



A PRIORI



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The Brown Journal of Philosophy

Volume 3

*Brown University
Department of Philosophy
2018*

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A Priori: The Brown Journal of Philosophy is made possible through the generosity of the Department of Philosophy at Brown University. The Journal would like to offer special thanks to Professor Bernard Reginster, Professor Riki Heck, Benjamin Seymour, and Katherine Scanga for their indispensable contributions.

Letter from the Editor

We live in a world where we are expected to move, think, and act quickly. Our success is measured by how much we can produce. These constraints sideline thinking that takes time — and the people committed to it. Philosophy stands in opposition to these metrics: It demands to be read slowly and written slower. The methodologies that define philosophy force us to move at what can feel like a tortoise-like pace, taking into account the work of our predecessors and closely considering every conditional and counterexample. But our patience is rewarded with conceptual clarity and understanding that we can celebrate, even knowing that such progress cannot be captured in terms of productivity.

In the process of putting together this edition, we, the editors of *A Priori*, had the pleasure of reading dozens of essays and articles in philosophy. In the process of reading and re-reading these essays, we were constantly reminded that the value in philosophy often requires a measured patience to uncover. We encourage our readers to resist the constant sense of urgency as they make their way through these essays and, in doing so, to recognize that they are supporting an alternative and — hopefully — more equitable way of thinking.

Margot Witte, Editor-in-Chief

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***Is Circumventing the Euthyphro Dilemma By
Appealing to God's Nature Problematic?***

Toby Eugene Bollig

Abstract: The Euthyphro dilemma has plagued theistic metaethics and undermined moral arguments for the existence of God throughout history. More recently, this has led a number of philosophers and theologians to try to circumvent the dilemma by appealing to God's nature. I argue that these appeals are *prima facie* problematic because they lead to a metaphysical constraint on God's will, commands, and actions which seems to conflict with divine omnipotence and divine free will. However, I argue that these apparent issues can be resolved by treating metaphysical constraints to God's omnipotence in the same way that many philosophers treat logical constraints to His omnipotence and by asserting that this constraint is compatible with divine free will.

Introduction

The dichotomy between theistic metaethical theories and metaethical theories that are not based on the divine is one of oldest distinctions in metaethics – dating back to at least as far as Plato’s *Euthyphro*. Deciding between these two views has immense implications in ethics and beyond. Specifically, it impacts how we answer two of the most persistent human questions: “What is morality?” and “Does God exist?” Historical and contemporary proponents of theistic metaethics have linked their answers to these questions by offering moral arguments for the existence of God. These moral arguments play an important role in Western philosophy of religion and contemporary Judeo-Christian apologetics because, unlike many arguments from natural theology, they provide a reason to think that a perfectly good, omnibenevolent, God exists.¹ Being perfectly morally good is a necessary condition both for being worthy of worship and for being the omnipotent God commonly discussed in philosophy.² Therefore, moral arguments set forth by proponents of theistic metaethical theories offer evidence for the existence of such a being.

Divine command theory is the most prominent theistic metaethical theory in Western philosophy, and many proponents of moral arguments for the existence of God ascribe to versions of this theory.³ Consequently, they are interested in responding to criticisms of divine command theory in order to bolster their moral

arguments for the existence of God. Given that the Euthyphro dilemma is the most famous criticism of divine command theory – and of the entire theistic metaethical – project divine command theorists are particularly concerned with escaping this dilemma. To this end, many of them have developed so-called ‘modified divine command theories’, which attempt to circumvent the dilemma by appealing directly to God’s nature.

In this paper, I argue that these appeals to God’s nature to circumvent the Euthyphro dilemma impose a metaphysical constraint on God’s will, commands, and actions, creating two apparent conflicts (i) with divine omnipotence and (ii) with divine free will. Moreover, I suggest that (i) constitutes *prima facie* evidence against the existence of an omniperfect God and that (ii) provides *prima facie* evidence against the existence of a God worthy of worship. This is especially problematic because the principal aim of theistic metaethical theories is to explain how morality depends on an omniperfect God who is worthy of worship. However, I contend that this constraint is actually compatible with divine omnipotence and free will. First, I argue that modified divine command theorists may be able to reconcile this metaphysical constraint with God’s omnipotence by treating it as relevantly similar to logical impossibilities. Then, I offer compatibilist arguments to assert that this metaphysical constraint does not actually violate divine free will.

Divine Command Theory and the Euthyphro Dilemma

Divine command theory can refer to a specific constructivist metaethical theory, which I will refer to as “DCT”, or to a broad class of constructivist theories, also called “theological voluntarism.”⁴ Metaphysically speaking, constructivism holds that moral facts and properties exist and that these facts and properties are response dependent. That is, they constitutively depend, at least in part, on the attitudes and reactions of certain observers. In both the specific and broad cases, divine command theory holds that God is the observer whose will, commands, attitudes, reactions, practices, etc. are of interest. This makes divine command theory a theistic metaethical theory. Theistic metaethics requires that, at the end of every chain of explanation, each moral fact be metaphysically explained by some fact(s) about God. For the purposes of this section I will focus on DCT and generalize to theological voluntarism as needed. Metaphysically, DCT purports that moral facts and properties exist and they are grounded in facts about God’s commands. Essentially, the theory suggests that God’s commands constitute morality and that moral duties exist because God commands things. For example, if God gives the commandments “Do not murder” and “Obey your parents” then, according to DCT, there is a moral duty/obligation to not murder and to obey your parents.

The Euthyphro dilemma gets its name from

Plato's *Euthyphro*, in which Socrates asks the pivotal question, "is the pious loved by the gods because it's pious? Or is it pious because it's loved?"⁵ Having been adapted to fit a monotheistic context, the Euthyphro dilemma still applies to theistic metaethical theories like DCT. The contemporary version of the dilemma can be stated as: does God command things because they are morally obligatory, or are things moral obligatory because God commands them?⁶ As the disjunction implies, the dilemma has two horns — a non-voluntarist and a voluntarist horn.

On the one hand, the non-voluntarist horn (i.e., God commands things because they are morally obligatory) problematically suggests that the things that God commands are morally obligatory prior to God commanding them. This means these things have a prior moral status that does not depend on God, and thus, that moral facts are not ultimately explained by facts about God. Consequently, accepting this horn of the dilemma makes morality independent of God. This not only violates theistic metaethics' requirement that every moral fact be fundamentally explained by some fact(s) about God, but also makes it impossible to give a moral argument for the existence of God.⁷

Conversely, the voluntarist horn of the dilemma (i.e., things are morally obligatory because God commands them) is problematic because it either leads back to the first non-voluntarist horn or it makes moral truths arbitrary; either God has reasons for com-

manding something or He does not have reasons for doing so. If the former is true, then the proponents of DCT have opened themselves to the objection that the things that God commands are morally obligatory because of His reasons for commanding them and not merely because He commands them. This seems to return us to the problematic non-voluntarist horn. Conversely, if the latter is true and God has no reasons for commanding things, then it seems that God's commands are arbitrary and that we have no morally significant reasons to obey them or to care about moral facts grounded in them. We might, nevertheless, have prudential reasons to obey, e.g. so that God does not smite me where I stand. However, the proponents of DCT, and of theological voluntarism in general, need morality to matter and depend on God because they want the existence of some set of moral facts or desired moral ends to provide evidence for the existence of an omniperfect God who is worthy of worship.

Circumventing the Euthyphro Dilemma by Appealing to God's Nature

The Euthyphro dilemma is supposed to establish that DCT, and theological voluntarism more generally, cannot be true because it leads to either the non-voluntarist or the voluntarist horns of the dilemma. As a result, a number of philosophers and theologians have developed various 'modified divine command theories,' which try to escape the Euthyphro dilemma by

appealing to God's nature.⁸ Typically, they do this either by suggesting that the two horns of the dilemma are not exhaustive or by arguing that the voluntarist horn can be made non-problematic. I consider both of these strategies below.

Some philosophers, like William Lane Craig, appeal to God's nature to argue that the horns of the Euthyphro dilemma are not exhaustive. Craig suggests that there is another non-voluntarist option, which involves asserting that moral facts exist prior to God willing things. However, these moral facts are grounded in God's nature, as opposed to being independent of God. Craig summarizes this position saying:

I think it [the Euthyphro dilemma] is clearly a false dilemma because the alternatives are not of the form "A or not-A" which would be an inescapable dilemma. The alternatives are like "A or B." In that case you can always add a third one, C, and escape the horns of the dilemma. I think in this case there is a third alternative, which is to say that God wills something because he is good. That is to say, God himself is the paradigm of goodness, and his will reflects his character. God is by nature loving, kind, fair, impartial, generous, and so forth. Therefore, he could not have willed that, for example, hatred be good. That would be to contradict his very own nature. So God's commands to us are not arbitrary, but neither are they based upon something independent of God. Rather, God himself is the paradigm of goodness.⁹

It is crucial to understand the modality of "could not" in this passage. Craig suggests the reason that God

could not have willed hatred to be good is that it would contradict His nature. Metaphysically speaking, it is impossible for any object or being to take any action or have any property that contradicts its nature. Otherwise that object or being would not have its particular nature, which is to say it would not be identical with itself – an absurd conclusion. So, given that Craig grounds moral facts directly in God’s nature, saying ‘God could not have willed that hatred be good’ is equivalent to saying ‘it is metaphysically impossible for God to will that hatred be good.’ Thus, appealing to God’s nature in this way circumvents the Euthyphro dilemma by imposing a metaphysical constraint on what God can command.¹⁰

On the other hand, some philosophers, like Glenn Peoples, argue that the voluntarist horn – i.e., things are morally obligatory because God commands them – can be made non-problematic. Peoples suggests that God’s commands do in fact constitute morality but emphasizes that God “has a particular nature.”¹¹ Peoples argues God’s commands are non-arbitrary because they are informed and constrained by His nature without being metaphysically grounded in it. Thus, God does not command just anything; His nature gives Him reasons to command certain things. Summarizing his position, Peoples says:

God cannot command that which He hates, even though it is within His power. Whatever God commands is right, and torture could never be

right because God would never command it, nor would His character, His nature and His desire permit him to. For example (and others could be given), if God is benevolent, then He does not command that which is repugnant to benevolence. ¹²

For Peoples's statement to be consistent, saying 'God can do X' must not be identical to saying 'X is within God's power.' Additionally, 'God is permitted to do X' also must not mean the same thing as 'X is within God's power.' This distinction is especially important because Peoples does not want to metaphysically constrict God's power to command and thus violate His omnipotence; he does this by suggesting that "the metaphysical possibility would still exist" for God to command something that conflicts with His nature.¹³ So, 'X is within God's power' must be equivalent to 'it is metaphysically possible for God to command X.' Thus, Peoples is proposing that God's nature constrains His commands without reducing His metaphysical power to command, making the constraint a non-metaphysical one. However, this position seems to conflict with my treatment of Craig's account.

Metaphysical Possibility and Constraints Based in God's Nature

In order to resolve this conflict, I consider the analogy Peoples offers to explain his view. In this analogy, a woman refuses to eat a food that she "utterly despises" and that makes her "nauseous even to look

at.”¹⁴ Peoples suggests that if the only relevant causal factors affecting her decision to eat the food are her “will and desire” and, further if she “has no reason to eat it,” then not only will she never eat the food but he thinks she actually “could not” eat it.¹⁵ Nevertheless, he thinks it is still “metaphysically possible” for her to eat the food in question.¹⁶ Analogously, Peoples thinks that, while God’s nature does not permit Him to command certain things, it is still metaphysically possible for God to command these things.¹⁷

However, it seems that Peoples confuses God’s nature with His will and desires. If Peoples intends to defend DCT and theological voluntarism, he needs to present a constraint to God’s commands, will, and desires. Yet, in the analogy, the woman’s desires and will are not constrained; on the contrary, they provide the constraint to her behavior. So, if we accept his analogy, Peoples’s modified divine command theory at best constrains God’s commands with His will and desires. This does not resolve the Euthyphro dilemma. It merely shifts the problem from the Euthyphro dilemma for DCT to the Euthyphro dilemma for theological voluntarism in general, wherein God’s will and desires are either arbitrary or based on reasons that make morality independent of God. However, we can improve the analogy and Peoples’s account by deriving a constraint from the woman’s constitution – the physical analog of her nature – instead of her will and desires. This would require that she have something like a severe allergy

to the food in question that causes her throat to swell shut before she can ingest it. In such a case, the woman's physical composition would render it impossible for her to eat the food. This amounts to a constraint of physical possibility. Similarly, the analogous constraint on God's commands, will, and desires derived from His nature will amount to a metaphysical constraint, as in Craig's account. Importantly, the physical constraint in our improved analogy leaves open the metaphysical possibility for the woman to eat the food. Similarly, the metaphysical constraint in Peoples's – and Craig's – modified divine command theory leaves open the logical possibility for God to command something that conflicts with His nature. In summary, both of these strategies to circumvent the Euthyphro dilemma by appealing to God's nature lead to the conclusion that God cannot command evil metaphysically but can command evil logically.

Moreover, this metaphysical constraint seems to conflict with divine omnipotence and divine free will. Peoples argues that the constraint in his theory is not a metaphysical constraint so as to avoid violating God's omnipotence. This is because such a constraint would entail that it is metaphysically impossible for God to command things that are inconsistent with His nature.¹⁸ However, it seems God would have more power, metaphysically speaking, if He could command these things. Thus, because both varieties of modified divine command theory impose a metaphysical constraint,

they seem to imply that God is not omnipotent. Because an omniperfect God must be omnipotent, these theories provide *prima facie* evidence against the existence of an omniperfect God. It also seems like metaphysical constraints – including this one – inherently limit free will, as “‘free will,’ as a philosophical term of art, means just exactly what I mean by ‘metaphysical freedom.’”¹⁹ Given that many philosophers think moral agents must have free will in order to deserve moral praise or blame,²⁰ the existence of any metaphysical constraint on God’s will suggests that His moral perfection might not make Him worthy of praise or worship. Because of this metaphysical constraint, these modified divine command theories, if true, also constitute *prima facie* evidence against the existence of a God who is worthy of worship. These implications of modified divine command theory ultimately undermine moral arguments for the existence for an omniperfect God who is worthy of worship and challenge the foundational proposal of theistic metaethics: moral facts depend on God.

Reconciling this Metaphysical Constraint with Divine Omnipotence

While the metaphysical constraint in these modified divine command theories seems to imply God is not omnipotent, I think it would be a mistake to simply accept this as fact. There are two reasons for this. First, I think that the metaphysical impossibility for God to command things inconsistent with His nature

may be relevantly similar to the logical impossibility for God to create a round square. Many philosophers and theologians do not think the latter impossibility reduces God's omnipotence. They maintain that creating round squares and bringing about other "logical absurdities" simply falls outside of the realm of possibility even for a fully omnipotent being.²¹ Similarly, I maintain that God commanding something – or doing anything – inconsistent with His nature may likewise be outside of the realm of possibility for an omnipotent being.²² If this is the case, then this metaphysical constraint on God's power to command does not actually violate God's omnipotence; it just highlights a necessary metaphysical impossibility. So, rather than simply entailing that God is not omnipotent, I believe this metaphysical constraint points to a real, substantive debate in theology and philosophy of religion regarding God's nature and what it means to assert that He is omnipotent.²³ Thus, until this debate is resolved, the apparent conflict between this metaphysical constraint and divine omnipotence need not undermine the modified divine command theorist's project. Second, it is consistent with this metaphysical constraint to think God's will is still in some sense unrestricted. This is because both Craig's account and Peoples's account leave open the logical possibility for God to command/will differently. Perhaps this logical possibility is enough to avoid violating God's omnipotence.

Compatibility Between Metaphysical Constraints and Divine Free Will

Though modified divine command theories constrain God's will, commands, and actions by requiring that they be consistent with God's nature—which seems to *prima facie* violate divine free will—I believe free will is compatible with such a constraint. I start by examining the libertarian view that free will requires alternative possibilities. The pertinent question in this case is whether this metaphysical constraint eliminates God's alternative possibilities. Initially, it seems that, even if God's nature fixes the moral facts and makes them metaphysically necessary, this does not entail that God does not have choices in moral matters. After all, we can imagine a situation in which morality, and in particular justice, requires that someone be punished for wrongdoing and the arbiter of justice can choose between various punishments that are all morally satisfactory. If God were the arbiter of justice in such a situation, then He would be able to choose between various punishments. So, it is possible that God does have alternative choices in certain moral situations. However, there are clearly situations in which God does not have options. We arrived at this discussion because divine command theorists want to be able to say things like, "God cannot command that murder is right." Hence, when faced with a choice regarding whether to command or forbid murder, torture, rape, etc., this constraint eliminates God's alternative possi-

bilities. Thus, the constraint in question clearly implies that God does not have alternative possibilities in every moral situation. So, if free will requires alternative possibilities, then God does not have free will in at least some moral situations.²⁴

However, we can also consider the compatibilist view that free will does not require alternative possibilities. This moral constraint is derived from God's nature and it ensures that God acts in a way that is maximally consistent with His nature in every moral situation—even if He does not have alternative possibilities because the constraint has eliminated them. Furthermore, it seems quite intuitive to say that always acting in a manner consistent with one's own nature is the very epitome of free will. This is because it seems that a person's will is made less free when they lack the power, knowledge, etc. required to act in accordance with their nature. Conversely, when a person possesses more power, more knowledge, or more of anything else that enables them to act in accordance with their nature, then it seems that this person has greater freedom of will. Consequently, when a being is always able to act in a manner consistent with their nature, then it seems like they are maximally free according to this view. Thus, on this view, metaphysical constraints to God's actions that stem from His nature do not violate divine free will, but rather point to its presence. Descartes makes a similar point in his error theodicy in the *Meditations*:

For in order to be free, there is no need for me to be capable of moving both ways; on the contrary, the more I incline in one direction—either because I clearly understand that reasons of truth and goodness point that way, or because of a divinely produced disposition of my inmost thoughts—the freer is my choice. [...] But the indifference I feel when there is no reason pushing me in one direction rather than another is the lowest grade of freedom; it is evidence not of any perfection of freedom, but rather of a defect in knowledge or a kind of negation. For if I always saw clearly what was true and good, I should never have to deliberate about the right judgment of choice; in that case, although I should be wholly free, it would be impossible for me ever to be in a state of indifference.

Descartes suggests if humans were to have perfect free will then they would always act in a particular way. The metaphysical restrictions that I have been considering help ensure that God always acts in such a way. Thus, instead of actually limiting or destroying God's free will, perhaps these metaphysical restrictions point to the fact that His will is maximally free.

Frankfurt examples, inspired by Harry Frankfurt's "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," offer another good reason to think this metaphysical constraint does not reduce the freedom of God's will even if it eliminates all of God's alternative possibilities.²⁷ Consider a situation where Sarah goes to vote in an election. However, unbeknownst to Sarah, a powerful scientist has previously implanted her brain with a computer chip that will not allow her to vote for

anyone other than candidate A. If she tries to vote for either candidate B or candidate C, then the chip will take over and force her to vote for candidate A. However, if she wants to vote for candidate A and tries to vote for her, the chip will not interfere. Suppose Sarah actually wants to vote for candidate A and that she wants her desire to vote for candidate A to result in her actually voting for candidate A.²⁸ Then, when she goes to vote, Sarah votes for candidate A of her own accord without any interference from the chip in her brain. It seems that Sarah's will is free in this situation even though she could not have taken any other action. Even if this chip is programmed to impact all of Sarah's decisions, it seems Sarah could still exercise her will freely if she always chooses – and wants to choose – the actions that the chip would have otherwise forced her to take without the chip actually activating at all. Similarly, if God always chooses to act in a manner consistent with His nature, which is analogous to the computer chip in Sarah's brain, then it is possible that God's will is fully free even though it is metaphysically impossible for Him to do otherwise. Moreover, given that the constraint we are concerned about comes from God's own nature rather than an external source (e.g., the scientist's computer chip), it seems that this argument is even more compelling when applied to God than when applied to Sarah. This is because, intuitively, it seems that the elimination of a person's alternative possibilities by something external to them is a greater threat

to that person's free will than the elimination of their alternative possibilities by something inherent to their nature.

Conclusion

I have shown that the two main strategies used by modified divine command theorists to circumvent the Euthyphro dilemma by appealing to God's nature lead to a metaphysical constraint on God's will, commands, and actions. Further, because this constraint seems to conflict with divine omnipotence and free will, it appears to turn the truth of modified divine command theory into evidence against the existence of an omniperfect God who is worthy of worship. Thus, modified divine command theory initially seems to undermine both theistic metaethics and moral arguments for the existence of God. However, I have provided reasons to think that this constraint can, in fact, be compatible with both divine omnipotence and divine free will. In particular, I have argued that we should treat the implications of metaphysical impossibility for omnipotence in the same way that many philosophers treat the implications of logical impossibility for omnipotence—that is, by taking them to be compatible with omnipotence. Further, I suggested that God always acting consistently with His nature, as He does under this constraint, might actually be the epitome of free will, and I also argued that Frankfurt examples provide a good reason to think that this constraint is

compatible with divine free will.

Thus, I conclude that modified divine command theories are viable theistic metaethical theories and are not a liability to the proponents of moral arguments for the existence of God. Rather, they offer a robust account of the dependence of moral facts on God while managing to avoid the famous Euthyphro dilemma. Hence, modified divine command theories can actually augment moral arguments for the existence of God. As a result, the proponents of such arguments can safely argue that their preferred version of modified divine command theory offers a better metaphysical explanation for a particular set of moral facts than the alternative secular theories and, consequently, that these moral facts are evidence that God exists.

Notes

1. See: Evans, C. Stephen. "Moral Arguments for the Existence of God," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta.; Baggett, David, and Walls, Jerry L. *Good God*. (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.
2. For further discussion see: Garcia, Laura. "Moral Perfection," In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael Rea (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 217-219.
3. For examples, see Robert Adams, William Alston, David Baggett, Jerry Walls, William Lane Craig, Glenn Peoples, John Hare, and C. Stephen Evans.
4. Theological voluntarism refers to all metaethical theories that "hold that what God wills is relevant to determining the moral status of some set of entities." See: Murphy, Mark. "Theological

Voluntarism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta.

5. Euthyphro, 10a

6. Other moral concepts (e.g., ‘morally wrong’) can be substituted as appropriate for ‘morally obligatory’ here. Additionally, ‘will’ can be substituted for ‘command’ to make the dilemma target theological voluntarism in general instead of DCT specifically.

7. For further discussion see: Evans, “Moral Arguments for the Existence of God.” Evans suggests that moral arguments for the existence of God either “begin with alleged moral facts and argue that God is necessary to explain those facts, or at least that God provides a better explanation of them than secular accounts can offer” or “begin with claims about some good or end that morality requires and argue that this end is not attainable unless God exists.” If morality is independent of God, both strategies fail.

8. These include Robert Adams, William Alston, David Baggett, Jerry Walls, William Lane Craig, and Glenn Peoples.

9. Craig, William L. “The Euthyphro Dilemma Once Again.” Last modified January 4, 2015.

10. Ibid. Despite its “modified divine command theory” label, Craig’s view falls outside the realm of theological voluntarism because he suggests that, at a metaphysical level, “moral good[ness] is not something that is based in God’s will but in His nature.” However, God’s commands/will still have a role. Specifically, they play an epistemic role by “express[ing]” God’s nature and communicating moral truths to moral agents like humans

11. Peoples, Glenn. “A New Euthyphro,” *Think* 9, no. 25 (2010): 77.

12. Ibid., 78

13. Ibid., 78

14. Ibid., 77

15. Ibid., 78

16. Ibid., 78

17. Importantly, Peoples overlooks that it is also physically possible for the woman to eat the food and that this constraint, which is derived from her will and desires, is more restrictive than the

constraints of physical possibility.

18. If this metaphysical constraint is to fully resolve the Euthyphro dilemma by eliminating the arbitrariness in God's commands/will, then it must also make it metaphysically impossible for God to fail to command certain things. Otherwise, God could arbitrarily choose to forego giving commands like 'do not murder.' This would be unacceptable because, in voluntarist accounts like Peoples's, this would make murder morally neutral even though it should be morally wrong.

19. van Inwagen, Peter. "The Mystery of Metaphysical Freedom," In *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*, ed. Peter van Inwagen & Dean W. Zimmerman (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 368.

20. See: Eshleman, Andrew. "Moral Responsibility," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta.

21. Pearce, Kenneth L. "Omnipotence," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ISSN 2161-0002.

22. See: Horn, Laurence R. "Contradiction," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta. "Aquinas, [...] underst[ood] omnipotence as the capacity to do only what is not logically impossible. (Others, including Augustine and Maimonides, have noted that in any case God is "unable" to do what is inconsistent with His nature, e.g. commit sin.) For Descartes, on the other hand, an omnipotent God is by definition capable of any task, even those yielding contradictions. Mavrodes (1963), Kenny, and others have sided with St. Thomas in taking omnipotence to extend only to those powers it is possible to possess; Frankfurt (1964), on the other hand, essentially adopts the Cartesian line."

23. Within this debate, Peter Geach even suggests that the Judeo-Christian conception of God does not actually need to be omnipotent (i.e., He does not have the "ability to do everything") but instead needs to be almighty (i.e., He has "power over all things"), which is consistent with this constraint. See: Geach, Peter. T. "Omnipotence," *Philosophy*, 48, no. 183 (1973): 7.

24. It is unclear whether modified divine command theorists hold

that the entirety of God's nature constrains morality or only that some specific morally relevant portion of His nature constrains morality. Even if only a portion of God's nature grounds moral constraints, it seems that the rest of God's nature would still impose other similar metaphysical constraints on His will and actions. While I do not discuss other possible non-moral metaphysical constraints further, my treatment of this moral metaphysical constraint extends to them as well.

25. Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. In *Descartes Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 102.

26. Frankfurt, Harry. "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 66, no. 23 (1969): 829-839.

27. These examples also apply to metaphysical constraints not derived from God's nature as well as logical constraints. Thus, this argument can be adapted to suggest that neither logical constraints nor metaphysical constraints reduce or violate divine free will.

28. Here, I am referring to Frankfurt's proposed sufficient condition for freedom of the will, which he articulates in terms of second order volitions. See: Frankfurt, Harry. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 68, no. 1 (1971): 5-20.

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Backwards and in High Heels

Willa Maxine Tracy

Abstract: Feminist arguments on the subject of pornography belong to one of two categories: anti-pornography or anti-censorship. I will take an anti-censorship position, and proceed with an analysis of pornography's effects, presupposing a definition of pornography that falls under the umbrella of representations within the realm of (sexual) fantasy, where fantasy is a particular category of fiction. This paper evaluates the potential for mainstream pornography to produce harmful effects, implementing Judith Butler's analysis of the force of fantasy. I will then present my characterization of the pornography debate as pertaining to the paradox of fiction involving body genres, and examine the potential for egalitarian representations to operate within this framework.

Feminist arguments on the subject of pornography belong to one of two categories: anti-pornography or anti-censorship. Linda Williams notes that this distinction inversely resembles that between arguments surrounding women's right to choose, where both groups are positioned in favor of something: pro-life or pro-choice.¹ In contrast, the feminist debate surrounding pornography concerns two arguments positioned against something, underscored by Susanna Paasonen's term "anti-anti-pornography"² to characterize anti-censorship arguments. Catherine MacKinnon famously presents an anti-pornography feminist argument that pornography constitutes the subordination of women.³ MacKinnon was at the helm of the anti-pornography movement, and arguments in support of her position hinge on verifying a causal relationship between fictional representation and action. Philosophers of language have also developed arguments in defense of MacKinnon's position that are based upon speech act theory,⁴ but I will be focusing here on anti-pornography arguments that understand this causal mechanism as involving the unconscious.

I am most sympathetic towards a definition of pornography that applies to sexually explicit media that is produced with the primary intention of inducing arousal in its viewers. Through this lens, a representation's status as pornographic defers to the authoritative intention of the producer, over the consumer. There is nevertheless appeal to a far less precise

definition of pornography from the perspective of the consumer, which is roughly, “I know it when I see it.”⁵ While inherently sloppy in its application, this definition captures our intuitive approach to discussions surrounding pornography, where there is a fairly incontrovertible mutual understanding of the sort of content in question.

A definition of pornography must also capture an asymmetrical normative status in relation to its counterpart, erotica. To articulate this imbalance succinctly, “pornography is what turns you on; erotica is what turns me on.”⁶ The dynamics of the relationship between pornography and erotica will inform my arguments regarding pornography’s perceived membership among ‘lower’ genres of representation, and the potential for pornography to achieve art status. I will proceed with my analysis of pornography’s effects, presupposing a definition of pornography that falls under the umbrella of representations within the realm of (sexual) fantasy, where fantasy is a particular category of fiction. I will evaluate the potential for mainstream pornography to produce harmful effects implementing Judith Butler’s analysis of the force of fantasy. I will then present my characterization of the pornography debate as pertaining to the paradox of fiction involving body genres, and examine the potential for egalitarian representations to operate within this framework.

Butler attacks Andrea Dworkin’s anti-pornography argument that fantasies are “forcibly imposed”⁷

by certain kinds of representations, which is to say these representations possess some causal force that can lead to action. Critiques of pornography depend on establishing a logical or causal continuum among fantasy, representation, and action. Anti-pornography arguments construe representation as injurious action, and understand fantasy as both producing and being produced by pornographic representations. Butler, in contrast, describes fantasy as a psychic action, where pornographic fantasy is substituted for action and provides for a “catharsis in fantasy”⁸ that makes action superfluous. The realm of the phantasmatic is necessary to the construction of the real, where what qualifies as real depends on a stabilized boundary of the unreal. Fantasy therefore “constitutes a dimension of the real.”⁹ Prohibition is always present in the postulation of desire, so efforts to control the phantasmatic through censorship ironically result in the reproduction and proliferation of the representations that one intends to restrict.

The explanatory circularity between prohibition and fantasy, where prohibitions both generate and restrict phantasmatic narratives, causes Dworkin to conflate the content and rhetorical force of representation. An important characteristic of fantasy is the dissimulation of identity, which distributes among various elements of the scene. Butler argues that there is no one-to-one relationship between a subject in reality and a singular vantage point in a fantasy. Pornography can-

not restrict identification to one position, and therefore cannot force men and women to identify with the dominant and subordinate position respectively within the representation. Dworkin's reading implies a privileged mode of identification involving agency, which would be required for a woman to categorically identify with the passive position. Identification in fantasy is a site of inevitable rifting, which provides the "persistently ungrounded ground"¹⁰ from which feminist discourse can eventually emerge. Butler argues that we must safeguard this uncontrollability of the signified in order to politically undermine terms suppressed by regulatory violence. Feminist theory relies on the capacity of fantasy to postulate an egalitarian future, which cannot be achieved in conjunction with attempts to restrict the phantasmatic. The harmful capacity of mainstream pornography entails the corresponding potential for egalitarian representations to achieve positive effects, through operations in the domain of fantasy.

I understand the causal link between inegalitarian¹¹ pornographic representations and harmful sexual interactions in the real-world as a manifestation of the paradox of fiction.¹² This paradox is familiar from much human experience concerning the consumption of literature, theatre, and film in the realm of fiction. The paradox follows from the premises that it is irrational to feel real emotions as a result of false events, but that we often do experience real emotions when engaging with works of fiction, resulting in the seem-

ingly unacceptable conclusion that we are not justified in feeling those emotions.

I believe the best response to the paradox appeals to a distinction between emotions in isolation versus subsequent action. The tension in the paradox can be illustrated by two contrasting scenarios. In the first scenario, someone is protesting a company's unequal hiring opportunities for women. A more knowledgeable citizen informs the protestor that the company in fact hires more women than men. If the person nevertheless continues to protest, we would consider that action to be unjustified. This scenario is compared with an avid reader of Harry Potter crying when the character Dobby dies. The reader knows that she is having an emotional reaction to a false event, but that knowledge does not mitigate her emotional response. We still consider her response to be rational, which demonstrates the inconsistency involved in the paradox.

This inconsistency can be resolved by pointing out that the protestor continued to act with the knowledge that her information was false, whereas the reader did not take any action inspired by her emotion, which is arguably beyond her rational control. When readers do take real-world action that is morally impermissible, inspired by their emotional engagement with fiction (such as Mark David Chapman stating after murdering John Lennon that he was inspired by the novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*) we do in fact consider their behavior irrational. This distinction becomes blurry in

instances of the paradox of fiction that concern body genres, which are categories of media that operate through representations of excess.

Linda Williams understands the body genres in film as constituted by the subgenres pornography, horror, and 'weepies,' which are films that implement excessive emotion, usually targeted toward an audience of female spectators. These genres are distinguished by their features of bodily excess, with a focus on the ecstasy or uncontrollability involved in arousal, fear, and other extreme emotions. Body genres are named for their associated spectator engagement, where the body of the viewer is caught up in a sort of mimicry of the onscreen bodies. Williams uses this criterion of bodily mimicry to exclude comedy from the realm of body genres, despite the low cultural status it shares with other representations of excess. In comedy, "the audience's physical reaction of laughter does not coincide with the often dead-pan reactions of the clown,"¹³ which contrasts with the more direct resemblance between onscreen bodies and spectator bodies that characterizes the experience of viewing pornography, horror, and weepies. I do not entirely agree with Williams's treatment of comedy as separate from body genres, because the parallels between the physicality of spectators and onscreen bodies can diverge for the other categories of body genres as well. As per Butler's argument, a subject does not have a one-to-one relationship with any single character in a fantasy, rather

identity proliferates beyond recognition. The imperfect parallels involved in bodily mimicry can be aptly illustrated in the genre of horror, where the viewer's experience of fear during a scene where a villain is sneaking up on an unsuspecting victim does not closely resemble the experience of either character in the scene.

I also believe that comedy shares an inherent link with pornography, when considering the way we respond to pornographic representations in a group setting. In stark contrast with viewing pornography in private, where one typically experiences feelings of arousal, watching pornography as part of an audience usually generates laughter. Admittedly, this laughter may be a reaction of embarrassment at viewing socially deemed taboo representations among peers, or an attempt to counteract feelings of arousal which may be considered inappropriate in a public setting. In addition to some resemblance in audience response, pornographic and comedic representations share a similar moral status. Many comedians are infamous for including inflammatory content in their performances, but it is not clear what the appropriate moral requirements for comedic material should be. Morally offensive content can be defended on the grounds that the context of comedy precludes any true normative assertions, because the primary purpose is entertainment. Violently pornographic representations might be defended with a similar argument, that pornography is a genre pri-

marily concerned with inducing arousal in its viewers, and does not take a normative stance on any of the sexual acts depicted.

Returning to the more general discussion of body genres, the fact that these representations can involve parallels of bodily mimicry complicates the solution I proposed to the paradox of fiction. Earlier, I suggested a boundary between the mental and the physical, separating emotion and action to resolve the paradox, but this boundary threatens to dissolve in these cases of physical mimicry. The physical responses of body genre spectators are in a sense involuntary or beyond rational control, but they are instances where the realm of emotional response bleeds into the territory of physical response, and potential for real-world actions.

The bodily mimicry involved in body genre spectatorship does not, however, directly support the anti-pornography position's insistence on a causal relationship between pornographic representation and real-world instances of sexual violence. There is a stark moral difference between a viewer of pornography engaged in sexual bodily mimicry masturbating to inegalitarian pornographic content, versus that viewer enacting sexual violence against women. Butler cites an argument made by Dierdre English that, contrary to the claim that pornographic representations somehow lead to the action of rape by fueling violent fantasies, most men interested in pornography are "just benign masturbators for whom the auto-erotic moment was

the be all and end all of sex.”¹⁴ The progression from emotional to physical spectatorial response to body genres is still isolated to the experience of the viewer, in the action of masturbating to pornography. The argument that this private physical response directly leads to sexual assault against others can be attributed to an inaccurate and anachronistic portrait of (male) sexuality, where male sexual urge is primitive and uncontrollable.

But the discussion of body genres is still relevant to understanding the fearful moral panic that motivates the anti-pornography position, which is illuminated by the link between pornography and horror. This link is best encapsulated in the concept of the ‘snuff film,’ a cinematic display that is alleged to culminate in the actual murder and mutilation of a woman. No agency has been able to authenticate the existence of a genuine snuff film, yet it remains an ominous presence in arguments attacking pornography, as an instantiation of the trajectory from sex to death that allegedly characterizes the pornographic. Before the low-budget exploitation feature *Snuff* (1976), pornography had been viewed generally as a victimless vice. *Snuff*, despite the fact that it was not itself pornographic, contributed to the re-stigmatization of pornography as a dangerous form of low culture that legitimized the exploitation of women. In reality, *Snuff* was a hoax. No one is actually murdered, as any viewer would easily have been able to tell. But the film nonetheless inspired a lingering

fear that, maybe somewhere, such films truly did exist. The remaining dispute over whether there really were ‘snuff films’ in which women were actually murdered inspired concern, because the mere concept seemed to suggest to male viewers that women’s lives were expendable. The anxiety over *Snuff* epitomizes the fear of the anti-pornography movement that representations of violence lead to actual violence.¹⁵

Snuff provides an interesting example of genre confusion, exposing deep divides within society regarding definitions of taste. Descriptive accounts of *Snuff* differed radically depending on people’s genre literacy and assumptions about ‘acceptable’ entertainment. These divides speak to how body genres can be dismissed based on their presumed appeal to lower parts of our persons. *Snuff* was marketed to capitalize on the rumors of snuff films, and the contemporary anxiety over violence. The advertising campaign for *Snuff* was based on techniques used by exploitation filmmakers, to promise displays of the forbidden onscreen.

The Adult Film Association of America opposed the self-proclaimed X-rating of *Snuff* because they feared the film’s graphic violence would provoke more aggressive attacks on nonviolent X-rated films.¹⁶ Investigations into the existence of authentic snuff films coincided with investigations into a link between the pornography industry and organized crime. *Snuff* was a film that threatened onscreen freedom of expression by inciting proponents of censorship. For feminists,

the snuff film became the ultimate instance of male backlash against women's liberation, based on the belief that *Snuff* would inspire demand for the real thing. The public reaction to *Snuff* refers us back to the paradox of fiction, and the question to what extent fictional representations inspire real world effects.

Examining pornography as fiction is not to say that it is fictive, or disconnected with reality. It would be too simplistic to think of pornography as a 'documentary' record of some sexual encounter, where watching porn is indistinguishable from watching people have sex. Pornography therefore falls within the category of fictional representation, which describes imaginary people and events. Pornographic representations play a role both in directly influencing our immediate sexual responses, and in cultivating longer term effects enriching sexual imagination. The longer term imaginative potential for pornography to shape desire is highlighted by Anne Eaton's argument that egalitarian representations can positively inform erotic taste.¹⁷ Fiction can be a tool for moral education, because our imaginative responses to fiction can influence our genuine responses to reality. Eaton argues that inegalitarian pornography leads to inegalitarian attitudes, where the source of harm is the persuasive capacity of representation. Shen-yi Liao and Sara Protsi amend Eaton's position by arguing that fiction is not necessarily responsible for genuine responses in the real world. One must consider the genre of fiction,

which influences the normative conditions for imaginative engagement with fiction and actual responses.

In their discussion of genre, Liao and Protasi use *The Wire* and *Dr. Strangelove* as examples of candid and satirical representations respectively.¹⁸ They argue that in the world of satire, the absurd is normal, so we would not respond to the fictional characters and scenarios in the same way that we would respond to analogous people and situations in the real world. In contrast, worlds that are ‘response-realistic’ are more easily accessible to the imagination, where a subject can envision herself interacting with the characters and situations in the representation with the same expectations she would have in the real world. Because of this direct imaginative accessibility, Liao and Protasi argue that only response-realistic representations can be held responsible for cultivating genuine real-world desires. Whereas mainstream pornography is sufficiently response-realistic to elicit genuine responses, fetish pornography such as BDSM presents a more abnormal world that places no normative claims on reality. Fetish pornography can still result from or constitute harm, but it is susceptible to a different feminist criticism from mainstream pornography.

The importance of attending to genre when viewing pornography adds layers of nuance to Eaton’s argument in favor of egalitarian pornography. Eaton believes that mainstream pornography’s eroticization of male dominance and female submissiveness informs

actions that perpetuate gender inequality. By means of Aristotelian habituation, representations solicit emotional responses that foster a predisposition in the audience, which carries into the real world.¹⁹ These representations must be sufficiently vivid and cumulative to solicit such an emotional response (the same mechanism that works in advertising), and Eaton argues that ‘garden-variety heterosexual porn’ achieves its power in shaping collective erotic taste by eroticizing gender imbalance.

Sensible anti-pornography feminism acknowledges that the power of mainstream pornography operates in this way, but anti-censorship feminists argue that the solution to bad pornography is not no pornography, it’s better pornography. Feminist pornography is committed to fighting gender oppression and rigid gender roles, through production, content, and form. Eaton describes feminist pornography not as softcore, rather as representations of women as active subjects of pleasure and desire, where appropriate attention is paid to the female gaze. Feminist pornography also takes on the responsibility of representing female bodies in a realistic way, portraying male bisexuality, including representations of men as sex objects, and handling BDSM with care.

I agree that the solution to bad pornography is better pornography, but there are several different labels that could be applied to these representations: “feminist,” “alternative,” “egalitarian,” and “radical

egalitarian,” to name a few. Whatever label we choose to promote, the content should not be excessively restricted. There is potential for ethical representations anywhere on the spectrum between egalitarian pornography that does the bare minimum not to promote sexist conduct, and radical content that actively defies gender expectations and sexual scripts. I disagree with the blanket statement that egalitarian pornography cannot eroticize any acts of violence, humiliation, or objectification. Awareness of interpersonal power dynamics is inevitably present in sex, and representations can give attention to such dynamics without enforcing stereotypes that help sustain gender inequality. I see no problem with a female performer actively desiring and consenting to ‘degrading acts,’ so long as these representations are accompanied by the same behavior by male performers. This may, however, be an unrealistic standard, because within a single film, one would not expect all points of view to be represented. There remains the challenge of representing such acts responsibly in their own right, which would involve authentic representations of consent.

Equality among sexual partners does not necessitate total abolition of sadomasochistic inclinations, but egalitarian representations ought to dissolve the association between dominant and submissive roles and the dynamics of societal gender inequality. Deliberate defiance of mainstream active/passive scripting could include the participation of gender-queer performers

to further promote the enjoyment of sadomasochism disassociated with gender roles. Such disassociation can only be achieved if symmetry is actively represented, where male and female performers engage in both active and passive sexual behavior. Dominant/subordinate relationships exist comparatively; men can assume a dominant role only when women are apt to perform submissively. This collaboration resembles that between the iconic dance partners Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, where “Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did, except backwards and in high heels.”²⁰

Many egalitarian pornographic representations lay claim to the status of pornographic art, with the aim to expand and educate viewers’ sexual tastes. While achieving art status would pave the way for an open and critical discussion of pornography as a genre, this in itself is not enough to combat the insidious effects of mainstream pornography. The function of art to stimulate new interests and challenge our tastes cannot fully satisfy the inflexible demands of mainstream consumers, who seek only the forms of sexual representation that serve and gratify their preexisting desires. The effectiveness of an egalitarian representation relies on a twofold success, both to be sufficiently egalitarian and to be sufficiently arousing to serve as an enticing picture of what can be progressive and erotic.

I acknowledge that there are obstacles impeding the production and proliferation of respectfully erotic

egalitarian representations. One obstacle is the idea that feelings of sexual attraction often go against our better judgment and are very hard to steer or control. Erotic standards possess a strong inertia, built up over the course of historically sustained gender inequality. Women are bombarded with the message that their attractiveness hinges on their passivity, and the stakes for women to be perceived as sexually attractive are far higher than for men.²¹ Additionally, asymmetrical power associations make men's desire to appear sexy compatible with their other ambitions, while women are expected to abandon all other personal goals that would detract from their presentation as a demure sex object. This expectation of power inequality fuels the beauty myth,²² where older women who have the potential to attain more influence in society are consequently seen as less attractive. The beauty myth imposes two starkly separated categories for female characters within a narrative structure: the protagonist damsel in distress, and the antagonist female villain. A classical heroine must possess youth and beauty combined with helplessness and passivity, whereas older more powerful women make for compellingly sinister villains. The Wicked Witch of the West, Ursula, Circe, Cruella de Vil, Bellatrix Lestrange, and Maleficent, to name a few. Even the goddess Juno had villainous qualities. Correcting the imbalance of the beauty myth would require: both lowering the stakes for female beauty to a reasonable standard where sexiness is not

considered indispensable for any person's self-esteem, and incorporating power and ambition into our concept of female sexual subjectivity.

While pornography has the potential to eroticize and promote healthier female beauty standards, representations that veer into the realm of fetishization are more objectifying than empowering. I am hesitant to embrace Hans Maes's argument that the Internet has a liberating effect on women who struggle with body image. He quotes porn director Anna Span as saying, "if there's something you don't like about your body, put it in a search engine, add the word porn and you will find a load of sites where that is the most attractive thing about you."²³ If a woman (or anyone) has a negative perception of a particular bodily feature, that indicates a dysmorphic self-image that cannot be counterbalanced by fetishizing that bodily feature. An autonomous sexual subject must possess a healthy body image characterized by a conception of their own body as a cohesive and operational whole. Fetishizing individual features is potentially dehumanizing, because it involves a bodily perception that is fragmented or broken.

In addition to the responsibility to realistically portray female bodies, ethical representations of sex require realistic representations of female pleasure. Linda Williams argues that pornography speaks truth to sex,²⁴ but the truth of women's sexual desires and experiences has been historically rewritten and socially

manipulated. Jane Gerhard explores the political significance of sexual pleasure in Anne Koedt's piece "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," which seemed to challenge the very foundation of heterosexuality. During early years of women's liberation, clitoral orgasm came to signify the political power of women's self-determination. Koedt's piece outlined a gender analysis of the historic discourse on female heterosexuality, and articulated the stakes for feminists in it. Psychoanalytic experts had made the vagina into a symbol for mature and healthy femininity, but feminists in the late 1960s sought to make the clitoris the symbol of the liberated woman. Koedt was one of the first feminists to theorize clitoral sexuality as a form of sexual expression beyond social designations of homosexual or heterosexual.²⁵

Feminists challenged the essential heterosexuality of both the sexually passive woman of Freudianism, and the liberated woman of the counterculture. Information about the female orgasm and the clitoris had been discussed as extraneous components of women's essential heterosexual identity. Freud's transfer theory acknowledged the clitoris as a sexual organ, but at the same time pathologized it as being out of step with mature femininity. The transfer theory also created a moment where a young girl stood outside of sexual categories, ironically establishing a liminal space or instability in the girl's development of her sexual identity.

Psychoanalysis used the vagina as a symbol that harmonized women's reproductive and sexual

identities, infusing female sexuality with the values of 'healthy' subordination, passivity, and dependency. Helene Deutsch even went so far as to theorize that women come to find what they first experienced as an act of violence as an act of pleasure.²⁶ Psychoanalysts labeled a woman frigid if she was unable to reach vaginal orgasm through intercourse, or if she were under sexual. Women who were deemed overly sexual were subject to the diagnosis of nymphomania. Thus, psychoanalytic labels prescribed a specific level of female sexual desire, and the kinds of sexual behavior women ought to engage in. The clitoris represented the chaos of women behaving like, or overpowering, men. The script of female sexual passivity has therefore been reinforced by historic conflation between gender and sexuality, fueled by myth and misunderstanding of female sexual experiences. Feminists like Koedt set out to reclaim the clitoris to re-imagine a new kind of female sexuality.

In addition to the challenge brought on by historical confusion and misinformation surrounding female sexual experience and simple female anatomy, authentic representation of female pleasure confronts technical obstacles involved in representing the nuances of bodily pleasure through film. Female sexual pleasure does not easily lend itself to onscreen representation, compared with the visual spectacle of male ejaculation. While pornography faces challenges in representing non-orgasmic sexual pleasure for both men and wom-

en, there exists a noteworthy asymmetry where there is no true female equivalent to male ejaculation. This asymmetry is reflected in the pornographic obsession with portraying female ejaculation, as a rare but compelling female equivalent of a visually discernable orgasm. Eithne Johnson explores the representational strategy of “female vocal ejaculation,”²⁷ and how it can be used responsibly to depict female pleasure.

Mainstream pornography implements female vocal ejaculation as an audio strategy to simulate the culturally assumed insatiability of female sexuality. Johnson distinguishes between ecstasy and excess, and argues that mainstream pornography opts for the latter, using female voices in excess of any individual woman. The misalignment of pornographic sounds and images does not persuade the viewer of an authentic representation of female pleasure. Rather, the exaggerated, non-diegetic use of female voice textually embodies the fantasy of the multi-orgasmic and insatiable female. Johnson uses the metaphor of a siren song to describe mainstream pornography’s unconvincingly excessive audial representations of female pleasure. This metaphor astutely captures the harm these representations can cause by convincing male viewers that female pleasure only manifests in excessive vocal displays, and persuading female viewers to enact such displays to reassure male sexual partners. Johnson argues that in conventional pornography, the “woman’s body usually provides the dummy’s lips

through which the porn ventriloquist throws his vocal fantasy.”²⁸ Thus, mainstream porn is dictated by the ‘male ear,’ as well as the male gaze.

Conventional pornography thrives on narratives of sexual difference and gender representation. Johnson analyzes the motives of women pornographers to rewrite the female narrative to maintain erotic immediacy and intimacy, not subordinated to the production process. Audio strategies that diegetically anchor orgasmic voice to a female body, deemphasize voice to privilege musical score, or naturalize voice to merge with ambient sounds, are alternative approaches to audiovisual representation that authenticate female pleasure. It is not necessary for the female orgasm to be ‘real,’ given that pornographic acting is performative, but orgasmic representation ought to be sufficiently convincing to rewrite female sexual pleasure as specific and local, rather than universalistic and essential. Visual techniques that frame rather than fragment the female orgasmic experience, using longer takes and dissolves rather than hard edits, generate proximity to a unified female body. Whereas mainstream pornography represents the male orgasm as visible and finite, egalitarian pornography eroticizes the male body and presents male orgasm in a broader context of bodily responses to sexual activity. Portraying active female desire in contrast with male vulnerability during orgasm constructs a more egalitarian pornotopic fantasy, free from social reality.

Ethical porn ought to position female performers not only as exhibitionists, but also as voyeurs. This allows the viewer to be transported into a scene as the object of a character's gaze, which helps bridge the division between pornographic producer and consumer. Visual representations of female voyeurs complement the audio strategy of deemphasizing female vocal ejaculation, exploiting the connection between narrative and voice. Many narrative theorists maintain that a personified voice is necessary for the construction of a narrative, but mechanisms of power hinge on a voiceless or anonymous subject. The most emblematic illustration of this form of power is Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon²⁹ a prison designed with the intention for all inmates to be observed by a single watchman. Although it is physically impossible for the watchman to observe all cells at once, the fact that the inmates never know when they are being watched motivates them to constantly monitor their own behavior as if they are being observed at all times. The uninterrupted and unverifiable presence of the watchman symbolizes the male gaze, the ultimate voyeur, who maintains authority by remaining voiceless. Panoptic voyeurism aligns with Williams's characterization of pornography as a 'frenzy of the visible,' committed to satisfying a viewer's desire to see the truth of sex in its entirety. Pornographic representations that implement the female gaze and refrain from excessive non-diegetic female vocal ejaculation have the potential to give women a

voice in this frenzy. Egalitarian pornography implements audiovisual techniques to restore female sexual agency, and situate the female body outside the formal logic of male sexual narratives.

Up until this point, I have focused only on questions about producing egalitarian representations. I would like to conclude by asking what we demand of egalitarian viewers of pornography. Returning to the metaphor of the siren song, I do not advocate that viewers avoid all mainstream representations. Rather, as Odysseus restrained himself in order to hear the siren song without being lured to his destruction, a viewer of mainstream pornography must suspend his belief in the reality of a representation. Earlier, I discussed the distinction that Liao and Protasi make between response-realistic and absurd genres, in arguing that only the former can be responsible for altering real-world action. I believe that pornography as a whole should be viewed as absurd. Pornographic representations systematically implement excess, making them almost cartoonish portrayals. While a viewer cannot control his response of arousal to a given pornographic representation, he can remain aware that the representation he is viewing is absurd in the sense that reproducing sex onscreen necessarily requires removing that sex act from reality, and real-world action. Pornography, as a body genre, should not problematize the paradox of fiction, by virtue of a rational viewer's obligation to grasp the inherent absurdity of the genre.

Acknowledgements

Richard Kimberly Heck provided me with all the source material for this paper, and gave me routine feedback on my writing. I would like to express my immense gratitude for their mentorship, as this project would not and could not have happened without their knowledge and support.

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Displaying Death: The Ethics of Museums and Morbid Objects

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Abstract: In this paper, I discuss the ethical issues with museums' display of objects associated with death. I call these artifacts "morbid objects," and argue that they provoke significant reactions from visitors because of their connection to a specific narrative in the past. Attitudes towards death promoted by museums' treatment of morbid objects as mere entertainment can be unhealthy, violating the museum's obligation to its visitors as well as to the represented dead. I conclude that museums can more ethically avoid unhealthy morbidity by displaying these objects in such a way that viewers can understand the historical death as well as their own mortality in terms of a meaningful narrative.

Introduction

Historically valuable objects help the past come alive for audiences, which can be problematic when the past event is a death. Morbid objects draw on both historical value and the macabre to cultivate visitors' interests in a specific death, and museums must be careful when handling those interests. With a purist and constructivist approach to museum learning, it becomes clear that museums have an obligation to refrain from turning death into entertainment. This is especially the case when museums can provide meaningful narratives that allow visitors to find greater ontological security by coming to terms with the presence of death in their lives. Museums must take thus responsibility for their role in visitor understanding of death.

Specific Deaths and Morbid Objects

Historical museums, almost by definition, are associated with death. Displays of everything from ancient Egypt to Victorian England are necessarily displays of objects constructed and used by people who are now dead. The same is true of objects and artwork concerned with war, which are also concerned with death. Memento mori, burial goods, and numerous other objects in museums are specifically related to death, but this paper will focus on objects related to specific deaths.

Examples of objects associated with specific deaths can be found all over the world. The Latter-day

Saint Church History Museum in Salt Lake City, Utah prominently displays the clothes worn by one of the church's early leaders when he was killed. Bullet holes and bloodstains are visible. The guns used in Alexander Hamilton's fatal duel have been displayed in New York. Mount Stuart House on the Isle of Bute has the diary that was on the scaffold when Mary Queen of Scots was executed, our only source for the events of that day. These objects certainly have historical value: the diary has important information about a landmark political moment, the guns help educate about early 19th century dueling culture, and the clothes provide a verification of oral accounts of the martyrdom.

But each of these objects also has an emotional value rooted in the macabre. The spark of morbid curiosity can be detected in the National Parks Foundation's description of objects related to Abraham Lincoln's assassination: "The bloodstained pillow that cushioned Abraham Lincoln's head and the .44-caliber 'pocket cannon' that fired the fatal shot are what most captivate visitors to Ford's Theatre National Historic Site in Washington, D.C., as they imagine the events of April 14, 1865."¹ This process of visitors imagining the night of the assassination by using the gun to connect themselves with the very moment of killing is both a dark secret and the very essence of the attraction.

For the purposes of this analysis, I will refer to these objects as "morbid objects," and intend that classification to apply to objects associated with a specific

historical death. This paper argues that objects associated with death provoke morbid impulses in viewers, hence the label. Objects can engage morbid curiosity in varying degrees. Oxford Castle displays the shackles worn by notorious murderer Mary Blandy before her execution, which, while not present at the moment of her death, are prominently displayed along with detailed descriptions of her death and the death she caused. We must also consider the question of human remains, which are objects associated with death that clearly inspire morbid curiosity. Much has been written on this subject, and it is relevant to this study. However, the majority of this paper will focus on objects associated with individual deaths like those discussed in the previous paragraphs.

Witnessing History

Objects can have value on a number of different levels: aesthetic, cultural, historical, economic, and educational, to name a few.² Each of these values comes into play in museum presentation. Museums may choose to highlight different values both in the way their displays are designed and in the objects they choose to display. A plaque discussing the artistic details on a vase would emphasize aesthetic value, mentioning various sale prices would emphasize economic, and placing it within broader cultural movements would be educational. Similarly, selecting the oldest vase, or the most ornate vase, or the vase that was

owned by Louis XIV would also demonstrate different value priorities.

The value that seems most relevant to morbid objects is historical value. Randall Mason writes, “Historical value can accrue in several ways: from the heritage material’s age, from its association with people or events, from its rarity and/or uniqueness, from its technological qualities, or from its archival/documentary potential”.³ Morbid objects derive their significance from association with people or events, and specifically death events. Mason adds, “some kind of historic value is represented by – inherent in – some truly old and thus authentic material (authentic in that it was witness to history and carries the authority of this witness).”⁴ Historical objects carry with them the presence of the past and the memory of the distant people who made and used them.

It’s often said that such objects “bring the past alive” by verifying historical accounts and making them matter to us in ways that mere textbooks never could. Michael Shanks comments, “The objects have presence, human presence – the features of the burial mask, the thumb-print on the pot. This presence constitutes the object’s authority, its authenticity. The presence of the past – the past endures and reaches out to touch us.”⁵ Historical objects function as windows into the past by making us feel closer to the historical Other as we see the object as a sort of shared experience between us

and them.

History as Specific Narrative

These shared experiences are more potent when they are more specific. In one study of student engagement in a museum display about the Holocaust, researchers found that displaying objects associated with specific stories – for example, the bracelet an Auschwitz survivor used to cover up her tattoo – “acted as triggers that generated interest,”⁶ while generic objects not “explicitly related to a specific personal recollection, such as a Star of David or military equipment, did not trigger as much engagement.”⁷ Students told researchers that these specific objects “made them realize that ‘it actually happened.’”⁸ These findings make intuitive sense: the more specific the narrative, the easier it is for the past to come alive. Even given a plethora of objects from daily life in Rome, imagining daily life is much more difficult than imagining the day Julius Caesar was assassinated. The narrative detail present in specific events helps to animate objects as part of the story.

Each of the elements discussed above comes into play when understanding the appeal of morbid objects. They have witnessed the past – the diary, for example, was present when Mary Queen of Scots was beheaded – and by virtue of their witness they can help that past come alive for the viewer. As we have already seen in the description of John Wilkes Booth’s gun, the object

serves as a sort of window through which visitors can watch and rewatch the assassination. As the National Parks museum curator notes, “It’s not so much the gun that fascinates people, but rather that Booth used it to change the course of history of the country.”⁹ In general, historical objects act as windows into a remote past, helping audiences to imagine what it was like for the people who populated it. Morbid objects act as a window into a specific event, helping audiences to imagine what death was like for the people who experienced it.

Constructing Meaning in the Museum

All this comes into play when thinking about the place of morbid objects in museums. Museums, after all, are places of learning. How and what, then, ought museums to teach their visitors? Reinhard Bernbeck lays out two competing models: the pragmatist museum and the purist one. Pragmatists see education as part of a larger goal to distract an increasingly anxiety-ridden public from their inauthentic, consumerist present by entertaining them with authentic past experiences.¹⁰ Purists want museums to provoke critical questioning of the world, educating their audiences by providing them with frameworks with which to recontextualize their lives.¹¹ Pragmatists design museums with massive amounts of contextualizing information in order to make the experience of the past as thorough as possible, while purists forego much of that information to focus on the museum’s “potential to de-con-

tualise [sic] objects and then to re-contextualise [sic] them freely.”¹²

The purist view proves ultimately more compelling, as it recognizes that museums can never provide authenticity, but only “a more or less intricate, beautified facade” of the past.¹³ As Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago write, “museums are performances.”¹⁴ Museums are not unbiased conveyors of objective truth, but spaces of ever-changing stories. Preziosi and Farago continue, “all museums stage their collected and preserved relics in such a way as to enhance the facticity of these surviving objects, documents, and monuments.”¹⁵ They arrange them with similar objects to give a sense of being present in the past, or contrasting objects from different times or cultures to engage various narratives about the way the past has developed. They present only the most exemplary objects, creating a fantasy space where every item is special and important. Museums are constructed spaces.

George Hein uses this perspective to argue that constructed museums ought also to engage with “constructivist” models of learning, which see the viewer as an active participant in meaning-making rather than a passive sponge for information.¹⁶ Instead of printing long signs that tell audiences precisely how to understand each object, constructivist museums present “multiple voices rather than being singularly authoritative,”¹⁷ or even silence the authoritative voice altogether by providing as little extraneous information as

possible. This ensures that the visitor cannot be a mere consumer of facts, but a creator, engaged in the museum experience and producing their own meaning.

The end goal of the purist, constructivist museum is to allow the visitor to interact with the past in a way that informs their present experience. Philosopher of education John Dewey wrote that education ought to “shape the experiences of the young so that instead of reproducing current habits, better habits shall be formed, and thus the future adult society be an improvement on their own.”¹⁸ Museums, then, have an obligation as educational institutions to inform their visitors morally as well as factually; the narratives museums provide, as well as the experiences they intend to provoke, should inspire rather than merely entertain.

Morbidity in the Museum

One crucial concept for constructivists is that of “entrance narratives,” “the ‘internal story’ that [visitors] bring with them into the museum.”¹⁹ Because the process of meaning-making necessarily interacts with the visitor’s prior experiences, interests, and frameworks, museum displays must be able to accommodate a variety of different perspectives. Chloe Paver argues that visitors who have previous knowledge of events on display often look for confirmation of their entrance narratives in museum presentations. Those without prior knowledge find it more difficult to engage be-

cause the historical and cultural value of objects is less apparent to those without it.

Let us use the concept of entrance narratives to conceptualize the dual role of morbid objects as both having emotional value and triggering morbid curiosity. Those whose entrance narratives do not include the event with which the morbid object is associated might experience less interest in the morbid object because they do not have the details that make the past come alive by interacting with it. The importance of detail helps us make sense of a set of intuitions. Displaying a beautiful, ornate knife will generate some interest from visitors. Labeling a knife, “This knife killed four men in war” will generate more interest; labeling it, “This is the knife used by Jack the Ripper” would merit its own section of the display room.

This complicates the constructivist model examined above, because it reveals that the value of morbid objects is only accessible through context and presentation. Where aesthetic objects can be appreciated on their visual merits alone, historical objects, especially those associated with specific events, need the authoritative voice of the museum to convey their meaning. In the case of morbid objects, this means that the museum is forced to articulate their morbid value. Indeed, this burden grows even greater when we consider how viewers see museums: a study by the Museum Association noted that participants trusted museums, seeing them “as the guardians of factual information and as

presenting all sides of the story.”²⁰ Where a constructivist might like to avoid responsibility for the meaning a visitor takes from a display by claiming they are making their own meaning, morbid objects require museums to take responsibility for the way they approach death.

Morbidity in Society

In order to understand whether and how to display morbid objects, we must examine different societal responses to death. Using historical objects to draw closer to death makes us instinctively uncomfortable since we have been socialized to find death uncomfortable. Phillip R. Stone and Geoffrey Gorer argue that this is because over the course of the last century, death has been removed from most people’s lives and hidden away in hospitals. While almost everyone in any other era would have witnessed the death throes of a close relative, few people today share those experiences. Yet death still remains an ever-present part of our lives. This is in part because hiding death away does nothing to prevent us from experiencing it, but also because death saturates our media. Gorer makes a distinction here, arguing that, “While natural death became more and more smothered in prudery, violent death has played an ever-growing part in the fantasies offered to mass audiences—detective stories, thrillers, Westerns, war stories, spy stories, science fiction, and eventually horror comics.”²¹ Morbid objects often ca-

ter to this violent death: Lincoln's bloodstained pillow generates much more visitor interest than his death-bed pillow would have had he died thirty years later of natural causes.

Morbidity is addicting; criminologist Scott Bohn notes that activities like watching true crime shows produce an adrenaline rush, which the brain takes as evidence that the activity is good and should be repeated.²² Whole industries exist to satiate – or even create – this desire for sensational death. Websites like FindADeath.com have thousands of users reading, writing, and adding photos of celebrity deaths, and the phenomenon of “dark tourism” brings people to book the hotel room where Janis Joplin overdosed and tour sites of massacres. Stone suggests that eventually commodifying death is inevitable, as death “requires inoculation and thus rendering into something else that is comfortable and safe to deal with and to contemplate.”²³ The clean, sanitized museum environment helps to do that for dead bodies and bloodstained pillows alike. At the same time as morbid objects bring us closer to the past, they also provide us with distance, allowing us to experience violence in the context of a carefully curated environment that feels utterly removed from our lives. This, however, can also be deeply unhealthy. Gorer argues that modern taboos surrounding natural death have created in their stead a “pornography of death,” writing:

There seem to be a number of parallels between the fantasies which titillate our curiosity about the mystery of sex, and those which titillate our curiosity about the mystery of death. In both types of fantasy, the emotions which are typically concomitant of the acts – love or grief – are paid little or no attention, while the sensations are enhanced as much as a customary poverty of language permits.²⁴

Display of morbid objects makes violent death safe at a distance at the expense of our ability to acknowledge and accept natural death. It also runs the risk of normalizing violent death to the point where we are unable to understand it as a tragedy. One example is the display of John Lennon's bloodstained clothes and glasses from the day he was killed. Yoko Ono, Lennon's widow, displayed the objects, as well as the bloodstained paper bag in which they were delivered, in an exhibition she framed as a tribute to victims of gun violence.²⁵ Yet many claimed that the display was a voyeuristic exploitation of Lennon's death, especially after Ono sold replicas of the bloody clothes and glasses for tens of thousands of pounds. The horror of gun violence, some argued, is sufficiently clear without such gruesome displays, and to commodify and fetishize the dead is to reduce rather than increase that horror.

The Dangers of Dealing with Death

As Stone points out, dealing with death is no small issue: how cultures treat death reveals the how the view life.²⁶ Because modern society lacks the re-

ligious structures that used to help us make sense of death, we are now left searching for that meaning. The absence of publically sanctioned spaces to contemplate our own mortality inspires an existential dread, which drives us to sanitize spaces like the museum and sensationalize spaces like the front pages of magazines. We will all experience the deaths of those close to us, as well as our own eventual demise, and so the meaning we make from death impacts us socially and existentially. Presenting morbid objects as sensationalized or sanitized deaths at a distance, then, inspires a number of objections.

First, because morbid objects almost without exception have to do with violent death, there is always the fear of copycat killers. If John Lennon's death became an exciting celebrity symbol rather than a tragedy, future killers could be motivated to create that experience again. Second, morbid objects run the risk of turning fact into fiction. By playing too much on the sensationalized aspects of the death, or by embedding the object too deeply into a distant historical narrative, morbid objects remove the morbidity from the fact of real death itself. In cases of violent death, this often involves celebrating the story of the killer without recognizing the reality of the victims. This means that viewers are not actually asked to contemplate their own mortality, instead pretending that their own death, like the death presented to them behind the glass, is a mere fiction.

Finally, there is the problem of associating violence with pleasure. Dark tourism spaces like the London Dungeon make torture into sport, and museums run the risk of turning murder weapons and blood-stained relics into romanticized, highly-anticipated exhibits. Studies of violent video games provide evidence that exposing people to distant, sensationalized violence decreases their empathy,²⁷ making them less able to respond healthily to real tragedy on a personal or global scale. It is hardly disputed that we have a moral obligation to take seriously the suffering of others and to prevent it to a reasonable degree. If Holocaust museums become exciting attractions, distancing their visitors from the horrors of genocide, then it will be easier for those visitors to later dismiss reports of current genocide. If war museums glamorize war, it will be easier for people to support violent conflict. If morbid objects transform an individual's tragic murder into an exotic thrill, then visitors may find themselves utterly unprepared to deal with the realities of personal tragedy. Or worse, they may respond to it callously, with the mere morbid curiosity museums and magazines have encouraged all their lives.

Obligations to the Dead

Much of the concern about morbid curiosity comes not just from concern about the health of the living, but from concern about the dead. Given the context of morbid objects, we can consider our obligations

to the dead in light of Kantian arguments about animals. Kant argues that we ought to treat animals well and humanely because to act otherwise would be to disrespect our own humanity.²⁸ We do not owe anything to the animals themselves, but if we refuse to respect the value of the ways in which they are like us, we might lose touch with the value of others that are like us, and risk mistreating human beings.

Given modern knowledge about the cognitive and sensory capacities of animals, this argument no longer seems applicable to them, but the core concept is applicable to other non-persons. The dead may not exist as persons to be harmed, but if we treat the dead as mere objects or commodities despite all the ways in which they are like us –and indeed, once were us – we risk treating the living in the same way. Commodifying death is problematic because it diminishes respect for life; objectifying the dead is only a few steps away from objectifying the living. If Lennon’s bloodstained glasses glamorize gun violence through this celebrity association, we lose the moral weight that such tragedies ought to carry. In Gorer’s language, pornography of death exploits both the living and the dead.

Pragmatism and Human Remains

A useful focal point for crystallizing the obligations of museums in response to this is the display of human remains. The British Museum released a book on the display and care of human remains which seems

in large part intended to justify their own practice of using human remains for display and research purposes. They make a number of arguments already familiar to us: human remains “individualize and populate a past that may otherwise seem rather remote and impersonal,”²⁹ they are useful for educational and research purposes. But one repeated claim is particularly noteworthy. Authors consistently use the idea that audiences enjoy seeing human remains. “The public increasingly wishes, and indeed expects, to see displays featuring archaeological human remains when they visit museums.”³⁰ One particularly telling paragraph reads:

When Tollund Man was recovered in Denmark in 1950, the National Museum of Denmark initially felt that the body might be too ‘macabre’ for public view. When the remains were finally placed on display, this assessment proved spectacularly out of tune with public attitudes with 18,000 people visiting the exhibition in ten days. This disconnect between academic discourse and attitudes of the museum-going public all too often persists today.³¹

This is a clear example of the pragmatist museum model, and we have already seen that that is insufficient when dealing with morbid objects. The argument made here is that evidence of public enjoyment is evidence of a good display. The logical leap between noting huge visitor turnout and arguing that bog bodies are not macabre is enormous – throughout the book, authors fail to consider the idea that the public wishes

to see human remains because of the macabre, rather than despite of it. To assume that public support for displays certifies those displays as ethical is irresponsible. The disconnect between academic discourse and the public may not come down to what each party considers macabre but to whether or not they consider the displaying macabre objects ethically permissible.

Healthy Morbidity

Despite all this, fascination with death is universal and unsurprising. Morbid curiosity is an expression of our deep, desperate desire to make meaning out of death. Though there are many ways to go wrong, museums, as spaces that construct meaning and narrative for their viewers, can also help to create healthy meaning.

Phillip Stone argues that it is possible for dark tourism to help “engender personal meaningfulness and ontological security”³² by providing viewers with socially sanctioned spaces to contemplate their own deaths. Rather than only encountering the dead in sensationalized presentations designed to shield us from our mortality, it is possible to surround the dead with narratives to help us make sense of the living. Stone argues that the fact that we only display non-routine deaths that are difficult to understand can be a virtue, because if we can make sense out of those deaths, we can make sense out of all death. In that vein, Holocaust museums can provide moral narratives about

tolerance, with “the poetic use of shock... provid[ing] a deeper, more critically alert awareness of things-as-they-were, and an anticipation that such genocide can never occur again.”³³ The National Parks Foundation can focus on Lincoln’s murder as one part of a tragic narrative about leadership and hatred, using the gun to remind us how terrible it is to respond with violence. The connection that morbid objects offer to the past can help individuals better grasp the present as they see the bloodstains and recognize the similarity to their own blood.

By providing authorized community spaces for this contemplation, morbid objects mediate taboos around death. They allow viewers to face their own mortality through the mortality of others, without attempting to turn the other’s death into a simple adrenaline rush. Rather, by incorporating another’s death into a real narrative about the way the world works or the work we need to do in the world, museums can give audiences a way to understand their own lives and eventual deaths as having a similar narrative. The museum constructs the narrative, and the viewer constructs the meaning, allowing them to return home with a more secure sense of both self and other.

Contemplating Mortality in the Museum

In order to have these positive effects, museums must take responsibility for their role in viewer’s understanding of death. They must balance purist and

constructivist models of museum education and focus on cultivating visitors' morality and providing audiences with frameworks to critically question the past as well as the present. They cannot allow death to become mere entertainment or safe fiction, but must acknowledge that death is an essential part of life and can be made meaningful.

It is clear that museum presentation and visitor reactions do not always align. In his study of 19th century anatomical museums, Samuel Alberti notes that though "pathologists and anatomists intended their collections to be edifying,"³⁴ visitor responses included "horror, disgust, and titillation...[as well as] anger and violence."³⁵ It seems reasonable to claim that museums have both a vested interest and an ethical obligation to minimize the distance between intended and actual visitor responses. If a museum displays a bog body to help people learn about life in ancient England, then finds that visitors are really ogling the garrote around his neck, it cannot simply dismiss these reactions for the sake of higher visitor numbers. Rather, it ought either to acknowledge that element of the display, taking the dirty secret of death out into the open and allowing a healthier space for viewers to engage with mortality, or it ought to redesign the display to inspire the critical questioning and learning it intended without morbid distractions.

One concrete step that museums can take when evaluating whether to display morbid objects is to fo-

cus on the morbid object's historical value. When the London Metropolitan Police decided to put on a limited display from their "black museum" of crime artifacts, an ethics committee was formed to approve every object. Some objects, like the stove upon which Dennis Nilsen boiled the heads of young men he murdered in the 1970s, were not approved, despite the fact that visitors would flock to see them. The committee argued that "there was nothing new about either the crime or its detection,³⁶ and thus it had little historical value to merit display. Museums displaying morbid objects in the name of education must make sure they are actually educating.

Finally, avoiding Gorer's pornography of death and creating instead a space where viewers can engage with death in socially and morally sanctioned ways seems to be not just a possibility but an obligation for museums. Morbid objects help the past come alive to us and can thus enable educational contemplation of death and the circumstances surrounding specific deaths if museums can fully acknowledge and properly frame the macabre elements of those objects in narrative. The diary recording Mary Queen of Scots' execution can become part of a narrative of governmental upheaval and personal tragedy, where one cousin was forced to kill another out of political necessity. The Latter-day Saint leader's bloodstained clothes can tell a story of fervent faith and sacrifice. Alexander Hamilton's guns can become the heartbreaking capstone of

an passionate individual life. Through morbid objects, we can see the dead as people, and thus engage our moral capacity to treat all persons as people as well.

Museums are sometimes called “cathedrals of learning,” with the implication that they are the chapels of the modern era. Indeed, museums often seem like sacred spaces, full of treasures and relics of the dead. Most importantly, museums organize those treasures to construct meaning, letting their audiences experience spiritual communion with the past that grants them peace and greater understanding of the present. With death, our most important and incomprehensible human experience, museums have the potential to fill the void religious structures have left by situating death within meaningful narratives through their display of morbid objects. However, abusing that power in the name of entertainment can be deeply unhealthy, especially given the trust that visitors place in museums. Museums can validate this trust and create a healthier society by using morbid objects to give the dead a voice and their deaths a story. This will help individuals come to terms with the past and their own future demise.

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An Externalist Approach to Inferred Experience and Perceptual Justification

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Abstract: This paper on cognitive penetrability examines Susanna Siegel's theory of inferred experience as it is presented in her book, *The Rationality of Perception*. I argue that certain aspects of her account contradict standard internalist inferences, and subsequently discuss a plausible externalist alternative. While preserving Siegel's inferential account of cognitive penetration, I develop a causal account of perceptual justification in an attempt to reconcile internalist and externalist intuitions about inferred experiences.

Introduction

As empirical studies of the relationship between cognition and perception have increasingly shown, perception is often susceptible to subtle influences from cognitive states. Notably, instances of such “top-down” effects on perception can also be picked out in everyday experience. A suspicion that an insect is in the room may lead one person to feel a crawling sensation on her leg.¹ A fear of illness may lead another person to see his fingertips turning blue. To illustrate this more clearly, take the following case: I am walking through a grocery store in search of a banana. I stop at the sign that says “Bananas” and look down, and based on a deeply ingrained belief, I expect to see a yellow banana. Unbeknownst to me, the store has run out of bananas, and as a strange practical joke, one of the employees has placed a gray plastic banana where the bananas would normally be. If I pick up the replica banana, I will no doubt realize that it is not a real banana. But based on my belief about the color of bananas, the banana does not look gray to me. If asked at that moment, I might say that the banana was somewhere between gray and yellow. Certain conditions might even lead me to indicate that the banana was simply yellow.

Let’s call the above scenario the Gray Banana case. There is a stark contrast between my situation in this case and my situation in what we can call the Standard Yellow Banana case, in which I look at a yellow banana and perceive that there is a yellow banana without

the interference of my beliefs. In the Gray Banana case, it seems clear that something about my beliefs has interfered with the contents of my experience in a way that jeopardizes the experience's normal justificatory powers. How are we to explain occurrences of this sort? One suggestion comes in the form of cognitive penetrability theories, which generally posit that beliefs are capable of directly influencing certain properties of perceptual experiences. The veracity of some such theory would entail that any experiences that are altered by beliefs do not solely include information gained from one's immediate perceptual inputs, but that they also reflect the content of those intervening beliefs. In *The Rationality of Perception*, Susanna Siegel (2017) endorses such a view, and suggests that the occurrence of such a phenomenon can be explained with the introduction of a theorized inferential structure for experience. In Part II of *The Rationality of Perception*, Siegel focuses on establishing an account of the cases where an inference about the contents of perceptual experiences can penetrate (and thereby alter the content of) those experiences. Her account also delves into the implications that this may have for one's justification in believing the content of an experience that is altered by inference, leading to the eventual conclusion that inferences can lead to both detrimental and beneficial deviations from the "baseline" level of justification conferred by standard perceptual experiences.

In response to Siegel's account of inferred expe-

rience, I argue here that an account of deviations from baseline justification based on the rationality of underlying inferences is inadequate. According to my argument, Siegel's account of perceptual justification and inferred experiences cannot provide a satisfactory explanation of certain justificatory assessments, and this can be attributed to a broader problem with internalist views of cognitive penetrability. I subsequently develop an externalist condition, the *non-mental causal criterion of justification*, which sidesteps this internalist pitfall while also avoiding many of the shortcomings of standard externalist views. I go on to demonstrate that this criterion has the same intuitive force behind it that Siegel's account of perceptual justification does, and that it allows us to strike a balance between internalist and traditional externalist accounts of cognitive penetrability.

Siegel on Inferred Experience

Siegel begins her account by introducing cases of *epistemic downgrade*, in which the inferential origins of an experience cause that experience to lose justificatory power.² Cases of epistemic downgrade typically involve ill-founded inferences overriding informative perceptual inputs. Roughly speaking, Siegel's account supposes that everyday perceptual experiences provide a baseline level of justification for believing their contents.³ Further, she states that when an experience is inferred, one's level of justification in believing the ex-

perience's contents can fall below baseline.

However, the fact that an experience was produced by inference does not entail that the experience will be subjected to epistemic downgrade. While all ill-founded inferences lead to epistemic downgrade by Siegel's view, her account allows for non-downgraded experiences when an experience results from a *well-founded inference*. The category of well-founded inferences includes all inferences for which the inferential inputs adequately support the inferential output, for which the inferential inputs were themselves reached rationally, and for which no belief q that was inferred from a priori belief p is circularly used as an inferential input to offer additional support for belief p . Siegel argues that when an inferred experience meets these conditions, it is possible for it to confer the same baseline level of justification for believing its contents as a phenomenally identical uninferred experience.

Moreover, Siegel also contends that there can be cases where the justification that one has for believing the contents of an inferred experience exceeds baseline justification. For instance, this is possible in a case where a yellow banana perceptual input and a yellow banana inference both contribute to the formation of an experience, which we can call the Inferred Yellow Banana case. By her account, the Inferred Yellow Banana case will be an instance of *epistemic upgrade*, meaning that the Inferred Yellow Banana experience will provide more justification for believing its

contents than the Standard Yellow Banana experience. Siegel argues for this by analogy, employing the intuition that a person with both a perceptual experience of a yellow banana and background beliefs supporting the notion that she is looking at a yellow banana “could aggregate these two bits of support, [ending] up with more reason to believe that [the banana] is yellow than she would have with either the experience alone, or with the background beliefs alone” (Siegel 2017, 143). Similarly, she holds that the features of the inference and the features of the perceptual input in the Inferred Yellow Banana case aggregate, and that epistemic upgrade can result.⁴

Siegel’s inferential account of perception makes significant progress towards a more concrete explanation of the cognitive penetrability of experience. However, her views on perceptual justification create problems that threaten to undermine her entire account. One particularly troubling consequence of Siegel’s views is that inferences, given a set of amenable conditions, can sometimes lead to experiences that generate additional justification for believing their contents simply by virtue of their inferential etiology. There are several reasons to question the viability of this suggestion. Firstly, while there is a strong intuitive basis for the notion that a defective etiology can compromise the justificatory power of an experience, no such intuition supports the idea that the right kind of etiology can improve the justificatory power of an experience. More

subtly, it seems that this notion relies on an *internalist* condition for justification while also coming into conflict with it. For our purposes, if I am an internalist about justification, I must hold that a belief is justified if and only if it is justified by some mental fact.⁵ This means that if two cases are identical with respect to mental facts, they must be identical with respect to justification. Siegel's view is reliant on internalism in that it distinguishes downgraded inferred experiences from other sorts of deceptive experiences by suggesting that bad inferences compromise justification. Siegel's view comes into conflict with internalism insofar as it is not clear that there are any mental facts that distinguish the Inferred Yellow Banana inference from the Gray Banana inference.

In order to see this problem more clearly, we can try to account for the justificatory differences between downgraded experiences and their non-downgraded counterparts. In order to do this, we need to define all factors that can play a role in perceptual justification. For instance, take the phenomenal character of experiences. As Siegel notes, epistemic downgrade excludes the possibility of an inferred experience deriving all of its justificatory power from its phenomenal character. If it could, we would be as justified in believing the contents of the Gray Banana experience as we are justified in believing the contents of the Standard Yellow Banana experience, given their shared phenomenal character. So if an account that relies only on the

phenomenal content of an experience cannot accommodate our intuitions about the justificatory power of experiences, what other factors must we include in an account of perceptual justification?

As already mentioned, Siegel identifies the inferential character of an experience as an additional source of justificatory power. However, this still does not lead to an adequate account of the justificatory power of experiences, not even in conjunction with phenomenal character. For instance, compare the Gray Banana case and the Inferred Yellow Banana case. Both cases feature the same well-founded inference altering the contents of perceptual experience, and the two cases are phenomenally identical. Nevertheless, Siegel holds that while the Gray Banana experience is an instance of epistemic downgrade, the Inferred Yellow Banana experience need not be. Despite sharing the same phenomenal and inferential characters, there is still a clear discrepancy between the justificatory status of the Gray Banana experience and that of the Inferred Yellow Banana experience that must be addressed. Thus, the inferential character of experiences does not seem like a plausible candidate in our search.

Only two relevant differences between the Gray Banana case and the Inferred Yellow Banana case remain: pre-conscious perceptual inputs⁶ and the external facts that produce those perceptual inputs. Unfortunately, as far as an internalist account of justification is concerned, neither of these differences seems prom-

ising. In the case of perceptual inputs, Siegel argues that an inference's response to perceptual inputs is rationally assessable, and that the rationality of reaching a particular perceptual experience depends on the perceptual inputs to which the inference is responding. However, Siegel's account allows for the possibility that an inference overriding perceptual inputs can sometimes be epistemically responsible in certain circumstances, meaning that some cases much like the Gray Banana case could avoid epistemic downgrade.⁷ The upshot of this is that there can be cases that are identical in all internal respects, and that Siegel's account must implicitly depend upon external facts in many of its justificatory assessments. As we know, external facts are not an admissible justificatory factor in an internalist account of justification. Given Siegel's prior commitment to an account of perceptual justification that does not rely on any external facts in its justificatory assessments, this predicament may stand as a threat to her entire account.

Inferred Experience and the New Evil Demon Problem

While the difficulty of finding a set of justificatory factors that is consistent with Siegel's account is itself troubling, it is in fact just a symptom of a larger problem for Siegel's view. To illustrate this larger problem, I will be using a modification of the well-known new evil demon problem⁸ (or "NEDP"). Briefly, the NEDP is

meant to offer convincing grounds for rejecting *externalism about justification*, or the view that justification can rely on non-mental facts, based on the following suggestion: If a person whose experience was phenomenally identical to mine was deceived about the existence of the external world, she would still be just as justified in her external-world beliefs as I am in mine. Given this idea's strong intuitive basis, its introduction demands a strong counterargument if externalism is to remain viable. However, the same intuition that motivates the NEDP also threatens to render internalism and epistemic downgrade incompatible with one another. In order to see this point more clearly, we can modify the NEDP scenario as follows: If an evil demon suddenly began to deceive you in such a way that all of your perceptual experiences from then on would result from your beliefs and associated inferences, would you lose justification for believing the content of your experiences? *Prima facie*, since there is no obvious reason to expect the etiology of your deception to alter the justificatory power of your experiences, the answer should be no. Yet this seems to contradict the very notion of epistemic downgrade, which suggests that the inferential etiology of an experience can influence its justificatory power.

This modification of the NEDP, referred to here as the Inference Demon case, allows us to examine the reasoning employed in theories of perceptual justification more closely. In the set of propositions below,

we refer to some person being deceived in the NEDP as Evil Demon Victim (EDV). We refer to some second person, whose perceptual experiences are phenomenally identical to EDV's experiences but are produced by the Inference Demon rather than the standard Evil Demon, as the Inference Demon Victim (IDV). We refer to some third person, whose perceptual experiences are phenomenally identical to both EDV's experiences and IDV's experiences but are produced by ordinary distal stimuli in a non-deceptive manner, as Non-Victim (NV). Take the following inconsistent tetrad of propositions:

- (1): I am less justified in my perceptual beliefs in the Gray Banana case than I am in the Standard Yellow Banana case.
- (2): EDV is just as justified in her perceptual beliefs as NV.
- (3): IDV is just as justified in her perceptual beliefs as EDV.
- (4): If (1), then IDV is less justified in her perceptual beliefs than NV.

The inconsistency among these propositions lies in the fact that (2) and (3) together establish an equivalence between IDV's justification and NV's justification, whereas (1) and (4) together lead to the conclusion that IDV cannot be as justified in her perceptual beliefs as NV. Some internalists might resolve the inconsistency by rejecting (1), and in doing so would reject the possibility of epistemic downgrade.⁹ Some externalists might resolve the inconsistency by rejecting (2),

and in doing so would reject the intuition behind the NEDP.¹⁰ Siegel is committed to both (1) and (2), and so must reject either (3) or (4) in order to overcome the inconsistency.¹¹

Identifying a relevant difference between EDV's circumstances and IDV's circumstances would provide grounds for rejecting (3), and such a relevant difference might also explicate the justificatory difference between the Inferred Yellow Banana case and the Gray Banana case. At first glance, Siegel's claim that one is rationally responsible for the content of inferred experiences seems like a plausible premise in an internalist argument for rejecting (3). After all, if I hold certain beliefs, I can be held accountable for holding those beliefs. Matthew McGrath offers a similar defense of Siegel's view on the internalist grounds that inference leads experience to have a rational standing, making someone who is deceived by inference responsible for the contents of experience in a way that someone who is otherwise deceived is not (McGrath 2013).

However, this position runs into trouble when trying to explain cases where the irrational etiology of an experience is not a mental fact.¹² Further, McGrath and Siegel's form of internalism holds that one's justification supervenes on one's mental states, such that if there is a justificatory difference between someone who is deceived by inference and someone who is otherwise deceived, there must be some difference between the totality of one person's mental states and the totality

of the other person's mental states. Since beliefs and inferences that are formed responsibly can still lead to epistemic downgrade by Siegel's account (as we have already seen in the previous section), rational responsibility for an experience is precluded from offering a complete argument for rejecting (3).

The only remaining reply available to Siegel's view would involve rejecting (4), which appears to be the sturdiest of the four propositions. The reasoning behind this proposition is that if an inference alters the content of an experience, it does not seem to matter whether this alteration occurs as the result of a purely mental process or whether some non-mental event is what leads the perceptual experience to conform to one's inferences. In both the Inference Demon case and the Gray Banana case, the justification-compromising feature is the role that inferences have in the formation of perceptual experiences, not the location of the process that allows inference to carry over into perceptual experience. Any plausible argument against (4) would have to give some account of a justificatory difference between the two cases that could be explained in terms of the location of the inference-perception transition, which is not readily apparent.

The problem for Siegel's view, then, is that it provides us with no means by which to reject (3). The reply to (3) suggested by the account falls short because the rational responsibility account of epistemic downgrade cannot adequately distinguish between

cases where the content of a perceptual experience is at least partially determined by mental facts and cases where it is exclusively determined by non-mental facts. More broadly, it may appear as if any position that involves commitments to both (1) and (2) will run into the same trouble that Siegel's view does. If this were the case, any viable response to the inconsistent tetrad would have to reject (1), (2), or both. Nonetheless, it is my view that a response to the inconsistent tetrad that defends both epistemic downgrade and the intuition behind the NEDP is still possible on externalist grounds. There is a strong argument for accepting the resulting account of epistemic downgrade, and as we will see, this account raises serious doubts about the possibility of epistemic upgrade.

A Causal Criterion of Justification

One plausible view on which we can reject (3) may be a causal account of justification, by which a perceptual experience can only provide adequate justification for believing its content if it has the right kind of causal etiology. In its crudest form, a causal criterion might specify that a baseline experience such that p must be caused by some object p . Importantly, some causal accounts of justification can explain the justificatory difference between the Gray Banana case and the Standard Yellow Banana case without relying on attributions of rationality and irrationality. In making the case for such an account of justification with regard

to inferred experiences, I will be starting with a set of roughly externalist assumptions. While it remains possible that a causal account of justification might be compatible with some form of internalism, the requirement that one must have introspective access to a causal connection in order to be justified in believing the contents of an experience is far stronger than is needed to deal with (3), and does not offer any clear benefits when dealing with inferred experiences.¹³ Moreover, it is not clear that (2) could withstand such a position, which is a problem when trying to formulate an account that preserves the intuition behind the NEDP.

The notion of a causal account of justification may seem objectionable on the surface. The prospects seem particularly weak for a possible criterion of justification of the following sort: “In order to confer at least baseline justification for believing its contents, an experience must be caused by the thing that it represents”. Putting aside concerns about how to define conformity between the content of an experience and the cause of the experience, a criterion of this kind would also have strong externalist implications, not the least of which being that the Evil Demon Victim’s experiences would not confer baseline justification. Instead, a more moderate causal criterion is necessary if we are to reconcile the intuition that the EDV has baseline justification for believing the contents of her experiences with the intuition that the Inference Demon Victim does not.

I propose a more plausible causal criterion of

justification:

Non-Mental Causal Criterion of Justification: If I have baseline justification for believing the contents of an experience, the experience must be caused by some non-mental cause.

Such a criterion is particularly appealing for three reasons. Firstly, it can identify clear cases of epistemic downgrade with the same consistency that Siegel's account can, as demonstrated by its ability to properly differentiate between the Gray Banana case and Standard Yellow Banana case, while also capturing the motivation behind the notion of epistemic downgrade more fully. Secondly, it can offer an account of perceptual justification that is compatible with the intuition behind the NEDP without appealing to seemingly arbitrary criteria for justification.¹⁴ Lastly, it can differentiate between the Evil Demon case and the Inference Demon case, giving us grounds to reject (3).¹⁵ Thus, a "non-mental" causal criterion of justification accommodates both (1) and (2), unlike many other externalist views, while still proposing a solution to the inconsistent tetrad, unlike Siegel's view. Coupled with the intuitive strength behind the idea that experiences that are primarily the result of mental processes cannot justify beliefs in the same way that experiences produced by non-mental processes can, it seems that the non-mental causal criterion of justification has a great deal to recommend it as an alternate approach to

inferred experiences and, more broadly, to perceptual justification.

This criterion seems largely acceptable as a necessary condition for baseline justification, but several immediate problems make it clear that further adjustments are needed. Most notably, it may seem as if the Inference Demon experience actually is the result of some non-mental cause, namely the inference demon itself. This concern can be addressed without abandoning the intuition motivating our account. The idea behind developing a non-mental causal criterion is that having an experience that is not directly derived from a non-mental state compromises one's justificatory standing, and the Inference Demon experience clearly fits this description. Yet it seems that the non-mental causal criterion does not fully capture this idea. On closer inspection, the complication is not that the experience itself cannot be attributed to some non-mental cause, but rather that the contents of the experience cannot be attributed to some non-mental cause. A modified causal criterion that accommodates this observation will allow for a more conclusive account of the Inference Demon case, as it will clarify that the experience's causal inadequacy comes from the etiology of its contents, not from the etiology of the experience itself. Thus, incorporating this idea into the preliminary proposal yields the following new criterion of justification: If I have baseline justification for believing the contents of an experience, the contents of the expe-

rience must be caused by some non-mental cause.

Another problem arises when considering cases in which the content of an experience is indirectly caused by a mental state. Suppose that in the distant future, a virtual reality headset is created that can be connected to a human brain. If one's brain is properly outfitted with the right instruments and equipment, the headset allows its wearer to visually simulate the entire set of one's external-world beliefs. In this scenario, the cable leading from the back of my head to the headset plays the same role as the inference demon, insofar as it is a physical means by which my belief states are transmitted into my perceptual experience. But unlike the inference demon, whose deception is entirely mental, the simulation involves information displayed on a screen that produces the content of my perceptual experience. My belief states are plainly responsible for the content of my experience, but the physical intermediary nonetheless seems to fill the role of a non-mental cause. To exclude the possibility of baseline justification in such cases, we can stipulate that the non-mental cause of the content of a baseline experience cannot be *causally downstream* from a mental state with the same content.¹⁶ Importantly, this still means that if a mental cause with a given content *p* has some non-mental effect that does not preserve content *p*, and if that non-mental effect goes on to cause a perceptual experience, the justificatory status of the experience is not compromised.

However, while the second modification is necessary in order to deal with cases where the content of an experience is indirectly caused by some mental state, it also risks contradicting common-sense cases of baseline justification where a mental state is responsible for some non-mental change. For instance, if I believe that I am out of bananas, and if this belief causes my decision to write myself a note that says “Buy bananas at the grocery store,” surely I have baseline justification for believing the contents of my experience when I glance at the note later. As it stands, the criterion fails to account for the fact that my mental state, despite having the same contents as my eventual perceptual experience, does not undermine the justificatory status of my perceptual experience in this case in the same way that it would if I was being deceived by an inference demon. The decision to write something down is not in the same class of mental states as beliefs, desires, and emotions, insofar as the latter kinds of states are not typically causally powerful in the same way that the former kind of state is.

In order to ensure that we do not deny baseline justification to such experiences, we can make one final modification to our criterion: The non-mental cause of the content of a baseline experience can be downstream from a mental state with the same content if the mental state is capable, in its present context, of producing some non-mental fact that corresponds to its content. My decision to write a note to myself does

not require some additional mental state for the note to be written, and thus does not compromise the justificatory status of a resulting perceptual experience. The belief that I am out of bananas, on the other hand, could not causally interact with the relevant facts without some intermediary mental state being present to do the “heavy lifting”, so to speak.¹⁷ Adding this constraint makes room for certain mental states, namely those that are causally efficacious, on the grounds that such mental states do not compromise the justificatory basis of perceptual experiences in the same way that other mental states do. This modification is consistent with the intuition behind the non-mental causal criterion, as causally powerful mental states have the potential to make physical changes that would, in turn, produce experiences with veridical contents.¹⁸

Bringing these changes together leads us to the final version of our causal criterion,

Non-Mental Causal Criterion of Justification (Modified): If I have baseline justification for believing the contents of an experience, the experience must have some non-mental cause, and that non-mental cause must not be downstream from some non-efficacious mental state.

With this set of adjustments in place, the non-mental causal criterion seems to successfully differentiate between cases that are intuitively instances of epistemic downgrade and cases that are not. If this is so, then

as long as it remains consistent with (1) and (2) and provides reason to reject (3), the non-mental causal criterion may provide us with an externalist means by which to circumvent the problems presented for Siegel's account.

Non-Mental Causes and Epistemic Upgrade

As we saw in Section 2 and Section 3, the phenomenal and inferential characters of an experience are inadequate in assessing the justificatory statuses of inferred experiences, meaning that any account of perceptual experience must single out at least one additional necessary condition for baseline justification. As we saw in Section 4, the condition offered by a non-mental causal account of perceptual justification fills this role. If we accept this account, it follows that we should accept that any experiential content that is not caused by the proper non-mental facts is an instance of epistemic downgrade. Thus, as long as we hold that causal relationships make some non-negligible contribution to the justificatory status of standard perceptual experiences, the contributions of phenomenal and inferential characters will never be sufficient for baseline justification.

If the non-mental causal criterion of justification holds, our verdict as to whether or not epistemic upgrade is possible will rely on whether or not the content of an inferred experience can be caused by the proper non-mental facts in the same way that the con-

tent of an uninferred experience can be caused by the proper non-mental facts. This is unambiguously not the case for the Gray Banana experience, as the color properties of the gray banana are causally unrelated to the color content of my perceptual experience of a yellow banana. The causal relationship is more difficult to establish in cases where the color content of a perceptual experience is not sensitive to the color properties of the object being perceived due to overdetermination, as in the Inferred Yellow Banana case. Given that the inference and the perceptual inputs would each be sufficient for producing a perceptual experience of a yellow banana,¹⁹ the complication is that it may not be possible to individuate the two potential causal factors. One conceivable answer to this problem lies in Siegel's account of memory color, a means by which "the perceptual system stores information about colors things tend to have" to be "used in generating perceptual experiences" (Siegel 2017, 100). Siegel suggests that the memory color phenomenon and similar phenomena may be crucial in the inferential process of determining experiential content. Such phenomena are thought to be reliant on certain types of pre-conscious perceptual inputs being processed before others, making it possible for inferences to causally intervene in the standard development of perceptual experiences.

There are two plausible ways to interpret the implications of the memory color phenomenon here. The stronger interpretation is that while the causal in-

tervention of inference may not produce any phenomenal differences when compared to baseline experiences in insensitive cases, the inferred experience is etiologically different, and must therefore be treated differently on this basis. The result of this strict causal distinction between inferred and uninferred experiences would be that we can separate out the experiences that are formed inferentially and those that are not, and can explicitly point to the ways in which the causal relationship between observer and object is compromised by it. If this is so, we can reject the possibility of an inferred experience ever offering baseline justification for its contents due to its causal inadequacies, leading us to the conclusion that epistemic upgrade is not possible.

The weaker interpretation is that the two causes can be individuated, and that the inference can be assigned a greater causal role in the formation of the experience, but that the respective contributions of the inference and the pre-conscious perceptual inputs must both be taken into account. By this interpretation, insensitive inferred experiences are the result of an amalgamation of mental and non-mental causes, and will thus vary in degrees of epistemic downgrade based on the degree of causal influence from mental inputs. While the stronger interpretation may be more desirable in that it offers a more conclusive rebuttal of epistemic upgrade, the weaker interpretation has the advantage of allowing inferred experiences to maintain

baseline experience in some cases where inference does not disrupt the contents of an experience. Given the potential scope of cognitive penetration, the difficulties introduced by suggesting that all inferred experiences are downgraded experiences may be reason enough to accept the weaker interpretation.

Conclusion

While *The Rationality of Perception* offers a great deal of insight into cognitive penetrability, Siegel's account of the justification of inferred experiences brings with it many of the problems associated with internalism. If the non-mental causal criterion of justification holds up under scrutiny, it may offer a powerful externalist alternative by which to make sense of inferred experiences. This criterion is meant to take the concerns that motivate both internalism and traditional externalism into account, proposing a means by which we can navigate the middle ground between the two. At the very least, its plausibility suggests that an externalist approach to perceptual justification can still accommodate certain internalist intuitions, and that a view of this kind may eventually yield a more satisfactory account of inferred experiences.

Notes

1. While it is a controversial claim that bodily sensations of this kind constitute perceptual experiences, [David Armstrong, *Bodily Sensations* (London, Routledge & Paul, 1962)], I am taking the liberty of ignoring this controversy for illustrative purposes. At the very least, this case closely resembles perception in various relevant respects.

2. The account in this section is adapted from Susanna Siegel, *The Rationality of Perception* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017), 57-145.

3. Broadly, we can think of baseline justification as the standard level of justificatory power held by everyday experiences. In reference to an inferred experience, “baseline justification” refers to the level of justification that one would have for believing the contents of a phenomenally identical experience that was produced in standard perceptual conditions. “Baseline experience” refers to such a phenomenally identical uninferred experience. Importantly, baseline justification is not the level of justification that one would have had for believing the contents of the phenomenally distinct experience that would have occurred in the absence of the relevant inference.

4. Siegel clarifies that baseline justification is a range of justificatory statuses rather than a single justificatory status, and that standard perceptual experiences can vary in terms of their placement within the baseline range. With this fact in mind, she argues that some cases of aggregation will be instances of epistemic upgrade, while others will remain within the baseline range. For more on this, see Susanna Siegel, *The Rationality of Perception* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017), 145.

5. This is actually only one of several different kinds of internalism. This sort of internalist view, namely that one’s belief that *x* is justified by one’s mental states, can be more accurately characterized as “mentalism”. It is important that we take care to distinguish mentalism from the internalist view referred to as “access internalism” or “accessibilism”, which is that one’s belief that *x* is justified by one’s reflective access to justifying factors that justify a

belief that *x*. Unless otherwise specified, I will henceforth be using the term “internalism” to refer to mentalism. For more on this distinction, see Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, “Internalism Defended”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2001): 1-18. 6. This term comes directly from Siegel, and is used to refer to the raw perceptual information taken in from our surroundings that is combined with inferences in the formation of inferred experiences (Susanna Siegel, *The Rationality of Perception*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, 114). By “pre-conscious”, Siegel means that we do not have conscious access to these perceptual inputs.

7. In particular, Siegel argues that Bayesian analysis can distinguish between those cases where overriding perceptual inputs is epistemically appropriate and those where it is not. Roughly, she supposes that there is always a “proper weight” to assign to perceptual inputs, and that only those inferences “that fail to give pre-conscious input proper weight will be cases of [epistemic downgrade]” (Susanna Siegel, *The Rationality of Perception*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, 138). Siegel takes there to be cases where assigning proper weight results in “properly overriding a pre-conscious signal that the banana is gray with the prior probability that bananas are yellow” (Susanna Siegel, *The Rationality of Perception*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, 140).

8. Based on discussion in Stewart Cohen, “Justification and Truth”, *Philosophical Studies* 46, no. 3 (1984): 289-295.

9. For instance, Chris Tucker in “Why Open-Minded People Should Endorse Dogmatism” (*Philosophical Perspectives* 24, no. 1, 2010, 529-545) and Anil Gupta in *Empiricism and Experience* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006).

10. For instance, Alvin Goldman in “What Is Justified Belief?” (in *Justification and Knowledge*, ed. George Pappas, Boston, D. Reidel, 1979, 1-25) and Jack Lyons in “Inferentialism and Cognitive Penetrability of Perception” (*Episteme* 13, no. 1, 2016, 1-28).

11. Siegel’s acceptance of (1) is clear, given that her view is constructed with (1) as one of its main premises. Her commitment to (2) is demonstrated by her account of common-sense justificatory

power in cases like seeing a mirage in a desert without realizing it. Her account suggests that unless you have good reason to think that you are currently being deceived by a mirage, “you would have good reason to think your surroundings are as liquidy as they appear, just as you have to think that your surroundings are as hilly and as bright as they appear” (Susanna Siegel, *The Rationality of Perception*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, 66).

12. Take the following case: Let’s say that A holds irrational beliefs that lead her to sign a deal with an evil demon, allowing the demon to alter her memory and deceive her about the external world. We can further stipulate that the totality of her mental states would be identical to those of B, who is deceived in the same way but has not signed a deal with an evil demon. Despite the irrational etiology of A’s deception and the arational etiology of B’s deception, it is not clear that we can offer an account of A being less justified in her external-world beliefs than B without appealing to the external differences between A’s situation and B’s situation.

13. For one example of a viable causal account of justification that is compatible with internalism, see Robert Audi, *The Structure of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 332-352.

14. In particular, Alvin Goldman’s externalist account of the NEDP in “Strong and Weak Justification” (*Philosophical Perspectives* 2, no. 1, 1988: 51-69) has been criticized for the apparent arbitrariness of stipulating that justification varies based on whether or not one meets certain “normal-world” criteria. For one example of this criticism, see Matthew McGrath, “Siegel and the Impact for Epistemological Internalism” (*Philosophical Studies* 162, no. 3, 2013: 723-732).

15. To clarify, this is because the experience in the Inference Demon case is caused by mental states, namely the Inference Demon Victim’s beliefs and associated inferences, whereas the experience in the Evil Demon case is not. While some may worry that beliefs and inferences do not actually cause the experience in the Inference Demon case, closer examination reveals that this worry is unfounded. Inferences do not cause the connection between infer-

ences and experiences necessary for inferred experiences, but they still cause inferred experiences. Analogously, while the Inference Demon Victim's inferences do not cause the Inference Demon's deception, the inferences still cause the experience.

16. By some cause Cb being "downstream" from some antecedent cause Ca, I mean that Ca either causes Cb, or it causes some intermediary cause Cx that goes on to cause Cb, or it causes the first member of an ordered set of intermediary causes where each member goes on to cause the following member (e.g. Cx1 → Cx2 → Cx3), the last member of which causes Cb.

17. Note that even in the context of the Virtual Reality Headset case, this belief alone still could not lead to a baseline experience. While it would be able to produce a perceptual experience by way of the headset, it would still be precluded from causally interacting with the relevant facts. Only in causing a related, causally efficacious mental state could this belief be upstream from a baseline experience.

18. This is distinct from saying that mental states are only capable of producing baseline experiences if they produce veridical contents. Just as justification is not compromised in cases where the content of a mental cause is not transmitted to the content of a perceptual experience, baseline justification must also be possible in cases where a non-efficacious mental state causes an efficacious mental state and the efficacious mental state goes on to cause some non-mental fact.

19. For the inference, this means that it would produce the relevant perceptual experience when one's visual apparatus was presented with the right spatial information but indeterminate color information. For the perceptual input, this means that it would produce the relevant perceptual experience when one's visual apparatus was presented with the right spatial and color information without the intervention of an inference.

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Language in Relation to Essence

Ella Scholz

Abstract: That language is transmitted through tradition necessarily limits its ability to define concepts such that they contain all intended instances and exclude all others. In *Negative Dialectics* Theodor Adorno explores how a “changed philosophy” should be aware of its limitations (its transmission through language being one of them) and must give itself to instances rather than concepts. Using Jorge Luís Borges’s *Funes the Memorious* and Friedrich Nietzsche’s *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* I explore the discrepancies between objects and concepts which try to define them and show how the tensions that arise between the two can themselves be useful in transmitting truth about the essence of concepts.

In his book *Negative Dialectics*, Theodor Adorno hoped to define and practice a philosophical methodology which was aware of its finite capability to describe the infinite. Because the circumstances of our lives are historically contingent, and history only ever chooses one course as its outcome, the field of thoughts that philosophers can have access to is limited at any point in time. Additionally, the fact that we exist historically leads to systems of data transmission which are inherently flawed because history does not allow them to evolve solely through pure thought. This makes it difficult to justify the claim that philosophers can ever hold generalizable truth claims which describe concepts that encapsulate all their intended instances of objects, while also capturing their essence. In this essay, I will explore how language is inherently limited in its ability to capture essence through concepts because of its finite nature.

The finitude of language is caused by a multitude of factors that are inherent to it. For one, language is inextricably linked to tradition. This makes it incredibly fallible to contradiction. Rules created within a tradition need not follow a logical schema because tradition is handed down familiarly, and its rules are not adopted solely on the basis of their adherence to a rational form, but also largely on the basis of interpersonal relationship and the weight they acquire through their particularity and existence through an extended period of time. In his essay “On Tradition”, Ador-

no writes, “Tradition is opposed to rationality, even though the one took shape in the other. Its medium is not consciousness but the pregiven, unreflected and binding existence of social forms – the actuality of the past; unintentionally this notion of binding existence was transmitted to the intellectual/spiritual sphere.”¹ Philosophy’s dependence on language as a mode of its transmission is one way in which tradition binds intellectual pursuits.

In the same essay, Adorno writes of language, “The value of each and every word, each and every combination of words objectively derives its meaning from its history and this history embraces the historical process as such.”² That language exists within history, and is thusly largely dependent on it, further points to its limitations. After all, history is the remembrance of one existent outcome, not of all possible past outcomes. This places limitations on language’s ability to be rational. Language does not have an infinite sampling of outcomes from which it can choose some most accurate version of itself, which best reflects concepts as they appear in the world. In fact, history forces it to “choose” precisely one outcome at a time. This, again, makes language fallible to internal contradiction and makes it unlikely that any language’s schema will accurately reflect the ways in which concepts exist in the world. In this paper, I will explore how language might misrepresent objects and concepts in the world given its existence both within history and tradition.

Since it is the case that language's ability to transmit information is necessarily limited, we are forced to ask how it could possibly be used to accurately represent philosophical truth claims. To explore this question, let us hold that it is one of philosophy's aims to linguistically capture the essence of concepts through statements or sets of statements. Additionally, let us hold that the set of objects that are defined by any concept is the set of instances which are accurately described by the statements that make up a concept. Then, in order to understand the complexities involved in conceptualizing generalizable truth claims, we must first consider the innate philosophical problems that exist when we try to define them. In his chapter "After Auschwitz" in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes, "In philosophy we experience a shock: the deeper, the more rigorous its penetration, the greater our suspicion that philosophy removes us from things as they are—that an unveiling of the essence might enable the most superficial and trivial views to prevail over the views that aim at the essence."³ If a truth claim is meant to get at the essence of an object, then, per Adorno, we run into problems when we make rigorous, sealed, systematic attempts at defining concepts in order to make our claims. It appears that the essences of objects are always more complex (or more simple, as we shall see later) than philosophy needs them to be. When we make truth claims and later adjust those claims — hoping to keep them generalizable while, in fact, add-

ing neverending levels of complexities to account for counterexamples, forgotten nuances, newly collected data – we come to the realization that we might never achieve the accuracy we would need in order to create an all-encompassing claim.

This is because a tension exists between concepts and the objects they attempt to describe. When we make claims aiming at describing the essence of objects, we set out to classify objects in a way which allows us to make statements that tell us something about what is necessary to their being. However, if everytime we do this we end up piling on corrections after corrections to account for individual instances of objects which contradict our definition for a given concept, the task of philosophy becomes one of bandaging an ever-increasing blood flow of instances. Philosophers are forced to write in a defensive mode where life-preservation (or truth-preservation) drives the task of the acquisition of knowledge. This makes us lose track of the intentions we set when we began classifying objects into concepts in the first place. This metaphor illuminates Adorno's claim that the increased rigor that philosophy has seen as its tradition has continued often leads philosophers to create claims which are coherent and complex, but which lead us astray from the answers they set out to seek in the first place.

As philosophers, then, we might wonder whether the act of making truth claims is innately flawed, or whether we are simply using a mistaken methodology.

Philosophy of language can provide us with perspectives on this question, given that philosophical truth claims must generally fit into a linguistic schema. Written truth claims that aim at the essence of objects are linguistic description of concepts, since concepts are meant to predict and encapsulate objects. However, as Friedrich Nietzsche clearly outlines in his essay “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” all of language is a system of metaphors.⁴ The word tree says nothing of the essence of a tree, nor of any tree. Instead, it describes something like the generalizable “treehood” that we perceive all trees to possess. In this way, every word is a descriptor of a concept (“tree” being the label for the concept of “treehood”), which means it describes an infinite amount of more or less related instances of trees which fit the statements that we use to define “treehood”. Therefore, per Nietzsche, “Every word immediately becomes a concept, inasmuch as it is not intended to serve as a reminder of the unique and wholly individualized original experience to which it owes its birth, but must at the same time fit innumerable, more or less similar cases—which means, strictly speaking, never equal—in other words, a lot of unequal cases.”⁵ Not all trees are equal, but we call them all by the same name. Because of the generalization that is a necessary result of linguistically representing truth claims, in philosophy we are often forced to adjust our concepts to make them more precise and rigorous. For example, if I want to make a truth claim about trees’

leaf colors in the fall, I might have to adjust my concept of “treehood” to exclude evergreens, because their leaves do not change colors in the fall in the way that the leaves of most trees do. In doing this, I am decreasing the amount of inequality between the objects that I am referring to (the trees) and their concept (“treehood”) because I am limiting the amount of objects that can fit into my concept. This allows me to make a truth claim with regards to the color of leaves on trees in the fall. However, it also distances me from the essence of “treehood” because we create a divide within the concept when we distinguish evergreens from other trees. Originally, I had wanted to define all of these to be trees in the first place. Besides, when I attempt to make truth claims about concepts, I hope to learn something about some Platonic idea I have of them – what Adorno might describe as their essence. Additionally, I want to keep a distance between objects and their concepts (i.e. a concept should encapsulate more than one object). Otherwise concepts lose their generalizability and their claim as holding a universal truth value.

Alternatively, if I believe strongly that evergreens are trees and therefore want the concept of “treehood” to encompass instances of evergreens, I would have to adjust and complexify my truth claim to account for those trees whose leaves do not change color. For example, instead of being able to make a simple statement like “The leaves of trees change color in the

fall,” I would have to make a statement like “If a tree is an evergreen, its leaves do not change color in the fall. If a tree is not an evergreen, its leaves do change color in the fall.” However, it should be clear that once we begin to allow for these complexities in the truth claims we make, we could easily fall into a regress in which we realize that we are always generalizing too much for each instance of a tree (that the objects we are trying to describe cannot all fit the statement we are making about the concept). This regress could lead us to the conclusion that any claim we make about trees (which refers to the concept of “treehood”) is too general and can be countered by some example, until we have a claim for each instance of a tree.

Of course, as we multiply the truth claims we attempt to make about trees, the set of such claims holds more rigorous truth values. That is, each more specified truth claim allows for less counterexamples. Perhaps this regress forces us to conclude that the task of philosophy should be one of perfectly describing instances. However, given the fact that language is a symbolic system which necessarily detaches us from the essence of that which it describes (given, for example, its necessary relation to tradition), we might wonder whether this is even a task worth taking up. Additionally, solely describing objects certainly is not what we hope to do when we make truth claims. It is hardly useful for me to write about the exact time when the leaves of every individual tree in the world change colors. The task of

philosophy, of knowledge, is to find statements that describe concepts, so that we can know something about a multitude of instances (that is, about more than one object).

In the introduction to *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes that, “Traditional philosophy thinks of itself as possessing an infinite object, and in that belief it becomes a finite, conclusive philosophy. A changed philosophy would have to cancel that claim, to cease persuading others and itself that it was the infinite at its disposal.”⁶ We have already shown that an infinite object can never be equal to a concept. Therefore, from the perspective of philosophy of language, Adorno’s statement discards the idea that being infinitely precise about objects is a possibility, given the finite nature of language. However, he does introduce a thought which could serve as a catalyst to the pursuit of such an infinitely precise approach to philosophy when he writes, “If it were delicately understood, the changed philosophy itself would be infinite in the sense of scorning solidification in a body of enumerable theorems. Its substance would lie in the diversity of objects that impinge upon it and of the objects it seeks, a diversity not wrought by any schema; to those objects, philosophy would truly give itself rather than use them as a mirror in which to reread itself, mistaking its own image for concretion.”⁷ However, Adorno realizes the impossibility of this task, and precisely this realization is what, for him, drives a dialectic between concepts and ob-

jects.

To further explore this impossibility, let us consider *Funes the Memorious* a short story written by Argentine author Jorge Luís Borges which explores the tensions that arise when we hope to make truth claims perfectly exact in order to mitigate the inequality between concepts and objects. The story's narrator tells of a man named Ireneo Funes whose memory becomes infallible after he one day falls off his horse and becomes paralyzed. Borges takes the idea of inerrant memory to its logical extreme; Funes does not forget anything that he perceives. Additionally, "[His] memories were not simple ones; each visual image was linked to muscular sensations, thermal sensations, etc. He could reconstruct all his dreams, all his half-dreams. Two or three times he had reconstructed a whole day. He never hesitated, but each reconstruction had required a whole day."⁸ With his memory, Funes takes on certain projects. For example, he invents a system of numbering which goes up to the twenty-four thousand mark, in which each number is called a unique phrase or word. "In place of seven thousand thirteen, he would say (for example) *Máximo Pérez*. [...] In place of five hundred, he would say nine."⁹ He does this to avoid the repetition that occurs when we create numbering system on base ten. In his system he could represent the number three hundred sixty-six with a single phrase which would not have to refer to the numbers one hundred or ten to be understood. He never wrote down his num-

bering system because he could perfectly remember it without hesitation, but, as the narrator points out, his project was rather useless. In attempting to be perfectly direct when referencing numbers, Funes makes it impossible to use large numbers at all. It would, after all, take an infinite amount of time and words to name an infinite amount of numbers.

Funes constantly struggles with the idea of perfect precision, since he can remember everything perfectly. “Not only was it difficult for him to comprehend that the generic symbol ‘dog’ embraces so many unlike individuals of diverse size and form; it bothered him that the dog at three fourteen (seen from the side) should have the same name as the dog at three fifteen (seen from the front).”¹⁰ He finds trouble understanding that a single name can refer to so many different moments in the dog’s life. Words (concepts) are never precise enough for him. Borges provides these examples in order to convince us that Funes’s thought projects, albeit impressive, are ridiculous. Of course it would be ludicrous to change a dog’s name depending on the position from which we view it. The purpose of naming a dog in the first place is, after all, mainly one of practicality. It is simply useful to have a name to reference our pets, just as it is simply useful to have words to reference concepts. If it were at all possible to ever be infinitely specific, then linking every word to a particular object would of course result in a perfectly precise language, but it would also strip that language

of most of its practical purpose.

For these reasons, the narrator suspects that, “[Funes] was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions. In the teeming world of Funes there were only details, almost immediate in their presence.”¹¹ This claim points to the idea that it is impossible to translate the singularity of objects into the universality of concepts. Funes can only think in terms of particular instances, forcing his memory to become somewhat paradoxical. On one hand, he clearly retains much more data and information than any other human. On the other hand, he does this so well that he cannot reserve brain space to process the data, and it becomes useless. His statements become so specified that they only have meaning in relation to themselves, which makes it seem impossible for them to have universal meaning at all. Although he can perfectly recall images and sensations, he has no sense of concepts which could encapsulate them, generalize them, make them noteworthy. Borges is showing us that perfect specificity results in the dissolution of knowledge because it results in the dissolution of a system of concepts which hold meaning by referencing each other, language being one such symbolic system.

Borges’s conclusion that knowledge requires generalizability, the blurring of details, the loss of data, can be tied back to Adorno’s insistence that rigor in philosophy can force us to lose the essence of concepts and breed superficiality in philosophy. When

Funes wants the dog to have a different name when it is viewed from different angles, he is missing the point of naming the dog in the first place, and he is brushing over the essence of the dog (which is, we like to think, a coherent self that does not change identity from one minute to the next). Funes wants language to be precise, and this results in the two fundamental problems we outlined earlier: First, we do not have the capacity to describe every object with perfect precision and no generalization. Second, and perhaps more significantly, if we could, every statement would be a vacuous one which only retains sense by its own likes.

Nietzsche offers an interesting perspective on why Funes's attempts at salvaging truth by avoiding concepts and speaking only of particulars is fruitless. *In Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* he writes, "We obtain the concept, as we do the form, by overlooking what is individual and actual; whereas nature is acquainted with no forms and no concepts, and likewise with no species, but only with an X which remains inaccessible and undefinable for us."¹² In this view, language is effective at communicating meaning precisely because it creates meaning when it creates concepts. Human cognition is such that it understands form as truth. Per Nietzsche, this is because it understands life-preserving usefulness as truth. "[Man] desires the agreeable life-preserving consequences of truth, but he is indifferent to pure knowledge, which has no consequences."¹³ Understanding this quote in conjunction

with the last leads us to conclude that language is reliant on concepts not only because we do not have the time to define every object, but also because truth, by human standards, requires form, which perfectly precise objects in themselves do not have.

To elaborate on the claim above, suppose that I want to make a truth claim about a point on a plane. On this plane there is one triangle and one square, and I have a particular point in mind of which I want to ask whether it is in the triangle or square. One way I could do that is to place a grid over my plane and to use Cartesian points to name the locations of the two shapes and also of the point. In this way I could know where the point lies. This method would be productive and effective. However, if the titular character of *Funes the Memorious* were faced with this question, he would want to refrain from calling the chosen point by its Cartesian coordinates because these reference the grid before they reference the point itself. He would want every point to have its own unique name that is not affected by the others', on the model of his numbering system. The problem with his approach should be clear. If the location of the shapes and the point are not both referencing the grid (or some other intermediary system of representation), then they are only referencing themselves, and the locations of the two cannot be determined in relation to each other. It might be the case that giving the point its own unique name tells us some truth about its existence as an entity (which is,

I think, what Funes was hoping in his pursuit of pure knowledge), but it is in no way helpful in answering our original question which is whether the point lies on the triangle or square.

The example above could illuminate another fundamental tension. If we are not placing objects within concepts, then we have no idea of their location on some predetermined plane of systematic representation. If we admit that truth is really just the singling out of statements in an interconnected web of metaphors as Nietzsche believes, then attempting to make a claim about objects without the use of concepts, gives us no sense of how our claim relates to truth, because our claim would not exist within a web of metaphors which interconnect concepts. However, it is also the case that objects themselves never perfectly exemplify their concepts. Continuing with our previous geometric example, there is nothing about any individual point that distinguishes it from another besides its location, which only exists in reference to other points. That is, the points in the square would be indistinguishable from those in the triangle if they all existed in a vacuum; no point inherently possesses “trianglehood” or “squarehood”. In some ways, this fact is worrisome because it means that the identity of points do not indicate the concepts we have used to encapsulate them. How, then, can we justify making generalizations, when, geometrically speaking, points carry no meaning? This is the worry, perhaps, that Funes was hoping

to counteract when he wanted to speak only of points, and stayed unwilling to make the leap from object to concept.

Using these thoughts we will explore another interesting dichotomy. In the tangible world which we have to be yet to be able to perfectly describe or predict through mathematics, we cannot ever refer to exact points, only instances. For example, we can think of a tree as an instance, but not a point. Only in a mathematical paradigm can we talk about an infinitely small point which is indivisible. In other words, every philosophical truth claim which we make on the basis of perception and deduction must, by varying degrees, necessarily be alienated from any infinitely specific object. Nietzsche explores this thought as follows, “The ‘thing in itself’ (*das Ding an sich*) (for that is what pure truth, without consequences, would be) is quite incomprehensible to the creators of language and not at all worth aiming for. One designates only the relations of things to man, and to express them one calls on the boldest metaphors.”¹⁴ Of course, we have no way of knowing whether the “thing in itself” (which perhaps is the essence of objects we hope to get at through the description of concepts) is in fact merely a point, or whether it also only exists relationally. Either way, it remains evident that we cannot know what, if any, ontological relation exists between instances and their concepts.

Once we have established this line of thought,

however, we might see how it provides us with some comfort within the framework of language. Consider trees, for example, which should all more or less unequally fit the concept of “treehood”. Trees are not perfectly precise in that they are not points; they could for example, be talked about in terms of their trunks, and branches, and leaves which are, in themselves, concepts. This allows trees to, in some ways, indicate the concept of “treehood”. While a point has no element which makes it clear that it exists as part of square, or triangle, or any other shape, a tree has branches, and maybe we have defined “having branches” as part of the concept of “treehood”. In this way, the tree tells us something of “treehood” in a way that a point never could. This means that the word “tree” is not purely self-referential, in the way that any claim we make about a point would have to be. This speaks to Nietzsche’s claim that language fabricates its own truth, and also forces us to admit that once we allow for the leap from object to concept, objects have a relation to the concepts which aim at describing them, although this relationship is by no means one of equivalence.

We have now shown that words refer to instances which are not points, and that the instances we describe through language can tell us something about their concepts. We can also consider an opposing outcome of this line of reasoning. Because the instances we hope to refer to through language are not points, we can always make statements about tangible

(non-mathematical) instances which exist outside of, or even contradict, the set of statements that we have created to define their concept. To illustrate this, we can return to the earlier example of the leaves of trees changing colors in the fall. Because the concept of evergreens is composed of its own set of concepts (such as its trunk, leaves, etc.), and many of them overlap with those that we have used to define general “treehood”, we can consider evergreens trees even though they might contradict a statement which exists within the concept of “treehood” that says that trees’ leaves change colors in the fall. From a purely logical standpoint, this is a contradiction which should force us to either adjust our concept of “treehood” or to adjust our statement about leaves’ colors, as we explored at the beginning of this essay.

Hopefully, however, we have shown by now that it is exactly language’s lack of precision which allows it to transmit meaning, and we can conclude that contradictions within it are inherent to it and do not deny its ultimate usefulness. Because philosophy is transmitted through language, the contradicting statements Adorno makes about a “changed philosophy” which is guided through the negative dialectic do not discredit his approach to it. He insists that, on the one hand, philosophy should yield to instances because it will never be able to define concepts which describe any instance perfectly truthfully. On the other hand, the definition of concepts is what allows us to talk about the essence

of the instances around us, and, potentially, is what relationally creates truth and meaning in the first place. This, of course, makes all of our truth statements conditional to experience. We are, in this way, never accessing universal truths through concepts. Those two ideas support each other, and thus allow philosophers both a skeptical and a necessary relation to language.

That truth claims are somehow contingent on experience is evident to Adorno. Furthermore, this contingency makes truth claims necessarily historical in their existence. That any historical outcome is necessarily specific makes its structure somehow parallel to that of the development of language. Adorno's insistence that philosophy has to allow for negative dialectics, which are more lenient towards contradiction and tensions between objects and concepts, follows from philosophy's existence as an inherently historical field that is transmitted through a historical medium. For example, he writes in his chapter on "Metaphysics after Auschwitz", "Our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience."¹⁵ Because history chooses a particular course out of many, philosophy's existence within it necessarily limits our potential grasp of universal truth claims. The historicity of thought speaks to the finite nature of its reaches, which forces us, as philosophers, to accept the negative dialectic. The negative dialectic, in turn, asks us to consider tensions and contradictions

as essential to philosophy, and even to truth itself.

On a final note, we might return to Adorno's insistence that philosophy should attempt to get at the essence of the objects around us. This is why, for him, it is worthwhile to generalize in philosophy in the first place. "In philosophy we experience a shock: the deeper, the more rigorous its penetration, the greater our suspicion that philosophy removes us from things as they are — that an unveiling of the essence might enable the most superficial and trivial views to prevail over the views that aim at the essence."¹⁶ This quote, which also appears at the beginning of this paper, exemplifies why philosophy can never "truly give itself" to the diversity of objects, which exist without a schema. What we can make out of this tension is that exceptions will exist contra to any philosophical truth claim we make. Because of the specific and, therefore, limited nature of language and of history, we can never account for all instances when we use concepts. What this means for Adorno is that we should not only allow for the existence of examples which contradict our truth claims; we should examine them closely. Instances which do not perfectly fit our concepts, but which nonetheless carry the essence of the concept, are precisely those which we might have a lot to learn from with regards to what essence is and how it transmits and holds truth. Ultimately, every philosophical truth claim we make and explore exists within history and is thereby contingent on tradition. That this is the case can be shown

in many ways, but perhaps most simply by the fact that ideas are transmitted through language and language is inextricable from tradition. The linguistic schemas which we use to transmit meaning are never entirely rationally defined, because, definitionally, tradition exists contra to rationality to some non-trivial extent. For Theodor Adorno, this means that any truth claim we make which attempts to say something about a concept's essence will be able to be contradicted or pushed back upon by some object whose essence should fit that of the concept, but whose characteristics somehow differ from the statements we have chosen to define the concept. This should lead us to conclude that we must allow for tensions between concepts and the objects they attempt to contain, and that we may have a lot to learn from the negative dialectic that arises when we allow objects and concepts to both contradict and reference each other.

Notes

1. Theodor Adorno, "On Tradition," *Telos* 1992, no. 94 (1992): 75.
2. Adorno, "On Tradition," 78.
3. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (Great Britain: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1973), 364.
4. Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," Oregon State University online, http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/Philosophers/Nietzsche/Truth_and_Lie_in_an_Extra-Moral_Sense.htm.
5. Friedrich Nietzsche.
6. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 13.
7. *Ibid*, 13.
8. Jorge Luis Borges, "Funes The Memorious," (1964), <http://users.clas.ufl.edu/burt/spaceshotsairheads/borges-funes.pdf>, 152.
9. *Ibid*, 152.
10. *Ibid*, 153.
11. *Ibid*, 154.
12. Friedrich Nietzsche.
13. Friedrich Nietzsche.
14. Friedrich Nietzsche.
15. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 362.
16. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 13.

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