reflect an anthropology opposed to faith and right reason.'"[4] The authors of *MF* are focusing undo and unnecessary attention concerning gender and sexuality. To be clear, the authors also contend that any anthropology incongruent with their interpretation of human anthropology is ideological, a symptom of the present educational crisis. Put simply, to the authors of *MF*, their Christian anthropology is the only human anthropology worthy of being called a human anthropology.

Thus, this use of "people" can also be understood as other disciplines and modes of research that are caught up in this quagmire of theo/logical thinking. The problem is that *MF* demands some "people" are not understood as people, as not properly human. Attuned to the precarity of trans, intersex, and queer life, such rhetoric is dangerous as best and violently instigative at worst.

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[3] This line of thinking follows Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Additionally, this article owes a rhetorical framing debt to Mark D. Jordan concerning the usage of Church; see *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1. Here, we should think less of individual congregations and the work these communities are doing and understand this Church to reference the bureaucracy of the Magisterium, in this case Roman Catholicism (for there are other flavors of Catholicism out there). We must distinguish between these two usages. Concerning individual congregations (individual churches), there are people conducting phenomenal working toward transforming Catholicism; however, it would be a mistake to extrapolate this case study to be indicative of the whole of Catholicism. While big-C Church can certainly function in the same direction (for there is clearly evidence of congregations flouting official Church teaching), we must contend that the Church is concerned with the articulation of a structuring theo/logics. In the case of *MF*, these theo/logics then demand a particular anthropo/logics. In other words, while we might name rogue congregations doing phenomenal work as being a light for what Catholicism *can* be, we must simultaneously name these same congregations as deviations from the normative claim of Catholicism *ought* to be.

[4] *MF*, sec. 1.

Methodologically, this article is indebted to queer and trans critique.[5] Not to be confused with identity politics, queer and trans critique—while naming the ways in which violent ideological structures enact violence toward queer and trans life—attunes its analysis to ideological and structural antagonisms that produce the very idea of queer and trans as such; in the case of *MF* this also extends to intersex.[6] This critique follows trends in queer and trans scholarship by exploring a pericope of text (here *MF*) and reveals the ramifications and hidden ideological undercurrents of the text and, in this case, theo/logics. I will focus on how "Christ" is deployed in the document (used only in one paragraph of *MF*), and how this usage of Christ reverberates in various ways. I will quote the pericope at length, and then proceed with a line of questioning in relation to this selection. Finally, I am concerned about the *ethical* implications of this rhetoric and theo/logics. These concerns are woven throughout the article.

Introducing Christ

As noted, the paragraph where "Christ" appears will be quoted at length. Questions rise to the surface with this paragraph, for it functions as a dense transfer point of ideological construction and implication. These following questions will guide the article, serving as headings. What is the relation of the family to the school? What is its importance? How is the human person being defined? How does Christ relate to this human person? What is the development of the "whole man" and how does Christ

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[5] See Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities," *differences* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1991): iii–xviii. De Lauretis famously rejected the notion of "queer theory" a few years after this publication, as it was failing to live up to its political and/or critical usage (as a mode of rigorous interrogation of gender, sex, sexuality, race, class, and more). With all things academic, once something has become published, it takes on a life of its own, so perhaps there is something queer in the un-tameability of these permutations. Despite these criticisms, de Lauretis would eventually re-affirm "queer theory" were it would retain greater intersectional analysis and criticism. See also, Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," *GLQ* 1, no. 1 (November 1993): 17–32; David L. Eng, with [Jack] Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz, "What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?" *Social Text* 84–85, Vol 23, nos. 3–4 (Fall-Winter 2005): 1–17; David L. Eng and Jasbir K. Puar, "Left of Queer," *Social Text* 145, Vol 38, no. 4 (December 2020): 1–24.

[6] Please note, intersex is not always glossed within queer and trans scholarship, nor do all intersex activists want to be captured by the labels of queer and trans. For recent exploration of the intersection of religion and intersex, see Stephanie A. Budwey, *Religion and Intersex: Perspectives from Science, Law, Culture, and Theology* (London, UK: Routledge, 2023).

sanction human values? What human person is the centrality of the educational project of the school? Finally, and aiming toward a question not explicitly from this paragraph, is Christ functioning the same way as Jesus?

These questions are far from exhaustive regarding this paragraph from *MF*. They do, however, carry a dense matrix of implications, which will be elucidated below. These questions then serve as a vehicle for a close reading of *MF*, in particular, its deployment of Christ.

> The primacy of the family in educating children is supplemented by the subsidiary role of schools. Strengthened by its roots in the Gospel, "The Catholic school sets out to be a school for the human person and of human persons. 'The person of each individual human being, in his or her material and spiritual needs, is at the heart of Christ's teaching: this is why the promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school.' This affirmation, stressing man's vital relationship with Christ, reminds us that it is in His person that the fullness of the truth concerning man is to be found. For this reason the Catholic school, in committing itself to the development of the whole man, does so in obedience to the solicitude of the Church, in the awareness that all human values find their fulfillment and unity in Christ. This awareness expresses the centrality of the human person in the educational project of the Catholic school."[7]

What is the Relationship of the Family to the School? What is Its Importance?

Lauded in *MF*'s initial publication as a fantastic resource for schools (which, it was and still may be), a necessary reassessment is in order concerning *MF*.[8] Within the above paragraph, the school plays a

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[7] *MF*, sec. 39.

[8] See also *Compassion and Challenge: Reflections on Gender Ideology from Archbishop Robert J. Carlson* (Archdiocese of St. Louis: 2020); *Theological Guide: The Human Person and Gender Dysphoria* (Diocese of Lansing: 2021); and "Catechesis and Policy on Questions Concerning Gender Theory," (Archdiocese of Milwaukee: 2022), which were directly inspired by *MF*. Additionally, see United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), "A Doctrinal Note on the Moral Limits to Technological Manipulation of the Human Body," March 20, 2023: https://www.usccb.org/resources/doctrinal-note-moral-limits-technological-manipulation-human-body. While *MF* is not

subsidiary role in relation to the family. What does this mean? This entails a closer reading of the text. The text is not as focused on the specific deployment of its anthropology in Catholic schools as one might think, though it certainly is a component. Rather, the text is focused on reinforcing *educational institutions* in general, taking care to present their importance in a hierarchical fashion.[9]

It would also be a misunderstanding to read subsidiary as simply secondary to the family, resulting in the family fulfilling a primary role. While the family is most certainly privileged in this hierarchical construction, it is key to note the hierarchy of educational institutions finds its origins in a more fundamental location: creation itself.

Recourse to creation takes a decided turn toward the natural law tradition, which is not a surprising move for church documents. Though there have been powerful revisionist approaches to the natural law tradition, they rarely—if ever—are acknowledged as viable revisions to natural law.[10] Additionally, just as *MF* asserts a Christian anthropology, it is forwarding a Christian natural law tradition. Thus, a natural law more inspired from ancient foundations is out of the question. A rejection of revisionist natural law frameworks solidifies the ideological enclosure of colonial cis-heteropatriarchy, which becomes apparent through a choice interpretation of Genesis.

The title of *MF* is derived from the Genesis 1:27 passage (glossed in the text as "God created man in his own image […] male and female he created them.").[11] It is the only biblical passage referenced in the text. While it is certainly not necessary to exhaustively prooftext the bible for every argument, there is at least one passage within the New Testament that can complexify this statement: Galatians 3:28 ("There is no longer

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explicitly referenced, the doctrinal note is a thinly veiled anti-trans and anti-intersex document, which perpetuates the "spirit" of *MF*.

[9] It is worthwhile to note how "institution" carries a multivalent definition. Physical entities, perhaps like a school, can be an institution; moreover, conceptual, perhaps ideological, entities can also be an institution, like marriage, the family, and more.

[10] See Cristina L. H. Traina, *Feminist Ethics and Natural Law: The End of the Anathemas* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999); Vincent C. Llyod, *Black Natural Law* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Craig A. Ford Jr., "Transgender Bodies, Catholic Schools, and a Queer Natural Law Theology of Exploration," *Journal of Moral Theology* 7, no. 1 (2018): 70–98. From the perspective of replacing natural law ethics in relation to Catholicism, see also Hille Haker, *Towards A Critical Political Ethics: Social Ethics and Social Challenges* (Basel, CH: Schwabe Verlag, 2020).

[11] *MF*, sec. 31.

Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."). We will return to this Galatians passage later.

For now, the concern is how Genesis has been utilized to articulate a Christian anthropology, which is to be understood as a fundamental human anthropology,[12] revolving entirely around biological complementarity (male/penis and female/vagina). As such, this *anthropology*, what the authors will later intensify through a reworking of the language of *Laudato Si'* as an "integral anthropology" (a phrase pairing which never occurs in *Laudato Si'*), holds an intended catholic force of creation.[13] The *oikos* of the earth and the *oikos* of the family must resonate; therefore, the fundamental difference of male and female demands the family must be comprised of this fundamental difference, then the school, and eventually society. As it concerns *MF*, there is no other anthropology worthy of the name "anthropology."

The initial question was slightly misleading, for the concern *really* resides in neither the family nor the school, but rather nature itself. Nonetheless, we are left with a noticeable gap. Despite this anthropology of biological complementarity, the school still fulfills a subsidiary role *to the family* (and not nature) as it concerns educational intuitions. Recourse to nature to properly educate us is not part of this educational equation, yet functions as the fundamental and hierarchical backbone of education. I contend this is not an oversight, but a first step in the fabrication of heterosexuality in *MF*. This recalls how natural law, especially in a revisionist lens, has the ability to understand this beautiful multiplicity within the natural; however, the natural law framework deployed ignores these avenues.

Additionally, this articulation founds the earthly manifestations of theology (our lives on this side of life should we subscribe to life after death and even resurrection) not in people, but creation. There is a unique attunement to the vacuum of sovereignty, wherein no one person is sovereign.[14] Here, then, there is an ability to create a theo/logical distance; the rhetorical raising of hands in innocence that nature has already determined the sovereign order of things. It becomes a matter of right reason to understand this order.

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[12] *MF*, sec. 30.

[13] *MF*, sec. 55.

[14] This could be explored via Foucauldian avenues, yet even if we remain with Schmitt, it could be argued that the sovereign is only truly understood *ex post facto*, once the state of exception has been determined. Sovereignty acts first as function before interpreted as identity.

Reason is a necessary component of the natural law tradition, residing in the faculties of the human person. While the family, school, and eventually society should educate toward the end of producing humans capable of reason, the next questions emerge from the paragraph: what *is* a human person and how are they being defined? How does Christ relate to this human person?

How is the Human Person Being Defined? How does Christ Relate to this Human Person?

The answer to this question is quite simple: male and female. The arrival at the answer, however, is fraught with violence and ontological erasure. I contend recourse to the family, *and not nature*, stems from scientific research that undermines the fundamental difference of male and female, which is *integral* to this anthropology. Additionally, to understand why the definition of the human person is of such importance, we need to explore "gender theory"—arguably the reason for the urgency of this document.[15]

"Gender theory" is a complex term, utilized differently by different people.[16] Within *MF*, we read, "Gender theory (especially in its most radical forms) speaks of a gradual process of denaturalization, that is a move away from *nature* and towards an absolute option for the decision of the feelings of the human subject."[17] When *MF* writes toward "gender theory" it is writing toward a vague straw argument. Per usual with documents in relation to culture, the church only argues from within its own ideological enclosure (notice how we have already encountered this in relation to anthropology as natural law); it does not actually seek to give space regarding the matter toward which it is writing.[18]

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[15] *MF*, sec. 1.

[16] See Sara Garbagnoli, "Against the Heresy of Immanence: Vatican's 'Gender' as a New Rhetorical Device Against the Denaturalization of the Sexual Order," *Religion & Gender* 6, no. 2 (2016): 187–204. https://doi.org/10.18352/rg.10156. See also Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024), 73–92.

[17] *MF*, sec. 19, emphasis in original.

[18] We can point to the history surrounding *Humanae Vitae*, where the committee assembled overwhelmingly urged the adoption of contraceptives within Catholicism. What we received as *Humanae Vitae* were the sentiments of a handful of dissenting opinions. Then the justification for its logics was hedged only in relation to the insularity of the church. We see this occur again in relation to the *Pastoral Letter* by Ratzinger; again, couching the argument framed through the insularity of the church. This can also be coupled with other protocols in relation to HIV/AIDS, where the dissemination of contraceptives

There is a very clear vision of what is intended concerning "gender theory" in *MF*, which is any anthropological theory that suggests "sexuality [sic] identity and the family become subject to the same 'liquidity' and 'fluidity' that characterize other aspects of post-modern cultures."[19] As it will succinctly note at the end of the paragraph, this is encapsulated through any theory that is "opposed to anything based on the truth of existence."[20] The ideological enclosure of the church's position is clear, yet this leads to bodily violence. The reference to postmodernity also implicates a cadre of human sciences; thus, biology, psychology, and yes, even anthropology are not exempt from these concerns toward "liquidity" and "fluidity." The notion of "gender theory" has become the privileged focus of *MF*'s criticisms. Such framing calls into question that status of educational institutions like schools within the anthropological imagination being forwarded; what becomes of disciplinary diversity and difference when all must become ordered toward such confining, limited, and monological ends? Such a singular desire and drive is also not wholly absent within the history of Christianity.

In what could be described as ironic if it were not so burdened by violence, the Church fails to understand, nor really consider, how the colonial deployment of Christianity was integral in the construction of the modern sex/gender system.[21] Furthermore, enslavement during this colonial period was also dependent upon the ungendering of Black and Indigenous bodies—an exercise that erases humanity and reduces Black and Indigenous bodies to mere flesh.[22] This ungendering continued well into the 20th century, with a history marked by chattel slavery and the dissolution of African families and kinship networks, as well as the

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was rejected (see *Humanae Vitae*) to save human life. We can fast-forward to *Querida Amazonia*, where, despite the church's dialogue with people, it reinforced the primacy of maleness in relation to community. In these examples, we are seeing the justifications of positions that are not properly taking into consideration the lived realities of peoples.

[19] *MF*, sec. 19.

[20] *MF*, sec. 19.

[21] See María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 186–209; María Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2010): "If *woman* and *black* are terms for homogenous, atomic, separable categories, then their intersection shows us the absence of black women rather than their presence. So, to see non-white women is to exceed 'categorical' logic," 742.

[22] See Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64–81.

genocide of Indigenous peoples;[23] medical experimentations on Black enslaved women with little concern of medical ethics owed toward humans—concerns which would be taken into consideration once procedures were perfected and then provided to white women as an option of care;[24] forced sterilization—whether through coercion or dubious medical procedures where Black women were sterilized without their knowledge;[25] unethical medical experiments that still to this day impact Black trust in medical institutions;[26] and the rhetoric of the Jim Crow era, or even apartheid South Africa, where segregation produce bathroom realities of "men, women, and colored people"—where "colored people" either implies a tertiary gender or the ungendering of all Black bodies, regardless of how this gender relates to one's sex;[27] and more. This small archive also is primarily in reference to Blackness, and we must fully acknowledge myriad racial and ethnic categorizations because of coloniality, which also intermingles with constructions of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Let's also look at intersex people in *MF* (it should be noted that *MF* refers to intersex within scare quotations).[28] The church only

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[23] See Spillers; see also Marquis Bey, *The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Gender* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2020); Stephen Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

[24] See Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1997); C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

[25] See, again, Roberts; See also Vanessa Northington Gamble, "Under the Shadow of Tuskegee: African Americans and Health Care," *American Journal of Public Health* 87, no. 11 (Nov 1997): 1773–1778.

[26] See Gamble.

[27] See Snorton; see also Marquis Bey, "Black Fugitivity Un/Gendered," *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* 49, no. 1 (2019): 55–62; Marquis Bey, *Cistem Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022; Marquis Bey, "The Trans*-ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*-ness," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (May 2017): 276–277.

[28] As with most terms in relation to gender, sex, and sexuality, "intersex" is also debated. While some people embrace intersex, so people eschew this category. Clinically, intersex is captured under the rhetoric of Disorders of Sexual Development or DSD. DSD can range from genital morphology (which is the focus of *MF*), extra chromosome, and even gene mutations that impact sex that

references medical discourse (though not cited) which recognizes the binary of XX and XY chromosomal difference. However, even a cursory exploration of research would reveal this is far from the case; this is not limited to the medical sciences, but also research in theology.[29] *MF* acknowledges that one's sex may not be clearly defined, yet it falsely presumes the stability of the XX and XY binary. This means the church has effectively reduced sex (and by extension, gender and sexuality) to be entirely determined by genitals. In cases where genitals are not clearly defined, *doctors* are to intervene toward therapeutic ends as "parents cannot make an arbitrary choice on the issue, let alone society."[30] Here, this is an extraordinary breach of medical ethics toward the ends of theological domination.

This culminates in *MF* advocating for church-sanctioned genital mutilation, though it would never frame the matter as such. Furthermore, we see reasons why recourse to nature is bypassed in favor of the family concerning education (though, in this case, even parents are bypassed in favor of a medical system that is willing to uphold the violence of the Church). What is occurring is a form of heterosexuality that is dependent upon a visual regime of genitals; meaning we must see the difference. However, despite being able to see the difference, the Church chooses to erase the multiplicities of human nature. Intersex people, determined through a visual regime, are rendered invisible.[31] The violence done to the human body is not seen as violence, because the body is not yet properly human.

Please note, this is not to say the XX and XY distinction does not exist, for they do create a vast pool of sex distinction. The concern is how XX and XY distinction becomes reified and apotheosized (or raised to the

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are not overtly physically noticeable. An in-depth exploration of the various expressions of DSD are beyond the scope of this paper.

[29] See the introduction within Susannah Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology* (London, UK: Equinox, 2010) for a survey of literature existing in 2010, 1–23; as well as the glossary of intersex/DSD (Disorders of Sexual Development), 237–246. For more recent scholarship, see Stephanie A. Budwey, *Religion and Intersex: Perspectives from Science, Law, Culture, and Theology* (London, UK: Routledge, 2023). Budwey's text, obviously, would not have been available to the church; however, Cornwall's and the various other texts she cites would have been.

[30] *MF*, sec. 24.

[31] See Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto*, trans. Kevin Gerry Dunn (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018), 112; Paul B. Preciado, *Manifiesto contrasexual* (Barcelona, ES: Anagrama, 2020), 160.

level of divinity itself) as normal, and anything other than XX and XY distinction is abnormal. To complicate matters even more, "deviations" from XX and XY distinction do not necessarily entail a direct correlation to genital morphology or even body composition; meaning, some people may be intersex and not even know it due to how distinct genital morphology has played a role in sex designation or how a chromosomal composition other than XX and XY may not be discovered until a medical condition (which usually entails a list of tests) arises.[32] Additionally, we still must ask *why* recourse to XX and XY chromosomal distinction is deployed when recourse to the visual regime of genital morphology is prized above all else. This note toward chromosomal distinction presents a caricature of science that only exists to uphold binary sex/gender complementarity.

Concerning transgender people, the conversation shifts. Framed in contrast to intersex people, transgender people are presented as selfish individuals who mock intersex people. "This oscillation between male and female becomes, at the end of the day, only a 'provocative' display against so-called 'traditional frameworks,' and one which, in fact, ignores the suffering of those who have to live situations of 'sexual indeterminacy.'"[33] Much is happening in this statement. For starters, by conjoining intersex and transgender people, *MF* creates a false equivalency of intersex and transgender people. While not mutually exclusive, they are certainly not synonymous. However, following the argument of *MF*, such elision is necessary, as sex, gender, and sexuality *must* exist in alignment (male, man, masculine and female, woman, feminine, both under the auspices of heterosexuality).

Secondly, *MF* incorrectly assumes that transgender only refers to the binary formation of male and female; however, it *must* assume this limitation if it is to maintain its own argument. In reality, while some transgender people transition between male and female, many eschew these sexual categories altogether. For this reason, this is why non-binary, queer, and bisexuals (and other forms of gender and sexualities) are

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[32] One such example is Klinefelter syndrome (a DSD), where people assigned male at birth (AMAB) have an additional X chromosome (XXY). While this syndrome is congenital and impacts 1 in 660 males, making it the most common DSD impacting males, diagnosis may not occur until other medical developments arise, such as developing type-2 diabetes or infertility. See Kristian A. Groth, Anne Skakkebæk, Christian Høst, Claus Højberg Gravholt, and Anders Bojesen, "Klinefelter Syndrome—A Clinical Update," *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism* 98, iss. 1 (Jan 2013): 20–30: https://doi.org/10.1210/jc.2012-2382.

[33] *MF*, sec. 25.

implicated within these overt attacks toward intersex and transgender people.

Again, history reveals how Black bodies have been denied access to these binary sex/gender formations in the first place. In this regard, contemporary scholars like Marquis Bey explore the movements into, out of, between, outside blackness and trans*ness (here blackness is lowercase to name coalitional potential and not necessarily *only* Black bodies).[34] Bey's work interrogates forms of ontological negation and paraontology.[35] Yes, Black bodies and Black flesh has been negated, but trans*ness is interpellated as negation via the hegemony of biological complementarity. Black flesh, already framed outside of sex/gender construction, is made to trans*gender; Black bodies (and bodies associated with the ontological negation of blackness) are disallowed gender. Bey will frame this quagmire and potential as the blackness of trans*ness / the trans*ness of blackness.[36]

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[34] See Bey, "The Trans*ness of Blackness, The Blackness of Trans*ness." For an overview on the usage of "trans*," see Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018), 4. When referencing Bey's work, I will utilize "trans*ness."

[35] See Bey, *The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Gender* (yet paraontological life does contend ontology otherwise—which is outside the parameters of *MF*); see also Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York, NY: Liveright, 2020); Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). Lee Edelman will also incorporate threads of Afropessimism in *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 1–43. From a perspective of biopower and sovereignty, such negation can also be seen in Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 66–92. From political theory, we can see this extend toward the Middle East in works like Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). Some of the strongest aspects of Puar's critique is the assertion that neoliberal gay and lesbian politics as engendering a "homonationalism" that becomes cultural export—per the assertions of Lisa Duggan in, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, eds. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 175–194, such neoliberal gay and lesbian politics are not queer. See also, Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London, UK: Verso, 2016 [2009]).

[36] Such analogous framings can also be seen in Ana-Maurine Lara's *Queer Freedom: Black Sovereignty* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2020).

Finally, the conversation transitions to the matter of rational philosophy. While *MF* is poised on the precipice of its invocation of Genesis, here it references Greek and Roman thinkers. It is a convenient cherry-picking of male-female relationships that order the rational human. However, again, there is a specific intention as this demands a virtue ethics paradigm as well; one where we cannot give ourselves over to our appetitive desires. This is the charge leveled toward transgender people, via *MF*'s assessment of "gender theory" in sec. 19.

Resultingly, *both* intersex and transgender people are effectively rationalized philosophically (but also medically) out of existence. Such rationalized ontological negation follows the thinking of Bey, but also chimes with decolonial thoughts of abyssal exclusion put forward by Boaventura de Sousa Santos.[37] As is made explicit by *MF*, this opens the door for violence toward the human and the human bodies of intersex and transgender people who have been defined outside the category of human. As I have also been naming, the lack of interrogation also leads to violence toward raced bodies; to apotheosize biological complementarity and the primacy of the family is to apotheosize whiteness.

This brings us to Christ. If Christ operates as the fulcrum regarding *human* education, where does this leave intersex and transgender people? Where does this leave raced bodies? Furthermore, where does this leave all other people of non-normative sexuality, sex, and gender?[38] I contend that *MF* has effectively rendered non-normative sex, gender, and sexuality outside the function of Christ. What simultaneously occurred is the fabrication of the categories of intersex, trans, queer, bisexual, and frankly, all sexualities, genders, and sexes that escape naming and categorization via the logics of heterosexuality (the normative ideological paradigm of biological complementarity). These embodied realities are outside the vivifying function of Christ afforded sexual dimorphism and are rationalized outside of humanity. This question of what a human is, is not merely language games of continental philosophy

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[37] For a brief overview, see Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 22–23.

[38] It is worth making clear that this analysis is rooted in a Euro-US critique, yet decolonial scholarship does uncover archives of gender and sexuality across the world that was erased and replaced with sexual dimorphism. Additionally, simply reclaiming this diversity through the rhetoric of queer, trans, or even intersex, can still be considered a colonial imposition. For an introductory overview of these dynamics across various religions, see Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer Religiosities: An Introduction to Queer and Transgender Studies in Religion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

and gender studies, but the visceral realities that demand the erasure of human life.

What is the Development of the "Whole Man" and How does Christ Sanction Human Values? What Human Person is the Centrality of the Educational Project of the School?

The abrupt summation of the previous questions dovetails into explorations of these next questions. In contrast to intersex people, we can intuit the most ideal formation of sex is clear distinction of male and female through the clear distinction of the penis and the vagina. While genital representation does not always correspond to chromosomal realities, this discrepancy does not seem to concern the church, so long as the visual regime of sexual difference is maintained.

This ideal formation of sex then corresponds to gender and sexuality. Here, sex and gender are conflated, so male=man and female=woman; any breach of this reality reverts to the church's constructions of transgender as noted above. Concerning sexuality, although never mentioned, the famous *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* appears to still be in play.[39] This document, though refuted by scholars[40], was never retracted by the Catholic Church. As part of the literature that gets wrapped up under the title of Catholic Social Teaching, the teachings with the "Pastoral Letter" still hold firm. While they (in the letter it is most directed toward gay men) may be "intrinsically disordered," these individuals still maintain a proper sex/gender alignment; though, it should be noted that "homosexuality" is not so easily reducible to simply same-sex attraction.[41]

But should bisexuals not be placed in this category? While bisexuality is often assumed to infer the attraction to both men and women, a wider accepted definition simply notes the attraction to two *or more* genders. Bisexuality is out of the question, for it cedes ground concerning the stability of male and female, and it becomes a deviant sexuality.

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[39] See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, Vatican website, October 1, 1986, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html.

[40] See Jeannine Gramick and Pat Furey, editors, *The Vatican and Homosexuality: Reactions to the "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons"*, (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1988).

[41] Cf. Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London, UK: Routledge, 2003), 59. The scare quotes here also note how the Church still favors the pathologizing rhetoric of "homosexual."

Additionally, this would complicate matters in a different direction *à la* the *Pastoral Letter*. Are bisexuals only sometimes or partially intrinsically disordered? This inability to "pin down" the desires of bisexuals that cannot be contorted into the anthropology of sexual difference only results in the usual erasure of bisexuality. This, effectively, is also what has occurred with the framing of queer (a word used only once in *MF* yet imbued with such blatant disregard concerning decades-long conversations, both academically and colloquially, that we cannot treat it here). This is why *MF* takes such direct aim toward intersex and transgender people. They are the explicit target, with bisexuality and queerness as implicit targets. None of these non-normative sex, gender, and sexuality expressions comprise the "whole man."

The ideal conditions for the "whole man" are found within a properly ordered heterosexual arrangement; namely, the family.[42] Thus we return to our centering paragraph. Once nature has been bypassed (for the church is already aware that nature itself does not possess the rigid stability it so desperately needs for its ideology of biological complementarity), the centrality of the family comes into focus. It is a convenient placeholder that reflects contemporary constructions of social life. Within *MF* we read, "In the family, knowledge of one's mother and father allow the child to construct his or her own sexual identity and difference."[43] On the surface, this may appear to be more in alignment with "gender theory." The church, however, is clear that such nuclear arrangements would lead to the proper sexual outcome, as children can see who they are through a relationship with who they are not—the relationship being reduced wholly to the genitals.

This is articulated in the subsequent paragraph: "The physiological *complementarity* of male-female sexual difference assures the necessary conditions for procreation."[44] This may seem a rather bizarre rupture; however, we have progressed from intersex violence to transgender psychopathy, and then from the philosophical erasure of both intersex and transgender people to the reassertion of the primacy of the family through biological complementarity all in the span of five paragraphs. For clarity, this occurs *prior* to the church's own proposal of Christian anthropology.

Nonetheless, the "whole man" that is alluded to is one that participates within the project of reproductive futurism (not the rhetoric used by *MF*), both ideologically and sexually. Derived from Lee Edelman,

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[42] *MF*, sec. 27.
[43] *MF*, sec. 27.
[44] *MF*, sec. 28, emphasis in original.

reproductive futurism alludes to the foreclosure and regulation of political discourse in favor of the figure of the Child. The Child becomes placeholder to a fantasy of futurity, one which is threatened by those who pose a threat to this futurity through disruption of the regulated political.[45] Ideologically, then, reproductive futurism secures a unique assemblage and hegemony of the state, or in this case, a religious institution. Importantly, the Child need not be confused with children, for queer children also threaten the Child of reproductive futurism through a disruption of the "just-so" *nature* of the world. Simultaneously, institutions both secular and religious, operating under the bastion of reproductive futurism and the Child, can profoundly threaten the safety and innocence of children.[46] Within *MF*, we can read the suggestion to surgically intervene in genital morphology with intersex infants.[47] From a secular perspective, we can note how migrant children are not seen under the banner of whiteness, so while there is desire to tout the importance to secure the safety and future of children, it is white (ideally straight, but time will tell) children who figure the Child, and it is migrant children that engender the specter of the queer.

To complicate the matter further toward sexual reproduction, such activity should not partake in reproductive technologies, as there is a severing of the unitive bond and "the manipulation of human embryos."[48]

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[45] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 11. While Edelman draws his overall argument from Jacques Lacan, particular his Sinthome lecture, it is possible to also tease out a flare toward Louis Althusser's formulation of ideological state apparatuses. See Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capital: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London, UK: Verso, 2014). An in-depth overview regarding these connections is beyond the scope of this article.

[46] Here, we can think of the phrase "Think of the children!" Children, in this case, become the mythic Child, when policies—or lack thereof—fail to pass that actually would ensure the safety of children. This can be thought along the lines of sex and gender, but also racism, or even gun violence.

[47] *MF*, sec. 24: "In cases where a person's sex is not clearly defined, it is the medical professionals who can make a therapeutic intervention. In such situations, parents cannot make an arbitrary choice on the issue, let alone society." Notice how parental rights also appear to be transgressed. This also hearkens to outdated modes of sexual determination (think along the lines of the Prader Scale), because *MF* is only interested in the visual regime of sexual difference.

[48] *MF*, sec. 28. Additionally, *Humanae Vitae* (1968) remains in play. Fast-forward to the 2023, and the United States Council of Catholic Bishops will also publish their "Doctrinal Note on the Moral Limits to Technological Manipulation of the Human Body" (2023).

Such technologies fragment parenthood and threaten the stability of the family. While *MF* alludes to reproductive technologies utilized in more capitalist commercial capacities, it fails to even attempt to interrogate why some heterosexual couples (because in their framing homosexual couples are completely out of the question for child-rearing) might seek reproductive technologies. In this regard, we can learn how heterosexuals (people attracted to the opposite sex and/or gender) also fail to "live up to" the standards of heterosexuality (the ideology that privileges this sexual relation as normative).

Potential inabilities to participate within reproductive technologies notwithstanding, there is the added component of Christ sanctioning these human values. It is through Christ where humans find fulfillment and unity. Yet, where does this come from within the document itself? Paragraph 39 is nearly a word-for-word excision from *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (1997). The function of this paragraph in that document is beyond the scope here; nonetheless, through its usage here, we receive the quotations concerning Christ employed in *MF*.

Again, this is the *only* paragraph when Christ appears, with each of its three instances being quoted from another Vatican source. It is oddly fitting. A document that effectively rationalizes intersex and transgender people out of existence through a choice quotation expressing a deliberate function of Christ, has not even deigned it appropriate to utilize novel arguments concerning Christ for the task. As *MF* implies this is a movement toward dialogue, there seems to be a hesitancy to reflect on what Christ means for us in light of "gender theory," not against "gender theory" (again, we still must acknowledge the term "gender theory" is a fabrication). Intersex and transgender people are not worth the effort, it seems, as we dialogue toward a *Christ*ian anthropology. Regardless of its extraction from another text, this fulfillment and unity through Christ resonates with another document also published in 2019.

As noted earlier, there is no recourse to Galatians 3:28; however, the verse is treated in *"Che cosa è l'uomo" (Sal 8,5): Un itinerario di antropologia biblica* (hereafter, *CC*), released in September of 2019 by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. Genesis 1:27 is treated in *CC*, and it is deepened through alignment with Sirach 42:24–25.[49] This connection

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[49] Pontifical Biblical Commission, *"Che cosa è l'uomo" (Sal 8,5): Un itinerario di antropologia biblica*, September 30, 2019, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20190930_cosa-e-luomo_it.html, sec. 262. At the time of writing this article, the document is still only available in Korean, Italian, and Polish.

facilitates an interpretation of creation via a two-by-two formula, the pair that faces each other. However, we are not free from the complications just yet, for this biblical pairing is telling.

Sirach has been fused with the *first* creation account. Within the first account of creation, God creates humankind, a general term and not necessarily the connotation we receive in the second creation account of a single person. While Genesis 1:27 does provide the phrasing of "male and female", there is interpretative precedence this could be interpreted as a merism. A merism is utilized to express a sense of "this, that, and everything else." Therefore, it is not beyond reason this could be interpreted to mean that God created humanity, which is male and female, and everything else.

While the second account of creation may lend itself more toward an interpretation of a single man and then a single woman, it appears the authors of *MF* are familiar with the critiques of sexual subordinationism, despite its own masculinist rhetoric within the document. Therefore, there is necessity to limit Genesis 1:27 to the *pairing* of male and female, rather than a merism in reference to the category of humanity. Hence, the incorporation of Sirach. This addresses the allusion to Sirach, and now Galatians must be treated.

Galatians 3:28 is only partially treated within *CC*. While I disagree with *CC*'s assessment of Gal 3:28, they still provide some interpretation. They opt for the tertiary creation of a third entity captured under the "new man" in Christ. The slave and free, as well as the Jew and Greek are unified. Problematically, this erases difference. Ironically, *MF* has foreclosed this problematic interpretation of the tertiary option, albeit through different means. "The *process of identifying sexual identity* is made more difficult by the fictitious constract [sic] as 'gender neuter' of 'third gender,' which had the effect of obscuring the fact that a person's sex is a structural determinant of male or female identity."[50] A tertiary reality made possible through Christ in relation to sex would dance too close to the church's perceived specter of intersex and transgender people.

There is biblical scholarship that allows the church to keep the categories of male and female. However, there is a catch. This catch is rooted in the scholarship of Judith M. Gundry.[51] Gundry does not adhere

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[50] *MF*, sec. 25.

[51] Judith M. Gundry, "Christ and Gender: A Study of Difference and Equality in Gal 3,28," in *Jesus Christus als die Mitte der Schrift: Studien zur Hemeneutik des Evangeliums*, eds. Christof Landmesser, Hans-Joachim Eckstein and Herman Lichtenberger, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestatementliche Wissenschaft: und die Kunde der älteren Kirche, Band 86, ed. Erich Gräßer (Berlin, DE: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 439–477.

to an interpretation of Gal 3:28 that simply erases difference. Erasure would mean the categories of Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, and female would cease to exist, being eclipsed by Christ; rather, Gal 3:28 "refers to the adiaphorization of sex difference in a new creation where being male and female is no advantage or disadvantage in relation to God and others and where man and woman are reconciled and united as equals."[52] While this certainly is not an explicit interpretation regarding intersex and transgender people, it aims toward a foundational axiom within queer theory by Eve Kosofky Sedgwick: "People are different from each other."[53]

Adiaphora refers to matters that have no moral merit or demerit. As Gundry refers to Gal 3:28, she asserts that rather than erasure of the difference or the unification of difference for a tertiary option (which is still a form of erasure), the adiaphorization renders these categories as losing a moral valence. It is not better or worse to be free or slave, or Jew or Greek, or male and female. Additionally, Gundry also investigates the Christological undercurrents in this passage and assesses that there is no evidence of erasure of difference.[54] This returns to Sedgwick and the misunderstandings of "gender theory" by the Church. The focus concerning the denaturalization of sexual difference is only in reference to an interpretation of sexual difference that forecloses anything outside the binary of male and female. Following Sedgwick, there are as many unique and discrete sexes as people on this planet. This difference, cinching these two thinkers together, is not a moral hindrance where it concerns Christ.[55] This, therefore, can cause problems for *MF*.

MF is dependent on the moral merit of sexual difference dependent upon biological complementarity—it is a genital essentialism, and the function of genitals ordered toward reproductive futurism. Furthermore, this elision of politics and theology entails a morality that must extend beyond Catholic (the denomination). Following an interpretation of Gundry, a catholic interpretation of sexual difference would not place moral merit regarding male and female. However, the moral merit regarding male and female cannot be ceded concerning the church, which is why we see the omission of "there is no longer male and

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[52] Gundry, "Christ and Gender," 439.

[53] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 22.

[54] The explication of these reference is beyond the scope here, see Gundry, "Christ and Gender," 460–467.

[55] This *Christic* function is key. This does not absolve these categories (Jew, Greek; slave, free; male, female) from political analysis—especially in the contemporary time.

female" in the treatment of Gal 3:28 in *CC*. This omission reverberates and informs the logics of *MF*. It determines the shape of the "whole man" toward which education must be facilitated. This is of great importance for our final question.

Is Christ Functioning the Same Way as Jesus?

Up until now, the questions have deliberately revolved around Christ, as that was invoked in the selected passage. However, what of Jesus? Within my own work I consider Jesus and Christ to be distinct, though not mutually exclusive. Put another way, they both function, but differently. I do not interpret *MF* to be exempt from this framing. Jesus, the discrete (potentially historical) person who existed in relation to systems of colonial domination and power, functions as a powerful entry point concerning ethics. Christ, in distinction to Jesus, serves a specific theological function—this would become the Christian interpretation of the messianic quality that becomes attached to the specificity of Jesus.

The distinction between Jesus and Christ then yields another question: how is Jesus addressed in *MF*? Jesus, similar to Christ, appears in only one paragraph. For context, its reference appears in the subsection regarding "points of agreement":

> It cannot be denied that through the centuries forms of unjust discrimination have been a sad fact of history and have also had an influence within the Church. This has brought a certain rigid *status quo*, delaying the necessary and progressive inculturation of the truth of Jesus' proclamation of the *equal dignity of men and women*, and has provoked accusations of a sort of masculinist mentality, veiled to a greater or lesser degree by religious motives.[56]

No doubt, there is much to consider. While unjust discrimination is noted as part of human history, there is a lack of recognition that some of this discrimination has come from within the church itself. *MF* presents itself as a victim of the external world infiltrating the hallowed sanctity of the church. There is no recognition regarding the ideological (and physical) enclosure of the sacred in contrast to the profane which ironically creates the very external world that penetrates the church, nor the moments when sacred and profane agendas coincidentally aligned throughout history like colonial expansion, which many scholars point to as a dense transfer point

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[56] *MF*, sec. 15, emphasis in original.

regarding the construction of race, sex, and gender. Notice, also, how there is no apology, and it appears the Church has fabricated its own sense of absolution in this matter.

It is not surprising a rigid status quo would be in place, yet the church does not question the violence of this status quo, nor really interrogated the thick history that props up this status quo. Rather, the church must continue to promote Jesus' proclamation of the equal dignity of men and women. While the gospel accounts work in their own registers of Christic formation, there is ample biblical account of ethical conduct beyond the equal dignity of the men and women. This does not devalue this ethical conduct but calls into the question its invocation in the context of *MF*. Importantly, we must remember that there can be *no* relationship outside of the male/female binary. This normative ethic is dependent upon the exclusion of what is usually glossed—or identified—as non-normative bodies.

This means that intersex people, trans people, and more have been framed outside of human ethical consideration. As has already been noted regarding intersex people, this opens the door for church-sanctioned violence toward the human body that forcibly aligns bodies to a sexual binary. Christ functions as the theological and philosophical mechanism that results in ontological erasure, while Jesus functions as the normative ethic for a properly ordered human community.

Ironically, sec. 16 references ethical discernment that is shared by both the church and "gender theory" to educate children and young people to respect every person—the irony being the church fails to adhere to its own ethical imperative. In the same paragraph, they note, "Essentially, this involves educating for active and responsible citizenship, which is marked by the ability to welcome all legitimate expressions of human personhood with respect."[57] While on the surface this appears like a strong connection, we must dig into the complication.

The problem with the church's discernment of affinity with "gender theories" comes down to their understanding of political engagement concerning citizenship. Yet, more often than not, the necessary political discourse and action embodied in "gender theories" comes down to the ways in which bodies have been determined to be illegitimate, unintelligible, and/or beyond recognition.

By no means am I saying scholars of gender and sexuality have always been right in their assessments. Nonetheless, most authors' assessments already function through the understanding that any theory

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[57] *MF*, sec. 16.

will create a remainder.[58] A theory offers a paradigm of thinking, and the totality of humanity cannot be contained under *one* theory, which is precisely the end goal of *MF*; precisely the logic the Church has used with its usage of "gender theory"—in other words, the monological nature of *MF*'s understanding of anthropology necessitates it presents "gender theory" as an equally monological specter, yet gender and sexuality studies is far from monological.

The admission of the perpetual remainder leaves gender and sexuality studies as open projects that, I argue, function in precisely the opposite as presented by the Church: it involves educating for active and responsible citizenship, which is marked by the *inability* to welcome all *illegitimatized* expressions of human personhood with respect.

The ethical framing of respect can still be present, but it is framed instead through the lens of counter-normativity. Ethical norms are not necessarily thrown out the window; rather, they become understood and/or framed by those people to whom the norms have not extended. There is a decentering that interrogates the hegemonic framing: if we are to have norms, who defines these norms? The Church both misleads readers of the document unfamiliar with "gender theories" and simultaneously misrepresents itself to "be on the same side" in relation toward respecting every person. Indeed, as we have seen, *MF* is very concerned about defining what exactly "makes" a human person a legitimate human person, and by extension now, determining what ethical consideration is owed both to human persons and non-persons.

There can be no doubt that *MF* presents a problematic theological anthropology. The rigidity of the male/female binary forecloses not only contemporary understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality,[59] but also forecloses *any* anthropological framework that challenges a fixity of biological essence. *MF* may take direct aim at "gender theory," yet any

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[58] See Dean Spade's critical trans politics, where he notes: "We must remember that whenever we propose new systems of distribution and imagine a better world, we also—often unknowingly—establish disciplinary and population-management norms that marginalize and/or vilify. Even if we reject certain existing state forms, process-oriented and relentlessly self-reflective practice must attend all of our work if we are to resist the dangers of new norms that we invariably produce," *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 113.

[59] It should be noted, the focus in this chapter proceeds from the 19th century. A genealogy of the sex, gender, and sexuality throughout history is beyond the scope here, as has been treated by other scholars.

anthropology that expresses a whiff of social construction becomes implicated and negated. However, *MF* does not stop at this negation. It goes one step further and reifies the rigidity of the male/female binary through enjoining it to the function of Christ. In summation, this renders intersex and transgender people (explicitly) and bisexual and queer people (implicitly) as outside the function the Christ. We must turn toward some further implications.

Conclusion, or Heterosexual Fabulations

The elision between politics and theology is apparent. While this precise reading centered around the deployment of Christ, there are still more sections within *MF* that could receive attention. Beyond being an incredibly anti-intersex and transmisic[60] document, *MF* was deliberately selected to show how Christ is a powerful prosthetic in the technology of Theology. While only being referenced in one paragraph of *MF*, the emplacement of Christ for people who exist in binary alignment (male, man, and masculine and female, woman, and feminine) in a heterosexual union ordered toward reproductive futurism reverberates throughout the entire document. This is the coherence *MF* is trying to convey.

To that end, due to how Christ has modified the heterosexual binary of sexual difference, this document expresses a liberation for some. However, this biopolitics of Christ also expresses its shadow-side: the dual necropolitical function of Christ regarding those who exist outside the binary of sexual difference. These are the necessary violent incoherencies displaced onto non-normative bodies to secure the coherence of the privileged few. Put another way, the salvation of heterosexuality is earned at the expense of non-normative bodies. This is a dubious theological position that has effectively reduced the use of Christ to determine anthropology (no mention of salvation, forgiveness, or even events like the resurrection—in my opinion, topics much more pertinent to theological understandings of Christ) with the expressed intention there should be wider social ramifications. Therefore, this is also a dubious political position, for the concern passes from internal theological discussions to socio-juridical implications.[61]

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[60] From "transmisia," a more appropriate term than transphobia. Rather than a fear transgender people, open hatred toward transgender people is exemplified, thus the usage of transmisic over transphobic.

[61] This point could be explored further, *à la* Foucault's *dispositif* or Althusser's ideological state apparatuses. However, this conversation escapes the scope of this chapter.

This valence of *MF*'s ability to align sociological, juridical, political, and theological cannot be lost, nor the elision of theology and politics. This theological salvation, then, becomes expressed in the political through the security and protection of heterosexuality at the expense of non-normative bodies. The abyssal exclusion, especially of trans women of color, expresses this ontological negation at the heart of such colonial deployments of theology. Put another way, this is the entanglement of politics and theology and the quagmire of catholic (universal) documents. It is certainly far from fun to intervene in such vitriolic rhetoric and advocation of violence toward human bodies, but the stakes are too high for such documents to be ignored.

But it need not be this way. The great irony of *MF* is that it pathetically participates in the very "ideology" it seeks to unseat. *MF* is playing a participatory role in "gender theory" through its own assertions of an anthropology rooted in biological complementarity; its theo/logics becomes its undoing. The colossal fabulation of *MF* is that heterosexuality represents the unique expression of human sex, gender, and sexuality. But this article shows a slice of how heterosexuality is *also* constructed.

If we follow the theo/logics *MF* employs to discredit socially constructed anthropologies, then even heterosexuality—as a constructed social reality—is incompatible with Theology. This results in the complete shuttering of the document. Since a whole theological structure is hedged alongside heterosexuality, this potentially shutters theology—if this is what all theology is meant to do. While I seriously doubt such recognition concerning the constructedness of heterosexuality is forthcoming from the Church any time soon, we must always strive toward a more liberatory theology.

The argument progressed through a precise line of questioning regarding the paragraph in *MF* when Christ is invoked. This revealed how intersex, transgender, and queer people were rationalized outside the ontological category of human. This ontological erasure is twofold and is exemplified in the document through advocating for intersex genital mutilation and rendering transgender people to lack a proper rationality to be considered fully human. Simultaneously, *MF* ensures the family is poised to hold the burden of the ideological enclosure of the church's own "gender theory". These sections were inflected by analyses of race to name hidden logics of white supremacy operative in the document. A brief journey through biblical passages in relation to "male and female" complicates the rigidity of the male/female binary. And finally, this section ended with noting the distinct function of Jesus. While Christ functioned to meet the needs of ontological erasure, Jesus was concerned with ethical relationships. Following the document, however, *MF* erases the need for

human ethical concerns when bodies are outside male/female sexual difference. Such determinations of the Church ought to give us great pause.

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De-Colonizing Language for More Effective Communication

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Abstract

Most professionals pride themselves in being able to communicate effectively with others. And that might be the case when those with whom they are interacting possess similar enough psychological and language frameworks to theirs.

In a world in which there are diverse cultures, however, a particular person's or group's frameworks might not be shared to a sufficient degree to achieve the intended, desired outcome. Using European or colonizer language to represent identity and other realities, as well as thinking about what we should be and how we should act, for example, leads to significant, potentially harmful, miscommunications that can exacerbate disparities and alienation for Indigenous communities.

In this contribution, I will first identify several instances in which European/colonizer psychological frameworks were at odds with those of Indigenous people, and then develop a process that should be implemented to reduce and manage future conflicts. The end result will not be a shared knowledge, because the cultures and lived experiences do not allow that but can come to a common understanding that allows more effective communication and interactions with the real world.

Keywords: Decolonizing, decision-making, language, morality

Introduction

On 25 October 2021, NBC News rather breathlessly announced that science, through a new development in genetic technology, had been able to establish that Sitting Bull was, in fact, Ernie LaPointe's great-grandfather. LaPointe was fighting to move Sitting Bull's remains to a place with greater cultural relevance to his ancestor than they currently occupied. Without the close, genetic tie being established governmental and other institutions were reluctant, at best, to cooperate with Lapointe in what seems to be a reasonable, respectful plan and goal (Chow 2021).

With the best of intentions to help LaPoint and others like him, as well as a seemingly neutral desire to move technology forward in interesting, useful ways, the process was developed by European scientists. Standard methods of genetic testing could not work in this case because the genetic material used by them did not exist. So, a different approach was required. The new technology uses autosomal DNA, which is a non-sex-specific genetic material that each living organisms inherits from both parents, to establish genetic ancestry. This technology was fourteen years in the making, but as was reported, now everyone knew for certain that LaPoint is not only related to Sitting Bull but that he is the latter's closest relative. That kinship link enables him to act as guardian and stand as primary litigant in any lawsuit or legal action relevant to Sitting Bull's remains.

Kim TallBear, who was interviewed for the same article, provided a non-Eurocentric perspective on the issue:

> The study findings present no a-hah moment for the Lakota and other tribal communities…"To my knowledge, there's never been any real challenge to Ernie LaPoint and his siblings' direct descent from Sitting Bull…We have detailed genealogies that we keep through oral history and now also tribal genealogical documentation" (Chow 2021).

Those stakeholders who were most closely affected and knowledgeable about LaPoint's efforts, his status, and his community and its culture, therefore, did not need the genetic testing innovation to know of LaPoint's relationship to Sitting Bull. One might say that such technology and the resources used to develop it were wasteful in this regard, since the outcome would have been the same in both cases. In fact, it would have been faster and more respectful to ask for the Indigenous communities' records to establish LaPoint's relationship and legal standing, and then he could have carried out his plans much sooner and at far less cost.

There was no intent to complicate matters by scientists, government workers, and others. Those with power over Sitting Bull's remains merely used the Eurocentric standard to identify their moral and legal duties to LaPoint and other relatives. Control over Sitting Bull's remains went to those who have power in this colonized institution merely by being awarded it by a settler culture or on other irrelevant grounds rather than to who should have had it in the first place.

Why was there a disconnect between two cultures' psychological frameworks and understandings of reality in the Sitting Bull descendant

case? The different reactions show the problem of colonialization in language and thinking about what is real, what matters in that worldview, and how we and others should engage in that identified reality. Colonized language automatically prioritizes settler-dominant language over Indigenous people's language, even when the former marginalizes and disempowers Indigenous people's self-determination.

Fixing language as part of a wider project of decolonization of culture and its institutions requires a pragmatic approach. A revised or new language will communicate more effectively by building an inclusive, diverse system that creates sufficient shared understandings of reality, what matters, etc., as well as one that apportions power for self-determination in an equitable way.[1] It will help make science, for example, be more inclusive, diverse, and collaborative by restructuring how decisions are made about what research is conducted and funded, what questions and words make sense in the field, and how data is interpreted (TallBear 2009, p. 190; Reardon and TallBear 2012, p. S243).

TallBear recommends connecting science to culture to keep Indigenous scientists interested in being part of the science community (TallBear 2011). Part of that meaningful linkage work has to be altering language pragmatically to decolonize it for science and every other realm of human interaction and endeavor. Besides addressing other ills, doing so might address problems such as why many Indigenous scientists have left their fields as a result of being treated more as curiosities than as colleagues.

The Need to Decolonize Language

In 1988, James Clifford drew attention to what he labeled the Predicament of Culture and some of its binaries. He questioned why Indigenous people were seen in either one of two simplistic, false ways: *traditional, backwards,* and *premodern* or *modern* and *more or less extinct as they became Eurocentric.* Clifford wondered why Indigenous societies could not be seen as: "dynamic and inventive, able to recreate a modern form and culture that may have been lost or extinct for a period of time" (Clifford 1988). The answer is colonization and Eurocentrism becoming the standard psychological framework in the culture and of the language we use to articulate the dominant worldview.

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[11] Equitable does not entail equal. For pragmatism, the situational content determines what will be equitable. If there is an illicit power differential or other morally relevant characteristics in place, then equity could demand something far different from equality of all stakeholder parties.

Colonization of language is prevalent and unconscious in many instances. Sometimes it can be of relatively trivial matters, but too many of them incur significant costs. Many make the distinction of First and Third Worlds or Developed and Developing Nations; each binary indicates the superiority of one group and the inferiority of the other (Curtain 2005). Colonization targeted languages, with English and Eurocentrism becoming the standard of what is normal and proper, and Indigenous languages, thinking, and cultures being deemed as abnormal and primitive harmed a number of innocent people, groups, and society. One instance of this was when the United States of America attempted to replace Indigenous culture with European by taking Indigenous children from their parents and putting them into boarding schools to be assimilated. The result is complicated and complicating:

> Boarding schools embodied both victimization and agency for Native people and they served as sites of both cultural loss and cultural persistence. These institutions, intended to assimilate Native people into mainstream society and eradicate Native cultures, became integral components of American Indian identities and eventually fueled the drive for political and cultural self-determination in the late 20th century (Davis 2001).

Although goods did flow from such political practices, it should not be forgotten that the Indian schools and their measures were designed to achieve a cultural eradication as Indigenous cultures were destroyed and replaced by Euro-American ones. Moreover, to indoctrinate children into thinking themselves as less valuable and even defective because of their genetic ancestry and culture than those of another culture is rightly recognized as morally repugnant.

The distinctions privileging Developed Nations and the First World, which are heavily Eurocentric, make neither moral nor rational sense. Regardless of whether it finds itself in the Developed or Developing World, for example, each culture is a fully developed entity with values and rules created and tested over a long period of time based on its people interacting and reacting with themselves and others in their environments, that, in turn, also influence and are influenced by them. They have histories together and shared understandings. They have worked out their ontologies, epistemologies, ethics-moralities, aesthetics, and religions or spiritualities. And their languages have developed over time to capture that culture as it was and what it will become as the contextual situation alters,

as well as to help them successfully interact in the world they encounter to achieve their practical ends.

The designations of First and Third World and Developed and Developing Nation are about how power is unconsciously used by those privileged with being the cultural standard of what is assumed should be the center or pinnacle of value and how to get there. Once power, whether that be economic, political, or from some other source, is acquired, those with it can force others to comply with their nomenclature by dictating what will be done.

The abuse of power can be subtler but as, or even more, effective. Making one's culture the automatically assumed benchmark of what is normal, good, and proper in the world and then convincing those from different, disfavored cultures to adopt the former eliminates the over violence caused by dictating. Usually this is done by convincing those from a culture that theirs is inferior or defective in comparison to the one to be standardized. There then becomes an incentive for the people from "defective" cultures to abandon them in order to adopt that which is more likely to enable them to more effectively compete and collaborate in a society governed by that paradigm. That is, people are taught to conquer and subjugate themselves and their identities as individuals and as groups, which means that those in authority do not have to expend resources policing the marginalized, disempowered group to keep them under control. If those in power and their adherents can persuade those from non-standard cultures to denounce their own as backward and wrong, then there is an even more powerful motivation to establish and maintain the now dominant cultural paradigm as what is and should be, as well as to alter one's identities to fit this standardized worldview and new reality.

Consider what is supposed to be a wholly neutral, objective language and endeavor – science – as one of the best candidates, besides mathematics and other logics, to lack cultural bias. Unfortunately, science has colonized language shaping its psychological frameworks. Firstly, the naming of the current epoch as Anthropocene is based on the assumption that changes occurring, mostly negative as damage to the environment, is the work of *Homo sapiens* as a whole. In reality, many Indigenous people did little to nothing to assist the Industrial Revolution and globalization that has caused climate change, loss of species, and other environmental problems, yet Indigenous people are being equally blamed for the results by using "Anthropocene" to designate this time period. Not only is this nomenclature inaccurate, but it has also been considered a way of spreading blame to others to make the actual perpetrators more innocent seeming than they are (Dutt et al. 2022).

Scientific language's Eurocentricity also ignores cultural practices and knowledge priorities in pursuit of what passes as objective, rational, value-neutral outcomes[2] and cares nothing about the actual subjects being affected by science (TallBear 2007, 2011, and 2014). The scientific study of genetics, for example, focuses solely on the biological connection to ancestors and ignores the "political self-determination and mutual networking for survival in a global world including social relationships to place, to powerful states, and to one another" (TallBear 2013, p. 510).[3] It is blind to important considerations Indigenous people have when understanding their individual and group identities and how and why those identities exist as they do. These identities are based on genetic ancestry but also upon oral tradition and contemporary tribal membership (TallBear 2013, p. 522).[4]

It is the same sort of moral, mental blindness that permitted the use of tissue samples taken to investigate diabetes in the Havasupai for other research purposes, and which would never have been permitted by the human donors had they known about them in the first place (TallBear 2009, p. 190; Soo-Jin Lee et al. 2009, p. 38; Reardon and TallBear 2021, p. S241). Such use was institutionally vetted using both current law and the federal, ethical rules governing human subject research and previously collected data and tissue banks. Therefore, the researchers, with good cause, thought that they were acting as they should and meeting all the required standards, even though the donors, when they learned of it, plausibly thought the research unethical. Hence, it would not be unjustified to claim that there are two different languages being used to think about what is real, what matters, and how we should go about interacting within that worldview, and that one of those languages dismisses the other.

The situation, unfortunately, is worse than merely having one's cultural realities ignored by people speaking separate, commensurable languages. As TallBear notes, "Any time we participate with a scientist in

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[2] Kate Black states that science is not neutral and objective. It does not reveal truth, but rather constructs truth in particular ways, including what is being researched, how the research question is phrased, what is considered to be a stakeholder, etc. (Black, 2021)

[3] Paul Meighan makes a similar case for how technology is envisioned, created, and used. He argues more Indigenous people need to play an essential role in creating technology and learning environments to increase self-determination there and overall (Meighan 2021, pp. 402-3).

[4] History has the same Eurocentric problem. Native languages are important to study tribal histories because the language provide non-Eurocentric lenses to understand how Indigenous people of the past understood themselves, others, and their environments (Wilson 2005).

reaffirming genetic definitions of what it means to be Indigenous, we are de facto helping to uphold their definitions over our own" (Chow 2021). Because Eurocentrism is, without anyone questioning it, society's dominant psychological framework, it becomes the norm or standard of what ought to be and how to get there. By working with a colonized system on its own terms, the marginalization and disempowerment caused by it are reinforced, at the very least. Although well-meaning and intentioned people are trying to help Indigenous people and expand useful knowledge, communicating and thinking in this manner acts against building Indigenous people's self-determination of what happens to them and their ancestors, as well as illicitly restricts how we think about what should be and how we ought to obtain it.

V.Y. Mudimbe points out that Eurocentrism is not unique to the experience of American Indigenous people. "Africa" is represented in Western scholarship and thinking by false constructs and fantasies, including Africa being thought of as a uniform, singular entity rather than as a geographical region with many cultures and lived experiences differentiating groups residing on the continent (Mudimbe 1994). This lack of recognition of ontological realities of significant differences indicates that essentialism—all members of a group have a characteristic that no member of a different group possesses—is at work.

On the other hand, the United States and European countries are thought of as distinct entities in their own right. If something goes wrong there, such as a pandemic, then each receives the privilege of being identified and considered in its own right using its singular identity. What does not happen is to refer to North America as a continent, for instance, when talking about issues in the United States, although all people from the USA are called Americans, whereas citizens from other nations also on the continent are identified more narrowly by country name. Nations and cultures within Africa are not afforded the same recognition. Pandemic rates are generally given for the continent as a whole instead of each country's unique experiences being mentioned, much less discussed in any depth.

Ademola Kazeem Fayemi and O.C. Macaulay-Adeyelure (2016) argue that "African bioethics" should be replaced with "bioethics in Africa" as a way to assist in decolonizing language in the field. Although there are those who argue that "African bioethics" is an effective way to reference the discipline, it suffers from identity reference and reverences that characterize bioethics as a colonizing project (Ibid.) "Bioethics in Africa," on the other hand, is a far more pragmatic linguistic approach:

> [It] allows the opportunity of censoring the domineering values in globalization; it offers the theoretical platform for harnessing critically, the scope and circumstances of cultural, moral and aesthetic value-laden ideas to be accepted from any other parts of the world…this is without discountenancing the salient aspects of traditional African ethical values that are still relevant in the specific context of healthcare dilemmas in contemporary Africa (Fayemi and Macaulay-Adeyelure 2016, p. 12).

As when discussing decolonization in regards to Indigenous cultures and peoples, the means and ends here should not be to isolate communities and disciplines from each other by creating artificial barriers between them. Decolonization cannot set African bioethics or Indigenous science as something that is essentially different and distinct from other regional or cultural forms of those disciplines, which entails that each can only be performed correctly by those who authentically belong to that group. Instead, decolonization creates a set of moral ideas, theories, and principles from all different human societies and cultures to act as prima facie tools to solve issues affecting human well-being in context of "globalization values and local healthcare challenges" (Ibid.).

Pragmatism and Language

Pragmatism rejects both relativism's subjectivism, as well as any sort of certainty asserted explicitly in Cartesian Foundationalism and Kantianism or implicitly in Quine's and others' Coherentism. Instead, pragmatists are more like scientists who ask two questions in sequential order:

1. Given this context, what is the desired end-in-view?
2. What are practical approaches to achieving that end?

In science, there is no absolute, certain truth with a capital "T". Likewise, pragmatism's arguments are not valid, in the sense that the conclusion must follow from the premises, nor sound, in which the argument is valid, and all premises and conclusions are true, as exist in many logics and mathematical systems of thought.

Pragmatists and scientists, instead, seek truth through non-deductive reasoning, such as induction and abduction. For the latter reasoning, there is generally a hypothesis that best explains the collected observations, as well as also allowing successful predictions. If a better explanation or predictor comes along, the former is rejected and the newcomer adopted. Induction enables us to generalize about a set of things

and make predictions about the future based upon observations of other members of that set. If used well, both produce plausible and probable conclusions that work in general, given the existing circumstances and our experiences of the world.

Of course, science and pragmatism require the adoption of Fallibilism, which is simply the deeply held position that one can be wrong on any belief, judgment, value, and so on that one possesses. That means that even one's central core or seemingly essential set of beliefs that help make a person who she is could be mistaken. And if so, then that core or parts of it in need of replacement with something that works better for whatever end there is in view. Being humble or having humility is required to make Falliblism a motivating way to engage with one's beliefs. To possess this virtue means to accept being wrong, and then to be motivated sufficiently to change. Accordingly, humility permits people to not feel as if they are under attack when a core or significant component of their belief set is challenged. If one can be mistaken, then one can change, and should do so in order to become a better person and interact more efficiently and effectively in the world. For better interactions, the better information we have on what the world is and how it works makes us more effective in achieving the practical approaches we need for our ends, as well as helping us set goals that can be achieved in the particular circumstances in which the agent is embedded (Belfi and Sandiford 2021).

In addition, pragmatists take seriously the individuality and values of lived experiences as part of each situation's uniqueness. Although life would be far easier if we only encounter identical situations each and every time we act—what worked in the past would always work, that way— exact sameness is not how the world functions. There is always unique nuance in every context that is at least slightly different from any other similar situation that has or will happen. It might be in a particular circumstance that there are more resources available, there is a new belief because of new experiences, and so on. Those dissimilarities might not alter what we do or what we should be, in general, but they have to be considered in order to be able to determine the appropriate end-in-view for that particular situation, as well as efficient pathways using that particular, relevant information to achieve that determined goal.

That being said, there are human commonalities that also should guide how ends-in-view are selected and plans made to achieve them. Every living being desires or should want to flourish in their artificial and natural environments. That means that they like and aspire to a life worth living or meaningful life with all of the physical and psychological elements of it, including security of various types and being valued by oneself and one's community. If taking a larger picture view, this is a

sustainable life. Not only does each person likely desire to have such an existence extend over her individual life, but it is probably the case that the person wants such an existence for all those things for which she cares, such as friends, family, and her environment.

Collaboration and competition are part of how people pursue, obtain, and maintain such an existence in just about any environment. The use of collaboration can be of great benefit to social animals, since human beings and other similar species are unable to continue their existence solely through their own efforts. Each person needs others to survive, from infancy to old age. Each person has to learn how to survive, whilst being kept alive until sufficiently able to support himself. Even if a person is a rugged, individualistic hermit with misanthropic tendencies, he had to learn these skills, and he still requires sustenance and other essentials from the environment in which he lives cooperating to provide him with such.

Competition is as essential as collaboration in and to a good life; each is needed in order for any living thing to thrive in a sustainable way. Competition works because there are always an insufficient number of resources in the environment to permit everyone to receive everything she needs to survive at a bare minimum, much less flourish in that environment. Hence, each organism is competing with other living things for limited goods. Although living beings might not be conscious of their thriving or have other requisite mental states to be persons or sentient creatures, the former have interests and the way the world works out for them can be good or bad for their existence and its value within the environment in which they live. It is bad for the vegetation itself to be wholly consumed by the herbivore, and bad for the prey to be stalked and killed by a carnivore, but winning this competition is good for the latter in each case because they survive, and possibly, thrive. Winning the competition, therefore, benefits them.

Overall and over time, as competitions continuously occur, they tend to create the flora and fauna's sustainability within the environment. Through evolutionary pressures and advantages over eras, small changes that improve competitive abilities will be retained through genetics, epigenetics, or learning. Those species who have won their competitions in the environment almost become "designed" for a stable environment. Given how the species are adapted by the environment, whilst the environment is being adapted by the species, the environment with its individual beings and their relationships to each other function sustainably in this manner unless some significant disruption happens, such as a comet hitting the Earth or an invasive species intrudes. The environment's sustainability can withstand small changes over time, but rapid, abrupt

alterations in short time periods can destroy the chains of energy that have been built over millennia.

Pragmatic morality is inclusive, meaningful language incorporating lived experiences, relationships, such as a person's self-understanding in conjunction with communal understandings, which are part of a person's identity. It is:

> [A] creative, cooperative enterprise whose end is to better the world by trying to realize in ourselves and others nurturing goods such as caring, considerateness, compassion, sympathy, and love (Holmes).

If morality is defined as this, then language and communication must pursue those same ends using the same goods as the means to that end. That is, the nurturing goods are both the ends and means to the end. Permissible communication would, therefore, be trying to make the world a better place for ourselves and others by realizing the nurturing goods in and for those people.

Given all of the above, a pragmatist would try to find a probable and plausible hypothesis within these pragmatic parameters to explain why we have language. One such hypothesis is that all languages have the practical purpose of communication, although language might not have been created through any intentional goal-setting or planning. Language communication might have naturally originated as a series of accidental sounds made useful through evolutionary adaptation (Deutscher 2005). When animal brains became sufficiently developed to do so, they began putting meaning to auditory occurrences happening in their environments. That is, those animals that could create and interpret auditory signals assigned a meaning to the sounds that were not actually contained in the noises themselves, such as a loud, short cry standing as a warning that some sort of danger was imminent. Over time, this power proved useful for species' survival and reproduction, therefore it was selected by evolutionary pressures and passed to offspring that also used and refined that tool, such as creating a grammar (Sperber and Wilson 1986).

Language's root purpose, therefore, is to convey information successfully enough to be able to transfer a sufficient amount of the originator's meaning to the receiving hearer's consciousness to achieve a desired result—whether any party in the process is explicitly or implicitly aware that they are communicating as such. That relayed data can then be used to make decisions affecting the individual, groups, and the surrounding environment. Sometimes those choices are of the gravest kind, such as life or death challenges for entities deserving some sort of

respect for who or what they are in the environment. In other circumstances, the decisions may be important, such as those that build community, for example, an enquiry to health or acknowledgement of another's existence, which makes the interrogated believe he is being valued by the questioner. Trivial communication exists when someone is merely passing the time of day in order to ward off a small amount of boredom or for some other unimportant matter. In all language communication, one entity is attempting to convey data to another, regardless of whether the latter has sufficient psychological capacity to receive or decipher the information.

Besides the language involved in survival and reproduction, other important communication bears on individual, group, community, and environmental identities, views of reality, values, ethics, and one's place in the environments—both social and natural—that one inhabits (Bijil 2019). In addition to transferring information, the language we use shapes our thinking about ourselves and the world around us because most, if not all, of us think in a language that allows us to carve up our reality into classes and other more manageable bits from the overall universe-as-a-whole. Distinguishing predators from prey, for example, increases the species member's chances of survival. If the language categorizes well, and also provides some useful indication how to respond in the circumstances, then it helps us succeed in that environment. Simplistic languages, therefore, have limited functionality in helping us to flourish in complex circumstances, although they might be good enough for simpler environments. Being too simple entails being unable to sufficiently capture reality as it is, as well as stifling the creativity needed to imagine new worlds that can be brought about. Hence, a pragmatic language should be both inclusive enough to sufficiently capture reality yet dynamic enough to find creative, practical ways of reimagining how we think about our world to change it to be a better place and achieve our ends-in-view.

What does a pragmatic language look like? Language and communication are supposed to make the world a better place, whilst respecting all stakeholders and others values and pursuing justice. Pragmatism rejects the Eurocentric belief in essences and intrinsic qualities, such as whether an object is numerically identical over long periods of time (Minow 1991, pp. 98-9). Instead, pragmatists ask what works to achieve communication's goal? And for whom does it work? To answer these questions, pragmatists also query:

1. How does our language help us decide what world we want to live in?

    2. How does our language help us figure out how to get there?

The latter questions provide a much-needed context that allows those about how communication should work to be answered in a way that can be either true or false, rather than merely stating subjective opinions. Answering questions (1.) and (2.) above sets the contextual end-in-view and method to achieve it to act as benchmarks by which we can evaluate competing proposals to reach that end and how to do so. For example, if we say that we want a world in which Indigenous people have more effective say in how *Homo sapiens* think about identity and reality, and for significant changes be made to language and decision making in order to enable Indigenous people greater and more meaningful self-determination, then some pathways can be labeled as good or right because they lead us to the end we desire. Anything that does not succeed to obtain these goods is a failure, and therefore, bad or wrong. That which works to attain the identified end-in-view, even if that harms settler dominated thinkers, Eurocentrists, or dominant paradigms is good because it is focusing on the right goal. In addition, if pragmatic languages demand far more inclusiveness in who should have more self-determination or influence in the process of achieving that end-in-view—more stakeholders, generally, is better than fewer to define, plan, and work toward goals—with more meaningful collaboration between the included stakeholders, then the more successful people will be in achieving the identified ends in the situation.

      For pragmatism, decolonizing language is not an end in itself, but one of the pathways to more important, long-term ends-in-view as well as being an end-in-view in its own right. And intrinsically valuable end-in-itself is a stopping point. Once it is achieved there is no reason to go further or farther. But for pragmatism, there is no such thing. Life is continuously lived, much as a river constantly flows, and there is nothing in the past that is not affecting the current states of affairs and the future, and there is no end. Moreover, all goals identified as ends are also means to an end, and vice versa as people continuously engage in the world. Besides decolonizing language, therefore, additional ends-in-view and means to those ends will be achieved:

A. Decolonize and Indigenize language to increase Indigenous people's self-determination, and

B. Provide the groundwork to fairly compete and collaborate with the social and natural environments in which people have their lived experiences.

The latter goal might seem a bit strange to mention here but fits with why self-determination is so important for individuals, groups, communities, and nations. All people share and pursue it; so, whilst working towards Goal A, with A being the primary end-in-view, Goal B must provide some balance in what Goal A looks like in practice and how it should be achieved.

Pragmatism and Decolonizing Language: Identifying Some Relevant Situational Elements.

Decolonizing any language, especially those involving marginalized or vulnerable people, requires recognition of differences in psychological frameworks caused by cultural differences. For example, TallBear (2011) points out a distinction between understandings of science:

1. Eurocentric =df. The systematic, empirical investigation of the natural/material world, which ideally happens abstracted from the researchers' culture.
2. Society for the Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans =df. Mentoring, systematic and open discussion of personal histories, and the importance of family as both a source of support and a reason to achieve (TallBear 2011).[5]

One apparent contrast is the focus on individuals versus relationships. The Eurocentric individual's reason is oriented to doing "good" science whereas for Indigenous people, reason is part of the picture but emotions and relationships matter as well. These differences can alter how we think about ecology, conservation, and chemistry (Lee 2011). For instance, a materialist view of nature as a more of a mechanical system working independently of human experience is essentially different from one based on Indigenous people's theology of place (Cajete 2002). For the latter, the

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[5] The Eurocentric issue can also be seen in business ethics in which it has been claimed that in business ethics there is a "rough moral consensus" that capitalism is the standard, as long as there are safety nets for those unable to compete or collaborate and sufficient government regulation to address market problems (Hartman 2000, p. 25). Whether that statement is true for Indigenous people and other groups, as well as whether there is general agreement as to how individual autonomy, citizen rights, democracy, employer rights, and so on are defined are open questions.

environment is physical land, but also one of identity and sacredness, which is often missing from Eurocentric conceptions of it (Ibid.).

The Indigenous and Eurocentric frameworks produce greatly divergent results when applied to thinking about reality and how we should interact with it. The materialist view lends itself to anthropocentrism with Domination and Dominion as the guiding principles as to how humans may permissibly interact with the land. Domination "is the excessive use of power to control lives, social structures, and events in order to benefit unjustly inordinate individual, family group, nation, or species desires" (Hart 2006, p. 119). It entails that humans can do whatever they like with the environment, including destroying it for no self-benefit, and they can do it with a full understanding of that fact. Humans are viewed as the one and only intrinsically valuable beings and that all other entities, regardless of whether they are alive or able to have psychological experiences, have no moral consideration in their own right at all. To kill an animal becomes equivalent to snapping a dry twig in two in a Domination system.

On the other hand, Dominion requires keeping the land alive and healthy as a feudal lord would treat his peasants or serfs: "the responsible, privileged exercise of authority over lives or land, so that they might serve the purposes that the one with authority understands them to have" (Hart, Ibid). Healthy and alive peasants can benefit him, as well as there being a duty to keep them alive as intrinsically worthy but lesser beings to him. Here the lord, because he is a superior being, is charged with ruling over lower creatures under his authority who are unable to make decisions or manage for themselves as fully endowed persons. *Noblesse oblige* would state that it is not only wrong to destroy lesser living beings on a whim, but it is imperative to paternalistically make their lives better, as long as that betterment does not exceed the range of what is fitting for this lower class of being, for example, treating them as an equal.

A framework based on Gregory Cajete's theology of place is more biocentric—all living things are intrinsically valuable or ecocentric—the environment is intrinsically valuable—with Stewardship or Relation as the way to interact (Cajete 2002; Hart 2006). For the former, the land and its contents is never any one person's or society's possession to do with as they please because it is owned by something else, such as a divine entity (Hart 2006) or other beings, such as future generations. Here the land must be cared for with the primary motive and intention of benefitting those real property owner(s) (Berry 1990, p. 277). That does not mean that the stewards are treated as a mere means for another end. The caregivers may use the loaned goods sustainably for their own thriving, but they may not make the environment less valuable than it was when they were given loan of it (Hinman 2000, p. 564). At the very least, stewards must leave the land

and its goods as well off as they found them, if not improving them for others' sake. They must be faithful, grateful, humble, neighborly, just, kind to one another, generous to strangers, honest in trading, and perform good husbandry. The stewardship view leads to a similar set of duties—humility, understanding, and respect—which are also mentioned by Cajete (Ibid., p. 150).

The sacredness of nature and the natural is an avenue a number of people have taken to prove that there are special duties toward the environment (Wood 1985, p. 1). Some Native Americans and others, for instance, claim that nature deserves reciprocity and respect because it is imbued with spirits (Cajete 2002, p. 150; Hinman, p. 564; Wood 1985, p. 1). Since spirits deserve respect, anything full of them would merit the same kind of treatment. Furthermore, Cajete argues that Native Americans believed that nature is a part of human beings qua human beings and their identities (Ibid., pp. 148-9). Native Americans understood that there exists "an intimate relationship between themselves and their environments as the essence of their survival and identity as people" (Ibid., p. 149).[6] If people consider themselves to be separable or distinct from nature, then they have failed to recognize their true identity and the values of the environment as a whole and its components. In order to be ethical, the environment deserves as much respect as a person *because* it is part of each person.

With a theology of place, the Relation model seems to be the more likely way that interactions with the environment must be maintained: "Relation is an attitude of reciprocal responsibility for Earth, Earth's goods, Earth's creatures, and Earth's places in a context of human species' engagement with and interdependence among other Earth beings" (Hart 2006, p. 120). With relationships, there is greater equality and equity here and reflection of self-other binaries/dichotomies being the prevalent value base—at least with healthy, nurturing relationships. Everything in the environment is its own thing, and at the very same time, is only what it is because of its reciprocal relationships with other things within that whole. The environment is both its own sacred thing, whilst all parts of it are imbued with the sacred as ends in themselves and in relationship to each other. This is reason why humans interacting with the environment have to remember that their relationships with animals, plants, and the

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[6] See also: "indigeneity as generative or productive, as enabling mural recognition and collaboration by indigenous people across disparate histories and geographies…they narrate their peoplehoods as emerging in concert with particular land – and/or waterscapes. They were not simply first but they arose *as peoples, as humans* in relationships with particular places" (TallBear 2013, p. 514).

environment teach us about the essential life-sustaining relationships and that they are part of the integrated whole that helps form who they are and is the environment at the same time.

In addition, even for the most basic concepts of how we understand reality and our role in it, such as the Eurocentric binaries of life and not life, humans versus nature, and "more graduate Eurocentric hierarchies of life" (TallBear 2019). According to TallBear, "being in good relation" is the everyday Dakota's understanding of existence (Ibid.). Furthermore:

> Propose an explicitly spatial narrative of *caretaking relations*—both human and other-than-human—as an alternative to the temporarily progressive settler-colonial *American Dreaming* that is ever co-constituted with deadly hierarchies of life. A relational web as spatial metaphor requires us to pay attention to our relations and obligations here and now. It is a narrative that can help us resist those dreams of progress toward a never-arriving future of tolerance and good that paradoxically requires ongoing genocidal and anti-Black violence, as well as violence toward many de-animated bodies. The path toward the supposed democratic promised land of settler mythology is in everyday life a nightmare for many around the globe. American democracy not only "dies in darkness," as the *Washington Post* claims, it is ever formed of hierarchical violence (TallBear 2019).

Declaring one entity alive and human, and another as non-alive/dead and natural fails to recognize the fact that there are other-than-human agential beings. These entities, such as thunder and stones, "engage in social relationships that profoundly shape human lives" (TallBear 2015, p. 234).

Besides understanding the differences in ontologies, epistemologies, identities, and more, there is another other pressing definitional issue. Decolonization seems to be a generally acceptable goal and method to pursue that end. At the very least, colonization entails European and white supremacy, racism, hetero-patriarchy, capitalism and European values about what society is and should be as well as the rules that individuals and various groups use are superior to all competitors. That being said, there are vastly different conceptions of what decolonization is and what it entails, which adversely affect any collaborative effort to decolonize language.

It is helpful to consider some of decolonization's definitions. Firstly, Alicia Cox writes: "Settler colonialism is an ongoing system of power that perpetuates the genocide and repression of Indigenous people and cultures (Cox 2017). Perhaps in the same vein, Tuck and Yan (2012) argue that decolonization requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life.

What repatriation would entail and how to know if we have adequately achieved it is left open by the authors to speculation. Given the power dynamics in existence as of now, if that goal is to transfer ownership of large swaths of land in the United States to Indigenous groups, then it is likely to fail. Those in power tend not to give up it nor that which gives them power. If it means something less threatening to certain segments of the population, then it might be something most, if not all, stakeholders would adopt and implement. Moreover, trying to "reset" to the past excludes a number of Indigenous people who do not fit what might be an essentialist definition of what it means to be an Indigenous person. They might have adopted Eurocentrism, made parts of it, such as capitalism, as core beliefs and principles, or in some other ways do not conform to the traditional standards of Indigenous identity (Goodyear-Ka'opua 2013). The question becomes how they are identified and treated under this form of decolonization.

Another possible interpretation is that "repatriation" or property rights do not mean what Eurocentrists assign them in standard cultural usage. That is, instead of this being a discussion of property rights as Europeans understand them—perhaps as natural or moral entitlements that one individual possesses to exclude others from using whatever the individual possesses, except for when that individual permits it—repatriation entails some other shift in the current state of affairs to provide Indigenous groups with adequate self-determination. But how this works out seems to be an open question at the moment, and one that might make decolonization along these lines difficult, at best, to put into practice (Goodyear-Ka'opua 2013).

There are other ways to define decolonization in general that assist in understanding what decolonizing language would require. Belfi and Sandiford propose what may be a more moderate goal that does not seem to entail a shift in private property ownership:

> [C]ultural, psychological, and economic freedom for Indigenous people with the goal of achieving Indigenous sovereignty – the right and ability of Indigenous people to practice self-determination over their land, cultures, and

political and economic systems" (Belfi and Sandiford 2021, p. 5)

Both definitions here might be compatible, but there do seem to be significant differences between them. Vagueness and ambiguity on such an important matter as understanding what decolonization means and entails cannot be permitted. Stakeholders have to pragmatically approach defining terms, identifying ends-in-view, and developing plans to achieve them as something anyone and everyone can recognize as worthy of the effort. Whatever decolonization is must be determined by the stakeholders involved using democratic approaches, however those are defined by the people and groups involved in the process. Although any of these approaches entail what is significant alterations to the status quo, especially for those with Eurocentric perspectives or power in keeping things as they are, the outcome could be an environment in which far greater numbers of individuals and groups can engage in fairer competition and collaboration.

A Pragmatic Process

How to define decolonization and colonization, what decolonization looks like in practice, and how to structure a set of steps to work toward decolonization requires a nuanced process based on the ideas presented above. Since the approach to this work must be pragmatic, there isn't just one way of doing something. Any extrinsic way to achieve the end-in-view that works efficiently enough is an acceptable alternative. That being said, elements from the approach below are general and useful enough to be found in a number of variations.

To decolonize/indigenize language and cultural thinking requires building reliable, trustworthy, and useful institutions with whom all community citizens engage, as well as bringing about the desired and desirable outcomes of making language more inclusive and empowering for those individuals and groups. This is especially the case because alterations of this type simultaneously change culture in ways that some community members might find threatening. Both outcomes and the threat to community stability demand a number of concrete changes and a pragmatic, Fox-like approach (Kahneman 2011) to a very complex situation. To develop efficient, thoughtful means to the ends-in-view, therefore, privilege and its history must be understood and managed in an appropriate manner. Moreover, efficient, practical ways to achieve reconciliation, restorative justice, social justice, or whatever the desired and desirable outcome is must pass through a critical understanding of the

causal group's identity as a product of its history, experiences, its interdependent, interconnected relationships to others, and its place within its environment.

Firstly, empowering Indigenous people's—both individual and group—self-determination requires all stakeholders receive an adequate education. Although some of the public is conceptually aware of racial and ethnic vulnerability caused and maintained by language and other colonization, a significant segment does not understand what those terms actually mean or how they function. This illiteracy calls for a program designed to enable people to understand why and how the current state of affairs is as it is. Part of that learning activity includes developing their understanding, empathy, and respect for those with whom they work by knowing their histories, cultures, and narratives, which TallBear identifies as part of the decolonizing process (TallBear 2015, p. 233). Stakeholders also need "to rethink what is meant by terms such as *community*, *vulnerability*, and *greatest need*" (Warren et al 2011, p. 5). To do so well, they must have "knowledge of the community in the broadest sense of the term," including the social, economic, political, and ethical dimensions (Walker et al. 2004, p. 2), so that they can have a shared and motivating understanding and appreciation of what the relevant terms mean (Warren et al 2011, p. 5).

Education must also instruct upon the root causes of marginalization and disempowerment and how they affected groups in their environment. One of the largest challenges for some racial/ethnic groups, for example, is mistrust in cultural and public institutions, including language itself. Another instance is the health system is viewed as detrimental or indifferent to marginalized groups' health equity and health outcomes (Ramos et al 2019). The mistrust for the health system and other institutions comes from being ignored, exploited, exposed to micro-aggressive behaviors, "derogatory, invalidating snubs in research and health care services," (Ramos et al 2019, p. 2) and political/social incivility. In addition, for Indigenous people it is the introduction of diseases for which the communities had no developed immunities, wars, ethnic cleansing, enslavement, discrimination by local, state, and federal governments, loss of ancestral lands, exploitation, and forced assimilation which led to a severe loss of population decline, culture, and community, and other elements that could do nothing other than take away self-determination, marginalize, and make vulnerable.

Finally, to find pragmatic ways to address these problems, education must enable all stakeholders to identify what their privilege is and how it may blind them to particular issues and contexts, as well as bias their beliefs and judgments. Vine Deloria, for example, argues that:

> [Each White person must] examine his past. He must face the problems he created within himself and others. The white man must no longer project his fears and insecurities onto other groups, races, and countries. Before the white man can relate to others he must forego the pleasure of defining them (Deloria 1989).

Moreover, Deloria states there must be an "adjustment of the legal relationship between the Indian tribes and the federal government, between the true owners of the land and the usurpers" (Deloria 1989). Here both the predicament—in part skewed relationships and projected fears/insecurities—and a method of solving it are being identified. The cause of the problems is the same in both cases, which is why Whites must be part of the solution to those problems, according to Deloria.

Secondly, working with what and who people are in general helps craft pragmatic solutions to complex problems. Pragmatists appreciate that all individuals qua individuals and all groups qua groups have good and bad elements in who they are and what they do. As *Homo sapiens*, each species' member has strengths and weaknesses, good and bad properties, and relationships that make them who they are as individuals, and which also give them their intersectionalities through many, many group memberships (Hodge 2018). How science is performed, and technology is engineered, for example, is universal for human beings, but the social and political contexts in which technology and science are produced can be different for different groups (Black 2021). Each should be influential in identifying, evaluating, deciding, and planning an end-in-view and how to achieve it.

Pragmatists also know that most, if not all, individuals and groups use their natural drives of competition and collaboration to make their way in the world. Competition and collaboration are good relative to how they help individuals and groups flourish in the way that they—individually and as species-beings—need and want. These drives are unhealthy in direct relation to how they prevent or degrade flourishing of individuals and groups, especially if the individual or group is vulnerable from being marginalized. Harmful competition and collaboration are unethically destructive because they give illicit power to those undeserving of it, whilst keeping it from people who deserve their fair share. On the other hand, harmful competition and collaboration injures the person with the illicit power because that person is not developing his moral character and abilities to compete and collaborate fairly, whilst doing the same thing to those from whom deserved power is kept. Using morally irrelevant

properties, they create and maintain unnecessary barriers to flourishing lives.

Differences in who people are matter as well in the project of decolonizing language. All people possess multiple identities that reflect complex ancestral origins, tribal and communal associations, and varied ideological outlooks on race and culture. Each of these are elements determining the contextual situation. In general people do not change their ethnicities as a matter of fashion, but they may emphasize different aspects depending on the circumstances (Perez and Hirschman 2009). Intersectionalities and their impact also have to be part of our considerations. In addition, each intricate, intersectional individual exists in complex, tangled webs of interdependent relationships. Some of those relationships elevate, whereas others degrade or create barriers. The same reality applies to groups in their environments.

Most importantly, Pragmatists know that Indigenous people have their own voice which must be primary in the communication and decolonization process. Identifying Eurocentrism and changing current language requires literacy and fluency that native speakers have. For example, many Indigenous groups, unlike Eurocentrists, rely on how people communicate, such as storytelling and story listening for communities where that mode of communication is employed (TallBear 2015, pp. 232-3). Finally, community engaged in a meaningful way is essential for empowerment (Warren et al 2011; Walker et al 2004). If decolonizing is done right, then creating an in-group (powerful) and out-group (Indigenous) Eurocentric binary with its increased chance of Othering can be avoided (Tajfel 1974). This process is about what Indigenous people need and want from their own perspective rather than being what the privileged determine Indigenous people should want, whilst at the same time each stakeholder has appropriate self-determination in the process to make it his or her own.

Thirdly, all stakeholders need to view themselves as part of an enabling community wholly designed to pursue each person's and group's thriving in a collaborative, meaningful, inclusive way, and take special care and effort to achieve the goals stated above. Successfully decolonizing language would benefit from community engagement, such as following a variation of Community-based Participatory Research, which:

> focuses on the social, structural, and physical environmental inequities through active involvement of community members, organization representatives, and

researchers in all aspects of the research process (Warren
et al 2011, p. 10).

Perhaps it could be called Community-based Communication
Engagement, so that its charge is all communication issues rather than
those limited to research and the research process. This broadness of
charge would be more useful than limiting it, because as we have seen
above, the reason that certain groups are marginalized is because of far
more factors than merely one. The relevant causes include social, cultural,
economic, environmental, and other influential sources, so any community
engagement and implementation must address those as foundational issues
for decreasing vulnerability and pursuing individual and group
flourishing.

From improved language and communications, Pragmatists create
Regardless of what it is labeled, this inclusive, empowering
process guarantees that each participant is a valued partner with significant
weight in designing and making decisions. The outcome, hence, is a self-
determined collaboration in which all participants become emotionally
and rationally engaged. Instead of solutions being forced by those
privileged with power and other relevant resources onto those who are
marginalized or vulnerable, whatever is decided is acceptable because that
work-product uses diverse, inclusive, and meaningful processes to
produce community solutions.

From improved language and communications, Pragmatists create
complex, nuanced solutions to complex, nuanced problems. Building
sustainable justice and equity requires that we create a plausible and
practical process that will increases meaningful respect for Indigenous
people (Taylor, et al. 2014). Individuals and groups should not have their
neediness relieved but should have their talents liberated through
equalized social access so that they can have "full and meaningful
citizenship" in the society (Silvers 1998, 143), with the provision of what
it means to have a full and meaningful citizenship is not limited to one
type of X-centrism. Why is equity access so important? It enables
Indigenous people to function adequately as the individuals and
community citizens they are, rather than as stereotypes begging the
powerful for alms in a cycle that never allows them to be in charge of their
own thriving and narratives.

Appropriate, pragmatic education makes an Indigenous person or
groups and others better able to maneuver in the system and to change it.
For example, it would alter how researchers and Indigenous people
interact by "introducing mechanisms for networking between stakeholders
concerned with expanding indigenous governance of science and
technology" (Reardon and TallBear 2012, p. S240). Networking is more

efficient with a shared understanding of the situation's context as a framing mechanism.

At the same time, this approach helps those with power to understand and collaborate effectively with Indigenous people in pragmatic ways, such as addressing the roots of that group's vulnerability and marginalization rather than applying a One-Size-Fits-All approach, trying to fix it for them, or doing the least they can do that still allows them to believe that they have rectified the issue.[7,8] In the Havasupai tribe and diabetes case, for instance, instead of Eurocentric positions being used, the Havasupai and other Indigenous people would have been provided "more comprehensive rights to govern research activities and to have a greater say in the construction of knowledge about their bodies, populations, and histories" (Reardon and TallBear 2012, p. S241). It also avoids those instances in which well-intentioned people want to be meaningfully diverse and inclusive but treat those that they would on-board more as "social or cultural curiosities" than as valued beings for who they are (TallBear 2011). If Pragmatists appreciate, understand, and respect who Indigenous people and cultures are and empathize with them for who they are and their actual contextual situations, then the relationship moves away from paternalism to appropriate collaboration. Those with power assist with building Indigenous self-determination, and then step back so that Indigenous people take over as leaders.[9]

Conclusion

There is probably general agreement that everyone and every morally relevant thing should be allowed to flourish, and perhaps, is owed assistance in this endeavor if that worthy entity cannot achieve that goal on its own. The problem has always been about what it means to flourish and who gets to make that decision, especially in communities with diversity and unearned privilege. It is clear that just one voice cannot speak for all people, and that diversity and inclusion are essential to the process of defining terms, identifying problems, and things finding acceptable

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[7] Although understanding is possible, a privileged person knowing what an Indigenous person has experienced is not possible.

[8] The latter explains why some powerful people resent Indigenous peoples' continued demands for power-sharing and self-determination.

[9] At the very least, public officials, politicians, and others working with marginalized, vulnerable groups better appreciate that they can no longer treat all communities as if they are equal in all relevant ways, when it is more than clear that some face different challenges from others, especially between those with unearned power stemming from Eurocentric standardization of what is normal and expected and those who have been marginalized.

pathways to address those challenges. The trick, if it is one, is to make the diversity and inclusion meaningful in a way that serves the needs of those who have been marginalized or made vulnerable. However, if we have clearly identified ends that increase self-determination by those marginalized or vulnerable groups, and the process to achieve them has followed the Community-based Communication Engagement or one similar to it, then there is a greater probability of achieving those ends and making the world a better place.

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Bats, Fear, and Ecological Ethics: Pragmatically Changing Perceptions to Improve the Environment

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Abstract

Generally, public perception of bats is poor (Morattelli 2016; Tuttle 2017). Because attitudes and beliefs towards them is often rooted in fear and misconceptions, bats are often treated with hatred or with a strong aversion to their presence, resulting in their intentional or unintentional killing. Bats are known vectors for disease and further feared because of this. Due to the lingering misconceptions surrounding bats, attitudes toward bat presence will likely continue to be poor.

Due to increased urbanization and development, and the role natural resource managers and policy makers have in these decisions, sustainable design and sustainable resource consumption is forced to reconcile with adapting to emerging threats with wildlife and learning how to integrate species into management plans. Because bats are often misunderstood or sensationalized, there is a need to better understand bat ecology and habitat to make informed decision concerning urban ecosystem functions and design.

Keywords: bats, conservation, COVID-19, perception, environmental ethics

Introduction

Increasing knowledge of bat conservation will likely improve public perception and attitudes towards bats. Globally, bats are one of the most misunderstood animals (Moratelli 2016). Due to misconceptions rooted in myths and legends, bats have been viewed with disdain and contempt. Filtered through a distorted lens of fear and dislike, emotional decisions have misguided people into culling bats, which has led to devastating effects upon their populations (Hassan et al. 2020). Relatedly, educating the public about bat conservation and presenting management plans is a difficult task, the public does not tend to be receptive to or supportive of bats because, largely, they are feared or disliked.

Bats' value to human beings often goes unrecognized. Bats are among the best ecological and economical providers (Boyles et al. 2011). Highly valued for their ecological and economic benefits, bats disperse seeds over great distances, manage insects (e.g., eating about 1,000 insects

per hour), such as mosquitos and crop pests—saving approximately $1 billion to farmers and pest-control management, annually—and remain essential for pollinating many species of plants, especially within tropical areas (Taylor et al. 2020). In the United States, many species of bats are insectivores and migrate along river and forested systems near urban areas and forage insects nearby large bodies of water (Cortes and Gillam, 2020). However, worldwide, bats are in sharp decline.

Bats face many challenges including those caused by humans. Although they have long lifespans relative to their size, with the average reaching 34 years old, their maternities contain only one or two pups (2020). Due to low maternities and low resilience to disturbances, environmental disturbances and threats drastically reduce populations, making recovery exceedingly challenging. As a result of slow recovery rates to mortalities and habitat disturbances, many bat species are listed as endangered and threatened species (Gillam and Barnhart 2012). Anthropogenic climate change and global expansion are key threats to bat populations, along with urbanization and the conversion of natural resources, the operation of wind turbine facilities as well as fungal diseases like white-nose syndrome (WNS) (Frick et al. 2020). As these major threats continue to devastate bat populations, conservation efforts and managements plans will likely need to mitigate these issues.

Unfortunately, these problems are further exacerbated by the onset of COVID-19 because bats are negatively viewed for carrying diseases (Lu et al. 2011). The purpose of this research is to gauge the public's perceptions of bats and determine how COVID-19 might operate as an underlying influential factor.

This thesis originally began as a question of the effectiveness of bat houses on bat populations. Because the public is more likely to be indifferent or fearful of bats rather than favorable to their presence, keeping bat houses as a central theme was refined into a new research question: public perceptions and attitudes towards bats. Therefore, my research question shifted toward meaningful education on bat conservation to promote more favorable views of bats, and thus a more likely outcome of locale residents establishing bat friendly environments.

General Characteristics and Ecology of Bats

The order Chiroptera consists of roughly 1,400 species of bats, which account for nearly a quarter of all mammal species across the globe (Silvis et al. 2015; Simmons and Cirranello 2024). With a species rich taxon, bats are, traditionally, subclassified into two suborders: the

Megachiroptera (megabats) and the *Microchiroptera* (microbats), as compiled and used by the NCBI-NIH Taxonomy Browser.[1]

Relatedly, another classification was proposed accounting for the variation in the evolutionary relationship between echolocating and non-echolocating bats; the categories Yinpterochiroptera and Yangochiroptera have gained greater support because these suborders better explain the drawbacks of the traditional system by organizing species large categories (Kammer et al. 2018; Teeling 2005). With the newer arrangement, Yinpterochiroptera consists of four microbat families whereas Yangochiroptera includes twelve microbat families.

Bats are unique among species. According to Kunz et al., this species-rich order is the only mammal capable of powered flight resulting in their wide geographic distribution (2011; Tuttle 2020). Moreover, equipped with short hair, protecting them from cold temperatures or humidity, much of their nocturnal activity is dedicated to foraging or mating (Kingston 2010; 2011). Most species rely upon extremely sophisticated biological sonar or echolocation to navigate the sky and forage, with the ability to detect objects the size of a human hair (Taylor et al. 2020). Unlike other species' reproduction rates, bats are one of the slowest-reproducing mammals, often only producing one pup per year (Silvis et al. 2015). And although some species of bats can live up to thirty-four years, their low-reproduction rate makes it difficult for them to recover quickly from population losses.

Bats' role in the environment should not be underestimated. Bats provide both ecological and economical value to the environments in which they exist and visit that benefit their, humans', and the environment's best interests. Although many of them are often considered urban pests or damaging to crops, bats annually save billions of dollars in the United States alone through their foraging of insects (Kunz et al. 2011). Globally, bats are known as being the primary predator of night-flying insects, such as moths, mosquitos, beetles, and other pest insects—specifically crop pests. The little brown bat (*Myotis lucifugus*) is capable of consuming about 1,000 insects per hour and many species eat their weight or more to ensure they maintain vital body temperature needed when roosting and in torpor. (Taylor et al. 2020).

There are other environmental benefits bats provide to humans. For nectar-feeding and fruit-eating bats, furthermore, they serve as ecological entities which help pollinate plants and disperse seeds for the environment. Flying foxes (*Pteropus*) are of the family *Pteropodidae*,

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[1] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/Taxonomy/Browser/wwwtax.cgi; Teeling et al. 2018.

otherwise known as 'Old World fruit bats,' which are often the sole seed-dispersers in paleotropical islands (Springer 2013). Many plants that are worth significant sums of money rely upon bats for pollination, such as flying foxes. The presence of bats within a forest act as indicator species to environmental effects and overall species richness functions (De Conno et al. 2018; Laurance and Cassman 2014; Put et al. 2019).

Immediate Threats to Bat Populations

Worldwide, many bat species are listed as endangered or threatened species primarily due to habitat loss and habitat fragmentation, disease, wind development (e.g., collisions with or proximity to wind turbines), the effects of anthropocentric climate change, and the rapid development of urbanization and continued stress of resource consumption (Frick et al. 2020).

Collectively, global bat populations share a few key, significant, threats. Currently, the largest immediate dangers to bat populations are: (1) White-nose syndrome (WNS), (2) renewable technologies such as wind turbines, and (3) intensive agriculture practices resulting from urbanization and urban sprawl (Cheng et al. 2018; Long et al. 2018; Zimmerling 2016). These threats to bat populations are, arguably, listed according to their severity—with WNS and wind turbines being the most severe hazard to bat populations and urbanization and urban sprawl being the lowest-grade hazard.

A severe threat to bat populations in North America is White-nose syndrome (WNS), which is a fungal disease wreaking havoc on hibernating bat colonies. According to U. S. Fish and Wild Service, WNS is known for mortality rates of 70% and can often lead to 100% mortality rates for bat colonies within cave systems This is due to bat roosts being tightly clustered together, allowing for WNS to swiftly spread among the colonies. Moreover, WNS has resulted in the sharp decline in hibernacula to over 90% for many species, specifically three species: the Indiana bat (*Myotis sodalis*), northern long-eared bat (*M. septentrionalis*), and big brown bat (*Eptesicus fuscus*) (2014; Barr et al. 2021). For researchers, this fungal disease is one of the most alarming threats because once it infects a colony there is little to be done to stop the event.

This disease is caused by the psychrophilic fungus *Pseudogymnoascus destructans* (Rajkumar et al. 2011), which primarily covers their wings as well as their faces. In addition to impeding their mobility, the main threat of WNS is the targeting of hibernating bats. Once the wing tissue is infected bat hibernation is disrupted, and arousals are the result of discomfort from the irritation. For bats, proper hibernacula and undisturbed hibernation is critical for their survival. Torpor disruption

leads to loss of essential fat stores needed for their long migration and frequent foraging activities. WNS prolonged disturbances are the primary result of death, specifically species experiencing high evaporative water losses (McGuire et al. 2021; Warnecke et al., 2012).

Climate change[2] is an immediate global concern and a product, primarily, of industrial nations' historical and continual use of fossil fuels, as well as the resulting ecosystem disturbances due to extracting natural resources. To mitigate cumulative effects upon the natural environment, and as a solution to the destructive and dangerous use of fossil fuels, renewable energy has been deemed a sound investment to offset the effects of the fossil fuel industry by reducing global temperature and fossil fuel emissions within the atmosphere. Renewable resources, such as wind energy, are deemed safe and reliable alternatives because they tend to have little to no output of carbon emissions.

Yet, during this process, many bat populations have been adversely affected by the unintended consequences and detrimental effects of wind turbines (Arnett et al. 2013). Bat mortalities reach tens to hundreds of thousands of deaths on an annual basis due to wind turbine outputs (Frick et al. 2017). One way bats are at greater risk is because of wind turbine collisions (i.e., proximal collisions due to rapid air temperature changes around turbine blades). According to Arnett and Baerwald, 38% of bat mortalities from wind turbines in the United States and Canada are hoary bats (2017). Hoary bats tend to navigate above tree canopies and fly at higher altitudes than other bats and while hoary bats tend to be a solitary species, they have demonstrated patterns of interaction with other bats when it comes to foraging for insects. During these periods of foraging, migration, and breeding, hoary bats become extremely vulnerable when their flight paths take them within the proximity of wind turbines. A direct collision to the tower or rotating blade is not necessary for causing severe injury or mortality; close proximity with a wind turbine creates rapid changes and pockets of air pressure, which ruptures their internal organs. For hoary bats, and all bats involved in these near-collisions, this phenomenon is known as "barotrauma" (Cryan and Barclay 2009).[3]

The challenge to offset bat moralities resulting from wind turbines is a difficult one, since wind energy is sought after as a successful source

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[2] Climate change is a leading factor affecting biodiversity on a broad scale, however, more research is needed to quantify how bats, in particular, are impacted (Festa et al. 2023).

[3] Ironically, researchers studying the life cycles of bats are best able to locate this elusive species by collecting their corpses at the bases of wind turbine facilities.

of renewable energy. Little to no changes in daily operations will likely result in species extinctions. To mitigate the bad effects, researchers are calling upon facility managers to limit operational hours during bat migration seasons, during nightfall, or when wind speeds are relatively low (Behr et al. 2017; Millon et al. 2018). Moreover, promising research from Knight suggests that attaching ultra-sonic boxes to wind turbines holds high success rates as deterrence measures because the frequencies ward off bats, altering flight patterns around wind turbine blades (2021).

As many bats are insectivores and frugivores, intensive agriculture is a significant threat to them (Put et al. 2019). This is due to natural environment being converted into cropland or landscapes dedicated to urban expansion and development. Agricultural development for cropland and livestock is a significant keystone to Western culture, especially within the Midwest (Laurance et al. 2014). These practices result in widespread loss of degradation to soil quality and productivity, natural resources degradation, and loss of biodiversity and species richness. These effects are further amplified by confined animal facility operations (CAFOs), the dominant use of monoculture cropping, and fragmentation of ecosystems, such as prairies, forests, and wetlands (Moses and Tomaselli 2017). In addition to land conversion, these environments receive frequent application of non-target pesticides and herbicides. Such practices significantly alter the presence of flora and fauna in a given area, affecting the foraging and breeding activities of bat species which depend upon these critical environmental resources. When these habitats are disturbed, degraded, or destroyed, it is virtually impossible to restore them to prior conditions and largely reduces the presence of bat populations—whether it is a rural or urban development (Griffith 1970).

Another consideration of habitat fragmentation due to urbanization and agricultural practices is the reduction of essential roosting areas, which provide concealment from predators and cover from weather (Park 2015). These areas tend to be within proximity to foraging sites. For example, bats often use dead trees or parts of trees, known as snags, to roost (O'Keefe and Loeb 2017). When these snags are removed by wildfires or for land development, bats are adversely affected and require longer distances to travel to foraging sites and back to their roosts or colonies (2017).

Most cropland in the United States uses some form of tilling, which disrupts soil integrity and prevents growth, while leaving the cropland without cover crop outside the growing season. In addition to the loss of topsoil containing essential organic matter, biodiversity is reduced and flora essential to pollinators is eliminated. High rates of applications

of insecticides and herbicides further damage the presence of suitable habitat for pollinators and the insects upon which bats rely. One example is the reduction of moths that are staples in bats' diet (Whitney 2010). A study exploring the homogenization of agricultural cropland, demonstrated that, within the 13,245 bats detected at various sites, bat species' richness and activity sharply declined when the surrounding landscape was predominately agriculture (Put et al. 2019). This suggests monocropping reduces biodiversity, because the land is being frequently disturbed, and insects become less abundant due to heavy insecticide use. As this cycle continues, pollinators such as bats, bees *Hymenopterans*, butterflies *Lepidoptera*, and birds, *Passeriformes* will face sharp declines because the plants which pollinators depend upon and the insects which birds and bats depend upon are being reduced with an overabundance of chemical applications (2019).

A final threat one must consider for bats is the direct and deliberate human intervention in removing or destroying bat roosts. This is important because the perception of bats is poor in the lens of the public; bats are often associated with carrying diseases and, therefore, disliked or feared (Lopez-Baucells et al. 2018). While some bats certainly do contain disease, the extent to which they are carriers is often overexaggerated. Moreover, it seems absent-minded to ignore the fact that humans carry a myriad of diseases themselves (Tuttle 2015), but are rarely treated or thought of in the same way.

Negative feelings towards bats can lead to culling bats or destroying roosts in caves or artificial structures that are occupied by bats. Given that bats are not capable of creating their own roosts, artificial habitat is something prized and used when it is located (Kunz 1982). Some species, such as the Indiana bat (*Myotis sodalis)*, prefer buildings and artificial structures to tree snags or forested systems (Benedict et al. 2017). Further, rural structures, such as barns, are moderately used by little brown bats (*Myotis lucifugus*) and heavily used by big brown bats (*Eptesicus fuscus*), though their primary uses for these structures may differ (2017). According to Lausen and Barclay, artificial structures may be preferable because they possess better thermal conditions for rearing young and these spaces provide superior protection against predation (2006). Artificial structures, especially rural structures, are important to bats, however, buildings may be intentionally destroyed to remove unwanted bats or the unintentional demolition of a building hosting bats results in a loss of habitat (2017).

Tyler Waltz

Public Perceptions of Bats

Bats are one of the public's most misunderstood animals (Tuttle, 2020). In most areas, wildlife is given a hierarchal status depending upon the contributions they provide or the status they are given by society. Because many societies predominately operate under an anthropocentric lens, some species are viewed more favorably because they contribute to ecological and economical services (Boyles et al. 2011; Kunz et al. 2011; Maslo et al. 2022). Sometimes species are adored for their features, mannerisms, characteristics, or simply being cute. Conversely, many species are ignored because they are not well-known, while others are disparaged for no other reason than their distasteful appearances or lack of popularity (Lopez-Baucells 2018). Given current public perceptions, bats are already at a disadvantage in how they are perceived.

More powerfully, this misunderstanding is not because of any actual threat bats pose or life experiences people have had with them, but primarily through film and media presenting bats as something to be feared, avoided, or destroyed (Tuttle, 2020). Instead of having an accurate conception, many in the public believe Hollywood fantasy which they take as fact. In this realm, fear—often amplified and invigorated by myths—distorts public perception of bats to the extent that they have become vulnerable to human fear and the behavior caused by it (Ibid.). This tale is echoed throughout literature and is not uncommon. For example, snakes are often held with disdain and strongly misunderstood for no other reason than their solidified reputation as being untrustworthy and dangerous due to the creation myths in monotheistic religions (Souchet and Fabien 2016). Wolves are viewed similarly, therefore, to better understand the public perception of bats' situation, it is useful to consider public perceptions of wolves.

Historically, wolves have been hunted and eradicated within most ecosystems to address false fears in the community (Johansson et al. 2016). And while there is merit to reports of livestock being targeted by wolves, livestock are not typically preferred prey for wolves.

In fact, the retaliatory measures of culling wolves are based upon rancher's desires to remove wolves from their land (Khorozyan and Heurich 2022) more than from any actual losses. As Lopez discovered when interviewing ranchers and fur hunters, in his book *Of Wolves and Men*, many of the beliefs people held about wolves were based upon superstitions and creation myths which were passed down for generations. The fictional dangerous, vile, wretched, and chaotic nature of the wolf as threat to what was good and right was a contrast to the rational agent humans could achieve (2004). The idea that one could be bitten,

transformed into a werewolf with a reverted chaotic nature gripped many people's primal fears of losing control of their environment and selves, or being unable to cope with dark forces threatening their safety and well-being.

The denigration of bats and other wild creatures would be more easily alleviated if these were merely trivial or lightly held beliefs. However, when superstitions take root and spread, these stories become fundamental within cultural upbringing and established hallmarks of community identity. That is, they become core psychological "truths" that are difficult at best to mitigate much less change. To question them is to question the individual and community's values and self-identification; thereby throwing aspersions on their characters. As a result, deeply held beliefs that wolves are inherently evil or dangerous operate as justification fear and revile them, which in turn justifies all efforts to cull the species (Fernández and Nerea 2010). Due to these actions caused by real fear and false beliefs, predators responsible for managing prey species are disrupted and the ecosystem loses essential services and balances to the structure and function of the ecosystem (Hebblewhite 2013). Ironically, the result is humans are harming themselves whilst trying to make their lives safer, more stable, and more sustainable.

Like wolves, bats have been stigmatized as blood-sucking predators, or pests acting as vectors for diseases that must be eradicated (Tuttle 2020). Traditional knowledge of local communities—the "everyone knows that X is evil" variety of shared false beliefs—tends to be misguided by the myths and stories of vampirism. The media, which is supposed to better inform the populations to help it make better decisions, has been known to incite fear through its tabloids and newspapers accusing bats of attacking communities in large clusters (Lopez-Baucells 2018). Once again, the popular false story is that it is a matter of weak humans having to face a threat from ugly, mistrusted creatures trying to harm them for the latter's evil purposes.

But we should be careful here. With most myths, there is at least some element of the truth hidden in the narrative. With over 1,300 species of bats across the globe only three species drink blood: the common vampire bat *Desmodus rotundus*, the white-winged vampire bat *Diaemus youngi*, and the hairy-legged vampire bat *Diphylla ecaudata*—all of which reside within South America and range into Mexico (Tuttle 2013). These three species—empowered by storytelling and myths—have largely distorted public perception of bats.

There have also been times when hunters have killed fruit bats and sold the bushmeat, resulting in the exposure to Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Leroy et al., 2009). But this is extremely rare

in comparison to everyday threats to one's safety from overeating, smoking, and war (Buckner et al. 2020; Goldschmidt 2017; Khorram-Manesh et al. 2021; Ruhm 2012).

Since the evidence of bats' menace is so thin, one would imagine it would not have had such an impact on the human imagination. The fact that the proof is this powerful must mean that it found very fertile grounds in the minds of individuals and communities. That grounds, it appears, is fear. According to Robins and Regier, the public's perception of bats is like other intensely feared animals, such as mice and snakes (1991). For example, surveys indicate that the public tends to answer questions, such as, "bats are a sign of bad things," "bats are birds," or does "bat meat and bones can cure different diseases" incorrectly (Hassan et al. 2020). Additionally, statements such as "I like to read books about bats" or "greater attention should be provided for bat protection" are received with higher rates of disapproval than approval and acceptance for bat conservation (Ibid.).

Given the demands of rationality, those who misunderstand bats should be more than willing to learn the truth and alter their belief structure. One of the barriers to that happening is that scientific literacy tends to be poor, and knowledge of bats is even worse (Boso et al. 2021; Dibner 2018; Gu and Feng 2021; Howell and Brassard 2021; Meli et al. 2024; Sharon et al. 2020). Rural, urban, and suburban knowledge may differ, but there exists a strong shared disconnect of the general public's level of education concerning bat ecology and function in contrast with perpetuated myths and stories which give rise to attitudes and behavioral practices toward bat populations.

Matters would not be as dire as they are if fears based on false beliefs harmed no one—or perhaps only those who indulged in them—but there is a considerable negative impact to bats', the environment's, and people's sustainable well-being. While people may have good intentions to protect their children and community, needless fear has led to the destruction of bat colonies (Tuttle 2013). Due to fear, vulnerable cave systems are burned in the effort to destroy bat roosts and colonies, which also results in disrupting bats from torpor (Matthew et al. 2016). Relatedly, while foraging or migrating, bats are killed by use of shotguns—not for the sake of bushmeat, but with the intention of eradicating something deemed a pest.

Finally, when bats populations are targeted and culled, researchers lose their ability to monitor and collect data on banded bats, thus losing a key conservation technique which helps them identify their migratory and foraging patterns (Schneeberger and Voigt 2016). Losing both the habitat and information collecting abilities ensures that bat populations become

more and more likely to diminished until they can no longer perform the functions which keep the environments energy circuits open and at work, which in turn threatens all living beings' sustainability in what Aldo Leopold called the biotic community[4].

The Psychology of Fear and its Impact on Decision Making

There always appears to be an assumption that being a person entails that the being is rational, which would include taking evidence seriously, not allowing emotion to overrule reason, always seeking efficacy and efficiency in one's endeavors, etc. But that is not how it works. Rather than reason operating transparently with the upper hand, intuitions and impulses hold large sway over moral/rational agents, and people tend to act upon these intuitions, which may be incorrect and difficult to reshape one's thinking, ultimately influencing their judgement (Tinghög, et al. 2016). People's perceptions and attitudes towards bats and other unpopular animals are sometimes influenced by lack of knowledge and understanding.

To come up with adequate solutions to problems in this reality, we first must understand why it happens and how it may pragmatically be addressed. We do not want to waste resources creating an elegant plan for a desired outcome if neither the outcome nor the plan is practical, if either is even possible. Efficacious resource management needs to use what it can of what already exists, such as working with human psychology instead of against it, and then seeing what changes can be practically made within those parameters.

Cass Sunstein explored the use of heuristics in making quick decisions compared to long-term thinking, the importance of understanding cascading effects, and exploration of how important emotions are in decision making, as well as appeals to emotion. When it comes to decision making or risk management, there is often a stark difference between experts and the public in forming their conclusions and making these judgments (Sunstein 2015). According to Sunstein it breaks down to the 'technoautocrat' and the 'populist'. The technoautocrat tends to think the public does not have a strong science background, resulting in them making ill-informed mistakes, and they should be educated and informed about best practices. The populist holds a sense of distrust toward experts, or anyone deemed an elite (2015). The populist, then, unconsciously prefers to guide law and policy based upon things they fear or distrust. When risk management is based upon appeals of emotion

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[4] For Leopold, the biotic community consists of interrelated parts (flora, fauna, soil, and so on) that make up the entire ecosystem community.

rather than facts grounded in science and sound policy, a response to an emerging threat, such as a viral disease, becomes a challenging topic to discuss with the public. It makes it even more difficult to get community buy-in for any solution being crafted or proposed.

People are also primed to use the availability heuristic. If something is known to happen, then, given similar conditions, it will likely happen again. (Kahneman et al.1982). But as Sunstein points out, the public tends to focus on the wrong risk factors (2015). Kahneman et al.'s example involves insurance claims: insurance tends to be expensive, and disasters are few and far between in most areas, therefore, people tend to assume a natural disaster is unlikely and will elect a premium with a lower rate because of that assumption (Ibid). Relatedly, choosing a lower monthly payment results in a higher deductible in the event of a natural disaster strike.

The rational action would have been to buy appropriate insurance based on expert opinion, such as a financial adviser, but that does not generally happen because of the availability heuristic. When a natural disaster occurs, therefore, the public is not equipped to meet the challenges or financial costs associated with it. And, at worst, poor risk management based on informal fallacies of reason leads to many deaths.

There are more fallacies at work. Besides struggling to overcome their own natural psychological fallacies, most people are influenced in their beliefs by outside sources. Regular media and social media possess a strong influential power over people along with how information is disseminated (Sunstein 2015; Tuttle 2020). Sunstein writes that highly televised events in the media or online, such as tornadoes, tends to garner more fear and attention than serious risks, such as disease, because the death and risk surrounding the highly discussed event in the media holds more power with the frequency and recency of it being viewed (2015). This goes a long way to explaining why many people think that plane travel is far more dangerous than driving, even though the latter has far more occurrences in everyday life.

The different outlets from which people receive information are important because they can influence perceptions and beliefs, but there are other reinforcing factors as well. For instance, Sunstein states that a person's perceptions are fortified when surrounded by like-minded persons (2015). Basically, the echo chamber makes the person feel as if she is justified because people like her believe it. Since they confirm her beliefs and she thinks herself a good person and rational being, then she must be right—she often fallaciously believes.

These negative influences on obtaining knowledge and understanding are further exacerbated when group polarization occurs.

Polarization tends to result in more extreme positions than if there is a marketplace of ideas with conflicting beliefs. What happens in polarization is that people want to fit in with the herd. To do so means accepting what the many accept and valuing what they value. As the echo chamber gets louder and louder, the people in it come up with more and more extreme views which they share, and then others in the group need to top to belong (Sunstein 2015). This is the cascade effect.

If this were not bad enough news for rationality, effective education on unpopular subjects becomes more challenging because perceptions and beliefs grow more rigid and amplified when around others in their shared group (Iandoli et al. 2021). As a result, risk assessment by those who are not experts or open to changing their minds becomes impaired, to say the least. Accuracy becomes almost impossible depending on how emotionally invested the person is to that belief being true (Cohen 2003; Kaplan et al. 2016; Lao and Young 2019; Whitfield-Gabrieli 2011). Further, the more emotional value in a belief, the more likely those holding it become invested in protecting the belief (2016). Extreme emotions entails extreme measures to protect oneself from being threatened by being questioned or shown to be wrong. This reaction further demonstrates why belief systems are not easily shaken when challenged, as the emotional weight behind the belief tends to be clung to, even in the face of new evidence.

According to Margolis, experts understand the facts, rooted in science, and the ordinary person is likely unaware of the facts and circumstances (Margolis 1997). This view is a simplification, but it gets at the heart of the matter: the public does not have all the information experts possess (or are continuously refining) nor are they able to put that information into a psychological framework by which they can understand and appreciate it in context. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, fear dominated the public's mind (Goldner Lang 2023). During this time, that emotion governed people's thoughts as they were concerned about their lives, freedom (of movement), the economy, institutions, and what they valued and other matters important to how they wanted their lives to proceed (Ibid.).

Events televised about COVID-19 and people talking on television and other places in the media were repeatedly portrayed as experts. Some were on the relevant subject, whereas too many others were not. Actual experts discussed cautionary measures, which were based on some version of the precautionary principle, as a way to handle the crisis (Aven and Bouder 2020; Goldner Lang 2023; Mihelj et al. 2022). The experts argued that short-term sacrifices now would result in long-term

benefits to the community (2022). What they were saying was backed by objective, verifiable evidence. But it went unheeded by too many.

The reason is that fake experts had greater influence over much of the public is a mismatch between how the experts and the public make decisions. During chaotic events, when fear is rampant, the public is more tuned to the risks rather than benefits, whilst experts tend to analyze both in a cost-benefit analysis (Sunstein 2015). So, the public is using half of the equation to their decision-making determinations; thereby creating an inaccurate picture of a problem and any solution's ability to mitigate or solve it. If the public is also making decisions based more on fear than rational analysis of the situation, then their reasoning becomes even less practical for good problem solving.

How COVID-19 and Vectors of Disease Contributed to the Public's Perception of Bats

Knowledge, attitudes, and general practices (KAP) are often associated with infectious disease control and public response to outbreak events or emerging threats (Claude et al. 2018). Covid -19 exacerbated the poor standing of bats in the public's mind. During COVID-19, bats were suspected of being the original agent of SARS-CoV-2 and creating the transspecies spillover event into humans (Lu et al. 2021). With COVID-19 misinformation, the public's negative perceptions of bats became increasingly difficult to address or change even when disseminating the correct information (Lu et al. 2021). Zhou et al. discovered that the coronavirus RaTG13 in horseshoe bats (*Rhinolophus affinis*) is nearly identical to SARS-CoV-2, overall (2021). Because of this distinct similarity, bats, in general, were initially targeted as the vector responsible for COVID. However, none of the 1,400 species of bats species have been known to contain SARS-CoV-2. Yet, during this time, public response toward bats negatively increased as people viewed bats poorly and even attempted to evict them from urban areas or human structures (Zhao 2020).

The COVID situation points out that a significant reason why bats are feared can be traced to the public's belief that bats are dangerous vectors of diseases. This belief is held even though bats may operate as intermediate vectors, their blame for transferring diseases may be misinterpreted (Tuttle 2013). While bats have been known to carry rabies, severe acute respiratory coronavirus (SARS-CoV), severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2), and Nipah virus (NiV), the general media often sensationalizes the health risks associated with bats or negatively misinterprets a statement given by health experts and scientists to the public (CMS 2020; Lopez-Baucells et al. 2018; Lu et al. 2021). These reports are often baseless claims found in tabloids or

newspaper articles getting the wrong idea about migration patterns, such as 1.5 million bats relocating from Congress Avenue Bridge in Texas to their new crevices in allocated structures (Tuttle 2020). This event was exciting to the public, but officials heavily mentioned the dangers of "rabid bats." People were afraid instead of merely being informed that rabid bats are easily avoided due to clear signs of the condition, as well as common sense disclaimers instructor attendees provided to the community not to handle or touch bats if they happened to come in the direct vicinity of them (Tuttle 2017).

In one study showing media bias, from over 1,000 articles sampled, around 180 focused on bats and disease. Of those, 80% presented bats as threats. In ecological and conservation articles based on scientific evidence, only 3% claimed bats were a threat, which means that those better informed did and do not fall prey to the "everybody knows" falsehoods believed by the general public (López-Baucells 2018). The threat to bats, however, comes from the misinformed public.

An important point to remember is that many people hold assumptions about the world based upon their feelings rather than on the best evidence. These assumptions become embedded in their worldview framework (Reiss 2021), thereby making their beliefs stronger and more difficult to change. The framework amplifies the notions that bats are pests with disease, labeling them a major threat to human populations during a pandemic or in the general course of life. It contributes to bad risk assessment: while bats certainly carry diseases, overemphasizing this fact ignores the reality that many other animals, including humans, do the same—at even higher levels of risk probability. Although bats are the leading vector of human rabies deaths in the US, for example, only 62 deaths have been recorded in the U.S. between 1960-2018 (Pieracci et al. 2019). Whilst rabies remains a serious health concern for humans interacting with wildlife, the number infected is relatively low when compared to violent crimes occurring annually (e.g., homicide, official assault, self-reported assault, robbery), of which 204.7 persons are victims in 100,000 people (Wolf et al. 2014).

In addition, zoonoses (diseases which are spread from animals to humans) are an example of how people ascribe negative affects to species, or even regions where species are identified as vectors. As MacFarlane and Rocha highlight, negative effects (i.e., irrational fears attached to bats) are increasingly solidified by repeating exposure to that sentiment which makes the negative attachment become familiar (2020). Zoonoses are harmful to human health and can be transmitted through non-human animal contact. COVID-19 is a disease like zoonoses. The reasoning follows in a simple logical syllogism: Bats carry disease. Disease, such as

SARS-CoV-2, is bad. Therefore, bats are bad. This outcome tends to explain why bats are viewed as pests or creatures inducing fear, frustration, or disgust. (Frick et al. 2020; Rocha and MacFarlane 2020.) If this were not enough, anything that carries a disease that can transfer to a human is bad and a threat to safety and security. This conclusion and the feelings accompanying it make people feel that bats are bad, unpleasant, and a threat. Thus, the negative effect influences the public's decision-making and perceptions.

Instead of worrying about bat boogeymen and to make better pragmatic decisions, the public should better understand the relationship between humans and wildlife, in part, because of the increasing need for more natural resources results in their extraction from relatively undistributed, old growth areas or sensitive environments (Karesh et al. 2012). These areas, when disturbed, may result in unintended consequences of presenting a new pathogen to humans from wildlife in these low traffic areas (Jones et al. 2008). In addition, it affects the environment on which humans depend to meet their basic needs.

Changing negative attitudes towards bats revolves around public education and exposure to bat conservation and education. This may dispel fears and misconceptions the public holds about bats. To know how to change public perception of bats for the public's own rational self-interests, as well as those of
bats, a few questions have to be investigated and answered:

- How much does the public know about bats' contribution to the environment as well as how they benefit humans in crop pollination and pest removal?
- How do humans value or view the natural environment?
- Does ecological knowledge shift public opinion, if given an opportunity to learn?
- Is one's education level, socioeconomic status, or gender a contributing factor in attitudes towards bats?

By discovering the core beliefs, values, and principles, as wells as the possibility and potential for altering or managing them, we can know what pedagogical approaches will be effective and efficient to inform public opinion on the importance of bats continued need for conservation and protection, and generate support for actions that have to be taken. When education and exposure is increased, bats will be less targeted.

Moreover, appreciation of these species may result in the public advocating for increased measures to protect habitat and use less insecticides, both in agricultural lands and the applications within city zoning, such as targeting mosquitoes. Creating lived experiences between people and bats and expanding the public's knowledge about them leads to an increased likelihood that they would engage in bat conservation by putting up a bat house, planting wildflowers, talking to others about bats, or donating to bat conservation efforts (Hoffmaster et al. 2016).

Psychological Frameworks of Value: Human-wildlife Interaction Theory and the Importance of Bats

The ways in which people conceptualize nature, regard their role (or lack of it) in the natural environment, and hold assumptions toward species likely determines their position on how they value and work toward preserving each environmental thing. For example, one's familiarity with any given species and knowledge of that species appears to shape how they view and value nature and conservation efforts toward managing or protecting the environment (Buijs 2009). Although we as moral agents might like to think we base our decisions on sound logic, one's assumptions about a species, in this case bats, is often swayed by personal bias or feelings (Tinghög, et al. 2016) rather than reliable evidence put into context.

Although many people falsely believe in the dichotomy of humans versus the environment, in reality, humans are part of the environment. Human-wildlife interactions (HWI) bridge social and ecological components within an environment (Goumas et al. 2020). This is best demonstrated by the social-ecological system model (SES), as indicated by Lischka et al. (2018). In Figure 1, the social or human aspect is compared to the ecological or wildlife aspect of environmental ecosystems. Humans are not separate from wildlife nor are wildlife inescapable from the influences and cascading effects brought on by humans. Instead, they interlock in interdependent relationships—as expressed in the Venn-diagram in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Social-Ecological System (SES) Model (Lischka et al. 2018).*
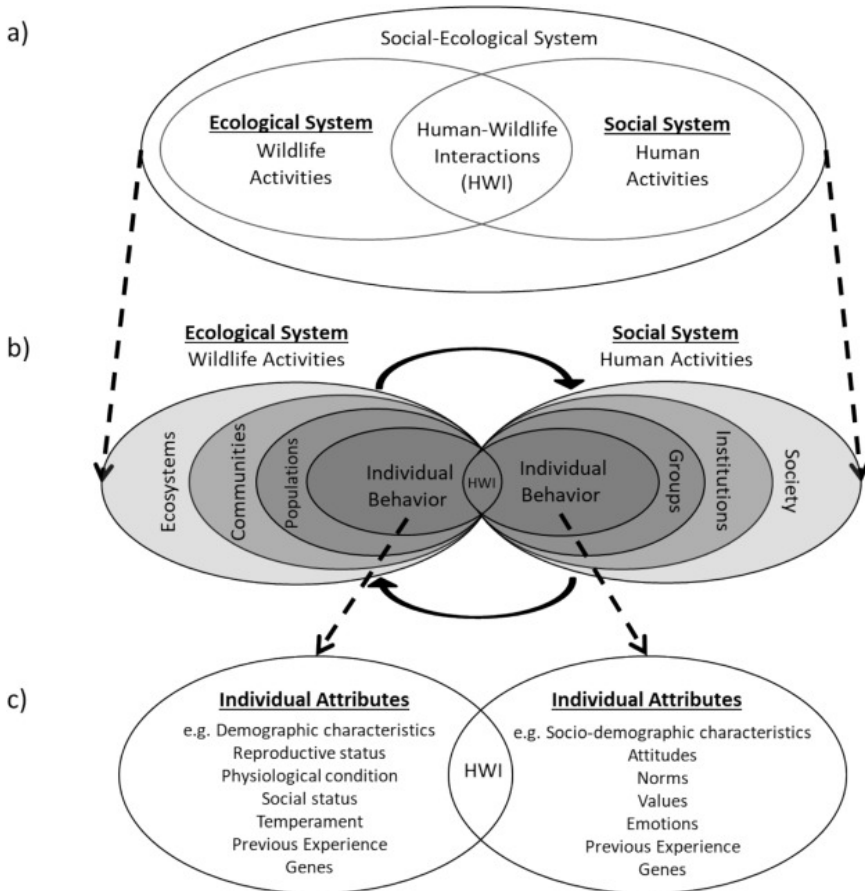
The social components of human activities such as society, institutions, and groups are contrasted with ecological considerations in which ecosystems, community assemblages, and wildlife populations clash against human resource consumption and expansion (Lischka et al. 2018). All of these elements require stable and resilient structures and compositions to function. At the center of the diagram, HWI demonstrates the behaviors and actions of both sides influence over one another (Ibid.). Yet, anthropocentrism, which generally views nature with utilitarian values making human beings the sole intrinsically worthy things, which often places nature second at any occurrence between HWL conflicts (König et al. 2020).

There is a clear need to be aware of the psychological frameworks in play when thinking about any issue, especially when doing research.

Research should be illuminating; research done with inadequate frameworks can lead to false results, much as anyone using Aristotelian instead of Newtonian physics would generate when calculating arrow trajectories. Much of the current research examining human-wildlife interaction assumes one of two sets of values as part of the framework. Firstly, it sometimes focuses on short-term gains, which provide immediate benefits to humans, rather than on more long-term benefits. Short-term benefits include economic gains or ecological or environmental gains in the near future.

Secondly, the value emphasis has also been upon wildlife's negative aspects to reduce conflicts with humans or other positively identified stakeholders. Identifying potential invasive species, recognizing disease vectors, or reducing environmental degradation are beneficial goals. Avoidance strategies (e.g., reducing invasive species presence or mitigating pest-species within urban centers) or conflict-resolution emerge as main drivers when studying wildlife and tend to eliminate some of the stakeholder conflict. These goals are necessary, but conflict mitigation does not have to be the sole purpose of wildlife management. Such a narrow framework may ignore positive interactions with wildlife, such as the significance wildlife plays in cultural and religious values such as symbolic or religious importance. For example, sacred animals provide a sense of identity or reverence (Hubert 2013).

The value dichotomies create an unrealistic view of the complexity of the biotic community. Studying wildlife for their own inherent properties and intrinsic value provides researchers with a suitable framework for understanding their broader benefits, leading toward the goal of promoting cohabitation between humans and wildlife (Buijs and Jacobs 2021).

Any adequate environmental framework includes an axiology, or theory of value, an environmental science, biological science, social sciences, including psychology, an economic theory, and possibly, aesthetics. Why is an adequate framework based on these needed? First, because we are obligated to act ethically. Secondly, we need natural science to know how the system works and can work. Thirdly, anything we do is going to have to be plausible and probable in some market system. Finally, in part, much of what natural resources management and its vast interdisciplinary contributors hope to accomplish is unachievable without a solid foundation borne from social research—applying theory, contacting the stakeholders, and integrating them into the process through public forums, surveys, policymaking, and monitoring, or implementing volunteers into restoration projects. Doing so facilitates participation, education, awareness, and exposure to environmental entities.

More comprehensively, an environmental ethos and ethics, broadly understood, frames how to understand and interpret the world around us, including how we believe it functions and should function. Consider the seemingly simple framework of the relationship between humans and the environment which influences how we behave in our environment. Over the course of human history, four frameworks have been prevalent at one time and place or another: domination, dominion, stewardship, and relationship.

Domination, with a libertarian bend to it, is the first and oldest. One may do anything one wants with the environment, including one's own land, as long as doing so does not intrude on another person's property nor violate their liberty. I can sew salt into the soil of my land, for example, thereby rendering it useless for farming or any sort of growth, but my action cannot then threaten my neighbor's land through rain run-off. Bats and other living things do not fare well here, because they are viewed as mere objects of no real worth.

Dominion was a dominant framework notion for much of human history. Justified by religious texts, it stated that men were the lords of the earth and all that lived upon it:

> And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth (King James version, Genesis 1:28).

Much like the relationship between a lord of the manor and his serfs, men are not to use the gift of power whichever way that they wanted. And it did not make sense to abuse the power for two reasons. First, one does not anger a divine entity who gifted finite beings with dominion. Secondly, although humans are superior to all other living things, in order to survive and flourish, each person needs the living things to support her. Just as harming your serfs harms you, destroying living things without adequate cause is irrational when pursuing one's self-interests. Bats, thus, have to be cared for more or less under dominion depending on how well they support human thriving.

Stewardship continues the movement from doing whatever one's liberty allows toward greater consideration and care for the environment and the things in it, but not for their own sakes. The main idea here is that the environment can never be owned by one person, group, society, or generation. In fact, it is merely on loan to those individuals from some other entity, whether that be a divine one or the more currently held view

that it is future generations. When we consider our duties and obligations to the environment writ large, we have to leave it at least as good as we found it so that the actual owners do not suffer as a result of our neglect or recklessness. Bats and other living things under this framework receive far more consideration than the former two, and even can begin the process of being valued in and of themselves.

Finally, the relationship framework has the best results for bats but suffers from the threat requiring a full-on revaluation of people and the environment poses to many people's worldview. Instead of any one species being dominant or having its needs be primary or capable of automatically overriding any other species' need should the two come into conflict, all entities have equal value and are deserving of equal care for their existence and thriving.

One way of working out what this means in practice can be seen in Indigenous culture. As Native Americans and others contended, the environment is not only a place and part of our identity but something that is imbued with the sacred, viz. there is a theology of place (Cajete 1994). One may use other parts of the environment to stay alive, but doing so must be done with humility and an understanding that life is a cycle. Life is given to benefit you now just as yours will benefit others later.

Regardless of whether we adopt the above or go with a biocentric or ecocentric axiology, in a relationship framework, bats would be treated as equals for their own sakes instead of merely being seen as useful to human beings' interests, even to the point in which human needs should be sacrificed for those the bats'.

Besides the relationship of humans to land framework, identifying what has intrinsic value in the environment to create an adequate axiology has enormous implications for how we conceptualize our reality, judge value within it, and make our plans, decisions, and judgments. If our value theory is anthropocentrism, for example, then the only entities valuable in and of themselves are human beings, which means that all other living and non-living entities acquire their worth relative to what they do for us. Biocentrism, on the other hand, places all intrinsic worth in living things; thereby dethroning humans from the center of the universe when it comes to being of sole moral consideration in their own rights. Finally, ecocentrism makes the environment as a whole the entity worthy in and of itself and for its own sake. Depending on how that is spelled out, humans fare better or worse. Much worse if the functioning of the ecosystem is most important and humans are seen as a destructive invasive species threatening its stability, safety, or sustainability.

Making these calls on psychological frameworks and axiologies is necessary given how the United States government goes about its

business of managing the nation's environments and ecosystems. In response to growing public concern over environmental degradation and increasing demands for a more accountable approach to environmental policy in the late-1960s, the US government enacted the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in 1970 under President Nixon (Bennon 2024). NEPA provided a drastic restructure in national environmental governance, requiring federal agencies to assess and publicly disclose the environmental impacts of Federal projects and environmental actions (2024). This was driven by a rising tide of environmental activism in the late 1960s, which was fueled by heightened awareness of pollution, natural resource depletion, and the need for sustainable development.

The first American environmental call to action or concern for the environment is often attributed to ecological icons such as John Muir or Rachel Carson. Muir, for example, often championed preservation of the natural environment. However, he was an anthropocentrist. Much of his work and expressed views point towards favorable opinions of expanding commercialism, such as mining, forestry, or road construction, in old-growth areas (Muir 1901), as long as doing so served human beings. Building roadways in natural, forested areas provided a means for the public to access the natural environment, enjoy nature, and, hopefully, act on nature's behalf in protecting and treasuring these sites (1901). Muir thought ventures into nature exposed people to the natural environment, thus resulting in favorable opinions of it. Nature itself was only valuable for what it did for people rather than having worth independently.

Another anthropocentrist, William Baxter, argued that the environment is crucial for sustaining life and useful to support human needs; therefore, we need the environment to promote human needs and a flourishing lifestyle (1974). His main contribution to these environmental issues is a set of criteria to make
decisions about the environment.

1. **Libertarianism/spheres of freedom**: "every person should be free to do whatever he wishes in contexts where his actions do not interfere with the interests of other human beings."
2. **Waste is bad**: "The dominant feature in human existence is scarcity." Our resources, labors, and our ability to employ both will remain to be insufficient to achieve everyone's satisfaction. Therefore, none of resources should be wasted.
3. **Respect all people affected**. "Every person should be regarded as an end rather than a means." Each person as a person is worthy of dignity and respect.

4. "**Both the incentive and the opportunity to improve his share of satisfactions should be preserved to every individual.**" This provides the basic necessities for each person whilst keeping opportunity for each person to improve his   lot.

As can be seen, each criterion focuses on human beings (Baxter 1974). Other species should be saved or used as long as that works for humans' best interests, people have autonomously agreed to do so, it does not illicitly harm anyone's freedom or opportunities. Saving penguins or bats for Baxter depends on humans. Does doing so adversely interfere with any human's liberty? Does it cause unnecessary waste? Does it disrespect any one of the human stakeholders? Does it reduce opportunity or prevent providing for every human's basic needs? If the answer is yes to any one of these questions, then it is morally wrong to save bats or penguins.

Baxter's position promotes human welfare with the environment playing a crucial role in enhancing our quality of life and fostering a sustainable future. A healthy environment contributes to individual freedom and well-being by providing essential resources or reducing air, water, ambient noise pollution, etc. (Baxter 1974). According to Baxter and his *spheres of freedom*, when people have access to essential resources without harm or degradation, their lives are better off to pursue their personal goals. Moreover, if something which promotes human well-being and satisfaction is needed, then it will be done. Equally, if penguins or bats promote human wellbeing, then they are safeguarded with laws protecting them. If not, their extinction is justified if it costs too much to prevent that occurrence. At the forefront, protecting our natural resources and minimizing waste ensures that future human generations can thrive and that everyone has access to what they require. This focus on sustainability not only benefits individuals today but also preserves natural resources for our future offspring—or at least it provides them with the best possible set-up for what they might need.

Additionally, for Baxter as it was for Muir, nature enriches our lives with its beauty, diversity, and inspiration. Recognizing and respecting nature fosters a deeper appreciation for all living beings and encourages a sense of responsibility toward conservation (Baxter 1974). When we understand the worth of our natural surroundings and where that value comes from, we are more likely to advocate for their protection and preservation rather than wanton destruction or degradation of ecosystems in the pursuit of extracting resources. Furthermore, a well-preserved environment provides equitable access to opportunities for recreation, education, and well-being. Ensuring that all individuals can engage with

healthy ecosystems supports personal growth and fosters a sense of community (Leopold 1968).[5] By nurturing our environment, we not only enhance our own lives but also promote a collective sense of responsibility for the world we share (1974).

Baxter is an anthropocentrist because he believed that species other than humans are unlikely to have agency or the ability to enact laws surrounding the environment, thus, they have no voice in any rational decision-making process. Penguins, trees, and bats cannot vote, and their preferences cannot be expressed by them (Baxter 1974). Non-human animals and other living things must rely upon Baxter's criteria and the good faith of humans working on ecological governance—as long as they promote the well-being of humans, etc., they should be safe[6]. Indeed, Baxter's anthropocentric approach stresses the need to balance ecological considerations with human welfare and comfort. His question, "How clean is clean?" regarding air and water pollution levels, alludes to the challenges of not only setting clear environmental standards for environmental quality, but also identified that 'clean' may differ from person to person (1974).

Baxter's inquiry highlighted that environmental ethics requires an anthropocentric lens to measuring pollution and focused on the costs and benefits of environmental regulation (Baxter 1974). Rejecting the idea of respecting the "balance of nature" for its own sake, because there cannot be a "right" or "morally correct" version of nature, Baxter asserts these statements are baseless grounds for solving environmental problems. Reducing pollution or regulating water and air quality is expensive. Instead, rather than focusing on 'pure' air or water, he concentrated on a general set of principles supporting an "optimal state of pollution" (1974). An optimal state of pollution seeks to maximize as much human satisfaction as possible, and it is determined by finite things such as labor, technological skill, capital goods, and natural resources.

An optimal state of pollution, according to Baxter, is limited by what people are willing to sacrifice in order to improve environmental qualities. For example, people enjoy watching pandas; people enjoy having clean air and drinking water; people enjoy smog-free cities; people enjoy vehicles which provide them with means of transportation throughout a city. Each of these is a good or service that has value relative

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[5] This is Leopold's contribution with his biotic community and ecocentric approach.

[6] This approach is problematic because immediate questions are concerned with: how are persons selected and how do they communicate with penguins and trees to relay their interests?

to what it does for human beings. A practical application of the optimal level of pollution should seek to eliminate pollution to the point at which trade-off something valued, such as vehicles, to promote an environmental improvement, such as the reduction of carbon emissions (Baxter 1974). However, as Baxter asserts, most people are not willing to give up things which promote human satisfaction if they solely benefit the environment. Therefore, a balance between environmental improvements and resources is the ideal and most pragmatic outcome, insofar as it improves human beings' quality of life.

Using Baxter's model, ecological gains involve an investment in the environment to elicit a favorable outcome, such as clean air. Promoting wildlife habitat, natural or human constructed, provides bats the means to serve as pest control to unwanted crop pests as well as pollinators and seed dispersers which is vital for food production and ecosystem richness. Additionally, soil and water quality are improved by species such as beavers which regulate environmental processes by improving water storage, reducing sediment, and increasing nitrogen. (Puttock et al. 2017). These short-terms gains to humans provide mutual, long-term aid to ecosystems and wildlife, but the primary consideration here is whether human needs, values, and such are being satisfied; not whether bats or other species have value in and of themselves.

As Baxter states, the environment is integral to our freedom, well-being, and future sustainability. By valuing and protecting it, our natural resources are safeguarded, used wisely, and remain sustainable for future generations. However, unlike Muir or Baxter, Leopold argued for a biotic community of which all biological and ecological entities share a part and each of are valued for their own sakes (Leopold 1949). His position is either biocentrism or ecocentrism. Although some Asian environmental philosophies, such as Taoism, had long before adopted them, biocentrism and ecocentrism become discussed more frequently in the Western Eurocentric world in the 20th Century. Leopold's major contribution to environmental ethics is found in his 'land ethic.'

Noting the similarities with Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, claims of organisms interacting and competing within various communities, Leopold noticed that ethics appears to be linked to nature or to a natural community (1968). According to Leopold, our social community extends to the biotic community because we are naturally a part of it, not separate beings capable of existing without it. Instead, a 'biotic community' comprises of biotic and abiotic components which, as Leopold stresses, are interdependent and interrelated parts of a whole. Therefore, the soil, water, organisms, terrain, and so on are all members of a living community. Furthermore, because humans are a part of this natural

community of which they rely upon for basic needs or resources, there is a sense of stewardship to treat it with respect one has for any living being. His three key ideas are:

1. "Land, then, is not merely soil;
2. It is the fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals;"
3. food chains are living channels which direct energy upward, while death return it to the soil (1968).

For Leopold, the land is alive like a person.

In this regard, the land ethic changes human's role from domination, dominion, or even stewardship. People must move from being 'conquerors' of the land (i.e., domination and dominion), to a member of the biotic community, stewardship or relationship (Leopold 1968). Furthermore, traditional philosophy has focused on duties, obligations, and general treatment toward other humans or human society. Leopold recognized that, in order for ethics to evolve, ethics should encompass the land, or 'biotic community.' Policy changes would then arise supporting the preservation of natural habitat, wildlife, and maintaining biodiversity and species richness when extracting natural resources or altering landscapes. Leopold notes the competition and even cooperation existing in nature should be extended to ethical decision making.

Artificial (human made) changes have a ripple effect across ecosystems and alter how they function. The 'land ethic' concerns itself with the entire biotic community, recognizing the importance of each entity within the biotic pyramid (Leopold 1968). He states that there are two main questions to answer if the land
ethic is to be promoted:

1. "Can the land adjust itself to the new order?"
2. "Can the desired alterations be accomplished with less violence?" (1949).

These questions emphasize how environmental decisions should be guided with three main principles—ethics, economics, and aesthetics—which operate as the factors involved in valuing biotic beings and the environment on which they depend. Those actions that work with the energy circuits resulting from evolution and other natural forces are preferable to radical alterations of the landscape that might yield short term benefits but destroy the biotic pyramid. Technology has allowed humans to spread to all parts of the world and extract resources unlike any time

before, activities which Leopold refers to as 'violence,' particularly in the case of forestry and the vast alteration of the environment by humans (Leopold 1968).

Economics should factor in the ecological costs of land degradation and the value of conserving species rich, functioning ecosystems, rather than draining resources for ultimate economic gain. Conservation, then, operates as a cost-benefit analysis between how resources are harvested, how often they are harvested, and mitigation or restoration plans to ensure ecosystems are resilient to these changes and remain sustainable practices. The long-term impact of resource extraction, such as logging or mining, results in degradation and irreversible damage to soil fertility (due to soil compaction), biodiversity, water quality, and others, must be always of central concern for the biotic community. Implementing ecologically sound policies reflects a deeper environmental ethics recognizing that economic success is strongly related to ecological health.

Aesthetics involves more than valuing the beauty of nature, it includes the integrity of the land. The land is important to human experience for many reasons, such as human connection, recreation, mental and physical health, and an overall appreciation for nature. Aesthetics are highlighted in naturally beautiful areas, such as state and national parks, but they are also important for their intrinsic worth. The land is beautiful because it is a biotic community. Here, policies should enact a commitment to protecting the environment, promoting habitat for wildlife, and preserving both to ensure future generations have similar meaningful, spiritual experiences and respect toward nature.

The land ethic is not without its flaws. Leopold highlights the importance of protecting nature for its own sake, but problems arise when human needs or interests are not prioritized over natural landscapes or living beings. If everything contains similar value as community members of the biotic pyramid (Leopold 1968), then it goes against many humans' psychological frameworks and axiologies. The plan to construct a shopping mall might be impaired due to the presence of a forest or prairie system at its proposed location. The forest or prairie is not only valued for its ecological and aesthetic value, but also its membership within the biotic community and, therefore, deserves equal consideration against human desires. But many moral agents in the community will not like this result.

Although challenging to our emotional values, Leopold posits a strong case: humans, wildlife, and the natural environment are all interconnected. One cannot make alterations in one's ecosystem without it affecting other ecosystems. So, framing environmental issues through the lens of the biotic community makes sense. Humans are important, but

their value needs to be put into a bigger perspective. Therefore, a shift in thinking about environmental ethics and policy entails valuing the health of a thriving ecosystem and the importance of all its integral parts.

As part of the biotic pyramid, bats are excellent bioindicators in all fashions of the word: biological, ecological, and environmental indicators. As Jones et al. point out, a true biodiversity indicator is challenging to define because different taxa respond to biological disturbances differently; however, bats come close to this mark in that they respond to environmental disturbances in a predictable way, and they provide some key insight into trophic levels and environmental degradation or restoration (2009). When the biotic community is disrupted or impacted in one area, the ripple effect is experienced in other areas. Bats are primary examples of this, because they are sensitive to a wide range of environmental effects and tend to respond to it in predictable ways— whether it is habitat degradation from logging or disturbances from wildfires (Russo et al. 2021).

If Leopold is correct, we should be tuned into occurrences where the biotic community is disrupted, especially as humans alter their environment for continued expansion or the impacts of climate change (1968). As bioindicators, bats play an important role in nocturnal insect suppression. Bats fulfill these ecological functions, such as predators of many cash crop pests such as corn earworm moths, cucumber beetles, cotton bollworm moths, and others are important seed dispersers (Bizerril and Raw 1998). Their ability to disperse seeds, eat pest crops, and pollinate a variety of species makes them integral species within the biotic community (Kunz 1982; Taylor et al. 2020). Flying foxes specialize as being the sole seed dispersers for many products, such as medicines, dyes, ornamental plants, and timber (Fujita and Tuttle 1991). Yet, bats continue to rapidly decline across the globe.

To treat these ecological and economically important bioindicators with care, further attention is needed to promote their importance to the public. The education process has to be able to work with the public's frameworks, axiologies, and such to be effective to achieve the desired and desirable outcome. That means that, although it would be better for people to value things in and of themselves, the best that we can do is to create an intervention that works with existing reality.

Management Plans

Effective bat management plans are those that have demonstrated successful outcomes, whether through research-backed strategies or by being replicated in restoration plans. Successful plans typically

incorporate both protective measures for bat populations and educational components aimed at informing the public (Trewalla et al. 2005). For example, clear user-policy guidance—such as signage marking sensitive habitats or designating off-limit areas—serves to both educate the public and discourage disruptive activities in critically important areas, reducing as much disturbance to these ecosystems as possible.

Changing public perceptions of bats, especially those that are negative or neutral, is a significant challenge. Most individuals lack expertise or in-depth knowledge about bats unless they have direct experience with bat conservation, work with bat species, or encounter them regularly in local environments (Lu et al. 2021). For most of the public, awareness of bats often stems from casual observations, film depictions, or media portrayals, which may not accurately reflect their behavior or ecological importance (Tuttle 2017).

In addition to direct management strategies, educational outreach plays an important role in shifting public perceptions. Programs or events that focus on bat conservation and the essential ecological services bats provide, such as insect control, seed dispersal, and pollination, can significantly improve public understanding and appreciation of these species (Taylor et al. 2020). As awareness and knowledge of bats increase, so too does support for conservation efforts, leading to greater protection (and funding) for bats and their habitats. As a result, bats are recognized by the community for their economic and ecological contributions. The following management plans exemplify strategies that have been successful in achieving these objectives.

There are a number of approaches that have already been taken to greater or lesser success. One dealing with human beings and avoiding cross-species exposure is adequate signage. A management objective is to promote early identification of WNS potential before it is present (Frick et al 2015).[7] When WNS is present, it is difficult to contain and leads to rapid rates of infection and high levels of mortality to bat colonies (2015). Proper user-policy techniques can help mitigate these effects[8]: User-policies tend to implement signage within public recreational sites, which may deter the public from sensitive or protected areas (Saunders et al. 2019). In North Dakota, there are few cave systems where such containment would be worthwhile. However, there are plenty of crevices within Roosevelt National Park which may operate as hibernacula. For

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[7] Bats are sampled with sterile cotton plastic swabs along their wing membranes, whilst handling bats in a manner which minimizes stress; once sampled, bats can be released (Seidlova et al. 2023).

[8] Soil samples and collection of bat guano are easy methods to capture and assess a site (Dimkić, et al 2021).

these regions, signs can be displayed at visitor centers stating what WNS is and how to prevent its spread.

Another management plan is to increase bat populations. There have been positive results for promoting existing artificial roosts or even enhancing existing buildings to support bat populations. A program in Germany, and within the EU, has been call the "Bat-Friendly House" where participants are awarded this status for protecting and promoting bats in their backyards (Kingston 2016).

Furthermore, synanthropic bats, those in close association with humans, have been supported with buildings specifically renovated for the promotion of bat roosts (Murphy et al. 2012). Specifically, the horseshoe bat may not survive in cases where habitat is changed too swiftly (2012). Rather than demolishing unoccupied buildings or ones which have deteriorated, they can be modified to support existing colonies (Voigt et al 2016). For example, in Germany, a building was entirely renovated to support a colony. Heating domes were installed to help with insulating the building, and the main floor was transformed into an education community center for bat education and outreach (2016).

In urban areas and developing peri-urban areas, green spaces are valuable location because they offer connectivity to wildlife corridors while providing economical services for the urban city (Murkin 2023). Local green spaces in urban areas offer opportunities to promote volunteer programs to increase education and awareness of local bat species and populations (MacGregor-Fors et al. 2016; Printz and Jung 2023).

Non-profit organizations are in the unique position to advocate for wildlife conservation and able to mitigate or dispel fears and misinformation about bats. The National Audubon Society, which works to ensure birds, and their habitats are protected (Michel et al. 2021), has a successful method of educating the public. This organization receives a lot of attention and actively involves and relies upon volunteers to lead birdwatching activities and monitor wildlife habitat. Using the same proven method, organizations could educate the public, set up bat houses in appropriate green spaces and wildlife corridors, as well as lead groups to watch bats and monitor their activity in the evenings with basic acoustic detection equipment, field cameras, and nets.

Human-wildlife interaction theory contains various approaches to engaging with wildlife for promoting positive outcomes. Ecotourism, such as visiting state and national parks, are significant sources of revenue. Ecotourism is a beneficial component of human-wildlife interaction theory because it promotes the restoration and conservation of sensitive ecosystems or the continued maintenance and use of national and state parks (Tanalgo et al. 2021). These areas offer stakeholders a means to

connect with nature in the form of hiking, birding, fishing, hunting, and so on and tend to provide the added benefit of securing a positive association with wildlife and outdoor recreation. Likewise, conservation, the foundation of ecotourism, becomes a familiar practice for those who interact with the natural environment. There is a reciprocal, beneficial effect for humans and wildlife within sensitive areas in urban greenspaces (Goumas et al. 2020).

Involving the stakeholders strengthens community ties and increases general awareness through educational workshops (2023). Relatedly, wildlife biologists may hold public events surrounding education of bats and demonstrate how banding species is important for monitoring their activities (Frick et al. 2020). For example, roosting areas, such as caves or tree snags, may hold little importance to the local community unless these sensitive areas are highlighted with a known value—in this case, habitat restoration and species conservation. (2020) According to Urich et al., wherever conservation efforts are being made to protect a sensitive region, the restoration plan must incorporate nearby areas where bats forage and navigate (2001). As the public becomes more involved in experiences with and conversations about what bats are and how they affect the local environment, as well as being part of bat conservation education and outreach, they are more likely to view them favorably and alter their perceptions and attitudes.

Lu et al. Literature review

It would be useful at this point to examine a study on COVID-19's impact on public perceptions of bats. At the time the study was conducted, there was an immediate need to know the Chinese public's attitudes towards bats. Lu et al. surveyed the population to find how categories such as one's gender, education level, or ecological knowledge played a role in how participant's viewed bats before and after COVID-19 (2021).

Study subjects characterized: Their study involved nearly 14,000 participants with a survey instrument of thirty-one items based on similar KAP studies. Since the study took place after the COVID-19 outbreak, attitudes towards bats were likely influenced by the recent event. In general, those with a negative disposition towards bats outnumbered the participants with a favorable view of bats. Most of the participants held some form of higher education and 87% of the participants held little knowledge of bats, before the researcher presented the participants with bat conservation education. Thus, one's education level does not necessarily mean one is informed on ecological knowledge or knowledge of bats (2021). For example, 80% of the participants stated they had little

to no knowledge of bats, and those identified as having worked with bats, stated they had some knowledge of bats. However, over 60% of all participants incorrectly assumed bats do not live in the outdoors near their work or home, and about 20% believed bats directly attack humans (2021).

Intervention: After the initial survey, an intervention was introduced. The authors conducted an educational bat lecture led by thirteen experts (pre-recorded video) to improve associations towards bats, (2021). Following this presentation, participants were given a second survey with eighteen items from the first survey to assess how attitudes and perceptions of bats changed from Time 1 to Time 2.

Results provided and explained: Lu et al. also discovered that one's culturally important symbols, such as an eagle (or, in this case, bats), does not guarantee that cultural symbol is immune from the public's changing view of that species (2021). Bats are one of the few species celebrated in China and yet even with bats being viewed with cultural appreciation, the events of COVID-19 no longer insulated bats from negative public opinion (Kingston 2016).

These results might be due to the media listing bats as being one of the top ten species who were likely to contain SARS-CoV-2 (Gormon 2020; Nanni et al. 2022). As a result, 96% of the respondents in the study selected bats as being a likely vector of SARS-CoV-2 (2021). In such instances, media and other outlets of information may prime the pump to what the public considers threats or risks, especially during critical periods worldwide. Because of this, Lu et al. noted there is a need for increasing education surrounding bats and conservation efforts towards bats, because of the bat-virus relationship in the public's eye. And due to extreme reactions by the public (e.g., bat culling) scholars are charged with correcting misinterpreted information in the media (2021).

One's knowledge of bats or ecology, not one's education level, resulted in higher favorability in bats (Lu et al. 2021). For example, 84.6% of the participants believed bats were likely the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic or to contain SARS-CoV-2 (2021). Relatedly, there was a strong rejection to humans eating bat bushmeat. This is likely due to the belief that bats carry SARS-CoV-2 and other diseases. However, when the participants were polled on whether bats should be culled, a large majority (77.1%) rejected scientific culling of bats. Furthermore, 63% of the participants submitted that they were in favor of increased protections for bats (2021).

Lastly, the study issued two messages:

- **Message 1**: "Scientific research indicates that although bats carry many viruses, they are an important reference for bio-inspired radar systems and play critical ecological roles in pest control, seed transmission, and plant pollination."
- **Message 2**: 'Ecological Culling' of bats will probably cause a series of serious ecological consequences. Thus, we should live in harmony with bats."

The first message resulted in very little change (a 2% increase) to attitudes towards bats, however, the second message managed to increase positive views towards bats by 30%. The second message drastically decreased negative feelings towards bats, as some of these misconceptions were framed from poor understanding of bat-virus relationship toward humans, as seen in Figure 2 (2021).
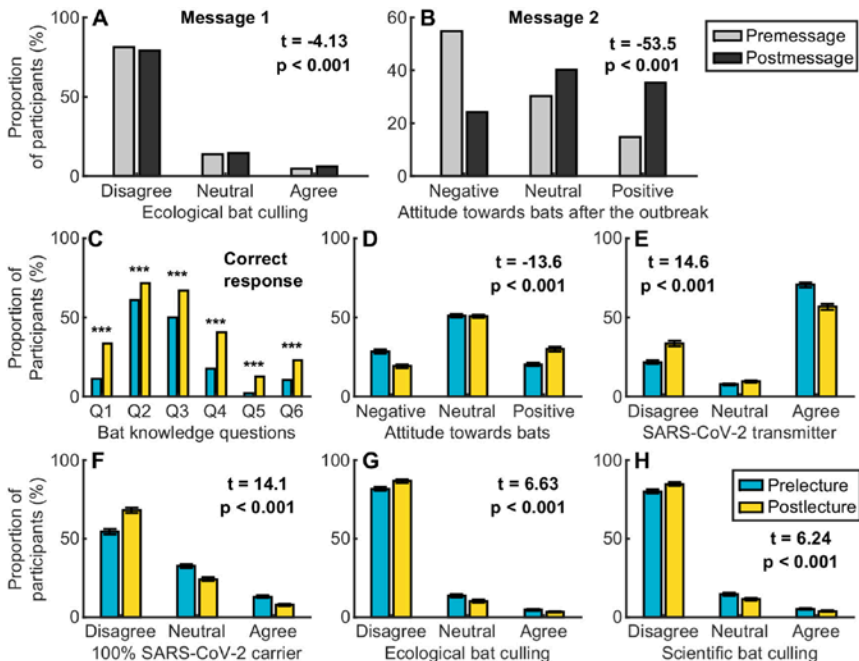
Figure 2. *Message 1 and Message 2 indicate the effect of conservation efforts on people's perceptions of bats.*

Increased education of bats not only increased one's likelihood of promoting conservation efforts towards bats, but it also improved their scoring in correctly answering questions on bat knowledge.

This study showed that at least in some cases, negative attitudes towards bats were highlighted during COVID-19, and there is a need to understand how emerging diseases can influence public attitudes towards bats.

Conclusion

Attitudes and perceptions of bats is a challenging topic for wildlife biologists and natural resource managers. Bats remain one of the finest performers of ecological and economic services. Sustaining perceptions of fear, aversion, or neutrality about bat knowledge and the roles they provide remains. Theoretical frameworks such as human-wildlife interaction theory offers insight into how people think about things they fear or remain foreign to them. As both datasets demonstrate, increasing one's familiarity with bats and bat conservation increases favorability. That is, when ecological knowledge of bats increases, positive views and attitudes towards bats also increase.

The literature expressed surmountable evidence for a few key threats to bat populations: (1) White-nose syndrome (WNS), (2) renewable technologies such as wind turbines, and (3) intensive agriculture practices resulting from urbanization and urban sprawl. Population declines will continue to persist unless action is taken to implement preventative measures. Equipped with this knowledge, wildlife biologists and natural resource managers are better informed when discussing their advice and sharing counsel with city officials.

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NORTHERN PLAINS ETHICS JOURNAL

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Community Section

Ever November

Michael L. Gjesdahl

NPEI Advisory Board Member

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It's yet another November day.

Near us, in memories we see and feel, are long rifles, canteens, and rusty bayonets. There are trenches and poppies, Hueys and napalm. Above us, a slate blue sky. There's a chill in the air. And we stand together.

We stand on graves; graves in which loyalty and courage, or at least solidarity, are buried. And the bones speak; they speak but only to those with ears that hear. The poet-composer is soon to speak, too, though his words will be buried, too; buried in a torrent of other words.

In his crafting, he harkened back to those before. He'd surely read John Adams' pithy counsel. "Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself." And Madison's, too. "Democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention…and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths."

Like him, his predecessors—learned men—knew of earlier democracies, earlier republics, that had come, then gone. And they knew the culprit causes, in both their variety and kindred familiarity. It could be a sudden, audacious surprise. The Rubicon is crossed and Rome bows down. Or it could come slowly, bulwarks rotting before unseeing eyes; oligarch money and the power-mad co-opting and weakening institutions.

He sang his song for the first time on a November day. It was dirge and consecration, a call to both peace and arms, but mostly for vigilance. Be alert! Wake up! Defend! Fight! On that day, the multitude gathered. They heard. Then most of them, puzzled by a truth too pure, went away and didn't understand.

A next-day newsman's review was famously dismissive. "We pass over the silly remarks…we are willing that the veil of oblivion shall be dropped over them and that they shall be no more repeated or thought of." Message unreceived.

Yet, the lyrics were too powerful. So, through all our Novembers, the song still echoes up the smokey hollows, 'cross the fruited plains, and through the caverns of our alabaster cities. American gospel now. Sacred text. A familiar, time-worn hymn. We reverently sing, but do we heed, or even hear, its call?

"We are met on a great battlefield…".

The test, as Lincoln framed it, was whether our nation, "conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal…can long endure." Indeed. Can our democratic republic endure? Can it survive not outside insurrection, but ourselves?

In other words, both he and the founders intimately understood. The question isn't whether the frog is in the pot. It's *always* in the pot. The question is whether we can, whether we will, prevent the boil?

Democracies face unrelenting, perpetual risk. In another day, the peril was largely of military take-over, of coup d'état. Death came quickly at the point of military spear. It happened that way in Argentina, Brazil, Greece, Guatemala, Peru, Turkey, and more.

In our day, though, democracies die from domestic causes, from internal subversion. It's less about generals seizing reigns with military might. Rather, it's presidents and prime ministers who gain the machinery's control and morph democracy into dictatorship. Blatancy and obviousness are gone. Coups are now sly and sneaky, at least to the unvigilant.

Recall, even Hitler rose to power, aided by the ballot box and Germany's legitimate political and legislative powers. He joined the German Workers' Party and became its leader. He exploited division and unrest to enhance his profile. He became Chancellor by political appointment. He employed nationalism and othering, murderously. And, ultimately, he obtained full authority through legislative act: the Reichstag passed the Enabling Act in 1933. The usual, familiar, political and legal processes paved Hitler's path to dominion: It happened from within.

It was paved, too, with the help of sycophantic profiteers, most famously perhaps, Henry Ford—the Elon Musk of his day—one of America's most famous antisemites; recipient of Hitler's highest foreign honor, the Grand Cross of the German Eagle. When the Third Reich flew nearest the sun, the main, and sometimes only, consumer of Ford's German and French plants was the German military. Henry's wealth doubled as Adolf's dominion swelled.

And so it is in recent decades. While Hitler's is the grandest, there are more recent examples of democracies dying via corruption of their own legitimate electoral, political, and governing processes. Elected leaders have overthrown democracy from within in Poland, Hungary, the Ukraine, Nicaragua, Peru, Sri Lanka, and Turkey. Death involved no planes, no tanks. Just votes.

Do we see? Do we hear? Is the othering apparent in demonizing every refugee and immigrant as a job-taker and free-rider, or worse, a rapist or murderer? What kind of hands are on democracy's levers when packing a court that, in turn, exempts one from laws that apply to all? When power seekers plan and plot to disenfranchise voters through mass voter challenges, gerrymandering, and refusal to certify results?

Will we remain blind and deaf, when more than 80 organizations have generated a 920-page plan, to restrict or deprive citizens of our nation's core liberties? The plan, or Project, proudly aims to distill political power, obstruct free elections, and weaponize law enforcement institutions, such as the FBI and the Department of Justice.

America's history has witnessed other authoritarian-minded politicians seek endorsement by our main political parties, but for the first time one has obtained it. He promises to use the Department of Justice to "go after" his predecessor and others he regards as enemies. He scoffs at and ignores laws and our sacred institutions, the courts and juries that have convicted him and denied his democracy-defying claims. He adores the Civil War-era Insurrection Act and would use the military to prevent civil protests against him. He dismissed an overwhelming vote and the peaceful transition of power. He rejected democracy and fomented an assault on our Capitol, a true insurrection.

And the oligarchs are on board. Elon Musk says he's committing $45M a month to a supportive Super Pac. In exchange, he's been promised the role of reshaping our federalism. Elderly recluse, Tim Mellon, hater of immigrants and minorities, has donated over $125M to the anti-democratic cause. Pro-dictator, Peter Thiel, and a cadre of tech billionaires have grafted one of their ingratiated own onto the ticket, next man up. Greed forms a selfish line and is a value of its own, disinterested in democracy.

Blind faith in institutions and values that have guarded us for hundreds of years is no defense. Weakened, undermined, and overtaken, they cannot protect once gone. Democracy needs to be saved before the boil. It cannot be saved after.

Thus, the words were said for the first time on a chilly November day, under a slate blue sky, in 1863. Their message was true to the founders in their time, and to us in ours. Democracy is crafted of crystal and light, not steel and stone. It is precious and fragile. Its protection is always unfinished work, requiring not only alertness, but resolved, devoted action. The test is always before us; the words still echo up. And once again, we stand together:

> It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us; that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth. *Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, November 19, 1863.*

It is ever November.

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NORTHERN PLAINS ETHICS JOURNAL

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Student Section

Physician-Assisted Suicide, Euthanasia, and the Right to Die: Ethical and Legal Considerations

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Abstract

This research paper explores the ethical and legal dimensions of physician-assisted suicide (PAS), euthanasia, and the broader right-to-die discourse. It presents three central arguments: the right to die as an extension of the right to life, the role of autonomy in end-of-life decisions, and the moral justification for choosing death to alleviate suffering. Definitions of PAS and euthanasia are clarified, and the paper analyzes diverse legal frameworks and societal attitudes, focusing on Western perspectives. Counterarguments such as the potential for abuse, sanctity of life, and slippery slope concerns are addressed, emphasizing the importance of safeguards to ensure ethical application. The paper concludes that a compassionate and regulated approach, respecting individual autonomy and minimizing suffering, supports the moral legitimacy of the right to die.

Keywords: physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, right to die, autonomy, end-of-life, suffering

Introduction

The ethical debate surrounding physician-assisted suicide (PAS), euthanasia, and the broader concept of the "right to die" has gained significant traction in recent years. As medical technology prolongs life, sometimes at the expense of quality of life, individuals and societies are forced to confront the complex questions of personal autonomy, ethics, and legal boundaries. This research paper explores three primary arguments in support of the right to die: (1) the right to die follows logically from the right to life, (2) autonomy includes the right to end one's life, and (3) in some cases, ending one's life could be more moral than prolonging it.

Definitions and Scope

Before delving into the ethical arguments, defining key terms is essential. "Physician-assisted suicide" refers to the act of a physician providing a patient with the means to end their own life, typically through medication. "Euthanasia" involves a physician actively administering a

substance to end a patient's life at their request. "The right to die" encompasses a broader concept, encompassing both PAS and euthanasia, suggesting that individuals should have control over their own end-of-life decisions.

This paper considers ethical and legal considerations from a Western perspective, acknowledging that other cultures and legal systems may approach these issues differently. The focus is on voluntary euthanasia and PAS, excluding non-voluntary or involuntary cases where consent is absent or unclear.

The Right to Die Follows from the Right to Life

The right to life is a fundamental human right, recognized in numerous legal frameworks and ethical doctrines. This right is traditionally seen as a protective measure against arbitrary killing or harm. However, a growing school of thought argues that the right to life should encompass the right to choose how and when one's life ends. This shift reflects a broader interpretation of the right to life, emphasizing personal autonomy and self-determination.

The Natural Extension of the Right to Life

The extension of the right to life, including the right to die, reflects a nuanced understanding of personal autonomy. The right to life is rooted in the idea of human dignity, acknowledging that individuals have intrinsic value and should be protected from harm. However, when life becomes a source of unbearable suffering, the same principle of human dignity could support the right to choose death over prolonged agony.

Terminally ill patients often face extreme pain, loss of independence, and diminished quality of life. In such cases, the desire to have control over their own end-of-life decisions becomes profoundly significant. Forcing them to continue living against their will could be seen as an infringement on their dignity and autonomy. Recognizing the right to die allows individuals to reclaim control over their bodies and make informed decisions about their futures.

Legal Context and Precedents

The legal context varies widely across different jurisdictions. Some countries, such as Belgium and the Netherlands, have legalized both PAS and euthanasia, allowing individuals to end their lives under specific conditions (Young 2024). In the United States, a few states, including Oregon and California, permit PAS but not euthanasia (Young 2024). These legal frameworks often require patients to meet specific criteria,

such as terminal illness, and to undergo multiple assessments to confirm their decision-making capacity (Young 2024).

The variation in legal approaches highlights the ongoing debate about the right to die and the extent to which it should be recognized. Some jurisdictions view it as a natural extension of the right to life, while others see it as contrary to the protective nature of the right to life. Understanding the legal context helps illustrate the broader implications of this debate.

Autonomy Includes the Right to End One's Life

Autonomy is a foundational concept in ethical discussions. Some examples are the age of consent, voting, and drinking age. Autonomy is particularly relevant in the context of healthcare. It refers to the capacity of individuals to make informed decisions about their own lives without external coercion. In medical ethics, autonomy is closely associated with informed consent, where patients have the right to decide about their treatment options.

The Principle of Autonomy

Autonomy is closely linked to the concept of bodily integrity. Just as individuals have the right to refuse medical treatment, they should also have the right to choose a peaceful and dignified death. Autonomy empowers individuals to make personal decisions based on their values and beliefs, free from external pressures.

In the context of PAS and euthanasia, autonomy plays a crucial role in justifying the right to die. Terminally ill patients, who often endure significant suffering, may wish to end their lives on their own terms. Denying them this option can be seen as a violation of their autonomy. Society acknowledges that individuals can make personal life decisions by recognizing the right to die.

Informed Consent and Decision-Making

One of the critical components of autonomy is informed consent. Patients have the right to be fully informed about their medical conditions and treatment options, enabling them to make educated decisions. This principle is foundational to medical ethics, ensuring patients have control over their healthcare journey.

In the context of PAS and euthanasia, informed consent is critical to prevent abuse and ensure that patients are making voluntary decisions. Many jurisdictions that permit PAS or euthanasia require patients to undergo psychological evaluations to confirm their decision-making capacity (Young 2024). These safeguards help ensure that patients are making informed choices without external coercion.

Ending One's Life Could Be More Moral Than Prolonging It

The ethical argument in favor of PAS and euthanasia rests on the idea that, in some cases, ending one's life could be more moral than prolonging it. This argument centers on suffering and the ethical responsibility to minimize it. Terminally ill patients often experience significant physical and emotional pain, which can reduce their quality of life and burden their families and caregivers.

The Ethics of Suffering

The moral case for PAS and euthanasia is initiated in the reduction of suffering. When life becomes unbearable due to terminal illness, aggressive medical interventions that prolong life may lead to unnecessary suffering. From an ethical perspective, allowing a patient to choose a peaceful death can be considered an act of compassion and humanity.

Prolonging life through aggressive medical interventions can also have broader implications for families and society. The emotional and financial burden on families can be substantial, leading to prolonged stress and hardship. In cases where patients have no reasonable chance of recovery and experience severe pain, allowing them to end their suffering can be seen as an act of compassion and love.

Compassionate Care and Moral Considerations

Compassionate care involves recognizing when further treatment is futile and respecting a patient's desire to end their suffering. This perspective emphasizes the importance of providing patients with the option to choose a peaceful death when the alternative is prolonged suffering without hope of recovery.

From a practical perspective, the overall reduction in suffering for both the patient and their loved ones can justify the decision to pursue PAS or euthanasia. This perspective aligns with minimizing harm and promoting the greatest good for all involved. By allowing patients to choose a peaceful death, society acknowledges the complexity of end-of-life decisions and prioritizes compassion.

Counterarguments and Ethical Challenges

Despite the ethical arguments favoring the right to die, significant counterarguments and ethical challenges persist. Opponents of PAS and euthanasia often raise concerns about the potential for abuse, the sanctity of life, and the "slippery slope" effect.

Concerns About Abuse and Coercion

One of the primary concerns about PAS and euthanasia is the potential for abuse and coercion. Vulnerable individuals, such as the elderly or disabled, may be pressured into choosing death, either by healthcare professionals or family members with ulterior motives. This concern is not unfounded, given the potential for exploitation in various contexts.

To address this concern, jurisdictions that permit PAS or euthanasia often implement strict safeguards. These safeguards include requiring multiple medical opinions, confirming the patient's mental capacity, and ensuring the absence of coercion (Young 2024). These measures are designed to minimize the risk of abuse and ensure that patients are making voluntary decisions.

The Sanctity of Life

Another common argument against PAS and euthanasia is the sanctity of life. This perspective views life as inherently valuable and asserts that it should be protected at all costs. This argument often has religious underpinnings, with many religious groups viewing the act of taking life—either one's own or another's—as morally wrong.

The sanctity-of-life argument suggests that allowing PAS or euthanasia could undermine the intrinsic value of life, leading to a devaluation of human existence. Proponents of this view believe that life should be preserved, and that suffering has inherent value, offering opportunities for personal growth or spiritual development. Due to this argument's religious underpinnings, it has the burden of being strong for religious people but weak for secular people. A different argument would need to be made at least to convince secular people.

The Slippery Slope

The "slippery slope" argument suggests that legalizing PAS or euthanasia could lead to unintended consequences, where the practice expands beyond its intended scope. Critics fear that allowing individuals to choose death in specific circumstances could eventually lead to non-voluntary euthanasia or the devaluation of the lives of the disabled or elderly.

While the slippery slope argument raises valid concerns, it is essential to recognize that strict safeguards and regulatory frameworks can mitigate these risks. Jurisdictions that permit PAS or euthanasia often implement rigorous procedures to ensure that the practice is limited to cases where patients are mentally competent and fully informed (Young 2024).

Legal and Societal Context

The legal and societal context surrounding PAS and euthanasia is complex and varies across different jurisdictions. Some countries have embraced the right to die, while others continue to prohibit it (Young 2024). Understanding these legal frameworks and societal attitudes helps illuminate the broader implications of this debate.

Legal Frameworks

Countries that permit PAS or euthanasia often have strict legal frameworks that regulate the practice. For example, in the Netherlands and Belgium, both PAS and euthanasia are legal, but patients must meet specific criteria, such as having a terminal illness and experiencing unbearable suffering. These countries also require multiple medical opinions and psychological evaluations to ensure patients make informed decisions (Young 2024).

In the United States, PAS is legal in a few states, including Oregon and California, but euthanasia remains illegal. These states have established regulatory frameworks that require patients to meet specific criteria, such as having a terminal illness with a prognosis of six months or less. Patients must also undergo a waiting period and provide multiple requests for PAS to confirm their decision (Young 2024).

Societal Attitudes

Societal attitudes toward PAS and euthanasia vary widely, reflecting cultural, religious, and ethical differences. Some societies embrace the concept of the right to die, viewing it as a natural extension of personal autonomy and self-determination. Others view it as contrary to their cultural or religious beliefs, emphasizing the sanctity of life.

Public opinion surveys often reveal a complex picture, with support for PAS and euthanasia varying based on factors such as age, religion, and personal experiences with a terminal illness (Andrade and Moreno 2022). Understanding these societal attitudes is crucial for navigating this issue's ethical and legal complexities.

Conclusion

The debate over physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, and the right to die is complex, involving ethical, legal, and societal considerations. This research paper argued that the right to die follows logically from the right to life; autonomy includes the right to end one's life, and ending one's life could be more moral than prolonging it in certain circumstances.

While significant legal and ethical challenges remain, a compassionate approach that respects individual autonomy and seeks to minimize suffering provides a compelling case for supporting the right to die. Strict safeguards and regulatory frameworks are essential to ensure ethical implementation, allowing society to navigate this sensitive issue with care and compassion.

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Asian Americans and the Stigma of Mental Health
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Abstract

Asian Americans have faced a long history of racism and cultural erasure in the States that continues to persist, despite many efforts to combat these stereotypes. This essay serves to highlight how laws and movements meant to hinder Asian Americans, dating as far back as the 1800s, have morphed and evolved into newer and subtler ideas that remain as insidious as ever. It is also important to highlight the distinction between the struggles of Asian Americans and Asians, as well as to show how we can uplift Asian Americans in our society.

Keywords: Asian American, Mental Health, Racism, Culture, Immigrants

Introduction

Within the past ten years, we have seen Asian culture and issues brought to the forefront of American society. With cultural exchanges such as K-pop, bubble tea, and anime it only stands to reason that Asian Americans would find themselves more scrutinized and analyzed than ever before. We have seen the worst of this come to light during the COVID-19 epidemic, in which there was an unprecedented rise in hate crimes against the Asian American population – with the major breaking point being the 2021 Atlanta spa shooting (Chavez, Chen 2022).

Despite being in the zeitgeist of Asian influence in the United States, we have failed to take a look at the people themselves who are making the culture enjoyed globally. One major crack that has formed is the declining mental health of the Asian American community. Asian Americans have issues wholly separate from Asians that have been imposed and reinforced by US stereotypes, as well as by the generational traumas that brought them here. It is these issues that will be discussed in this paper as well as what the duty of mental health advocates should be in response to them.

Asian American and Pacific Islander Before and After COVID-19

Asians in the US have a history of being a scapegoat for underlying issues in the country, dating back to a century after its founding. An often-overlooked part of history is the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which marked the first race-based immigration law passed by the country. After this law was passed tensions broke and many violent acts, such as the Rock Springs Massacre, occurred against the Asian population—which was echoed during the pandemic (Rea 2014). One aspect of the Act was to specifically target Asian women, whom the government believed to be immigrating to the US for the express purpose of prostitution and gave immigration officials the power to fully decide if that was the case (Hijar 2022). The sexualization of Asian women as "exotic" immoral people was driven so deeply by this act that the 2021 Atlanta spa shooting echoes these fetishized stereotypes exactly, as the shooter claimed to have been at odds with sexual addiction (Chavez, Chen 2022).

It is almost impossible to discuss Asian immigrants without bringing up the Model Minority Myth—how it was created to distract from atrocities committed by the US during World War II, and how it is now reinforced to keep Asians at odds with other minorities. The myth was created after it was observed that a select number of Japanese Americans who were previously incarcerated in internment camps during WWII were able to reintegrate back into society. This observation failed to account for the 1,600 people who died in the camps and the countless others who were unable to bounce back after losing their businesses and properties (Crable 2022). The US, however, latched on to this myth to put up a false image that what they did to their citizens in WWII was justified and had little lasting effect on the population. The myth has now taken on the role of seemingly lifting us on a pedestal despite it being even more false now than it was when it was created.

The Cycle of Generational Trauma

The social chains stopping Asian Americans do not simply end at the history of us being used for political gains but extends into how our very culture often hinders us from fighting these chains, locking us in cycles of trauma. I am a first-generation Cambodian American and have spent much of my life talking to other Asian Americans, through which one theme I see time and again is how we deal with trauma. My parents fled to America during the Cambodian Genocide in the 70s, when the country was destabilized after the secret bombings that took place during the Watergate scandal under Nixon (Morris 2015). During this time my parents experienced many horrors and the loss of loved ones, resulting in

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. This PTSD affected me and many others similarly (Hok 2023) during childhood, as I would force impossible standards onto myself knowing what they had been through. When I couldn't meet those standards, they were unable to comfort me, still dealing with their grief so very different than mine.

The barriers to mental health are deeply rooted in many Asian cultures (Kirk 2021) which further pushes the cycle of generational trauma and makes it so Asian Americans cannot find comfort in their families. This idea that we are meant to be stoic and unwavering in the face of adversity and racism is a major reason why the current leading cause of death in Asian American and Pacific Islander youth is suicide (Bui, Lau, 2024).

Alone and at Odds, the Asian American Experience

The generalization of all Asians into one Asian American umbrella, while having its benefits in uniting us as a subculture, has astronomical downsides when it comes to how we are represented. The truth of the matter is that Asian Americans are the most varied group when it comes to determining factors of wealth and status. Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders have much lower numbers than other groups while the large Indian population is well above the national average (Jin 2021).

These generalizations also apply to how Asians are represented in media. As discussed in the intro, we are in the zeitgeist of Asian influence but the places those influences come from only represent a small fraction of Asia. You will find that many people's idea of Asian culture is shaped by Chinese, Japanese, and Korean media which erases many South and Southeast Asian voices, similar to how they are ignored in the data previously shown (Jin 2021). The lack of representation in media and society for these groups leads many to feelings of isolation and inadequacy, reinforcing the cyclical nature of immigrants feeling out of place in both cultures. Immigrants do not have the same experiences as the people around them and are also majorly disconnected from the people back home as well.

I have experienced this all of my life, where I am too ethnic when compared to my peers who never had to experience racism. Yet this is paradoxically true for my family back home in Cambodia since everyone there is Cambodian. Still, I am not Cambodian enough for many people back home, and many immigrants deal with the same stigmas. I do not speak the language fluently; I spent all my time as a child learning English to support my family. I do not look the part; I am pale from the Midwestern sun. I've integrated into American culture the best I could to avoid prejudice, just for the prejudice to come from my heritage.

These feelings were amplified during the pandemic as Asian Americans dealt with increased levels of racism. At that time, as poet Cathy Park Hong says, "To be Asian in America during the time of coronavirus is to feel very alone. You might think that everyone's alone during the pandemic. But it's a different form of isolation carved out by that insidious model-minority myth, with its implication that as long as you worked hard and didn't ask for handouts, racial inequities could be overcome" (Bainbridge 2020). From this I raise the question, "If Asian Americans cannot seek comfort from people back home, their immediate families, and even other races, how are they supposed to be supported?"

What It Takes to Break the Cycle

As discussed previously, Asian Americans have been underrepresented and overlooked in society, unless convenient for ulterior motives, and to seek help for these grievances they must go against the cultural norm of not asking for help and facing all problems alone. To combat these norms people who are advocates for mental health should check in and have deep conversations with Asian Americans they know. I remember when the Atlanta shooting first happened many people I knew posted things about checking in on your Asian friends, but seldom did. This is not enough—as we discussed, for us to reach out is much harder than the other way around. Furthermore, those in the health field should consider taking up a new language to better fit the generational and cultural gap. In Japan, they have seen success in changing the way schizophrenia is worded from dealing with the mind to dealing with coordination (Kirk, 2024). Similarly, in California, they have had success in rewording clinics into "happy houses" (Hok 2023).

Another major factor is having places of community for people so they can combat feelings of loneliness and celebrate cultural unity. The representation of our culture must be broader to encompass Asia as a whole rather than select regions. This will provide the younger generations with strong role models they can learn from when their parents are unable to give them that level of support. The quality of representation must also be looked at and criticized if it is to benefit people. In many films, the representation seen does not invoke positive emotions due to a lack of understanding of the culture. Asian actors are often put in as "diversity hires" and serve minimal purpose other than being present (Schmader, Toni, et al, 2015). What we need to combat this is to have more Asian people in places of power, such as directors and business owners, to give the younger generation something to aspire towards.

Conclusion

By knowing and understanding the past of racism in the country, as well as how we are pitted against other minorities, we can work towards healing and understanding. By redefining the language around mental health we can reach out to older and younger generations. By creating media with positive and real depictions of Asian Americans, we can give future generations aspirations and relevant cultural connections in today's landscape. These are the steps we must take to pave the way for destigmatized people.

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Generative AI and Theft of Human Effort
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Abstract

Generative AI technologies have become increasingly prevalent in our day-to-day lives and demand an increasing share of our attention as they do so. Among the considerations brought to our attention is that of ethical development and use of generative AI. While a focus on such considerations as human decision-making capacities or intellectual property rights, for example, have entered the conversation, I believe there is a lack of attention concerning generative AI's effect on human effort. This paper seeks to introduce, consider, and advise on the issue of generative AI's theft of human effort; effort is important to the human experience, and generative AI stands to rob us of countless opportunities to practice such effort. We must employ a human-centered approach in the development and use of generative AI to ensure its effect on humanity is positive and ethical. Otherwise, we leave the human experience susceptible to considerable losses including that of human effort.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, AI, Generative AI, Human-Centered AI, Ethical AI Development, Accessibility Tools, Human Effort

Introduction

Humans are incredible beings. Throughout our existence, we have mastered control of fire, developed spoken and written language, harnessed the power of electricity, and overall defined and repeatedly pushed the bounds of philosophic and scientific knowledge. In the last 100 years alone, we have advanced our computational capabilities to enable space travel, internet communications, 3D printing, the list goes on. One advancement, however, seems to be on everyone's mind as of late—artificial intelligence. AI research has made incredible progress in the past few years and gained the attention of scientists, philosophers, and the general public alike.

AI advancements are exciting; applications across business, entertainment, healthcare, and beyond position AI to become the next general purpose technological revolution. Just as with any other advancement in technology, however, there comes plenty of reason for caution. Studies already find that AI "significantly impacts the loss of human decision-making" (Ahmad et al. 2023), for example. This paper aims to explore a major threat posed by generative AI to humanity—theft of effort.

Importance of Effort

I began this paper by sharing a few of humanity's greatest feats primarily to highlight the incredible capacity we as humans have to discover and create, but I wish now to describe something these feats—along with every other push of humanity's progress have in common: effort. In his paper "The Psychology of Effort", early American pragmatism philosopher John Dewey gives the practically stated definition of effort as "tension between means and ends in action" (Dewey 1897). Dewey stresses the "tremendous importance" of effort quite beautifully in the following manner:

> [The importance of effort] is due to the fact that effort is the critical point of progress in action, arising whenever old habits are in process of reconstruction, or of adaptation to new conditions; unless they are so readapted, life is given over to the rule of conservatism, routine, and over-inertia. (Dewey 1897)

I hope Dewey's claim here resonates with readers, as I believe it captures well how effort is necessary for *all* of mankind's discoveries and creations—whether incredible or seemingly unimportant.

Whatever purpose one feels they themself or humanity at large has, it is surely impossible to fulfill without effort. Effort's extrinsic role of progress in action is valuable[1]. Furthermore, I claim effort is valuable in and of itself. Though effort often carries with it a sense of aversiveness—more on this later—there is evidence that practicing effort reduces this aversiveness through a phenomenon called "learned

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[1] Effort is also cited by psychologists to add value in many specific ways. For example, the "IKEA effect" describes the phenomenon where "People value products that they successfully build or prepare themselves more than identical products that are ready-made or prepared by others." (Inzlicht et al. 2018) For details concerning this and other additions of value made by effort, see the referenced Inzlicht paper.

industriousness". "To the extent that effort tends to be rewarded, effort itself comes to predict reward (as a secondary reinforcer), thereby reducing its aversiveness." (Inzlicht et al. 2018).

Have you heard?

In late 2022, OpenAI shook the world with the release of their AI chatbot ChatGPT. While AI research has been conducted since as early as the 1950s, the release of ChatGPT gave most people their first look at real-world artificial intelligence. There I was, deep in my studies for final exams, when a friend said to me: "Have you heard of ChatGPT? It's this new AI software that lets you generate pages of text with only a simple prompt. I just used it to write my entire final essay for microbiology." Though I was familiar with the general idea of text-based generative AI as an undergraduate computer science major, I didn't really believe my friend. It was only after I played around with ChatGPT myself that I realized—this is going to be big.

I give this personal "flashbulb memory" anecdote for a few reasons. First, generative AI *is* unbelievable. The ability for a computer program to spit out human-sounding responses like ChatGPT was something of science fiction. But this wasn't HAL from *2001: A Space Odyssey*; this was a real program that I was really interacting with. Second, ChatGPT seemed to come out of nowhere to most people. The Google Trends interest graph for search terms like "AI" or "Artificial Intelligence" since November 2022 seems almost vertical compared to years prior. Finally, and most importantly, ChatGPT *can* write a passable final essay for a college microbiology course. Sure, there are ways to detect AI generated text[2] in many cases, but we find ourselves looking down the barrel of a very serious question: What happens when humans lose "The Imitation Game"?[3] And for our purposes here: What threats do generative AI models pose to human effort?

Theft of Effort

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[2] A major area of current AI research is focused on the ability to detect when content has been produced by AI. This research has applications such as combating "fake news" or assigning ownership of digitally created works.

[3] "The Imitation Game" is the original name for the "Turing Test", a thought experiment devised in 1950 by Dr. Alan Turing to assess a machine's ability to exhibit human-like intelligence. In the experiment, a game is played between two competitors (one human and one machine) and an interrogator. The interrogator asks each competitor a series of questions. The machine is said to "win" the game and pass the Turing Test if it can fool the interrogator such that they cannot determine which competitor was the machine.

Those who watched the opening ceremony of the 2024 Paris Olympics may have seen Google's TV advertisement—titled "Dear Sydney"—for their generative AI chatbot Gemini. In the ad, a father asks Gemini to "help my daughter write a letter telling Sydney [McLaughlin-Levrone] how inspiring she is and be sure to mention that my daughter plans on breaking her world record one day. (She says sorry, not sorry.)". It was appalling, quite frankly, to see one of the front-runners in generative AI development pitch Olympics viewers on the idea of having an AI model generate a letter to a child's favorite athlete in place of that child—and I wasn't alone. At the time of writing this article, the YouTube video for "Dear Sydney" has 1,727 likes and over 25,000 dislikes (Google 2024); if nothing else, the shocking ratio of 1350% more dislikes than likes should be cause for consideration.

"Dear Sydney" highlights the general marketing strategy of generative AI as a tool for ease and efficiency. It also highlights, however, the theft of effortful experience that comes with generative AI use. In the example of "Dear Sydney", we ought to consider the purpose of writing a letter to one's favorite athlete, specifically as a child. While the kind gesture towards the athlete is obvious, there is much more going on. Sitting down to write with one's child provides an opportunity for several positive experiences for both the parent and child. The child develops their writing skills, the parent gains insight into their child's interests, and both benefit from the time spent bonding together. In a time when children and adults alike are seeing an increase in screen-time and associated mental health decline (Wang et al. 2019), the loss of time spent bonding over letter-writing surely does not help the problem. Having Gemini write this letter robs both the parent and child of the experience's aforementioned benefits.

The argument may be raised that generative AI changes, rather than eliminates, an effortful experience like writing to one's favorite athlete. This argument warrants consideration, as one might consider using generative AI over human cognition changes only a small part of the experience; the ad only shows Gemini drafting the letter and not the potential editing process, physical writing process, etc. However, I believe a disturbing message is being sent that is echoed across AI advertisement: "Why take the time and effort associated with the experience when AI can do it for you?". These companies may not explicitly be selling the "letter-writing process" or the stargazing, cooking, or construction processes seen in Meta's "Expand your world with Meta AI" ad (Meta 2024), but I think implicitly they are. Why research stellar phenomena? Why learn to cook? Why plan a construction project? Generative AI is promising effortless experience, but experience shouldn't necessarily be effortless. The knowledge of the cosmos, the ability to cook, the creative and technical

skills associated with architecture, all lost to avoid effort. Obviously, there is nuance here; experience shouldn't have to require expertise, nor should experts be barred from a simple shortcut now and then. However, I think this message that effort is something to be eliminated is wrong.

The Easy Way Out

The reason I believe people are drawn to using generative AI over "doing the work" for themselves is simple—it's so easy. With an ever-increasing push to move faster and faster as technology progresses, it takes more and more effort to keep up. Additionally, it is quite easy to find oneself averse to effort. Practicing effort always takes some combination of physical, mental, and emotional energy, which can easily drain a person without careful care and consideration of these respective states. To make matters worse, "breaktime" has been overtaken by screen-time; though activates like scrolling through social media or playing mobile games may seem like a break, these activities keep our minds engaged and away from relaxation[4]. All things considered, the draw of using generative AI to fulfill our responsibilities is easily understood.

However, I don't believe AI is "the easy way out" we may consider it to be. Life has always and will always require some amount of effort to be well lived. AI usage not only eliminates effortful experience as seen in the "Dear Sydney" example, but it also reduces our capacity to undertake future efforts. We have already discussed "learned industriousness", but a similar phenomenon is also at work. The concept of "learned helplessness" is a largely understood phenomenon in psychology, where an individual stops trying to change their situation— even if they have the ability to do so—when previous attempts to do so have failed. The phenomenon usually applies directly to removing oneself from negative, uncontrollable situations, but I believe a similar if not identical phenomenon applies to our discussion of generative AI use and effort. We all face unavoidable efforts—think drafting emails to colleagues, writing school essays, etc.—that are often viewed as negative. As we begin to offload these efforts to generative AI, whether we feel we don't have the time or are unable to accomplish such efforts, we teach ourselves that we *do not* have time or *cannot* accomplish similar efforts in the future.

An even stronger and more obvious phenomenon is at play too; we cannot improve our ability to accomplish challenging efforts if we do not practice. The adage of "practice makes perfect" (or "practice makes

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[4] Increased screen-time can (or already has) become a problem in its own right, but I will omit a deeper discussion of this point for now.

you better" if you wish to be more precise) certainly carries truth. Using generative AI to write those emails or that microbiology essay takes away any opportunity to practice one's writing skills through these efforts. I believe this is a major threat to education, creativity, and any other area where routine practice is omitted in place of generative AI usage. The easy way is often not the right way, and while gains in efficiency may be enticing in the short term, we must weigh these gains against what is lost for efficiency's sake.

The Right Way In

So far, we have discussed threats posed by increasing AI usage. I will not, however, make the argument that AI use is entirely bad or threatening to humans. Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence (HCAI) is an approach to developing AI systems with, as the name suggests, a human-centered emphasis. HCAI encompasses many areas of consideration: restoring or improving human abilities rather than displacing them, promoting human creativity, defending human rights, protecting the environment, ensuring safety and transparency, the list goes on. The only ethical way to continue AI development, in my view, is to put humanity first through a human-centered approach. A failure in this regard, however profitable to company shareholders, will spell disaster for AI's most important stakeholder—humanity.

As for positive ethical developments in AI there are many. The most important that comes to mind is AI as an accessibility resource. A pair of smart glasses or smartphone app that "sees" products on a grocery store shelf, for example, and "tells" users what is in front of them can serve to enable greater independence for visually impaired individuals. An app that translates distorted speech patterns to fluent conversation can enhance communication for individuals with speech impairments. Complex language can be simplified to help individuals with learning disabilities better understand difficult content. Each of these cases demonstrate how AI has the power to create a more accessible and inclusive world, allowing individuals to overcome all kinds of obstacles that disabilities can create[5].

Another (potentially) positive use of AI is that of big data analysis. AI is a powerful tool for analyzing massive data sets that a human would struggle to complete alone. I say potentially because AI will often generate

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[5] We must also be mindful of the unintentional discrimination that AI can cause. An AI-powered decision-making system, for example, may not account for the unique needs presented by an individual's disability. Discrimination of any kind, whether based on disability or any aspect of personal identity, must be actively fought against in the pursuit of ethical, human-centered artificial intelligence development.

a biased analysis due to a lack of contextual understanding. For this reason, HCAI requires data analysis never be undertaken by AI without careful human judgement. That being said, AI is capable of generating reports on data analysis faster than humans alone. The importance of fast analysis cannot be understated in fields like medicine, where faster analysis means faster cures and more lives saved. Again, we cannot remove humans from the equation; it is too risky to go about developing drugs or other treatments without a human in the driver's seat.

So, where does HCAI fit into our discussion of human effort? Ethical AI development and use requires a human-centered approach, and with it, human effort. Always. Human effort is required to learn how individuals with disabilities can benefit from AI. Human effort is required to reduce biases in AI data analysis. Artificial intelligence models are not human. They do not "think" or "know" or "understand" or "feel" like humans do. Though I did not give an in-depth discussion of AI's impacts across areas such as education or creativity (of which there are plenty), human effort is just as necessary here too. Education requires human effort to retain knowledge and gain understanding of content. Creativity, especially in the fine arts, can only be bolstered through human effort; without it, humans are delegating—rather than practicing—creativity. A human-centered approach to AI is *crucial* in avoiding theft of effort, as an approach that does not consider what humanity might lose to AI will certainly neglect the importance of human effort. HCAI is "the right way in" to world where AI enhances, rather than replaces, humanity and human effort.

Conclusion

The invention of generative AI models is undoubtedly a major human technological achievement. These models are fascinating, as humanity has never seen a challenger like AI. However, as with any technological advancement, it remains ever important to consider the implications of AI prevalence to humanity. Examples of generative AI crafting a heartfelt letter or passable college essays raise questions of worth in human effort and what is lost when this effort is bypassed. Human effort is important, and in order to avoid AI's theft of effort, we must employ a human-centered approach to AI use and development. Otherwise, we open the door for AI to rob humanity of opportunity after opportunity to practice effort and experience the value these efforts provide.

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The iFunny Deformity: Investigating Discourse Community Ethics in The World of Memes
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Abstract

Discourse communities play a vital role in shaping communication, values, and shared meaning in both online and offline spaces. This paper examines the ethical implications of one such community, iFunny, a meme-sharing platform that thrives on user-generated content and intertextual humor. Applying John M. Swales's eight criteria for discourse communities, this study demonstrates how iFunny meets these benchmarks while simultaneously fostering an environment that raises ethical concerns, such as the propagation of hate speech and harmful cultural bias. Key theoretical concepts from Naming What We Know: Classroom Edition—including ethical writing choices, intertextuality, and the evolving nature of texts—are used to analyze iFunny's effectiveness and its failures. Through the examination of meme artifacts and framing iFunny as an ethical case study, this paper argues for the critical need of ethical accountability in digital communities and highlights the broader implications of unchecked media ethics. This study underscores the power of discourse communities to influence cultural norms while emphasizing the importance of addressing their ethical challenges.

Keywords: discourse communities, ethical communication, meme culture, rhetorical analysis, online accountability, iFunny

Introduction

As stated by Kevin Roozen, "Writing is a Social and Rhetorical Activity,"[1] and one way of socializing with writing is through discourse communities. Discourse communities are an integral part of sharing information between groups of people, achieving a broad common goal, and enhancing an individual's communication and writing skills. However, not all discourse communities are ethically sound, and the nature of the content they produce can raise important moral questions. In this article, the discourse community of focus will be iFunny, for its unethicality and immoral culture. While iFunny meets the criteria for an

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[1] Kevin Roozen, "Writing is a Social and Rhetorical Activity" in *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, ed. Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, 17-19.

effective discourse community, its content often perpetuates harmful and dangerous messaging. This article provides a description of the community, an overview of three key threshold concepts, an analysis of how iFunny meets discourse community criteria, and an exploration of the key concepts and their applications, supported by artifacts. It concludes with a final discussion, and frames iFunny as an ethical case study, emphasizing the responsibility of discourse communities to address morally problematic content.

Introduction: Patient Zero, the Disease Sets In

For background, iFunny is a social mobile application dedicated to entertainment via the creation and sharing of memes. Memes are typically funny images, videos, or gifs with cultural contexts that are distributed through the Internet. iFunny was created in 2011 by a Russian company called FunCorp, with their office located in Limassol, Cyprus. There are, as of October 2024, over 16 million active users, and the app is rated for ages 17 and up. Because of its local, national, and international reach, iFunny is considered a 'folocal' discourse community. Since the platform is entirely online, anyone in the world can gain access to it, so long as they meet the account age requirements. This directly affects the Northern Plains region because of its scattered population and abundance of rural areas, which can lead individuals turning to the Internet as an easier method of connecting to new communities.

Though originally intended to be entertaining, iFunny has devolved into a degenerate and derogatory platform, known for adopting the 'Fight Club' mentality: no one talks about iFunny outside the app. This self-imposed silence allows the community to perpetuate its ideals without outside interference or risk of shutdown, maintaining a fringe and insular platform. While iFunny itself has a very low barrier of entry to its community, finding the community can be difficult without leveraging other avenues, such as word of mouth, digging through Reddit posts, or being invited to a Discord server. Reddit is a social media platform that utilizes a bulletin board and post thread system, comprised of a multitude of communities called 'subreddits', and Discord is another social media platform that utilizes an invite-only server system to voice or text chat. Because there are only a few methods of connecting to iFunny, its culture is notorious for hosting unethical content within the hidden obscurity of itself and other small, isolated, or private communities. This emphasizes the containment and control over its discourse, referring to Appendix Figures A1, A2, and A3 as examples of external iFunny discussions.

This controlled discourse within iFunny provides a basis for analyzing its community through key concepts in writing and rhetoric. To

complete this analysis, three main concepts from the book *Naming What We Know, Classroom Edition* by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle[2] will be central. The first concept will be "Writing Involves Making Ethical Choices", the second "Texts Get Their Meaning from Other Texts", and lastly, "Text is an Object Outside of Oneself That Can Be Improved and Developed." Integrating concepts such as these is crucial when examining communities, as some, like those on iFunny, fail to prioritize quality writing or ethical considerations in their content.

Recognizing such communities, understanding their origins, analyzing how they operate, and assessing the potential harm they can cause are key to addressing the ethical challenges they pose to others. Keeping these concepts in mind when creating content can enhance both the quality and ethical impact of one's work, offering solutions to issues not only in the writing realm, but also within everyday life. iFunny serves as a case study of what everyday discourse communities ought not to look like, and why it would be an unsuitable source to derive inspiration and information from, since they perpetuate harmful rhetoric and behavior within their discourse community.

The Anatomy of a Discourse Community: iFunny's Rotten Insides

Before delving into each key concept, it is necessary to establish that iFunny meets the criteria of a discourse community. Referencing John M. Swales's *The Concept of Discourse Community: Some Recent Personal History*[3], this section examines how iFunny fulfills the eight defining characteristics. Beyond demonstrating compliance with these expectations, the analysis will also highlight some examples where certain elements are distorted or corrupted, revealing how the community's practices can undermine the very principles that define a discourse community.

First, there must be a broadly agreed upon set of goals within the community. For iFunny, the primary goal would be to create content in the form of memes (images, gifs, videos) with the intention of entertaining users. As the app has aged, additional subgoals have risen to the surface, and unfortunately, some of these subgoals can be considered dangerous or morally misaligned with quality writing through the perpetuation of

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[2] Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizbeth Wardle, *Naming What We Know: Classroom Edition*, Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2016.

[3] John M. Swales, "The Concept of Discourse Community: Recent Personal History," Composition Forum, Fall 2017, https://compositionforum.com/issue/37/swales-retrospective.php#:~:text=This%20article%20reflects%20upon%20my%20thirty-year.

harmful ideologies. That includes extreme, offensive, and unethical content. Below is an example of the clear divergence from the goal of creating constructive and quality material, and while it is indeed offensive, this is a rather tame example compared to some other content that is spread through iFunny, such as videos of uncensored human and animal harm or death, predatory or threatening speech and behaviors, and other explicit material.

Figure 1. *A four-panel meme from the Dolan comic series depicting Dolan Duck and Gooby (parodies of Disney original characters Donald Duck and Goofy). In this scene, Dolan is shown holding an explosive device outside a kindergarten building, implying an act of violence. Gooby, concerned for the safety of the children, says "dolan please think of the children." Dolan responds with "okay gooby" and, then in the third panel, is depicted with an exaggerated bulge, implying arousal at the thought of causing harm. In the final panel, Dolan faces the viewer with a smile, saying "lol", indicating his indifference and enjoyment in the disturbing situation. The comics were originally published on Kuvalauta, a Finnish image board site in 2010 by Sakolut, a Finnish creator.*

Second, there must be mechanisms of intercommunication among its members. iFunny has multiple methods of accomplishing this by using smiles (equivalent to 'likes') and open comments on posts, encouraging a user subscription function, and utilizing public or private chat rooms. There is also a feature in which you can create your own memes within the app and upload them. While these features promote interaction, they also allow for the rapid spread of unethical content with very little oversight and raise the concern for regulation.

Third, there must be participatory mechanisms to provide information and feedback. iFunny meets this standard by giving feedback on content through comments, having chat rooms (some with specific intentions), and creating popular memes that critique the app's culture. Additionally, the app store also allows comments and feedback on the app's functionality and user satisfaction, as well as shared Discord servers for iFunny users to interact on. As an example, below is an image of the comment section referring to the post of Figure 1. This underscores the clear lack of ethical awareness, as there are multiple avenues for providing feedback, many of which are not being clearly utilized for correcting unethical behavior and content.

Figure 2. *The comment section of the Dolan comic image shown in Figure 1. User im__here_for_memes_mostly says "A relic from a time long past. The predecessors to what ifunny is today." User BARRY_OBUNGUS says "We used to have memes, real memes", and user BaitMaster3000 shares a*

reaction meme depicting an edited image of Joe Biden, who is smiling with a suggestive face and his tongue out.

Fourth, a discourse community must utilize one or more genres within the community. iFunny is exclusively used for unfiltered entertainment through the genre of memes. As it has grown in popularity, various users upload memes that cater to specific interests within the community, which includes but is not limited to: inappropriate memes (i.e., pornography, violence, NSFW), racist, homophobic, ableist, misogynist memes, involuntary celibacy, far-right extremist, antisemitic, political memes, or simply dad jokes and light-hearted cat memes. Additionally, each post is equipped with tags that a user can click on to find content of similar nature, creating a web of interconnected genres. There are thousands of 'curated' users which one can subscribe to, but a shared characteristic among all of them is that their visual media is in either meme, gif, or video format.

Fifth, a discourse community must acquire a specific lexis. iFunny typically leverages general Internet slang, common amongst other sites such as Reddit or 4Chan, another social media site that utilizes a bulletin board and post thread system, which includes "TL;DR" (too long; didn't read), "TFW" (the feeling when), or "LFG" (lets f***ing go), and etc. However, it has also adopted other popular catchphrases, one being "Part of the ship, part of the crew", which originally came from Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie series and was meant to imply that once you join (the app community), you can never leave.

Another could be "death in the collective", which refers to seeing unexpected graphic or violent videos in the 'Collective' section of iFunny, where all the non-featured content is housed. Appendix Figures A4a & A4b are an example of content found in the 'Featured', A5a & A5b of the 'Collective' to compare. Seeing a "death in the collective" happened so often that the phrase became coined in the early stages of iFunny's existence, and while it enhances communal bonding through humor, it also normalized the desensitizing of graphic content and dismissing any concerns of foul content. This is especially so when the 'Collective' content leaks into the 'Featured' memes and still gathers attention. Appendix Figures A6a & A6b as an example of 'leaked' content.

Sixth, there must be a threshold of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discoursal expertise. iFunny accomplishes this by enlisting moderators on the site, whose job is to both remove unsuitable content or comments and help determine what content is promoted to the 'Featured' section. They are identified by having a blue check mark next to their usernames. You can also identify paying users on the free app via

multiple color options of the usernames, which costs approximately $3.00 a month. However, while moderators are tasked with upholding community standards, the effectiveness of their oversight can be compromised by both the sheer volume of content to review, as well as the moderator's acceptance of what content is considered suitable for the community.

Seventh, there must be a developed sense of 'silential relations', which is a style of implied communication with nuanced interpretation. On iFunny, users can gauge the popularity of posts through "smiles", equivalent of "likes", which implies which content is favorable and worthy of being "Featured" without requiring written feedback. This system of communication effectively promotes certain types of humor or content, including phrases such as 'would'; originally spelled out as "10/10 would smash", which basically objectifies individuals and trivializes consent. Unfortunately, many of the silential relations on iFunny reinforce inappropriate attitudes or beliefs.

Lastly, is that there is a developed horizon of expectation. The value system and activity rhythms are decided by the general iFunny public and moderators. The app features multiple pages, including 'Featured', 'Collective', 'Subscriptions', 'Explore', 'Profile', 'Chat', and 'Map'. Viral memes are liked by thousands of users, prompting moderators to elevate them from Collective to the Featured page. This hierarchy not only showcases popular content, but also reflects the community's values, most often prioritizing sensationalism over quality. The Explore page functions as a data library, allowing users to navigate through various tags and users. However, this system can continue sharing harmful ideas when popular content aligns with negative values. The chat feature fosters large group interactions, up to and beyond 500 users per room, which can potentially normalize inappropriate behavior within extensive discussions.

Additionally, the Map page aims to connect users in real life, raising ethical questions about user safety, and the implications of fostering in-person relationships within a community that harbors toxic content.

Key Threshold Concept 1: iFunny's Descent into Decay

Now that iFunny is a confirmed discourse community, the first applied concept would be "Writing Involves Making Ethical Choices," which was selected for several reasons. This concept expresses the importance of thinking critically about what topics are ethical to write on, the way in which they are written or delivered, and choosing an intended audience. These are all examples of the ethical decisions that writers and

content creators must make when in the process of creating. Being aware of how content will affect the audience, how it is interpreted, and what its intentions are determine what kind of writer one may be perceived as.

In the example of iFunny, one can consider much of the content and many of the users to be unethical, because the platform allows graphic, extreme, and unsafe material to be both created and publicly distributed in mass volumes. It serves as a powerful case study of neglected ethical considerations, because it both accepts and highlights pornographic, racist, misogynistic, and otherwise extreme content. This can be perceived as not only morally destructive and hateful, but also dangerous when ethical concerns are not addressed as a community or society. This is especially relevant when such content is digested by younger audiences. The following artifacts were selected to illustrate the first concept, making ethical choices, by providing examples that both ignore and adhere to this principle.

Figure 3. *A meme employing ableist, sexist, and transphobic language to mock numerous Democratic political figures, including Beto O'Rourke, Jerry Nadler, Adam Schiff, Rachel Levine, Joe Biden, Nanci Pelosi, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Maxine Waters, Stacey Abrams, and Elizabeth Warren.*

IFUNNY USERS IN A NUTSHELL

I use Ifunny to start fights in the comment section

I use iFunny to look at porn and weird anime stuff

I post original memes

I just repub features and comment reaction images

ifunny.c

Figure 4. *A meme depicting four men, two of which interact with iFunny in a negative way, and two interacting in a positive way, according to the meme creator. The "Soyjack" and "Chad" drawings themselves were published in 2010 by Christian Grodecki, a Polish creator, and became an extremely common meme format on iFunny.*

Figure 4 was made as a satirical meme, making fun of the iFunny users that create controversial content in hopes of starting arguments ("ragebaiting") or spreading inappropriate material, creating a toxic environment on the app. It also supports the users who create new content and interact positively with the posts, making a healthier atmosphere. The guidelines of iFunny are incredibly lax and very simple to work around, which in turn allows many users to make memes and comments that may be considered highly unethical. Users that could have been banned from 4Chan or Reddit, slightly more regulated and moderated sites, may find iFunny as a haven to share and spread content that is highly offensive in different realms, whether that be misogynistic, racist, ableist, antisemitic, visually/verbally graphic material, or otherwise extreme. This artifact makes a commentary of this aspect, using a highly popular meme format, and it comes from an iFunny user that claims to share this opinion. Figures

A7, A8, A9, and A10 in the Appendix are a few different examples that share a similar sentiment or attitude towards the iFunny userbase.

Ultimately, iFunny showcases the importance of making ethical choices within discourse communities and highlights the consequences when such choices are disregarded. Platforms like iFunny illustrate the real-world impact that writers, creators, and communities can have, both positively and negatively, on their audiences. In failing to enforce ethical standards, iFunny fosters an environment that normalizes dangerous perspectives and makes it difficult for users to engage constructively. This calls for discourse communities to adopt a shared commitment to ethical engagement, ensuring that content not only entertains or informs, but also respects the impact it has on individual users and society. Developing healthy, responsible, and inclusive interactions should always be the goal of any moral discourse community.

Key Threshold Concept 2: Mutations of Morality

The second applied concept is "Texts Get Their Meaning from Other Texts," which was chosen due to the prevalence of meme formats on iFunny. It is widely recognized that many human creations draw inspiration from preexisting ideas and often reference other contexts. Memes are known for their highly referential nature, with much of the humor being derived from remixing or recontextualizing preexisting content. "If you know, you know", or "You just had to be there" attitudes are constant across the platform, and if someone is not on iFunny rather

consistently, they won't have the background knowledge necessary to enjoy or understand the meme, leaving them left out of the context.

Much of the preexisting content found on iFunny relies heavily on adopting an extreme perspective, and a substantial portion of the iFunny source material is rooted in detrimental ideologies, including Nazism, homophobia, white supremacy, misogyny-based involuntary celibacy groups, and so forth. This creates a cycle of reinforcing, resharing, and normalizing harmful perspectives within the discourse community. The below artifact(s) represent the second concept, text gets its meaning from other texts.

Figure 5. *A layered meme depicting a cat asking to sit on its owner's lap, comprised of pictures 5b, 5c, and the face of a cat.*

Much of the content on iFunny is derivative of previous memes, events, or media, and can come from other unrelated platforms. Memes often layer on top of one another, and without the prior background contexts, one might not understand what they are looking at or why it is funny. Some other examples of referential memes are in the Appendix under Figures A11 and A12, but below is a general dissection of Picture 5a to give a more in-depth understanding.

The background image, or Picture 5b, is originally a clip from a 1990s anime called *The Brave of Sun Fighbird*, where a humanoid character mistakes a butterfly for a bird and makes the memorable quote, "Is this a pigeon?" It has become a meme format since and has hundreds of thousands of variations. This particular variation includes another meme, Picture 5c, one deriving from the 2007 Adult Swim series *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!* skit called "Free House for You, Jim." The original image includes the subtitles for the quote "It's free real estate", but the phrase has become so popularized that the image can still be understood even when subtitles are cropped. The overall general message of Picture 5a is describing someone's cat confusing its owner's lap as free real estate, likely to take a nap on. Cats have always been a source of entertainment on the Internet, so it's no surprise that iFunny would produce intertextual cat content, but problems arise when cats are no longer the focus and someone instead looks to reference *Mein Kampf,* for example.

Thus, it is crucial to have a discerning understanding of the information one consumes. iFunny demonstrates the danger of neglecting the origins and meanings of referenced texts. When creators fail to critically examine the source material they build upon, knowingly or not, they contribute to and perpetuate the spread of unethical and dangerous ideas on a broader scale.

Key Threshold Concept 3: iFunny's Malignant Meme Mitosis

The third applied concept is "Text is an Object Outside of Oneself That Can Be Improved and Developed" and was selected to illustrate the continuous creation and evolution of content. When individuals publicly share their content, it can serve as inspiration for others to produce similar or contrasting content, while also influencing the platform on which the content is shared. Consequently, this can further a particular agenda that may not prioritize the creation of high-quality and moral content, or it can introduce conflicting perspectives that may be helpful in reestablishing some of the more ethical concepts discussed prior. In such cases, the focus is often on the artistic output rather than the individual artist.

When applying this lesson to iFunny, the process of content evolution often leads to the amplification of moral-lacking perspectives, and harmful ideologies can be strengthened through the constant reproduction of memes that derive from misogyny, racism, and other damaging beliefs. This platform emphasizes the potential dangers of reiterating unregulated messages; however, it also showcases the opportunities available for creators to improve content and foster a healthier community through the same system. Below is an example of this concept.
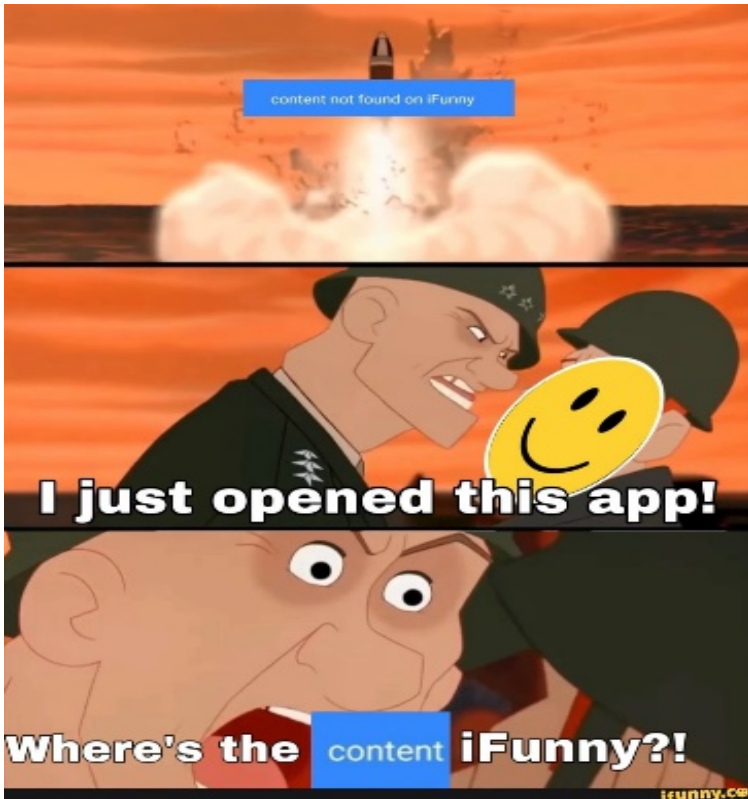
Figure 6: *A meme criticizing the functionality of iFunny's app through series of still images from a clip of the 1999 film Iron Giant. The blue texts and smiling face are images directly clipped from the iFunny app itself.*

This artifact was chosen for the 'text outside oneself' subconcept to highlight the idea that the creator of the meme is not always as important

as the act of creating and publicly sharing. It is a critique of the iFunny app bugs, one which makes it difficult to load and view content. This artifact was shared app-wide, became Featured, and pushed iFunny developers to update the bugs for the app, which shows that the meme was effective in bringing attention to an issue and resulting in app changes. It was not so much about the artist, but rather the art, and that the art had a significant effect on improving the app processes outside of the creator. This could also be considered as a performative style of media, and more examples of this include Figures A13, A14, and A15 in the Appendix.

This concept reveals both the opportunities and risks of treating text as an evolving object within online communities. On platforms like iFunny, the constant recreation and reinterpretation of content can either instigate change or reinforce harmful ideologies. The nature of shared content takes on a life of its own, becoming a larger part of impacting a platform's culture and user perspectives. While this process could lead to constructive outcomes, such as encouraging platform improvements or ethical debates, it also carries the risk of perpetuating destructive viewpoints when left unregulated. Recognizing content as an object outside of oneself challenges creators to consider their impact, and the responsibility their community holds in shaping a more positive and ethical culture.

Discussion: Addressing the Ethical Epidemic

Discourse communities can be pervasive, especially online, where numerous groups foster behaviors that may be deemed unacceptable in offline settings. There have already been multiple instances of real-life situations being linked to the dangerous nature of participating in immoral online discourse communities. Over the past half-decade, several individuals associated with iFunny accounts have been reported or arrested for engaging in such extreme activities, and openly shared their intentions online. These include promoting Neo-Nazi recruitment propaganda[4], issuing death threats against government officials[5], federal

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[4] Mack Lamoureux and Zach Kammel, "Neo-Nazi Terror Groups Are Using iFunny to Recruit," Vice, November 14, 2019, https://www.vice.com/en/article/neo-nazi-terror-groups-are-using-ifunny-to-recruit/.

5 Dan Mangan, "Man with a van Containing Guns and Explosives Possibly Planned Joe Biden Assassination, Court Records Say," CNBC, October 24, 2020, https://www.cnbc.com/2020/10/23/alexander-treisman-plotted-joe-biden-assassination-court-records-say.html.

agents[6], and women's health clinics[7], as well as committing hate crimes, such as the murder of Blaze Bernstein[8].

iFunny, as an application that represents a discourse community, often prioritizes the sheer quantity of content over its quality, contradicting the pursuit of meaningful or constructive engagement. This serves as a prime example of a flawed discourse community, where the normalization of radical ideologies, inappropriate material, and toxic behaviors destroys the integrity of the platform, and can potentially result in real-life threats. Such an environment directly undermines the three key concepts previously discussed: ethical decision-making, the intertextuality of content, and the continuous improvement of texts. The disregard for these principles within iFunny's community illustrates the adverse consequences that arise when content creators and moderators neglect the ethical effects of their actions.

The presence of radical and violent content within this community not only impacts the internal culture but also has broader societal implications. For aspiring writers and content creators, recognizing the ethical choices made in their work, including the sources of inspiration, their interpretation, and their potential effects on audiences, is crucial. By actively considering these factors, creators can help shape online spaces that respect diverse voices and foster a culture of responsibility. This approach contributes to the development of healthier discourse communities that prioritize positive, meaningful interactions.

To promote healthier online environments, users and readers must remain vigilant about the content they consume and share, understanding that their participation plays a role in shaping the broader culture of these communities. By actively rejecting harmful memes and advocating for content aligned with ethical standards, participants can help curb the spread of dangerous ideologies and support spaces that encourage constructive and respectful discourse. Ultimately, fostering collective

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[6] Steve Almasy and Dave Alsup, "Feds Say in Court Docs That Teen Threatened Agents and Had Stockpile of Weapons and Ammo," CNN, August 14, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/14/us/ohio-man-firearms-charges/index.html.

[7] Northern District of Illinois United States Attorney's Office, "Chicago Man Convicted of Threatening Violence at Women's Reproductive Clinic," Press Release - United States Department of Justice, November 9, 2023, https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndil/pr/chicago-man-convicted-threatening-violence-womens-reproductive-clinic.

[8] Ari Feldman, "Who Is Blaze Bernstein's Accused Killer - and Did He Turn to Hate Online?" The Forward, January 18, 2018, https://forward.com/news/392334/who-is-blaze-bernsteins-accused-killer-and-did-he-turn-to-hate-online/.
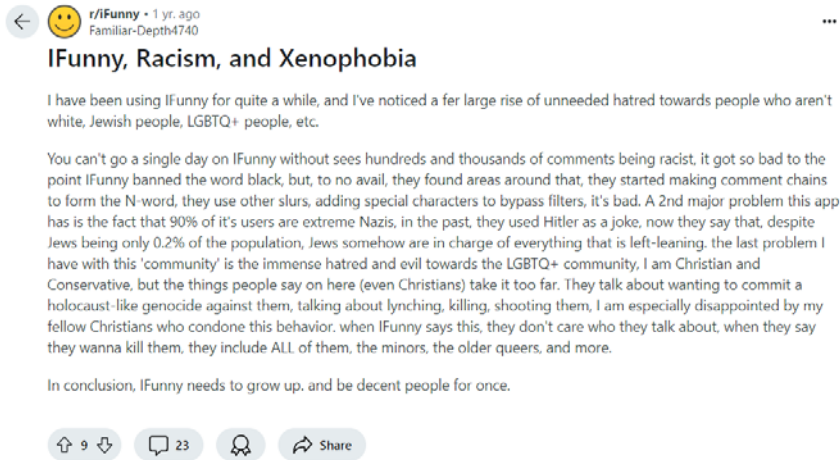
awareness of a community's presence, their behaviors, cultural influences, and digital footprints online can lead to a shared commitment of integrity and positive engagement.

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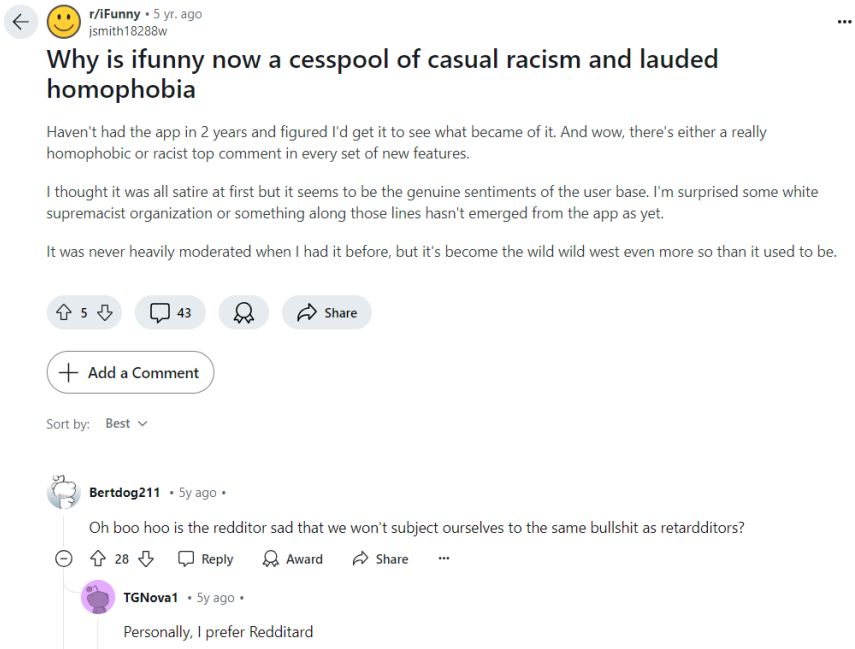
Appendix

r/iFunny • 1 yr. ago
Familiar-Depth4740

IFunny, Racism, and Xenophobia

I have been using IFunny for quite a while, and I've noticed a fer large rise of unneeded hatred towards people who aren't white, Jewish people, LGBTQ+ people, etc.

You can't go a single day on IFunny without sees hundreds and thousands of comments being racist, it got so bad to the point IFunny banned the word black, but, to no avail, they found areas around that, they started making comment chains to form the N-word, they use other slurs, adding special characters to bypass filters, it's bad. A 2nd major problem this app has is the fact that 90% of it's users are extreme Nazis, in the past, they used Hitler as a joke, now they say that, despite Jews being only 0.2% of the population, Jews somehow are in charge of everything that is left-leaning. the last problem I have with this 'community' is the immense hatred and evil towards the LGBTQ+ community, I am Christian and Conservative, but the things people say on here (even Christians) take it too far. They talk about wanting to commit a holocaust-like genocide against them, talking about lynching, killing, shooting them, I am especially disappointed by my fellow Christians who condone this behavior. when IFunny says this, they don't care who they talk about, when they say they wanna kill them, they include ALL of them, the minors, the older queers, and more.

In conclusion, IFunny needs to grow up. and be decent people for once.

⇧ 9 ⇩   💬 23   🏵   ↪ Share

Figure A1: *A screen shot of a Reddit post by Familiar-*

r/iFunny • 1 yr. ago
SpezIsAPissBaby0002

OH MY FUCKING GOD, IFUNNY IS 100 TIMES THE CESPOOL OF UNHINGED RANCID HATE

I was looking through (without an account) to see if Sethical is still active on here (he isn't), but then I saw a feature showing a New York Post article about that one autistic black guy Brendan Depa who viciously stomped his teacher for taking his nintendo switch, he's in court for his actions, and him living in Florida, he had a possibility of a death sentence. you gotta see the hellfire of the comment section, you guessed it, blatant racism. calling him "monkey" "ape" "n****r" and "13% of the population" (you know what that last one means). I was so disgusted.

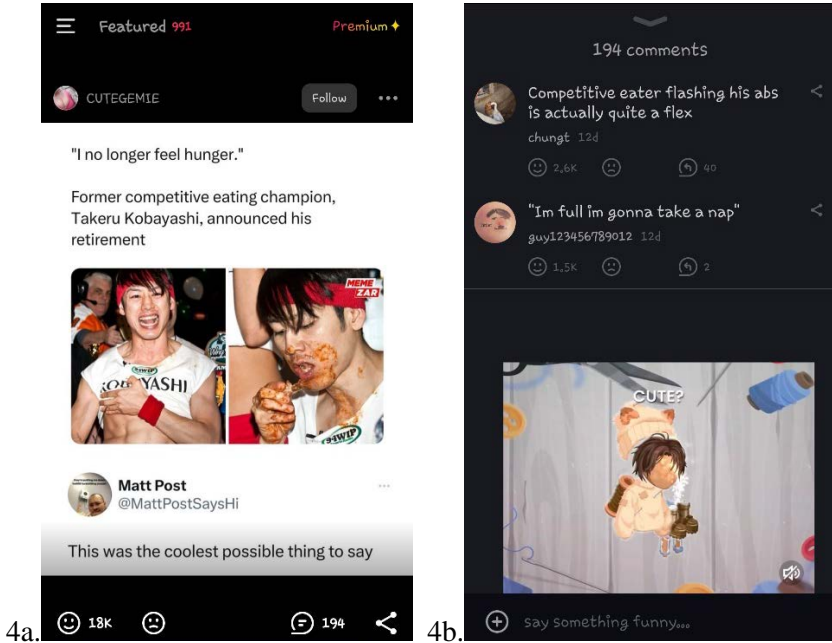⇧ 13 ⇩   💬 38   🏵   ↪ Share

Depth4740 on the r/iFunny community board.

**Figure A2.** A screenshot of a Reddit post by SpezIsAPissBaby0002 on the r/iFunny community board.

Figure A3. *A screenshot of a Reddit post by jsmith18288w on the r/iFunny community board, with commenter Bertdog211 disagreeing with the original poster. Take note of the number of upvotes between the post band the comment.*

r/iFunny • 5 yr. ago
jsmith18288w

Why is ifunny now a cesspool of casual racism and lauded homophobia

Haven't had the app in 2 years and figured I'd get it to see what became of it. And wow, there's either a really homophobic or racist top comment in every set of new features.

I thought it was all satire at first but it seems to be the genuine sentiments of the user base. I'm surprised some white supremacist organization or something along those lines hasn't emerged from the app as yet.

It was never heavily moderated when I had it before, but it's become the wild wild west even more so than it used to be.

⬆ 5 ⬇   💬 43   🏅   ↗ Share

＋ Add a Comment

Sort by: Best ⌄

Bertdog211 • 5y ago •

Oh boo hoo is the redditor sad that we won't subject ourselves to the same bullshit as retardditors?

⊖   ⬆ 28 ⬇   💬 Reply   🏅 Award   ↗ Share   ⋯

TGNova1 • 5y ago •

Personally, I prefer Redditard

4a.   4b.

Figures A4a & A4b. *A screenshot of a typical Featured meme and its comment section. Notice the 18K smiles. Figure Xa is an image of Takeru Kobayashi, a Japanese competitive eating champion during one of his competitions, and the post references the last half of his retirement quote. Figure Xb is the comment section under the post, with user chungt claiming "Competitive eater flashing his abs is actually quite a flex," and user guy123456789012 comments "Im full im gonna take a nap."*
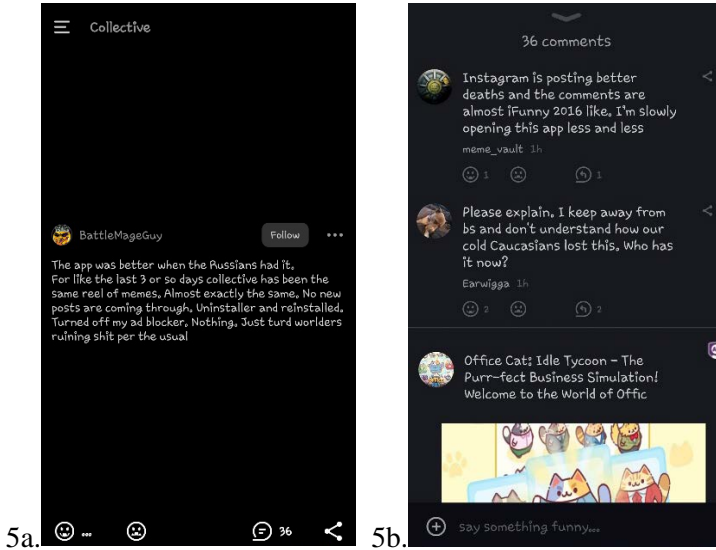
Figures A5a & A5b. *A screenshot of a typical Collective meme and its comment section. Notice the lack of numbered smiles due to low interaction. Figure Xa is a text post stating "The app [iFunny] was better when the Russians had it. For the last 3 or so days collective has been the same reel of memes. Almost exactly the same. No new posts are coming through. Uninstaller[d] and reinstalled. Turned off my ad blocker. Nothing. Just turd worlders ruining shit per the usual." Figure Xb is the comment section under the post, with user meme_vault claiming "Instagram is posting better deaths and the comments are almost iFunny 2016 like. I'm slowly opening this app less and less" and user Earwigga comments "Please explain. I keep away from bs and don't understand how our cold Caucasians lost this. Who has it now?*

6a.

6b.
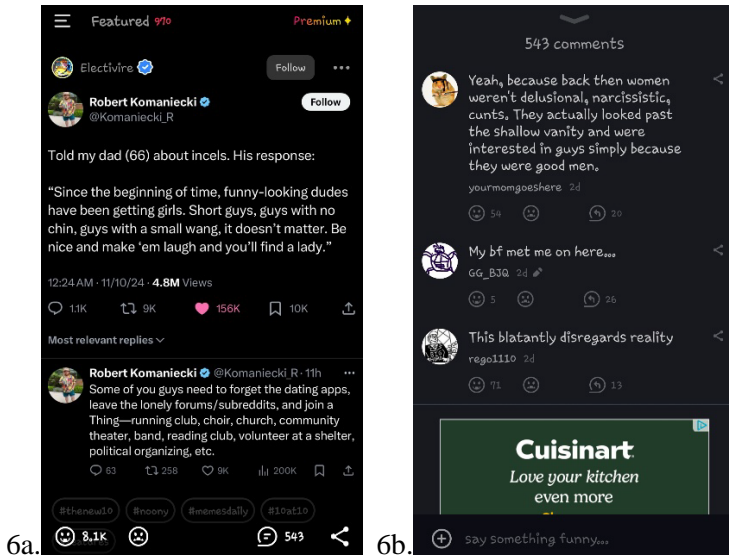
Figures A6a & A6b. *A screenshot of a 'leaked from Collective' Featured meme and its comment section. Notice the 8.1K smiles. Figure Xa is an image of an X [Twitter] post thread by @Komaniecki_R saying "Told my dad (66) [years old] about incels. His response: "Since the beginning of time, funny-looking dudes have been getting girls. Short guys, guys with no chin, guys with a small wang, it doesn't matter. Be nice and make 'em laugh and you'll find a lady." Original poster continues under their own post, saying "Some of you guys need to forget the dating apps, leave the lonely forums/subreddits, and join a Thing – running club, choir, church, community theater, band, reading club, volunteer at a shelter, political organizing, etc." Figure Xb is the comment section under the post, with the comments of focus from user yourmomgoeshere claiming "Yeah, because back then women weren't delusional, narcissistic, cunts. They actually looked past the shallow vanity and were interested in guys simply because they were good men." and user rego1110 comments "This blatantly disregards reality."*
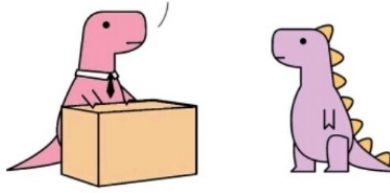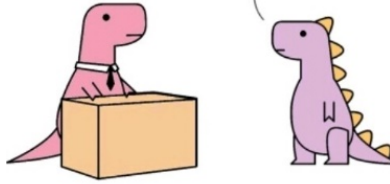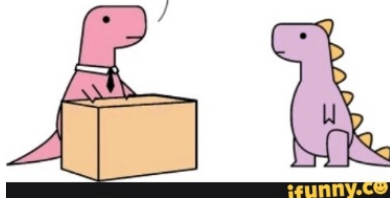
Figure A7. *A commentary meme on iFunny, art originally created by James Stewart of Dinocouch comics.*
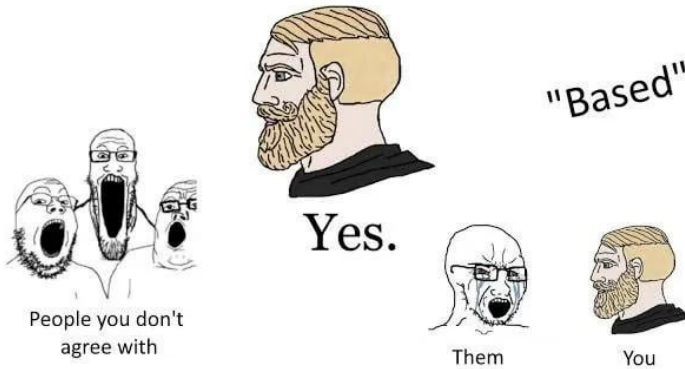
Figure A8. *A satirical, mocking meme depicting how some users leverage memes to justify and defend controversial or extreme opinions. The 'Chad' or bearded man images represents someone confidently standing by their views, often seen as bold or "based." The 'Soyjacks' or images of men with glasses, represent people who disagree, displaying them as inferior. The drawings themselves were published in 2010 by Christian Grodecki, a Polish creator.*
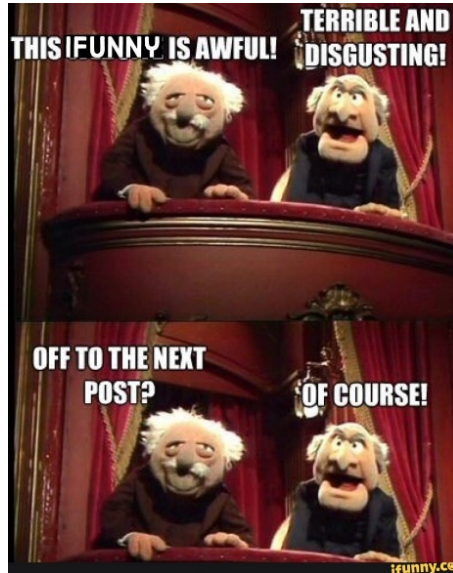
Figure A9. *An iFunny commentary meme created with the characters Statler and Waldorf, originally from The Muppet Show.*
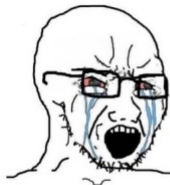
Figure A10. *Another iFunny culture critique meme, using the popular "Chad and Soyjack" format, intending to illustrate the*

behaviors of iFunny users. Drawings originally made by Christian Grodecki.

Figure A11. *A meme created with a Shutterstock image of a skeleton and multiple meme creator website watermarks, intended to be sarcastic.*

Figure A12. *A meme illustrating the difficulty of pinpointing a specific time period in history when long-standing figures, Queen Elizabeth II, are present across multipole eras. The creator used three different pieces of media, including a scene from 2000 DreamWorks movie The Road to El Dorado, some panels from a webcomic series created by Argentinian illustrator SrGrafo, and a scene from the 1999 Warner Bros. Television Animation series Batman Beyond, featuring the character Blight.*

Figure A13. *A popular meme format using still images from a clip of the singer Drake's music video "Hotline Bling", as well as the iFunny brand images for 'smiles' and 'unsmiles'.*

Figure A14. *A meme depicting a still image clip from a gif, commonly referred to as the "disintegrating emoji". It's intended to criticize the functionality of the 'meme maker' feature of the iFunny app.*

Me: Dang why does iFunny drain my battery so bad
IFunny features:
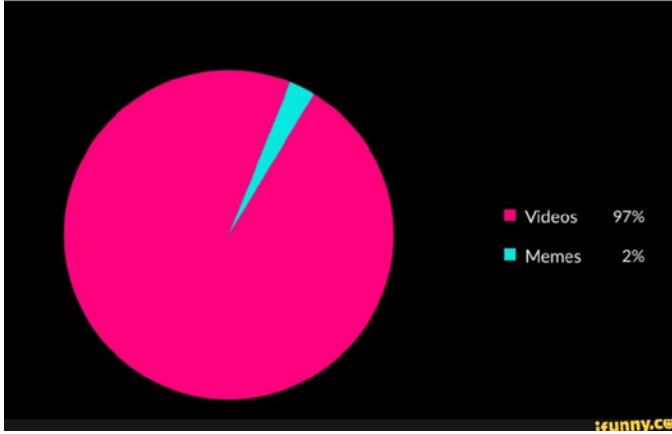
Figure A15. *A meme depicting a pie chart that criticizes the format of content that iFunny highlights.*