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The Compatibility of Aristotle and Evolution

Justin KUNDRAK

In this paper I will attempt to demonstrate the compatibility of Aristotle’s metaphysics and natural philosophy with contemporary evolutionary biology. In doing so, I will attempt to disarm two claims that represent the conventional objections to any such compatibility: 1) That Aristotle’s essentialism commits him to fixed and transcendent species, and 2) that Aristotle’s teleology is irreconcilable with central tenets of evolutionary theory such as random genetic mutation and natural selection. In arguing against the first of these two claims I will maintain that Aristotle’s essentialism has been commonly misunderstood and mistakenly equated with modern taxonomical classification systems. In arguing against the second claim I will analyze the metaphysical apparatus of form and propose that teleological ends can coincide with and even corroborate a theory of evolution driven by natural selection.

Aristotelian Essentialism:

We can begin by addressing the view that Aristotle’s essentialism commits him to fixed and transcendent species. If Aristotle had this commitment, it would plainly put him at odds with evolutionary theory because evolution requires that species be able to change over time. If Aristotle is indeed committed to fixed and transcendent species, then evolution is off the table for him.
But I will argue that Aristotle’s essentialism is conventionally misunderstood and is actually in accord with modern biology’s transformative view of species.

In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle clearly identifies substance with specific form. According to Aristotle, form is what differentiates the matter that could potentially be $F$ from the matter that is actually $F$. Any substance is a composite of matter and form, where matter is the raw material composing the substance, and form is what predicates the substance or differentiates it from other substances. Because Aristotle uses the Greek word ‘*eidos*’ in his biological writings – which is commonly translated into English as ‘form’ – his interpreters have traditionally viewed his biology as a project in taxonomy (the classification of species) rather than an essentialist classification of natural kinds. The broad classificatory terms he uses, ‘*genos*’ and ‘*eidos*’, to discuss natural kinds have been mistakenly conflated with the modern biological terms ‘genus’ and ‘species’. This reading of Aristotle equates form and speciation, and has led generations of commentators to mistakenly ascribe to Aristotle a ‘typological essentialism’ that he does not espouse. This misinterpretation has made it seem as though Aristotle is wholly committed to eternal and unchanging species. It attributes to him a principle of classification according to which there is a single canonical set of unchanging properties that defines a particular species. This view treats Aristotle’s essentialism as a purely taxonomical project and simply equates species with form (*eidos*) so as to predicate a position in the classical Linnaean hierarchy. This interpretation of Aristotle’s essentialism is fundamentally flawed: his concept of form (*eidos*) is not the equivalent of

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1 See Denis Walsh, “Evolutionary Essentialism” p. 429
the modern concept of species; to read Aristotle this way is to shortchange his theory of natural kinds.\(^2\)

Even though Aristotle’s approach to biology cannot be reduced to modern taxonomy, it is still classificatory in nature. Though ‘\(eidos\)’ and ‘\(genos\)’ do not correspond to specific levels in the modern taxonomic hierarchy, Aristotle does use these terms to classify and explain the various similarities and differences among organisms. The two terms represent categories that are broader and more nuanced than the taxonomical definitions that we have confined them to in the past. Denis Walsh clarifies Aristotle’s usage of these terms:

\[\text{\textit{Genos}}\] groups organisms together according to some shared general features. Typically, organisms that share a \textit{genos} discharge their vital functions in similar ways. Groups united by a shared \textit{genos} can be further differentiated into more specific groups, each according to a shared \textit{eidos} (differentia). According to this schema \textit{genos} and \textit{eidos} are relative concepts. One and the same feature may constitute a shared \textit{genos} at one level of generality, and \textit{eidos} at a more inclusive level. Hence \textit{genos} and \textit{eidos} do not correspond to any fixed level in a taxonomic hierarchy.\(^3\)

The important thing to note here is that ‘\textit{genos}’ and ‘\textit{eidos}’ are \textit{relative} concepts, and that they are applied to the features of an organism and not necessarily to the organism

\(^2\) See James Lennox, "Kinds, Forms of Kinds and the More and the Less in Aristotle’s Biology" p. 129, “to approach [Aristotle] with the Linnaean hierarchy in hand is a sure-fire way to miss most of what is interesting in his thinking about biological kinds.”

\(^3\) Denis Walsh, “Evolutionary Essentialism” p. 429
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itself. This means that participation in a ‘genos’ does not
determine specific features of an organism’s phenotypic
traits, but instead determines a range of phenotypic traits
that an organism of that ‘genos’ could exhibit. For
example, birds by their nature (genos) have feathers, but
there is nothing about the shared nature of all birds that
determines the specific organization, color, pattern, or
length of any particular bird’s feathers. The feather
arrangements of particular birds are instead determined by
the demands of their specific lifestyle and environment.4
‘Eidos’, more specifically than ‘genos’, can then
differentiate within a shared nature and further condense
the range of possible phenotypic traits. Notice that ‘eidos’
does not reduce in definition to ‘species’, as previously
discussed, but is instead used relatively to compare certain
features between species. Accordingly, James Lennox is
correct that the best way to translate ‘genos’ and ‘eidos’ is
as “kind” and “form of a kind,” respectively.5 This
translation is far more truthful to Aristotle’s goals of
biological classification than conventional translations.

Aristotle’s biological system of natural kinds uses
radically different criteria and processes of classification
than the taxonomical hierarchy of modern biology.6
Whereas contemporary biology is focused on categorizing
organisms based on structural and genetic identity,
Aristotle’s essentialism attempts to identify an organism’s
basic goals or vital functions and then explain the
organism’s distinctive features in terms of how they

4 Ibid.
5 Lennox, “Kinds, Forms of Kinds and the More and the Less in Aristotle’s
Biology”
6 For an excellent argument defending the essentialist position in regards to
contemporary biology and taxonomy, see Travis Dumsday, “A New Argument
for Intrinsic Biological Essentialism”
facilitate the accomplishment of those goals. It is not surprising that Aristotle’s approach is so deeply teleological. As one commentator explains, “in Aristotle’s essentialist biology the nature of an organism is manifested as a goal-directed disposition to produce and maintain a living thing capable of fulfilling its vital functions in ways characteristic of its kind.” Thus, Aristotle is interested in categorizing the ways in which different organisms fulfill their goals and vital functions. In one commentator’s language, Aristotle relies on this analysis to explain what is referred to in modern biology as “recurrence” and “resemblance” between organisms. Recurrence refers to the continuity of phenotypic traits within a species, e.g. the similarity of offspring to their parents; and resemblance refers to the observable similarities and differences among species. Aristotle explains recurrence as the transmission of nature, composite of formal and material nature, from parent to offspring that results in a similarly natured offspring, e.g. “for a human being generates a human being, so that the character of the parent explains the way in which the offspring comes to be.” Resemblance is explained as the degree of similarity (or difference) among the natures of organisms, essentially the level and magnitude of kind (genos) or form of a kind (eidos) they share. Walsh elaborates:

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7 See also James Lennox, “Material and Formal Natures in Aristotle’s de Partibus Animalium” p. 183, “Soul (Psuche) is distinguished by a set of vital functions, nutrition, growth, locomotion and (in the case of humans) cognition. We may think of the form of an organism as a set of organising principles, or a set of goal-directed dispositions, to organise its matter in such a way that the organism is capable of performing particular soul functions (in the particular way) distinctive of its kind.”

8 Walsh, “Evolutionary Essentialism” p. 427

9 See David Balme, "Aristotle's Biology Was Not Essentialist"

10 Aristotle, On the Parts of Animals 1.1.640a25
Members of each of the great genera (birds, fish, cetaceans, insects, hard-shelled animals, soft-shelled animals and cephalopods), for example, share very general ways of fulfilling the most basic vital functions. Because of this, members of a great genus resemble each other in very general but fundamental ways. The various more specific ‘forms of a kind’ within the great genera are demarcated by more specific ways of realis

Even though Aristotle’s natural kinds may overlap with taxonomical considerations in terms of structural similarities, the two are not equivalent. The ultimate goal of Aristotle’s essentialism is teleological explanation. It does not make structural comparisons among species so as to justify their classification into species via form, but instead examines how the nature of each organism facilitates its teleological end and compares the magnitude of the similarities and differences between these natures.

This distinction is significant because if form (eidos) does not divide species into separate and discontinuous categories, then it is possible for Aristotle’s essentialism to accommodate evolutionary theory. We can rightfully recognize Aristotle’s essentialism as non-typological and therefore absolve him of the supposed commitment to a fixed and transcendent idea of species. Though, as I have mentioned, Aristotle’s essentialism classifies organisms by their natures; it does not imply that their natures cannot change. An apt example of this point refers to Aristotle’s own building metaphor in Parts of Animals 1.1.640a15: “To borrow an Aristotelian analogy, just as the nature of a particular house explains its salient features, there is no reason to believe in general that natures
of houses cannot change over time.”¹¹ If there is nothing to prevent change to an organism’s essential nature, which is Aristotle’s metaphysical apparatus for determining the traits of an organism, then there is nothing in Aristotle’s scheme to prevent the change or evolution of that organism. In fact, if a change increases an organism’s ability to produce and maintain living things characteristic of its kind, then it will not only be permissible under Aristotle’s scheme: it will be desired and beneficial. Rightly, David Balme comes to the same conclusion: “Reproduction is part of self-preservation, and its continuance is part of the continuance of the universe. The fixity of species is a different matter, not entailed by the continuance of species. . . . There is nothing in Aristotle’s theory to prevent an ‘evolution of species’, i.e. a continuous modification of the kinds being transmitted.”¹² If Aristotle’s natural kinds can change over time, then there is no reason to consider his essentialism incompatible with evolution.

Teleology and Natural Selection:

The metaphysics of Aristotle’s essentialism has been vindicated from the misconception of fixed and eternal species and thus rendered compatible with evolution. However, the second problem of compatibility between Aristotle’s teleology and the stochastic mechanism of natural selection must be addressed. Michael Pakaluk elucidates this point:

Even if this suggestion [sc., denial of the fixity of species claim] were sound, it would render Aristotelian metaphysics compatible only with the fact of evolution, not the

¹¹ Walsh, “Evolutionary Essentialism” p. 431
¹² David Balme, Aristotle’s "De Partibus Animalium I"; and "De Generatione Animalium I" p. 97
mechanism of natural selection. Natural selection is the more difficult case, because it is non-teleological.\textsuperscript{13}

To demonstrate that Aristotelian metaphysics can in fact support evolution, it is necessary not only to disprove the claim about fixed and transcendent species, but also to reconcile Aristotle's teleology with natural selection – the mechanism that drives the theory of evolution. This challenge to teleology is clearly presented by Ernst Mayr:

If teleological means anything, it means goal-directed. Yet, natural selection is strictly an a posteriori process which rewards current success but never sets up future goals. Natural selection rewards past events, that is the selection of successful recombinations of genes, but it does not plan for the future.\textsuperscript{14}

The primary objection to relying on a concept of telos in biology comes down to its incompatibility with a system governed by chance. In his Physics, Aristotle differentiates between two types of chance events, those that occur spontaneously ("of itself") and those that occur due to "fortune" or "luck".\textsuperscript{15} He classifies the first as an instance of an agent acting without deliberation and producing an unintended effect, and the second of an agent producing an unforeseen effect from a deliberate action. In this classification, Aristotle accounts for effects that are unintended and unforeseen, but are still caused by an agent, and thus are coincidental. According to Aristotle, "since

\textsuperscript{13} Michael Pakaluk, Dissoi Blogoi April 6, 2005
\textsuperscript{14} Ernst Mayr, Toward a New Philosophy of Biology p. 43
\textsuperscript{15} Aristotle, Physics 2.6.197b18-20
there is nothing incidental unless there is something primary for it to be incidental to, it follows that there can be no incidental causation except as incident to direct causation.”\textsuperscript{16} This reveals that Aristotle recognizes that all events have a cause and that when cause is inscrutable, the outcome is then relegated to chance. Fran O’Rourke uses Aristotle’s argument in this passage to assert a natural teleology that is prior to coincidence, making chance posterior to this overarching teleology and thus already incorporated into it.\textsuperscript{17} O’Rourke claims that evolution possesses an inner teleology because chance is subsequent to and subsumed by this overarching teleology. But I believe this argument fails and cannot be substantiated on any level other than begging the question by assuming nature is teleological from the outset. I think there is a different insight to be gleaned from this passage. In his theory of chance Aristotle affirms not only that there are coincidences but that, since nothing is caused incidentally, these coincidences have causes. Thus Aristotle affirms accidental causes, which may prove important considering that under an Aristotelian causal scheme, the causes of those traits that have been selected for would be almost exclusively classified as accidental. This at least opens the door for Aristotle to recognize evolutionary processes, but in order to determine whether they are in fact compatible with his teleological scheme, a further analysis of \textit{telos}, Aristotle’s final cause, is necessary.

In \textit{Physics II} and \textit{Metaphysics V} Aristotle defines his fourth and final cause (\textit{telos}) as “the end” or “that for the sake of which a thing is done”, e.g. health is the end of jogging, dieting, visiting the doctor, and prescription drugs. Aristotle adds the qualification that not all things have a final cause. If something is a coincidence then it has no

\textsuperscript{16} Aristotle, \textit{Physics} 2.9.198a7-10

\textsuperscript{17} See Fran O’Rourke’s “The Metaphysics of Evolution”
teleological cause because it does not occur for the sake of anything (i.e. accidental cause). Aristotle also notes that “not everything that is last claims to be an end (telos), but only that which is best.”^18 Telos is not defined by whichever end-state happens to come about, but is goal-directed in that it is a beneficial or objectively good outcome. Yet in Aristotle’s natural teleology there is no end or aim that is intentionally pursued by any personification of nature or divine creator, and intentions of individual agents participating in nature can be ignored as trivial to the determination of telos. Thus, telos in Aristotle’s biology is not planned or purposive and does not entail any sort of preordination, just as in evolutionary theory. Natural processes are not the result of purposive action, since Aristotle denies a cosmic designer, but instead the ends of nature are contained in and necessitated by immanent natural form. Aristotle identifies an important unity between formal and final cause that drives his explanatory teleology.

To fully understand the role form plays in this teleology the concepts of actuality and potentiality must be examined. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle expands his discussion of matter and form to apply diachronically^19, instead of holding either as constant at a single point in time. This introduces another important metaphysical relationship which Aristotle refers to as actuality and potentiality. Aristotle is somewhat cryptic in his description of these principles, but explains that actuality is to potentiality as “someone waking is to someone sleeping, as someone seeing is to a sighted person with his eyes closed, as that which has been shaped out of some matter is to the matter from which it has been shaped.”^20 Potentiality is

^18 Aristotle, *Physics* 194a 32–33
^19 Occurring over time
^20 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1048b1-3
represented in matter without form imposed upon it, while actuality is the realization and completion of form in conjunction with that matter. Someone who is sleeping has the potential to awaken – consider this the matter without form – and when the form (awake) is fully applied to the original matter (the sleeper), the potential is actualized and the sleeper is awakened. For Aristotle potentiality and actuality are inseparable corollaries of formal and final cause. Form anticipates actuality and potentiality anticipates finality. The potentiality of matter is what allows for actualization of form and thus the realization of telos or final cause. In this way, formal and final causes are unified in the same way that potentiality and actuality are linked together. This point is crucial to understanding that final causes do not in fact cause the states of affairs that they they actualize. O’Rourke summarizes the evidence for this point nicely: “To suggest that ‘end-states’ of themselves initiate the action whereby they are brought to completion involves the contradiction that something preexists itself and causes its own existence.” For Aristotle, final causality (telos) does not exert causal efficacy from a predetermined goal or preexisting end-state, but is instead already loaded into the potentiality of an object or being. Form is latent within the potentiality of an organism and is not reliant upon a logically prior final cause to achieve actuality.

Latent potential form transmitted between species and their offspring may sound familiar; this is because it was discovered by Watson and Crick in 1952. In fact, some biologists consider the discovery of DNA as a more accurate elaboration of Aristotelian form. Genetic code has striking similarities to the facets of Aristotelian metaphysical form discussed earlier in this paper, such as

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21 O’Rourke, “The Metaphysics of Evolution” p. 35
transmission of traits to offspring, latent potential for future actualization, and the ability to supervene on matter. Even if Aristotle had no evidence to suggest the existence or biological significance of genetic material, DNA fulfills many of the same explanatory roles as Aristotle’s metaphysical apparatus of form. The discovery of DNA, viewed as the greatest vindication of evolutionary theory, provides strong biological corollaries to Aristotle’s metaphysics even though the two are sometimes viewed as conflicting with each other.

The significance of potentiality bestowed by form is crucial when pitting Aristotle’s metaphysics against the conventional view of teleology in modern biology. The conventional view is best summarized in the remarks by Mayr quoted above. Recall that Mayr rejects teleological accounts because evolution is a strictly a posteriori process that “never sets up future goals” and “does not plan for the future.”22 Contrary to what Mayr suggests, Aristotle’s teleology is not a priori and does not make specific plans for the future. Final cause, or telos, does not necessitate a predetermined or planned outcome, as we have established that this would lead to a contradiction, but there is an important metaphysical role for final causes to play. I propose that telos is salient in the actualized outcome, but only insofar as it is pre-loaded into the potentiality of form.23 Formal cause bestows potentiality upon matter, and final cause (telos) is the realization of that formal potential, but does not necessitate the actualization of that specified end-state. Instead, this telos provides a goal or general aim towards that potential end-state with the understanding that

22 Mayr, Toward a New Philosophy of Biology p. 43
23 O’Rourke comes to the conclusion that evolution could be understood in terms of “development of latent virtualities in specific form,” referring cryptically to “the deep potency of the genotype” (45). He is on to something important but does not take the idea quite far enough.
if things play out accordingly, then the organism will reach the specified end-state, thereby fulfilling its *telos*. But there is no necessity claim for that potential end-state to be actualized, and the end-state that *is* actualized will depend on the interactions of the organism with external factors in the physical world, which may promote or hinder the actualization of its potential *telos*. The fact that Aristotle accepts accidental causes puts him in a position to teleologically accept the mechanism of natural selection. Within Aristotle’s four cause scheme, accidental causes can explain the seemingly random or chance factors that prevent an organism from reaching its potential end-state, analogous in evolutionary terms to environmental factors that affect survival capability.\(^{24}\) Since the teleological end-state of actualization is not a necessity, different potentialities could be actualized (i.e. varying degrees of reproductive success) depending on their interaction with accidental causal factors (i.e. adaptive advantages relative to environmental factors). The metaphysical apparatus of form bestows these teleological potentialities, transmitted from parent to offspring, and then natural selection selects for the most adaptively advantageous of the actualized results.

A plausible explanation of the role of final cause in natural selection could be that the traits being selected for are already naturally incorporated into an organism’s *telos*, namely those adaptively advantageous for survival. Mayr was wrong about final causes “planning for the future” but he was correct about final causes necessitating a goal. Recall that for Aristotle the nature of an organism is manifested biologically as a goal-directed disposition to

\(^{24}\) Remember that accidental causes are the result of luck or fortune, and thus account for things that lack a *telos*, or final cause. Many of the external factors that affect an organism’s evolutionary success (e.g. environmental factors) would fall into this category.
produce and maintain a living thing capable of fulfilling its vital functions in ways characteristic of its kind. An organism’s *telos* stems directly from its nature: it is the goal-directed manifestation of this nature. Understood in this way, the organism’s goals and purposes must already be in accordance with its survival, or its ability to fulfill vital functions. In other words, the *telos* of an organism naturally aligns with successful behavior in terms of natural selection because survival is a necessary precondition for an organism to achieve its *telos*. For example, we might say that the *telos* of a lion (what makes a good lion) is to become a regal hunter, the king of the jungle. But it is clear that the lion cannot achieve this *telos* if it does not survive to reach maturity: a dead lion is not a good lion. Again, this *telos* is not a necessitated end-state, as some organisms do not survive and some species ultimately become extinct; but the goal of survival seems to be necessarily incorporated into the *teloi* of all organisms. Successful behavior as determined by natural selection is already built into the biological concept of *telos*. The above discussion of the fixity of species allows for change in form, including the emergence of new form, and thus new potentiality. Natural selection can be understood as teleological in that it selects towards adaptively advantageous and therefore beneficial actualities, thereby also trending toward objectively beneficial forms of organism. While I am not asserting that Aristotle embraced any sort of theory of evolution or natural selection, I believe that if he were confronted with the biological facts we have access to today, Aristotle would find his scheme of metaphysics capable of accommodating contemporary evolutionary theory.

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25 Walsh, “Evolutionary Essentialism” p. 429
Subjective Truth: Russian Roulette with Kierkegaard

Reid Sharpless

When Søren Kierkegaard, in his Concluding Unscientific Postscript, says “subjectivity is truth,”¹ we might immediately disregard any serious metaphysical claim he proceeds to make and label him a solipsist. At first glance, Kierkegaard’s statement may very well seem to function as a license for epistemological and ethical relativity, an ill-made attempt to justify his own beliefs. However, the project of this essay is to show why this label of solipsism is unwarranted by clarifying the meaning of Kierkegaard’s claim and by showing what insight it can give his reader in ethical and metaphysical pursuits. Kierkegaard says that subjectivity is truth with the intent of placing his reader “in a vacuum” as an autonomous, ethically existing individual.² In other words, his claim is


² Let it be noted by the reader that Kierkegaard’s position in Concluding Unscientific Postscript, as in the majority of his work, is presented from a pseudonymous standpoint. Kierkegaard hoped that this method of “indirect communication” would better function to bring his readers into a “vacuum,” where only the subject and the Absolute are concrete things. That said, Kierkegaard must be read with a grain of salt. Some of his pseudonyms contradict one another, a strategy of “indirect communication” in which the
not concerned with the state of objective reality, but with that of the subject. Kierkegaard sees truth claims as commitments rather than descriptions, as “faith” in something, whether it be God, science, rationality, etc. We know that skepticism has plagued the possibility of knowledge of the objective world, and that even with a decent epistemological framework, it is notoriously difficult to translate the existence of something into a system of ethics. Kierkegaard recognizes this difficulty and presents a framework that seeks to move beyond it. The aim of this essay is to clarify Kierkegaard’s metaphysical and ethical positions, and in turn, to reveal how a clarified understanding of his claims can inform the way we go about philosophy. I will claim that accusations of solipsism against Kierkegaard are merely misunderstandings of the weight he assigns to subjectivity and inwardness, and that ultimately, Kierkegaard justifies his argument for the unjustifiable nature of objective belief. The function of Kierkegaard’s statement that “subjectivity is truth,” then, is to provide his reader the occasion to step into her own subjectivity in a non-rational, faith-filled movement of will, and to take responsibility for her commitments.

The accusation of solipsism leveled against Kierkegaard is a weighty one since solipsism as an ethical or metaphysical position is very costly. Solipsism can be defined as the belief that “only a single conscious subject and its mental parts and properties” exists. Nothing outside of this lonely subject carries any metaphysical weight.

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reader must form her own position. (See Kierkegaard’s The Point of View for My Work as an Author.)

Also, by “ethically existing individual” Kierkegaard speaks of the individual concerned with what she is to do with her life and how she relates to what she believes. “Inwardness” is used as a technical noun to denote the act of “ethically existing.”

Other minds, nature, the earth, and the cosmos in general are mere projections of this singular being. Metaphysically, solipsism finds its roots in the Veil of Perception, a thesis that argues that “mental things are the only possible objects of sense perception.”\(^4\) George Santayana proposes an extreme version of solipsism that follows Ockham’s Razor\(^5\) to its logical conclusion: only the present moment exists, and all memory and consciousness is an illusion.\(^6\) The subject is left with a singular axiom: thought occurs. The solipsist is her own arbiter of morality and objective truth, since she is the only metaphysically fundamental being. It is not a large leap to assume that Kierkegaard’s “subjective truth” would establish grounds for such a being, one whose state determines the “truth” of objective reality. Kierkegaard seems to give the subject the ultimate justification for any claim or action, regardless of how absurd or unethical it is. The subject is given the power to treat her opinion as objective truth.

One might reasonably conclude that there exists some barrier or lens between reality and our perceptions—some mediating or interpretive process governed by our minds. Indeed, to claim that reality \(iS\) exactly as we perceive it to be would be overly reductive. But to take this to its extreme and accept metaphysical solipsism seems to be a costly leap, in which the pursuit of accuracy in

\(^4\) Ibid, 141.
\(^5\) As the methodological crux of solipsism, Ockham’s Razor is the belief that holds that when one is presented with two metaphysical positions, one should always choose the simplest. This is often in tension with accuracy. The world is a complex place, so oftentimes the “best” metaphysical theory is one that blends accuracy with simplistic eloquence. Solipsism lies at the end of a logical progression facilitated by Ockham’s Razor. In contrast, one who disagrees with the principle of Ockham’s Razor will pursue accuracy above all else, resulting in incredibly complex metaphysical theories.
metaphysics has been abandoned for that of simplicity. When we hear Kierkegaard proclaiming that subjectivity is truth, we are right to wonder whether or not this claim supports solipsism, for it seems to demolish all metaphysical and ethical weight outside of the individual.

However, once the reader considers the context, as well as Kierkegaard’s rhetorical mission, we may be confident that he is simply expressing the primacy of the ethically existing individual. Let us begin with evidence outside of Kierkegaard’s own explanation of his philosophical position. Firstly, Kierkegaard writes in pseudonyms as a strategy to bring his reader into decision, allow her the occasion to step into her own subjectivity, and push her to take ownership of her choices and beliefs. Some of his pseudonyms present incomplete or conflicting ideas, and the reader must weigh and evaluate their arguments herself. Such strategy and purpose seems to reveal a genuine passion and care for his reader that point toward a fundamental belief in the reality of relationships and other minds. Kierkegaard’s later “Edifying Discourses” are much more religious texts in nature, written with the purpose of bringing his readers, in their subjectivity, into relation with God. Thus, even outside of his more theoretical writings, Kierkegaard seems to believe that, at the least, people and God exist as metaphysically robust and complex beings. As Kierkegaard scholar Louis Mackey notes, Kierkegaard tends to make the larger

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8 In this way, Kierkegaard seeks to replicate the educational benefits of the Socratic method.
9 That is to say, Kierkegaard, by putting his reader in a situation of indirect communication and expecting her to decide where she stands on the matter, assumes that his reader has inner intelligence and complexity.
assumptions of Classical Realism\textsuperscript{10} in his works, yet he never attempts to justify these beliefs.\textsuperscript{11} Further, Kierkegaard had a disinterested respect for the sciences.\textsuperscript{12} However, the staunch critic may object that it is not uncommon for people to live in a way that contradicts the theory they profess, or even that which they know to be true. For example, it is possible for some people to act and think as if they are the only metaphysically fundamental entity, though they themselves deny solipsism. Though it seems that Kierkegaard’s metaphysical system was written for the benefit of his readers, let us answer the critic with evidence from within his own work and the intellectual context in which it was written.

The intellectual climate of Kierkegaard’s time was saturated with skepticism and idealism. Kierkegaard himself, as aforementioned, makes many of the assumptions of Classical Realism, yet the philosophy of his time affects the manner in which he treats these assumptions. In his studies, he was largely influenced by Kant’s theory of Transcendental Idealism and Hegel’s \textit{Geist}. He holds that Kant’s theory attacks “the validity of thought”—that it brings metaphysics to, if not past, its limit.\textsuperscript{13} Consequently Kierkegaard makes a “break” with the skepticism of objective thought, and instead directs his

\textsuperscript{10} Classical Realism is, at its core, the belief that reality exists independently of those who observe it. A contrasting position would be Idealism, which upholds that reality is fundamentally mental and otherwise immaterial.\textsuperscript{a}


\textsuperscript{12} Great Courses on Tape, \textit{No Excuses: Existentialism and the Meaning of Life}, Lecture 8 “Kierkegaard on Subjectivity” Presented by Robert C. Solomon.

\textsuperscript{13} Mackey, 606.
work toward an exploration of subjectivity. According to his interpretation of Kant, the problem of skepticism for metaphysics has not been silenced. Hegel’s attempt to solve the problems of metaphysics using a rather esoteric method of “pure thought” is a prime target of Kierkegaard’s satire. Kierkegaard sees Hegel’s attempt to grasp objective truth as not only a quixotic pursuit, but also as a danger to subjectivity and faith. Metaphysics, as a pursuit of objective certainty, meets its inevitable end in skepticism, and passes the torch to the subjectively existing individual. Thus, it is reasonable for us to conclude that Kierkegaard believes that an objective world exists; yet, he is skeptical about how well we can know things about it. In saying that “subjectivity is truth,” it is plausible that Kierkegaard means only to emphasize the importance of the ethically existing individual when the knowledge of objective truth exceeds our grasp.

Despite his skepticism about the possibility and usefulness of metaphysics, Kierkegaard still poses a metaphysical position, albeit unsupported by tedious argumentation. Through his pseudonym Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard not only holds to an underlying set of metaphysical assumptions, but also gives us some guidance on how we are to treat metaphysics and ethics. Needless to say, Kierkegaard was a theist. He never issues any apologetics for the existence of God in his work, partly because he thinks that proving the existence of God, like gaining absolute certainty of objective reality, is impossible, but also he holds that to have knowledge of God’s existence is to destroy the nature of faith, and faith

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15 Mackey, 607.
for him is the greatest passion of the individual.\textsuperscript{16} “Without risk, there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual’s inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe.”\textsuperscript{17} Kierkegaard’s remarks about belief in God can be applied to any belief in metathetical frameworks or truth claims,\textsuperscript{18} but most of Kierkegaard’s skepticism (at least when it comes to the importance of metaphysics) is centered on \textit{proofs} of factual existence, not factual existence itself.

Kierkegaard presents a new metaphysical position in \textit{Concluding Unscientific Postscript} and \textit{Philosophical Fragments}. As Louis Mackey remarks, the fundamental propositions of \textit{Concluding Unscientific Postscript} are twofold: “the ethical reality of the subject is the only reality,”\textsuperscript{19} and “all realities other than his own the subject encounters only in the mode of possibility, by thinking them.”\textsuperscript{20} Kierkegaard defines ethical reality as a relationship “between the moments of that hypothetical unity of thought and being which abstract thought presupposes,” and it is this kind of existence that should “constitute the highest interest of the existing individual.”\textsuperscript{21}

The individual has no access to reality outside its own

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{CUP}, 182.
\textsuperscript{18} Kierkegaard primarily focuses on religious claims in his critique of objective certainty because he saw them as the most pressing issues of his time.
\textsuperscript{19} For the sake of clarity, a better way to understand this first proposition would be to say: the ethical reality of the subject is the only reality \textit{that the subject can know with all certainty}. (I believe this distinction was already present in the “reality of the subject” in Mackey’s words, but it is important to be exact on this point).
\textsuperscript{20} Mackey, p. 603.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{CUP}, 279.
subjectivity, and therefore, thinks of other realities merely as possibilities.¹² Insofar as this goes, it seems plausible that Kierkegaard agrees with the Veil of Perception Thesis. The distinction between knowledge and belief is paramount here. The pursuit of objective certainty (knowledge in its most robust sense) makes belief impossible, for belief entails presupposition. The individual in pursuit of objective knowledge can approximate it as “the almost probable, the very probable, the extremely and exceedingly probable: that he can almost know, or as good as know, to a greater degree and exceedingly almost know, but believe it, that is impossible.”¹²³ The two fundamental propositions of the Postscript may seem to gesture towards solipsism when read alone, but Kierkegaard distances himself from such a position:

To assert the supremacy of thought is Gnosticism; to make the ethical reality of the subject the only reality might seem to be acosmism. The circumstance that it will seem so to a busy thinker who explains everything, a nimble mind that quickly surveys the entire universe, merely proves that such a thinker has a very humble notion of what the ethical means to the subject. If Ethics were to take away the entire world from such a thinker, letting him keep his

¹² Not to say that the reality of all that is external to the individual is merely possible and not actual. By “possible” Kierkegaard means insofar as the individual knows something about the external world. The only thing “actual” in this particular sense is the individual’s experience of selfhood and subjectivity, while “possibilities” exceed the grasp of the individual’s experience, though he or she can make conjectures and approximations of them.

own self, he would probably regard such a trifling as not worth keeping, and would let it go with the rest— and so it becomes acosmism… but his own ethical reality, on the other hand, ought to mean more to him than ‘heaven and earth and all that therein is.’

Thus, Kierkegaard compares the value of objective knowledge of the external world and the inwardness of the individual. In his estimation, “the question of the reality of the world, whatever interest it might have for the disinterested science of metaphysics, is irrelevant to the ethical concern of the individual.” For Kierkegaard, metaphysical speculation has the potential to become a dangerous distraction for the individual. Consequently, he feels no need to establish justification for “beliefs-which-it-is-not-necessary-to-call-into-question.” Kierkegaard uses the epistemological problem of existence to illuminate the presuppositions common in everyday life, for existence is presupposed in the concept of what we try to prove: “Thus I continually deduce not toward existence, but I deduce from existence… So I do not prove that a stone exists, but that something which exists is a stone; a court of justice does not prove that a criminal exists, but that the accused, who certainly exists, is a criminal.”

As Kierkegaard writes in *Philosophical Fragments*: “Whether we call existence an accessorium (external addition) or the eternal prius (presupposition), it is never

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24 *CUP*, 305.
25 Mackey, 605.
26 Ibid. 605.
subject to demonstration.” Insofar as objective certainty of existence goes, Kierkegaard holds knowledge to an unattainably high standard. Furthermore, Kierkegaard regards the human condition of coming-into-being as a limiting factor in the pursuit of knowledge. Any effort at obtaining objective truth “is an approximating whose beginning cannot be established absolutely, because there is no conclusion that has retroactive power.” In other words, there is no system that can prove, with objective certainty, the validity of its presuppositions by appealing to its conclusions. Kierkegaard rejects any metaphysical theory that does not, from its foundations, renounce a priori certainty. To claim a priori certainty would be to ignore the presence of presuppositions. He believes that speculative philosophy has overly conflated the terms “thinking,” and “being,” and thus it had ignored the dialectical middle terms, or presuppositions and assumptions, in the structuring of knowledge. Furthermore, he holds that every attempt at understanding, “when it is made (if it is not arbitrariness by not being conscious of this), does not occur by virtue of immanental thinking but is made by virtue of a resolution, essentially by virtue of faith.” Kierkegaard goes on to present a “system” that takes the concept of faith as its starting point:

The system presupposes faith as given (a system that has no presuppositions!). Next, it presupposes

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29 In that he does not equate our approximations of reality with knowledge. “Knowledge” implies objective certainty, and in this sense, we are all ignorant of objective reality, yet we must make assumptions in order to function in it.
30 CUP, 189.
32 CUP. 189.
that faith should be interested in understanding itself in a way different from remaining in the passion of faith, which is a presupposition (a presupposition for a system that has no presupposition!) and a presupposition insulting to faith, a presupposition that shows precisely that faith has never been the given.... In order, however, to avoid confusion, it should immediately be borne in mind that the issue is not about the truth of Christianity but about the individual's relation to Christianity, consequently not about the indifferent individual's systematic eagerness to arrange the truths of Christianity in paragraphs but rather about the concern of the infinitely interested individual with regard to his own relation to such a doctrine.... The objective issue, then, would be about the truth of Christianity. The subjective issue is about the individual's relation to Christianity.  

Thus, for Kierkegaard, every belief, even if it is supplemented by knowledge, is fundamentally based on faith; decisions are founded on the “nothingness” of freedom, and the value of commitments is not found in “objective truth,” but in the individual’s relation to “subjective truth.”

Now that we recognize the metaphysical system that Kierkegaard proposes, let us address the work that draws the most overt criticism from scholars opposed to Kierkegaard’s concept of subjective truth: Fear and Trembling.  

As aforementioned, Kierkegaard’s claim is contentious, partly because it appears to provide

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34 Kierkegaard, Søren Fear and Trembling, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton, 1983).
justification for unethical acts, or at least actions that the rest of society condemns. To the critic’s chagrin, he uses the Biblical story of Abraham’s attempt to sacrifice Isaac to illuminate his conception of faith as a passionate commitment. In the story, God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (an action that clearly violates ethical norms, as well as one that seems to nullify the covenant previously made between God and Abraham). Abraham decides to obey God, but fortunately, he is stopped from murdering his son at the last second, and his covenant with God is renewed. Kierkegaard upholds the obedience of Abraham as a passionate “leap of faith” to a personal relationship with God; a leap made possible by Abraham’s position of subjective truth. To the critical thinker, Abraham’s decision is no different from those of religious or ideological militants; it cannot be justified from an ethical standpoint. From an ethical position, Abraham’s intent is murder.

But it is imperative that the reader understands that Kierkegaard does not wish to ethically justify the actions of Abraham, nor does he wish to establish his own system of ethics. Kierkegaard praises Abraham as an individual who made a choice that could not be justified. He uses Abraham as an extreme example of the passion of personal commitment, of the ethical position we all inevitably find ourselves in, to greater or lesser degrees. The weight of subjective truth, then, rests not only on *what* is believed, but *how* it is believed. In fact, Kierkegaard sees the

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35 *Fear and Trembling* constitutes an extended meditation on the story of Abraham and Isaac, and in the end Kierkegaard distills his concept of faith from Abraham’s unwavering obedience.

36 In other words, God’s command constitutes the highest truth for Abraham, yet it cannot be extrinsically justified.

“what” and “how” of belief as inseparable. Abraham does not represent a paradigm of an ethical system that forbids the justification of actions. 38 Instead, Abraham is presented as a paragon of faith, of action according to belief. In this respect, Kierkegaard is much closer to making metaethical claims 39 than he is to making ethical ones. In Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard explores the nature of religious faith from the perspective of one in relation to subjective truth. Kierkegaard believed Abraham’s action to be a “leap of faith” that cannot be justified from an ethical position, and the “Teleological Suspension of the Ethical” reflects Kierkegaard’s efforts to find a truth more compelling than both the societal conditioning and sentiment offered by empiricism, and the a priori deontology offered by rationalism. 40 Kierkegaard seeks a truth for which he can “live and die.” 41 What is directly pertinent to our inquiry into subjective truth in Fear and Trembling is not the ethical system of Christianity, but the insight it gives into the very nature of ethics; our decisions are not easily justified, but we must recognize them as commitments we must stand by.

But how does this play out in everyday life? Let’s investigate the nature of making a promise as an analogous

38 On this point, Kierkegaard would perhaps hold that there is no ethical system that can be objectively justified. Much like the method of logic, ethical systems can only justify themselves internally. There appear to be nonrational presuppositions at the foundation of every ethical system.

39 That is, claims about the nature and pursuit of ethics, how we come about ethics from metaphysical and epistemic considerations, and most importantly to Kierkegaard, what an ethical commitment means to the individual. a.

40 The “Teleological Suspension of the Ethical” is the situation Abraham finds himself in. He is called by God to violate societal ethics, and in this sense the call of God transcends the individual’s duty to an ethical framework.

example: when the individual makes a promise (more precisely, a promise that commits her to some sort of future action) she makes a commitment that cannot be grounded with objective certainty. She commits herself to a certain action in the future, with no guarantee to ground her commitment stronger than her own trustworthiness. We can approximate what will happen, we can project what she will do based upon her trustworthiness and environmental factors, but we can never know exactly what will happen with all certainty. We do not avoid rationality and empirical observation, for they are tools that help us to find a closer approximation. However, we should not expect more out of our tools than they are able to provide. There is always a leap of faith made, both by the individual making a promise, and by those who believe her, no matter how honest she is, or how predictable the environment. Although no one in this situation is completely certain of what will happen, the commitment is binding on the individual (making her responsible for what happens).

What then, according to Kierkegaard, are the attributes we should seek in the context of promises and commitments alike? They are honesty, caution and integrity in making commitments, and understanding and awareness in believing them.

Kierkegaard has been called a proponent of fideism, the principle that at the core of every belief there is something arbitrary, something nonrational, namely faith.\(^{42}\) For the most part, given Kierkegaard’s concept of subjective truth, this claim seems plausible. Australian philosopher J.L. Mackie criticizes the fideism evident in Kierkegaard’s work, calling it “a sort of intellectual Russian roulette” that diminishes the responsibility of the

individual.\textsuperscript{43} Although fideism has been disparaged and overlooked by much of Western thought, I would argue that, like Kierkegaard’s reasoning on the ungraspable nature of objective knowledge, it conveys a pertinent message to metaphysics and ethics: that at the heart of every claim, there is some faith-like assertion. Every commitment is, to varying degrees, a kind of “Russian roulette” in the sense that we don’t know its presuppositions (or its outcome) with objective certainty. But instead of trivializing the commitment, instead of stripping the individual of her responsibility, this “leap of faith” makes the commitment infinitely more important. The weight of commitment is not trivialized; it is magnified.

What does Kierkegaard leave us with? The intellectual honesty and awareness to see claims as passionate commitment, the dearest possession of the ethically existing individual, which would be annihilated by the pretension of objective certainty. Metaphysics is certainly possible, but only if we recognize it as an enterprise that does not seek to ground itself in anything other than commitments. Thus, for many it may lose its “gravity.” For Kierkegaard, when we make a metaphysical assertion, it is not so much an assertion of fact or knowledge as it is a personal commitment that one is willing to stand by, and for which one is responsible. This has a cautionary message for metaphysics: one should not value a metaphysical position because it promises to make knowable the unknowable. This “gravity” is both misleading and dangerous. However, one should hold on to one’s assertions as unverifiable commitments—manifestations of one’s own freedom and value. With this standard, reason can be used to further refine these

commitments by better approximating reality. Paradoxically, metaphysics becomes in one sense meaningless (in the sense of trying to establish objective knowledge of reality) and in another sense, valuable (in the personal commitment of the individual to metaphysical claims). Perhaps the hyperbole of late author David Foster Wallace has some truth to it: “the only thing that’s capital-T True is that you get to decide how you’re going to see [the world]. You get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn’t. You get to decide what to worship.”

Truth is something lived and related to, not merely known. For Wallace, as for Kierkegaard, the beauty of truth claims rests in the commitment to the truth they uphold, rather than in the groping for objective certainty. As Louis Mackey speaks for Kierkegaard:

“You reader! Whatever you believe, whatever you claim to know, remember in fear and trembling that you hold this faith and stake this claim solely on the strength of your freedom to do so, with no guarantee more ultimate than your own decision, at your own risk, and on your own responsibility!”

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44 David Foster Wallace, “This is Water”
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/sep/20/fiction>
45 Mackey, 602.
Marx’s Interests and the Authority of the Material

Jeremy Springman

Introduction

Marx begins the Communist Manifesto with the declaration that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”\(^1\) This statement declares the subject of his studies – human history – and depicts the dialectic method as a highly deterministic and downwardly reductive process. This methodological judgment is motivated by a carefully crafted understanding of human beings which looks to material needs (interests) in order to understand and explain behavior. By understanding Marx’s unique philosophical contributions – and how these motivated his economic analysis of interests and behavior – we can begin to uncover what Marx truly meant when he staked his theory of history on this notoriously bold claim. In turn, I will show that while his writings about a community free of coercion and unified by the community interest seem to contradict accusations of authoritarian sympathies, the exclusion of non-material factors from the ontological and methodological foundations of his approach leaves little room for agency or creativity, and

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prevents the role of human ideas and ingenuity in solving social problems. This strict materialist approach allows Marx’s theory to be used for the justification of unbridled force in pursuit of an ideal communist society, while neglecting mechanisms by which to confer legitimate authority.

The claim that ideas lack causal efficacy restricts the scope of social reform to the realm of the economic-material and bars the incorporation of less strictly materialist value-systems capable of accommodating individual human rights. Because Marx’s community interest (characterized by a set of material conditions) is formulated as a powerful moral imperative inapplicable to the individual, when humans fail to respond in the way Marx’s dialectic analysis predicted, his theory becomes particularly vulnerable to justificatory claims about the acquisition and exercise of authority. The threat global climate change currently poses to the pursuit of the interest of the community is an example of this breakdown in Marx’s moral theory. By bifurcating human interest into community and individual interests, and positing the material conditions necessary for the communal good as humankind’s real interest set, Marx subordinates his theory to a radically materialist and consequentialist morality incapable of adapting to a changing world.

Marx’s Ontology of Interests

2 Marx refers to “needs” at some points and “interests” at others; I think it correct to treat both as part of interests, as both refer to something which gives agents reason to act.
In order to understand Marx’s ideas about interests, we must first understand the unique ontology and methodology developed from his “transcendence” of philosophy and incorporated into the historical materialist method. This requires a brief exposition of *The German Ideology*, written in 1846 but unpublished until 1932. According to Marx and Engles, the essay was an attempt at “self-clarification” through a reconciliation of their methodological approach with their “philosophical conscience.” This essay (and some of his later writings) has caused many to reject the ‘young philosophical/mature economist’ dichotomy and interpret this early text as a conceptual bridge between the two. It has also encouraged views, such as Joseph Fracchia’s, that object to an interpretation of Marx as promoting an “essentialist” and determinist historical philosophy. Instead, Fracchia sees Marx’s method as a conscious attempt to produce a heuristic study guide to history which “demands its own revision” as a “purely conceptual [historical-economic]

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5 This resembles a similar distinction which many have seen in Adam Smith (known as ‘the Adam Smith problem’). Some of both Marx and Smith’s readers have seen their move from moral theory to economic theory as a distinct break in their intellectual focus. Many recent readings of both have seen continuity between their moral and economic theories.

analysis.” Fracchia also disagrees that Marx intended his dialectic to be understood as dictating an ultimate teleology of history; rather, he contests that it was intended to demonstrate the consequences of the capitalist structure and the potential for the natural order to accommodate a communist society which reunites man with his alienated labor. However, even this revised and softened interpretation of Marx’s dialectic structure will do nothing to alleviate the theory’s problems with authority, which are tied exclusively to Marx’s economic-material conception of human interests.

To depict Marx’s approach to history and its foundations in philosophy, Fracchia begins with Marx’s understanding of Hegel and how it informed his philosophical concerns. One of Marx’s early “breakthroughs” was his revision of the object-subject distinction, which exposed a new dimension of reality and opened it to scientific investigation. Hegel and Marx believed that the “unity of the philosophical tradition lay in its consistent definition of the subject-object relationship.” According to Fracchia, Marx and Hegel both perceived an epistemological dualism pervasive in German philosophy that mandated a “particularistic definition of the human subject as the knowing subject” – barring any philosophical investigation of the material subject, economic realities, or “deep structures.”

The philosophical perspective “differentiated human beings from animals on the basis of the human capacity for Reason” and “in so doing... excluded the

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7 Fracchia 26-27
These epistemological assumptions guided Hegel’s thought concerning history and liberty. Hegel saw the French Revolution as the embrace of Enlightenment thought and a premonition of a new society in which the ideas of philosophy would be realized by the introduction of rationality to social and political institutions. Society was picking up the tools – the ideas – with which it would liberate itself. Through the application of rational principles to legal institutions and societal development, a truly free society would inevitably emerge. For Hegel, this inevitable historical outcome was determined by a dialectic process of gradual refinement of human ideas (humans being the rational animal) driving humanity toward a free and just society.

The Hegelian perspective on the subject-object relationship deprived philosophy of a realistic understanding of human interests and a practical understanding of freedom and justice. In the Germany Ideology, Marx builds his scientific methodology into a critique of the idealist approach of the prevailing German philosophy. For the materialist in the pursuit of an “abstract conceptual presentation,” the behavior of the “real, active” man can be traced back to the need-interests which are given by his material circumstances rather than abstract ideological commitments. This historical materialist method requires that a historical account begin with the “essential structure” and account for the circumstances that place real restrictions on behavior. According to Marx,

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9 Fracchia 155.
11 Fracchia 17. In the German Ideology, Marx sets out to discover the deepest level of society’s structure, and in Capital, he seeks to discover the specific mechanics of capitalism’s exploitative nature.
“men have history because they must produce their life, and because they must produce it moreover in a *certain* way.” This ‘certain way’ is determined by the historical moment in which agents find themselves, and their material need-interests – interests that are given by their “physical organization,” access to resources, and the productive forces available. These needs are changed and augmented by the act of production and the acquisition of “the instrument of satisfaction” necessary for production. As a material being, man has always had material needs, and the act of production to satisfy these needs constituted the “first historical act.”\(^{\text{12}}\)

Marx’s theory holds that the material context gives agents their individual interests – interests that arise out of their needs and the corresponding structure of social relations. It is important that Marx sees interests as fundamental to the structure of society. This is why Marx expects social relations to undergo a seamless and natural transition to communist society, when the material existence of private property is abolished, and with it, our individual interests. Therefore, “any political or religious nonsense” which may “hold men together” at a particular historical moment is merely an expression of the current material reality – an “ideological form” by which men “become conscious of [the] conflict” of “material life.”\(^{\text{13}}\)

This ‘deep structure’ of material-economic potentials lies below isolated events in history, and shapes the patterns of human interaction with the environment and other

\(^{\text{12}}\) Marx, “The German Ideology”. 156. As we will see, it is important to note that while man has always had material interests, and these are the only type of interest man will ever have, he has not always had *individualized* material interests.

individuals by dictating the needs that cause these associations in the first place.

Marx intends to show how the “ideological reflexes” of men are “echoes” of their “life-process,” and how history is defined by the “materialistic connection of men with one another, determined by their needs and their mode of production.”14 In order to conduct a “positive science” of history, he thinks we must analyze particular events “in relation to the history of industry and exchange” which determines the needs (constitutive of individual interests) of individuals and exercises a dominant causal role over individual behavior.15 In this way, the economic ‘deep structure’ exists and perpetuates itself by providing individuals with a specific need-interest set (necessary to survive in the given historical era) that motivates their behavior.

Marx came to understand the world – including the ideas and intellectual convictions that seem to guide our preferences and motivate our interactions – in precisely the opposite way that Hegel and the German philosophers understood it. By “casting aside its Hegelian idealistic shell,” Marx emerged with an entirely new approach to the dialectic method in which “internal contradictions are inherent in all things and phenomena of nature” and are the drivers of change in nature and society.16 According to Engels, the “evolution” of nature is “proof of dialectics”

16 Stalin, Joseph. "Dialectical and Historical Materialism." Marxists Internet Archive.
and provides evidence that “Nature works dialectically and not metaphysically.”\textsuperscript{17} By appreciating the existence of dialectic relationships inherent in nature, we can work toward an “exact representation of the universe.” Beginning with the universe and “its evolution,” we can understand the “development of mankind” and the existing social order and eventually comprehend the “reflection of this evolution in the minds of men.”\textsuperscript{18} Marx retains the teleological idea of history as the “development from the lower to the higher” that “operate[s] on the basis of… contradictions,” but he denies that the refinement of our ideas could resolve society’s contradictions.\textsuperscript{19}

The economic structure exists as the foundation of all social relations, and should therefore be the departure point for a study of the human subject.\textsuperscript{20} Engels makes clear that the “economic element” is not the sole causal generator, but that it is the “ultimately decisive” structural factor. Even the “reflection of [history] in the minds of men” can be studied because it is guided by dialectics, while the “endless host of historical accidents” can be regarded as “non-existent” because of their “remote” causal role over which “the economic movement finally asserts itself.”\textsuperscript{21} According to these thinkers, the methodological advantage of this idealization is more than a matter of convenience; it is sanctioned by the causal structure of the

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Marx, "The German Ideology", 156-159.
world we inhabit. Marx and Engels claim that the ideas of individuals are not new elements of reality generated by the minds of men, and therefore cannot be understood on their own terms and afforded their own distinct causal efficacy. Instead, we can think of ideas as symptomatic of the causes generated by the deep structure. This, in turn, entails a methodological judgment about where we ought to focus our attention. Rather than being the drivers of a top down process of historical development distinct from natural processes, Marx deprives man’s ideas of any independent impact on the course of history.

In Marx’s approach, the material structure was placed at the bottom of an unyielding upward causal chain. Not only did Marx recognize the profound significance of these insights for social analysis, but he was also aware of their consequences for ethical considerations of justice. Whereas the idealist tradition saw the realization of justice as contingent on equal consideration and treatment under the law, for Marx these intellectual gestures are impotent in a world where material inequality and exploitation leave some to starve, and others, to enjoy vast reserves of wealth that greatly exceed their material needs. This marks a more realistic approach to understanding human well-being and judgments about society’s virtue. Contrary to the consensus among German philosophers, it is material, not legal, justice that constitutes meaningful human justice. Likewise, freedom cannot be secured through revisions of the legal structure. As human survival is fundamentally material, we

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are constrained by the material conditions under which we must manufacture our lives. From this perspective, the institutionalization of legal equality does nothing to advance freedom if it is not precipitated by material equality.

There are three core reasons why meaningful human freedom cannot be furthered by thinking about the world. The first is the causal sequence claims that we just discussed – the material is ontologically prior to the ideal. Ideas are simply an attempt to characterize what we experience and the “existence of revolutionary ideas… supposes the existence of a revolutionary class.” The remaining two reasons are contingent on this first premise. Second, the “material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.” This is a result of the division of labor, which arises from gender and “natural predisposition,” but takes on its true form with the “division of material and mental labour.” The division of mental labor deprives the proletariat of the resources necessary to produce ideas. This implies a determinacy about “mental production” which concludes that the ruling ideas “in every epoch” are “nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships.” Third, ideas will never convince the ruling class to surrender its possessions to the proletariat willingly. Bourgeois private property is backed by the force of the state, and only the highest stage of capitalism will contain the right conditions for the eradication of its exploitation. Therefore, man’s liberation must be a “historical and not a mental act.” Good ideas can do nothing to establish and secure Marx’s ideal society until the historical stage is set.

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23 Marx, “The German Ideology”. 158.
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid, 169.
Marx’s individuals are as “analytically substitutable” as those in rationalist or structural/institutional theory and his methodological treatment of behavior contains elements of both.\textsuperscript{27} Individual need-interests are similar to those present in rational choice; Marx assumes that there is a “rational” way to act determined by man’s historical location and his material needs. But Marx also recognizes that people “yield to extra-rational or irrational prejudice and impulse” and that rational capacity is severely bounded.\textsuperscript{28} This contains an explicit rejection of “any fixed and \textit{a priori} essence of human beings” which could contribute to behavioral explanations.\textsuperscript{29} His rejection of any determined human nature causes him to pursue structural explanations for behavior. As Fracchia points out, Marx defends his approach to individuals, and admits that they are “dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests.”\textsuperscript{30} Fracchia calls this deference to structural idealization a “methodological signpost that \textit{Capital} is concerned only with the basic structure” and that specific historical accounts must fill in the details. This is the key to his argument about Marx’s “modest” approach to


\textsuperscript{29} Fracchia (7-8) identifies this as an intellectual development (after the writing of the manuscripts) which causes Marx to disavow his beliefs about alienation; Geuss, Raymond. "Raymond Geuss on Real Politics." \textit{Philosophy Bites} [http://philosophybites.com/2008/10/07/raymond-geuss.html] October 19, 2008.

analysis. Fracchia argues that this is proof of Marx’s profound epistemological insight: that our understanding of deep structures can tell us about the context of history. And our analysis of specific historical moments, in return, can sharpen our understanding of the deep causal mechanisms at play behind the scenes.

Marx’s materialist insight marked an important shift in thinking about the needs and interests of human beings. Rather than depending on an intellectual evolution to solve social ills created by an inequitable distribution of material resources, Marx’s approach to social science promised a more realistic strategy for the pursuit of social justice by focusing on the material needs and interests common to humans. In the social realm, the dialectic is operationalized by the interests that nature gives to men. It is man’s response to capitalism that will drive society to a final period in which the conflicting interests of men are abolished through the destruction of the exploitative system of production. It is this real equality – the community interest – that is in man’s interest to pursue.

The Community Interest

Human interests are unique because they operate on two levels. The division of labor – a natural product of the dialectic – “implies” both. First, the division of labor creates private property and places man “under the sway of egoistic need,” which in turn, creates a “contradiction

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31 Fracchia 24, 13.
between the interest of the separate individuals or the individual family” and the “communal interest.” Private property imposes need-interests on individuals and alienates individuals from the interests of the community. Under divided labor, man’s “own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him.” The second level – community interest – is constituted by the interest each individual has in promoting and sustaining a community characterized by an equitable and just system of production in which the available resources are used to satisfy the needs of all constituents. Derived from the “mutual interdependence of the individuals among whom the labour is divided,” Marx’s community interest exists “in reality” through the interdependence that characterizes the human species. This approach assumes man has a natural interest in mutual support because it promises liberation from the “exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him [by divided labor].” This community interest can only be realized in a society centered around collective action, where individuals are free from the constraints of need-interests, and are subsequently able to live their lives in the manner they see as most beneficial to themselves and the community. Although these interests are given to agents (Marx treats this as though it is obviously the case), they cannot be

33 It is interesting to note that Marx sees the division of labor originating with the reproductive act, and offers this as evidence of the natural existence of dialectics. I personally think that this is something Fracchia misses.
34 Ibid.
35 The “reality” of interests lies in the reliance of men on one another. This “interdependence” is material by nature.; Ibid, 160.
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pursued by the individuals who perceive, or rather, possess them, until the appropriate historical period. The realization of this community interest requires the “material elements of a complete revolution” and a “revolutionary mass” which consciously revolts against the “very ‘production of life’” rather than a simplistic rejection of societal “conditions.”36 This is to be accomplished using the unprecedented technology and wealth (once it exists; Ehrbar believes that it does) yielded by capitalism to “collectively shape... social relations” into a “benign and supportive backdrop for individual emancipation.”37

Community Interests and Authority

Marx wrote that “mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve” and “the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.”38 In order for his dialectic to retain its teleology, Marx requires certain assumptions about the natural world and the natural origins of human interests; however, these prove problematic. He treats human interests and the historical and moral imperative of free labor as real in a dramatic way; interests are borne from the dialectic structure of the world, which produces the division of labor, which leads to private property, giving rise to individual interests, all of which assumes that another mode of relations is possible. This is essentially an output claim – the superior output being human freedom to live as we please free from the fetters of need – couched in a claim about how the natural world is

36 Ibid, 165.
38 Marx, “Marx on the History of his Opinions”. 5.
structured and how this structure determines the course of history. Marx and Engels rely on the claim that humans are better off when their material situation is reconciled with the communal interest, and on the further claim that they have correctly identified this objective communal interest in the abolition of the capitalist division of labor.

So far, we have discussed the consequences of Marx’s structural emphasis for the concepts of justice, freedom, and equality, but his materialist approach also conditions the path society must take to realize these virtues. This methodology ignores top-down causes, preferring to “ascend from earth to heaven.” In Marx’s framing, no matter how captivating and emotionally compelling man’s ideas are in explaining his environment and in asserting rights, ideas cannot free men from the material needs which dictate their lives. While we may “make history ourselves” it is under “very definite assumptions and conditions.” By reducing all interests and questions of justice to questions of material distribution, and by discounting the role of ideas, Marx eliminates a key tool generally accepted as useful in the pursuit of societal goals. Since human liberation will not be realized by the development of legal reform or the perfection and dissemination of our ideas about the world, in the presence of highly developed productive forces and in the absence of any semblance of a ‘revolutionary mass,’ the only method available to modern Marxists to restore man’s ownership of his own labor is a forceful destruction of the material order by a conscious minority. And despite Marx’s disregard for the efficacy of such measures, this type of normative claim about real ultimate interests resting

40 Engels 1890.
on material conditions by its nature opens his theory to strong claims about the necessity of authority in pursuit of these conditions. Marxian communal interests assert the normative assumption that there is a definite and obvious (discovered through an analysis of the material structure of nature and the economic conditions of freedom, justice, and equality) way in which it is man’s destiny and right to live. But, even if Marx’s teleological assumptions are discredited by a closer analysis of his writings and beliefs (as Fracchia may argue) or by the path taken by history since his death, the force of his normative claims about human good are unaffected (as neither of these revisions render his material objective any less desirable). The fact that popular revolutions have failed to subsume the capitalist forces in the service of the community’s interests, or even the conclusion that they never will, has no bearing on the moral injustice of divided labor. This leaves Marx’s theory in a conflicted and precarious position.

By positing a universal moral imperative in the destruction of capitalism, any group pursuing these goals can see its efforts as legitimized by the pursuit of the highest social good. With unified labor as the only truly desirable consequence, there is nothing else by which we can define morality on Marx’s terms. Once the fruits of capitalism have been subjugated by the community, Marx leaves us with an approach that militates against any concrete source with which to justify the authority of communal organizations that may form in order to protect and sustain the communist arrangement.41 Because Marx

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41 By Marx’s definition, the state follows the emergence of private property to defend a false common good. When private property is liquidated, the state would become unnecessary and fall into disuse. However, it is difficult to imagine that society could function well without some collectivist institutions to organize the distribution of resources and social goods - presumably, these institutions would need some way to gain legitimacy and support.
does not allow for the immaterial to be fundamental to human welfare, the only claims these communist institutions could make regarding their authority is a correspondence with the Marxian vision of a perfect community. Therefore, even if everyone were to suddenly subscribe to Marxism, the stability of Marx’s radically idealized community apparatuses – free of specialization, coercion, and exploitation – could be afflicted by competing authority claims. There is no ability for organizations to establish legitimacy in something immediately present and objectively determined such as referendums or elections. Although Marx’s ideal community is one united by common interests and rid of the material needs that create conflict, it seems very likely that these institutions may be desirable – even if they are not necessary – in an organized and well-functioning society. Yet, even if a communist society were to incorporate such devices to provide stability and demonstrate its approval by the people, this type of justification could not gain any footing in Marx’s restrictive normative framework.

By the traditional interpretation, the dialectic structure holds that man must ultimately be reunited with his labor, and Marx believes that the current mode of production (given to agents by way of their need-interests) determines the necessary corresponding social mode. Therefore, only when the proper conditions are present and “all earlier relations of production and intercourse” have been destroyed will man have epistemic access to the mechanics of the communist order.  

42 Since the existent mode produces society’s structure, Marx’s ideas about the community interest are necessarily vague and left relatively

undefined. Ehrbar identifies this as one of Marx’s critical errors “inherited” from Hegel. He is critical of the Marxian dialectic for an “excessive emphasis on inner contradictions” which reinforces the expectation that “negation automatically gives birth to a higher stage.”

This is why Marx believed that once capitalism was properly understood and successfully abolished, the “alternative [would] be obvious.” Since Marx didn’t believe that hypothesizing about the structure of a communist society was necessary, we cannot have a precise understanding of what he intended when he discussed this as an objective. In addition to leaving his theory vulnerable to problems with means and authority, Marx consciously neglected any specific treatment of what this future community would look like and how it would function.

By rendering a blueprint for the communist society impossible and unnecessary, the theory ensures that the satisfaction of the community interest could be adapted to any historical moment, given a sufficient level of technological development. This exposes the theory to circumstances Marx could not have foreseen, and which have caused further difficulties for his theory, particularly with regard to authority. In his discussion of the Hegelian flaws in Marx’s dialectic, Ehrbar offers an example of its impact on contemporary Marxist approaches which

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43 Ehrbar, 5.
44 Ibid.
45 Some passages in the German Ideology and writings on the Paris Commune seem to contradict this; however, it has been suggested that at least some of these seemingly contradictory passages were inserted by Engels.

perfectly illustrates this problem (although he employs it for entirely different purposes):

At the rate at which human consciousness and behavior is presently transforming itself, it will take at least another 200 years (Mao’s seven generations) before mankind, spurred on by the potential which modern productive forces open up, has shaken off capitalism. However this is not soon enough. We must get rid of capitalism in the next 30-50 years if we want to prevent a worldwide ecological catastrophe. This is a more pessimistic outlook than Marx’s. It means that a problem has arisen which does not contain the means for its solution. Socialism, if it comes in time to prevent an ecological catastrophe, will be a minority affair, which has to be forced on the majority of the population before they are ready for it. Stalin has shown that it is possible to impose a not very desirable form of socialism by terrorizing a population which is not ready for it. Modern Marxists have to learn better ways how a minority can institute “emergency socialism” before the majority is ready to accept it.\textsuperscript{46}

With the aforementioned account of Marx’s community interest, it is easy to see how this pursuit and exercise of authority could be made legitimate by an acceptance of

\textsuperscript{46} Ehrbar,5.
Marx’s conclusions about humanity’s ultimate good. Without a precise definition of the necessary productive forces, there is no standard (using his theory) by which those pursuing Marxist objectives could establish whether this technology is already in existence. Ehrbar believes that recently this level of development has been accomplished, and it is easy to see why many observers could reach the same conclusion. The environmental situation which he describes is not out of line with the claims of many climatologists, and the maintenance of the environment can easily fit into the Marxian community interest framework.

Consider the consequences if we subscribe to the belief that the technology for liberation is present and that society will not develop any revolutionary consciousness in the foreseeable future. Further, if we come to think that “worldwide ecological catastrophe” will destroy the highly developed productive capacity of capitalism, then surely any attempt to prevent this would conform to the communal interest. If we were to allow global climate change to destroy the productive forces that have finally made man’s freedom a real possibility, then we appear complicit in the perpetuation of an exploitative and corrupted order (perhaps permanently, depending on our interpretation of the impending consequences of climate change). If we try to adhere to Marx’s framework, justice for all of humanity is within reach, but inexplicably the population has none of the revolutionary inclinations that Marx expected it would acquire naturally. Marx provides us with no reason why humanity’s reluctance should stand in the way of giving the people what they should be clamouring for. But he also leaves the process open to competing and contradictory authority claims. Deciding whether we want to allow some role for authoritarianism in

47 Ibid.
governance is not something we will tackle here. However, it is conceivable that we may want to permit some room for the justification of particularly onerous levels of authority. This would be particularly appealing for cases like the hypothetical climate change case mentioned above. But such claims could be based more safely on values or human rights than material conditions and corresponding interests – especially conditions that are epistemologically inaccessible.

But the problems continue. It is also difficult to advocate the pursuit of realistic reform of contemporary democracies from a Marxist perspective. This cuts off more promising routes to solving our current problems. While Marx acknowledged the possibility of nonviolent revolutions, he did not believe that our human freedom would be secured by a gradual revision of the legal code (for the three reasons mentioned earlier). His objective was the sudden and forcible rejection of the social and economic mode of divided labor, an act justified by the material interests he attributed to humans. In the contemporary environment, as Ehrbar points out, humanity has shown no signs of coalescing into a ‘revolutionary mass.’ So if we insist on Marx’s depiction of human interest, there is little incentive to work toward the gradual expansion of material equality within the institutional legal framework. Instead, what appears to be necessary is behavior intended to bring about the abolition of the framework itself – whether by undermining it through revolutionary action or by fostering the revolutionary consciousness of the global population. This is unfortunate. The materialist aversion to reform also augments the

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justificatory claims about authority available to revolutionary Marxist groups. And if the current state of affairs leads some to conclude that there will be no revolutionary class, and we know that there is a limited time in which capitalism’s highly developed productive forces can be salvaged and harnessed by a united working class, what conclusion besides the advocacy of minority revolution could a Marxist come to?

Ehrbar also brings up the question of means in his example and implicitly recognizes the difficulty in deriving any moral imperative other than the attainment of an ideal society out of the framework Marx provided. Groups pursuing a communist society are likely to see undesirable methods as sanctioned by their furtherance of the objective interests of humanity, more so if they are perceived as necessary in the face of adversity or impending doom. It is very possible that Marx would have regarded certain means of realizing the communal interest as necessarily opposed to this interest based on some more abstract moral principle, but there is nothing posited in the theory to force its defenders to a similar conclusion. By Marx’s understanding, his theory had no need for any grounds on which we could develop a moral system; he had discovered the deepest moral imperative (the community interest) and expected society to be perfected by the intellectual rejection of the fetters to humanity (introduced by private property) and the very act of society’s destruction and regeneration.

This is why the climate change example is so effective for my argument: Ehrbar recognizes how undesirable Stalin’s methods were (presumably he would admit the same of a variety of history’s communist leaders) and draws from historical experience to suggest to Marxists that they should be more considerate about how they go about imposing the will of a minority on behalf of the majority. But his example does not appeal to anything in
Marxism that could lead the Marxists he is addressing to this conclusion. Although being physically harmed or forcefully relocated may be opposed to an individual’s interests in a very objective sense, such behavior is not necessarily a violation of the community interest. If Marx’s vague pronouncements about the necessary productive forces lead his followers to conclude that socialism is within reach only until capitalism destroys the environment, the vanguard is left with a perplexing scenario. Marx leaves them a well-defined objective – the end of exploitation and the equitable distribution of resources (society should function on its own once this is accomplished) – but no prescribed rules by which this can be accomplished.

The subsumption of trivial individual interests under the greater communal interest means that, in fact, there are ultimately no individual interests according to Marx. Here it is crucial to recall that interests at the individual level are introduced with private property and with the division of labor, and are expected to dissolve – once individual material need is abolished – in order for the community to function. The disappearance of the individual need interests is also why the state – which defends a false general good – will no longer be necessary when society is the embodiment of the community interest. It would be difficult to say that killing a potential counter-revolutionary, or the extermination of an excess population, would not be in the community interest if its execution brings an end to individual interests. Because Marx’s morality is defined by a set of material conditions which he believes are necessary for society to function properly (to the exclusion of virtues or values which may also be necessary for a socialist society to function), when these conditions fail to be realized in the manner he predicted, his
followers are still charged with the moral imperative of achieving them.

By understanding the nature of Marx’s underlying beliefs about humanity’s interests, we can see why the scenario posed by Ehrbar and the solution he included would appear, to a Marxist, as a reasonable and consistent response to climate change, and probably the most responsible one (although utterly unrealistic). This is a problem. By creating a moral system that ignores anything but the material conditions of the entire community, Marx committed himself to turning a blind eye in the face of authoritarianism and brutality once we have reason to believe that the people cannot or will not achieve this highest good on their own, or once it has been provided and citizens cannot or will not sustain it.

Conclusion: How can we think about interests?

Ehrbar’s proposal is particularly troubling for two reasons: the acceptance of dictatorship and the casual suggestion that such an enterprise should avoid brutal authoritarianism for fear of alienating people, and the fact that this proposal is in reaction to a real-world problem of unprecedented severity and scope that necessarily concerns us all. Regardless of whether Ehrbar’s “example” was intended as a suggestion (he doesn’t say that it is), for our purposes it demonstrates how Marx’s human interest set – in the presence of a breakdown of Marx’s premises about transition such as we have witnessed – can be employed for unsavory justifications for the imposition of authority and dictatorship on a population. Not only this, but there is no determined way to avoid a variety of competing authority claims contradicting one another about when and how their authority is justified on behalf of communism. This is something we should not want in our theory, and because it
is a product of the communal interest we must regard these normative contributions as ones that cannot be salvaged.

Considering the dangers incurred by a Marxian conception of interests, normative political theorists and philosophers in pursuit of a just society should avoid claims about human welfare and interests that reduce to an immutable set of materially-defined conditions, especially when there is no corresponding plan for how these conditions should be identified, established, and preserved. This demands that we abandon Marx’s ideas about the primacy of community interests and the contingency of individual interests on private property. We can still give Marx the credit he deserves for his profound contributions to social analysis and scientific application. These include his realization that human beings are a part of the physical world that contains them (and the innumerable conclusions this entails), and his truly revolutionary ideas about the value of systematic structural analysis in understanding the social world. But in order to avoid a commitment to the permissibility of authoritarian methods, in normative political thought it is necessary to afford to agents some emergent distinctness from the natural order, and some immaterial rights based on this natural distinctness. Such claims would permit us to advance certain rights as characteristic of every individual alongside (and even reinforcing) the material necessities for human freedom and a just society.

We must counter Marx’s failings and honor his contributions by linking our human interests to the content of immaterial ideas about justice and morality. These allow for authority claims to be grounded somewhere other than a set of material conditions that are expected to produce the just society to which we aspire (although the material necessities for the fulfillment of such ideas cannot be
If we want to talk sensibly about interests without implicitly sanctioning authoritarianism, we must fall back on a partially immaterial understanding of the innate and individual considerations which human beings deserve. The immaterial dimensions of concepts such as social justice and the right of a population to confer authority should stand as fundamental principles that must be enshrined into our definition of human interests. In turn, these principles, anchored to immaterial values, can be used to argue for the necessity of certain material conditions required for the realization of these more abstract principles about what is right and wrong.
In his essay “Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion,”¹ Hume presents two types of sensibility that cause their possessors to experience a wider range of emotions than the average individual. Though both species of delicacy consist in an unusual degree of emotional responsiveness, they differ in object and thus in the kind of sensitivity to the circumstances of daily life, whether one is winning an award, being dumped by a significant other, or arriving at the dry cleaning place after it has already closed. The delicacy of taste, the other hand, directs itself toward “beauty and deformity of every kind”², whether it be poetry, paintings, scenes of nature, or even objects less typically associated with beauty. (Hume claims he finds beauty in a good argument). Delicacy of passion stimulates the “violent passions,” while delicacy of taste inspires far calmer ones. For this reason, and simply because we have less control over life circumstances than over “what books we shall read, what diversions we shall partake of, and what company we shall keep”³, Hume recommends cultivating one’s delicacy of taste but suppressing one’s

² Ibid, p. 4.
³ Ibid, p. 5.
delicacy of passion. He even suggests that the former pursuit will achieve the latter result. Hume explains one delicacy’s ability to “cure” us of the other by invoking the fact that taste requires good sense; cultivating taste strengthens our judgment, which results in a happy state where “many things, which please or afflict others, will appear to us too frivolous to engage our attention”\(^4\). This neat picture of immersion in art drawing us away from the vulgar concerns of practical living is, I will argue, complicated by the Humean account of morality. Hume regards virtue as a species of beauty, which is to say that it is a sentiment inevitably aroused in any human observer who perceives certain qualities in certain objects: pleasing properties of human actions, sentiments, or character, in the case of virtue. This inevitability is crucial to Hume's argument that our value judgments can be right or wrong; in “Of the Standard of Taste,”\(^5\) he argues that the variability of human preferences arises almost exclusively from some people's lack of perception of all the relevant qualities. For a quality to be identified at all is for it to be felt as a particular sentiment. In this paper, I will argue that Hume's claims about the delicacy of passion and its “cure” are difficult to reconcile with his claims about taste.

A further look at the two essays will inform the reader that there are more differences between the two types of delicacy than Hume explicitly acknowledges. Delicacy of taste consists largely in a superior perceptive ability. People with bad taste in art are in much the same position as those with deteriorated vision or hearing: “Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease; and if they fail of their effect in any particular

\(^4\)Ibid, p. 6.
instance, it is from some apparent defect or imperfection in the organ". Hume recounts a story from Don Quixote to serve as an analogue for all cases of incorrect aesthetic judgments. Sancho Panza's kinsmen pronounce an old wine of good vintage to be flawed by a slight taste of iron and leather, and those who laugh at them turn out to be wrong when an iron key with a leathern thong is discovered at the bottom of the hogshead. The anecdote reintroduces a sort of "objectivity" into judgments of taste: while Hume gets to preserve beauty as a sensation of pleasure in the subject, he links it inextricably to specific qualities in objects. If every single time S perceives quality $q$ in an object, then he experiences sensation $s$, it is as good for evaluative purposes as $s$ somehow belonging to the object. The account demonstrates true universality in human preferences while explaining the appearance of disagreement: some people have defective organs that do not enable them to perceive $q$ where it is in fact present. The dispute can be settled empirically by appealing to $q$. This solution, of course, relies on the premise that there can be no gap between the identification of a quality and the experience of its attendant sensation. To sense the leather is to entertain an unpleasant feeling, and this must be so for all who actually do sense the leather. If the quality of the wine were separable from the unpleasant feeling – if leather could be experienced differently by different percipients, perhaps felt as something pleasant by some – Hume's standard would vanish.

While the delicacy of passion is never described so thoroughly, it is safe to say that this delicacy is not a perceptive ability. Like the delicacy of taste, it allows the possessor to experience emotions that others do not. Unlike

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that desirable characteristic, this does not seem to result from the possessor's picking up on qualities in the object that escape the sensory organs of others. They simply experience an exceptionally intense emotional reaction to "every prosperous event, as well as...when they meet with misfortunes and adversity." There is no reference to fine details of these positive or negative turns of fortune that most people do not perceive and hence cannot be pleased or troubled by. Ostensibly, everyone is able to process the circumstance in the same way, perceiving all the same qualities. It is just an unexplained fact of life that people's reactions to stimuli can vary widely, particularly in their level of intensity. Hume allows the considerable differences in judgment of life events to be real; universality of "taste" in certain kinds of human experience is lacking.

Such a distinction is not immediately troubling. The fact that delicacy of taste amounts to a special ability and can give us a certain type of knowledge only helps explain why Hume holds it in higher regard than the delicacy of passion. Whatever the underlying explanation for the variance of emotional reaction is, it must somehow be accounted for by the fact that delicacy of taste and delicacy of passion have different objects. We must turn to the objects in order to make sense of the phenomenon that Hume describes.

In book two of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume offers an illuminating guide to his notion of the violent passions. We see that the difference between calm and violent passions is a matter of distance between subject and object. "For we may observe, that all depends on the situation of the object, and that a variation in this particular will be able to change the calm and violent passions into

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7 Hume, "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion," p. 3-4.
each other...the same good, when near, will cause a violent passion, which, when remote, produced only a calm one.”

Hume also notes a crucial difference between a violent and a strong passion. Though this terminology can certainly be confusing – particularly when he invokes the “force” of violent passions, which seems synonymous with strength – it is clear in this section that he intends for “violent” to denote a “sensible agitation” whereas “strong” just means the passion that wins the struggle to motivate our decisions. Though Hume acknowledges that the violent passions are often the strongest, saying that “tis certain, when we would govern a man, and push him to any action, 'twill commonly be better policy to work upon the violent than the calm passions”, calm ones are certainly capable of prevailing. This is what we mean when we talk loosely and inaccurately about reason triumphing over the passions. Hume re-categorizes the motivational force that we attribute to reason as a type of passion on the grounds of its volitional, non-representational properties. Some passions guide our actions without being warmly felt, he argues; custom is an example of an extremely compelling force that motivates but does not agitate.

These definitions are important for interpreting “Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion,” where Hume uses the term “passion” in its more conventional sense to denote what he elsewhere calls the violent passions. Since he views the proximity of an object as the decisive factor in

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9 Ibid, p 418. Hume does not mean “near” and “remote” in the sense of physical distance, of course, but is using these terms to describe our sense of how a “good” is perceived in relation to our personal interests. For example, a promotion at work is considered a “good”, but the “good” is only “near” if it happens to ourselves or a loved one. The promotion at work of a stranger would be a “remote” good.

10 Ibid, p. 419.

11 Ibid, p. 419.
the degree of sensible agitation that it produces, it makes sense that the delicacy of taste is oriented toward objects of beauty and the delicacy of passion toward the changes in our own life circumstances. Far from being the reveler in sentiment that famous phrases like “Reason is, and ought to be the slave of the passions” suggest, it seems clear that Hume was wary of emotions. Like the Stoics, he saw them as potentially dangerous and in need of regulation. A person with delicacy of passion is one whose “sorrow or resentment takes entire possession of him, and deprives him of all relish in the common occurrences of life; the right enjoyment of which forms the chief part of our happiness.”¹² In this unfortunate state the individual is “apt to be transported beyond all bounds of prudence and discretion, and to take false steps in the conduct of life, which are often irretrievable.”¹³ If we are to preserve ourselves from such a poor fate, reason must be the slave only of a certain type of passion. Hume's new place for emotions at the center of his account of human nature brings with it a concern about what the 'right' emotional states are and how they can be achieved. While Hume's decided preference for the calm passions seems a bit strange when one considers that they differ only in intensity rather than in kind, it is clear that this distinction is qualitatively very important. Melancholy is an “agreeable” state;¹⁴ depression is not. Sensation, the essence of conscious experience, is what makes life worth living, but when any one sensation becomes immoderate it deprives us of all others and wrenches us away from our normal functions. This is why, for Hume, somewhat paradoxically, to immerse oneself in poetry, plays, and paintings offers a more authentic and purposeful existence than to take much

¹³ Ibid, p. 4.
concern in one's personal affairs. Happiness requires the moderation of our emotions, which can only be achieved when there is some felt distance between the external things that occupy our attention and what we conceive as our selves. Aesthetic objects are thus the perfect mediators of experience. We can sense all the qualities that tend to please or displease humans without the disruption that occurs when they too closely affect our interests.

But if it is the distance of aesthetic objects that makes them so much more rewarding to contemplate, we are still left with the question of what enables some people to feel the violent passions more easily than others, if not the sensation of particular qualities that usually go unperceived. As previously noted, Hume explicates delicacy as a matter of perceiving objects more fully or accurately, but the people with “delicacy” of passion seem to apprehend the same qualities as everyone else and yet experience them differently. It is tempting to chalk this up to the differences in the objects and let the inquiry rest. The more distant objects of calm passions possess subtle qualities that their appreciation depends on recognizing, whereas closer objects have “obvious beauties” whose “greater or less relish...depends entirely on the greater or less sensibility of the temper.”¹⁵ Perhaps the reason this account seems unsatisfying is that the objects Hume tries to distinguish are so much the same. It can be difficult to understand the logic behind these classifications and thus to accept Hume's sweeping causal story of how particular objects in particular situations evoke particular emotions in particular people. The difficulty is not merely that there is supposed to be a degree of universality in human reactions and an observed regularity to our inner workings that

Hume's position on the delicacy of passion seems to abandon. Rather, the problem lies in the fact that the very same qualities of the very same objects sometimes behave regularly and sometimes don't. For Hume to be able to claim that all people experience the same uneasy sensation upon reading poor writing wherever they are actually capable of perceiving its poor qualities, he should be similarly committed to our feeling misfortune to the same degree (since there does not seem to be a question of perceptive ability here.)

To fully elucidate this worry it is perhaps helpful to discuss the place of morality in Hume's schema. As I have mentioned, it appears that, for Hume, virtue is a type of beauty, which itself is a type of pleasure-sensation. Both aesthetic and ethical judgments are well-established throughout his work as consisting of an internal sentiment of pleasure or uneasiness, and several passages make it clear that he does not see any great difference between feelings of what he calls “moral beauty or deformity” and other types of beauty and deformity. In book three of the *Treatise*, Hume refutes the potential objection that anything that causes pleasure should be called virtuous by arguing that we intuitively recognize a variety of different pleasures. “A good composition of music and a bottle of good wine equally produce pleasure; and what is more, their goodness is determin'd merely by the pleasure. But shall we say upon this account, that the wine is harmonious, or the music of a good flavour?”

If virtue can be characterized by analogy to the purely aesthetic, then virtue is just the word we use to denominate that unique sensation that can only be aroused by goodness in human actions, sentiments, and characters. Virtue, on this account, carries no special authority over and above the dictates of feeling. This might be seen as a deflationary view of morality, but

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since Hume thinks our feeling-based judgments can be right or wrong it is more properly considered an inflationary view of aesthetics. The fact that we cannot ground our moral judgments in reason does not, for Hume, preclude the possibility of a prescriptive standard; the emotional consensus that arises from our common human nature can give force to normative claims once we weed out the dissent from defective cases.

Due to their classification in the Humean system as forms of aesthetic response, virtue and vice are among the qualities to which the people with delicacy of taste are highly susceptible. The implication for Hume's argument is important: it is not just emotionally remote things like landscapes, music, and philosophical arguments that we ought to be developing a relish for, but also human actions, sentiments, and character. Upon this consideration, the line between life circumstances and beauty and deformity of every kind begins to look very contrived. People's actions, sentiments, and characters are presented to us every day in many different contexts, some of which affect our personal interests in the world and some of which do not. Hume argues that when presented with beauty and deformity that is closely concerned with our interests, we can let our notion of self influence our sentiment or we can consider the object in a more general and abstracted way. His example is that we can let the fact that a singer is our enemy bias us against her voice or we can distance ourselves from our individual perspective and invoke those general sentiments that we share with all humanity to judge her voice “correctly.” The same divide must hold for cases that involve morality. When considering a human action – say, an evil one like an adult's harming an innocent child – the universal sentiment evoked is one of unease and disapprobation. Any normal person reading an account of
such an action in the newspaper experiences a relatively calm sensation of its deformity. If the child harmed is one's own child, on the other hand, the sensation of the action's deformity is a very violent one. Our feelings of grief and anger consume us. Clearly, the exact same action can be the object either of passion or taste, depending on the position from which it is viewed. This is certainly consistent with Hume's claim that a calm passion can be changed to a violent one when its object draws nearer. But it seems inconsistent with his rather different accounts of how impressions occur in the two types of delicacy. For any S, when S considers an object of taste, if S perceives quality \( q \) then he experiences sensation \( s \). Hume holds that people can be affected in different ways by the circumstances that impact their own interests. That means that for any S, when S considers an object of passion, if S perceives quality \( q \) it is indeterminate what sensation he will experience – it varies according to temperament. But the objects of taste and the objects of passion are the same objects. Why should an object's being considered as affecting our self-interest allow for a mysterious gap between quality perception and emotional response? Why shouldn't the perception of qualities in the objects of passion – that is, the objects of immediate personal concern – entail a specific sensation in all subjects? Does this account of personal emotional response jeopardize Hume's standard?

Such questions are puzzling but not unanswerable. One argument that might be offered is that delicacy of passion actually works in the same way as delicacy of taste, even if there is not much evidence that Hume recognizes this. People who are extremely affected by events that touch them are perceiving properties of those events that even other people standing in the same relation to the events would not perceive. This seems still less plausible than the already dubious claim that any person who doesn't
enjoy Milton is necessarily not perceiving a particular property that his writing possesses in a small quantity. It is unlikely that Hume wants delicacy always to mean perception of subtle qualities. Perhaps more promise lies in the consideration of Hume's other criteria for a delicate percipient. He speaks in “The Standard of Taste” of the requirement of aids such as practice and an undistracted focus on the object. If delicacy of taste is partially constituted by an ability to concentrate on the aesthetic object, we might view the delicacy of passion as the disability of not being able to concentrate on more remote objects for the purpose of distracting oneself from personal concerns. In order to preserve Hume's claims that violent and calm passions differ only in the distance of their object, emotional responses of both kinds must be equally standardized.
EX NIHILO
On the Virtue of Compassion

Dustin Vegas

This paper is an exploration into compassion's dual role as a virtue and emotion. I will argue that compassion manifests itself in a particular coordinate on intersecting x- and y-axes. An instance of compassion is a point on two different axes: self-distinguishing vs. effacing is marked along the x-axis, and object-oriented individuating vs. generalizing is along the y-axis. These axes represent the range in which a person feeling compassion (a subject) may interpret his subjective identity and the identity of that for which he feels compassion (an object), respectively. I will also argue that compassion is influenced by an overarching sentimental disposition. The sentimental disposition can be more empathetic or sympathetic, depending on how well the subject relates to the suffering of the object.

My emphasis on identity revolves around a subject-object distinction. I understand myself as a subject when I feel compassion, and my personal identity depends largely on how I relate to the world. This identity can change depending on the context in which I understand myself and the context in which I feel compassion. Even though I am at the same time an individual who is a son, a co-worker, a countryman, and a mammal, my subjective identity changes when I consider myself in one or more of these
contexts. For example, I may understand myself more as a son when considering my relationship with my mother, or as more of a worker when considering my relationship with my co-workers.

I use the term ‘object’ when considering that for which I feel compassion. I use ‘object’ instead of ‘human’ or ‘person’ because I can feel compassion for non-human entities and non-individual concepts, such as a kitten or kittens in general. My compassion is influenced by how I view the object. I can perceive its suffering without considering any suffering beyond it. I may also view it as one instance of suffering, and focus my compassion on the larger concept of suffering things of that type.

Aristotle defines proper virtue as the mean between two extreme vices, and I follow this pattern when dealing with compassion. He conceives of a spectrum, with the vices of excess and deficiency at both ends, and proper virtue saddled between them. Unlike Aristotle, however, I will not discuss what constitutes a vice. My treatment of compassion is an attempt to offer a non-normative description of what occurs when a person feels compassionate. In short, I consider the experience of a compassionate moment, whereas Aristotle considers the action and habituation of proper virtue.

The extreme ends of my theoretical spectrum may seem to describe vices. Common knowledge tells me that viewing my subjective self as an island, detached from any larger identity, may lead to a vice. Such a view can strain the relationships I need to thrive in society. Conversely, failing to recognize my personal identity when I share a commonality with something may be a vice as well. I may act unvirtuously when I see a suffering object, and ignore whether or not she participates in some larger community of suffering; however, it may not be virtuous to ignore the
individuality of a suffering object by totally subsuming it in a larger group. Discussion of these claims will be saved for another day. In this paper I am more concerned with what people experience in a moment of compassion, and less concerned with the application of proper virtue.

By exploring these topics I will argue that compassion is an emotional virtue. A virtue becomes an emotional virtue when it is influenced, sometimes even determined, by an emotion. Emotions can transform otherwise stale and esoteric Aristotelian “mean between extreme” theories into viable and realistic virtues. Perhaps there are virtues like steadfastness or honesty that have very little to do with emotion and rest totally on habituating rationally-achieved values; however, courage, ambition, defiance, devotion, and compassion are among the virtues which rely on the emotions for their particular character.

On Suffering

Compassion derives its meaning from the Latin word compassiō, which is the noun form of the verb compatī, which means literally “to suffer together.” This etymology reflects how people commonly conceive of compassion. It involves suffering with an object outside oneself. A problem arises, however, when we unpack the notion of suffering involved in compassion. Surely not all forms of suffering together involve compassion.

If two people are involved in a high-impact car crash, both people may suffer physical pain together. They may lay side by side on stretchers with broken spines, but this obvious case of suffering together does not involve compassion. It must be that the suffering involved in compatī involves specific types of suffering. The suffering
experienced through compassion must be experienced in conjunction with something external to one's self. Though the two people involved in the car crash suffer next to one another, they suffer from independent sources of pain, namely their own broken spines. Implicit in the etymology of the word compassion is the Latin “co-m,” or “together,” which implies an experience of co-suffering and not independent suffering.

Indeed, compassion involves at least two agents who suffer together. Physical or emotional pain felt by the object must be felt as emotional pain within the subject, since it is impossible to feel the physical pain of another person. If a man were to break his spine in a car accident and relay the story to another party, they may suffer along with him due to compassion, but will only suffer emotionally. Indeed, emotion must be present in the subject in order for compassion to exist at all.

Emotions and Virtues:

It may seem strange to classify compassion as a virtue. How could an emotional state be virtuous? Kant brings this skepticism to a head when he claims that sympathy is a beautiful emotion, but does not carry any moral obligation. Furthermore, traits like fortitude, dependability and strength are virtues which are not fundamentally emotional; they are values that can be quantified and dutifully adhered to. Considering that many virtues seem unemotional, is it possible to scrutinize emotions in the name of virtue at all?

Of course we can. Emotions have been intertwined with virtue theory since the Greeks and Chinese began formulating ethical theories thousands of years ago. We

1 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* §34
find evidence of this in many different virtue traditions. For example, the virtues of Classical Greece include courage; the Seven Christian Heavenly Virtues include humility and patience; Theravada Buddhism’s virtues include loving-kindness and serenity; and the Sikh Five Virtues include contentment, compassion, humility, and love.

Each of the above virtue theories directly reference the emotions. What is courage without fear? Aristotle, the figurehead of virtue ethics, argues that “courage is the mean between cowardice and recklessness.”\(^2\) It would be impossible to understand the nature of courage without admitting that fear has a large role in it. One is overwhelmed by fear in cowardice and neglects it completely in recklessness. The person without fear is incapable of being courageous. She may achieve great deeds that tend to occasion courage; she may overcome dangerous and seemingly insurmountable odds; but, if the courageous person is entirely without fear, her act is no more courageous than figuring out a difficult math problem or navigating through gridlocked traffic. Fear is vital to the virtue of courage. To Aristotle, the person without fear is not virtuous at all – she ought to fear the appropriate things to an appropriate degree. If she fears nothing at all, she is incapable of doing so.\(^3\)

Pride is another virtue which is grounded in the emotions, namely when one feels proud. Pride is classically interpreted as the mean between arrogance and self-deprecation.\(^4\) This spectrum is more than a range of behavior. Certainly a virtuous person would exhibit behavior that is not arrogant or self-deprecatory; however,

\(^2\) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1107a30-1107b5
\(^3\) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1115b
\(^4\) Ibid., 1123b
proper pride also involves correct emotional self-knowledge and control. A person may outwardly express prideful actions, but pride involves more than such a display. Imagine that you have won a very important political position that you have been vying for your whole career. Certainly, you will outwardly express your pride at the celebration dinner later that night. Before this, however, pride is kindled emotionally within you. Upon hearing of your victory, pride begins to warm your chest; you feel mighty and competent. This is an emotional state, and any outward expression of pride would just be a show without it. A moment of true pride involves a subjective emotional experience, just as true courage requires fear to be present.

To understand compassion we must understand that it involves a position between at least two perceptual extremes (I will argue for four) and its emotional components. We have already isolated the emotional component: co-suffering. This suffering can take many different forms; we can feel pity, sorrow, grief, disgust, among many other forms of suffering. Interestingly, compassion can even arouse emotions like hope, happiness, or relief.

Imagine that your friend had been fighting cancer for years with a dim chance for survival. Your compassion would probably involve pity, grief, and other such emotions. Now imagine that one day she tells you that her treatment appears to have worked, and her chance of survival has improved. Your compassion may now include hope and joy along with the aforementioned emotions. You still suffer because her cancer still exists; however, you are joyous to hear that her situation is improving. This shows that compassion is a complex emotion that often involves experiences of co-feeling beyond co-suffering. Yet, despite the possibility for more pleasurable emotions to participate,
emotional suffering is still necessary for compassion to exist.

**X-Axis – The Subject:**

What are the perceptual extremes of compassion? If we imagine a basic Aristotelian virtue spectrum with a mean and two extremes, we can use one’s subjective identity as the mean. The extremes are self-distinguishing and self-effacing. Proper compassion must be conceived of this way because it requires a subject (me), an object (how I see the suffering one), and a state of subjective identity that affects how the subject views the relationship between the two.

The extreme of self-distinguishing occurs when the subject recognizes the autonomy of her personal identity during the compassionate moment. It draws a stark line between subject and object. Cases found far on this end of the spectrum often exist when the compassion is short-lived. When I see a beggar on the street and give him a dollar, I distance my identity from the recipient of my generosity by identifying myself as his benefactor. My identity is not the focal point of my compassion; however, I interpret our identities as distinct. I am not his comrade, and so I do not identify with his struggle and suffering. I do my part to help him and continue living my own life.

The extreme of self-effacing, on the other hand, requires that the subject assimilate her identity with her perception of the object. For example, imagine the extreme cases in which a parent lives vicariously through her child. Her identity is not starkly separated from her idea of her child’s identity; she views the failings and sufferings of her child as her own failings and sufferings. The distinguishing
line between the parent’s identity and her child is often very thin, perhaps broken in places.

Depending on the relationship between the subject and object in a given compassionate moment, the mean of personal identity is bound to move further toward one side of the axis. I do not argue that a distanced identity is preferable over an effaced one, or vice-versa. While the extremes of this axis might lead to vice, I only mean to point out how one’s subjective identity can change when one considers themselves in various contexts.

Importantly, though, it is possible to identify with the beggar. Perhaps I was in his position at one time, or perhaps I view us as two countrymen, or as two manifestations of humanity. Depending on how I understand my subjective identity, my position on the axis will change. The beggar and I are both Americans. We are both human beings. Perhaps I learn more about him as we converse, and it turns out that we root for the same sports teams and vote for the same political candidates. All these similarities may affect the placement of my subjective sense of identity regarding the beggar on the axis.

Y-Axis – The Object:

The x-axis described above involves the range of ways a subject can view his identity in reference to a suffering object. Subjective identity is a necessary part of compassion, though it is not sufficient. The subject also considers the identity of the object though a range of interpretations.

This makes the y-axis similar to the x-axis, but with the identity in question being that of the object rather than the subject. Compassion has intentionality because of its emotional nature. The intentionality of an emotion is its
ability to reference things outside of itself. In short, emotions are always about something. They may reference a thing in the world, a memory, a possibility which may occur, or a totally fabricated imagining, but one never feels an emotion without feeling it about something. Cases exist, though, in which people sometimes feel happy or anxious generally. People wake up in a certain moods, without any cause for feeling that way, and thus argue that their emotions must lack intentionality. I disagree. Such an argument incorrectly conflates cause and intentionality. The person feeling angst may not know what causes her to feel angst, but her angst is still directed toward things in the world. The person feeling angst still feels vulnerable toward the world despite not knowing why. Indeed, this state of general unease is partially what differentiates anxiety from fear. Angst is directed toward ‘that which I know not what’ while fear is directed toward a specific concept.

The y-axis of compassion, then, involves how we view the world outside of ourselves. It tells us what the intentionality of our compassion is directed toward. The two extremes on either end of this axis are abstraction and individuation. There are multiple ways one can interpret the object and its suffering. An object can be individual while simultaneously participating in multiple larger communities. Those communities could be a political society, a subculture, a historical period, or even a species. The common trait these contexts share, however, is that they assimilate the individual into the collective in the mind of the subject.

If I see the object as a totally isolated example of suffering, my compassion will center on the individual case of suffering. Alternatively, if I see the object as a part of a
larger whole, my compassion will urge me to reach beyond the individual case to affect something greater.

The extreme of individuation requires that I see the suffering object as nothing more than an individual case. For example, imagine that you walk by a starved kitten mewing pitifully in a gutter. It is a stray, and has little chance of survival. You may be moved by compassion to pick up the kitten and take it home with you. You alleviate its suffering and nurse it back to health before deciding to keep it or find it a good home. The compassion you feel and the actions you take reference only this one kitten, not any kittens beyond it. You do not try to change the laws that affect the welfare of kittens. You do not found an organization dedicated to spaying or neutering cats to fight the overpopulation and starvation of kittens. You think about the one kitten, and the one kitten alone.

The other end of this spectrum is defined by abstraction or generalization. Compassion manifested at this end of the spectrum interprets the object as an instantiation of an increasingly universalized concept. It sees the suffering kitten as one example of kitten suffering, and urges you to affect the larger cause of kitten welfare. You may walk past the mewing kitten and straight into a city council meeting to demand that money be put toward helping kittens. The abstract idea of helping suffering kittens is more important to you than helping the individual kitten in the gutter. Interestingly, this abstraction is not endemic to compassion. Jean-Paul Sartre’s novel *Nausea* involves a character who loves humanity generally yet hates every particular person he meets. He loves the forest while despising the trees. In abstracted compassion, a person protects the forest and forgoes the tree.

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5 Sartre, *Nausea* (1938)
This kind of abstraction is involved when a subject feels compassion for a cause or movement. It can be confidently asserted that some of the people watching the political uprisings across the world this year\(^6\) felt compassion for the social movements. The men and women throwing Molotov cocktails in revolt seemed like individual instantiations of larger concepts like justified rebellion. Some of us watching from home did not care to know the names of the individual revolutionaries, but we did follow closely as revolutionaries overthrew an oppressive dictator in the name of freedom.

The actions that result from viewing the uprisings as representative of larger concepts will reflect this point of view. This kind of compassion results in organizations designed to address problems generally. It urges us to create animal shelters for suffering kittens and international peace-keeping bodies like the League of Nations and NATO as a response to injustice and oppression in its varied forms.

It is important to remember that the ends of the x- and y-axes are extremes. People usually view the suffering kitten or the oppressed revolutionary both as an individual and as participating in larger universalized contexts. People also view themselves as individuals and members of some type of community with the suffering object. It is a matter of degree.

*Emotional Dispositions:*

There is more to compassion than considering identities. Aside from noting that other emotions can

\(^6\) The uprisings in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen in late 2010 and early 2011, for example
participate in compassion, I have not yet explored its sentimental nature. The emotional disposition of compassion is not a third axis, but is, instead, a sentimental outlook that is influenced by the subject’s familiarity with the object’s suffering.

The emotional disposition of compassion necessarily involves a subject’s emotional suffering on the behalf of an object. The nature of the subject’s suffering, however, is influenced by how well he can relate to the object’s suffering. The subject feels sympathy when she cannot relate to the object’s suffering, and feels empathy when she can relate.

Sympathy is concern for the suffering object, a hope to see its suffering alleviated and its happiness increased. The subject may feel pity, sadness, or even a general uneasiness. I would feel very sympathetic to a friend who had been struck by a car while walking across the road. My co-suffering is limited, though, by how precisely I can imagine the kind of suffering she feels. I have never felt any level of physical or emotional pain comparable to getting struck by a car and its aftermath. My suffering cannot be fully empathetic because I lack a strong point of reference.

My friend's wife may have left him due to his inability to work, or his medical bills may have drained him of all his money. He would feel despair and other like emotions because of these tragedies. The extent to which I can empathize is relative to how accurately I can relate to his suffering. I have never been divorced, so my ability to relate to the suffering in that situation would be stunted; however, perhaps I have been impoverished due to medical bills and have suffered in that situation. Alternatively, perhaps I have had family members who have experienced poverty due to medical bills. My ability to empathize would
vary by the similar situations I have experienced.

Pure empathy is characterized by acutely understanding and experiencing the suffering felt by the object. In empathy, my feelings are different than the pity or care found in sympathy. Empathy opens the door to the many complex emotions that the object may be feeling. As a middle-class American philosophy major, my compassion for the revolutionaries in the Arab Spring was defined by sympathy. I cannot relate to the emotions they felt while besieging Tripoli after decades of oppression. Had I been once oppressed or involved in a firefight, my compassion would have been characterized less by sympathy and more by empathy. I would be granted a unique view into their internal struggles and perspectives. Sympathy can be conceived as a view from the outside in, and empathy from the inside out.

The role of personal history and experiences in empathy touches on the problem of sub-conscious emotions. It has been argued that emotions can exist without being felt consciously. Emotions may be like goals and desires. I may not feel the strong urge to graduate college in every moment of every day. There are times when other activities crowd out my active desire to do so. It would be very strange, however, to say that I stop desiring this goal when I don't experientially feel its tug. If I can unconsciously desire something like graduation, is it possible that I can unconsciously have an emotion as well?

Solving this problem of unconscious emotions is beyond the scope of this paper. I only intend to make the reader aware of its existence. It is conceivable to think that a person can be unconsciously compassionate. Perhaps she has such a compassionate disposition that she is not aware of the emotion every time she acts compassionately. Aristotle seems to think that something like this is the end
goal for any virtue: that we practice it repeatedly until it becomes second nature and requires little to no effort to express.

Practicing Emotional Virtue:

Much like Aristotle, I believe that practice is the best way to habituate a virtue. Repetition of proper pride or beneficence eventually begets an effortless predisposition toward that virtue. So how can we practice the virtue of compassion as I have described it in this paper?

I want to emphasize how many perspectives are available in a compassionate moment. Our compassion is determined largely by how we view ourselves and the objects we feel compassionate for. People often forget to see themselves as members of larger communities. Americans especially have the tendency to see themselves as islands. People can also forget the larger contexts surrounding an object, and how those contexts influence its suffering. For example, it is easy to forget the sociological influences on poverty rates, and see an impoverished person as simply lazy.

Conversely, people often highly emphasize their relationships with other beings while ignoring their own individuality. Such a person finds it difficult to separate her own identity and projects from those she sees around him. The further a person slides toward the extreme of self-effacing, the less energy she can devote toward each thing she feels compassion for. By seeing her own identity as tied to those of many others, she risks over-committing her resources and burning out emotionally.

There are multiple ways to view one’s identity and the identity of an object in a compassionate moment. Imagine once again that I run into a kitten mewing in a
gutter. I may see myself as completely distinguished from the kitten. I am myself and the cat is itself; there is no “us.” Also, I may view the kitten without referencing any suffering beyond it. My subjective identity is heavily distinguished from the kitten and the intentionality is individuated.

On the other hand, I may emphasize the commonalities between myself and the kitten while emphasizing that the kitten is one instantiation of a universalized idea of suffering. We are both animals capable of feeling pain, for example. Here, our identities are thrust into the opposite ends of each spectrum: my identity is effaced into that of the kitten, and my intentionality is generalized.

Compassion takes different forms depending on the situations in which it arises. Each situation involves different identities which can be sorted through and contemplated. I tentatively argue for habitual contemplation of the roles between one’s self and one’s community, both human and otherwise. Such a habit involves serious self-inquiry regarding the basis of one’s relationships with others. Also, it involves connecting the experiences of others to any broader contexts bearing upon them. Thirdly, compassion requires honesty when considering one’s ability to empathize or sympathize with the misfortunes of others. By better understanding the nature of compassion, we can more accurately define its role in ethical decision making.
Gorgias vs. the Eleatics and the Atomists: Gorgias’ Antiplatonic Theory of Nonbeing as Imagery

Dr. Michael Bakaoukas

In his treatise On What is Not Gorgias claims that “nonbeing exists”, or, according to the veridical sense of the verb to be, “nothing is true” (ouden estin). He seems to say that my claim that nothing exists is as good as anyone's because nonbeing may be thought about. Similarly, in the

1 The central argument of this paper was first formulated in my MSc and PhD theses under the supervision of Prof. Theodore Scaltsas at the University of Edinburgh and Prof. Basileios Kyrkos at the University of Athens. A more complete form of this argument is presented in the present paper.

2 In Greek truth involves some kind of correlation or “fit” between what is said or thought, on one side, and what is or what is the case, on the other. "Reality” is the fact that it is so or what happens to be the case. This is the veridical (or informative) use of “to be” which affirms a state of affairs (Kahn, 1982: 8-11; Mourelatos, 1970: 48-49; Curd, 1998: 27). This interpretation is followed by Mourelatos and Curd according to whom the Greek verb “to be” is “predicative” and “informative” in the sense that this verb “calls forth the characteristic essence of a thing” or “reveals the nature of a thing, saying what something is” (Mourelatos, 1976; Curd, 1998: 26-27, 39). So Gorgias’ claim “nothing exists” means “nothing is true”.

3 As Gorgias says, being thought about is no criterion of being. That is to say, Gorgias connects nonbeing with nonexistent entities like the chimera. The
**Sophist**, Plato has the Eleatic stranger claim also that nothing exists as follows: “we shall find it necessary in self-defence to put to the question that pronunciation of father Parmenides and establish by main force that what is not, in some respect, has being” (241b; trs Cornford). So, as we shall see, Gorgias and the Eleatic stranger could be one and the same person because of the connection between their arguments. I shall analyze Gorgias’, Plato’s, and Aristotle’s relevant texts in order to understand this connection better. What Gorgias is saying in the *On What is Not* is not as controversial as has been interpreted but actually shares many features with the claims of Plato and Aristotle. In this way, I will establish the legitimacy of Gorgias’ arguments in the context of the debates of his time, since Gorgias’ discussion is part of a larger dialogue on *being* and *nonbeing* extending from the presocratics to Aristotle.

*Nonbeing as a mental image: Gorgias’ and Plato’s similar views on nonbeing*

Recent interpretations of Gorgias’ texts treat Gorgianic arguments as serious and valid. For example Schiappa and Hoffman say that “we ought to treat the *On What is Not* as a work of careful argumentation and of not

only genuine Gorgianic examples of “unrealities that can be thought” are “the chariots running over the sea”, for “the Scylla”, “the Chimaera” and “the flying man” are sceptical examples of Sextus who misunderstood the MXG Gorgianic text and treated it in a sceptical way. See Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* 7.80 ff (3rd cent. AD paraphrase; henceforth DK). Ps.-Aristotle’s *De Melisso, Xenophane, Gorgia* 979a-980b in Bekker’s edition of Aristotle. See also Cassin, 1980, 610-643= Bekker 980a (2nd cent. BC paraphrase; henceforth MXG). Cf. Newiger, 1973: 144 ff; Guthrie, 1975: 706.
inconsiderable philosophical significance.” According to them, Gorgias successfully refutes the Parmenidean premise “if (A) can mention (O) or can think of (O), then (O) exists”, and consequently, that Gorgias refutes the claim that what is thought of is necessarily existent (DK B3 79). He argues “against the existence of thought-about-objects” using a reductio ad absurdum; namely, Gorgias believes that the fact that we can think of nonexistent things like chimeras and chariots running across the sea is sufficient to render Parmenides’ underlying premise as false. The same criticism is adopted in the Sophist by the Eleatic stranger who says that, since the sophist as an image-maker influences our minds “to think things that are not”, “what is not” can be thought after all (240d9, 241d3).  

The criticism above of the Parmenidean position is based on a latent Gorgianic theory of nonbeing. We can get a clear view of Gorgias' theory of nonbeing by looking at Plato's Sophist. There, the role of the stranger is meant to be identified with Gorgias, and Gorgias' views are presented by the words of the Sophist. As we shall see, Gorgias' (or the Sophist’s) view is that nonbeing and falsehood are imagery. Plato endorses it but disagrees with Gorgias insofar as he thinks that images may also be false and therefore cannot be combatible with the realm of the Forms. As Havelock put it, the Platonic forms are moral

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5 As Guthrie (1975: 708) and Newiger (1973: 177-8, 181-188) first pointed out, Gorgias was the target of Plato's Sophist. Newiger (1973: 177-188) and Hays (1990: 336-7) argue that there are some important parallels between Gorgias' On What is not and Plato's dialogues Parmenides, Meno, Theaetetus and Sophist. These parallels have not yet been investigated in detail. In Hay's words (1990: 336-7), "it would seem prudent for scholars of Plato to re-
values, axioms, objective physical properties, relations, categories, physical formulas, universals, classes, principles, and also concepts. They have been coined by the mind to explain and classify its sensual experience. We cannot see or taste or hear them. If we call the Forms ‘concepts’ it is to opposed them to images. If we call them ‘abstract’ it is to oppose them to visualized things. Platonism at bottom is an appeal to substitute a conceptual discourse for an imagistic one.²

In order to prepare for this difficult task, Plato searches for a definition of the sophist as an image-maker (216a-221c). For Plato the image-maker must represent Gorgias the sophist, for, as we shall see, the image-making was Gorgias’ own theory regarding nonbeing.³ Plato describes the sophist as an an angler-like hunter of rich kids, a sham virtue salesman, and a professional athlete in contests of words (221c-226a). Secondly, he is shown to be a philosopher-like cleanser of souls, who refutes others

acquaint themselves with the treatise and to keep in mind that Plato had to respond to these Gorgianic arguments⁴. This has been done to a certain extent by Stumpo (1931), Rensi (1933), Rezzani (1959), Sciacca (1967), Wesoly (1983), Leszl (1985), Gigon (1985), Kraus (1990), Crivelli, (1996) and Bakaoukas (1995, 2002b). But, as Calogero and Mansfeld point out, "there is not a systematic comparison of concrete parallels between Gorgias and Plato" (Calogero, 1972: 269 ff, 311ff; Mansfeld, 1985: 258, n. 48). The first systematic comparison of concrete parallels between Gorgias On What is Not and Plato’s Sophist was made by Lefavor (2011), who proved beyond any reasonable doubt that the target of Plato in the Sophist was Gorgias the sophist.

² Havelock, Preface to Plato, 1963: 260
³Plato calls the anonymous sophist in the Sophist "stranger" (xenos). It is interesting to note that Gorgias was known in classical antiquity as the Greek stranger (xenos) who came from Sicily to Athens and Larissa. That is possibly why, according to Aristotle’s Politics (1275b), Gorgias was defining citizenship, by making its origin depend not on birth, but on the act of the state (Barker, 1950: 110).
with a view to removing opinions that impede learning (226a-231b). Most importantly, the sophist is also a debater. According to Plato, debating turns out to be a kind of making: the art of making spoken images of all things. This art of imitation has two forms: likeness-making and apparition-making – the making of true and of distorted images (illusions) (231b-236d). The existence of distorted images presupposes that nonbeing is in the sense that there is “appearing or seeming without really being.” That is to say, the “appearing” covers the metaphysical problem: If there is a world of real being (Parmenides’ One Being or Plato’s world of real Forms), there is also a world of nonbeing as seeming. This runs contrary to the Parmenidean claim that nonbeing is unutterable and, indeed, unthinkable. If distorted images are possible and they represent nonbeing as an appearance, then nonbeing is and, as Gorgias has also argued above, the Parmenidean thesis is wrong (236d-242b). In this way, the stranger’s (and/or Gorgias’) search for nonbeing becomes the search for distorted images (eikones).  

The sophist is shown, among other things, to be an image-maker (264c-268d). He is among those who mime things or paint them, or who make images in words. Some images preserve the proportions of the original and are truthful likenesses; others are distortions – phantasms and apparitions of the original. The sophist gives imaginary accounts and induces, for profit, deceptions and false opinions in the soul. To hold a false opinion is to think

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8 Gorgias (as “the stranger”) refers here to Parmenides’ frag. 7 as follows: “Never shall this be proved—that things that are not are” (237a). He has just connected this metaphysical problem with distorted images by saying “The truth is, my friend, that we are faced with an extremely difficult question. This ‘appearing’ or ‘seeming’ without really being” (236d). See Plato, Sophist, in Benardete, 1984 and in Cornford, 1970: 200-202. Cf. Bakaoukas, 2002b-c.
what is not, to speak falsely is to say that what is not the case is the case and vice versa. The sophist is a maker of false verbal images like the image expressed by the false statement “Theaetetus [a real person] flies” (263a). The sophist cunningly appeals to the great Parmenides himself, who had denied that exactly this was possible: to think and to say what is not.9

In the Sophist, Plato attempts to explain how falsehood is possible. As the stranger remarks, falsehoods are “things which are not” and “speaking falsely” is saying the thing that is not (236d). The stranger here follows Gorgias in saying again “the audacity of the statement lies in its implication that ‘what is not’ has being” (237a).10 Plato admits that if stating a falsehood requires there to exist something which does not exist, then false statements could not be made. But Plato does not agree that we cannot state falsehoods. Instead he proceeds to show that stating a falsehood does not require there to exist something which does not exist. Sophists’ arguments can only be understood if falsity is possible. But the False in words – that which makes them pseudo-accounts (pseudos being the Greek word for "falsehood") – is itself nonbeing.11 Just as imitations are not what they seem to be, so false sentences say what is not the case. Now if nonbeing is unthinkable and unutterable, as Parmenides asserted, then we may conclude that all speech must be taken as true for all who utter it; that is, we could not utter falsehoods. Absolute relativity reigns. This is exactly what Gorgias purports to be the case when he says: "All subjects of thought must exist and Nonbeing, since it does not exist, could not be thought of. But if this is so, no one…could say anything

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10 Plato, Sophist, 236d-237a, in Cornford, 200 (trs Cornford).
false, not even if he said that chariots compete in the sea. For everything would be in the same category" (On What is not MXG 980a9-12).\textsuperscript{12}

Nonbeing has to be given a meaning if uttering falsehoods is to be possible. Thus, Plato specifies nonbeing as otherness. He is concerned with “that which is not” in the sense of the “different” – i.e. any existing thing defined as different from some other existing thing; for example, “the not-beautiful.” In this sense, “that which is not” is distinct from “the non-existent,” which is covered by the phrase “the contrary of what exists” (tounantion tou ontos.) “The different” is “the not so-and-so.” The discussion is confined by the Eleatic stranger to the world of the Forms and their relations. So the nature of the “different (or other)” can be regarded as covered by Forms, every one of which can be negatively described as “that which is not so-and-so.” Therefore, “the different,” i.e. the nonbeing, is distributed over the whole field of existence. “The not-beautiful” is the collective name for all the Forms there are, other than the single Form, “Beautiful.”\textsuperscript{13} As such nonbeing is not just a subjective, mind-dependent image, but a single objective Form (eidos 258c4). By doing this, Plato transfers the nonbeing from the realm of seeming and imagery to the realm of Forms and thus obtains a powerful principle for regulating the slippery relativity that is the sophist's refuge. Nonbeing becomes a universal, categorical characteristic of things. Nonbeing interpreted as the Other, thus, ceases to be mere nothingness, and images now are to be defined not in terms of nonbeing, but in terms of otherness. In this way,

\textsuperscript{12} See also Bakaoukas, 2002b-c.
\textsuperscript{13} Plato, Sophist, 257b-258c, in Cornford, 289-290.
Plato manages to substitute a conceptual discourse for an imagistic one.\footnote{14

To conclude, according to Plato, the stranger, viz. Gorgias, treats nonbeing as imagery. But for Plato an image or an imitation, because it has a share in nonbeing, may be a distorted image and therefore, being less than the original, may be false and thus cannot be consistent with the realm of real Forms. In other words, images and Forms do not match, since they do not have the same qualities and characteristics. Gorgias (as “the stranger”) says that the sophist is a maker of images and asks “what on earth we mean in speaking of an image” (239d). Unlike the Forms, images (eidola) belong to the world of appearances, denied by Parmenides, but recognized by Plato as the object of opinion (doxa), and distinct from the object of knowledge\footnote{15
For White (1976: 93) and Lee (1966), it is easy to think that there is something somehow epistemically superior in models over copies, and even if it is not clearly explained by Plato what that something is, the notion takes hold and adds to the general epistemic prestige of the Forms.}. Having accused the Sophist of being a creator of images, false statements and false beliefs, Plato must meet Gorgias’ (and/or the Sophist’s) claim that there must be some sense in which what is not has some sort of existence. That is to say, he must meet Gorgia’s thesis that nonbeing is an image.\footnote{16
Gorgias (as the Eleatic stranger) connects images to nonbeing as follows: “So, not having real existence, it really is what we call a likeness” (240b trs Cornford); Plato, Sophist, 239b-242b, in Cornford, 209-210.}

This interpretation of Gorgias’ thought seems to be accurate, because, as will be shown, Gorgias did use the concept of images in his attempt to understand nonbeing. Gorgias was one of the first thinkers to use the concept of a (sensory) image; for this reason, as we have seen in the
Sophist, Plato has Gorgias (as “the stranger”) begin his inquiry into nonbeing and image as a specialist in analysing image-making. In On What is Not, Gorgias begins his inquiry into images and sensible things first by appealing to the possibility of there being things that are accessible and private to a single sense. For example, he says that visible things are accessible only to sight in the same way that audible things are accessible only to hearing, and likewise, that every sensible thing is private to the sense by which it is perceived (DK B3 81). Accordingly, a colour can only be seen and a sound can only be heard. As Gorgias put it: “for each sensible thing ought to be judged by its own special sense and not by other...visible things are apprehensible by sight and audible things by hearing, and not conversely” (DK B3 81, 83; trs Bury). These Gorganic claims mutatis mutandis agree with the following views of Ayer: “it is true that there is a familiar use of words like 'hear' and 'taste' and 'smell', according to which the objects that are heard or tasted or smelled are private to a single sense. We commonly talk of hearing sounds [...] There are objects, such as mirror images which are private to the sense of sight.”17

Gorgias also emphasizes the commonsense fact that it is not necessary for many observers to see exactly the same thing at the same time, even if they are looking at the same object. In De Melisso Xenophane Gorgia 980b 9-19 Gorgias says:

For it is possible for the same thing to exist in several separate persons; for then the one

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17 Ayer, Problem of Knowledge, 86.
would be two. But if the same things were in
several persons, there is nothing to prevent it
from not being the same in them all, seeing
that they are not in every way alike, nor in
the same place; for if anything were this, it
would be one and not two [persons]. But
even the man himself does not seem to
perceive similar things at the same time, but
different things with his hearing and with his
vision, and different again at the moment
and long ago, so that one man can hardly
perceive the same things as another (...) and
because no one thinks the same things as
another
MXG 980b 9-19 (trs Hett)

In this case, he says that there is nothing to prevent
a thing from seeming different to many persons, since these
persons are supposed to be neither exactly the same nor
occupying the same vantage point. He simply points out
that two persons can perceive the same object differently,
and thus, that there may be two different appearances of the
same object. In this case, he says, it is difficult for someone
to have exactly the same sense-experience as somebody
else's sense-experience of the same thing. That is, it is
impossible for two persons to have the same experiences.
As Ayer puts it, "one person cannot have the experience of
another," a claim that has led philosophers to argue for "the
paradoxical view [that] when different people are said to
perceive the same physical object, each of them perceives
his own sense-data."  

In this context, it is legitimate to say that, for
Gorgias, the physical thing is one and the same, but is

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phenomenally duplicated, or multiplied, by the intervention of our sense-experiences (or, sense-impressions). Furthermore, since the sense-experiences differ from person to person, it is difficult for different observers to have exactly the same sense-impression of anything (MXG 980b 17). This, in turn, shows that one's own sense-experience of a thing is subjective, and thus, distinct from the thing itself. Gorgias wants to show that what is ‘one and at the same time two things’ is the different sense-experiences of two observers looking at the same thing, not the thing itself.

As Ayer would put it:

these objects do not change their perceptible qualities...they come to be contrasted with the fluctuating impressions that different observers have of them [and] in this way the objects are severed from the actual percepts...and the observers' experiences...are taken to be subjective...So far from being the only things that there are thought to be, they may be denied any independent existence, and treated merely as states of the observer.

Ayer, 1991: 105

This difference between people's sense-perceptions confirms that every sense-experience of a thing is subjective and private to its perceiver. So publicity, which is supposed to be the basic feature of physical objects, is not a feature of sensible things; or, in Ayer's words, sensible things cannot be properly called physical objects (1980, 85). A physical object has public existence, whereas
a sensible thing does not; the latter cannot be identified with the former.\textsuperscript{19} In this sense, Gorgias clearly distinguishes physical objects from sensible things.

In other words, Gorgias deals with the matter of perceptual identity and the argument from illusion. The argument from illusion is traditionally the main ground for epistemological dualism, according to which there is a distinction between the external world and the immediate data of experience (sense-data, sense-impressions, sensations, ideas, percepts, mental images, images of thought or memory, data of perception, etc.).\textsuperscript{20} Mourelatos and Kerferd remark that Gorgias also distinguishes between an external thing and its perception, experience, or thought; Gorgias doubts that different persons can have the same sense-perceptions, since their constitutions and perceptual conditions are different.\textsuperscript{21} Furthermore, Gorgias seems to hold a certain concept of a mental image which he calls \textit{eikon ton horomenon pragmaton} (image of the things that are seen \textit{Helen 17}). Such an image in our mind (\textit{en to phronemati Helen 17}) is distinct from the external things (\textit{pragmata}) the image represents.\textsuperscript{22}

In the same way, Gorgias deals with the process of how the fictional \textit{nonbeing} as literary deception affects the

\textsuperscript{19} Hirst, 1959:37, 46.
\textsuperscript{20} Hirst, 1965: 2-4
\textsuperscript{22} Kerferd, 1981: 325-6; Mourelatos, 1987:145; Mazzara, 1984:135-8. The fact that Gorgias did have an interest in phenomenal images and appearances is also indicated by fr. 26 according to which Gorgias says that “being(einai) is unseen without appearance (dokein), whereas appearance is weak without being”, that is, “being and appearance should be interconnected”. When this is the case, as Gorgias says in his \textit{Helen} (8-14), our speech becomes persuasive and “is able to control the human psyche”. For Gorgias’ rhetorical works the \textit{Helen} and the \textit{Palamedes} see Kalligas (1981) and MacDowell (1982).
human psyche. Gorgias understood that the spectators at a Greek performance are victims who succumb to emotional situations portrayed in a tragic play. Plutarch attributes this view to Gorgias, who in one of his most telling fragments on tragedy suggests:

Tragedy through its myths and feelings (pathē) furnishes a deception (apate), as Gorgias says, with reference to which the one who deceives is more just than the one who does not, and the one who is deceived is wiser than the one who is not. For the one who deceives is more just, because he has done what he promised, and the one who is deceived is wiser, for what is not insensible is easily captured by the pleasure of logoi.

Gorgias, Buchheim, 1989, fr. 23; trs Wardy

What Gorgias means is that tragedy, to have its characteristic effect, must generate a theatrical deception in order to captivate the audience both intellectually and emotionally: members of the audience must react to the nonexistent fictional characters portrayed by actors as if what is portrayed on stage were indeed happening, if they are to enjoy the tragic experience. For this to occur successfully, the playwright must produce an illusion, an imaginary world (essentially, imagery) in the way that the image-maker in the Sophist produces images.23 The

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23 "We are here determining the basic sense of that much-used word the 'image'. It starts as a piece of language so worded as to encourage the illusion
audience must also imbue this imagery with reality by means of the willing suspension of disbelief. Thus the tragic spectacle demands a sort of a paradoxical collusion between the actors and the audience: we should conceive of the theatrical experience as a sort of “contractual [fair] deception” (“dikaia apate”), relying on cooperation between the deceptive tragedian and the receptively deceived audience.  

*Nonbeing as a contradiction: Gorgias’ and Aristotle’s views on contradiction*

But we should not leave the following question unanswered: why (and how) did Gorgias use the argument from illusion? Aristotle uses the argument from illusion to show the irrationality of the Protagorean view that whatever appears to anyone is true. For Aristotle, the Protagorean view does not make any sense since "if every appearance and belief was true, every statement would be both true and false." As a result, the principle of non-contradiction would be violated, and the logical consequence of such a violation would be to be unable to discern “which of these impressions are true and which are false so that there would be no truth.” Interestingly, Gorgias agrees with that Aristotelian view, since, in the context of the argument from illusion, he says that there is nothing evident and true: “why should it be any more clear, if such things exist? But it is quite uncertain which kind of things is true” (MXG 980a 17-18; trs. Hett).

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that we are actually looking at an act being performed or at a person performing it” (Havelock, 1963: 188).


25 *Metaphysics* 1009b 11-12; tr. Ross in combination with Tredennick. For the Aristotelian argument from illusion see Kenny, 1967: 184, 189.
Regarding self-contradiction, Gorgias says: "it is neither one nor many, neither unborn, nor born [s.c. at the same time]" (MXG 979a20-23 trs. Hett). That is to say, according to the argument from illusion, a physical object cannot be A and B at the same time. To state this in logical terms, let us assume that O is the Gorgianic *being*, A any predicate which is asserted of being (one, divisible, born or moving), and B the contradictory predicate (many, indivisible, born and not moving). O cannot have both predicate A and predicate B. *Mutatis mutandis*, this is the way in which 'the principle of non-contradiction' is formulated and applied in practice.\(^{26}\) This interpretation is supported by Gorgias' *Palamedes* (25), in which he argues that "a person who upholds one and the same thesis about the same things before the same audience does not deserve our trust if thereby he contradicts himself." This Gorgianic view recalls Aristotle's descriptive definition of the principle of non-contradiction.\(^{27}\)

Aristotle states the law of non-contradiction in the form "the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject in the same respect" (*Metaphysics* 1005b ff). He devoted two long passages in the *Metaphysics*, not to demonstrate the law, but to refute

\(^{26}\) Stebbing, 1934: 39-40; Cosenza, 1985

\(^{27}\) *Metaphysics* 1005 b 19-22. This interpretation is also supported by Mazzara's paper "Gorgia contra il principio di non-contradizione" (1976). Cf. Mansfeld, 1985: 252. It is noteworthy that Gorgias' view is not that controversial. In fact, it seems to be precisely in line with how most people think about non-contradiction. So we should revise the interpretation that Gorgias' claim "nothing exists" is deliberately irrational, illogical and sophistical. That is to say, mostly the philological or rhetorical approach, according to which Gorgias' treatise *On What is Not* is just a rhetorical parody, needs to be modified. See Untersteiner, 1954: 163-5, Kerferd, 1981a: 93-95, and Bakaoukas, 1995; 2001a-b; 2002a-b-c, 2008.
the Protagorean sophists who would deny the principle.\textsuperscript{28} Unlike Aristotle, Gorgias employs an oversimplified principle of non-contradiction. He uses “the technique – known from Sextus almost \textit{ad nauseam} – of undermining philosophical and other positions by contrasting them with equivalent positions that contradict them.”\textsuperscript{29} As stated in his treatise \textit{On What is not}, Gorgias is dealing with “different thinkers, who in discussing the question of being have apparently made contradictory assertions” (MXG 979a15). In his treatise, Gorgias attempts to show (a) that contradicting views are not to be trusted and (b) that \textit{nonbeing} is nothing but a contradiction.\textsuperscript{30} This interpretation is corroborated by Gorgias' rhetorical works, the \textit{Palamedes} (25) and the \textit{Helen} (13-14), in which he claims that we should not believe those thinkers who contradict themselves.

Gorgias attacks these philosophers who contradict one another by claiming that \textit{being} is either \textit{one} and \textit{ungenerated} or \textit{many} and \textit{generated} (MXG 979a13-18). Judging by his rhetorical work \textit{Helen}, it is certain that Gorgias studied the “conflicts of philosophical speeches” in which it is shown that “quick-wittedness too makes the


\textsuperscript{29} Mansfeld, 1988: 249. It is noteworthy that logicians like Bochenski (1951: 17) and Thom (1986) take Gorgias' arguments into serious consideration.

\textsuperscript{30} It is interesting to note that Quine begins to treat the issue of \textit{nonbeing} (like Gorgias) by saying that \textit{nonbeing} emerges in contradictions and ontological controversies. In any ontological dispute, according to Quine (1980: 1): “two philosophers differ over ontology. Suppose McX maintains there is something which I maintain there is not. I maintain that there are no entities of the kind which he alleges. I cannot admit that there are some things which McX countenances and I do not, for in admitting that there are such things I should be contradicting my own rejection of them. This is the old Platonic riddle of \textit{nonbeing}”. For a modern treatment of the riddle of \textit{nonbeing} see also The \textit{Sophist} 201d8-202b7 and \textit{Euthydemus} 285d7-286b6, in McDowell, 1978: 235.
opinion which is based on belief changeable” (*Helen* 13).\(^{31}\) So the first ontological part of *On What is Not* (DK 65-76; MXG 979a13-980a8) is a logical criticism of those philosophical positions which, although they explain the same thing, violate the law of non-contradiction by contradicting each other. Hence, Gorgias deals with the following Aristotelian topic: “many people form judgements which are opposite to those of others, and imagine that those who do not think the same as themselves are wrong; hence the same thing must both be and not be” (*Metaphysics* IV 1009a10-14). This Aristotelian view holds that “the same thing must both be and not be.” As we shall see, this is equivalent to Gorgias’ view that “if *Being* and *Nonbeing* are identical, then neither *Being* nor *Nonbeing* has any existence” (MXG 979b30-31; 979b5).

In the case of contradicting views – that is, if we do not keep the law of non-contradiction – Aristotle holds that we cannot discern true from false beliefs, and “everything must be at once true and false” (*Metaphysics* 1009a9). As he put it:

> And if this is so, all opinions must be true; for those who are wrong and those who are right think contrarily to each other. So if reality is of this nature, everyone would be right (*Metaphysics* 1009a12-16).

Gorgias agrees with Aristotle, since, in the second part of *On What is Not* (DK 77-82; MXG 980a9-19), after

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referring to the contradicting views of some philosophers, he draws the Aristotelian conclusion that:

everyone [sc those philosophers] would be right [and thus] it is quite uncertain which kind of things is true (MXG 980a11, 18)

So for Gorgias and Aristotle, if we do not keep the law of non-contradiction, we cannot distinguish between true and false beliefs. For Aristotle the same thing that is predicated by two contradicting views “must both be and not be” (*Metaphysics* 1009a11-12). In such a case Gorgias would hold that it could not be clear “if such a thing exists” (MXG 989a17-18) which explains the Gorgianic claim that “being and nonbeing are identical” (MXG979a30-31).

Furthermore, both Gorgias and Aristotle refer to the contradicting views of some presocratic philosophers who argue against each other about one and the same thing, i.e. the *being*. For Aristotle:

we cannot be right in holding the contradicting views either of Heracleitus or Anaxagoras. If we could, it would follow that contraries are predicable of the same subject [sc which is not the case]” (*Metaphysics* XI 1063b24-26)

In the same way, Gorgias – like Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* (XI 1062-1063b35) – criticizes those philosophers whose conclusions about the same thing contradict each other. According to Aristotle (*De Generatione* 324b32-325a12; 325a23-32), the Eleatics and the Atomists had, if not contradictory, at least opposing
arguments on being and nonbeing.\textsuperscript{32} That is, the Eleatics Zeno and Melissus viewed being as \textit{one and ungenerated}, whereas Leukippus’ Atomists viewed being as \textit{many and generated}. That Gorgias also criticized their contradictory arguments is corroborated by the fact that the Atomists and the Eleatics, who were Gorgias’ contemporaries, are referred to in Gorgias’ treatise \textit{On What is Not} as follows:

he (sc Gorgias) collects the statements of others, who in speaking about what is seem to assert contrary opinions, some trying to prove that what is is one and not many, others that it is many and not one; and some that existents are ungenerated, others that they have come to be, and he argues against both sides (...) to prove that it is neither \textit{one nor many}, neither \textit{ungenerated nor generated}, he (sc Gorgias) tries to prove partly on the lines of Melissus and partly on those of Zeno, after the first demonstration of his own, in which he says that neither Being nor Non-Being can exist (...) For it falls short of Being (so Gorgias says) at the point of its division instead of void, as it is described in the works of the Atomist Leukippus

\textit{MXG}, 979a14-18; 979a21-24; 980a6-8 (trs Hett)

The philosophical controversy of the Eleatics and the Atomists provided Gorgias with material to develop his logical, dialectical argument about nonbeing. Gorgias holds that contradiction is not permissible. His basic tenet

\textsuperscript{32} Furley, 1987 and 1993, \textit{passim}.
“nothing exists” means that if we do not keep the law of non-contradiction, we commit ourselves to either believing that nothing exists (MXG 97a12) or that all things exist (MXG 979b10). That is, we commit ourselves to accepting that “everything must be at once true and false” (*Metaphysics* 1009a9) or that “the same thing must both be and not be” (*Metaphysics* IV 1009a10-14) so that “everyone would be right and it is quite uncertain which kind of things is true” (MXG 980a11, 18).

In other words, *nonbeing* is the logical consequence of contradiction. That is to say, when we contradict ourselves we are asserting or predicating nothing! What the Eleatics and the Atomists predicate as existent and non-existent, or as one and many, or as generated and ungenerated at the same time must be *nothing*. For nothing real can be, let us say, *being* and *nonbeing*, one and many, or white and not white at the same time. Simply put, Gorgias implies that it is impossible for an object to possess two contradicting properties (“Being cannot be both one and many, generated and ungenerated at the same time” MXG 979a20-23).³³

Furthermore, according to Gorgias, if we believe in contradicting views that assert (or state) nothing (*nonbeing*), we shall be deceived, or, in Gorgias’ terms: “if nothing exists, these proofs [s.c. the contradicting ones] are deceptive.”³⁴ To put it simply, Gorgias claims that we should not violate the principle of non-contradiction. That is to say, he just makes a logical point. His basic thesis “nothing exists” (or veridically, “nothing is true”) is a logical premise, which according to the view of the sceptical author of MXG, “is not proven, viz. neither

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³³ For a same formulation of the principle of non-contradiction see Stebbing, 1939: 39-40.
³⁴ MXG 980a8-9. I adopt Untersteiner’s and Gerke’s reading “apatan”.

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logically nor experientially.” According to MXG (979b19-20), “reversing Gorgias’ point that nothing exists, it is equally possible to argue that everything is; for Nonbeing is and Being is, therefore everything is” (trans. Loveday).  

For, “nothing” in the real world could possibly be one and many at the same time, as presented by the contradicting assertions of the Eleatics and the Atomists. If such a thing existed, then “everything” would exist.

In other words, contradictory assertions that describe the same thing as being one and many at the same time are not trustworthy. Contradicting judgements are not informative about a thing in the real world; for Gorgias, such judgements assert “nothing” and “nothing” is not a thing in the real world so as to be knowable (agnoston DK 77). This is the foundation of Gorgias’ epistemology in the second and third part of On What is Not (MXG 989a9-b21; DK 77-87).

In the same way, Plato has Gorgias (as “the stranger”) begin his inquiry into nonbeing with a critical examination of claims men have made about Being. The stranger then turns his dialectical powers against the presocratic giants who claim that Being is body, many and in motion, and the presocratic philosophers, who support the Parmenidean claim that Being is one, indivisible and at rest (242b-252c). The fact that Plato makes the stranger examine this presocratic debate confirms the claim that Plato is here criticizing Gorgias' treatise On What is Not,
since, as we have seen, therein Gorgias examines this very philosophical debate (MXG 979a14-18).  

Gorgias on the Presocratics

As has been shown, Gorgias’ *On What is Not* is to a large extent concerned with the presocratics. The main focus of presocratic philosophy centered on the controversy between the monists and the pluralists about *being* and *nonbeing*, a fact that is confirmed by the late presocratic philosophy in which the Atomists replied to the Eleatics. The Atomists' reply to the Eleatics is supported not only by Aristotle but by Gorgias' treatise *On What is Not* as well. Aristotle emphasizes four characteristics of the philosophical controversy between the monists and the pluralists: void (*kenon*) or *nonbeing* (*me on*), plurality, becoming, and local movement. The same four characteristics of the controversy between the monists and the pluralists are confirmed by Gorgias, who in his treatise *On What is Not* refers to them as follows: a). *Being* versus

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37 That is why Gorgias says in his rhetorical works *Palamedes* (25) and *Helen* (13-14) that we should not believe those people who contradict themselves like the presocratic philosophers who argue with each other. See also Bekker=Metaph. K 1063b24-26 and Plato, *Sophist* 245a4-6. This interpretation was first argued by Bakaoukas, 1995; 2001a-b; 2002a-b-c, 2008. Untersteiner (1954: 163-5) and Kerferd (1981a: 93-95) distinguish between three approaches to Gorgianic texts. According to the first approach, Gorgias' treatise *On What is Not* is just a rhetorical parody of philosophical doctrines (philological or rhetorical approach). According to the second approach, Gorgias is just a nihilist (or a negative dogmatic or a forerunner of scepticism) attacking the doctrines of the Eleatics and the Presocratics (ontological approach). In the third approach (which attributes to Gorgias an interesting philosophic position), Gorgias is seriously interested in the problems of predication and meaning (philosophical approach): see Kerferd, 1981 and Mourelatos, 1987. For a review of the Gorgianic scholarship see Bakaoukas, 2001.
nonbeing, b). Generated versus ungenerated being, c). One being versus many beings, and d). Not moving and indivisible being versus moving and divisible being. For Plato as well, the Eleatics (242d5) say that being is one and indivisible and not moving (242e1, 245a8, 249d3). On the other hand, pluralists say that being is many, divisible and moving (242e1, 245a1, 249d3). Gorgias, Plato, Aristotle (and partly the extant presocratic fragments) agree that there was a presocratic philosophical controversy about being and nonbeing between the pluralists (Ionian philosophers, Pythagoreans, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Atomists) and the monists (Xenophanes, Eleatics). So by comparing Gorgias’, Plato’s and Aristotle’s texts we can be sure that Gorgias’ target in his On What is Not was the philosophical controversy between the pluralists and the monists; for this reason in the Sophist (242b-252c) Plato presents Gorgias (as “the stranger”) to argue against both the pluralists and the monists.

But how does Gorgias connect nonbeing with this philosophical debate? For Gorgias, nonbeing is what is argued to be “one and many” and “generated and ungenerated” at the same time by the contradicting philosophical theories. That is, “nonbeing exists” not only as fictional entities like the chimera, but also as an image created by contradictions, conflicting appearances, and conflicting theories. That is why he says that “even the man himself does not seem to perceive similar things at the same time, so that one man can hardly perceive the same

38 Ibid., Bakaoukas.

things as another” (MXG 980 b9-19).\textsuperscript{40} So, for Gorgias, nonbeing exists as an image. That is why in the \textit{Sophist} (240c) Gorgias (as the stranger) says that “the hydra-headed Sophist has forced us against our will to admit that ‘what is not’ has some sort of being.” Plato accuses of the sophist of creating unreal images and false beliefs which nevertheless somehow exist, and the stranger himself admits that “the Sophist takes refuge in the darkness of \textit{Nonbeing}” (254a).\textsuperscript{41} The trajectory of this section is that Plato is targeting the sophist, and in particular, Gorgias, because sophists are makers of false images (264c-268d).

To conclude, according to the third part of \textit{On What is Not}, nonbeing is “unheard of” or “uninformative,” and thus can neither be trusted nor communicated as reliable information about an external existing thing (anexoiston DK 83; ou deloton MXG 979a13). \textit{Nonbeings} only manifest themselves verbally as descriptions of illusory sense-impressions, deceptive appearances (conflicting sensory images), deceptions, lies, contradictions, fictions, false beliefs, and ignorance. Gorgias, as has been shown, proved their very “phenomenal” and “logical” existence; a fact that Plato knows well via Gorgias’ arguments. Plato perhaps attacked Gorgias with an ad hominem argument because Gorgias’ arguments “had posed formidable challenges to Eleatic philosophy, and...[Plato’s] quest for forms was particularly vulnerable to the same arguments, because its ontological assumptions were similar to those of the Eleatics.”\textsuperscript{42}

But why was Plato's quest for forms and ideas particularly vulnerable to the same Gorgianic arguments? As Kerferd affirms:

\textsuperscript{40}This interpretation is argued by Bakaoukas, \textit{op.cit.}
\textsuperscript{41}Plato, \textit{Sophist}, 239c, 240c, 254a, in Cornford, 212, 263.
\textsuperscript{42}Hays, 1990: 336.
Gorgias has introduced a decisive breach into the relation between words and things, and by so doing also between words and sense-impressions. Yet from Parmenides onwards it was part of the received wisdom that words must refer to something… This was something from which even Plato could not escape – in default of any other objects of reference for words he ended up by proposing fresh entities, the Platonic forms. No such solution was available to Gorgias. The furthest that he was able to go was to suppose that it is thoughts in people’s minds which function as objects of reference.

Kerferd, Gorgias' Treatise *On What is Not*, 1981, 325-6

That is, as Gorgias might have put it, “the (Platonic) Forms” must refer not to a metaphysical mathematical reality, but to thoughts in people’s minds, which may be conflicting and contradicting. This Gorgianic claim could threaten the metaphysical foundations of Plato’s Forms. Plato acknowledges this threat in the *Parmenides*, where a fictional Parmenides warns Socrates of Gorgias’ thesis.\(^{43}\) Socrates, in order to preserve Plato’s theory of Forms, suggests that Forms perhaps are thoughts, which unfortunately makes them volatile and mind-dependent. If the properties of things should not be mind-dependent, it would follow that things in themselves, apart from thoughts, are unknowable because they are uncharacterizable. Parmenides suggests that difficulties such as these are inevitable, if Forms are to be

\(^{43}\) Lefavor, 2011: 3-4; Hays, 1990: 335
distinguished as things by themselves, apart from the sensible practical reality. Gorgias would argue that the metaphysical Platonic Forms do not exist, and that even if they do, they are unknowable by us. Supposing Gorgias’ claims are true and the Platonic Forms are unknown, then, as Parmenides says to Socrates “What will you do about philosophy, then? Which way will you turn, while these things are unknown?” Gorgias’ famous assertion “nothing exists, and if anything exists, it is unknowable, and if it exists and is knowable, yet it cannot be indicated to others” haunts Plato’s metaphysics in the *Parmenides* and in the *Sophist*.

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45 MXG 979a12-13, transl. Loveday.
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