

# THE VASSAR COLLEGE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

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## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	iv
Letter from the Editors-in-Chief	1
<b>The Legacy of the English Picturesque in the Tourist Photography of Instagram</b>	2
Martin Man <i>Vassar College</i>	
<b>Room for Prayer in al-Ghazali's Occasionalism</b>	15
Alex Clark <i>University of West Georgia</i>	
<b>The Socially Constructed Nature of Meaning</b>	27
Erin Leahy <i>Vassar College</i>	
<b>Work, Labor, and the Cyborg: an Intersubjective Phenomenology of Nature</b>	38
Alex Pustelnyk <i>Colgate University</i>	
<b>A Review of Jeffrey J. Kripal and Whitley Strieber, <i>The Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained</i></b>	53
Cat Tween <i>Vassar College</i>	
<b>A Review of Steven Vogel, <i>Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature</i></b>	59
Henry Krusoe <i>Vassar College</i>	
<b>Nature, Myth, and Mystery. An Interview with Claudia Baracchi</b>	62
Arshy Azizi & Cat Tween <i>Vassar College</i>	
Call for Papers	85

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## LETTER FROM THE EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

*The Vassar College Journal of Philosophy* aims to provide an accessible platform for undergraduate thought and philosophical engagement with compelling themes of broad interest. It annually invites essay submissions from undergraduates around the world, and it strives to include voices from diverse philosophical disciplines. Now in its third year, the Journal has continued what can now be called a trend by substantially broadening both the number and disciplinary breadth of its submissions.

This year's theme, "Nature," engages with exciting recent work in a variety of philosophical traditions. The notion of "Nature" sits at the intersection of ethics, metaphysics, aesthetics, social and political philosophy, and the philosophy of language. The four essays in this issue represent a diversity of approaches, stemming from both the Analytic and Continental lineages as well as high-quality philosophical argumentation. We hope that the Journal will provoke thought, discussion, and further exploration of the questions raised by the essays, book reviews, and interview. The Editors are proud to offer this issue, and grateful for the hours of work and critical thought it embodies.

**Erin Leahy & Spencer Davis**

## THE LEGACY OF THE ENGLISH PICTURESQUE IN THE TOURIST PHOTOGRAPHY OF INSTAGRAM

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**Abstract.** This paper offers an analysis of contemporary landscape tourist photography as exemplified by images that proliferate on the photo-sharing platform Instagram. By framing these travel images as a legacy of the English picturesque movement, their gaze is revealed as entangled in the history of imperialism, colonialism, and racism that demanded the representation and popularisation of ‘natural’, ‘idyllic’ landscapes as well as their inhabitants. Such conventions of seeing dictate what a tourist finds notable. The tourist, from this perspective, not only seeks picturesque views, but can pick out *nothing else*.

21st century globalisation has allowed mass tourism to take place on an ever-increasing scale, aided in large part by inexpensive aeroplane tickets and lodgings. Social media plays a key role in contemporary tourism, facilitating the wide, if not public, distribution of tourist photos, ensuring the global spread of images of landscapes. The ubiquity of cameras, especially since cameras of increasing quality have become integrated in mobile phones, has contributed to the ease of sharing such photos. Instagram may be the premier collection of contemporary tourist photography online today, where it has become a celebrated genre of its own—accounts dedicated to such images have followings in the hundreds of thousands. Photos are prized for their ability to please aesthetically—that is, formally. Their aim is not to provide documentary exposition, or serve as images of record. In short, the ruling agenda is the presentation of picturesque views—views which conform to a particular way of seeing inherited from the painterly tradition. To interrogate the phenomenon of contemporary touristic images, then, we begin with the origin of the picturesque.

The aesthetic theory of the picturesque in English painting was purely a regime of vision. As Christopher Hussey summarises in *The Picturesque*: “The capacity for seeing nature with a painter’s eye was picturesque vision.”<sup>1</sup> He quotes William Gilpin, the founder of the picturesque: “It is the aim of picturesque description,’ he says, ‘to bring the images of nature as forcibly and as closely to the eye as it can, by high colouring.’ This process ‘is not a string of rapturous epithets, but an attempt to analyse the views of nature, and to express all the detail in terms as appropriate and vivid as possible.’”<sup>2</sup> Gilpin added the picturesque as a subset of the beautiful, differentiating it from the latter by opposing to the “smoothness” of beauty the “roughness” in the picturesque, the quality that he determined as what made pictures pleasing. In his *Three Essays*, he explains:

I use the general term roughness; but properly speaking roughness relates only to the surfaces of bodies: when we speak of their delineation, we use the word ruggedness. Both ideas however equally enter into the picturesque; and both are observable in the smaller, as well as in the larger parts of nature—in the outline, and bark of a tree, as in the rude summit, and craggy sides of a mountain.<sup>3</sup>

Roughness, sudden variation, and the irregularity of wild nature were the elements of the picturesque. For example, craggy mountains, overgrown flora, and ruined structures presented such variety to the eye, and were deemed to be ideal as subjects of painting.

Yet, far from being purely an artistic theory, the ideal of the English picturesque was intertwined with the rise of tourism from its inception. The book in which Gilpin first presented his theory of the picturesque was the *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales* published in 1770, a guide-book for English tourists taking tours down the River Wye.<sup>4</sup> As Esther Muir describes in *The Discovery of Britain*, “The tour down the Wye...offered the tourist a series of picturesque tableaux, which demanded that he follow a closely defined route, and exercise an equally clearly defined aesthetic judgement.”<sup>5</sup> Gilpin endeavoured to not only point out scenic views, but teach the

tourist how to look for them. His books would prepare the tourist's eye to see the picturesque, but also the mind to be able to recognise it. Hussey explains: "Gilpin made every effort to approach each 'scene' in an appropriate frame of mind. He saw clearly the necessity of the mind's being educated to appreciate scenery, or else that would be called picturesque which in reality was merely fruitful or pleasant."<sup>6</sup> Gilpin and other picturesque writers detailed specific compositions, effects of light, shapes of mountains, rocks, and trees, etc. that were deemed picturesque in order to train the artist/traveller's eye.<sup>7</sup>

Practically, picturesque travel took English tourists to the British countryside, where they could appreciate rustic landscapes and 'untamed' nature. Muir recounts the reflections of one tourist: "'A Welch tour is surprisingly grand,' wrote Hutton quite simply; 'Nature is seen in extreme. The lofty, rough and barren mountains opposed to the beautiful and fertile vallies is a charming contrast.'"<sup>8</sup> Tourists were there equally to see the "natives" of these lands in their simplicity and naïveté. Regions such as Wales were considered edenic or arcadian idylls where humans lived close to nature in harmony, untouched by modern corruptions. Muir observes:

This simplicity made tremendous appeal, and the honesty, the absence of worldly ambition of these people living so close to nature, formed the subject of constant comment from admiring tourists. Here the tourists clearly felt they could glimpse something of that Elysian life long since buried elsewhere beneath the weight of corruption and the care of worldly vanities.<sup>9</sup>

From the outset, travel in search of picturesque views involved imperialist-like attitudes directed from the aristocracy and (increasingly as travel became more widespread, especially with the laying of railroads) the middle-class to the "primitive" countryside.

The picturesque gaze having already been trained in this way, it was only natural that, with the advent and increasing popularisation of photography, tourists with cameras sought to capture such landscapes in photos. Gilpin's emphasis on the purely visual aspect



of the picturesque seems to have made it particularly attractive for adoption by early photographers. John Taylor examines two early art photographers, H. P. Robinson and P. H. Emerson in his essay, “The Alphabetic Universe: Photography and the Picturesque Landscape.” Both photographers appropriated the picturesque vision and sought out “wild” countryside and their “natives:” “For [Robinson], the countryside was always and already Arcadia. It was people with ‘folk’ who were in harmony with nature. It was a countryside easily imagined from the drawing-room, a view of nature in harness, the conjunction of husbandry and idyll.”<sup>10</sup> Robinson did not travel, but Emerson did. His travel was

a retreat, moving away from the exigencies of the modern world to a place where they are as yet scarcely signified...Settled on board a fishing smack, Emerson and his friends settled down to “drink to the Arts in bumpers of claret.” He noted that during the afternoon “natives” came down to watch them: “they stared at us as if we, not they, were the ‘heathen.’” An exotic place, the Broads, and a place for the internal migration of the wealthy who could cruise the waterways...For Emerson, the world beyond the Broads meant not only “civilisation” but “boredom.”<sup>11</sup>

As the British Empire expanded across the globe, new destinations for touristic travel opened up. The picturesque tourist followed in the wake of advancing imperialism, and found in Britain’s far-flung colonies the same arcadian paradise that was sought in Wales. The tropical islands of the British Caribbean and South Pacific were marketed to tourists back home, just as the British countryside was, as both an untamed, pristine wilderness, but also an innocent, prelapsarian, harmonious idyll. In *Travelling light: photography, travel, and visual culture*, Peter Osborne analyses the European representation of Pacific islands:

The painter’s “revisited” Tahiti is either an island preserved for ever [*sic*] in the moment just prior to

first contact, or it is one already conquered, made safe, a visual feast that can no longer bite back, and yet somehow still approached eternally for the first time.... it has been made safe and made into image—made safe by becoming image.<sup>12</sup>

The tourist photographer is informed by pre-existing images which advertise the paradisiacal nature of such destinations, and travels in search of the promised views in order to photograph them and reproduce the view again. Just like Gilpin's picturesque tourist who was only interested in the visual, formal aesthetic qualities of a scenic view, and reduced the inhabitants of those landscapes to mere types, tourist photography reduces disparate lands into formulaic picturesque views, completely alienated from any sense of the original site of the tour.



Fig. 1: Isle of Skye, Scotland



Fig. 2: Corn Islands, Nicaragua

Taken from the Instagram account “bloggeries,” aptly subtitled ‘Stop Having a Boring Life’—turning Emerson’s touristic escape from middle-class boredom to the Broads into an injunction—these two photographs, one taken in Scotland, the other in Nicaragua, abstract both locations into a pure picturesque view. Gilpin’s cottage/ruin, foreground trees, varied and rough vegetation, etc. are all present in these photos. Instagram itself has become the process by which picturesque “rules” are reproduced. Tourist photographers see the type of photos posted on Instagram, and endeavour to produce similar photos on their own travels.



Fig. 3: Switzerland



Fig. 4: Colorado

These two photos, taken by different photographers, “chrisburkard” and “colerise,” follow the same formula of composition. A band of clear sky, with ideal ‘fluffy’ white clouds; a mountain ridge; a valley with trees; a grassy foreground, the road in one being comparable to the pool in the other. Osborne notes: “Consequently, much tourist photography is a quotation—a reprising of the contents of the brochures, or the reproduction of a view that as likely as not came into existence as a consequence of photography. Tourist photography is more a process of confirmation than of discovery; a practise which takes place within the system of tourism.”<sup>13</sup> The picturesque landscape photos that proliferate on Instagram confirm and reconfirm the mode of seeing idyllic landscapes presented by other Instagram users, feeding the touristic imagination and expectation of such locations.

Whilst these Instagram photos are presented as views that were “happened upon” by the tourist-photographer, they are, then, in fact formulaic creations. As W. J. T. Mitchell notes in “Imperial Landscape,” “this ‘subject matter’ [natural objects in a landscape] is not simply raw material to be represented in paint but is always already a symbolic form in its own right.”<sup>14</sup> By claiming that the landscape photo is natural the tourist-photographer attempts “to erase the signs of [his/her] own constructive activity in the formation of landscape as meaning or value, to produce an art that conceals its own artifice.”<sup>15</sup> In fact, “natural” landscapes on Instagram follow conventions of seeing that can be traced back to the picturesque begun by Gilpin, and which is inextricable from the paternalistic, attitudes held by wealthy European tourists toward “rustic natives.”

This vision not only rules the representation of landscapes, but has the ability to affect the real landscape which it purports to present in its natural state. The trope of the sunny white-sand beach with spreading palm trees and a wide blue ocean has long been the touristic



Fig. 5: Corn Islands, Nicaragua



Fig. 6: Sint Maarten

imagination of the Caribbean, as exemplified by pictures such as these, by “bloggeries” and “uncornered\_market” (again, an allusion to the attempt at representing the primitive, primal, arcadian, that which has not yet come under the corrupting influence of modernity). Both images are indebted to the legacy of “tropicalisation” of the Caribbean, as interrogated by Krista Thompson in *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque*. Photographs of the islands “created and circulated by tourism promoters, generated what the sociologist Rob Shields defines as a ‘place-image,’ a set of core representations that form ‘a widely disseminated and commonly held set of images of a place or space.’”<sup>16</sup> Such images were produced starting in the 1880’s by the colonial authorities and white elites in order to market the Caribbean islands as safe and idyllic to attract settlers and tourists, hoping to counter the impression held until then that such islands were disease-infested. “Images of the islands’ transparent waters emphasised another tamed aspect of the Anglophone Caribbean, in this instance, the ocean.”<sup>17</sup> Once again, the double movement of framing such picturesque landscapes as exotic and natural, but tame and safe.

Thompson goes further, however, and notes that over time, the landscape itself was purposely altered to fit the “tropicalized” image. She details,

[The tourism industries] physically transformed areas of the islands through planting campaigns or cleanliness drives, in efforts to make the islands appear as they did in photographs—orderly, picturesque, and tropical. The importation of “tropical” trees from different parts of the world, for instance, was one way governments in the colonies attempted to re-create a visual ideal of the tropical Caribbean landscape on the islands’ environment.<sup>18</sup>

Such attempts at terraforming the landscape to fit touristic expectations implicated the imposition of social controls on the very “native inhabitants” of the islands that tourists wanted to see in their paradise. Indeed, the population was as deliberately *landscaped* as much as the trees and rocks were:

Efforts to make white business and residential areas picturesque...would lead to the imposition of social controls on the island’s black inhabitants, contributing further to racial stratification and segregation. Thus, making Nassau like “a picture in the imagination” or “strangely tropical” prescribed not only a way of seeing and a program of landscaping but a way of governing.<sup>19</sup>



Fig. 7: Northern Mariana Islands



Fig. 6: Sint Maarten

Behind these images lies not only a regime of seeing that governs what is considered “picturesque,” but also the history of colonialist expansion that opened these views to the touristic gaze, the history of creating imagined visions of distant paradises, and the history of imperialist “landscaping” that controlled local inhabitants and physically altered the land.

If the picturesque contrives both the representation and the physical landscape, in its modern incarnation it finally also creates the contemporary tourist. The tourist no longer needs to be trained to see the elements of the picturesque, nor does he/she need to seek it out for him/herself. Through tourist advertising, the landscaping of physical sites, and social media, the regime of seeing that Gilpin sought to teach has been naturalised. Picturesque/tourist photography now pre-ordains, pre-frames views according to the conventions. The tourist merely steps into the space of “spectator” and *looks*. Osborne states,

The “sight” or the “site” is a “seeing” without a subject, for it pre-exists the arrival and activity of any individual tourist-photographer, who, once located there, is framed as much as framing. The sight is not so much an object to be viewed as an already structured condition of seeing, a situation which places the sightseer even as he or she freely chooses to look or shoot.<sup>20</sup>

In contemporary travel, picturesque views *precede* the photographer. The picturesque regime takes on an independence of its own—it shapes what the tourist sees/photographs, rather than being a tool for envisioning: “As tourists, even at the moment of photographing, even if touring cameraless, we are not so much looking as looking at images, or looking for images. Tourism provides us less with experience than with events to see, or rather, events to look at.”<sup>21</sup> That is to say, it is possible that these two photos of the same subject and angle were not specifically outlined in a guidebook and had not been published in advertisements. It is even possible that neither photographer had seen any other images of this view. But passing by this sight/site, both took

the same photo, moved by the regime of picturesque seeing, which designated that such a framing was “like a picture.”



Fig. 9: Meteora, Greece



Fig. 10: Meteora, Greece

The framing of the picturesque landscape is not an innocent exercise of painterly seeing or observation of natural forms, as was presented by Gilpin in the late 18th century. Its modern incarnation in the tourist images of Instagram present scenic landscapes as natural, idyllic views, but conceals a complex history of imperialism, colonialism, and racism involved in the popularisation, representation, and physical “terraforming” of both the land and its inhabitants. In its contemporary form, picturesque tourist photos not only carry these burdens that have shaped their vision, but the conventions of seeing dictate completely what a tourist finds notable to the extent that he/she not only seeks picturesque views, but can pick out *nothing else*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View*, 3rd ed. (Frank Cass & Co.: London, 1927), 64.

<sup>2</sup> Hussey, *The Picturesque*, 120-121.

<sup>3</sup> William Gilpin, *Three essays: On picturesque beauty; On picturesque travel; and On sketching landscape: to which is added a poem, On landscape painting*, (London: Printed for R. Blamire, 1702), 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Esther Muir, *The Discovery of Britain: The English Tourists 1540 to 1840*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 124-125.

<sup>5</sup> Muir, *The Discovery of Britain*, 128-129.

<sup>6</sup> Hussey, *The Picturesque*, 120.

<sup>7</sup> For example: Henry Twining, *The Elements of Picturesque Scenery*, (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1853).

<sup>8</sup> Muir, *The Discovery of Britain*, 133.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 130.

<sup>10</sup> John Taylor, 'The alphabetic universe: photography and the picturesque landscape,' in *Reading landscape: country—city—capital*, ed. Simon Pugh, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 184.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 184-185.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Osborne, *Travelling light: photography, travel, and visual culture*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 109.

<sup>13</sup> Osborne, *Travelling light*, 79.

<sup>14</sup> W. T. J. Mitchell, 'Imperial Landscape,' in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 16-17.

<sup>16</sup> Krista A. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics*, 10.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

<sup>20</sup> Osborne, *Travelling light*, 81.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

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## Figures

Fig. 1: bloggeries. Digital image. Instagram. 14 August, 2015. Accessed 15 December, 2015.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/6XLDaBmbGN/>.

Fig. 2: bloggeries. Digital image. Instagram. 29 October, 2015. Accessed 15 December, 2015.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/9biYetGbL8/>.

Fig. 3: chrisburkard. Digital image. Instagram. 10 November, 2015. Accessed 15 December, 2015.

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Fig. 4: colerise. Digital image. Instagram. 7 October, 2014. Accessed 15 December, 2015.

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Fig. 5: bloggeries. Digital image. Instagram. 21 March, 2015. Accessed 15 December, 2015.

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Fig. 6: uncornered\_market. Digital image. Instagram. 12 December, 2015. Accessed 15 December, 2015.

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Fig. 7: leeabbamonte. Digital image. Instagram. 12 December, 2015. Accessed 15 December, 2015.

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Fig. 9: theplanetd. Digital image. Instagram. 17 November, 2015. Accessed 15 December, 2015.

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## ROOM FOR PRAYER IN AL-GHAZALI'S OCCASIONALISM

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**Abstract.** Al-Ghazali did not accept the idea that natural law was a determining factor of events. Instead, Al-Ghazali opted for a view of occasionalism which allows for the supernatural intervention of God, i.e. miracles, and does not undermine God's power. In this paper, I present and examine his standpoint, and argue that it accommodates human autonomy, which expresses itself in the agency of prayer. I then offer the objection to my own argument that al-Ghazali's occasionalism precludes his acceptance of free will. Finally, I offer a counterobjection and hope to show that al-Ghazali's occasionalism is indeed *limited*, and thus still allows for free will.

Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad Al-Ghazali was not happy with the state of Islamic philosophy once it had encountered and adopted some Aristotelian and neo-Platonic notions. In various writings he has accused Avicenna, Al-Farabi and other Aristotelians of being infidels, and of innovating when it was not appropriate, among other charges. In his *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, al-Ghazali states his strongest case for the weakness of Aristotelianism and its effects on Islamic thought. He attacks the Philosophers (those being the aforementioned Aristotelians and the preceding school of thought) on two points: causation and necessity, making an empirical yet occasionalist argument against the Aristotelian and neo-Platonic ideas found in their thought. In this paper, I attempt to explain al-Ghazali's rejection of the Philosophers' collective stance on causation and necessity, while keeping an eye on his desire to affirm the possibility of the miraculous. From there, I argue that his thought allows for an account of prayer which is effective in its power to bring about change, an account which Aristotelian philosophy simply cannot muster. I will then consider an objection to my claims about prayer: were occasionalism true, there would be no reason to pray, because there would be no free will. I will respond to that objection with an argument claiming that al-Ghazali's occasionalism's limited nature allows for free will.

## Al-Ghazali's Rejection of Causation and Necessity

Like any empiricist, al-Ghazali was passionate about the natural sciences. It appears he was especially fond of pointing out how all of the Islamic philosophers were doing it wrong. Indeed, in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*—the section titled “Concerning the Natural Sciences”—he wastes no time in formulating his attack on the Aristotelian viewpoint of necessary causal connection between events. He states, “The connection between what is customarily believed to be a cause and what is believed to be an effect is not necessary, according to our opinion; but each of the two [namely, cause and effect] is independent of the other.”<sup>1</sup> What he means is that, though we typically see one event associated with another event in sequential order as either having caused or having been caused by the other, there is no causal relationship associating the two events and, in fact, neither is related to the other in any prescribed sense.

The crux of al-Ghazali's position is that what appears to be causation to our senses *only appears* to be causation to our senses. What appears to be causal to an effect is not causal to any effect, and what appears to be an effect to a cause is not an effect to any perceivable cause. He states, “Take for example: quenching thirst and drinking, satisfying hunger and eating, burning and contact with fire, light and sunrise, death and decapitation...indeed the connection of these occurs because the decree of God preceded their being created in this sequence, not because the existence [of this connection] is necessary in itself, not receptive of separation.”<sup>2</sup> For al-Ghazali, it is certainly not beyond God's power to quench one's thirst without them ever having drunk, to keep a decapitated man living, to make the sun rise with no light, or make light occur without the sun. He adheres to that old adage, “Through God, all things are possible,” with the added caveat that none of these are necessary.

It is clear what al-Ghazali's problem with “the Philosophers,” the most notable of which being Avicenna, seems to be on the topic of the natural sciences: their philosophy, as he sees it at least, undermines the possibility of what would be deemed miraculous. The miraculous,

in this sense, is something like a woman living after her decapitation: an obvious separation in what is typically deemed a cause and effect or, as David Hume defined it, “a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity.”<sup>3</sup> Al-Ghazali seems to undermine the miraculous as well in that sense. He is not denying the possibility of a miracle, however, but by denying outright the very existence of any cause or effect beyond God’s hand, al-Ghazali literally seeks to undermine the laws of nature as having anything to do with how things naturally are. In his first point, he presents the Philosophers’ position nicely: “The opponent asserts that the acting cause of burning is fire exclusively and that fire acts by nature not by choice, so that fire, when brought in contact with a subject receptive of it, cannot refrain from acting according to its nature.”<sup>4</sup> Al-Ghazali outright refuses that position by stating

On the contrary, we say that it is God Who, either through the intermediation of angels or without any intermediation, is the acting cause of burning by creating blackness in the cotton, dividing it into its parts, making it burn, or [turning it into] ashes. Fire, however, is inanimate and does not have any action.<sup>5</sup>

This statement shows that on al-Ghazali’s view, the miraculous is not especially divine intervention—for every action of both the fire and the cotton is divinely caused.

This view point, called occasionalism, states that all objects are inert until God sees in them an occasion, or reason, to make them active, and upon His willing it, they do so. In other words, on al-Ghazali’s account, whether or not an event occurs has nothing to do with natural laws, but is entirely up to God. While it sounds bizarre to Secular Western Rationalists, for al-Ghazali, it was far less bizarre than removing *God* as the system of cause and effect for an *Aristotelian* system of cause and effect, where events occur according to their nature instead of how God wills them to. In fact, it is the very idea that anything has a nature that troubles al-Ghazali, because the Aristotelian viewpoint suggests that things are incapable of acting outside of their

nature. That suggestion undermines God's power in that it makes the miraculous impossible. Al-Ghazali believes God is capable of anything, and for God to impose on anything a nature which it cannot act against is a contradiction of the very definition of God.

In reference to his previous example of fire touching cotton and the cotton then burning, Al-Ghazali asks:

What is the proof that fire is the acting cause? He has no other proof except the observation that burning occurs when there is contact with fire. However, observation only proves that one occurs together with the other, but it does not prove that one occurs through [the agency] of the other. Indeed, there is no other cause but [God].<sup>6</sup>

Thus it is clear that not only does al-Ghazali find his own argument more cogent than the Aristotelian philosophers' arguments, but also more nuanced in its understanding of God's power.

He illustrates how the Philosophers he is addressing mistakenly undermine God's power with their viewpoints through his example of a blind man. This blind man can suddenly, "miraculously," see and he obtains this ability during the light of day. He sees colors! And he thinks as long as he can see, he will necessarily see these colors. Then the sun sets and he realizes he was a bit too sure of his eyes necessitating the sight of color.<sup>7</sup> For al-Ghazali this example exemplifies the sort of mistakes his opponents have made in their reasoning. They are too sure of their own empirical inferences which are drawn from a limited understanding of the world. In other words, his opponents are far too sure of their sensory apparatuses and the weak conclusions, as far as al-Ghazali is concerned, that they draw from them. If only his opponent could realize that, "...if [these events which are perceived as cause or effect] would cease to exist or disappear, we would apprehend that they are separable and we would understand that there is a cause beyond our observation."<sup>8</sup> Thus, for al-Ghazali, it was not just miracles that were threatened by his opponent's philosophy, but a major aspect of what he deemed as a power of God. Namely, the power of God to make inert objects active—and on al-Ghazali's account, all objects

are inert. Miracles are something which abandon the cause and effect relationship we typically associate between fire and cotton, such as the fire touching cotton and it not burning. Al-Ghazali believes that God's power is seen even in the fire's every flicker, for the fire cannot do so without God willing it to happen first.

In support of his stance on miracles and God's power, al-Ghazali attacks the existence of necessity with the Biblical story of Abraham not being burned even though he was thrown into fire, which he takes as a literal account.<sup>9</sup> In fact, al-Ghazali uses it as part of a counter argument against the Philosophers. He argues that if the Aristotelian viewpoint which claims that everything acts due to necessity and nature, instead of God's deliberation and choice, is true, then it would be impossible for God to stop the fire from burning Abraham if Abraham were a man, something burnable, and for the fire to be fire, something that burns. His response to the Aristotelian viewpoint, which he now presents as quite an affront to God, is twofold. Firstly, he rejects the necessity of nature for God's will, stating, "If it is affirmed that the acting cause of [God] creates burning through His will, when cotton and fire are in contact, then it is possible...that he may not create burning when contact [between cotton and fire] exists."<sup>10</sup> For al-Ghazali it is simply not the case that such a burning is necessary. God makes choices, and it just so happens that his choices are so perfectly consistent, so unfailing and reliable, that things *appear* necessary and natural when, in reality, the only thing necessary is God. Nothing is natural in a given event except for His perfect consistency in decision-making.

In his second answer to the Aristotelian stance, al-Ghazali admits that God creates fire in such a manner that it *should* burn two similar pieces of cotton, and fire *should not* differentiate between the two. Yet, it is also possible for a prophet to be thrown into fire and remain unharmed.<sup>11</sup> It could be that the heat of the fire is limited to its own body, not transferred. In this model, fire keeps its form and its true nature. A person who is covered head to toe in talc and places him or herself in a burning oven will emerge without burns, yet those who have never observed this will deny it, just as the Philosophers would do

with regard to God's power in His choice-making.<sup>12</sup> Al-Ghazali states, "In God's power there are strange and wondrous things, not all of which we have observed."<sup>13</sup> As if to hammer the point home, he asks, "How is it proper that we should deny [these strange and wondrous things] possibility or affirm their impossibility?"<sup>14</sup> In other words, al-Ghazali believed that if the Islamic Aristotelians do in fact believe in God, they ought to have respect towards Him, and not be so quick to accept viewpoints which presume to know and undercut all that He is capable of doing.

### **Prayer and the Impossible in al-Ghazali's Occasionalism**

In the previous section, I pointed out that al-Ghazali's arguments against the Islamic Aristotelian Philosophers hinged on the idea that the Philosophers undermine God and the possibility of the supernatural, or the miraculous. In this section, I extrapolate from al-Ghazali's thoughts on God as a decision-maker to point out another extremely positive religious aspect of his occasionalism. Namely, that while the Philosophers' positions—as al-Ghazali portrays them—undermine the possibility of divine intervention and thus, the possibility of an answered prayer, al-Ghazali's own position empowers the act of prayer.

Al-Ghazali continues his theme of affirming an all-powerful God when he considers how miracles may or may not come about. He argues, "In itself [the miracle] is possible, but [God's] generosity is the principle through which it comes to be. However, [the miracle] only proceeds from God when necessity determines its existence and good appears in it. And the good appears in it only when the prophet needs it to establish his prophetic office, in order to promulgate the good."<sup>15</sup> Thus it seems that, for al-Ghazali, miracles only come about from God's generosity, meant in this context as his good natured willing of some event. However, it comes about only when God thinks it's both good and necessary, and that's only going to happen if God needs to establish a prophet to promote His own goodness on Earth.<sup>16</sup>



However, one does not have to be a prophet to pray. In fact, in the Islamic religion, prayer (*Salat*) is required and if one forgoes it due to laziness or for not wanting to, then they open themselves up for divine punishment.<sup>17</sup> According to al-Ghazali, God is capable of nearly anything. The only thing he is not capable of is breaking the logical law of non-contradiction. There are three performances that no one, not even God, can perform: "...The simultaneous affirmation and denial of something; or the simultaneous affirmation of the particular and the denial of the universal; or the simultaneous affirmation of two things and the denial of one of them."<sup>18</sup>

Thus it seems that for al-Ghazali, a prayer may be answered provided it is nothing of the miraculous (unless one happens to be a prophet) and so long as the prayer does not ask for something logically contradictory. Thus, to pray to God for a fire in one's house to stop burning, to dissipate, or to in some other way halt altogether is, as far as al-Ghazali is concerned, simply not going to work for anyone who is not a prophet. However, in the same situation, to pray for guidance towards a safe passage out of the burning house would be by all accounts completely acceptable and achievable for both God and the non-prophet. Praying to God to win the lottery when one has not bought a lottery ticket, likewise, is absurd on al-Ghazali's account. However, to pray for guidance through a financial pitfall, or to pray for help making it through a time of poverty is an adequate prayer based on the criterion al-Ghazali has stated.

I believe that this is an account of prayer implicit in al-Ghazali's comments, an account which those Philosophers he deems his opponents simply do not contain within their philosophy. For al-Ghazali, rationality is not always required and is in this very vein abhorrent. In al-Ghazali's thought, when one is completely aware of the fact that without God, fire is inert, when one is aware that without being a prophet no miracle is going to occur, and when one is aware of what God is incapable of doing, all other things are possible through God. Perhaps, to allude to the next section of the paper, he will influence one's thoughts to guide one away from the burning building. Perhaps, even, he will implant one's mind with those guiding thoughts.

But a working mind is, in any event, an active mind for al-Ghazali and it is up to the thinker to seek what should be sought.

### **Thought and Free Will in al-Ghazali's Occasionalism**

I have already shown how al-Ghazali's occasionalism is one which is miracle-affirming, in the sense that what is perceived as a cause and its effect can be broken by God should He ever so choose. I have also shown that al-Ghazali's stance on cause and necessity is one which allows for the utility of prayer (provided it does not break from the criterion he implicitly provides), whereas he believes that his opponents' arguments seems to not have an account for prayer at all. However, the objection may arise that, if al-Ghazali is an occasionalist, and all objects are inert, that any prayer—or thought for that matter—that anyone has was chosen by God. In response, I will argue that al-Ghazali's occasionalism is a *limited* occasionalism, and it is limited only to an object's physical action. I will attempt to show that, while for al-Ghazali God may choose to influence or place thoughts in a mind, someone with a mind is still an independent and active thinker.

For al-Ghazali's purposes of demonstration, fire is a nice, clean substance to work with as a force acting upon cotton, another nice, clean substance. By "nice and clean," I only mean that neither substance has a will, and both have a typically understood "nature." Even when it comes to his examples of the resurrected dead, or the living themselves, if God wills them to move, they will certainly move. Nevertheless, something with a mind, as far as al-Ghazali is concerned, is something with an *active* mind. However, that is because God's power is limited only in that he cannot do something contradictory. The fire as a substance is inactive. With humans, it is only the body which must be inactive from his occasionalist standpoint. The mind, though on the occasion that it is prepared to receive God's influence and God chooses to do so it will be influenced, is itself not inert.

From a purely religious standpoint, the position that minds are active is necessary. Coming from an Abrahamic religion, al-Ghazali

certainly believed the story of Abraham, as he references it in *the Incoherence*.<sup>19</sup> In the story of Abraham and Isaac, God tested Abraham by commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, to Him.<sup>20</sup> Though devastated by His command, Abraham decided to obey his God and, in doing so, God spared Isaac and blessed Abraham. This reveals that Abraham had a decision to make that was outside of God's own decision-making, and that is crucial. It may be in al-Ghazali's thought that when Abraham decided to gather wood that his body bending down, his hands grabbing kindling, and his body rising back up were all choices made by God, to allow Abraham to do as he so chose. However, Abraham so chose, and that is immensely important—because regardless of what Abraham chose to do, God did not *have* to allow him to bend down. For al-Ghazali, had God wanted to, he could have forced Abraham to perform an innumerable amount of actions. But Abraham made a decision, and God allowed him to do it by literally moving Abraham's body to the desire of Abraham's will. It is, in fact, God's allowance of the alignment of Abraham's will and the performance of his body that is testament to God's power. However, it is the very fact that Abraham *has a will at all* that shows that free will exists on al-Ghazali's account of occasionalism, which allows for the utility of prayer mentioned in the prior section.

If not yet convinced, the real smoking gun on the issue of free will in al-Ghazali's thought, I believe, is to be found in al-Ghazali's *Deliverance from Error*, an autobiography. In it, al-Ghazali is afflicted with a state of skepticism, which he considers a kind of spiritual sickness:

The disease was baffling, and lasted almost two months, during which I was a sceptic in fact though not in theory nor in outward expression. At length God cured me of the malady; my being was restored to health and an even balance...This did not come about by systematic demonstration or marshalled argument, but by a light which God most high cast into my breast. That light is the key to the greater part of knowledge.<sup>21</sup>

Here again is an interaction between God and subject, only the subject is al-Ghazali. Stricken with skepticism, al-Ghazali finds himself questioning what he believed had already been discovered, wondering if it is illusory, doubting his faith in what was already known. However, God's light saved him. This light is not something of mere intellect. It is a spiritual wisdom. Ghazali considers this spiritual wisdom of a higher knowledge than the intellect. What has been intellectually perceived has already been sought and is sought no longer. For al-Ghazali, the non-problematic parts of Aristotelian thought, those being Logic, Mathematics, and other matters of pure intellect were demonstrated as true already. What can be known by the intellect had already been discovered. What one should seek, for al-Ghazali, is that which is sought (and that alone)—spiritual truth, knowledge of God's existence, and life in the hereafter.<sup>22</sup>

Al-Ghazali advocated Sufism, a sort of mysticism, which emphasized prophecy.<sup>23</sup> However, the fact that he encouraged mysticism as the best way to get closer to the light of God, the spiritual wisdom that is the highest form of knowledge, the fact that he felt that God himself intervened on the direction of his heart and pulled him away from skepticism, all show that he is in fact a limited occasionalist who believes in quite a degree of free will. After all, his *Deliverance from Error* shows the path of a man examining how to practice Islam from many angles, and determining which is best, which is not merely blind conformism. It shows a man who is conflicted by the decisions that he has made in his life, a man who is troubled by his own egotistical desires, who is ashamed of his own want for reputation, none of which are decisions which God inflicted upon him. It also shows God's ability to disrupt the process he was going through, to immediately (miraculously?) pull him from his skeptical sickness in an instant. Nothing was demonstrated, nothing was argued. No conversation was required. He was immediately filled with the light of God, and instantly he realized the highest form of knowledge was something altogether outside of intellect. It is, I like to think, perhaps the emphasis on this sort of knowledge which impassioned al-Ghazali to write so feverishly against the Philosophers, who seemed to emphasize what can be

intellectually determined, rather than emphasizing the spiritual, the power of God, and the weakness of the human faculties.

In this paper, I have argued that while occasionalism may seem bizarre and/or unnecessarily restrictive, al-Ghazali's brand of occasionalism has some good religious consequences, including the potentiality for miracles and the empowerment of prayer. Some may argue that there is no room for prayer at all in al-Ghazali's occasionalism, since he states that substances are inert, unless God makes one say the prayer Himself. I reply that although al-Ghazali does state that substances are inert, he leaves room for the possibility of God affecting the mind without God having to, which makes his occasionalism limited in its allowance of free will.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Al-Ghazali, "The Incoherence of the Philosophers: Concerning the Natural Sciences," in *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Hyman, James J. Walsh, and Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: 2010), p. 278

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy McGrew, "Miracles," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/miracles/>>

<sup>4</sup> Al-Ghazali, p. 278.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 279.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 279.

<sup>9</sup> For al-Ghazali this

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>16</sup> You can see how, based on this explanation, the Islamic faith then accepts Christ as a prophet of God in his miracle working.

<sup>17</sup> Sunnah.com, Book 9, Hadith 89.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>20</sup> Genesis 22:1-19.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Ghazali, “Deliverance from Error,” *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali*, trans. W. Montgomery Watt, [England, 1963], p. 25..

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 54-63. Herein is al-Ghazali’s mentioned advocacy.

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## THE SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED NATURE OF MEANING

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**Abstract.** We interrogate many things when we interrogate the nature of meaning: What is meaningful? What lends something meaning and why? Is meaning subjective? Conversely, can we be wrong about what is meaningful? This paper aims to address each of these questions. I offer an account of meaning as socially constructed, drawing a parallel to the social construct of language. I claim that nothing is meaningful under the *aspect of eternity*, but that meaning is assigned and produced through an implicit social agreement.

### Introduction

Throughout his long and full life, Charles Goodman truly lived up to his name. By the age of nine he cured his first disease—the first of *several*. As a gawky teenager, he published a dissertation on the evils of torture that would convince nearly every military leader in the world. During his adult life, he excelled at his career of humanitarianism/activism/philanthropy, leading and inspiring unprecedentedly successful international social justice movements. He achieved all of this while raising a beautiful and healthy family, and fostering profound and delightful friendships with everyone he met. Charles passed away at the age of 130 (his longevity due to his own medical advances), after spending his retirement discovering a new cheap and renewable energy source.

Was Charles' life meaningful? By conventional standards, I imagine we would want to say *yes*. We might find meaning in his heroic career, his loving relationships, or simply his overall positive affect on others. Thomas Nagel identifies this as the subjective experience of meaning: the *feeling* that something has meaning. When we find meaning in a life like Charles', it is an instance of exactly this feeling. We find meaning in many things in this way, such as *passing a test, making up after a fight, or looking nice for picture day*.

Objectively, or *under the aspect of eternity*, however, Nagel does not think there is (or at the very least doesn't think there is a reason to believe there is) meaning at all.<sup>1</sup> He likens this objective perspective on human life to watching "an ant struggle up a heap of sand" or Camus' example of Sisyphus, who is fated to roll a boulder up a hill for eternity.<sup>2</sup> This tension between the subjective perception of meaning and the objective lack thereof is known as the *absurd*. Nagel and other philosophers have dedicated much time and literature to attempts to resolving this absurdity.

In this paper, I will defend Nagel's belief that there is no cosmic meaning, and also his subsequent claim that meaning is created by humans. However, I will offer a conception of meaning as socially constructed in nature instead of solely dependent on personal subjective experience, which allows for objectivity within a human community.<sup>1</sup> In other words, while I agree with Nagel's view that meaning cannot exist *under the aspect of eternity*, I disagree with his claim that meaning cannot exist legitimately "from our own perspective" as long as we understand "our own perspective" to refer to the perspective of human society as a whole instead of as individuals.<sup>3</sup>

## Part 1. An Argument Against Cosmic Meaning

I will begin by arguing that there is no meaning *under the aspect of eternity*. Firstly, I argue that in order for something to have meaning, something outside it or beyond it must lend it meaning. Nozick explores this notion: something is meaningful if it is connected to something beyond it that is itself meaningful. Unfortunately, this explanation of meaning leads to an infinite regress, each source of meaning requiring a source for *its* meaning, and so on. For example, if saving a cat from a burning building is meaningful because helping other creatures in danger is meaningful, we must ask why helping other creatures in danger is meaningful, etc.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>My project here is not to eliminate the tension felt by humans about the absurdity of their lives; it is foremost to offer an explanation of the nature of meaning. Incidentally, I believe that my stance that meaning can be simultaneously manmade and objective may ease that tension for some.



What can end this regress? How can we find a source of meaning at the end of these chains? One may claim that there is something *intrinsically* meaningful at the end of the chain which requires nothing beyond it for its meaning. I reject this explanation; if we understand meaning as arising from connection to something beyond itself, it is against its very definition for meaning to lend meaning to itself. Thus, the universe fails to provide a source of meaning.

Secondly, I appeal to the conventions of the words “meaning” and “meaningfulness” in our language to illuminate the very nature of their referents. As an adjective, I argue that “meaningful” does not work quite like adjectives such as “purple,” “hard,” or “true.” Instead, it works more like “ready.” When we utter “I’m ready!” we are really communicating “I’m ready *to/for x!*” The x here is supplied by context when we use the word “ready” colloquially.<sup>ii</sup> For example, if a child is sitting on a sled perched at the very top of a snowy hill with her friend behind her about to push her forward, x here would be something like “sled down this hill.” The same can be said for “meaningful.” If one utters “it was very meaningful,” what is truly communicated is “it was very meaningful *to x.*” Take the following exchange, for example:

Albert: “Charles saving that cat from the burning building was very meaningful.”  
 Connie: “Meaningful to whom?”  
 Albert: “It was meaningful but it wasn’t meaningful to anyone, Connie, sheesh.”

There seems to be some inconsistency with Albert’s answer—it doesn’t seem to be possible that something could have meaning abstracted away from some sort of observation, appreciation, desire, or even contemplation; something meaningful must be meaningful *to* someone. Thus when we state “she lived a meaningful life,” we’re really saying “she lived a life that is meaningful *to x.*” This x is that which/who determines what is meaningful.

<sup>ii</sup>As any other moderate to radical contextualist will agree.

Because the universe, mere time, space, and matter, does not have perspective, it cannot be the arbiter of meaningfulness or meaninglessness.<sup>iii</sup> Thus, the universe or cosmic objectivity cannot determine meaning nor be its source.

## **Part 2. Human Communities as the Creators of Meaning & Realm Objectivity**

Alas, what is this elusive *x* that decides whether something is meaningful or not? I argue that it is *humans collectively*, or *a society* at large. Like Nagel, I believe that humans create meaning, but while he believes that it is created by individuals for themselves, I argue that meaning is social in nature, constructed by all humans sharing a culture or society.

Appealing again to language as a guide, let us examine language as a parallel to meaning: language is indisputably socially constructed: humans in proximity with one another construct verbal and written ways of communicating. Without humans, language would not exist. Further, an utterance or written piece of language only maintains its significance (in the semantic and existential sense of the word) within the human community that shares the language. This is to say that the sounds forming the English word “potato” when uttered aloud signify nothing outside the English linguistic community.<sup>iv</sup> Similarly, from this outside perspective, the shape made by “potato” written on a piece of paper is merely arbitrary marks. Because the universe is not partial to the English language (or partial to anything for that matter), *under the aspect of eternity*, pieces of language signify nothing.

<sup>iii</sup> Both the criticism of the universe as unable to provide meaning and as unable to judge meaning could be contested with an appeal to God: God, it could be argued, is the end of the chain of meaning and the arbiter of meaningfulness on Earth. I will not entertain this possibility because I wish to remain secular in my metaphysical pursuits, and more importantly, because I believe that I can offer an account of meaning without appealing to the supernatural or divine.

<sup>iv</sup> I use English as my example because it is most familiar to me (as well as the language in which this paper is written), but the same could be said for any language.

However, although the meaning of words and grammar of the English language do not hold up to the objective perspective of the universe, the language and its rules are very real and are subject to declarations of truth and falsity. In other words, there is a kind of objectivity to the English language within its relevant community; I will refer to this kind of objectivity as *realm objectivity*. If one spells “metaphysics” as “mettaphisix,” it would be [realm] objectively incorrect. Similarly, if someone claims that the red savory juicy fruit which grows above ground and tastes amazing with mozzarella is a potato, they would be wrong. Thus, while language is a social construction and the rules of language do not possess cosmic objectivity, there is realm objectivity within the human community that speaks and reinforces the rules of their language.

It is clear how meaning may follow this pattern; meaning is created and determined by a community. For our purposes, let us say this community is the dominant culture and society of Western Europe and North America. Cultural groups or societies like this one, I argue, together formed a mutual understanding of meaningfulness just like a linguistic community formed a mutual way of communicating with one another. Even though meaning does not exist from the objective viewpoint of the universe (as I argued earlier,) if this group collectively and tacitly decided that saving a cat from a burning building was meaningful, it is thus granted meaning just like a community deciding the syllables “po-tay-toh” would refer to the bulbous and starchy root vegetable made it so.

Because of this realm objectivity of meaning within a society, individuals can be right or wrong about meaning just like we can be right or wrong about what the word “potato” means. For example, let us say our society has decided that protecting animals is meaningful, and doing harm to or in any way intentionally disadvantaging other people is not meaningful. If our friend Charles saves a cat from a burning building but has just read Camus and now believes that his life and everything in it is meaningless, he would be (realm objectively) wrong. Alternatively, if Connie lives her life stealing from homeless people and believes that this vocation is incredibly fulfilling and meaningful,

she, too, would be wrong. There are realm objective truths regarding what is and what is not meaningful, and here Charles and Connie's beliefs about meaning are thereby incorrect.

### Part 3. The Source & Content of Meaning

Thus far in my account of the nature of meaning, I have posited its genealogy and inner workings, but have yet to delve into its content—what *does* society claim to be meaningful after all? And why? Like Nozick, I claim that something gains meaning by being connected to something beyond it. However, this something beyond it isn't just *anything* beyond it. Something is meaningful because it is connected to that which the society *values*. This connection can take many forms—it can be an instantiation or manifestation of a value, it can aid the process of the realization of a value, or it can simply be of deep importance to a value. Luckily, this evades the infinite regress problem; because this theory does not seek to find meaning from the universe but instead seeks to explain meaning's social construction, the end of the chain of meaning is spotted right away: human cultures. And we need not ask what gives human cultures meaning because we already understand that beyond the scope of a society, *under the aspect of eternity*, there is no meaning. Because these values are selected by humans for humans, we are only concerned with the fact that they are *considered* intrinsically valuable by the people in the community rather than their actual cosmic intrinsic value. In sum, it is through the manifestation of or other significant connection to a societal value that something gains meaning.

Discussing values, and thus what is meaningful or not, becomes a matter of empiricism in this account; what does this society at this moment in time value? Based on observation, I offer the following list as a starting-point: a. helping others, b. loving interpersonal relationships, and c. long-term flourishing.<sup>v</sup> From these three values

<sup>v</sup> A society may come to value certain things for a variety and combination of historical, social, geographical, and evolutionary reasons. To explore these reasons is a worthy academic pursuit, but sadly one that is beyond the scope of this paper, and is almost surely better suited to the discipline of anthropology than philosophy.

alone we are able to see why many things we often consider to be realm-objectively meaningful are meaningful: volunteering one's time at a local nonprofit organization, (a), best-friendships (b), and pursuing one's lifelong dream of being an artist (c), among countless others and variations.

#### **Part 4. The Relativism of Social Constructs**

Because of its dependence on culture and human input, this conception renders meaning subject to change and variation across time and place. Like languages vary wildly from place to place and over time, that which a group or society decides they value is not consistent. While in our Western individualistic society we value individuality and originality (perhaps because we consider it necessary for long-term human flourishing), there are other cultures in the world that do not. Instead, these communal cultures value dedicating oneself to the objectives of the community.

Indeed, we can imagine that in societies past or future, communities value things we would never fathom; perhaps in a future society of the 25th century the ability to recite the screenplay of the recently unearthed and revered Nicolas Cage masterpiece "National Treasure" will be highly valued. In this future society, for example, learning about and watching this film will be quite meaningful because it furthers the pursuit of this value. However, this means that things we find meaningless or actively negative in our current society could be considered meaningful in a different society or age. For example, if a culture values causing pain in others, torture for the sake of torture will be realm objectively meaningful.<sup>vi</sup> This is a strange or even unsettling consequence of this view, but such relativism is nonetheless a consequence of social constructions and their realm objectivity.

<sup>vi</sup> Determining whether or not viewing a Nicolas Cage movie is in this category, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

## Part 5. Questions, Objections, and Loose Ends

The mechanics of realm objectivity and social construction are incredibly complex—certainly more complex than I can show in this paper. While in our linguistic community we all agree that “potato” is spelt as such and that this word refers to a particular object, the same cannot be said of all words or phrases. For example, the word “justice,” while still in a realm of objectivity, is not quite as uncontroversial; when referring to something as “just” or “justice,” it is more difficult to know who is right and who is wrong. While we might all agree that justice means *doing what is right*, we might (and many certainly do) disagree on what doing right consists in. To clarify, this is not the same as someone being wrong about what justice is: if someone utters “justice” in an attempt to refer to a potato, she will be incorrect.<sup>vii</sup> This is an ambiguity brought about by the conceptual nature of “justice” (other conceptual words being “freedom” or “beauty” for example). Thus, disagreement comes not from the definition, but the manifestation of this concept.

The same can be said of meaning. Let us use the value *interpersonal loving relationships* (ILR, henceforth) as our example. Like a definition of a word, our society agrees on what an ILR is conceptually. However, it may be contested what an instantiation of an ILR consists in. Because meaning is derived from something’s connection to a value, (ILR in this case,) whether x is considered meaningful or not depends upon something debatable: what an ILR consists in. Let us say that according to Tammy, an ILR is y: two people knowing one another other for at least a few months, and caring about each other. According to Stacy, however, an ILR is z: a relationship with no less than a lifetime commitment with a romantic quality. Even though Stacy and Tammy are both a part of the same society that values ILR, Stacy would not consider relationships of type y meaningful whereas Tammy would. Thus, it seems that meaning is in fact dependent on subjective ideas of what a value consists in; if two people in the same society can understand the same values but disagree about what is meaningful, perhaps meaning is not even realm objective after all!

<sup>vii</sup> Except in some delightfully contrived situation wherein a potato has brought about justice, that is.

Luckily, I don't think this is the case. It is true that people debate the nature of concepts like beauty, freedom, and justice.<sup>viii</sup> However, we must remember that thinkers dedicate their careers and lives attempting to *glean* the true nature of these concepts. This is to say that there *is* a true nature of such concepts, even if we haven't quite decided or discovered collectively what they are. Justice consists in *something*—some people are wrong about what it is, perhaps some people are right about what it is. It is also true that people may disagree about what an ILR looks like; some of them are wrong, and some may be right. This is merely another way in which a person in a community can be wrong or right about whether or not something is meaningful. The way of being incorrect about meaning that was previously mentioned was being wrong about *what is valuable*. I hope to have shown here that one may also be incorrect about meaning by being wrong about *what a value consists in*.

Another concern with this conception of meaning is the possibility of a clash between or combination of something we value and something we don't. We can imagine many examples of this: Somebody is happily and lovingly married but consequentially is unable to pursue her dream career, or even more saliently, a military general orders his soldiers to torture people for information necessary to diffuse a nuclear bomb that is set to detonate and thus kill millions. How do we determine the meaning or lack thereof in such situations? Does the negative value of torture cancel out the positive value of helping others? If not, must we concede that torture can sometimes be meaningful?

There are several possibilities to consider here:

1. The Sum Possibility: the positive and the negative aspects of a situation, each given their appropriate weight are “added together.” If the meaningful aspect (attempting to save lives) is more significant or strong than the negative aspect (torturing

<sup>viii</sup> And “meaning” of course!

people) is significant or strong, then it maintains meaning. If not, it loses its meaning.

2. The Taint Possibility: The presence of any negative value renders the positive value meaningless. If one uses torture, even in a successful attempt to save millions of lives, the good of helping others loses all meaning it would have otherwise had.
3. The Independent Possibility: Instead of seeing positive and negative aspects as interacting with each other, they are to be considered as distinct matters deserving of separate analyses. The general's attempt to save lives is in accordance with our values and is thus meaningful; the general's use of torture is in contrast with our values and is thus not meaningful.

In seeking an answer to this dilemma, I argue that we should accept the possibility that does not allow for torture to be excused or considered meaningful, but also does not prevent or diminish the instantiation of our values. Naturally, I propose the Independent Possibility as a means of understanding situations with this dual nature.

## Conclusion

This conception of meaning as socially constructed has several benefits that other conceptions lack. Perhaps most the most significant benefit is that it allows for meaning to have objectivity without necessitating the supernatural or an attempt to understand the universe and/or “the unlimited.”<sup>5</sup> Happily, this also does some work to remove the sting of the *absurd* by claiming that there is objective truth to meaning. Admittedly, my conception is not exhaustive; the objective of this short paper was merely to put forth an outline of an alternative understanding of meaning's true nature. Hopefully I have done so convincingly.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68 no. 20 (1971): 720

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Nagel, "Birth, Death, and the Meaning of Life," in *The View from Nowhere*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 210

<sup>4</sup> Robert Nozick, "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life," in *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 599

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, Nozick, 594

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## WORK, LABOR, AND THE CYBORG: AN INTERSUBJECTIVE PHENOMENOLOGY OF NATURE

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**Abstract.** Led by Donna Haraway's essay, *The Promises of Monsters* (1992), social science has begun to move towards a post-structuralist theory of multi-naturalism. This position denies that natural terms refer to any real entity outside of linguistic power structures. Instead, the natural world and the technological world are mutually intertwined in a 'cyborg ontology.' By highlighting our dependence on nature, Haraway attempts to uncover a new ontological grounding for our ethical obligations to the natural world. In this paper, I explore whether Haraway's 'cyborg ontology' can escape the challenges of relativism that are commonly leveled against post-structuralists. I then utilize Hannah Arendt's conception of the *viva activa*, the human being's essential activities, to establish an intersubjective phenomenology of nature. The strength of this new phenomenological approach is that it maintains objectivity, while also allowing for the fluidity of post-structuralist positions.

Nature has no essence; no boundaries; no reality; it is a place without substance—yet it is precisely this place that we are forced to enter in Donna Haraway's essay, *The Promises of Monsters* (1992). We begin this journey with Haraway's opening statement that "nature cannot pre-exist its construction;" its ontology is fundamentally tied up in human technology and artifice.<sup>1</sup> Nature's being has never been static or fixed. Prehistoric cave paintings depict a nature that is wholly different from the zoos, gardens, and parks constructed by 'modern man.' Dynamic power relations have constantly shaped that which is considered natural. Eventually, these assumptions become embedded in human language. No doubt, Haraway's post-structuralist vision is remarkably different from the accounts of nature traditionally offered by philosophers and scientists. These accounts have largely held that nature refers to 'natural kinds,' groupings of entities with given, common structures that exist independently from human action, thought, and artifice. In his essay *The Meaning of "Meaning"* (1975), Hilary Putnam defends the existence of natural kinds with his famous

twin-earth thought experiment. This experiment supposes that even if two beings have identical mental lives, they can still mean different things when they use the same word. Putnam's famous summary that "meanings just ain't in the head," but are instead reliant on external causal-historical connections to referents, directly contradicts Haraway's contention that nature is ultimately determined by human beliefs about the material world.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this ongoing debate, Haraway's deconstruction of nature has gained significant traction in the social sciences. Geographers, sociologists, and anthropologists point to different, changing, fluid conceptions of nature as evidence in support of multiple, socially constructed natures.<sup>3</sup> These varied conceptions of nature have caused the social sciences to move away from singular definitions, towards a combined ontology of multi-naturalism.<sup>4</sup> Such a radical departure from scientific explanation warrants extensive critical investigation; otherwise, scholars place the environment at risk. For centuries, secular societies have depended on scientists to define, catalogue, and manage nature. Science tells us what nature is, and how we should treat it. If multi-naturalism can't fulfill this important role, then we may be left without an ontological grounding for environmental ethics. Therefore, in this paper, I will pursue a critique of Haraway's claim that nature cannot pre-exist its construction. To do this, we must first continue our descent into Haraway's rhetorical space of nature. This will allow us to reveal potential pitfalls in the post-structuralist position. From here, I will argue that Hannah Arendt's *viva activa*, the human being's three essential activities, offers a conception of nature that can ground environmental ethics. Uniquely, Arendtian phenomenology will create an intersubjective, yet objective conception of nature that can still account for our changing perceptions of the natural world. As a result of this theory, we may yet mend the schism between the natural sciences and the social sciences regarding the ontology of nature.

Before we can propose alternatives, it is important that we delve deeper into Haraway's deconstruction of nature. The starting point for this deconstruction is Jacques Derrida's famous claim in *Of Grammatology* that "there is nothing outside of the text."<sup>5</sup> Derrida

goes beyond the literary to argue that there exists no referent outside and independent of language. There is only the signified and the signifier, each being shaped, altered, and constructed in relation to other terms. In this case, nature does not refer to anything at all. It is historically constructed, defined by privileged epistemologies that are propagated and established by discourse. This means that our knowledge of nature is always situated in the systems of power that shape our language.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, as a method of discursive analysis, deconstruction concerns itself with the historical context in which terms are created. If we can determine who has the power to construct meaning at a particular point in time, we gain a powerful glimpse into the way our lives are shaped, ordered, and structured.

For post-structuralists, science is commonly seen as the dominant epistemology in modern constructions of nature. Since the enlightenment, humans have deferred to scientific knowledge about the natural world precisely because it posits itself as an objective, rigorous, and well-tested method of uncovering truth; however, post-structuralists are not persuaded by these claims. They argue that everything from the scientist down to the scientific method is embedded in discursive practices that construct the discipline's assumptions about the natural world.<sup>7</sup> After all, to predict natural relationships, the variables in an experiment must already be presumed to be natural. As Haraway notes, these starting points often fall back on nature-culture binaries or age-old myths about our relationship to nature.<sup>8</sup> Untouched wilderness is believed to be natural, while all other organisms and environments are decidedly artificial.

The problem with this belief is that we have entered the anthropocene—an age where the entire earth is affected and altered by humanity.<sup>9</sup> During such a time, how can science distinguish the natural from the artificial? Science, like all other disciplines, is historically situated. On this point, American physicist Thomas Kuhn has been influential. Kuhn argues that scientific assumptions are largely determined by paradigms that are brought about by various revolutions in thought.<sup>10</sup> Paradigms are exemplary solutions to 'puzzles' that scientists use to direct their methods. When new puzzles present themselves that can't

be solved by the old paradigms, scientists shift to a new ‘normal science,’ complete with new paradigms. These paradigms determine what is considered acceptable science, accurate measurements, and appropriate assumptions; however, Kuhn argues that for each paradigm shift, new unsolvable puzzles present themselves. For this reason, science is not defined by chronological progress, but rather a series of incomplete perspectives. For post-structuralists, this indicates that science is far from an objective discipline. Instead, scientific epistemologies must be historically and socially deconstructed to determine the assumptions that lie beneath their claims.

Without an objective science, it appears that there is no way to discuss or develop our ideas about the natural world. We are stuck in a regressive, circular analysis. Haraway attempts to avoid this issue by developing a fluid, analogical, historically situated account of nature. Though nature has often been taken to mean “‘other’ in the histories of colonialism, racism, sexism, and class domination,” Haraway still believes that nature is a term that we cannot do without.<sup>11</sup> This is because nature serves as a starting point for a ‘public culture,’ a rhetorical place where we can establish our relationship to other entities in the world around us.<sup>12</sup> Without appeals to something like nature, we cannot practice environmental ethics, nor can we figure out how to live with non-human actors. To understand how we should live on planet earth, we must also understand how our natural world is constructed.

The problem post-structuralists face is that we cannot agree to any strict, categorical definition of nature, as these explanations will always be dependent on other contextual definitions, creating a vicious circle. Instead, we need a fluid account of nature that can be utilized even as language is altered. For this reason, Haraway employs analogy to create a fluid, historically situated depiction of nature. Her first contention is that we must distance ourselves from the humanistic, enlightenment driven narrative that presents man as the measure of all things, privileged, and separate from natural world.<sup>13</sup> Haraway refers to this narrative as the God-trick, whereby man is compared to an all-knowing God. Nature becomes man’s realm to subjugate and control, justifying acts of colonialism, sexism, and environmental

destruction.<sup>14</sup> Instead, Haraway seems to prefer a heterogeneous nature, a commonplace with “many houses with many inhabitants, which/who can reconfigure the earth.”<sup>15</sup> Human beings are not Gods capable of conquering the earth on their own. Nature is inhabited by both human and non-human actors and these actors all play roles in the configuration of the natural world. Humans, artifices, and all living entities become intimately entangled within the rhetorical place of nature.

For Haraway, the cyborg presents the perfect analogy for this commonplace nature. Cyborgs are futuristic beings that are part human and part robot. They are “companion monsters” that combine the natural and the technological in subversive ways, challenging the nature-culture divide.<sup>16</sup> When we think about the cyborg, we come to realize our own hybridity—the point at which our technological lives mix with our ‘natural’ self. We are so dependent on technology that we must acknowledge the lack of a discernable place where our technological self ends and our natural self begins. Our entire lives depend on food, medicine, and shelter, produced by technological artifice. Cyborgs are transgressive. They overcome the boundaries between gender, race, subject, animal, and machine.<sup>17</sup> By filling nature’s rhetorical place with cyborgs, Haraway thinks we can overcome the stark, totalizing distinctions created by the nature-culture binary. Nature will be deconstructed. Identities will become fluid, and humanist epistemologies will be challenged.<sup>18</sup>

Though Haraway’s project in *The Promises of Monsters* is as hopeful as it is robust, it is still vulnerable to traditional criticisms of post-structuralism. As Castree and Braun point out in their analysis of Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* (1993), there doesn’t appear to be any reality behind the discursive analysis exercised by post-structuralists.<sup>19</sup> Nature is completely dependent on the ways we represent it. For instance, if a culture does not have a word for nature, then nature would simply cease to exist, or should some Americans get their way, Big Macs, Ford Trucks and AR-15s could all become natural entities. Like many authors, I argue that post-structuralism is particularly vulnerable to charges of relativism. If nature’s being is determined

by power structures, then there is no truth to what is natural and what is not. First, let us consider that the cyborg's rhetorical value is completely dependent on the existence of a real culture-nature divide. If there is no real natural and no real technological, then there is no significance behind their merger. The cyborg becomes banal. For fluidity to exist there must be multiple real categories for the identity to flow in between. Without these categories, a fluid identity is simply nothingness—it is pure subjectivity. Here, the cyborg devolves from a transgressive entity to a being that merely acts without holding any real identity. There is a Cogito, but there is no Descartes.

A further problem with Haraway's project is that it struggles to bring us into an ethical relationship with the natural world. If nature is simply a social construct, then we lack a concrete foundation for the pursuit of environmental ends.<sup>20</sup> What makes nature important enough to protect? Do we have the same ethical responsibility to non-human actors as we do human actors? Without a clear boundary between the natural and the artificial, how are we to determine which environments and species should be protected? Here, Haraway's commonplace nature falls to the criticisms that are commonly leveled against nature monism. Though Haraway claims that natural and artificial entities should be distinguished, she is still committed to the belief that nature is wholly constructed. This means that everything has the potential to be constructed as a natural entity.

To prevent this, Haraway insists that we have a responsibility to consider multiple, interconnected perspectives before we determine what is natural; however, this multi-natural ontology leaves us without an epistemological method for determining what is natural and what is not. It trades scientific consensus for popular ballot. Surely, a democratic society can operate in this manner. For instance, we can assemble all the spiritual, social, and economic reasons for limiting carbon admissions; however, since there is no way to compare these competing claims, we are eventually forced to make an arbitrary decision. At this point, environmental ethics fall apart. Climate change deniers could claim that their position is equally valid, while arguing that carbon levels are 'naturally caused' and we have no obligation to

correct them. Under Haraway's position, we would be left without a way to make environmental progress. There would be no true nature, and no concrete environmental ends to achieve.

For human rights theorists and natural law theorists, Haraway's position becomes all the more untenable. In a commonplace nature, all actions could be construed as arising naturally out of the interactions between nature and culture.<sup>21</sup> There is nothing inherent in the human being or the natural world that would provide limits to human action. Humans would be logically permitted to do anything they wish. Their actions are no different than that of animals, plants, or the elements. Without the nature-culture divide, how can we say that the robotic missile-launching arm of a cyborg is any less permitted than its beating heart? They are one in the same. The mass eradication of life caused by H-bombs and gas chambers could no longer be considered unnatural.<sup>22</sup>

Faced with these problems, we are challenged to discover a theory of nature that can both account for nature's apparent reality, and its ability to be fluidly constructed in different contexts. Here, an intersubjective phenomenology of nature may lay the foundations for an objective, yet fluid nature. Intersubjectivity is a term that has its roots in Kantian metaphysics. By appealing to the common concepts and intuitions through which human beings understand the manifold of existence, Kant claims that it is possible for us to determine nature as being-other.<sup>23</sup> For Kant, nature is ordered, mechanistic, and determined. Our minds can cognitively apprehend the determined nature of non-human entities, and thus are able to categorize these entities as natural. Natural entities differ from the transcendental subject (the *Cogito* in Descartes) because they are determined, while the transcendental subject has free will.<sup>24</sup> Since nature differs from us, our minds rationally perceived it to be other. Here, we see a way in which nature can be intersubjectively objective. Nature does not exist prior to the subject, as our recognition of nature is necessary for it to exist; however, there is still an objective truth as to what is natural. If the transcendental subject has the capacity to determine nature as being-other, then any human being is able to discern what is truly natural and what is not—all we need is the proper use of judgment.



Obviously, the Kantian theory of nature runs into numerous difficulties. Perhaps the biggest problem it faces is that by seeing nature as other, it justifies the acts of colonialism, sexism, and environmental injustice that Haraway so strongly condemns. The 'free-thinking subject' is ethically privileged; meanwhile, nature exists only to be subsumed or controlled. Further, Kant can't seem to account for differing conceptions of nature. If we all have the ability to cognitively apprehend nature, why is it the case that many Buddhist societies have no word through which to describe nature? Also, how can he account for our changing perceptions, attitudes, and descriptions of nature? Though Kant provides us with a foundation for intersubjective objectivity, he cannot account for the various ways in which we experience the natural world. For this, we will need an addition to our philosophical method.

To fully grasp the meaning of nature, we must account for human experience that goes beyond language. Here, phenomenology, the study of that which appears to the transcendental subject, is a useful tool for understanding nature. For Edmund Husserl, intersubjectivity arises out of our shared relationship to the world.<sup>25</sup> By suspending any assumptions we have about the external world, Husserl believes that we can see the world exactly as any transcendental subject would perceive it. This act allows us to directly relate to the experience of the other, providing a consistent foundation for knowledge.

Nature, as Husserl conceives of it, is the shared space through which this fundamental agreement can take place.<sup>26</sup> It is the shared environment through which we can come to know the other. Unfortunately, Husserl's phenomenological approach to nature tells us how to interact with other humans, but fails to provide a fundamental basis through which we can interact with the non-human world. This prevents us from ever developing an ethical relationship with nature itself. A further complaint is that Husserl's method requires that we suspend all of our assumptions and a-posteriori knowledge of the world. This means that we will constantly view the world without a concern for humanity's interaction and impact within it. For example, we cannot come to fully grasp the being of a tree in a logging plantation unless it is

seen in relation to the human activity that surrounds it. Our perceptions and interactions with the natural world have direct consequences on our environment. They shape our relationship to the natural environment and alter the significance of the natural world. These layers of meaning are lost in a Husserlian phenomenology that only considers nature as a place for humans to interact between each other.

For these reasons, it is important that we develop a phenomenology of nature that both takes into account our fundamental interactions with the natural world, and how these interactions shape what is considered to be natural. Hannah Arendt's conception of nature in the *The Human Condition* (1958) seems to fit these important qualifications. While deconstruction assumes that our language has no referents outside of language, Arendt avoids this challenge by predicating nature's existence on fundamental human activities. Arendt claims that humans fundamentally interact with the world through labor, work, and action; these three activities comprise the *viva activa*, or active life.<sup>27</sup> Labor is the activity through which we discover the natural world. It is concerned with the biological functions of human life, the acquisition of necessities that we need to survive. We metabolize nature. We consume it. It passes through us, and we return it. Nature, as the object of labor, represents a never-ending cycle of production and consumption.<sup>28</sup>

On the cultural side of the nature-culture divide, Arendt believes that work is how humans "build worlds that function as safe havens from nature."<sup>29</sup> Work consists of a linear path that always leads to some end. Houses, art, tools, and Apache attack helicopters are all the result of work. For this reason, nature's purpose is always determined by our biology, while artifice is determined by contingent human action. Let us consider water as an example. Water in a stream is natural. It flows its course, evaporates, or is used by living beings. When we use this stream for irrigation, we utilize labor. The water is redirected, but it is still involved in a natural cycle. By contrast, bottled water is artificial. It is the product of work. The water becomes captured, preserved, and sold explicitly for drinking and thus they create a durable space in which we can construct our own identity.<sup>30</sup>

Work separates us from nature by creating worlds that are permanent and controllable. It is from these worlds that nature becomes its own object. The natural earth becomes separated from the human world, and the nature-culture divide becomes known.

Under this definition of nature, we avoid the post-structuralist challenge. Nature refers to that which is given to humans in an endless cycle of consumption and production. It signifies a multitude of objects that are involved in the activity of labor. In this way, labor provides an eternal 'text' that contextually defines nature. As long as nature is an object of labor, it can be historically constructed in different ways. Nature can be altered and shaped by our actions and work in the human world. To exemplify this fact, let's take the particularly problematic case of agriculture. Farming presents a problem for Arendt because it involves heavy interaction between labor and work. Though labor must be used to produce and consume food, this process is only possible with tools, such as plows and irrigation.<sup>31</sup> Arendt's response is that if agriculture is seen as a way of cultivating the earth, a peaceful and artful activity in which food is produced in harmony with natural processes, then it is indeed natural.<sup>32</sup>

However, most modern agriculture with its reliance on machinery, fertilizer, and genetically modified crops would not be natural.<sup>33</sup> In industrial agriculture, the human being is far removed from the natural feedback loops involved in farming. Every interaction is mediated by technology. Every product is sold as a commodity. Even the seeds from agricultural plants can no longer be collected and returned to the soil; GMO patents require that all seeds be purchased from the company that produces them. Here, Arendt's theory of nature fits our intuitions about the natural world. Industrial farming, which requires large inputs of external energy, is less natural than small scale, environmentally-conscious farming. Arendt's theory of nature provides us not only a way to determine what is natural, but it also provides an ontological grounding for our ethical treatment of the natural world.

To further cement how nature can be shaped and constructed intersubjectively, we should discuss Arendt's famed example of earth

alienation. According to Arendt, our ability to view the earth from satellites in space represents a fundamental shift in our construction of nature.<sup>34</sup> Earth images show us a future where we are freed from natural constraints. We no longer see the earth in context, as the home of human life. Instead, it is seen as simply another planet in the universe.<sup>35</sup> Here, the perishable, natural world is no longer that which sustains us; it becomes a boundary that limits human expansion and achievement. This new universal perspective shifts our focus from the natural sciences, which are concerned with humanity's role in natural systems, to the universal sciences, which attempt to master the natural world through nuclear physics and the conquest of space.<sup>36</sup>

Earth images present a vision of nature that is no longer mysterious, or ready-at-hand. It is a world that can be dominated, mastered, and controlled. We no longer relate to it through our senses, but rather through scientific data and mass calculation. This leads us to become alienated from the world around us. We see the world in what Baudrillard would call a hyperreality, relating to it through signs and symbols, rather than our own sense experience.<sup>37</sup> Arendt calls this the Archimedean Point, the moment at which our understanding of the natural world becomes controlled by scientists from a universal standpoint, outside of space and time. While some will argue that these images have provided a boost to the environmental movement, which has rallied around earth images as depictions of a common home, we cannot neglect that our ascent to the stars has also bolstered the view of neoliberal cornucopians, individuals who view science and technology as the solution to all the world's problems. Unfortunately, it doesn't take extensive analysis to see who is winning in this pivotal battle over the earth's future, making the establishment of a consistent theory of nature all the more important.

We might think that the reconstruction of nature caused by earth imagery proves that nature cannot pre-exist its construction; however, constructionism does not always imply that an entity is not real. In this case, nature still refers to the world in relation to labor, but if we no longer relate to the world through a biological process of production and consumption, then nature simply ceases to exist. A tree

in a logging plantation that is seen not as a product of the earth, but as human created entity, allowed to live for the sole purpose of creating wood, is no longer natural. In this way, our attempts to master, control, and drive the natural world towards human ends will actually result in the ontological destruction of the nature itself. The natural will be subsumed by the technological—the cyborg rendered nothing more than an artificial robot.

Haraway claims that nature cannot pre-exist its construction, but the Arendtian viewpoint stands in direct opposition to this claim. Certainly, the natural world of biological “necessity, futurity, and animality” would still exist even if humans did not have a word for it.<sup>38</sup> Nature has a real referent, allowing us to decidedly determine our ethical relationship to the natural world. Further, Arendt’s intersubjective phenomenology accounts for nature’s ability to be fluidly constructed in different ways. Nature is mediated through the interplay of work and labor. It can arise, change, and be eliminated, depending on how we interact with the world around us. However, this does not change the fact that nature always refers to our interactions with the world through labor. In this way, nature remains a fixed, concrete entity. So, while we might enter Haraway’s rhetorical place of nature to confront the cyborg, it seems that her position, though challenging, is not without problems. Perhaps what we truly need is a conception of nature that maintains nature-culture dualism without the trappings of colonialism, sexism, and domination. Haraway is right in declaring that we need a new ethical relationship to the natural world, but this promise will not be found in the heart of cyborg monsters, but rather, in the active life of real human beings.

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<sup>16</sup> Haraway, *The Promises of Monsters*, 300.

<sup>17</sup> Haraway, *The Promises of Monsters*, 328.

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<sup>29</sup> Ott, *World and Earth*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Ott, *World and Earth*, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Ott, *World and Earth*, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Macauley, *Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Place*, 37.

<sup>33</sup> Ott, *World and Earth*, 14.

<sup>34</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Macauley, *Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Place*, 30.

<sup>36</sup> Arendt, Hannah. “The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man.” (*The New Atlantic*, 1963.)

<sup>37</sup> Castree and Braun, *The Construction of Nature and the Nature of Construction*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Macauley, *Arendt and the Politics of Place*, 36

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**A REVIEW OF JEFFREY J. KRIPAL AND WHITLEY  
STRIEBER,  
*THE SUPER NATURAL: A NEW VISION OF THE  
UNEXPLAINED***

Cat Tween  
*Vassar College*

*The Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained* (2016) is the collaborative effort of two authors: Jeffrey J. Kripal, a historian of mystical literature and a professor of comparative religion at Rice University in Houston, TX; and Whitley Strieber, the 20th century's most outspoken UFO abductee. In their earnest, thought-provoking, and unorthodox new book, Kripal and Strieber hope to model a new conversation about paranormal phenomena—a conversation that is more even-handed, more open-minded, and less dogmatic than mainstream public and academic discourse. They are neither believers nor debunkers. They are Socratic gadflies, calling upon us to ask more questions, make fewer claims, and bring a sense of mystery and wonder back into our discussion of what is and is not possible in the natural world.

Kripal and Strieber take turns in writing alternating chapters of the book. Strieber's chapters contain the outrageous but allegedly true stories of his paranormal experiences, which include ongoing encounters with the non-human or, perhaps, no-longer-human. Others he calls "the visitors." As amusing as they are unsettling, Strieber's bizarre narratives range from visions of strange other worlds, prophetic dreams, and apparitions of the deceased, to kidnappings by little blue men, an intensely erotic affair with an alien-goddess, and harassment by a "droll and sinister coterie of trolls" (130).

These are the kinds of stories most rational people will dismiss out of hand, either as symptoms of madness or as outright lies—and yet, perhaps because the authorial voice which narrates them is so calm, intelligent, sensitive, and seemingly level-headed, the reader finds herself increasingly receptive and willing, if not necessarily to

*believe*, to at least *contemplate the possibility* that the experiences professed are, in some sense, true. After all, Strieber's reports do not read like the ravings of a madman, or the tall-tales of someone desperately seeking media attention. They read like the humble and often embarrassed confessions of a man who is living in the presence of something unimaginably strange and is earnestly seeking help in his quest for the truth.

Many who believe themselves to be unfamiliar with the name Whitley Strieber may nonetheless be familiar with his legacy. Best known for his controversial 1987 autobiography *Communion* (later made into a film of the same name, starring Christopher Walken), Strieber is the man who brought to our culture the classic image of the grey humanoid alien, with the tapering chin and the black almond eyes. He is also the original recipient of the widely lampooned "rectal probe." But perhaps most significantly, Strieber is responsible for revealing the truly massive scope of a phenomenon which had, up to then, been hidden. In the aftermath of the publication of *Communion*, Strieber received no less than half a million letters from individuals worldwide who had personal experiences eerily similar to his own, but who mostly kept quiet for fear of being ridiculed or, worse, institutionalized—all too legitimate fears, it turns out. Strieber's publications were met with vitriol and persecution, media satire and character defamation. He was spat on in the grocery store, his home was vandalized, his family's safety threatened. And this is typical of the social opprobrium that close-encounter witnesses endure.

Strieber repeatedly stresses that he is not claiming to have had contact with extraterrestrials. He is simply reporting the phenomenological content of his experiences. He speculates freely, but makes no interpretive claims. He is choosing to sit with the question, the mystery—he is choosing to honor it, to let it breathe, and to consider it in all its ambiguity: "I have let myself come to rest in the question," he writes, "and have found there what to me is truly holy ground, a mystery that can be neither ignored nor solved" (108).

Paired with each of Strieber's chapters is one in which Kripal engages respectfully with Strieber's accounts and responds to him by

offering historical contextualization and philosophical reflection. In light of Kripal's commentary, *The Super Natural* becomes an immensely valuable contribution to the growing academic discourse around mystical and paranormal phenomena, and a book potentially of use to philosophers, anthropologists, and scholars of religion alike.

Kripal's thesis is that all kinds of inexplicable, anomalous, and seemingly impossible or "supernatural" phenomena (such as spectral entities, miraculous healings, telepathy, levitation, and life after death) are not impossible or supernatural after all, but are rarely observed and poorly understood aspects of our natural world. Nature, he suggests, is just immeasurably weirder, more mysterious, and more populated than the mainstream natural scientific model presently understands it to be.

Hence the title: *The Super Natural*. With this new phrase, Kripal is prompting us to move beyond both the reductive materialism of scientism, with its exclusivist categorization of the "natural" qua the "real" (qua the "material"), and the dualism of occult traditions, with their invocation of the "supernatural" as something real but outside of or in conflict with the natural. The new category, "the super natural," refers to those potentially immaterial or non-Newtonian aspects of nature that elude empirical study but are nevertheless knowable and real. The super natural are those phenomena that lie not outside the natural world, but outside our presently limited conception of it. They don't violate the workings of nature—they violate our current dogma regarding it.

According to Kripal, there are several factors that have conspired to suppress adequate conversation about the super natural in our society today. These include the public shaming of citizens, and the professional discrediting, and defunding, of scientists and scholars who attempt to speak about or study the paranormal; a historical amnesia with respect to the richly spiritual and super natural lives of our ancestors; the colonialist, imperialist, and racist assumption that the magical, animist, and shamanistic beliefs and practices of indigenous peoples are deluded, ignorant, and false; the automatic conflation of "real science" with materialist interpretations of science; and the

positivist myth that if something cannot be proven mathematically, or replicated in a laboratory and subjected to the scientific method, it does not exist.

Modern science labels experiences like Strieber's as "anecdotal" and regards them as meaningless neurological hiccups, best left ignored. But Kripal thinks this is a cop-out. The scientific establishment, he writes, is "attempting to control what is on the table so that the only permissible evidence left there is the evidence that supports the materialistic assumptions. It is very easy to explain all of reality if you get to define what that 'all' is. It is very easy to explain everything on the table if you have just taken off the table everything that you cannot explain" (12).

Kripal reveals that experiences like Strieber's are neither anecdotal nor anomalous, but in fact belong to a stable and consistent pattern of reported visions throughout human history. The historical record is full of descriptions of mystical experiences that bear uncanny resemblances to the modern UFO phenomenon—a phenomenon which, it turns out, is not limited to encounters with almond-eyed aliens and sightings of saucers in the sky. Such experiences are central, but very often they go hand-in-hand with perceptions of what appear to be ghosts, angels and demons, nature spirits, and mythological creatures like the elves and gnomes of Celtic faerie-lore. "The UFO phenomenon" is an umbrella term for a wide array of culturally-filtered encounters with Others who are intelligent and communicative but non-human and often, seemingly, non-material. Aliens have shown up throughout history, but it wasn't until modern times that we interpreted them as extraterrestrials. The ancients believed them to be immaterial beings, existing in some ordinarily unseen dimension of our world—perhaps the same dimension we pass into (or through) when we die.

Kripal argues that when we uncritically assume the truth and near-completeness of the present Western worldview (a worldview that is materialistic and mechanistic, insofar as it asserts that all of reality is nothing but matter and that matter operates according to physical laws), we default to reading both the religious phenomena of the past and their contemporary parallels through the lens of scientific materialism.

As a result, we typically entertain only three possible explanations for the UFO phenomenon.

Explanation (1): All of the contactees are lying—which, given the sheer magnitude of reports and the many historical precedents, seems ludicrous.

Explanation (2): The experiences are projections from the unconscious minds of the contactees, products either of mental illness or temporal lobe epilepsy—but then how to account for the fact that many experiences have had multiple concurring witnesses, or observable effects on the physical body and external world? Plus the fact that Whitely has been tested extensively for epilepsy and other neurological abnormalities, at his own request, and his brain has been found to be functioning normally?

Explanation (3): Extra-terrestrials from some super-advanced technological civilization in a distant star system are traveling to Earth via spaceships to study humans the way primatologists study apes in the wild. What our ancestors saw and misinterpreted as angels, demons and gods, descending from the heavens in magical chariots, we now correctly identify as Zeta Reticulans. The ancients mistook technology for magic; but we moderns know better.

Kripal's response to this is very interesting. He points out that there is no good reason to assume that we just happen to be living in the historical moment that has the privileged view of things. What if the angels of antiquity were not extraterrestrials, misidentified by our scientifically naive ancestors? What if our modern extraterrestrials are actually angels, or something of the like, misidentified by our spiritually naive selves? Perhaps the ancients didn't mistake technology for magic. Perhaps we are mistaking magic for technology.

Nobody knows what is really happening to the people who report experiences like Streiber's. But that *something* is happening can hardly be denied. So why does our society resist peering more deeply into the UFO phenomenon? Why do we sweep the mystery under the rug?

Perhaps it is because we sense that the truth is far stranger than our materialist worldview permits us to imagine. Perhaps we sense that to face it would be to usher in a paradigm shift that would force us to

abandon our hubristic assurance that, riding the coattails of science, we will someday soon understand (read: control) the whole of reality.

For now, Strieber and Kripal insist, the most important thing we can do is admit to our own ignorance. Only once we have acknowledged the true depth of the mystery, and embraced the wonder, humility, and curiosity to which that gives rise, will we be in a position to begin learning more—either about the unknown beings with whom we share this universe, or about the strange and secret potentialities of our own minds.

Now is the time to ask questions, and entertain all manner of answers, but refrain from committing ourselves to any particular beliefs. Maybe the aliens are inter-dimensional beings, or the souls of the dead. Or maybe they are astronauts on an anthropological mission. Or maybe they are hallucinations.

Or maybe, or maybe, or maybe.

## **THE SUPER NATURAL**

### **A New Vision of the Unexplained**

By Jeffrey J. Kripal and Whitley Strieber

384pp. TarcherPerigee. \$28.00.

**A REVIEW OF STEVEN VOGEL,  
*THINKING LIKE A MALL: ENVIRONMENTAL  
PHILOSOPHY AFTER THE END OF NATURE***

Henry Krusoe  
*Vassar College*

For some, it only takes a walk through a Macy's department store to awaken disgust for the nauseating arrangements of senseless products on display. Such a person might try to imagine a serene forest or a babbling brook in search of calm when such a feeling overtakes them before making their purchases. On the way home from the Mall, the tree-shaped air freshener that hangs in so many cars is a disquieting reminder of a greater exploitation of Nature. This disgust and disquiet is familiar to anyone who has the privilege to entertain a certain romantic distinction between Nature and the man-made world. *Thinking Like A Mall*, by environmental philosopher Steven Vogel asserts that this imagined division is flawed and, more seriously, profoundly irresponsible.

From the outset of *Thinking Like a Mall*, Vogel dismantles the default and romantic conception of Nature that the reader (or environmental philosophers at large) is likely to hold before opening this book. Vogel argues that if our conception of Nature, perhaps exemplified by the image of untouched wilderness, means anything like "those features of the environment humans haven't yet tampered with," then Nature literally no longer exists. We have touched every environment on Earth with our practices. And even beyond this particular moment in history, when humans assume to have influenced every nook and cranny on the planet, Vogel more fundamentally demolishes our attachment to Nature as a source of authority, an entity we can betray, wrong, or fail to heed. If Nature is that which is beyond the reach of human practices, then Nature just isn't *the kind of thing* that humans can ever "return to" or look to for guidance. In other words, Nature has already been destroyed the moment we "find" it.

After Vogel calls the concept of Nature into question, we are left only with our environment, an expanse defined and created only by our physical practices. This notion of *practices* is key to Vogel, as it is what generates the fundamentally “built” nature of the environment that surrounds us. Our practices also save us from becoming anthropocentric Gods, who believe that our environments are formed and exist merely within our heads. Practice certainly involves our ideals, but only insofar as they unfold through physical actions in an uncertain world with unexpected consequences. We are certainly responsible for our practices, but part of this responsibility involves understanding that our intentions and actions immediately take on a life of their own as they unfold within and become the environment. Because of this, the pollution and decay of a majestic valley is no more *ontologically* significant than the mismanagement and demolition of a community mall. Our practices led to both catastrophes. We might have particular reasons to view these two examples of environmental collapse differently, but these reasons are ours and not derived from anything inherently valuable in those environments that we mistakenly believe belong to Nature. Part of the larger goal of *Thinking Like a Mall* is to convince readers that it is time to take full ownership and responsibility for our practices because our practices are all we have.

Throughout *Thinking Like a Mall* Vogel explicates and references monumental authors in philosophy. Immanuel Kant, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida all contribute positively to his project. In particular, Vogel invokes at length Karl Marx’s treatment of alienation with a powerful effect. Vogel argues that the mainstream and romantic concept of Nature is the emblem of a kind of edenic alienation. The conception of Nature as an intact ecosystem stems from the mistaken belief that the built and socially instantiated environment is separable from our human presence on the earth. We, as human species, can never withdraw from our built and socially instantiated environments; we only can or take responsibility for our practices.

Here, about a hundred pages deep into Vogel’s venture, the reader is at last invited to “think like a mall,” as Vogel tells the story of the rise and fall of one particular mall. The City Center Mall opened in



Columbus, Ohio, in 1989, enjoyed several years of commercial success, and became a powerful center of the community. Eventually, the mall fell to ruin and was demolished after the mall owners decided to open new ventures that inadvertently deprived the mall of the crucial patronage of Columbus' well-to-do. Vogel analyzes the history of the City Center Mall as an environment. He examines how the practices of the owners, designers, builders, and patrons of the City Center Mall coalesced to *make the mall*, as it flourished and then withered, up until the day that it was demolished. Our perception of this entangled web of commercial and social happenings is the life of the mall. The good of the mall, and the good of any environment, is therefore not determined by Nature's authority, but by our positive response to an intermingling of practices. Financial success and enjoyment of the mall-goers constitutes a healthy mall while financial disaster, poor upkeep, empty storefronts, and vandalism marks a mall that is dying. That these judgments reflect human values is perhaps no surprise, but we must then accept responsibility for our values in *all* environmental judgments.

One of the most impressive features of *Thinking Like A Mall* is its commitment to reorient political action toward a strong, practice-focused democracy within communities free of environmental alienation. It is a major success that Vogel's environmental philosophy can seamlessly describe "the forces of gentrification and racism... economic downturn... [and] the dependence of the city's health...on much larger forces of finance and geopolitics and energy policy and climate change..." as environmental problems caused by our practices, practices that communities have a responsibility to engage with and (potentially) reform (130).

## **THINKING LIKE A MALL**

### **Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature**

By Steven Vogel

296pp. MIT Press. \$24.00.

# NATURE, MYTH, AND MYSTERY: AN INTERVIEW WITH CLAUDIA BARACCHI

Arshy Azizi and Cat Tween  
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Dr. Claudia Baracchi is a professor of philosophy at the University of Milano-Bicocca. Her field of expertise is ancient Greek philosophy approached through the lens of contemporary Continental thinkers, especially Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Hannah Arendt, Julia Kristeva, and Gilles Deleuze.

A truly cosmopolitan figure, Dr. Baracchi holds a PhD in Philosophy from Vanderbilt University. After a brief tenure at the University of Oregon, Baracchi moved to the Graduate Faculty at The New School for Social Research in New York City, where she remained for many years. In 2008, she relocated to the University of Milano-Bicocca. While in Milano, Baracchi became a philosophically trained psychoanalyst. As a result, in addition to her teaching philosophy Baracchi practices as a clinician and serves as a faculty at Philo – Scuola Superiore di Pratiche Filosofiche, a graduate school specializing in the study of philosophically oriented therapeutic approaches.

Dr. Baracchi has written several books in Italian and English, including *Of Myth, Life, and War in Plato's Republic* (Indiana University Press, 2002) and *Aristotle's Ethics as First Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2008). She is also the editor of *The Bloomsbury Companion to Aristotle* (Bloomsbury, 2015), and the author of numerous articles on a range of topics in ancient philosophy, art, and contemporary thought.

On May 29th, 2016, Dr. Baracchi gave a lecture at Vassar College entitled, “Youth, Antiquity, and Traces of Eros in Plato’s *Timaeus*.” The occasion was part of the Philosopher’s Holiday Lecture Series, which has been hosting professional philosophers at Vassar for more than fifty years. In her lecture, Dr. Baracchi described the ancient Greeks as being “incorrigibly young” and yet bearing the traces of “a boundless antiquity.” In her reading, ancient Greek thinkers liberally borrow and reformulate different ideas from across space and time.

Baracchi expounded on the specific way in which Athenian culture does not either conform to an “original” and autochthonous voice or map onto an “appropriation” from other sources. Baracchi invites us to think of the Athenian milieu as a synthesis of heterogeneous traits, inherited from diverse sources, which, from the beginning, were not treated in terms of their authoritativeness but rather as alterable and re-interpretable. In our interview with Baracchi, this view gave rise to an interrogation of what it means to be “Greek,” for both the tradition of Western philosophy at large and the field of study known as “ancient philosophy,” in Europe and the United States.

The day after Dr. Baracchi’s lecture, we had the great pleasure of sitting down with her for a few hours in the beautiful wood-paneled Library of the Alumnae House. The focus of our conversation was the topic of this year’s *Journal*, Nature, but we branched out of it and touched upon science, myth, mystery, friendship, and Eros, never losing sight of Baracchi’s own development as a philosopher, an intellectual, and a practicing psychoanalyst.



Professor Claudia Baracchi by a Serra in Dia:Beacon.  
April 2016. Photograph by Giovanna Borradori.

***In yesterday's lecture, "Youth, Antiquity, and Traces of Eros: On Plato's Timaeus," you presented a deconstruction of the myth of the Greeks as the foundation of a continuous and identifiable Western metaphysical tradition. Before we delve into the topic of Nature, we would love to explore what led you to this conclusion.***

Since the time of my graduate work at Vanderbilt, it was clear to me that one could go to ancient voices not moved by an archaeological investigation of origins and the history of ideas, but in order to learn how to think. When I arrived at Vanderbilt, my formation was very contemporary. On the philosophical side, I was acquainted with phenomenology and, as an undergraduate, I had studied art theory very intensively, especially Aby Warburg's iconology. Yet, in the end it was a course on James Joyce's *Ulysses* that precipitated me in the world of Greek references.

When I arrived at Vanderbilt, John Sallis was just teaching his first class there on Nietzsche and tragedy. Sallis, who had a deep influence on me, embodies an unusual profile in contemporary academia: he is an extremely refined and systematic thinker, with tremendous imagination and autonomy, but also a Plato scholar.

Now, jumping all the way to today, while I have always worked with Heidegger recently I have gone back to one of his late works, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," which was also at the core of my first encounter with Sallis who opened my eyes on the possibility that one could go back to the Greeks precisely because something has remained unthought there. One could, or even should, go back to the Greeks because there are seeds yet to be developed. He taught me to let go of the idea that we know what we are talking about when we turn toward something as remote as ancient Greek philosophy. For me, Greek antiquity begins to emerge as yet to be discovered, not fully unfolded, yet to come—the past as mystery and as a task. In this same vein, I am fascinated by the connection between

Greek philosophy and its other(s): the non-philosophical (poetry and politics), the non-logical, the non-Greek. Last night we focused on Plato, but in the Greek philosophical discourse various thinkers let transpire their awareness of not being initiators, but rather of inheriting problems and investigations from traditions of wisdom often foreign and very ancient.

Interestingly, when we talk about multiculturalism and alterity today, we tend to naively understand these notions in spatial and geographic, rather than temporal, terms. Imagine rethinking alterity in just as much depth with respect to *time*. Imagine the remoteness and radical discontinuities in chronology that this involves.

***You have invoked the relationship between time, space, and the development of myth. Is there an atemporal human necessity to mythologize and to narrate, sometimes at the expense of truth? Do you see any benefits in our tendency to mythologize?***

There are indeed many benefits in our tendency to mythologize, which modifies how truth is itself understood. Among contemporary thinkers who have had a vital connection with antiquity, I am thinking of Carl Jung for instance, who more than Freud, recognizes the two-foldedness of thinking. Jung says, ‘Yes, we think logically and discursively, that is one modality of thought; but imaginal thinking is another, and is not a sign of failure, but exactly on a par with the *logos*-related modality that we are used to call thinking.’ So we have both *logos* and *eikon*—word and image. This, to me, is absolutely fundamental: to understand thinking in its essentially dual character, irreducibly dual. Thought does not operate in one way only and it is not even fair to *logos* to presume that it does. Syllogistic and logically rigorous thinking does not exhaust the resources of *logos*. Let us think of *logos* as evocation, as poetic utterance, as exclamation and invocation, as having a performative and affectively loaded dimension. *Logos* is not as schematically poor as it is made out to be in most of the mainstream rationalistic historiography.

The question of myth is absolutely vital to me. In Plato, it is very clear that the practice of mythmaking and storytelling *is* a mode of truth-making. In other words, speaking in the Greek fashion, it is a way of unveiling, of bringing things into the light in a poietic sense. Plato resorts to myth every single time he does not have a linear answer. He resorts to myth every single time he says, ‘We don’t know the truth about this—but here is what we *can* say.’ And of course this does not mean that myth is a kind of lesser-grade elaboration to be used when we are lacking the higher-grade *logos*. It is not to say, ‘We don’t know the truth, so this is what we can make up, and it is of course false’—No, it is a way of truth-making that retains its plasticity, remains constantly and dynamically in movement, in transformation, and so is not simply graspable once and for all.

Mythmaking is vitally related to truth, but in a way that remains elusive to our will to grasp. And this, interestingly enough, is what Plato resorts to not now and then but at the very core of his thinking, every single time he is facing questions regarding first and ultimate issues. That is why first principles are mysterious and the site of an endless inquiry: precisely because all that concerns first principles, in Plato, is wrapped up in myth, in images and stories, and cannot be said otherwise.

All this is very interesting, because then you have the Straussians who say that this is merely the exoteric Plato, and that Plato really *could* expose first principles in *logos*, in a demonstrative vein—he just doesn’t want to. According to this perspective. Plato thinks that, when speaking to ordinary people, the philosopher utilizes images because they are easier, more seductive, and more intuitive. This is of course an aristocratic take: the idea that if one were to say the truth the way one knows, most people just wouldn’t get it. And yet, everywhere in the Platonic corpus the crucial characters affirm that they do not know, that they do not possess unassailable, demonstrated knowledge: so that the only appropriate thing for them is to speak in images. For them this is not one option among many—it is a necessity. There are certain issues that can be spoken of only in those terms. So, in a Straussian

vein, myth is important, but as an instrument, which the philosopher authoritatively decides to use or not to use. The problem with this view is that Plato lets transpire several times that the philosopher is not thus empowered. 'I, the author, am not the master of this decision; I cannot do otherwise than this.' I think it is very interesting to think of myth precisely in its ineluctability, as an inevitable ingredient of our experience, and of what we can do and say.

*I recall that in your lecture you referred to the self-assurance of the Greeks when, in regard to Nature, Pericles proclaimed: "We forced the sea and the Earth to yield to our audacity." Considering the current scientific discourse on the anthropocene, as the epoch that necessitates a reconsideration of humanity's interaction with the surrounding world, the Greeks' pride in conquering Nature reveals a certain naïveté and irresponsibility. Should we take this view as one that privileges hindsight or can we hold the Greeks culpable of an originary wrong, stemming from their inability to foresee the consequences of privileging the notion of the human as separate from Nature?*

Well, this is an incredibly interesting question for many reasons. Very schematically we should say that when we talk about the Greeks, we are thinking of Greek philosophers. Now, the question is: How representative is the Greek thinker of his society? Or rather, how at odds is he, and even in a very difficult and dangerous position with respect to his society? Neither in our society nor in ancient Athens has the philosophical voice prevailed: the primal scene of philosophy is a death sentence. So it is interesting, especially with regard to the question of Nature, to think of philosophy as being in a complex triangle with political discourse and with the dramatic arts. Because with respect to Nature, just as with respect to the past, the philosopher's view really is not reducible to what we read in Pericles' epitaph.

The self-assurance we hear in Pericles' speech is painfully recalled in a passage from the chorus of *Antigone* that has been commented on extensively by a number of scholars in various disciplines: "Many are the strange things"—*deinos* being translated sometimes as 'strange' or 'disquieting,' sometimes as 'terrible'—"Many are the strange things, but the most strange of all is the human being." And then there follows a number of images showing how the human being is walking on the surface of this earth, devising ways to dominate everything he encounters. He is crossing the most perilous and raging waters, he is learning to overcome the savage aspects of Nature and subdue the animals. It is a fantastic series of images that Sophocles depicts here, mentioning the various fauna being captured and massacred by this crazy creature who wants to master it all. And it is a fantastic moment, when Sophocles uses and reiterates the use of this word, *pantoporos*: the dream, or the nightmare, of omnipotence.

So the human being is this crazy animal, raging, doing things, and critically transforming the very physiognomy of the world, just because everywhere he goes he imposes himself, believing himself to be *pantoporos*: omnipotent. Sophocles insists that he doesn't stop before anything, but finds a way to overcome every single obstacle. But then, at the close of the passage, he also says that one thing only he cannot overcome, and that is death. Even though he invents all sorts of remedies to cure ailments, death he cannot quite overcome!

I think this is very representative of the kind of anthropological truth that tragedy as such discloses. The human being believes to be *pantoporos* and enacts this belief in Nature disastrously. But tragedy also shows another aspect of the truth about human beings: they are so overcome with grief and with the difficulties they experiences in life that they desire to die. Even Nietzsche recalls this, the so called wisdom of Silenus: "Better it is never to have been born, but, being born, best is dying soon." These are the two facets of the tragic truth disclosed on the tragic stage. This sorrowful depiction of the human being, already in and of itself, exposes the grandiose rhetoric of political discourse in



a problematic light. Now how does the philosopher respond to these crucial elements?

Far from being hostile to poetry, the philosopher takes it up and realizes the depth of its insight into the human condition: its truth. The philosopher assumes the poet's diagnoses and undertakes to articulate a therapeutic response: to heal the mad presumption of omnipotence, the philosopher articulates the experience of impotence, *aporia*. The whole question of *aporia* is an answer to this. To the delirious claim of being *pantoporos*, the philosopher responds by presenting himself as *aporos*: 'No, I cannot overcome all obstacles, I have to encounter at every step my finitude and the fact that I am at a loss and don't know how to proceed.' *Aporia* means 'impasse': an inability to make the next move. Philosophy has disclosed the fecundity of this term.

Aristotle devotes an entire book of *Metaphysics* to the claim that *aporia* as standing-there is not simply a paralysis. Undergoing frustration is precisely another way for the human to carry on, as opposed to this deluded self-perception of omnipotence. It is a way of understanding that I inhabit this finitude and within it I find a certain richness that does not correspond with the appropriative and hegemonic way: utilizing Nature as a standing-reserve of resources for my own use and plans. *Aporia*, therefore, is the capacity to stand, to stay and to abide, and therefore to hold back from doing, acting, enslaving, appropriating, devouring, grabbing and grasping. *Aporia* is the posture of contemplation, of approaching things not in a desirous, acquisitive way, but by allowing them to be and to show themselves. This is very contemporary language, it is resonating with Heidegger's formulations, but it is really strictly Greek. So a lot of this language that we attach to figures like Heidegger, in terms of the imagery and even the phrase-construction, is really Greek.

So this is one thing that we can say. Then there is the fruitful but definitely hostile relation between philosophy and political or sophistical discourse. In particular this notion that the Sophist and the politician have that the

*logos* is not to reflect the world, but to make it. So *logos* is absolutized in its performative and poietic functions (which, in and of themselves, are undeniable), and this entails a complete disregard for what things are and how things are, and an instrumental use of *logos* to bend things according to my own finalities. The philosophical reply to this posture illuminates the irreducibility of the question of Nature and of human Nature as well. This is very clear in Aristotle, but also in Plato: the way in which there is absolutely no way we can theorize a dichotomy between the human and Nature, or, even more starkly, culture and Nature. It is always already too late for us to make that distinction—for us human beings, for us cultured and learned human beings, who are always already speaking in the moment that they pose that question. There is this Heraclitean fragment that remains pervasive throughout Plato and Aristotle, saying that *Nature hides*: Nature is not available in its depth and in the heart of its truth, but remains completely unfathomable. It is as if we will never have seized it, but dance with it and interrogate it and wonder about it and play with moments of its own disclosure, precisely because of this inexhaustibility and unfathomability.

This has tremendous import also in terms of first principles. For instance in the *Physics*, Aristotle says, ‘It doesn’t make any sense for us to wonder whether the beings of Nature are there or not, whether they exist or not, whether we are being deluded when we perceive things or not. We have to start from *the fact that* they are. We have no idea whence they are, we cannot provide an explanation. But at the very same time, the fact that they are, the fact that we perceive them, cannot be called into question.’ So this is like saying Nature can only be affirmed; there is no way Nature can be the site of doubt, of the kind we see in the skeptical Cartesians. The only thing we can do with respect to Nature is to say: It is. There is no account we can provide about it. So we start from something that is most deeply unknown and mysterious, and at the very same time it is our first step, our very first and most basic step. We affirm it and cannot but affirm it, precisely because it is that which eludes us. It’s fantastic! The question of affirmation with no scientific or demonstrative explanation is already there long before Nietzsche. And it is completely disarming:

it leaves us almost embarrassingly deprived of any instrument, at a loss. 'The fact that things are' can only be accepted.

***The inexhaustibility of the mystery of Nature is a theme throughout your work. But certainly in another sense, Nature is and must be recognized as precisely exhaustible. Currently, humanity is exploiting Nature at a rate that exceeds its capacity to replenish it. The constant demand that capitalism places on the natural resources of the Earth seems to be justified by an understanding of Nature as inexhaustible. What do you make of this?***

I totally agree with your formulation of this issue. I am under the same impression, and it is probably more than an impression. We have compromised the regenerative processes. Inexhaustibility is precisely the question right now: the inexhaustibility of the environment as we know it. It is very complicated: on the one hand, there is the disarming but undeniable fact that inexhaustibility in the sense of unfathomability is before us. And death as the reminder of finitude is quite peremptory, impassable. Here we have the most definite reminder of our impotence and finitude. But on the other hand, we can still do a lot of damage. And I think that is precisely the problem that is couched in your question. It is not enough to say that the techno-sciences and the capitalistic worldview that deploys them are deluded if they think that they can control because all of this is completely unmasterable. It is not enough. It certainly must be said because it seems undeniable, but it is not enough, precisely because the exercise of the techno-sciences is to this day not deterred. They continue to be raging.

I think it would be important to develop an ethics of scientific research, and to more radically and drastically call into question many of its practices because there is nothing neutral in an approach to Nature that objectifies it. There is nothing neutral in the delirium of objectivity, in this kind of mathematized reduction of everything. From Galileo on, the mathematization and objectification of Nature has been the default conception of Nature. The objectification translates into the

right to utilize, deplete, and appropriate as long as there is anything to appropriate. The ethical implication of this set of activities has not been particularly developed; and I don't mean ethical reflection among us philosophers, but an ethical reflection that should be a part of the formation of those who go on to become scientists.

Despite the ever-increasing specialization, and consequent partialization of what they do, some medical doctors are beginning to feel the urge to reconsider the human being as an integral whole. This means to fill a dramatic lacuna in their background, preparation, and present activity. This also implies a radical re-thinking of pedagogy, from kindergarten to higher education. Culture is not simply a matter of formalizing and providing a polished construction for what would be otherwise a wild bundle of drives, instincts, appetites, and natural pulls. Rather, it is precisely in the contact with Nature that lies the possibility of cultural regeneration—and by “Nature” I mean *our* Nature as well as the cosmos and trees, Nature inside as well as everywhere outside of us. If approached in a non-exploitative vein, Nature can be a tremendous re-creative and regenerative force, ever alive and vibrant.

***While the execution of Socrates is paradigmatic of the tragedy of philosophy's distance from the community, as you noted in your lecture, Aristotle takes up friendship in a way that seems to respond to this tragedy by emphasizing the importance of the community in philosophical investigation. Should this then be the ultimate goal of philosophy: to incorporate itself into a society that has a tendency to reject it?***

Yes, it seems to be absolutely so. The question of who is inside the community and who is outside, which is the question of foreignness, is interesting because it is of concern to Aristotle too.

Ever since Socrates, philosophy draws into a more protective circle. It protects itself because it needs to make sure people are not dying because of it. And so you have Plato founding the Academy and Aristotle the

Lyceum as worlds within the world, minorities within a majority. If community at large will reject the philosopher as an extraneous body, then at the very least philosophy can institute a smaller community of like-minded people and keep itself safe. The institution of schools has been interpreted in a decadent way, as a kind of withdrawal. But it is really a refuge, a place of survival.

Plato says that what really matters are not the arguments in books, but *suzen*, or living together. What matters most can only be attained by living together, constantly brushing against each other as if producing heat by this friction. Insight comes from this living together: *suzen*, coexistence. But then of course the task is disseminating the experience in the larger community. This seems absolutely crucial to me.

***Can you tell us about the work you are doing in Milan, concerning a philosophically oriented psycho-therapeutic method?***

I am part of Philo, a psychoanalytic school that trains analysts by proposing a *cursus studiorum* that includes the various traditions of psychoanalysis, including Freud, Jung, and Lacan. We are not a sectarian school aligned with a particular father figure. We bring together and into a dialogue diverse approaches and sensibilities. But we also place therapy on the backdrop of philosophy, precisely understood in a kind of militant way. Philosophy thus emerges, first of all, in its belonging to life, in its concrete practical and spiritual unity. Then, secondly, philosophy contributes its characteristic ability to cultivate a systemic view, to hold together things that are heterogeneous, and even conflicting with one another, and to sustain complexity. Qua analysts, we are concerned with the wellbeing and health of the psychosomatic, or somato-psychic, organism. The philosophical gaze encourages the analyst to situate each singular case in the broader context of the changing world and its socio-economic-cultural aspects. This also involves the exercise of critical distance, constantly calling into question the meaning of wellbeing. ‘The cure’ cannot be merely a matter of fostering adaptation and mechanical functioning in the world.

Quite a number of doctors have contacted us in the last few years, in particular psychiatrists who deal with psychological suffering in its extreme forms. They are attracted to the possibility of situating what they do as specialists in a more holistic picture. In Milan, this has become quite a conspicuous practice. Aside from the analytical training, we have formative workshops for people who work in various fields, in hospitals and all sorts of medical institutions. Militancy is for me the task of disseminating insightful philosophical perspective and inoculating present society with a tolerance for complexity and ambiguity.

***In your lecture you called into question the very notion of being “Greek,” considering how much so called Greek identity was a metabolization of other cultures and other times. Would you advocate a restructuring of terminology when we refer to the ancients?***

A harmless way to still retain these categories is to utilize them as purely chronological references. The pre-Socratics, for example, are spread all over the Mediterranean, from Italy all the way to Asia Minor. These were people speaking and writing in various Greek dialects and coming from dramatically different cultural scenarios.

First of all we should thus interrogate what it means to speak of the “Greek world” in the 5th or 6th centuries. We are not talking about imperial Rome with the relative homogeneity that was being achieved at that point. Even in the mainland cities were radically at odds with each other. In terms of cultural contexts and ways of life, Athens was a radically unique experiment, for better or worse.

What does it mean to speak of the Greek world, then, and also how can we understand the different inflections that we hear typically in Parmenides or Heraclitus, not to speak of the Pythagoreans and Empedocles—what does it mean to speak of their particular inflection in ways that do not reduce them simply to the comparative juxtaposition of philosophical positions? They are not theoreticians confronting

one position with another. They are people who are the bearers of dramatically different cultures.

This is exactly the question that Plato raises in the passage from the *Timaeus* that I shared with you in my lecture last night. What does it mean to be Greek? The Egyptian priest tells Solon: “You Greeks are always children. You don’t even remember that ancient Athens was and still is displaying the same cultural, political, and spiritual structures that we here in Egypt are safeguarding.” So what does that mean? It means there is a common tradition that constitutes the backdrop of Greece and Egypt. Plato is well aware that there is no way, if you take this stance and this perspective, of magnifying autochthony with all the pride and identity-related pretense that goes with it. This is a profound moment of vision but also profoundly difficult in its implications.

Among the various lines of research that I am pursuing at present is in fact the relationship between Ancient Greek philosophy and its many “oriental” influences, in particular the Indian Vedas and the earlier Upanishads—there are *immense* parallels there! Georges Dumézil studied this question from an anthropological point of view in the first half of the twentieth century. He made clear how Plato draws upon archaic Indo-European institutions. The construction of the *polis* laid out in the *Republic* with its three-fold organization of the social classes is an Indo-European mode of constitution that we find all the way from India to the Scandinavian peninsula. This is a model that brings us back in time, back to the third and fourth millennium before our era.

In the Katha Upanishad, for instance, you find exactly the same configuration of the soul that you find in the *Phaedrus*, with the chariot and the horses, and the horses meaning exactly the same thing that they mean in the *Phaedrus* (the desires, impulses, appetites). In asking these questions we ask what being Greek means and concomitantly what philosophy means. In this sense, the Greeks are not initiators but are inheritors. And Plato, in the *Timaeus*, expresses precisely this sensibility: he knows that he is not beginning anything in an absolute

way, he is just taking all this up and doing something with it. So, the question of inheritance is deep and if you open up the question of this relation with the Vedic and Indo-European legacies (but the same can be said for the Semitic ones), then the discourse is wide open to vistas that are, to me, very interesting.

*In your essays “Looking at the Sky: On Nature and Contemplation,” and “The Syntax of Life: Gregory Bateson and the ‘Platonic View,’” you talk about Nature as mystery. You often quote the Heraclitean fragment, “Nature loves to hide,” and suggest that the desire to unveil and de-cipher Nature gave rise to rationalism and the modern scientific project. Our generation, the so called millennials, feels increasingly frustrated by the arrogance and hubris of modern Western techno-science, or scientism. For example, the discovery that the brain is composed of neurons, and certain emotional states correlate with certain neuronal states, is often taken as an end result: science has somehow extinguished the mystery of human emotion, when really all scientists have done is reveal a further layer of the mystery. The answers that science has found to the questions it has asked, themselves rest on an abyss of utterly unanswerable primordial questions. Nature is, as you say, like a veiled goddess, and science undertakes to lift her veil—but does so only to disclose a nakedness no less mysterious than the veiledness that had preceded it.*

Yes, it is a beautiful line of thought. It is a way of understanding science as the re-elaboration of a mystery that remains abiding. Nakedness is yet another veil, another mask, another enigmatic hiding site.

*Yes, exactly. The mystery of Nature cannot be impoverished; it needs to be safeguarded by a “lineage of secrecy,” as you call it. This is in tension with the modern scientific project, which pretends to disclose the secrets of Nature as a kind of dissipation of the mystery, when really it has simply revealed more and more facets of it. This attitude is problematic for many reasons but*



***one is certainly that it stifles the religious and mystical impulse. If the experience of the mystery is the experience of the divine, then by numbing us to the essential irreducibility of the mystery and swelling our heads with the assurance that we have already got it all figured out, science cuts us off from the wonder and humility that are the prerequisites of the religious experience. In this way, I think, does us a disservice.***

First of all I want to underscore the word “humility,” because it brings back to my memory a very old episode. When I was a doctoral student, I remember I was beginning to work on ancient philosophy and I was talking to an ancient philosophy professor with a very traditional approach. I brought up the category of humility with respect to Socrates and I remember that the very evocation of this term provoked, in my interlocutor, very loud laughter—very loud—as though to say, ‘Oh, what a non-pertinent, irrelevant category in the context of philosophical discourse and Socrates in particular.’ In other words, he was saying that I was just projecting something onto these materials and that humility was none of Socrates’ concern. A funny view, given that Socrates is precisely a critic of *hubris*.

In my reading, the category of humility belongs essentially to the tradition of ancient philosophy, and is relevant to the question you are raising: Is it possible to have a science that is not exploitative, and not hubristic. Can we have a science that is not animated by the exclamation: ‘We’ve got it, we have it in hand, we have grasped it and we can now close our fingers and just... brandish it! We now have the truth in our possession.’

Something very slanted and very perverse has happened in the course of time. Science is the discourse that claims to be objective and neutral. But this is a completely distorted depiction of what science is about. Nietzsche sees with particular lucidity that science is about *a will to power*. In other words, science is not knowledge for its own sake, but rather aims to know in order to *own*, to control, and to use. In this sense, it is a

will to power. This is a strange trajectory, because *episteme*, in the Greek sense, is born precisely as the discipline of analysis and deepening knowledge of something. But we see that in its full blown realization, in the fullness of its own project, it has become a way of possessing and controlling that, far from neutrality, is essentially involved in making, in world-making, world-changing, world-designing. The entire world has become the scene of an architectural constructive project. Apparently, it was on the news today, they managed to reproduce a bacterium in a laboratory. It is a living cell that is not cloned, but synthesized. This is what we are after: playing God, but playing God has nothing to do with neutrality, it has to do with making, with creativity. So, let us call it for what it is. And it is a creativity that relies on big financial investments that then flow into the technological applications. This is why I like to talk not so much about science but techno-science.

Technology is about world-making, world-changing, world-transformation—making a world that corresponds more and more to our needs and exigencies and desires. Science is a making. In this regard, I think that we should just let go of the talk about neutrality and objectivity, which is nowhere to be found. And, on the other hand: what has happened to *techné*, understood in the most wide-ranging sense as the capacity to produce, and thus as art and creativity? What has happened to art? In our contemporary culture, it has become a matter of the artist's self-expression. As if what really is at stake were self-expressivity, and the way in which I make my interiority manifest by sculpting or writing or drawing in a certain way. This is also completely slanted and perverse. This way of understanding art as mere self-expression has brought about a complete dissociation between art and knowledge.

For the ancient Greeks, *techné* was originally a way of exploring the world, no less knowledge-oriented than science. On the one hand we should understand science in its creativity, but we should also understand creativity in its scientific valence. And it would bring to the fore the issue of responsibility—again, the ethical dimension of the scientific as well as artistic operations.

Is it possible to imagine a development of science that is capable of contemplation? This would entail being *humble*, allowing things to show themselves out of themselves. But in this sense, science would become very intimate with postures like the meditative one, or, in general, with postures that have to do with a spiritual outlook to the world. Who says that science doesn't have anything to do with spirituality? Such a posture might be most appropriate for someone who would want to pursue objective knowledge, or anything even vaguely close to it. Precisely because the spiritual posture entails, not so much extinguishing, but bracketing our urges, and our inquisitive, primary impulses—and it has to do with situating them in context and containing them, therefore making space for what is not-me.

***It is so funny that your old professor laughed at your comment humility. Isn't that the meaning of the Socratic 'knowing that you do not know,' knowing your own ignorance? And isn't humility the backdrop of the value Socrates ascribes to aporia, to leaving the question open and unanswered?***

Yes, I call this the discipline of the question. The discipline of not knowing is not anything paralyzing or impairing, but is really the way of inquiry. With all the openness and curiosity and adherence to things that you can muster. And this is the living posture that Socrates hands down: Not-knowing as a way of living that, far from being paralyzed, is a way of being more deeply there. More deeply present, not in the sense of self-presence, but presence to things, presence to the other-than-self. So, it seems to me that this is all inscribed in the figure of Socrates. The discipline of being present to the world, to the other than myself, and so going out of myself, in this utterly alive and vibrant curiosity that is really for its own sake, because it is its own reward.

***In your essay "The Syntax of Life," you present a vision of the world as it is described in the *Timeaus*, as a cohesive, harmoniously connected living organism, and you suggest that there must exist a meta-pattern which connects all of existence, "a grammar of***

*life... the connective tissue of all that is, the communicational web of contacts, exchanges, and transmissions... perhaps the nervous system of life.” We found this to be a very compelling thought. You say, in the same essay, that we can know that the pattern exists, but we cannot know what it is. I noticed that the language you used to describe Eros in your talk yesterday echoed the language you used to describe this unknowable syntax of life: as capable of unifying differences while preserving them in their difference, allowing for a self-differing unity. Do you think there is a connection between Eros and what you have called “the syntax of life”?*

This is also the way Freud talks about it, is it not? And of course he borrows it from Plato. Eros is even present in the correspondence between Einstein and Freud from 1932. This is a brief correspondence between the two and is published under the title “Why War?”. Einstein asked Freud to confront this question, as a psychoanalyst: What are the psychoanalytical roots of the phenomenon of war and its apparent inevitability? In that context, Freud talks about *eros* as a principle of aggregation, as a principle of progressive expansion of the organism. Which is really already in the *Symposium*, this ascent and descent, this movement of growth and accretion that is defined by *eros* in the teachings of Diotima.

In his correspondence with Einstein, Freud says: I call *eros* everything that brings things together, whether at the intrapsychic level or at the intersubjective level. What holds one individual being together, what holds two together, what holds a small community together, the human community as such together. These increasing concentric forms of unity—this is Eros. So the capacity to form bonds, and in Gregory Bateson’s terms, the capacity to form bonds in the sense of holding together differences (and that is to say composing organisms), forms alive and vibrant units. So not unity in any reductive sense but what really sparks the aliveness in this unity.

This emphasis on life is ubiquitous in the ancient Greek understanding. In the Orphic fragments, for instance, *eros* is a principle of cohesive vitality, that in virtue of which something, rather than falling apart, holds together, in its complex and diversified plasticity, as one. And in the *Symposium* this is the teaching of Eryximachus: *eros* and *philia* (the two terms are often superimposed and equivalent) name a cosmic principle, all the way from terrestrial phenomena to interplanetary choreography. There are beautiful passages on this same point in the late Neoplatonist corpus. Plotinus writes that everything is held together by bonds of friendship, in the sense of sympathy, in the sense of the capacity to really vibrate together and correspond: a sympathetic togetherness.

Environmentally, this definition of *eros* acquires ethical and political implications. These implications were already clear in ancient times and framed within a utopian or eutopian, or dream-like, vision. In Aristotle, for example, there is the dream that humanity, although no one has ever seen anything of that kind, can hold together not simply because there are institutions and constitutions of cities, forms of government, and political units that make coexistence possible. This is in contrast with Thomas Hobbes's vision: we have the social contract, so that we can tolerate each other and live together without acting like wolves. Centuries before Hobbes, Plato already saw that this is one way of understanding human coexistence. We are all wild animals and we sign a contract so that we can fear each other a little bit less, and make it sustainable. But Plato doesn't want to go with that, of course. The question for him is: What does the lawgiver look at, in order to draw inspiration and write the laws that grant and implement human coexistence? The lawgiver looks at friendship. And why? Because friendship is that way of being together that is not the fruit of any norm or law, not forced by anything, and is just that way of being together that is its own reward, pleasant, sublimely beyond toleration—that is really just the pleasure of being there in the company of each other, and sharing. And so Aristotle says, "Because, you see, when people live together under law, they still crave friendship, they still need friendship; but when people are friends, they don't need laws anymore." Friendship becomes thus the horizon of

a post-juridical vision, where laws and norms (understood in terms of juridical codification) have become dispensable. Friendship is thus the eutopian vision, where human community is imagined beyond laws and the community holds together without the artifice of written juridical codes.

This brings us back to the question of Nature because Nature has everything to do with the question of friendship. *Philia* and *eros* are in the city, yet they are completely foreign to what can be subjected to norms. *Philia* and *eros* are experiences defined by excess, by the interruption of the well-ordered and well-structured constitution—an interpolation that we could call divine, natural, non-political. And yet paradoxically it is the highest possible achievement of the political. The political, paradoxically, finds in that visionary scenario its own ultimate flowering and accomplishment.

***You seem to view the mystery of Nature ultimately not as transcendent, beyond appearances, but as immanent in appearances, inhabiting the phenomenal world. For all your closeness to Plato, this emphasis on appearances seems also anti-Platonic (at least according to the traditional, dualistic interpretations of Plato). Do you see it as somehow reconcilable with an alternative interpretation of Platonic idealism, and if so, how?***

Indeed, this tension resonates with Goethe's notion of the *Urphänomen*, the one archetypal phenomenon that is not to be found anywhere else than in phenomena themselves, in their multiplicity. This is a halting thought for various reasons. First, it thinks the source and ground of the visible in terms that do not exceed the visible, in terms that are in fact phenomenal. That which makes any one thing that particular kind of thing is not known by turning away from the thing, to pure and abstract concepts, but is somehow seized by staying with the thing itself, allowing it to show itself from out of itself. *That* is the place of intellectual elaboration.

The visible does not stand in need of explanation, let alone justification, from elsewhere. It is not disclosed by resorting to what would stand beyond or behind it, and grant it its being. Depth is inscribed in surfaces, as Nietzsche also saw. This is the archaic truth of the mask and of the lighting up of images, in Dionysian rituals and theatrical events as well as in the Mysteries. The question of Platonic interpretation—and whether or not such an understanding is incompatible with Plato—cannot be fully developed here.

But I want to go back to what we were saying earlier, the issue of myth as a mode of unfolding truth, and the issue of first principles as being systematically enfolded (in the Platonic texts) within myths, which is also the question of imaginal proliferation and the literary similes. Think of the *eikos logos*, or *mythos*, with which Timaeus accounts for Nature, its birth, becoming, and ordering principles: the only way he can speak of this is in the mode of a likely (literally imaginal) discourse, or of a story. Concurrently, think about the way the workings and symphonic scores of Nature are intimately described in the myth that ends the *Republic*. Transcendence is inherent—immanent, we could say. Images are explained through images. Nowhere in Plato is Nature (or any other name of the primordial or originary) accounted for by reference to a purely discursive-rational order. On the contrary, it is precisely before such tasks that Plato becomes the poet, the rapturous maker of images, beyond which no further explanation is available.

True, the invitation to subject the *logos* to the “things themselves” is Aristotle’s, not Plato’s. Yet, Plato (think of the divided line, in *Republic* VI) says that the proper way to relate to appearances is trust, faith (*pistis*), not doubt. It is from out of this basic experience that further exercises of thinking and of analysis may begin to unfold.

***In the Q&A section of your lecture at Vassar, you mentioned off-hand that you prefer to use the term “inherence,” and avoid using the term “immanence” because it sets up an immanence-transcendence dichotomy. This intrigued us and we wonder how***

*you would define “inherence”? We imagine it as something like transcendence-within-immanence, or the presence of what is normally understood to be transcendent existing in and as the immanent. Would you agree?*

“Transcendence-within-immanence,” indeed! It would be a matter of thinking transcendence prior to the dichotomy between transcendence and immanence, as the infinitely more archaic ground of that opposition, older than the dualistic logic that would oppose transcendence to its antagonist. Thus understood, prior to a contrast with immanence, transcendence would be the cipher of a oneness intimately agitated by excess, somehow differing from itself, moving, not simple. Immanent excess, excess at work within: another apparent paradox. Yet, that which appears paradoxical from a logical point of view is not necessarily nonsensical. Indeed, it may be the outcome of logic pursued with utter rigor to its end.





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