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Vulnerability, Power, and Gender: An Anthropological Mediation Between Critical Theory and Poststructuralism

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses what philosophical anthropology may contribute to the debate between critical theory and poststructuralism. It examines one prong of Amy Allen’s critique of Judith Butler’s collapse of normal dependency into subjection. Allen is correct that Butler’s assessment of agency necessary for political action is inadequate theoretically. However, I believe that some accounting of the nature of the being for whom suffering and flourishing matter is necessary. To this end, I provide an ontogenesis of intentionality as a response to Butler’s notion of the corporeal vulnerability shared by all human beings. On this basis, I articulate an anthropology that renders intelligible the sources of and links between mutual recognition and agency—as well as clarifying the sense in which the historical association between complementarity and gender can still be a resource for progressive thinking.

KEYWORDS

philosophical anthropology, critical theory, poststructuralism, vulnerability, power, Butler, Allen, gender

In 1928 in *Man’s Place in Nature*, Max Scheler claimed that “man is more of a problem to himself at the present than ever before in recorded history” (Scheler 1928, 4). He claimed that addressing the question “What is man?” was critical for solving urgent social and political issues. Following Scheler, Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen—despite their profound differences—continued to focus on the same theme. A hallmark of philosophical anthropology, unlike the empirical disciplines such as ethology, physical

anthropology, or cultural anthropology, was the assertion that the human lack of biological specialization was normatively significant. That is, purely natural solutions to biological precariousness are unavailable; thus, we are problems in the sense of having to continually take up a relation to the fact of our embodiment (Plessner 1970) or compensate for vulnerability through enculturation (Gehlen 1988). This is a life-long enterprise because humans are never fully transparent to themselves and never fully the masters of their vulnerabilities. For complicated reasons, philosophical anthropology fell into disrepute during the war and was eclipsed by Heidegger's *Daseinsanalysis* and the emergence of various antihumanist discourses.¹ However, in my view, philosophical anthropology's interrogation of questions about our species has much to offer in the present.²

To demonstrate anthropology's relevance, I will enter the debate between poststructuralists and critical theorists. Poststructuralism turns on a rejection of humanism, associating its excesses with a "European man is the measure of all things" attitude and thus with ethnocentrism, prejudice, runaway capitalism, the devaluation of the non-human world and even skepticism about our capacity to make positive changes regarding any of the above given that our very identities are products of these excesses. Critical theorists in the Habermasian tradition have responded to poststructuralist challenges in a variety of ways, ranging from outright rejection of what they see as the devaluation of human agency and a misunderstanding of power relations on one side to sympathetic engagement—or at least dialogue on the other.³ Generally, critical theorists are committed to offering an empirically grounded diagnosis of social pathologies that impede social transformation and to avail them-

1. For the history of this eclipse, see Axel Honneth and Hans Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1988). Gehlen's Nazi sympathies and Heidegger's excoriation of Scheler's and Cassirer's philosophical anthropology along with Heidegger's insistence that *Daseinsanalysis* was no philosophical anthropology were in part responsible. In addition, the biology of the day was mired in preformationist and Social Darwinist assumptions.
2. See Dennis Weiss, "Scheler and Philosophical Anthropology," http://faculty.ycp.edu/~dweiss/research/Scheler_and_Philosophical_Anthropology.pdf, for a discussion of Scheler as well as an argument for the continued importance of questions about the nature of the human species. Arguably, this is also a continuation of Kant's unanswered fourth question.
3. See for example, Jürgen Habermas' critique in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990); Thomas McCarthy's *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993) for less sympathetic responses and Axel Honneth's attempt at reconciliation in *The Critique of Power* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993). My focus will be on feminist engagement between critical theory and poststructuralism.

selves of what is best from our Enlightenment traditions. Hence, despite their individual differences, critical theorists generally assume a much wider scope for, or at least place a higher value on, human agency. Hence, the famous Foucault-Habermas debate.

My approach will be to examine a feminist iteration of the debate between poststructuralism and critical theory by examining one prong of critical theorist Amy Allen's project in *The Politics of Ourselves*—her critique of Judith Butler's account of the human propensity to be attached to one's own suffering such that envisioning social change becomes extremely difficult. Allen agrees with Butler that examining the painful hook that internalized oppression often has in the human heart should be part of diagnosing social pathologies. Allen also claims that Butler's assessment of the autonomy and agency necessary to work through this oppression is inadequate theoretically. I agree with the broad contours of Allen's position, especially with her claim that Butler "requires some notion of what binds individuals together in social and political movements to solve this problem (Allen 2008, 93). I also agree that critical theory must be empirically informed, but that Allen's argument requires an accounting of the nature of the being for whom suffering and flourishing would matter. Oddly, it is Butler who provides the clue for an anthropological entry point. In recent work, such as *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler postulates a fundamental corporeal vulnerability shared by all human beings, which she links to an awareness of our common humanity. She speculates that there may be some normative notion of the human implied by this vulnerability, although she remains ambivalent about it or the possibility of mutual recognition for fear of resurrecting humanism. However, she does claim that recognition of our common vulnerability, our "precarity," generates ethical obligations to either refrain from or redress the behaviors that would exacerbate our ontological vulnerability. In my view, sorting these issues requires engaging with Scheler's question. This article will offer an empirically informed ontogenesis of agency dependent on recognition as compensation for corporeal vulnerability. This ontogenesis will correct the deficiencies in both Butler's and Allen's accounts of agency, and illustrate the relevance of an updated philosophical anthropology.⁴

Allen's critique of Butler

In *The Politics of Our Selves*, Allen continues a line of thought begun much earlier in *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity* (1999). The more recent book deepens Allen's analysis of power and gender by locating

4. Ibid, 119.

Ibid? confirm referenece

it in an even more substantial attempt to reconcile insights from Foucaultian and Habermasian traditions. The former book describes modalities of power in the interest of clarifying gender inequities and assessing possibilities for feminist solidarity and resistance. The latter book takes up the challenge presented by Foucault and Butler, analyzing the complex ways that power works to shape and constitute subjectivities. Allen's work is important not only because of her engagement with reformulations of critical theory, but also because she provides clear, succinct, and astute analyses of the strengths and weaknesses of the most influential feminist approaches to the entwinement of power and gender.

For Allen, critical theory must discern the sources of human immiseration and account for the human capacity for critical reflection and self-transformation (Allen 2008, 2–3). Within this broader context Allen addresses Butler's assessment of the subject's often passionate psychic attachment to its own suffering. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler had argued that although Foucault explained quite well how power forms subjects, that is, how they incorporate given "disciplinary" norms, he ignored the emotional attachment to those norms that keeps them in place (Butler 1997, "Introduction"). This be would necessary, for example, in order to appreciate why a girl or a woman's understanding of herself as oppressed is often not enough to effect change. Because Allen is not satisfied with Habermas' relative neglect of the affective-motivational requirements for autonomy or with his treatment of the role that power plays in socialization, her engagement with Butler is intended to provide a corrective (Allen 2008, 122).⁵ Putting together insights drawn from the two traditions, she wants to develop a framework "that theorizes subjection without sacrificing the possibility of autonomy and that theorizes autonomy without denying the reality of subjection" (Allen 2008, 173). From the Habermasian tradition, she discovers resources for reformulating a conception of (political) agency that she finds missing in Butler's work. She draws especially on Maeve Cooke's contextualization and historicization of what both see as Habermas' overly rational, ahistorical subject, and on Jessica Benjamin's psychodynamically-inspired formulation of the recognition by others necessary for agency. Such recognition would refer to how people understand themselves as reflected in each other as separate beings who are structured the same psychically. Allen, following Benjamin, understands mutual recognition as moments within temporally unfolding, dynamic relationships (Allen

5. "Dwelling on the role that power plays in the socialization makes a strong conception of postconventional autonomy according to which we are capable of being rationally accountable for—in the sense of being able to reflectively distance ourselves from—our moral and ethical-existential choices difficult to maintain."

2008, 93). She agrees with Butler that there can be no outside to power, but she does not agree that relationships are primarily or only the expression of power. Hence, she needs to discover a source of empowerment not reducible to subjection, which is where recognition comes into play. Following Benjamin again, Allen claims that agency is the ongoing achievement of a subject dependent on requisite levels of mutual recognition, beginning with its foundation in early relations between infants and caretakers and continuing on as a resource in our social relationships as adults. Such recognition is “immanent to social life,” the necessary glue at the heart of our relationships, the bedrock of possible agency, and “at the very least, a regulative ideal” (2008, 179).⁶

Even though I agree with the substance of Allen’s position and elements of her strategy, her argument requires a thicker conception of the human who is or can be an agent. There are glimmers of this anthropology in her former book, *The Power of Feminist Theory*, where she makes analytic distinctions between types of power: “power-to” (capacity to achieve an end), “power-with” (capacity to achieve an end in concert with others) and “power-over” (control or domination). For me, this raises the question of what it means to be or to become a power-to or a power-with, i.e., what is the process by which we become agents who can cooperate to achieve goals? There are also suggestive passages in her more recent book where she examines Butler’s postulation of a fundamental corporeal vulnerability shared by all human beings. In this context, Allen maintains that the “radical dependency of human infants on their adult caregivers [is] a psychic and affective situation in which we are extremely vulnerable to subordinating forms of subjection” (2008, 171), but she does not agree that “identity per se is subordination” as Butler seems to be saying in *The Psychic Life of Power*.⁷ Although Butler continues to focus on subjection in her more recent work, she emphasizes shared corporeal vulnerability as the ground of an ethics of non-violence and tolerance of differ-

6. I will not be examining the two chapters devoted to Allen’s rereading of Foucault or her recasting of the status of validity claims, which would be separate projects. Allen refers to the debate between Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler as the “feminist incarnation” of the Foucault-Habermas debate, i.e., whether Habermas’ discourse ethics or Foucault’s genealogy provides a better critique of the nature of power in society. Allen seeks to split the difference here by integrating “Foucault’s insights into power and subjection with the normative-theoretical insights of Habermas” (*Ibid.*, 2, 3). Because the lynchpin is how to understand subjection in relation to fostering social change, and because gender is a theme here, my focus will be on Allen’s appropriation of Butler.

**Ibid? confirm
reference**

7. See “A conversation between Axel Honneth, Amy Allen and Maeve Cooke, Frankfurt am Main, 12 April 2010,” *The Journal of Power*, 3(2), (August 2010): 160, where Allen adds additional clarification of her position on Butler.

ence—as well as the link to an awareness of our common humanity and thus putatively the basis for collective solidarity (Butler 2004, 42).⁸ Ideally, for Butler, recognition should be of our differences: it is ethically imperative to keep open the question of who the other is.

Despite my agreement that caution is required regarding quick judgments about others, Butler's position provides no way to link corporeal vulnerability to a recognition of our common humanity (or to an awareness of common vulnerability) that would curb negative impulses. I agree with Allen that a theory of mutual recognition is necessary in order to forge these links. I add that the normative notion of the human that Butler resists articulating is also necessary. For Butler "primary helplessness" and dependence entail being "given over from the start to the world of others" (2004, 32–33). We desire to live, to be subjects, to be selves, but for Butler this entails forming passionate attachments to our own subordination or risk not existing at all. Thus, her notion of the human is fraught with negativity. Granted: we do become attached to the norms (injurious and otherwise) that we internalize and which become part of our identities. And although Butler recognizes the importance of attachment in infancy, the bulk of her attention is on how this vulnerability means openness to exploitation and violence. Equating vulnerability with destructibility collapses early dependence into subjection, to which Allen objects. Butler's way out is to couch resistance to negative interpellations as the repetition and variation ("resignification") of norms, which leads to a gradual transformation.⁹ Neither Allen nor I necessarily disagree with this strategy, but Allen asks an important question: where does the motivation to resist originate if identity equals internalized oppression?

In contrast to Butler and to address Allen's question, I argue that our vulnerability, despite being a site of possible subjection and unavoidable misrecognition, supplies the *motivation* for becoming autonomous and for acquiring the capacity to say "no" to internalized and other kinds of oppression. Furthermore, becoming a "power to" is more than saying no to oppression: we cannot say "no" without first having a sense of our worth or standing. Rendering these claims intelligible leads back to engaging with Scheler's question.¹⁰ I shift the focus more emphatically to a universal problem faced

8. See discussion in Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, 86–88.

9. Honneth has doubts about whether this would work because Butler has seems to be left with the position that the only "way out of subordination is to undo subjectivity." His suggestion is to develop "a more flexible notion of the self" ("A conversation between Axel Honneth, Amy Allen and Maeve Cooke," 161).

10. Early on Seyla Benhabib criticized Butler for failing to account for the spontaneity that is

by the species: its existential helplessness, along with accounting functionally and empirically for the developmental processes (compensatory behaviors) shared by all, which is the basis for having a sense of self-worth, being able to say no to injuries, and finally for developing compassion toward people who are different yet similarly situated.¹¹

Allen does appeal to developmental psychology as the empirical basis for charting how gender identity develops and to psychoanalysis to support her claims about mutual recognition; but burrowing more deeply into the implications of corporeal vulnerability will deliver a bigger payoff. In addition to developmental psychology and psychodynamics, I turn to cutting-edge research in a variety of disciplines (biology, evolutionary psychology and anthropology, and cognitive science) that share a common feature, namely the observation that human beings are characterized biologically by underdevelopment.¹² Thus, in order to become fully human certain non-natural

necessary to resist negative interpellations. Benhabib's take is: "Repetition and innovation, necessity and contingency are brought together in an interesting fashion here.... However, I think that one needs a stronger concept of intentionality and a more developed view of the communicative-pragmatic abilities of everyday life..." than Butler provides. Quoted by Allen in *The Politics of Our Selves* (160). See also Estelle Ferrarese, "Judith Butler's 'not particularly postmodern insight' of recognition," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 37(7): 762. Ferrarese points out that Butler's resignification "does not result from an action and an intentionality," which makes it difficult to pin down exactly what could provide motivation.

11. I do not mean to imply that only Butler has noticed the importance of corporeal vulnerability. For example, J. M. Bernstein, who has been influenced by his readings of Helmuth Plessner and Shaun Gallagher, has two recent articles that centralize corporeal vulnerability. See "Is Ethical Naturalism Possible? From Life to Recognition," *Constellations*, 18 (1): 8–20, and "Trust: On the Real but Almost Always Unnoticed Ever-Changing Foundation of Ethical Life," *Metaphilosophy*, 42(4): 395–416. And, as Estelle Ferrarese points out, Habermas "links his theory of recognition to an anthropology of vulnerability," 766. Habermas, unlike Butler, sees that the understanding of oneself is mediated by intersubjectivity. Furthermore, there is recent interest in formulating an "ethics of vulnerability," particularly by feminist theorists who have been inspired by Butler's work as well as by the "ethics of care." See, for example, *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, edited by Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
12. Availing myself of empirical resources is in keeping with the spirit of critical theory. Max Horkheimer—although critical of philosophical anthropology—described critical theory's mission as an "interdisciplinary materialism," drawing on the social sciences for empirical verification of its diagnoses of social pathologies and the natural sciences insofar as they did not assume a rigid distinction between nature and culture. Horkheimer believed that the mediation of the social reached into our biological being. Part of the argument is 1) given that biology was compromised by its connections with eugenics and Social Darwinism, it could not be a resource for critical theory despite Horkheimer's interest in it; and

(intertwined agential and social) solutions based on recognitive activities are required to cope with our biological givens. This will support Allen's under-theorized assumption that we can be autonomous agents not wholly subsumed by subjection, largely because of recognition's role in human development.

Power, vulnerability, and anthropology

In *The Power of Feminist Theory*, Allen delineates ways of understanding power in order to address diverse needs of feminist theorists to "illuminate the multifarious relations of domination, resistance, and solidarity." She argues that poststructuralist accounts of power, although useful for understanding how subjects are both produced and produce themselves out of their own subjection, cannot account for feminist interest in solidarity and are hard pressed to understand power as anything other than subjection. In her final chapter, Allen resists a monolithic, vague conception of power ("a night in which all cows are black")—the assumption that power is always strategic (Foucault)—or that it is always communicative (Arendt). Rather than finding a definition of power applicable to all cases, she pursues an analysis that will be useful for feminist theory generally. She parses power into "power-over," "power-to," and "power-with" as "analytically distinguishable features of a situation" (2000, 129; 130–131), insisting that power is always relational. She refines the concept further by considering the "modalities" of power. In the "foreground," are actual subject-positions available in a given situation and the internalized cultural meanings of femininity and masculinity that vary with race, ethnicity, and class. The "background," is the institutional contexts and structural aspects of power that shape life possibilities and subject-positions. Allen defines power-over in the usual sense of control by individuals, authorities, and institutional arrangements (which may or may not be benign); power-to as the ability or capacity to achieve an end; and power-with as the ability or capacity to achieve an end in concert with others. These definitions form the baseline of her analysis and she goes on to discuss resistance and domination in this context. Allen's bare-bones analytic distinctions between modalities of power assume that human beings are at least potentially self-determining agents.

It is here that philosophical anthropology will come into play in relation to questions raised earlier, such as: What sort of being can be or become a

2) after Habermas' linguistic turn, Critical Theory has lost sight of its original aspiration to be "supradisciplinary." See author, "Science, Normativity, and Skill: Reviewing and Renewing the Anthropological Basis of Critical Theory," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 37 (February 2011): 139–165.

power-to or a power-with? An answer depends on clarifying precisely what it means to be corporeally vulnerable understood as biologically incomplete. Although I will focus on the notion of biological vulnerability, a bit of background on classical philosophical anthropology will contextualize the importance of this notion. Philosophical anthropology emerged in the latter half of the eighteenth century, notably in disputes between Herder and Kant, and that re-emerged in the early twentieth century¹³—and more recently in Hans Blumenberg’s work. Length limitations preclude going into the history of this for the most part overlooked cousin of the humanist tradition, but the idea that humans are more world open and therefore more vulnerable to an affect-laden unpredictability is common to all of them. Gehlen, following Herder, captured this idea by referring to human beings as *Mängelwesen*, or creatures of deficiency. To stabilize, humans require non-natural solutions: ecologies of compensation in the form of a normatively structured life-world, composed of language, morals, skills, various habits, meaningful occupations, and so on, which Gehlen summarizes as “institutions.” Gehlen emphasized how compensatory behavior patterns then become “quasi-automatic,” thereby maintaining this stability by restricting the latitude of action (Gehlen 1988, 76). In short, human beings need a life world that supports, shapes, and informs their biological plasticity—one that is also a platform for their inevitable creativity. The term “compensation” refers to all acquired modes of living, which for human beings begin at birth through the ministering of care by parents. Compensation includes forms of social recognition that have become institutionalized and internalized, whether benign, oppressive, salutary, or some mixture of these.

In *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* [The Levels of Organic Being and Man], published in 1928, Plessner formulated the biological deficiency thesis as humanity’s “eccentricity” or “positionality.” That is, human beings are distinct from animals in that they are simultaneously embedded in and discontinuous from nature and their socio-historical setting. Whereas animals have a “centric” existence, guided by instinct, human beings are underdetermined (instinctually poor) and must compensate, which means always trying to strike a balance between embodiment and the lack of pregiven orientation. For Plessner, this constitutional rupture is the defining characteristic of the human being. To achieve balance, human beings become conscious, enlanguaged, and expressive in speech and gesture.

13. See Axel Honneth and Hans Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1988) for an excellent historical and thematic account of modern philosophical anthropology.

Gehlen and Plessner both aimed to substantiate anthropology's central assumption empirically, but the biology of the day was inadequate for this purpose.¹⁴ Recent work in comparative genomics and the life sciences, however, supports the idea that as organisms become more complex they also become more "detached" or less integrated naturally into an environment. There is also widespread recognition of the role of organisms in their own niche construction—of endogenous and adaptive phenotypic plasticity in the generation of effective evolutionary novelty. There is increased appreciation of epigenetic models of phenotypic stabilization and inheritance. All of this emphasizes the flexibility and increasing degrees of internal freedom (potential for self-generated adaptability) that accompany higher levels of detachment. Along with this comes an increasing susceptibility to contingent relationships and formations, which culminate in the most detached animal, the human being.¹⁵ Thus, bracketing claims that there is no outside to power (or subjection) for the moment, the human being, as the most detached and therefore most vulnerable creature (in the sense that it is the most underdetermined of species) *must* become self-directing or autonomous to a greater degree than other species. Humans are more than simply living beings; they are always in the position of, as Plessner would say, both being a body and having a body. Human existence is such that becoming autonomous entails continually taking up a relation to our living bodies. Physical existence is an ongoing project of learning, adjusting, and relearning (Plessner 1970, chs. 1, 5). Although natural beings, humans must have non-natural, social solutions that are not reducible to their biology. Neither Butler nor Allen makes this crucial distinction, but it may be implied by Allen's analytic framework. Having an identity or being autonomous is far more complex than the notion of attachment to internalized oppression can convey.

For human beings, greater degrees of freedom scale with greater needs for compensatory behavior in the forms of internalizing a culture *and* in being actively self-determining. Pinpointing precisely in what sense active self-determination is a necessary feature of human ontogenesis will provide a benchmark for how to theorize resistance to the collapse of vulnerability (and dependency) into subjection. It will also clarify how we become autonomous creatures in concert with others and are dependent upon the recognition that puts in place the foundation for mutual recognition as a possible resource throughout life.

note 00?

14. See **note 00**, above.

15. For a more complete account of recent biological research, see "Science, Normativity, and Skill: Reviewing and Renewing the Anthropological Basis of Critical Theory."

There are two more reasons for appealing to philosophical anthropology: first, anthropology is gender neutral because it is based on needs, facts, and processes of acquiring cultural orientation common to all human beings. It also does not assume an essentialist or determinant view of either human nature or of any specific cultural content, or an ungendered core.¹⁶ In addition, it can help account for how “gendered” positions are produced or constructed in relation to biological limit conditions. This is because philosophical anthropology characterizes the preconditions of symbolic differentiations and related patterns of behavior that might be made about sex or any other physical characteristic. One (but only one) way of coming to terms with contingency is by embodying the gender symbolism that is incorporated into and shapes roles and expectations. Philosophical anthropology shifts the focus to a set of invariable needs for compensation that are a structural feature of human existence. Regardless of which gender or biological sex we may be, we are vulnerable, dependent creatures needing a life world and its normative structures, which are put in place initially by the regard of others. Is it enough to invoke a desire to live and a “primary sociality,” as Butler does, stating that we are dependent on caregivers, and that we internalize disciplinary codes without more exploration of the process? (Benhabib 1992, 217–218). Allen’s appeal to the psychoanalytic account of recognition proposed by Jessica Benjamin is extremely useful, but too compressed.

Powerlessness becomes Power-to: The missing ontogeny

Agreeing with Butler, Allen claims that power is an anthropological given, that there is “no outside to power” (Allen 2008, 128). I take her to mean that no circumstances are devoid of power imbalances between individuals or between individuals and institutions and that these imbalances are often or even mostly relations of domination and subordination. Allen’s second book, however, does not make the fine distinctions found in the first book and thus often resorts to the shorthand of “there is no outside to power.” This can sound like the night in which all cows are black that she avoided in her earlier book. In any case, I propose shifting the focus to *powerlessness* (primary corporeal vulnerability) as the most fundamental anthropological given. What springs into relief is the incongruity and utter strangeness of “power to,” at

16. Allen criticizes Seyla Benhabib for using “gender-neutral language for describing the narrative ability that constitutes the core of identity,” for presupposing an “ungendered core” of the self (*Politics of Our Selves*, 164). It is unclear to me that Benhabib’s choice to distinguish between developmental processes and “cultural codes” (disciplinary regimes) posits an ungendered core of the self or whether she attempts to make heuristic distinctions.

least as the capacity to achieve ends. This is not to deny a converse side to powerlessness; however, does Allen cede too much of the framework to Foucault and Butler? Does focusing on the omnipresence of power as the source of subjectivation risk obscuring the significance of corporeal vulnerability for tracking how the preconditions for social agency and a recognition of our common humanity are built into the maturation process of every human being no matter how subjected he or she might be or become?

What then is the relation between powerlessness and the emergence of agency? Anthropologically, power-to would be the inchoate impulses that are part of being alive, which for human beings means needing to cope with underdetermination by becoming intentional, encultured beings. Butler does claim that the infant is “no passive medium; it enters the world with an array of needs,” and a “striving for life” (Butler 2003, 48). Given over from the start to already existing norms, an “I” emerges. Somehow this emergent “I” will later be able to call into question its own subjection, but little support is given to justify this claim or to explain what this striving for life is or entails. It is also unclear exactly who exactly this agent is. To thicken Allen’s analytic term “power-to,” and in keeping with the spirit of Critical Theory’s claim to provide empirical backing for its assertions, I will supplement philosophical anthropology’s key insight with recent empirical studies of anthropogenesis and ontogenesis. Although this approach may seem roundabout, it is necessary to capture a distinctly human intentionality in order to accurately conceptualize autonomy and agency. Only then is it possible to sort out the relation between gender and power.

If powerlessness is the anthropological given, then we come into the world having a body that is also an unformed capacity for intentional and goal-directed behavior—a striving to live. Intentional behavior involves, crucially, the increasing coordination of responses to the vulnerable body (Plessner 1970) in relation to cues from the environment. We learn to calibrate and adjust our behavior through the increasing automatization of bodily responses such that habits are formed. It would be impossible to function or to direct our attention to various projects without this background automatization or skill formation. How can this “unformed capacity” be understood? How can Butler’s “I” and Allen’s power-to emerge from vulnerability?

I propose that this striving in the midst of powerlessness be understood as an innate but primitive body schema that gradually becomes a kinesthetic “know how” that anchors human activity and cognition in the material world at the same time that it demarcates the bodily boundaries between an individual and the world. According to cognitive scientist Shaun Gallagher, a

body schema is “a capacity to move (or an ability to do something)...[which] involves certain motor capacities, abilities, and habits that both enable and constrain movement and the maintenance of posture” (Gallagher 2005). He claims that the body schema is a source of “proprioceptive information,” a perception or sense of the relative position of neighboring parts of the body that provides feedback about movement and makes adjustments possible in relation to the affordances of the environment. Feedback is processed and operates as the basis for “proprioceptive awareness” (Gallagher 2005b, 73). Taking up a relation to the body we have is a gradual process of coordination and differentiation.

Gallagher builds up his claim about an innate body schema based on studies of expressive gestures and imitation in infants. The infant, faced with “novel motor and gestural activities, already has the capacity to act out what it sees in the face of the adult—it recognizes what it sees as one of its own capabilities.” What begins with imitation and the progressive correction of imitations leads to increased motor capability. According to Gallagher, the structures that contribute to the generation of a primary performative self-awareness are mature at birth, although they lack coordination (Gallagher 2005b, 73, 74, 75). As it develops, the body schema functions in a non-conscious way even if we can become conscious of certain aspects of posture and movement. For example, adults might learn a new skill such as a particular dance. At first, attention is directed to movements, which become more automatic with practice. Even so, there is always something in “excess of that of which I can become conscious”—and ever more so as a skill becomes second nature. The body schema is the material basis of self-enablement, of physical agency, of acting intentionally in the world as a result of actively coordinating a relation to the fact of having a body.

However, this schema is at the beginning a capacity that must meet with consistent good-enough reinforcement such that a person can confirm a sense of agency based on trust in the world.¹⁷ The main point thus far is that the makings of “power-to” are this innate, but primitive, body schema that becomes the support of posture, balance, and movement and thereby integrates us into a shared world. Hence, this process is intersubjective from the very beginning of life.¹⁸ The acquisition of bodily skills while in a state of radical depend-

17. For an account of the importance of background trust as the ethical “substance” of everyday life, see J. M. Bernstein, “Trust: On the Real but Almost Always Unnoticed Ever-Changing Foundation of Ethical Life.”

18. In another essay, Gallagher cites research showing primitive body schematic development prior to birth. See “Dynamic models of body schematic processes,” in *Body Image and*

ence involves the infant coming to experience herself as an agent in a process shaped by the recognition of caretakers, which in turn allows her to begin recognizing and regarding herself as an independent being who is worthy in the eyes of others. This is the meaning of the compressed claim that *power-to is power-with from the beginning*. Given that our first experience with powerlessness takes place in a relationship that mediates the power discrepancy, it is misleading to use the term “subordination” as a synonym for dependence. The phrase being “given over from the start to others” captures just part of the story. Infants actively participate in relationships from the beginning, whether via mimesis, babbling, or in some way soliciting attention to meet their needs (Hardy 2009, ch. 7).

A body image in contrast to a body schema begins developing at birth through interactions with caretakers; it is about our partly conscious system of emotions, “perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions regarding” our own body. This is *my* body, my personal experience built up over time. Clearly, a body image may affect the workings of a body schema and both the image and the schema are modes of coping with plasticity, modes of human niche creation. However, the basic distinction between the body as mine and as it is affectively experienced as differentiated from the environment and as it operates primarily as a system of sensory-motor processes that regulate posture and movement within an environment is important. Body schematic activities and processes are gradually ordered in relation to actor’s intention and are colored by the beliefs about and attitudes toward the body that make up the body image. We are in the area in which most theorists operate: socially constructed meanings, but these are reflected in attitudes toward the body that at least indirectly affect the workings of a body schema. For example, dance or exercise can affect “the emotive evaluation of one’s own body image” (Gallagher 1995, 238). It stands to reason that asymmetrical gender relations, for example, associated with various regimes of truth will be incorporated into body image, as for example constraints on the movements of girls in many parts of the world, which will in turn affect the workings of a body schema and therefore habitual responses to circumstances. The sense in which we may be gendered all the way down is thus more complicated and perhaps harder to maintain—especially since gender does reference biological differences even if gender cannot be equated with them. An exclusive focus on body image would miss at least two things: 1) how gender has been and is a mode of tak-

Body Schema, ed. Helena De Preester, Veroniek Knockaert (John Benjamins: Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 2005), 236–237.

ing up a relation to a sexually differentiated body; and 2) the physical and intersubjective foundations of agency (body schema as a feature of the vulnerable human body and the corollary ongoing dependence on recognition) and autonomy necessary to counter Butler's tendency to collapse dependency and subjection given that her attention is focused on cultural codes alone.

Along the same lines, J. M. Bernstein usefully recasts Plessner's distinction between being a body and having a body as a relation between a voluntary and an involuntary (passive) body. That is, each of us experiences having control over our lives to a certain extent but there is always an involuntariness or its threat (powerlessness) given that bodies live, die, defecate, contract diseases, can be injured, laugh, cry, and so on—much of which is not under our control (except our sometimes being able to choose socially sanctioned places to experience involuntariness, e.g., the bedroom, bathroom, etc.). “Bodily experience [is] best understood through the adoption of a dual-axis conception of human embodiment: in one mode, I am a body that undergoes bodily life, while in another mode I have a body that is an instrument for realizing my purposes in the world.”¹⁹ If we are sexually differentiated, if women experience involuntariness in ways distinct from men, e.g., menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, plus the fact that women's bodies are morphologically different from men's, women's experience of vulnerability will be marked by these differences. If corporeal vulnerability—having a body that I must take up a relation to, but which I will never have complete dominion over—is a characteristic of the species generally, it is also true that women's ways of relating to the bodies (more holes and open spaces, and less physically strong) that they have will not only differ but women easily become a symbol for the fear of helplessness that is universal. It is not a new insight to say that the developmental necessity of relative autonomy and independence has been coded male and the correlative helplessness from which everyone seeks distance and fears has been coded female.

Although ahead of myself, I wanted to indicate how gender expectations can be elaborated on by examining the distinction between body image and body schema—keeping in mind the main point that the gradual refinement of a body schema as a practical attunement with and in relation to the envi-

19. Unpublished manuscript, “Torture and Dignity.” For Bernstein, dignity has a material, bodily basis that should command respect. The intelligibility of this ethical claim is rooted in a developmental story that begins with the care of bodily needs in infancy. This account runs parallel to what I offer here and I have been influenced by his analysis of the connection between trust, recognition, respect for bodily boundaries, and dignity—as well as his use of Plessner's distinction between the voluntary and involuntary body.

ronment is also a story about how corporeal vulnerability becomes the bodily autonomy through and by means of which an “I” emerges. Thus, the schema is both a constraint and an enabling factor for intentional behavior because the acquisition of skillfulness provides a dynamic stability by restricting the latitude of action (Gehlen 1988).²⁰ These body schematic activities are not mere reflex; the body actively and selectively organizes incoming stimuli, enabling the subject to direct attention to the external world as well as to internal states. How the body becomes self-organized through the coordination of a body schema and a body image is one piece of the puzzle about how we become powers-to. I add another piece of the puzzle by turning to evolutionary anthropologist Michael Tomasello’s account of the formation of intentional behavior—the need for joint attention with “conspecifics” (members of the same species).

Tomasello argues that human beings have a “biologically inherited capacity for living culturally” that bears on the discussion of intentionality and power-with—and eventually on gender (1999, 53), which I am locating in a response to a deficiency of biological norms. Tomasello infers this biological capacity by observing differences between human and nonhuman primates: human beings have the capacity to identify with and understand themselves and others as intentional agents, pursuing goals, and as mental agents thinking about the world. Human beings, unlike other primates, also discover that they can affect the intentional and mental states of the conspecifics, not just their behavior. For my purposes, Tomasello’s importance lies in his observation of the childhood acquisition of shared attention, identification with conspecifics, and the emergence of intentional behavior as a defining characteristic of the human species.²¹ Tomasello observes what he calls a “ratchet effect” resulting from cumulative cultural evolution (37), such that even though each human infant starts from scratch, humans have at their disposal the cultural learning into which they are born. Able to internalize (which they must do) the achievements and patterns of those who came before them,

20. *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, 236, 239. Gallagher is an anti-reductionist. In addressing the implications of his and others’ research, he claims that “If the body as a whole, and body schemata in particular, significantly affect cognitive functions, then neither the privileging of physiology over intentionality, or vice versa, nor the development of a discourse that strictly correlates physiological functions with intentional meanings will be adequate as a complete model of cognitive behavior,” (2005b, 240).

21. Tomasello has been criticized for overstating the differences between human beings and non-human primates. Perhaps he has done this, but for my purposes this does not matter because my claims about intentionality—whether or not and to what extent it is characteristic of only human beings—would still stand.

they are fundamentally historical beings. Tomasello does not discuss sex or gender differences, but if human beings must internalize the cultural learning of a given historical period, they will internalize the power—and other—relations embedded in the social moralities into which they were born, and this will include gender expectations and the construction of a body image. However, what we internalize are not just modes of subjection: we acquire skills of attunement with members of our species and ways of coping with the world, and this acquisition is fostered through recognitive activities because it is through recognition that both the skills and the inclusion into a specific community or group is how we come to be the kinds of beings we are.

Not surprisingly, infants are sensitive to contingencies and different adult styles of interaction from the beginning. Tomasello does not address how compensatory behavior solves the problem of contingency, but he does observe that infants are motivated to share psychological states, and that they engage in “proto-conversations”: “the glue that holds proto-conversations together is not just contingency but the exchange of emotion” (21, 22, 25). Parallel to claims made by Gallagher, Tomasello claims that infants often express the same emotion as the adult in dyadic behavior, and then in triadic activity, which is joint attention regarding an outside object (via mimesis or imitation). Gradually, the infant learns to anticipate the actions of others, acquires language, and internalizes and participates in normative structures and institutions of a society, which are acquired through the shared intentionality of culturally constructed affordances. Tomasello insists that there is a need for dynamic interaction between the infant or child and adults. Without such interaction, a child will not engage in much causal thinking and or learn to reason about the mental states of others. The need for this interaction underscores the inescapable intersubjectivity of the human species. Such participation with adults in specific cultures may involve internalizing asymmetrical gender relations and other forms of social inequality as part of the maturation process, although Tomasello does not discuss this.

Tomasello turns to object-relations theory for his claim that sharing of emotions and psychological states is foundational. “Affect attunement” refers to how infants “match” adult’s emotional states during a process of identification, which we have also seen in Gallagher’s account of imitation. I agree that the role played by affect is critical for understanding intentionality, and that object relations theory, developmental psychology, and cognitive science can help fill the gap. Given that underdetermination can entail excess sensitivity to stimuli, some means of regulating affect must be learned simultaneously with body schematic training. Becoming an “I” is of a piece with the coordi-

nation of a body schema, body image, intentional behavior, and affect regulation and therefore critical for taking up a relation to the body that one has and becoming powers-to/powers-with.

Becoming an “I” also involves learning simultaneously to regulate affect, which both object relations theory (psychoanalysis) and developmental psychology can help clarify. For example, psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott,²² describes the profound vulnerability of the human infant and provides yet another perspective on what it might mean for Butler’s “I” to emerge out of needs. The caregiver must cope skillfully enough with the absolute dependence of the newborn, enabling the child to build up a continuity of self. Love (compensation) is shown first as body care and the gradual process of affect attunement through mimetic activities that help the child acquire symbolic behavior. Entwined with this is integration in time and space and the experience of the ego as based on a body ego with skin as a limiting membrane (thus the formation of a boundary that should elicit respect). In accounts parallel to Tomasello’s description of intentionality, both Winnicott and developmental psychologist Alan Sroufe describe a series of stages that begins with the external regulation of bodily tension, the child learning to regulate her own states, and the formation of an effective attachment relationship to caregivers. This facilitates the child’s exploration of the environment.²³ The

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22. “Ego Integration in Childhood Development,” in *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1965), 56–63. Blumenberg also refers to psychoanalysis when he describes the “complete helplessness” of the infant and its demand for love as “compensation,” (*Work on Myth*, 5). Winnicott is representative of object relations psychoanalysis, which emphasizes the importance of attachment in infancy.
23. In *Affect Regulation and the Origins of the Self: The Neurobiology of Emotional Development* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: Hillsdale, NJ, 1994), 31–22, Allan Schore documents an “epigenetic sequence of adaptive issues which must be negotiated by the caregiver-infant dyad to achieve self-regulation,” via neurophysiological maturation. Schore leans on a biological model (which, interestingly, dovetails with basic assumptions of philosophical anthropology) that construes development as a progression of stages “in which emergent adaptive self-regulatory structures and functions enable qualitatively new interactions between the individual and the environment.” He claims that the primary caregiver facilitates “the experience-dependent maturation of a structural system” involving the growth “of connections between cortical limbic and subcortical limbic structures that mediate self-regulatory functions.” Early object-relations experiences directly influence the emergence of a frontolimbic system in the right hemisphere that can adaptively autoregulate both positive and negative affect in response to changes in the socioemotional environment... The core of the self lies in patterns of affect regulation that integrate a sense of self across state transitions, thereby allowing for a continuity of inner experience.” What he calls “dyadic failures of affect regulation result in the developmental psychopathology

infant acquires a sense of the not-me, which as Tomasello also claimed, blossoms between the ages of nine and twelve months.

Emotion is complex: it is cognitive, affective, and physiological (brain maturation depends on attachment). According to Sroufe, emotion evolved to promote social connectedness (feelings of attraction, love, grief at a loss, etc.). He also notes how emotion guided behavior is flexible and modifiable and that it gives experience meaning (143, 147, 151–52). At bottom affect regulation is a kind of empowerment—it is part of becoming intentional, autonomous beings within the cradle of a power imbalance.²⁴ This complexity and flexibility is advantageous, but it also registers our ongoing vulnerability given how susceptible emotion is to patterns of distortion, one—but only one—of which would be attachment to subjection.

Butler assumed a kind of “primary sociality,” but did not flesh out the notion. Thus far, in exploring part of the complex process by means of which human beings cope with their biological givens, I have suggested we understand “primary sociality” in terms of the necessarily intersubjective ontogenetic process involving learning skills grounded in the maturation of body schema, body image, joint attention, triadic attention, and emotional development, which is dependent on the ministering and cooperation of adults. Evolutionary anthropologist Sarah Hardy claims that we could not have evolved to become such complex beings without cooperation, which began with sharing food and childcare as part of our evolutionary history. Such cooperation was critical to human survival—and arguably it still is. I want to suggest understanding primary sociality along these lines.²⁵

My point in discussing philosophical anthropology, Gallagher, Tomasello, and others has been to flesh out ontogenetically the preconditions for and characteristics of power-to, which emerges from a proto-power-with. Each author reinforces the view that unless an infant experiences him or herself as an active participant in the processes involved in educating a body schema, participating in the acquisition of intentional behavior, and in learning to

that underlies various forms of later forming psychiatric disorders,” such as borderline personality disorder and psychopathology. Schore’s account of affect regulation supports Jessica Benjamin’s view that intersubjectivity is a dynamic process in which recognition is a critical factor, i.e., the caregiver’s empathetic awareness of the infant’s fluctuations and needs for a secure holding environment.

24. Virginia Held links mothering to empowerment and transformation in much the same way, *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

25. *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

regulate affect—each stage supported by recognition—the infant cannot mature and perhaps not even survive. These empirical studies support the notion that autonomy and agency are dynamic, ongoing processes dependent on the critical role of early care-giver recognition—and I claim that this dyadic process, no matter which sex or gender we are, is a reference point later on for differentiating between normal dependency on care-givers and others in a social context as well as for disentangling oneself from subjection. *Even a person attached to subjection would have experienced herself at some or many points in her development as an agent actively taking up a relationship to an involuntary body.* Our attachments to caregivers are simultaneously also at least partly attachments to the history of successful solutions to the problem of having a body. *There is no getting around this developmental story given that physiological, psychological, emotional, and intellectual maturation, and indeed sheer survival, depend on it. In addition, power-to and power-with are necessary correlates at the beginning of life, and early experiences of power-with are the foundation (“primary sociality”) for recognition of our common humanity.*²⁶ Through this ontogenetic account of development, the link between corporeal vulnerability (powerlessness) and our common humanity is rendered intelligible. Granted, to varying degrees a child is internalizing destructive power asymmetries and injurious norms pace Butler. Despite this, there is a moment of power-to that is not totally subsumed in the process, either by disciplinary norms or by total misrecognition, and this theoretical moment is missing from both Butler’s account of subjectivation and Allen’s assumption that we can be agents who can resist domination. Care and love necessarily include recognition of the striving for life in an individual being and this recognition, however tenuous, supports what will become self-recognition and then recognition of the other. This is the upshot of the recognitive activities involved in the developmental process, a process occurring within ecologies of institutional compensation and their varying degrees of support for autonomy or oppression in particular social and historical contexts.

26. Evolutionary psychologist Dacher Keltner, in *Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2009), discusses Victor, who was one of the “feral children” that are now and then discovered. Victor, the “Wild Boy of Avignon,” despite intensive instruction, learned very little language, did not get along with others, did not develop morals or cooperative relations with other people, and lacked self-awareness. “The first great love is what Victor never felt, that between parent or caretaker and child. This love enables what it means to be human,” (202–203).

Gender: Mimesis, myth, and complementarity

I also question whether gender necessarily entails subjection. It may be that gender has (or had) a legitimate orienting function in human life, despite the fact that difference has often meant being victimized by power asymmetries. I agree that there is no such thing as purely natural gender but I resist the conflation of gender and biological differences. I will also claim that complementarity is the orienting work accomplished by the historical identification of gender with sexual difference. That is, historically the tendency has been to view biological sexual differences as mandating certain “natural” roles and practices for men and women that complete each other, and this identification persists at deep emotional levels. Complementarity can refer to a relation between differences or contrasts such that the relation is (or has been considered) balanced, creating or intending a harmony or whole. Ideally, complementarity involves reciprocity and justice—a mitigation of the negative effects of power imbalances. I offer no defense of power asymmetry or of inherited women’s and men’s roles—only a description of the historical residue bequeathed to us, that is, what gender orientation has meant emotionally and functionally as an embodied mode of coping with a vulnerability that necessarily involves sexual difference. However, it is a mistake to assume that corporeal vulnerability is socially constructed. Butler implies this when she says that vulnerability cannot be posited prior to recognition (2004b, 43.)

The idea of gender complementarity is often attacked by feminist theorists, but perhaps something of value can be retrieved despite the heterosexual bias connected with gender’s origins. Certainly gender, in being disengaged from sexual difference in modernity, need no longer be tied exclusively to its historical identifications. Gender would then be the cultural memory or sedimented meanings of the history of our relation to sexual difference, which has entailed the masculinization of autonomy and independence and the feminization of vulnerability and dependence. However, filtered through Western modernity’s universalist notions of egalitarian reciprocity, complementarity could be understood as a regulative notion and therefore as an important element of envisioning solidarity, that is, of autonomous, yet vulnerable individuals of either sex working together on common projects—another point I hope to have clarified by the end of this article.

How more precisely does vulnerability relate to gender? Because human beings internalize sociocultural norms and meanings as part of coping with their lack of biological orientation, they also absorb a wide spectrum of subject positions, relationships to people, authorities, and institutions—which

can be likened to Allen's reference in *The Politics of Our Selves* (in her discussion of gender) as a "deep psychic and linguistic investment that structures not only how we understand the world but also how we understand and narrate ourselves" (2008, 171). Such internalization becomes "second nature" and creates the complex background of "social relations that ground every particular power relation" (2008, 131) (including but not restricted to subjection). For Allen, any analysis of power that references a "foreground perspective," would be incomplete without examining its background life-world context. For example, in the foreground a particular husband dominates his wife; a particular wife either resists or she doesn't; solidarity emerges out of collective protests against violence or it doesn't, and so on. These phenomena must be viewed against the backdrop of particular social, historical, and political contexts and their available resources (2008, 130–131). I fully agree. However, from an anthropological point of view, it is possible to distinguish between needing to embody and own as one's own compensatory norms per se in relation to organismic plasticity (taking up a relation to the body one has) and the specific power asymmetries embedded in that compensation. What are the implications? First, it cannot be claimed automatically that gender or any other compensation, whether it involves gender or not, is equivalent to domination, even though gender asymmetry, for example, has been the rule. Making a distinction between the compensation and what it addresses entails possibly assessing the extent to which the compensation recognizes the integrity and dignity of the individual in question. Clearly, it makes a difference whether a gender role supports a person's sense of herself as the author of effective choices, precludes or supports participation in available social goods, or causes psychic and/or physical harm. Second, without making this distinction we are hard pressed to identify a subject who has or can develop the "power-to" accomplish goals or resist inequities because there is no clear way to sort the relationships between the dependence all human beings have on others all of the time—most dramatically at birth, during illness, and old age—(basic needs for compensation) and subjection (injurious compensation, internalized oppression, misrecognition, etc.). Understanding subjugation and misrecognition rests on having a sense of what it would mean to actualize the potentials inherent in being an entity that must become self-determining while being dependent on the recognition of others.

One form of the sociality that the parent-child dyad initiates is the process of cultural internalization, an ontogenetic process that recapitulates phylogeny via history. I turn now to the connections between mimesis, affect regulation, gender, and myth on an anthropogenetic level—finally turning to the

tie between gender, understood as an orienting significance, and the much maligned complementarity. Evolutionary psychologist Merlin Donald, in *A Mind So Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness* (2001), presents an anthropogenetic explanation of the emergence of “directed attention” in hominid evolution that supports Gallagher’s, Tomasello’s, and Sroufe’s ontogenetic stories. A crucial stage, for Donald, involves the “control of emotion.” He claims: “The first humanlike culture was associated with a new species, *Homo*.... It must have been dominated by direct expressions of emotion,” and control of emotion would have enabled these prehuman creatures to share attention and knowledge “by means of gesture, body language, and mime.” Mimesis would have been a necessary “preadaptation for the later evolution of language.” He goes on to state that “having an accurate sensitivity to group feelings was a survival-related skill....mimesis is closest to our cultural zero point....and is the result of evolving better conscious control over action” (2001, 263). Thus mimesis, a kind of proto-recognition, is the foundation for becoming powers-with on a species level as well as on an individual level.

Not only must each human infant engage in mimesis as Gallagher and others have demonstrated, so also must homo sapiens. Early on, homo sapiens was deeply bound to a tribal mentality through mimesis. That is, mimesis is the cultural glue that holds a society together by regulating affect, and then language emerges as a mode of differentiating experience. Words focus our attention and clarify the experienced world. The byproduct of mimesis then is narrative or myth, very old and widely shared stories that lead to a “consensual version of a shared virtual reality” (Donald 2001, 295, 296). These stories are internalized by each new infant through the care of the parent(s) and the group. Referring to cultural institutions as “regimes of truth” compresses, reifies, and oversimplifies a complex and subtle process. Importantly, the word “regime” connotes negativity and constriction, bypassing the anthropological function of institutions to provide stability.

Donald’s treatment of this process supports philosophical anthropologist Hans Blumenberg’s more speculative anthropogenesis in *Work on Myth*, which addresses the function of myth from an anthropological perspective—and its ineluctable connection to sexual difference stories. According to Blumenberg, the first forms of cultural compensation were stories or myths that provided a cushion against reality’s indifference.²⁷ All great myths begin with a story about

27. Although Blumenberg refers to his account in *Work on Myth* as a “speculative anthropogenesis,” he also claims that it and his limit concept the “absolutism of reality” are justified because of what is common to “all currently respected theories on the subject of anthropogenesis” (4). However, a prior stage of development must be presupposed (to which

overcoming chaos of one type or another: “Myth itself tells the story of the origin of the first names from night, from the earth, from chaos. This beginning—as Hesiod [for example] pictures it in the *Theogony*—is crossed over with the ease of a leap and a bound, with a plethora of figures. The remnants of the previous dread now speak only to him who knows their stories as assurances of the depletion of their power” (xxxx, 38). The absolutism of reality, date which might be likened to (and experienced as) a night in which all cows are black, became recognizably a number of specific powers to contend with once they had been named and “procedures” set up for “getting along with power.” Blumenberg claims that myth exhibits a “directed process” through story telling (113), which is simultaneously movement toward a human form and distancing from something chaotic or “monstrous,” for example, the ungendered (or dubiously gendered) monsters that gave way to a plurality of gods and goddesses with human characteristics based partly on sexual difference. One way the monstrous recedes is through engendering/familiarizing stories that keep the ill-defined and uncanny at a distance. Absolutism is reduced when the powers have identities and their relationships become non-arbitrary but flexible. Behind these arrangements is pure chaos, an “opaque space in which forms make their appearance.” At the edge of the world are all the formless and awful things (“ungendered” monsters, such as Cyclops and some Gorgons) by means of which the border between the human and the abyss can be policed. Blumenberg claims that a pantheon of separate personalities that diffuse power is based on a “division into two sexes and the web of relationships based on that are firm preconditions for stories getting under way at all” (xxxx, 121). Sexual date difference stories based on biological distinctions were thus a primary mode of structuring the cultural compensations that make our world livable.

To cite these passages is not to suggest that any particular gendered model is immutable or just or that sexual difference is necessarily to be equated with gender difference. Sexual difference stories, or stories based on an awareness of sexual difference—whether they are passed on by means of great myths or whether they are part of any inherited cultural formation, form of recognition, or set of practices—familiarize the world and install a kind of anthropocenteredness. A human perspective must be from somewhere, and that somewhere must be related to human interest in orientation, and, furthermore, this

Blumenberg alludes), namely the emergence of a mimetic culture. According to Merlin Donald: “If mimesis is our cultural glue, stories are the main by-product, as well as the principal organizing force, behind the classic form of human culture, the oral tradition.” Stories are so deeply rooted in the ongoing operation of culture that “they assume a special cognitive status, that of myth,” (*A Mind So Rare*, 295–300).

orientation has involved assumed gendered differences as exemplified in the great myths that have been passed down through the centuries. Whether compensatory orientations create unjust arrangements is a separate issue, one that is best approached by examining the historical, social, political, and economic contexts of what has been put in place by the myths and other institutions and applying the concepts of justice, tolerance, and plurality at our disposal. If myth, and relatively constant meanings generally, manages the human relation to the indifference of reality, then it is not surprising that myths have countered reality's indifference by telling gendered stories that have shaped our assumptions given that each of us experiences bodily vulnerability as a sexually differentiated creature. Nor is it surprising that gender itself would eventually be thematized once these arrangements were experienced as inequitable—as involving unjust “power-over” relationships that efface the dignity that is put in place by early recognitive practices of those who would be members of the human community. I have claimed that we would not be able to experience this inequity unless some sense of self-worth had been put in place by means of an inhibition of power. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that recognition *is* a form of inhibiting power insofar as it acknowledges the (possibly less powerful) other as worthy of respect. Early recognitive experiences of childhood are precursors for adult capacities of power inhibition.

All human beings have intentional and affective requirements stemming from needs to compensate for corporeal vulnerability, and gender is a specific type or quality of compensation. More can be said about the needs filled by gender orientation, particularly at this historical time. Given: gender symbolism has been tied to sexual difference historically, and sexual difference has long been a pervasive standard for determining correct social roles in most of the world. However, the idea of gender contains a surplus of meaning beyond the fact of biological difference. This surplus meaning provides narrative possibility. The claim is that gender's function was and still remains, despite the increasing loss of sexual difference orientation in modernity, the possibility of telling a story of complementary distinctions between people (or in the case of lesbians and gays to discover complementary difference within sameness). Thus it seems that gender's anthropological function is to manage sociality via an embodied complementarity (a balancing of sexual differences, ideally with reciprocity and a recognition of equality), but this is a distinct type of complementarity precisely because it still references the sexual difference story. Hence the tendency to (falsely) naturalize gender. Why else would the debates about and repudiations of gender's tie to sexual difference be so charged?

My position is not far from Jessica Benjamin's, who claims that "the critique of gender complementarity results in a necessary paradox: it at once upsets the oppositional categories of femininity and masculinity while recognizing that these positions inescapably organize experience." She also asks, "if we do not begin with the opposition between woman and man, with woman's negative position in that binary, we seem to dissolve the very basis for our having questioned gender categories in the first place" (quoted by Butler 1997, 144). Our historical situatedness and legacy cannot be wished away. Butler rejects complementarity because she understands it as "projecting onto another what belongs to the self" (Butler 1997, 146). This statement occurs in the midst of a critique of Benjamin's notions of complementarity and recognition, which Butler finds problematic because she sees them as fundamentally dyadic and they therefore fail to "appreciate the triangulating echoes in heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual desire." Butler understands Benjamin to be saying that recognition means appreciating difference without resorting to violence, and so recognition has the potential to resolve differences within a harmonious dyad. Butler does not see the dyadic model as complicated enough to understand the relation between sexuality and gender once we renounce a binary model of relationships (complementarity is part of this) that would exceed the dyad. I can appreciate Butler's concern and that resistance to compulsory heterosexuality would be important, but isn't her reference point—the dyad of male and female—precisely that which she disavows, and doesn't this prove Benjamin's point that we cannot simply reject the historical matrix that renders complementarity understood as reciprocal balance intelligible. There is no need to reject complementarity *and* heterosexuality at the same time, because they are not necessarily connected even if they did materialize together historically within the context of a dyadic model. Complementarity can retain a dyadic valence, but one that ideally (regulatively) can be a reference point for imagining relationships of equality. Complementarity made reflective is the vision of a relationship cleansed of inequity: it is movement away from sexual difference ideology, but its meaning is part of the story of emancipation from this ideology.

That said: What does "gender" refer to in the modern world—based on having distinguished between socially constructed gender roles and biologically based sex differences? Gender, as part of our historical legacy, "mythicizes" or narrates the space that emerged from the loss of orientation based more exclusively on sexual difference roles. When we refer to gender, we are acknowledging the possibility of a distinction between a symbolically constructed designation and a biological fact—even though the discussion of body schema and

body image reveals how complicated making this distinction might be and how difficult it is to separate nature and nurture even analytically. Clearly the strength, some might say intransigence, of sexual difference orientation will vary greatly from culture to culture, but the tendency is for the tie between our experience of sexual difference and gender to recede in modernity and for the close couplings between autonomy and masculinity and vulnerability and femininity to blur, especially when individuals claim greater authority over how they relate to their involuntary bodies. And so, in the absence, or anticipated absence, of traditional sexual difference orientation, it is possible to identify the orienting work once accomplished by gender *as* orienting work. Our analytic term “gender” emerges as an abbreviation for and represents the sublation of the loss of the tie between sex and gender. Some would say good riddance, and be that as it may, the source of gender ambiguity and arguably its poignancy and distinctiveness is that it both does and does not reflect biological sexual differences—it both represents an orienting work we can identify as complementarity and it also contains an implicit acknowledgment of a specific kind of loss, that is, the loss of an orientation that once was experienced as natural and normative. To illustrate how change has occurred: when Sophocles wrote *Antigone*, the term “gender” was not part of the lexicon. When Antigone insists, against her uncle’s command, on burying her brother because it is her familial duty, her crime is partly her wild transgression of sexual difference roles when she disobeys Creon. *Our* recognition of Antigone’s transgression includes an awareness of the orienting work that gender symbolism conflated with sexual difference accomplished. Creon lacks the possibility of occupying that reflective space. Creon could not make a distinction between gender and sexual difference because that distinction had not been made historically.

So, there is no genderless unsituated self: there is only a set of needs whose compensation emerges in gendered, among other, ways. Once the work that gender as a symbolic mode of orientation accomplished and accomplishes on an anthropological level is clarified, it can then be asked what resources philosophical anthropology has to resist the power asymmetries that typify gendered social positions all over the world. First, by retrieving the notion of complementarity, it is possible to envision, in a regulative sense, potential symmetry (power-with) rather than an asymmetry that mandates destructive versions of power-over. Furthermore, inhibiting power is a necessary condition of justice. That is, it is possible to imagine and intend (power-to) gendered and other types of relationships on the symbolic site of gender itself that do not mandate the domination or compulsory heterosexuality that has accompanied the sexual difference symbolism as reflected in embodied prac-

tices and moralities throughout history (easier said than done). Thus, the argument is that part of what addressing oppression and domination involves is deconstructing or reducing the absolutism of rigid gender symbolism, which had become and in many parts of the world still is “sexual difference ideology,” but at the same time retrieving what is of value in the orienting work it accomplished. A reflective space opens for reimagining power-with that can be buttressed by modern conceptions of rights and social justice.

However, half the battle, as anyone who studies and writes about women in oppressive societies will attest, is changing the way both women and men think about what they perceive as natural or self-evident for women in their traditional gendered, sex-differentiated roles, i.e., undoing the internalized oppression that Butler so aptly describes. Nonetheless, it seems to me that attachments to normative femininity in the West, although responsible for much suffering, pale next to the imperative of female genital mutilation, the practice of selling female children as brides for older men, the suttee—all thought patterns and emotional investments based on absolutized gender roles justified by a history of cultural practices. Efforts to restrict women’s choices over how they relate to their involuntary bodies, either in the examples above or by attempting to reinstall power-over relationships that we have outgrown, such as criminalizing abortion, are attempts to externalize deep-seated, unowned fears of powerlessness onto the other. As Allen has stated, changing the way people think involves the very difficult process of encouraging them to change how they feel, how they deal with the emotions that are elicited when a deeply held myth about the nature of gender differences is challenged or when the most convenient scapegoat for feelings of powerlessness is the bodily vulnerability of women.

Not all compensations for the anxiety that accompanies corporeal vulnerability further the well-being of those involved, and feminist theory in having brought the gendered background and assumptions of human institutions to light has provided analytic tools to address very specific kinds of human suffering. Hence, by fleshing out the language of power anthropologically, gender can be construed as a myth-like story—one that in having been thematized has become an analytic tool. It is also possible to offer a critique of compensations, such as those given above, that does not necessarily reject the compensations wholesale but sorts out the orientation work, distinguishes between wholesome and harmful types of compensation, and resists the harmful types. From this perspective, gender has become a powerful critical tool precisely because it both does and does not have the essentialist force of sexual difference ideology. Gender continues to play a pervasive role in orientation work, which as such may be seen as salutary, but in trading on both the contingency of gender and

yet inevitably also the reference to sexual difference, human beings are condemned to seek perennially a delicate balance that is never far from possible appropriation for use in power-over relations. Resourced with an anthropological perspective sensitive to human needs for compensatory orientation, it is possible to make explicit the normative dimensions of ecologies of compensations in which gender is situated. Hence, along with Allen, I question whether it is correct to frame the problem as a choice between passionately accepting subjection or risking having no identity at all—except perhaps in cultures that would take the lives of women who do not submit to patriarchal practices. Not all gender orientation is equivalent to subjection any more than any orientation is automatically equivalent to subjection. Not all power imbalances are subjection either, although there is no shortage of people unable or unwilling to inhibit power insofar as they are unable to feel compassion for their own vulnerability and that of others, particularly when sexual difference (or any other) ideology precludes becoming aware of sameness.

Reconciliation?

Allen aimed to reconcile two diverse traditions, preserve the emancipatory possibilities championed by critical theory, and at the same time acknowledge the often intractable attachment to subjection. Both Butler and Allen hint at a normative notion of the human, but neither develops it. My argument has been that philosophical anthropology and insights drawn from a variety of empirical disciplines can supply resources needed for these tasks. By expanding on what it means to be vulnerable corporeally, which I have understood as being more detached or underdetermined than other living creatures, there is a rationale for tracking the ontogenesis of agency (and gender) with greater precision than critical theory has heretofore provided. There is also a way to get out Butler's dead end because it is possible to theorize a distinction between subjection and dependence and answer "the question [of] how the infant becomes a social self, regardless of the cultural and normative content which defines selfhood" (Benhabib 1992, 217). That is, it is possible to account for the passage from primal infant needs to the "I" that can resignify negative interpellations and to mine the implications of "primary sociality," which is fundamentally intersubjective and recognitive. If institutions are understood only as forms of domination, then Butler occludes their orientation function, which is to stabilize and support corporeal vulnerability.

Furthermore, distinguishing between a set of ontogenetic steps involved in the process of individuation and internalized cultural meanings provides a way to understand how it can come to be that an individual can say "no" to

an internalization because dependence (e.g., on caregivers and institutions) contains a moment of potential freedom. An infant must be actively engaged in an ontogenetic process by which she “transcends the causal order” from the very beginning of life.²⁸ There are obviously more and less successful negotiations of critical infant and childhood developmental stages, but people do resist subjection. Axel Honneth claims that “struggles are indications that certain forms of recognition have become problematic”; that is, they raise questions. However, questions would not arise if a sense of self-worth had not been installed earlier and if there were no cultural information available suggesting the possibility of alternatives.²⁹ For example, an Afghan girl says “no” to a forced marriage and runs away.³⁰ Some girls resist female genital mutilation. How can these girls and young women resist if their identities are solely the product of internalizing disciplinary norms? Early recognitive experiences that allow the child to develop a sense of worth necessary for agency are the sources of these rebellions, even if the parents and the society—which may be most important in this process—expected them to conform to traditional social practices.³¹ The story of Malala Yousafzai is a good example of the defiance of cultural codes—as well as the price that is sometimes paid. Both parents encouraged and supported her aspirations from the beginning of her life. When Malala spoke out against the Taliban and was shot, she instantly became a poster child for the education of girls. Her story resonated with a deep and yet suppressed yearning for freedom, an awareness that other worlds are possible (through media, contact with cultures in which women have greater independence, having freedoms already won taken away, and so on), but this awareness could not gain traction if it did not reverberate with early experiences of agency. Butler’s tendency to identify subjection and dependence rules out the possibility of rebellion. This rebellion is more than

28. The phrase is from J. M. Bernstein’s manuscript, “Torture and Dignity.”

29. For example, despite the formation of regressive Islamist enclaves that seek to install and enforce outmoded parts of Shariah law in major European cities, many women are managing to get an education that empowers them, creates employment opportunities, and challenges regressive parts of traditional customs regarding the place of women—particularly poorly educated female immigrants. http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/29/international/europe/29women.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 This liberalization exists side by side with female genital mutilation, forced marriages, and an “epidemic” of honor killings. <http://www.meforum.org/2646/worldwide-trends-in-honor-killings>, although there has been a gradual reduction of female genital mutilation in Africa in recent years.

30. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/31/world/asia/31flogging.html?>

31. See “The Target,” *Vanity Fair*, April 2013 (<http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/2013/04/malala-yousafzai-pakistan-profile>).

resignification, although it is that too. That said, recovering the orienting work accomplished by gender as complementarity, it is possible to envision what studies of gender and early childhood development can contribute to theorizing what it means to be not only a power-to but also a power-with.

Devoting so much space to human development is not to claim that good parenting will solve all our moral and political problems: rather, it is to isolate a normative trajectory or trajectory that is implicitly normative—a normative, dynamic notion of the human rather than a normative conception of human nature. The sediment of the developmental process (agency and self-regard) entails having learned skills of coping with our vulnerabilities (with the problem of having a body in Plessner's terms). This then is the basis not only of what is recognizable as valuable—namely a dignity to be preserved and not undone—but also the development of a capacity for recognition of the other as similarly constituted. In short: recognition contains the seeds of compassion. Having our own vulnerability and dependency recognized and cared for creates the potential to develop regard for the other—to recognize the other as constitutionally vulnerable and also in need of self-empowerment, despite our sexual and cultural differences. Claiming that we are constituted by power relations misses how we are constituted by and constitute ourselves by means of the inhibition of power. The normative emerges out of ontogenetic requirements, one of which is learning and cultivating skillful modes of inhibiting power, minimizing injustices, and promoting autonomy and cooperation on an individual, group, and on social/institutional levels. Our ontological vulnerability points toward a new kind of humanism—one without the excesses that was there all along in the anthropological tradition.

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Anxiety and the Emerging Child: Engaging “What is”

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ABSTRACT

This paper utilizes a humanistic psychology theoretical framework and pays attention to the rampancy of anxiety affecting youth in the United States. This paper intends to explore the phenomena of anxiety and discuss how it could be perceived as an opportunity for growth if approached in a constructive way. Specifically, we argue that youth need to be able to meet their inner self in the phenomena of anxiety in an empowering way, rather than unconsciously fleeing its destructive affects.

Keywords

humanistic psychology, anxiety

Introduction: Rampancy of anxiety

Anxiety is a widespread psychological disturbance in the United States. It affects more than 40 million people (18% of the population) and over six million people have been clinically diagnosed with General Anxiety Disorder (“Facts and statistics,” 2013, para. 1 and 8). According to Smoller, “Anxiety disorders are among the most common psychiatric disorders, affecting one in four individuals over a lifetime” (2009, 965). Anxiety deteriorates the body, the mind, and leaves the person susceptible to illness and isolation (O’Donnell 2011).

Anxiety typically manifests somatically as “palpitations, shortness of breath, dry mouth, trembling, sweating, gastrointestinal discomfort, diarrhea, muscle tension, blushing, and in the case of specific phobias, dizziness or fainting” (O’Donnell 2011, 46). These symptoms are typically elicited as a fear response to activities, situations, or things. However, the staple of anxiety is

constant worrying. Worrying is the most prevalent symptom for those suffer from General Anxiety Disorder (GAD), and results in disrupted sleep patterns, muscle tension, intense feelings, and inability to concentrate (Van der Heiden 2011). These symptoms distress and impair a person's vitality. One may conclude that anxiety is a plague destroying the health and well being of humanity (May 1953, 1977). The symptoms of anxiety manifest slowly, sometimes going unnoticed, and ultimately become the silent killer of happiness and fulfillment.

A specified etiology of anxiety eludes researchers and practitioners; there is no single gene to blame, disturbance in a particular brain region, or an anomaly of a single the neurotransmitter (O'Donnell 2011; Smollwer 2009). However, anxiety is known by neurophysiologists to involve the limbic and medial prefrontal parts of the brain. This includes the amygdala, which regulates emotional stimuli, particularly those that are associated with anxiety or fear. However, the most substantial risk factor for anxiety disorders has proven to be family history (Smoller 2009). Through research at the molecular genetic level, it has been shown that all anxiety disorders have a potential to be inherited. Roughly 20–40% of those with anxiety disorders are inherited (Smoller 2009).

Most people with an anxiety disorder can recognize what they are afraid of or be able to clearly identify potential threats. However, those with General Anxiety Disorder cannot find a clear and definable threat (Van der Heiden 2011). Therefore, worrying engages possibilities of what might happen, ultimately causing the person to live exclusively in future happenings. People with anxiety disorders, particularly GAD, find it very difficult to control worrying, and believe worrying is harmful and dangerous (Van der Heiden 2011).

Adults are not the only people who suffer from anxiety. It is reported that between 15 and 20% of children and adolescents suffer from some type of anxiety disorder (Beesdo, Knappe and Pine 2009). According to the *Anxiety and Depression Association of America* (2013), one out of every eight children is affected by an anxiety disorder ("Children and Teens," para. 17). During these years of human development, anxiety may sporadically manifest symptoms or one may even develop a full fledged disorder.

However, it is argued that anxiety is not an abnormal experience for a child (Beesdo, Knappe and Pine 2009). For the majority of children, anxiety is a normal phase/experience in life and does not have any significantly detrimental effects, nor does it interfere with growth/vitality. At the same time, there are many children who experience a full anxiety disorder and suffer in fear, introversion, nervousness, and become avoidant of growth promoting

activities (“Children and teens,” 2013, para. 1). When untreated, youth with anxiety disorders have poor performance in school, are reluctant to partake in social experiences, and are at higher risk for substance abuse (Beesdo, Knappe and Pine, 2009). Moreover, the rate of anxiety rises for youth especially between the ages of 15 and 24 years of age (Hodgson, Shelton, van den Bree and Los 2012; Sancakoğlu and Sayar 2012, 208). These years are critical for successful development in social, personal, and academic areas of the child’s life. In sum, the anxiety disorders affecting youth is of great concern.

Anxiety is a phenomenon that affects the child holistically. It requires further inquiry and exploration in order to fashion innovative and creative preventative strategies that can help the youth deal with these disturbances in healing ways (Batelaan, 2010; Bonner and Friedman 2011; Hodgson, Shelton, van den Bree and Los 2012; Segal 2006). The best and most effective treatment for anxiety disorders is prevention (O’Donnell 2011). Currently, anxiety disorder prevention does not have a comprehensive framework so that prevention can be tailored to meet a diversity of needs and circumstances (Rapee 2012).

Hence, by utilizing a humanistic psychological framework, this paper intends to discuss how the prevalent phenomenon of anxiety can be perceived in a more constructive way by youth and for people that work with the youth (e.g., teachers, parents, medical practitioner, or mentors). That is, we argue that youth need to be able to meet oneself in anxiety, rather than unconsciously fleeing, so that youth could be less susceptible to the negative affects of anxiety. Also, we intend to propose ideas to create a helpful environment where youth are encouraged to actualize themselves. Specifically, we address the importance of love, freedom, hope, creativity and spontaneity.

One cannot say “I feel anxious,” or “I am have much anxiety in my life,” because we cannot divorce ourselves from our feelings or from our body’s response. The *I* in the statement removes a person from the anxiety as if it is something to have. When indeed, you cannot throw it away or walk away from it; rather, to fully emerge from the negative effects of anxiety and to become empowered by it, you must realize at this moment, you *are anxiety*. As you embrace the anxiety, you will embrace your self, and ultimately the phenomena will reveal what it truly is.

Theoretical framework: Emerging as a person

Humanist psychologist scholars such as Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and Karen Horney enlightened many to the dynamic origins of certain personality disorders and found new ways to understand and treat psychological disturbances in youth (DeRobertis 2012). Briefly put, humanistic psychology focuses

on subjective experiences, free will, and the ontology and phenomenology of human experiences (American Humanist Association 2003; Hansen 2005; 2000). It is holistic, anti-reductionist, nondeterministic, and embraces creative expression and growth (DeRobertis 2012; Pienkos and Sass 2012). The common denominator for all the humanistic theories is that human beings have an innate dignity, worth, and are struggling to become more of themselves (American Humanist Association 2003; Maslow 1971; Pienkos and Sass 2012; Rogers 1969, 1980; Williams 2012). A humanistic orientation values human beings and believes they need respect, love, and a genuine sense of worth. Love designates “an act of healing, protecting, and nurturance toward the sanctity of being alive” (Krippner, Pitchford, Davies and Adhikari 2012, 599).

Based on humanist psychology, in this paper we understand the essential nature of human beings and life overall, as *emerging*. The idea of emergence signifies a “directional tendency toward wholeness, toward actualization of potentialities” (Rogers 1977, 240). Every capacity and potentiality is sought to emerge into a sense of wholeness or self-integration. Psychologist Clark Moustakas once worked with a terminally ill child and came to appreciate that even given the worst diagnoses or condition, the child “remained spontaneous, autonomous, active, in touch with life in an imaginative, flowing sense” (Moustakas 1966, 15). A child will not surrender, become passive or dependent. Children are *emerging* regardless of conditions or circumstance. This humanistic conception of the child proves integral for facilitating growth. Therefore, we argue that all humans, regardless of circumstance or condition, be regarded as *emerging*.

One may validate the idea of *emergence* from simple observation of any life form in desperate conditions striving to live, striving to become (Rogers 1977). Psychologist Carl Rogers offered the metaphor best, where as a child he observed in his dismal basement the spindly white sprouts shooting out of the winter supply of potatoes toward the light from a tiny window above. Those potatoes would never stretch their sprouts through rich soil again. But it is the nature of all life, including those potatoes, to adhere to an inner direction that seeks growth and to actualize every potential. Rogers tells the story,

The sprouts were, in their bizarre, futile growth, a sort of desperate expression of the directional tendency I have been describing. They would never become plants, never mature, never fulfill their real potential. But under the most adverse circumstances, they were striving to become. Life would not give up, even if it could not flourish. (Rogers 1980, 118)

Life is an active process regardless of conditions, but the conditions are important for its development and growth. Emerging youth, similar to our

vegetable friends, need favorable conditions for growth (Moustakas 1956; Rogers 1977). Providing a safe atmosphere of freedom, the child will express thoughts and feelings as a means to explore the self and relate to others. Research has proven that if we create conditions to be like rich soil youth will emerge and grow and realize potentials at any given moment.

The idea of satisfying needs to *actualize* one's being was championed by Abraham Maslow's (1971) theory of basic human needs. Once the basic physiological and safety needs are satisfied, the child may begin to form meaningful relationships. These relationships help the child understand more about living in a world with other people as well as his/her self. The interactive and social aspects are unique to human growth. The relationships we form offer a sense of self-esteem, or sense of worth. A child will grow with others, "in love and in frictions, he will also grow in accordance with his real self" (Moustakas 1956b, 221). When the child lives a well-balanced life, living congruently with internal and external conditions, in a world with others, he/she begins to actualize.

After basic needs such as nourishment, love, and safety are satisfied, the emergence into self-actualization begins (Krippner, Pitchford, Davies and Adhikari 2012; Maslow 1967, 1971, 1998). The self-actualizing person has a deep appreciation of elements that satisfy basic needs, regardless of how common the experience is, such as sleeping in a warm bed, playing with a beloved dog, or even eating a sandwich made by your mother. *Everything matters* for the self-actualizing person. Even after witnessing a lifetime of sunsets, the next one proves ever more breathtaking (Moustakas 1956). In this enlightened realm of being, "there is no poverty--nothing is insignificant or unimportant" (Rilke 2000, 12).

Exploration is a key component of the emerging child's life. They are open to creatively express and assess their self and feelings without fear. Communicating with others freely and creatively are avenues of exploration for the self (Rogers 1977). The self is accessed through intuition, feelings, emotions, daydreams, and fantasies. The emerging child may find better values within him/her self than what the present cultures or societies offer. For the child, "this increasing ability to be open to experience makes him far more realistic in dealing with new people, new situations, new problems. It means that his beliefs are not rigid, that he can tolerate ambiguity" (Moustakas 1956b, 203–204). Many situations do not have solutions nor does the emerging person insist closure upon them.

In this framework, "the individual seems to become more content to be a process rather than a product" (Moustakas 1956b, 210). Developing this

openness of awareness is a person *emerging*. As Moustakas (1966) describes,

In place of the habitual dead happenings, in place of the routine patterns and habits, in place of systems of definition and function bounded by proper time and proper place and proper role, a real person emerges who is suddenly present in the world, ready to collaborate with life, ready to use his resources for self-growth and for fundamental ties to nature and the universe. The individual no longer gets in the way of himself; he knows what he wants; he is aware. (1)

The emerging child seeks to develop his/her organic self, as he/she develops a self-trust and sensitivity to life's processes (Moustakas 1956b; Rogers 1969, 1977). Emerging children will come to seek responsibility in life's fluidity and will discover more about themselves and will become more aware of the reality of the external world not lead by dominant perceptions and categories (Bugental 1965; Fromm 1955; Moustakas 1956). No longer understanding the world in totalizing or reductionist concepts, such as, all failures are debilitating or certain people behave a certain way.

Actualization for the emerging child indicates a greater awareness of the existence and potentials of life. This occurs when "needless constraints of the personal resistances and cultural inauthenticities are eliminated or markedly reduced in their limiting efforts" (Bugental 1965, 263). Often, understanding actualization is held back by cultural conventions or language that focuses more on pathologies than on health or growth. Once released from limitations, the child seeks emergence of his/her potentials (Moustakas 1967). Through this process, the emerging child will not be driven by material, power, authority, or external stimuli or rewards, but by genuine self-growth and willingness to contribute to the growth of others (Medlock 2012; Rogers 1977; Wichmann 2011). Emerging children seek creative and positive ways of articulation, expression, and relating to others around them.

Beyond terminology: Anxiety and stress

As Gudmunsen argues, we "Divide up the world *into* 'objects,'" and once we have the objects (e.g., categories or distinctions), the *things* are so real that nothing new can be brought into existence" (1977, 39). However, what we perceive as a distinctive entity as anxiety may be "a result of mental fabrication," which does not exist in itself but only "exist because they are *named*—distinguished from something else" (Streng xxxx, 69, as cited in Gudmunsen 1977, 43–44). There is no *thing* that exists independently from the interwoven relationship with environment or/and another person, as we commonly perceive.

The words that are used to designate phenomena of the mind greatly influence how one thinks about that phenomena and people, and how we act

on them. The medical language used to describe mental illness, may be as fictional as myths (Szasz 1970).

Furthermore, from the late twentieth century to today, people use the word “stress” synonymously with “anxiety,” even though they are conceptually different (May 1977). Stress is a concept used in physics and engineering, but is widely used in psychology because its metaphoric qualities allow one to define and measure phenomenal qualities (May 1977). Psychology has inadequate ways to measure or define this human phenomenon on its own grounds, and so the use of metaphor helps. A bridge may bend or collapse under a great amount of stress at a specific point. Analogously, we may understand that when a person has too much stress from culture, societal demands, changes, personal value conflicts, etc., we say that the person is under those stressors, and can only handle so much weight. May states, “The problem with the term ‘stress’ as a synonym for anxiety is that it puts the emphasis on what happens to the person” (1977, 110). To be exact, “*anxiety is how the individual relates to stress, accepts it, interprets it. Stress is a halfway station on the way to anxiety. Anxiety is how we handle stress*” (May 1977, 113, italics in original text). That is, the failure of handling stress in a constructive way may result in anxiety.

The child suffering from anxiety presently carries a hurt or fear and feels his/her core values or self is threatened (May 1977). The real or imagined fear works itself out or is protested in the life’s narrative. Anxious children dread the future and are lost in a world of ‘what if’.

Anxiety is a narrative of fear. As Keen describes, “Fear prepares for unwanted surprises” (2011, 69). One continuously falls into an “almost universal habit” of thinking that our thoughts are in direct correspondence with, or are, objective realities (Bohm, 2009). The perpetual inner story telling can be perceived as the only important reality which robs oneself of the opportunity to notice other infinite possibilities available right there.

Fear and worrying have been measured, recognized, and diagnosed as anxiety. The diagnosis, along with the fixed perspective as a negative phenomenon from which one should strive to escape, estranges one from the narrative elements or oneself as whole. When mental illness is interpreted negatively, we fail to look at what the fear is about. Rather, one quickly resorts to some type of external influence to temporarily remedy intense or complex feelings. According to Keen (2011), this is why drug therapy is the most frequent method of treatment. Drug therapy is convenient, easy, and reliable, but it overlooks the very person experiencing the disorder. The person becomes dependent upon the influences and power of the drug, never exploring the narrative elements that the *disease* has originated from and continues with.

Atwood recommends that we move beyond the language of diseases and disorders and “concern ourselves with subjective catastrophes, with personal crises, with enduring dilemmas and captivities to trauma that destroy the quality of our lives” (2012, 58). Similarly, Keen recommends that to get past the sterile language of diagnostic manuals, we need to go deeper into the subjective narrative of the person and ask, “what is the person trying to do?” (2011, 69). The contents of narrative can allow one to understand how the person informs the symptomology of depression (Keen 2011; Malone Westen and Levendosky 2011). A whole new perception of mental phenomena could allow one to see how youth are responding to culture, environment, condition, and meanings in human context. “Anxiety” would take on new meanings, as we understand them through the person. By doing so, one may not only better deal with apparently negative mental conditions but also utilize them as opportunities for one’s personal (and possibly social) growth.

Knowingness

Fromm declares that “the deepest need” of human beings is to overcome one’s aloneness or separateness, or in many cases, being alone with anxiety (1956, 9). “The absolute failure of this means insanity,” the complete withdrawal from the world outside (Fromm 1956, 9). Similarly and ironically, with his concept of *false-self system*, Laing (1969) explains that a self that wants to be protected from the world ends up suffocating and deadening itself. By dividing and isolating oneself, the *inner self* tries to live only mentally, and resists meeting and being enriched by the outer world (of which the person may feel the anxiety originated from). Rather, the inner self meets the world only through the false self, in which the inner self doesn’t consider real in the first place. The self is “never revealed directly in the individual’s expressions and actions, nor does it experience anything spontaneously or immediately” (1969, 80). The self is “precluded from having a direct relationship with real things and real people” (1969, 82). Protecting oneself by isolating oneself from the outer experience leads to “persistent despair” and “haunting sense of futility” (1969, 75). As Laing puts it, “the tragic paradox is that the more the self is defended in this way, the more it is destroyed” (1969, 77).¹

1. Laing (1969) clarifies that his theory of false-self system does not only pertain to the people who are officially diagnosed as schizophrenic. Instead, he blurs the boundaries between the sane and the insane by defining the term schizoid as an individual, the totality of whose experience is split in terms of either the relationship with the world or the relationship with oneself (1969, 17). According to this definition, it is right to say that a majority of people in modern society is close to the insane (Berman 1981).

Youth find ways to deal with anxiety. They ultimately live with it by making anxiety their identity, habits, or focus and these become like a heavy armor to the self that has a crushing weight (Krishnamurti 1973). Youth suffering from anxiety may be too caught up in its manifestations or subtle disturbances, that they can only see themselves, others, world, and life in limited capacity; not seeing it with the fullness of the mind, heart, and spirit (Krishnamurti 1973). Being absorbed by anxiety makes the phenomenon of color, light, dogs, music, and trees become the background images of life and living. It is likely that they have relations with the images of these things, but never having direct relationships with the actual things themselves (Heidegger 1962; Krishnamurti 1973; Segal 2006). Furthermore, youth will not strive to have a direct relationship with the mental disturbance, but only the image of it and the image of themselves dealing with it.

Understanding the personal narrative or experience of anxiety is an exploration of Being. An individual will experience a phenomenological truth when “that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (Heidegger 1962, 58). This phenomenological framework, according to Said, “approaches experience as a novelist or poet approaches his subject, from within, but it is not all anti-scientific, on the contrary, its aim is to put science on a proper footing and to restore it to experience” (2000, 4).

It is therefore the person’s mission to utilize his/her aesthetic and creative capacities to understand what a child is going through and humanize the scientific diagnostics. It is to help a child directly meet what is going on with oneself and the world, and allow the phenomena of anxiety to reveal itself, from itself (Heidegger 1962). We may need to “see ourselves while neither identifying with any particular nor separating ‘me’ from ‘not-me’” and “actually face ‘what is,’ including the sense of lack and our backfiring strivings to escape from it by objectifying ourselves with material or psychological commodities” (Kazanjian 2012, 273).

The self-identified Buddhist social theorist, Loy argues that we should be aware of and stop all the efforts to make myself *real* by making myself an object, which is “giv[ing] power over oneself to those persons and situations which can grant or refuse the symbolic reality that I hope will fill up my *lack*” (1992, 165). He asserts that we need “de-reflection” or undoing the process of “my seeking to be something” by facing “the void” or “nothingness” in order to stop the fertile effort to escape from what we perceive as negative (Loy assumes that what we ultimately strive to escape from is a sense of void or lack) (1992, 173). He explains,

According to Buddhism, letting-go of myself and merging with that no-thingness leads to something else: when consciousness stops trying to catch its own tail, I become no-thing, and discover that I am everything—or more precisely, that I can be anything. (Loy 1992, 174)

According to Loy, nothing can fill up “the bottomless pit at the core of my being,” because “there is really no-thing there that can be filled up” (2003, 164). Rather, “instead of running away from this sense of emptiness at our core, we need to become more comfortable with it and more aware, in which case it can transform from a sense of lack into the source of our creativity and spontaneity” (Loy 2003, 164).

A child’s phenomenal *world* is a dynamic pattern. When one retains a critical self-consciousness and becomes more comfortable with oneself (including a sense of anxiety or fear), one is not fixated as a *thing* (e.g., one’s image of oneself) or to a *thing* (e.g. the ideas of social requirements). As one becomes *no-thing*, he/she is free to become anything, capable of noticing more possibilities available, and designing his/her future, meaningful relationships, meanings, his/her world, and self (May 1983). In this awareness, there is no a dichotomy between the self and the world. As Krishnamurti states, “The world is me and I am the world, then whatever action takes place whatever change take place, that will change the whole of the consciousness of man” (1973, 108). An interconnected person that is fully alive seems to find a harmony between his/her heart, mind, body, and world (Krishnamurti 1973; Moustakas 1995; Rogers 1942).

Being reflective and reflexive of anxiety is not solely about past events, but it is more about critically reflecting on and being mindful of current desires, attachments, and perspectives as they arise, with which past events resurrect and reincarnate (Kazanjian 2012). This kind of self-awareness, existential sensibility or expansion of the child’s consciousness is key for creatively overcoming anxiety, or difficult times (Aich 2013; May 1977; Mendelowitz 2011). Children begin to confront and rethink their habit of identifying themselves with their thoughts, feelings, anxiety and fear, or stress. Youth need to be encouraged to develop a new relationship with their minds so that they can expose and intervene in the unnatural realities of anxiety.

Toward a new understanding: Helping youth emerge

Anxiety consumes excessive amounts of energy. However, as Krishnamurti states, “[W]hen there is a possibility then there is great energy. What dissipates energy is the idea that it is not possible to change” (1973, 78). To regain energy to deal with and learn from problems, setting youth up for success would be

helping them to see and experience hope by taking immediate and decisive action. For example, finding possibilities with delusional beliefs may expose thematic truths in anxiety, such as loneliness, relationship issues, communication problems, loss, and sadness (Pienkos and Sass 2012; Segal 2006). Dismissing beliefs as being false robs the person of the existential reality that lies beneath the belief. Instead, the youth should be encouraged to face what feels monstrous. They should be assisted to experience that as soon as the devastating feeling (for instance, anxiety) is *seen*, the monster loses its power over them.

Also, we must help youth not to endeavor to answer a problem, because if they do, they go outside of it. It proves much more growth promoting and enlightening if youth remain with the problems or disturbances completely, to give it their full self and attention, live the problem, and therein they will live the answer (Krishnamurti 1973). Similarly, anyone who mentors youth should be careful not to provide them with answers. Rather, youth should be encouraged to have ownership or freedom over themselves and their life, and realize that they are the ones who have to, and have capacity to, live their problems and their own answer on a distant day. As Rilke (2000) writes to a young poet,

Try to love the *questions themselves*, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language. Do not now look for the answers. They cannot now be given to you because you could not live them. It is a question of experiencing everything. At present you need to *live* the question. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant day. (Rilke 2000, 35)

When youth experience their truth, they may become more capable of facing what it is and exploring it with more creativity, patience, and authenticity (Moustakas 1995). Unfolding within us is the process of awareness, of seeing. With this existential sensibility Rilke writes, “I am learning to see. I do not know why it is, but everything penetrates more deeply within me and no longer stops at the place, where until now, it always used to finish. I possess an inner self of which I was ignorant” (1930, 5)

It will be with personal freedom or respect for self-determination that youth will be able to learn to see ‘what is’. Optimistically, freedom is the ability of a person to be pro-active in the responsibility of choice, decision, integration, and development of his/her self (Cantril 1967; Bugental 1965; Fromm 1965; Rollo 1953; Wichman 2011). A person with freedom resists rigid customs, traditions, habits, and other obstacles to a free, flowing, and active life as the self (Bonner 1967). The unique dynamic of a person’s inner self and interpretation of the external world emerges as an authentic person

during existential moments of choice and decision (Gordon 2012; Krippner Pitchford, Davies and Adhikari 2012). When youth are provided with the freedom to choose, reflect, creatively explore and express, they will choose to live, strive to grow, and commit to life “not only for himself but for humanity and for all that exists in the world and beyond it” (Moustakas 1967, 125; 1995). When youth are given with authentic freedom and respect, they will emerge as a person.

The creative genius

A life lived in freedom is a life of uncertainty. Embracing the uncertainty of life provides opportunities to access deeper levels of understanding, opportunities for self-actualizing moments, and experiences of phenomenological truths (Bonner and Friedman 2011; Heidegger 1962). Through expression, the opportunities to express oneself in a creative and spontaneous way will help youth have self-actualizing experiences and ultimately grow from the anxiety. When youth experience a self-actualizing experience, they become fully immersed in what is happening presently (Maslow 1967). Leaving behind the past and future, youth are entirely in the living moment with mental clarity, *with* anxiety (Bonner and Friedman 2011; Krishnamurti 1973). In safe and accepting self-actualizing moments, one can begin to access deeper realms of the anxiety, and begin to understand and creatively express it with their whole being (Aich 2013; Rogers 1977).

For many, this moment of self-actualization is felt when they are doing something spontaneously. Spontaneity is more than just an egocentric or momentary release of feelings. Rather, according to Rollo (1953), it is

The acting “I” responding to a particular environment at a given moment. The originality and uniqueness which is always part of a spontaneous feeling can be understood in this light. For just as there never was exactly that situation before and never will be again, so the feeling one has at that time is new and never to be exactly repeated. (Rollo 1953, 114)

It is in the spontaneous moment that people take risks to be themselves and be creative.

Creativity is not exclusive nor is spontaneity. Creativity is “the process of developing original ideas that have value” (Robinson 2011, 2–3). The process of creativity means spontaneously acting, doing, being involved with manifesting imagination into our world. It can be done with music, writing, business, mathematics, or even through play. The creative capacity, which lies within each individual, enables one to perceive interconnectedness, gain insights, and make an existential and phenomenological connection with

others. Creativity cannot coexist with rigidities and it has a free flow guided by awareness and attention to the relevance of the moment at hand (Bohm and Peat 1987).

The most creative genius does not avoid anxiety, he/she moves through it and “*ventures into many situations which expose him to shock, is more often threatened by anxiety but, assuming the creativity is genuine, he is more able to overcome these threats constructively*” (May 1977, 66, italics in original text). Creative expression enables the person to integrate the self (where the anxiety has become a major part of) and find a way to manifest how the phenomenon affects them. By integrating mental disturbances with the self and expressing it, the person becomes more attuned with anxiety, rather than engaging it materialistically, as something they have. Rather it is something they are, live with, and can ultimately choose what to become. With the opportunities to express themselves with creativity and spontaneity, youth may be more capable of utilizing adverse conditions as an opportunity for one’s growth by being courageous to confront “what is.”

Closing remarks

Based on Humanist Psychology, we define a crucial element of human nature to be *emergence*. That is, under whatever conditions we are, humans and all kind of life strive to grow and move toward self-actualization. Although the efforts may not be always successful depending on the circumstances, all of us strive for our growth with the resources available at any given circumstances. We are endowed with innate dignity and worth, and naturally respond to genuine respect and freedom. With this understanding of humans as a theoretical framework, we paid our attention to the contemporary rampancy of anxiety among youth. This paper intended to explore the phenomena of anxiety and discuss how they could be perceived as an opportunity for growth and approached in a constructive way.

In sum, we asserted that one should not be misled by the abstraction of diagnosis or terminology of stress or anxiety. We argued that it is necessary to meet the phenomenology (the subjective experience and narratives of) anxiety. When we confront what we would call anxiety as it is, it is perceived less threatening and we are less likely to be misled to behave in a destructive way by striving to escape from it. In order to help youth to deal with the phenomena of anxiety in constructive ways, we emphasized the importance of the environment within which love, freedom, hope, creativity, and spontaneity are respected and encouraged. Youth need a space for them to realize their ownership over their life and to experience freedom to make decisions for

themselves. They should be provided with the opportunities to express themselves with creativity and spontaneity so that they expand their consciousness and be more courageous to confront ‘what is.’ Then, on a distant day, they may be able to sing about the true face of the once-devastating *monsters* (such as loneliness, anxiety, fear) as Jack Kerouac does in the 184th Chorus of the *Mexico City Blues*.

when I start falling
 in that inhuman pit
 of dizzy death
 I’ll know (if
 smart enough t’remember)
 that all the black
 tunnels of hate
 or love I’m falling
 through, are
 really radiant
 right eternities
 for me. (1959, 184)

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Fatalism, Determinism and Free Will as the Axiomatic Foundations of Rival Moral World Views

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ABSTRACT

One of the prominent questions of moral thought throughout history is the question of moral responsibility. In other words, to what measure do human actions result from free will rather than from being subordinate to a common “predetermined” law. In ancient Greece, this question was associated with mythical figures like Moira and Ananke while in recent times it is connected with concepts such as determinism and compatibilism. The argument between these two world views crosses cultures and historical periods, giving the notion that there are two types of ethical point of view that have assumed shapes during history. These points of view are mutually exclusive on the one hand, and on the other, they both stand as axiomatic standpoints of morality throughout history. The dialectical relationship between the two formulates the moral discourse throughout history.

KEYWORDS

fatalism, free will, determinism

According to the deterministic perspective, free will is only an illusion as man does not determine his origin, character or life circumstances since these result from the general law that governs man and the universe, and, therefore, the future, like the past, is predetermined and unchangeable. Compatibilism opposes determinism by relying mainly on the spontaneous ad hoc notion that man can, on numerous occasions, decide between alternatives. This notion rests upon the background of a juridical system that evaluates human decisions and actions but where extenuating circumstances that are

beyond human control could reduce punishment but does not exempt one from moral and legal responsibility (Fletcher 2010).

As said, compatibilism is an attempt to integrate the belief in free will with a deterministic world view. One of the first and the most prominent compatibilist theory was introduced by David Hume. The intension here is to compare Hume's theory concerning the relationship between free will and necessity to the one that emerges from Euripides's play "Oedipus Rex." By showing the similarities between the two, we argue that the question concerning the relationship between freedom of will and the belief in an inevitable chain of events is not a philosophical question but rather a question regarding peoples' basic attitudes to life and the world. These two prototypes of moral point of view: one that sees the natural world with human affairs included and subject to a common law that dictates an inevitable chain of events; the other that sees the human mind as being independent and above any such chain of events and therefore not necessarily subject to it. These archetypes appear throughout history in poetry, religion, art, drama and philosophy, and they manifest an unresolved dispute in the way a person sees his or her place in the world.

Homer and Hesiod established the myths that based ancient Greek theological thought (Herodotos 1974). Fatalism is associated with their poems while Moira and Ananke are the characters that represent this notion. The different characteristics and influence these figures were given by different authors, sometimes even in the same text, reflects the fluidity and indeterminate attitude toward the tension between free will and fatalism.

Ananke represented compulsion and necessity. According to orphic writings (**Orphica**), Ananke arose spontaneously with Kronos, they both encircled a giant egg. Ananke's and Kronos's stirring broke the primordial egg, creating the known universe. The two remained interlaced, encompassing the universe and controlling its orbits. Ananke's character is transformed in many different ways by subsequent authors, taking on a major role in the philosophical writings of authors like Empedocles, Parmenides, Epicurus and Plato, who granted Ananke a major ontological and ethical role.

Moirai are the deities of fate. Their designation is derived from the noun *moros*, which means a portion and relates to man's lot that is determined at birth or erstwhile. The three *Moirai* are: *Klotho*—the weaver, who weaves the shred of life; *Lakhesis*—"the dispenser," who dispenses human fortune; and *Atropos* or *Asia*, who cuts the shred of life. Even Zeus, according to Aeschylus, is bound by the cords of *Ananke* that are tightened by her attendants the *Moirai*.

The *Moirai* appear in Greek drama and the epos, since the time of Homer and possibly even earlier. Therefore, they are not equable figures since they get transformed by different authors, depending on each one's worldview concerning free will and moral responsibility. By analyzing scenes from *Aeschylus's* "Oedipus Rex" and comparing their attitude to the relationship between free will and compulsion to that of the British empiricist philosophers David Hume and Perstly, will show that the tension between determinism and compatibilism that emerged from the philosophical speculation of eighteenth century philosophers has been interwoven in society and culture since the time of Ancient Greece and, therefore, the dispute between these two philosophical and ethical worldviews is a matter of belief rather than a philosophical debate.

The similarity between the cosmological and scientific intuitions that circulated in ancient Greece and between them and modern science is remarkable (Aeschylus 1977, 103). Although there is a discrepancy between both Democritus's and Leucippus's atom and its modern concept, or between the Stoa concept of the Pnuma and Maxwell's equations, it is hard to deny that similar worldviews and scientific intuitions have guided scientists throughout history. Likewise, the debate between advocates of free will and those of determinism has existed in different forms throughout history, and, therefore, reflects a dual attitude to the relationship of human nature to nature. In other words, are people an integral part of nature or rather, some human phenomena are above nature and its laws. This argument is reflected in art, poetry, drama and philosophy.

Newton's Book *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* was published in 1687. It is considered to be a turning point in the history of science since it claimed to give a rational and mathematical foundation to all motions. In Newton's words: "Rational Mechanics will be the science of motions resulting from any forces whatsoever, and of the forces required to produce any motions, accurately proposed and demonstrated" (Newton quoted in Sambursky 1993, 97). The implication of Newton's book was that the universe is a closed and deterministic system. The British Empiricists adopted this view and projected it upon the social sciences. According to the Empiricists, there is no fundamental difference between natural or social affairs since all events could be explained by Newton's laws of mechanics, and, therefore, could be, hypothetically, be predicted.

The Empiricist moral philosophy tried to explain the gap between our notion of free will and the mechanical and deterministic account of nature. These efforts originate from the ethical discomfort of adopting a hard deter-

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ministic approach. After all, the freedom to act in alternative ways is a notion that accompanies most of our actions and our internal conflicts.

Priestley infers the contemporary physical view on psychology (Newton 1967, 24). According to Priestley, all mental forces originate in the brain, which is subject to Newton's laws. Therefore, human thoughts and actions are connected to one another by an inevitable chain of events that could be explained hypothetically and predicted by Newtonian physics. Priestley pictured human decisions as being determined by the combination of circumstances and personal inclination. Thus, Priestley defined human will as the outcome of the balance between different personal motives and denied moralistic personal autonomy. However, he still advocated the effectiveness of reward and punishment since he saw them as part of the motives governing human behavior. To support this claim, he gave the illustration of two brothers: one who is subordinate to motives; the other who can act independently of his motives and is largely released from his environmental restraints. The first could internalize social manners and grow up to be a dignified and useful citizen while his brother would be less open to social conditioning since his moral nature is autonomous and uninfluenced by education. The difference between the two brothers brings Priestley to conclude that punishment is one of the factors determining human conduct since it shapes human motives.

Hume's view on the concept of free will is part of his psychological and philosophical worldview, and is summed up in the chapter titled "on freedom and necessity" in his book *A Treatise of Human Nature*. This original view on the matter is the inspiration for modern thinkers such as Ayer, Schlick and Frankfurt. Hume confronts Priestley's determinism, according to which free will is merely an illusion; a name for human desires that man has no control over.

In all societies, the mutual interdependence of people is so great that scarcely any human action is entirely of itself and performed without some reference to the actions of others, which are themselves a prerequisite in eliciting (Hume 1977, 8.23). According to Hume the inductive principle gives rise to people's physical and social worldview has no philosophical validity and is dependent mainly on psychological conditioning. Therefore, the relationship between cause and effect are not as rigid as believed. To conclude, according to Hume free will could be defined as "*a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will*"; that is, if we chose to remain at rest, we may; if we chose to move, we also may. Now this hypothetical liberty is universally allowed to belong to everyone, who is not a prisoner and in chains. Here then is no subject of dispute" (Hume 1977, 8.23). Although the

“no subject of dispute” insinuates a measure of uncertainty since it is not at all clear what the meaning of not acting according to the will is. Hence, the autonomy of the will is the first amendment of the compatibilist approach. Another interpretation to this sentence is that there is a will beyond the will that determines human decisions but, then, one could ask whether this superior will is not subject to external causality as the “official” will.

In conclusion, the divergence of determinism from compatibilism revolves around the question of man’s faculty in the world. While the deterministic approach sees man as an integral part of the physical world and subordinates the human spirit to the laws of nature, the compatibilist sees the body as linked to a mechanistic chain of events, but still, a certain intelligent element of it is distant from the physical world and therefore can understand its order, and by that divergence, gets a certain amount of control over it. There is no way to resolve the discord that has accompanied moral thought since the time of Ancient Greece and possibly even earlier, as it occurs in ancient myths. One can compare compatibilism and determinism to two different approaches to the question of free will as they occur in Aeschylus’s *Oedipus Rex*.

In a well known passage of the *Iliad*, Zeus complains about human indulgence. This passage exemplifies that the *Moria* (fate) is not absolute and there is still room for free will and moral choices. In Greek drama and myth, the relationship between the *Moria* and the individual varies from author to author and sometimes also between different passages of the same text. This incoherency towards fatalism demonstrates a range of possible solutions to the dynamics between fatalism and free will. These solutions accord to a certain degree with the modern philosophical attitudes towards this moral dilemma.

Oedipus was the legendary king of Thebes who carried out the oracle that foretold that he would kill his father and marry his mother, which would cast a disaster upon his family and his city-state. This legend occurs in many versions in the ancient world starting with Homer and, possibly even before, and ending with Roman versions. The attempt to escape fate is a well known topic that has been dealt with in various ways by different authors; there is no standard way to describe the relations between man and the *Moria*. For example, in *Oedipus Rex*, Sophocles presents two different attitudes toward fate. In the play, there are two major prophecies. The first is the one mentioned by Jocasta that was given to King Laius before *Oedipus* was born:

An oracle came to Laius once—I will not say from Phoebus himself, but from his ministers—saying that he would suffer his doom at the hands of the child to be born to him and me. [lines 711–714]

This prophecy deals only with the patricide and not with the incest. The other is the prophecy that was given to Oedipus and caused him to leave Korinthos:

that I was fated to defile my mother's bed, that I would reveal to men a brood which they could not endure to behold, and that I would slay the father that sired me. When I heard this, I turned in flight from the land of Corinth, from then on thinking of it only by its position under the stars, to some spot where I should never see fulfillment of the infamies foretold in my evil fate.

[lines 791–795]

The Oracle given to Laius is substantially different from the one Oedipus heard. Laius was given an unconditional revelation while the prophecy that was the background for Oedipus's behavior was somewhat Conditional. As an example of the difference between an conditional and unconditional oracle we can compare the following sentences: "If Laius would have a child, this child would kill him" and "Laius would have a child and this offspring would kill him" The first emphasis on the notion that all is predetermined while the second leaves a certain amount of choice. Sophocles describes the oracle given to Laius as unconditional and by that releases him from the moral responsibility since the outcome was inevitable; this notion is supported by Jocasta saying: "for Loxias plainly said that he was to die at the hand of my child" (Sophocles 1997, 355). According to Dodds (1966), we should not understand Oedipus as a marionette but rather see the oracle as a self predicting prophecy since the oracle stirs the plot that ends in its fulfillment but it does not actually determine the chain of events. The oracle inspire Oedipus and leads him to various junctions but at every one it is Oedipus who decides how to act and these decisions reflects his will and his moral character. He chooses not to return to Corinth but to go to Thebes to kill Laius and marry Jocasta. He chooses to send Creon to the Oracle and Creon decides to accept the Oracle's advice and investigate Laius's murder. None of these actions was predetermined and therefore they reflect Oedipus's moral character and prove his guilt.

The unconditional oracle could be compared to Perstley's deterministic outlook while the conditional oracle could be equated with Hume's view on free will. In elucidating this analogy between eighteenth century British empiricists and Greek classical drama, one should emphasis that, since the question of free will is not a philosophical question but rather a theological one, the metaphysical interpretation that the British empiricists gave to it established the foundation of the modern philosophical debate between determinism and compatibilism.

Perstly saw free will as an illusion since human character, as a part of nature, is solely a product of mechanical laws such as cause and affect or of attraction and rejection. As said, this attitude corresponds to the unconditional oracle that left Oedipus with no real choice or alternative and, therefore, released him from moral responsibility. Since Aeschylus was not a philosopher, he was not obliged by conceptual consistency and part of the tragic notion of the play arises from two alternative moral views of fate that are reflected through the conditional and unconditional prophecy. And therefore one could sympathize with Oedipus grief and remorse but no one condemns Lious for attempting to kill his son.

As it is said, there are two types of people those with free will and those lacking it, and as such the play presents these two features of human existence. These two situations are not mutually exclusive but complementary and manifested in Oedipus's self-blame for not having avoided his destiny. This moral and conceptual dilemma accompanies human nature throughout history and manifests itself in various ways from the time of Aeschylus to that of the eightieth century British philosophers and, presumably, until the present.

If Perstly's philosophical view led to determinism that, to a degree, corresponds with the unconditional oracle in Aeschylus's play, then Hume's concept of free will matches the conditional prophecy. Two main premises stand as a corner stone to Hume's attitude toward the problem of free will. The first, freedom is not modified in the absence of causality since this absence would not enable freedom but, rather, lead to chaos and caprice. The second, the chain of cause and effect allow voluntary action since this chain of events is not subject to Newton's laws of mechanics. As said, Hume did not see causality as a philosophical connection but, rather, as a psychological one. By this, Hume meant that the persistence of cause and effect is the outcome of psychological conditioning that gives one the allusion of causality that leads one to postulate a set of mechanical and objective laws of nature. Hume's underlying induction as a valid assumption does not mean that we live in a chaotic world but, rather, that we do not live in a deterministic one. Hume saw the human ability to predict possible outcomes as an essential quality that enables one to live and communicate since without it we would not be able to form an homogenous and perseverant worldview. To conclude according to Hume different causal systems, that could even contradict each other could coexist an example could be useful:

The first islanders of whom Themistocles demanded money, would not give it. When, however, Themistocles gave them to understand that the Athenians had come with two great gods to aid them, Persuasion and Necessity, and that the

Andrians must therefore certainly give money, they said in response, “It is then but reasonable that Athens is great and prosperous, being blessed with serviceable gods. As for us Andrians, we are but blessed with a plentiful lack of land, and we have two unserviceable gods who never quit our island but want to dwell there forever, namely Poverty and Helplessness. Since we are in the hands of these gods, we will give no money; the power of Athens can never be stronger than our inability. (Herodotus, Histories 8.111.2)

This anecdote from Herodotus exemplifies how two different outlooks that are founded in different cultures and sets of beliefs can form deferent causal systems that would bring to contradictory outcomes. Persuasion and Necessity do not affect the Andrians since they are bound to other set of constraints.

Another example for the indetermination of fate could be seen in the following passage: “But when he had donned the yoke of Necessity, with veering of mind, impious, unholy, unsanctified, from that moment he changed his intention and began to conceive that deed of uttermost audacity” [**Aeschylus, Agamemnon 218**]. This passage is essential for understanding the drama since it reveals Agamemnon’s choice to bear the yoke of necessity by sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia in order to reconcile Artemis in order to set the campaign against Troy in motion. In theory Agamemnon could have chose otherwise, and spare his daughters life by giving up his virile virtue, no doubt that the possibility to act differently makes Agamemnon a tragic hero. Still there is reason to ask in what sense we can credit Agamemnon the freedom of choice. According to Hume the casual framework and basic moral concepts that govern our lives are not entirely compelled upon us and are subject to choice. In this light we could see the resemblance between Hume’s compatibilism and the conditional oracle since both see freedom of choice as interweaved into the shreds of necessity.

Conclusion

Hume’s psychology relied on the assumption that our feelings of attraction to or withdrawal from the other are the basis for understanding human society. Therefore, these emotions stand as the foundation of Hume’s utilitarian ethical philosophy that aimed at amplifying society’s benefits and reducing its disadvantages. According to Hume, moral judgment revolves around human character but this character is not deterministic since man has the autonomy of his free will. Agamemnon like the Andrians was subject to social constrains that seemed unavoidable and, therefore, led to a fatal and even tragic outcome. Agamemnon could have spared his daughter’s life but by doing so he would have had to give up the code of manhood that was manifested in Greek

society by *Aidos*—shame, which no man could bear since death was preferable to life without dignity. Such social codes shape the moral outlook of society's members and give a certain degree of regulation to human affairs that enables one to predict human conduct to a certain degree. Still, these general codes of behavior do not imply determinism since the subject is free to break these codes at any given time and act voluntarily. The sense of guilt that followed Agamemnon's act of sacrifice suggests that he saw himself as morally responsible for his daughter's death. This notion supports the claim that Aeschylus saw an individual's will as autonomic even though Agamemnon's choices were bound by external circumstances. These circumstances do not dictate human choice they only modify it and, therefore, the tragic perception depicts the fatal outcome of the plot as inevitable. According to Hume's concept of free will, tragedy should be seen as the outcome of events that compel the hero to choose self-defeating choices. However, he could have chosen otherwise.

Aeschylus was not a philosopher and, therefore, not obligated to conceptual consistency. He reflected different attitudes, regarding the question of fatalism and free will. The different attitudes concerning this question, reflected by the difference between conditional and unconditional prophecy, suggest that the argument between determinism and compatibilism existed in different forms since the time of Greek drama and, possibly, even earlier, and it got its most articulate philosophical expression in the writings of the British empiricists. Since the argument is not originally philosophical but, rather, mythological or theological, it is not founded on facts but, rather, on beliefs and, therefore, reflects personal and intimate attitudes that shape the moral character. If one looks around, one sees that there are different types of people, some of whom see the world as a deterministic or fatalistic system and act accordingly while others see personal initiative as its basis with endless possibilities. These two types do not exclude but, rather, complement each other. This paradoxical approach is summed up by the popular saying: "All is predicted but the authority is given."

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Epicurean Ethics in the Pragmatist Philosophical Counsel

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the extent to which Epicurean ethics as a general philosophy of life can be integrated in a composite pragmatist approach to philosophical counseling. Epicureanism emerged in a historical era that was very different from the modern time and addressed a different philosophical ethos of the time. This alone makes it difficult for Epicureanism to satisfy all of the normative criteria for a modern ethics. On the other hand, the article discusses aspects of the modern “external”—duty- and demand-driven ethics that may contribute to the emergence of some of the main issues for modern philosophical counseling. The author points out aspects of Epicurean ethics that are potentially powerful tools to address the issues of mood and meaning in philosophical counseling, and thus serve as a contemporary complement to a complex duty-bound, yet pragmatist view of ethics.

KEYWORDS

Epicurean ethics, pragmatist counsel, philosophical practice, the good life

Introduction¹

This article discusses the Epicurean ethics as a contemporarily relevant context for philosophical practice, specifically for counseling. To that end the article seeks, in the first section, to address common prejudice with regard to Epicurus and the Epicureans, namely that this was a philosophical doctrine

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1. The initial pages of this article draw to some extent on my ..., forthcoming in ... (2013). However this text builds on a different aspect of Epicurean counsel that explores its relationship with deontological, consequentialist and virtue ethics and the compatibility of Epicureanism with an eclectic model of pragmatist philosophical counsel.

advocating a life entirely devoted to an uncritical quest of “base” pleasures. Upon pinpointing key aspects of Epicurus’ simple moral philosophy, the article moves to introducing the ethics context of modern counseling and discusses two contemporary philosophical models of philosophical intervention: (i) the Stoic IDEA method, and (ii) the use of a pragmatist proposed by John Alexander. The argument proceeds to examining the extent to which these modern models are compatible with Epicurean ethics and, in the concluding chapter, showing that Epicureanism is highly useful for supporting various modern ethical models specifically tailored for counseling. Furthermore, the article argues that Epicurean ethics is capable of acting as a general value framework on which to base a pragmatist approach to philosophical counseling.

Philosophical practice and mass neurosis

The return to philosophical practice in the modern age has met various responses by the counseling and consulting professions, most notably by psychology and psychiatry. While the more philosophically educated psychologists and psychiatrists have tended to support applied philosophy as a counseling method, and some have even joined in the philosophical exercise, those threatened by philosophy have initiated, in some countries, what is in effect a “turf war” with practicing philosophers. The war rages mainly around the terminology used. One of the strategic strongholds of the medical and paramedical professions in counseling is the concept of “therapy,” which is widely banned for philosophers. While “therapy” in the modern sense has admittedly been appropriated by medicine, generically it is as philosophical as it is medical:

Empty is that philosopher’s discourse which offers therapy for no human passion. Just as there is no use in medical expertise if it does not expel the sickness of bodies, so there is no use in philosophy if it does not expel the passions of the soul.²

Since Antiquity the task of practical philosophy has been seen to “expel passions of the soul” by providing precepts for a balanced, happy life (eudaimonia). Such life has been thought to include moderate pleasures and a wisdom that allows virtue to flourish and thus conscience to rest at ease. Perhaps the best formulation of this perception of ethics was Epicurus’ 5th Principal Doctrine (or Sovran Doctrine), which reads:

2. Porphyry, Letter to his wife Marcella. In *Pros Markellan*. Edited and Translated by Walter Pötscher (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 31.

It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and honorably and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and honorably and justly without living pleasantly. Whenever any one of these is lacking, when, for instance, the man is not able to live wisely, though he lives honorably and justly, it is impossible for him to live a pleasant life.

Lou Marinoff has a modern formulation of this practical role of philosophy:

We all practice philosophy. The only question is whether we do so self-consciously and well, or unconsciously and poorly. Our beliefs shape the course of our actions, policies forge the future of business, and a culture's philosophy determines the character of its civilization. As long as these remain unconscious and unexamined, they control us. By becoming aware of them, their origins, nature, conflicts and consequences, we gain control of them and thereby our lives. (2002, xvi)

The practice of philosophical counsel is firmly embedded in an appropriate philosophical context for each individual client. I will argue here that Epicurean views of pleasure are a sound foundation on which to build an essentially pragmatist approach to counseling for many clients. The argument rests on the idea that many of the cognitive, emotional and volitional problems for which people seek counseling today are caused, or at least exacerbated, by the dominant duty-bound culture of bonds with others, and by a corresponding "external," duty-driven morality that has long been accepted as dominant. While Epicureanism is not capable of replacing external morality in the sense of providing precepts for what is morally right and wrong (nor does it purport to do this), it is practically useful for helping clients find a balance between external pressures and "hedonistic" duties to themselves.

Epicurean ethics treats hedonistic duties to oneself as equal with any external duties to others: an aspect of ethics as philosophy of life that has long been forgotten. The absence of this "internal" element of "duty of indulgence" may account for the normative perspectives in which it appears perfectly consistent to claim that a person can be highly moral, and highly valued by her community, yet utterly unhappy. The idea that one can be a morally perfect agent, and yet commit suicide out of misery is one that should not be so easily accepted. On a theoretical level, it is consistent with duty-bound morality. In practice, and especially in philosophical practice, it is unacceptable and needs serious "philosophical intervention."

Epicurean Tetracharmakos (the four key doctrines that serve as a mnemonic device for everyday rehearsal), suggests:

1. Do not fear gods, they do not care about human affairs;

2. Do not fear death, because it is merely a disappearance from being, and as such does not bring any new threatening experience;
3. Know that all things necessary for happiness (in the minimalist sense of absence of pain and want (*aponia*) and of anxiety (*ataraxia*) are easy to procure;
4. Be aware that all inevitable pains tend to be outweighed by pleasures.

If one swaps “fear of gods” with “fear of life,” “anxiety” or “uncertainty,” one gets a fairly contemporary advice on the approach to take to addressing the mass neurosis of today. Part of the neurosis is caused by the rampant fabrication of needs that are increasingly difficult to satisfy, yet:

Insatiable is not the stomach, as the many say, but false opinion about the stomach’s boundless need to be filled.³

In any situation where subjective feelings of deprivation are caused by the unavailability of something that we perceive as necessary, “false opinion” is likely at work. Epicureans believed that philosophy’s therapeutic task was primarily to dispel false opinions and liberate the “student” (client) from subjective deprivation, usually not by procuring what is missing, but by removing the conviction that what is missing is necessary.

Wherever intense seriousness is present in those natural desires which do not lead to pain if they are unfulfilled, these come about because of empty opinion; and it is not because of their own nature that they are not relaxed, but because of the empty opinion of the person.⁴

It is easy to see how these Epicurean views negate the currently prevalent, originally Marxist, idea that “man’s richness is a richness of needs” and its industrial perversion through the marketing of happiness through consumption (Marx 2007). The concept of richness of needs has even entered modern left wing criminology as that of “relative deprivation” (Webber 2007). Social expectations dictate one’s perceptions of one’s own needs, thus relative deprivation will differ for people from different social strata. For someone, relative deprivation is a lack of food and shelter compared to one’s peers who don’t suffer such predicament. For others, however, relative deprivation will arise from not owning designer clothes, a custom made car or a ballroom, where other members of the same social stratum possess all these things. The con-

3. *Sententiae Vaticanae*, 39, in Cyril Bailey, *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1926).

4. Principal Doctrine 30, in Bailey, *Epicurus*.

cept of relative deprivation has been designed to explain why crimes have been committed as a pattern conforming to the motive of deprivation in substantively dramatically different contexts of possession of wealth.

Epicureanism, like Stoicism, suggests that the cure for the ills arising from inauthentic needs, induced by the society, which cause anxiety and feelings of deprivation because they are difficult to satisfy, is the development of self-discipline.

Much of our distress, both individually and collectively, is not amenable to medical intervention, and time does not appear actually to heal *all* wounds or solve all problems (unless, of course, all problems are, as Stalin quipped, solved by death...). ... When we do not know our own minds and proclivities, we may be unable to discover why sleep does not come easily, or why a career no longer seems fulfilling, or why the general sense of dissatisfaction will not lift, or anxiety will not pass into peace and calm. ... The Stoic sage does not make demands on the external world, but instead develops self-discipline so as to deal reasonably with the world as it presents itself. (Ferraiolo 2010, 629–630)

However, Epicureanism sees this self-discipline in a slightly different light than Stoicism. Stoic counsel is almost exclusively *rationalist*. The rational explanation of the need to develop self-discipline sufficient to “deal with the world as it presents itself” while making no demands on that world is theoretically coherent: it is capable of supporting any type of rational self-discipline from that of a hermit to that of a business owner wisely refraining from expanding too much. However, the Stoic does not effectively address the affective side of the deprivation arising from self-denial: for him the forfeiture of satisfaction for the sake of peace and calm is sufficient for a wise life, and the quest of positive pleasure is not necessary for the balance such life requires. Acting wisely by accepting the external limitations and resigning oneself to restrictive circumstances ought to lead to as much happiness as can reasonably be expected in life. For many people today, this is insufficient, as the element of positive affect is missing. At least on the surface of things, the “Stoic sage” of today could fit in the common clinical picture of depression. The Stoic call for a rejection of passion in a world where virtually nothing can be achieved without a passion is a difficult proposition, to say the least. The original form of Stoicism emerged in a world where, for example, most “free” Greeks and Romans did not have to work. Theirs was a very different world from the present one, where work is often equal to social identity and industriousness to the individual’s value for the community. This is part of the reason the “rationalism” of the Stoic counsel today could consistently be Prozac-assisted in its actual application.

Psychotherapy, on the other hand, tends to subscribe to the opposite strategy: most psychotherapeutic approaches focus predominantly on the *affective* side and on the resulting suffering of the client, without sufficiently addressing the rational side of the need to devise a life plan that is based on one's authentic *values*. More often than not such psychotherapy collapses into a strategy of "supporting the client" rather uncritically, and, as a result, develops into quasi- friendships, misplaced commiseration and "the taking of the client's side" in concrete life situations. This is usually damaging to the client in the long term.

Sometimes the exaggerated emphasis on the affective side results in protracted therapy, with no clear structure based on a foreseen outcome or "exit strategy." This involves a high cost for the client over time, tends to cause the counselee's long-term dependency on the counselor, and, usually, a lack of the client's self-confidence in decision-making. Psychotherapists who fall in this trap are difficult to detect, because they can be very popular and highly recommended. Few questions are usually asked about therapists who have many of the same clients for years, although this should raise issues about the methodology, aims, and effectiveness of the counseling that they provide.

Epicurean counsel appears to integrate the rational and affective side in "talk therapy" by essentially agreeing with the Stoic understanding of minimalism, which Epicureans understand as the safest way to avoid disturbance. When a Stoic suggests that one ought to "return to the small place one belongs to" as a general strategy of self-denial that is "in accordance with nature," an Epicurean would agree, not necessarily because this is a way of nature, but because it is a way least likely to cause disturbance in the future (Marcus Aurelius. 2002). Disturbance is a form of pain, which by definition is an evil. Epicureanism goes a step further and suggests that virtue, rather than being "an end in itself"—a moral standard, is merely a means to attain the greatest safe level of pleasure. Living wisely means maximising pleasure while minimising pain, including that pain which is caused by certain pleasures, in which case one must abstain from such pleasures. Consequently, the most innocent pleasures, those that involve peace and quiet, such as conversations with friends, intellectual work and moderate care for one's body, are the preferred ones for Epicureans. Unlike the Stoics, Epicureans insist on practice aimed to develop a sensibility to enjoy such pleasures, to turn them into positive, affirmative affect of satisfaction and joy, even if the pleasures themselves arise from little more than the absence of pain. This is where Epicureanism provides a potent tool for philosophical counseling for anxiety, guilt and the pervasive issues with self-fulfillment that dominate many clients' problems.

The modern pragmatist philosophical counsel

The complexity of many situations in modern society requires philosophical counseling to address an array of issues simultaneously, and some arise from multi-level internal questions, such as moral dilemmas relating to responsibilities, learned responses to failure, or feeling of guilt. Unlike in earlier organic communities, life in modern society makes it increasingly important for ordinary people to have a moral “yard stick” that is sufficiently rationally and socially elaborate and tested, which they will use in making decisions amid a multitude of variables, potential outcomes and numerous involved parties’ concerns. This is the context of ethics in the modern sense that lies at the heart of modern philosophical counseling. In this context, ethics is far more specific and more restrictive than the Ancient philosophy of life.

In his pragmatist proposal for a model of counseling focused on ethics, John K. Alexander proposes that the most practically useful questions to be asked in the modern context, ones capable of integrating many different concerns, are those relating to *the type of person one wishes to be or to become*:

What kind of person should I be? How should I live my life? These are important practical questions because we find ourselves situated in a world not of our choosing, but one where we try to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for leading lives that we find interesting and worthwhile, or, to paraphrase William James, living a life that we find significant. (Alexander 2011, 777)

The quest of a “life one finds significant” goes back to Socrates’ idea that a life not properly understood, not philosophically interpreted and directed, “the unexamined life,” is not worth living. Such a life is victim to chance, source of constant disappointments, and is a continuous struggle linking one day of fear and toil to another. Only a life endowed with meaning, realistic goals and a rational perspective on chance and disappointment is potentially enjoyable in the long term. This is the point of Epicurus’ idea that one ought to follow pleasure subject to what modern philosophy would call a utilitarian calculus of potential effects, within the limits of the externalities imposed by circumstances one cannot control. According to Epicureans, within such a perspective, regardless of how much actual pleasure one might be able to obtain, one’s life could be considered a “good life”—one based on a strategy or life plan that is sound, natural and based on seemingly indubitable inclinations of human nature: to seek pleasure and avoid pain.

The more complex the circumstances, the more difficult it is to orient one’s life-plan between the various claims and counterclaims of moral justification, social acceptability, others’ rights and interests, and one’s direct and indirect

responsibilities. In such complex social circumstances, the question of “what kind of a person do I want to be” appears to integrate the natural inclinations and social concerns in what seems as a projection of one’s ego amongst the values and choices that make up the mindscape of any decision we make.

Alexander (2011, 782) spells out three sub-questions that constitute this general question of what type of person one wants to be, namely:

1. Can one live with the consequences of what one contemplates doing (or does one like the type of person one appears to be if one does what one contemplates)?
2. Is one able and willing to defend one’s actions before one’s peers?
3. If everybody performed the same action in the same circumstances, what type of society would this lead to, good or bad?

Alexander suggests that each question entails the employment of a distinct methodology of ethical reasoning. The first one lends itself to virtue ethics, namely to the exploration of what virtues one considers the most important and would therefore wish to have dominate one’s actions. The second one is suitably answered by utilitarian reasoning, by examining the consequences the action is likely to reach within the realistic limitations that apply to the decision. One might, thus, justify one’s actions by pointing to their direct consequences, and to the potential (less favourable) consequences for oneself and others of acting otherwise. The third question is best answered through the deontological ethical model: the action is justified deontologically if it is subject to universalization, namely if one could wish others to act in the same way in similar circumstances, where one would be exposed to the consequences of such action as a member of the same community.

“Can one like the type of person one becomes by acting in a certain way?”

The first question deals with self-value; it suggests directions for the development of virtue, but not happiness or satisfaction. One might “live with the consequences of one’s actions” in numerous situations where the actions make everybody happy but the actor. The onus of the first question is on what Freud would call the “super-ego,” namely on one’s own and the community’s expectations of the individual, more or less regardless of the individual’s wishes or choices of what is pleasurable. One may decide to donate an organ to save another although one likes sports and outdoor living, and giving up an organ would mean living a sedentary lifestyle for the rest of one’s life. The sacrifice would be noble and would by all means receive social praise, but at the same time it would make one’s life totally unhappy.

One would certainly be able to like the sort of person one would appear to be after giving away an organ, however this question is not necessarily synonymous with whether one would be able to live with one's decision from the point of view of one's own desires and needs in the future. One could consistently give away an organ and thus change one's life forever, and be able to like the type of person one (socially) appears to be by doing so (thus satisfying the deontic criterion of universalization), only to commit suicide several years later out of dissatisfaction with life. From a realistic point of view, the first question seems "defective," because the essentially duty- and virtue-driven view of ethics that the question is couched in appears to omit the perspective of *necessary pleasure* to make life worth living.

"Is one able to defend one's actions before others?"

The second question is subject to similar critique. Acting altruistically and selflessly means being able to easily explain one's actions to others; at the same time, however, it fundamentally neglects the need to honor one's own desires to the extent necessary for a happy life. A person with exceptional sexual desires may be unable to satisfy such desires with one person, and may embark on sexual experimentation with multiple partners. In a conservative community such behavior might be very difficult to justify, especially in the consequentialist manner: if one had acted differently, arguably no serious consequences would have arisen for one's physical and mental well-being, while perhaps many beneficial consequences would have been made possible for others. One's sexual promiscuity or extreme sexual behavior could hurt, socially compromise, or morally confuse others. It is unclear how values such as "necessary pleasure" or "optimum quality of life" would be convincingly expressed in such a situation. Here again the concept of morality taken by the pragmatist approach is the modern restrictive morality, rather than the philosophy of life model of ethics characteristic of the ancient philosophical schools. This appears the greatest problem of the modern normative ethics in a practical context, because it is socially focused and leaves the individual and her needs "out in the cold" as long as external expectations are satisfied.

"If everybody acted the same, would this lead to a good society?"

The third question is more argumentatively challenging than the first two. At first sight, it appears to be a classical Kantian question arising from an ethics of duty: the good society, by these lights, is one where one's duties to others and to one's own "noumenal," rational nature, are adequately represented. According to Kantian morality the justifying aspect of decision-mak-

ing is duty as the external link between motivation and expectations. This clearly means that a society of selfless individuals would be morally desirable. To take this to the extreme, the ethics of duty would be able to portray a society of unhappy selfless people as morally preferable to a society of happy selfish people who habitually encroach on the needs of others. For example, the latter community could be happy because they would rather have what they want when they want it than control their desires in exchange for others' controlling their, potentially expansive and threatening desires. The latter society would embody a kind of extremist mentality in the pursuit of immediate desires that implies accepting the risk of being victimized by the same behavior in others.

Epicurean ethics avoids advocating the latter option. However it does not shy away from that option on principle, but contingently: any pleasure is good, and any pain is bad. Experientially (contingently) Epicureans believed that extreme pursuits of desires tend to cause more pain than pleasure in the long term, hence they argued that moderation is the most conducive to pleasure not visited by subsequent pain. However, if it was possible to pursue pleasure recklessly without having to endure painful consequences in the future, such extremism of desire would be *in principle* entirely compatible with Epicureanism.

The quest of eudaimonia naturally yields contingent precepts: circumstance and experience largely dictate what actions are likely to support a good life plan. At the same time, deontological moral norms based on principled visions of a morally right society often stand in contrast with experiential conclusions about what is likely to lead to eudaimonia for particular people. In the case of Epicurean ethics there is no such apparent contrast. The types of pleasures recommended by Epicureans arise from moderation; they do not jeopardize the needs and pursuits of others, and are thus compatible with most visions of a good society, founded on general interest and the mutual respect of rights and interests. Epicureans advised those pursuing a happy life to withdraw from public affairs, live in a community of friends who share the same values (brought to life in the Epicurean "Society of the Garden"), not be involved in politics, and generally, live a "life unknown" (Algra *et al.* eds. 2005, 669–674). Such a lifestyle does not militate against the rights and interests of others. However, even hedonism so conceived is not likely acceptable for an absolutist view of the good society such as that characteristic of Kant's rationalist ethics.

On the one hand, the deontic claim of *universalizability* is logically capable of sustaining moderate Epicurean hedonism: if everybody lived a withdrawn life of moderate pleasures such a society would be sustainable and low in conflict potential, with everybody's rights able to be optimally protected. On the

other hand, the *absolutist* side of deontological ethics in its Kantian form arises from a claim of morally rational human nature that permeates Kantian ethics (Fishkin 1984). This claim, when pursued to its final consequences, paints the “good society” in extreme duty-bound terms that potentially militate against any intuitive concept of a “good life.” This is particularly visible in the deontologists’ typically retributive views of justice and punishment, where “just desert” is seen as the sole criterion for the meting out of penalties, and the actual execution of punishments a rational moral duty of government:

Punishment by a court (*poena forensis*)...can never be inflicted merely as a means to promote some other good for the criminal himself or for civil society. It must always be inflicted on him only *because he has committed a crime*... He must previously have been found *punishable* before any thought can be given to drawing from his punishment something of use for himself or his fellow citizens. The law of punishment is a categorical imperative. (Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6: 33)

More specifically:

In punishments, a physical evil is coupled to moral badness. That this link is a necessary one, and physical evil a direct consequence of moral badness, or that the latter consists in a *malum physicum, quod moraliter necessarium est*, cannot be discerned through reason, nor proved either, and yet it is contained in the concept of punishment that it is an immediately necessary consequence of breaking the law. The judicial office, by virtue of its law-giving power, is called upon by reason to repay, to visit a proportionate evil upon the transgression of moral laws... Now from this it is evident that an essential *requisitum* of any punishment is that it be just, i.e. that it is an immediately necessary consequence of the morally bad act; and this, indeed, is what its quality consists in, that it is an *actus justitiae*, that the physical evil is imparted on account of the moral badness. (Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals Vigilantius*, 27: 552–553)

Finally, Kant makes it very clear what he means by categorical retribution: “Woe unto him who crawls through the windings of eudaimonism in order to discover something that releases the criminal from punishment” (Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals* 6: 331a).

Clearly the absolutist morality that makes up the “hard” version of deontological ethics sees the good society in terms embedded in a metaphysical concept of morality: man’s moral identity, arising from categorical moral axioms, is constitutive of his nature; the good society is a realization of the moral threads in human nature, and is not subject to consequentialist considerations. While this “hard” type of deontology certainly satisfies the criterion that, should everybody act the same (in accordance with the Kantian precepts) this would lead to a good society in the described sense, it is by no

means the only or necessarily the most intuitive view of the good society. Contingently and experientially, it is doubtful to what extent a Kantian morally absolutist society would be “good” from the point of view of practical life, or how conducive it would be for the design of productive life plans. A good society that allows the possibility of all the morally good members living miserable lives is of little value from the point of view of philosophical practice, and especially so for philosophical counseling.

To conclude this section, Epicureanism is clearly capable of supporting the virtue-based and consequentialist perspectives of the eclectic pragmatist model of philosophical counseling. These are the perspectives embodied in the first two questions discussed. As far as the third, deontological moral perspective is concerned, Epicurean ethics is compatible with the requirement of universalization characteristic of deontological ethical methodology, however it does not support the stronger, “absolutist” version of deontic morality, which requires the execution of metaphysically conceived moral duties regardless of the circumstances. The fact that Epicurean ethics does not function in light of the last normative context, to my mind, does not make it less attractive for philosophical counseling, not least because the absolutist deontological context for ethics is of little use for counseling.

From the point of view of applied philosophy there appears something fundamentally defective with moral doctrines that allow the unhappiness of most to constitute a morally desirable social environment as long as external duties and largely formally defined expectations are fulfilled. The assumption that this is part of a “rational human nature” appears little more convincing here than the equally plausible Epicurean claim that ‘humans naturally desire pleasure and avoid pain’. The practical value of Alexander’s model is in its pragmatic side: moral expectations (though expressed in duty-bound terms of restrictive morality) are seen as guiding lights for adaptation in challenging circumstances, and thus, ultimately, have a functionalist role: the moral justifiability of actions helps the agent make better practical choices without the attendant negative phenomena such as guilt or reproach by others. It is this aspect of the pragmatist model of ethics that I wish to turn to next and place it in a specifically Epicurean context.

The pragmatist sense of duty-bound morality in the context of counseling

The eclectic model of restrictive ethics proposed by Alexander, when it is understood in its decidedly pragmatic context, as a means to orient one’s decisions in circumstances that are challenging for adaptation of behavior (in complex modern societies), while very Spartan in its emphasis of exter-

nal expectations and no or very limited room for “pleasures” or “happiness,” still plays an important soothing role. The duty-driven moral zombie that inhabits the rationalist mindscape of modern ethics suffers from guilt; the pro-active pragmatic directions provided by the three questions proposed by Alexander leave no room for his pursuit of “selfish pleasure,” however they help him *alleviate the fear of guilt*. These are simple directions, three manageable moral tests that lead to a “way of life...respected and admired: or at least the minimum features of a respectable way of life...” (Hampshire 1978, 11). Such a respectful way of life is free of blame, and thus of internalized and learned guilt. In ultimate consequence, sticking to the three questions that summarize the traditional virtue-based, consequentialist and deontic formulations of repressive morality practically liberates the agent from fear of guilt. It is appropriate to remember here that Epicureans also considered fear of reproach arising from transgressions of socially imposed values (“fear of gods” at the time) one of the main reasons for unhappiness, and that they ardently argued to dispel fear of gods and fear of death.

The pragmatist context for duty-bound morality emphasizes its instrumental value: unlike classical deontological ethics, which starts from claims about the rational aspects of human nature that require the recognition and abidance by certain more or less “categorical” moral duties, duty-bound morality in the pragmatist context does not serve any such fundamentalist goals: it is a means to satisfy social expectations and alleviate the threat of internal sanction or fear of guilt, whilst searching for an adequate adaptation strategy in complex circumstances. This means that repressive morality has only a conditional claim on the regulation of human behavior in the pragmatist context: if it can be proven to be ultimately dysfunctional, it can be rejected consistently with pragmatist philosophy. This is a point of its sharp contrast with genuine deontic morality, which is not sensitive to functionalist criteria of assessment. Thus the three eclectic moral questions proposed by Alexander need to be treated much more charitably than the duty-bound morality *sui generis*; this is warranted by the mere positioning of the three moral questions in a pragmatist context that he makes explicit.

One may note that as early as in Hellenism the external ethics of virtue (arising from the fulfillment of moral expectations of the community), or *arête*, preceded the Epicurean ethics of the good life (eudaimonia). Epicurus in fact argued in favor of seeking a good life filled with moderate pleasures *in opposition* to the already dominant external ethics that placed pressures on the individual arising from moral expectations. The wheel seems to have turned once again since then, and the dominant modern ethics is again an external

ethics of demands on the individual. They are not always phrased in the context of virtue, but as Alexander rightly points it out, the three dominant forms this pressure takes include the conceptualization of virtue, the deontologically conceived moral duty, and/or expectations arising from a prudent utilitarian calculus of predictable consequences. None of these three criteria for moral goodness are essentially related to, or necessarily conducive to, leading a good life, or enjoying eudaimonia. Conversely, all three are capable of producing morally justified lives deprived of eudaimonia. Casting the external moral demands in a pragmatist light, in the sense of interpreting their fulfillment as a means to address guilt is an essential strategy in philosophical counseling. This strategy is fully complementary with the introduction of an Epicurean view of eudaimonia as a quest of moderate pleasure. A combination of these two strategies is a particularly effective approach to addressing the modern neurosis of guilt through philosophical counseling.

A key aspect of pragmatist philosophy as the foundation for counseling is its conceptual capacity to transcend the traditional “methodological” distinctions between the deontic, consequentialist and virtue ethics through an integrative approach that becomes a counseling project. Thus the pragmatist counsel particularly readily lends itself to narrative conceptualizations of personal and collective identity and the good society, all of which are capable of integrating the traditional Epicurean concept of the good life in what is at once an integrative approach to ethics, and an effective method of philosophical counseling.

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“All the Consequences of This”: Why Atheistic Existentialism is more Consistent than Religious Existentialism

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ABSTRACT

The variety of existentialist thought show existentialism to be a flexible denotation, one that can be shared by believers and atheists alike. When approaching such a loosely defined term as “existentialism” a few questions arise. What are the boundaries for inclusion or exclusion? Are there more authentic forms of existentialism than others? The former question is usually dealt with by showing the history of existentialism—from Kierkegaard to Nietzsche, Heidegger to Sartre—along with noting some common strands amongst their writings (e.g. subjectivity, powerlessness, anxiety, despair, dread, isolation, tragedy, nothingness, meaninglessness, absurdity, etc.). The latter question is much harder to deal with. It asks for a value judgment as to which kind of existentialism is more authentic than others. It relates to the former because the person answering such a question has to have an idea of what existentialism ought to look like, but it goes beyond it by asking a deliberately evaluative question. This article is going to take both questions into account by examining the concepts and content of existentialist authors, their strengths and weaknesses, and is going to explain why I think atheistic existentialism is more authentic than religious existentialism.

KEYWORDS

existentialism, atheism

Introduction

The term “authenticity” comes out of existentialism as a criteria or method of evaluation by which one judges claims about the nature or truth of existence. Authenticity, as I understand it, is roughly equivalent to the analytic notions

of coherence, rationality, reasonableness, veracity, or truthfulness. The difference is that authenticity has more to do with a subjects' character than abstract notions of coherence or truth. It is more akin to personal integrity, honesty, and transparency. It tells us something about how the subject deliberates when reflecting upon her own existence. Because of this, "authenticity," is more difficult to establish as a normative measure or objective criteria than coherence. The inherently moral connotation of the term "authentic" is difficult to appraise, but it can simply be thought of (for the sake of this paper) as what is considered in popular parlance: "being real with your-self." Authenticity, as a loosely defined notion, is going to form the rubric through which I evaluate common themes in the existentialist canon.

Common existentialist themes

Tragedy

Existentialism, as I understand it, is primarily a philosophy of tragedy. It often speaks of tragedy as bound up with existence. You cannot have one without the other. Prior to the rise of German, and in turn French, existentialism, tragedy was considered primarily a poetic and literary style. It manifested itself in dramas, epics, myths, poetry, and art. Contained within these manifestations were stories of tragedy: families torn apart, greed, war, torture, revenge, strife, and meaningless suffering. As far back as the early Indic dramas, such as the Mahabharata (2009), we hear stories of strife and torment. The Greek poets employed this style of writing, outlining what it would become as a distinctive genre. We can think of Aeschylus' "Orestia" (1977), Sophocles' "Oedipus the King" (1984), and Euripides' "Alcestis" (1974) as examples of tragedy. Aristotle, who wrote on these early tragedians, distinguishes tragedy by its cathartic effect in soliciting pity and fear in the spectators (1987, 3:1, 7).

Centuries later there was a renaissance der tragödie in Germany in the writings of Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Jaspers. These four elevated tragedy outside of literary expression to a place of philosophical and existential importance. Hegel's "Lectures on Fine Arts" (1975, first published 1835) reveal to us how tragedy is incorporated into his own dialectic method; Schopenhauer's magnum opus, "The World as Will and Representation" (1818) elevates tragedy to "the summit of poetic art" as it expresses "the terrible side of life" (1966, 252); Nietzsche's early work "The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music" (1993, first published 1872), argues strongly for a Dionysian revelry in tragedy; and Jaspers' "Tragedy Is Not Enough" (1969) finds tragedy

as a condition for the experience of transcendence. Up to the present time we are still discussing tragedy, as a genre, a concept, a method, a phenomenon. What criterion there is for something to be called a tragedy is not the purpose of this article, since I will primarily examine the concept or sense of tragedy, and not its literary or poetic scope.¹

Jaspers is a perfect example of an existentialist philosopher who, in spite of tragedy, chooses to maintain an orientation towards what he calls transcendence and the Encompassing. In other words, Jaspers sees tragedy as a launching pad for authentic faith, while many of the atheistic existentialists see tragedy as the whole of human existence. Jaspers says, "Tragedy Is Not Enough," implying that we ought to move beyond the brute tragedy of existence. What Jaspers calls "tragic knowledge" or "absolute and radical tragedy" (Jaspers 1969, 30) is comparable to Sartre or Camus' notions of meaninglessness and absurdity. Jaspers knows that this kind of tragedy is opposed to salvation or redemption, since they are both answers to it. Jaspers says that "the chance of being saved destroys the tragic sense of being trapped without chance of escape" (Jaspers 1969, 38), but he fails to realize that this kind of tragedy is not something we can move beyond.

The fact that Jaspers retains his ideas of transcendence and the Encompassing in light of the tragic nature of existence shows how he differs from the atheistic existentialists. These, myself included, argue that the tragic nature of existence does not have an answer; it is just how existence is. Tragedy, contra Jaspers, is enough. It is enough because we cannot escape it, avoid it, or supply a remedy for it. I argue that the atheistic existentialists (e.g. Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus) speak of a more authentic form of existentialism, since they accept absolute and radical tragedy, and do not seek to avoid its consequences. Sartre says, "when we speak of forlornness, a term Heidegger was fond of, we mean only that God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences of this" (1957, 210).² Sartre and others "face all the consequences of this," while Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Marcel do not. They would all be uneasy with Sartre's notion, put forward in his fiction "Nausea," which carries radical tragedy to its logical conclusion: "Every existing thing

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1. One of the best analyses of tragedy, now forty years old, is Walter Kaufman's *Tragedy and Philosophy* (1969); for what I mean by *sense* see: Miguel de Unamino, *Tragic Sense of Life*, (1954); for a look at what the criteria for tragedy has been, as well as challenges to it, see Oscar Mandel, *A Definition of Tragedy* (1982), 1–23.
 2. Sartre explicitly states that existentialism "is nothing else than an attempt to draw all the consequences of a coherent atheistic position" (1957, 51).

is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance” (1964, 133). They would be uncomfortable because they still retain some distant “answer” to radical tragedy.

Anxiety

Another significant existential theme, usually connected with the work of Kierkegaard, is anxiety: anxiety, not simply as an emotion, but as a complex and frightening way of viewing the world. It is connected with angst because it arises in the individual when her freedom is pitted against the weight of the world. It is also connected with decision making, since anxiety most often surfaces when an individual faces numerous choices, and especially so, if one has no good reasons to choose one way over another. The human individual, who is always in the process of making decisions, sometimes faces a fork in the road and cannot decide which way to go. She is like Buridan’s ass—the hungry and thirsty donkey, who when placed equidistant between hay and water, dies of thirst and starvation due to the weight of the decision—and must choose between equally plausible and rewarding alternatives.

Kierkegaard (1944) examines the philosophical, psychological, and theological implications of *Angest* (Danish for “dread” or “anxiety”) in his famous “The Concept of Dread.”³ Dread, according to Kierkegaard, has a dialectic quality since it comes from within the individual (spirit) and from without (as an “alien power”). Kierkegaard connects dread with the fall (Genesis 3) of Adam and Eve and the entrance of sin into human existence. This sin brought with it dread—not in abstraction as something external to the individual—but as dread of one’s own self: “Hence even here one will encounter the phenomenon that a man seems to become guilty merely for dread of himself” (Kierkegaard 1944, 48). Man also finds dread in his longing for release from guilt.⁴ The central existential paradox regarding dread is that man “cannot flee from dread, for he loves it; really he does not love it, for he flees from it” (1944, 40). Dread continues the vicious cycle of: freedom-fall-dread-guilt, freedom-fall-dread-guilt, ad infinitum.

Kierkegaard’s response to dread, as with most other problems, is faith. He says:

“The one and only thing which is able to disarm the sophistry of remorse is faith, courage to believe that the state of sin is itself a new sin, courage to re-

3. This early edition translated *angest* as “dread” while the later edition (1981) translates it as “anxiety.”

4. Kierkegaard says “the expression for such a longing is dread, for in dread the state out of which a man longs to be delivered announces itself, and it announces itself because longing alone is not enough to save the man” (1944, 52).

nounce dread without any dread, which only faith is capable of—not that it annihilates dread, but remaining ever young, it is continually developing itself out of the death throes of dread. Only faith is capable of doing this, for only in faith is the synthesis eternally and every instant possible.” (1944, 104)

Kierkegaard, as with Marcel, thinks that tragedy, paradox, and dread should lead one out of attempts to rationalize and towards a subjective and inner movement of faith. Dread, like tragedy, should lead you somewhere. In this case, where you are led is faith. While Kierkegaard acknowledges that faith does not do away with dread, he still thinks that it develops itself “out of the death throes of dread.” Faith is the courage to “renounce dread without any dread,” but what is “renouncing” other than conquering and moving beyond? What if, on the contrary, dread should lead you nowhere?

Both Kierkegaard and Marcel argue against rationalistic answers to existential problems, since rational answers cannot explain the subjective experiences of paradox, contradiction, and mystery. Rational answers also assume a scientific stance of “objectivity” that tacitly require an epistemological realism⁵ about the external world and humanity’s cognitive relationship to it. Marcel is especially opposed to such thinking. He thinks this kind of “scientific” posture poses all inquiry in the form of problem/answer and leaves out, or completely ignores, the idea of mystery. “A problem,” says Marcel, “is something which I meet, which I find complete before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But a mystery is something in which I myself am involved” (Marcel 1965, 117). He also says, “a genuine problem is subject to an appropriate technique by the exercise of which it is defined; whereas a mystery, by definition, transcends every conceivable technique” (Marcel 1965, 117). Marcel is quick to note the problems language has when attempting to describe mystery. Mystery, like eternity, transcends language’s ability to grasp and define it.

Both Kierkegaard and Marcel acknowledge the role anxiety and angst play in human experience, each in their own way, and yet they both see subjective experience as pointing towards something “beyond,” and “transcendent.” They note how language cannot penetrate this noumenal realm, but they still choose to keep the noumenal realm as a possibility. Why they choose to do so is beyond comprehension for atheistic existentialists. They would ask the pertinent question: “Why believe in anything indescribable or beyond comprehension?” Why not simply accept human existence on its own terms, as something radically and absolutely tragic, riddled with anxiety and dread,

5. Gabriel Marcel makes this point when he wrote, “the scientist, in his conception of the external world, is and must be completely realist” (Marcel 1950, 215).

from which there is no escape? I argue that Kierkegaard and Marcel do not take anxiety and existential angst seriously because they think it points beyond itself to a dubious transcendental realm. The contradiction in Marcel's thought is that although he is against the scientific manner of framing inquiry as problem/answer, he nonetheless retains mystery and transcendence as potential "answers" to the problems posed by existence. To be consistent he, and Kierkegaard, should have abandoned these distant and elusive phantasms and, as Sartre argues, carry tragedy and angst to their logical conclusions. Existential angst does not equal ontological mystery.

Powerlessness

Many existential philosophers have described, sometimes in vivid detail, what it is like to feel powerless in the face of powers beyond your control. Forces external to the individual—social, political, and religious—can take away your freedoms and impugn you with guilt. This creates in the individual a sense of powerlessness. Forces internal to the individual—psychological, existential, and biological—can do the same thing. The internal forces are especially frightening because they occur "inside" of the individual and portray deterministic occurrences. This can inculcate feelings of isolation, fear, and dread, along with a sense of "being trapped" in your own individuality and personality. In my opinion, the best way to explore the feeling of powerlessness is to examine the work of those who have examined this idea in great detail and have come to different conclusions. For me this is Nietzsche and Kafka. Nietzsche knows these forces, both internal and external, and thinks that we ought to "harness" the power of our desires and affirm ourselves by "willing" to live with dangerous confidence. Kafka, on the other side, depicts the individual as powerless, weak, and passive, a recipient and victim of forces beyond her control. So which is a better way of viewing the individual in relationship to these "forces" and "powers"?

The greatness of Nietzsche's philosophy is that it encourages, uplifts, empowers, and revitalizes. It tells the individual to conquer fear and self-pity by affirming her unique existence and power in the world. He tells us the "greatness and fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment of existence is: to live dangerously. Build your cities under Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas! Live at war with your peers and yourselves! Be robbers and conquerors, as long as you cannot be rulers and owners, you lovers of knowledge!" (1974, 283). Nietzsche, who was at once an admirer of Schopenhauer, later rejected his idea that one should resign herself to the cosmic "Will." Nietzsche would rather think of the individual as actively engaged in the world, and not, like

Schopenhauer or Kafka, as a passive product of circumstances. There is an interesting parallel here: Nietzsche was to Schopenhauer what Kierkegaard was to Hegel, each were those who fought for the primacy of the individual against cosmic narratives that seemed to "absorb" the individual.

Kafka, in juxtaposition to Nietzsche, shows how powerless humans are in the face of forces beyond their control. His most popular fiction "The Metamorphosis" is the story of Gregor Samsa who awakes to find himself turned into "a monstrous vermin" (Kafka 1986, 3), (usually thought of as a cockroach). He cannot answer his door, he can barely move, and the struggles he endures to get out of bed seem almost endless: "no matter how hard he threw himself onto his right side, he always rocked onto his back again" (Kafka 1986, 3). "The Metamorphosis" has been thought to represent many different aspects of Kafka's life and philosophy, but no matter what you think the story is an allegory of, the theme of powerlessness is central. The never-ending struggle to "get out of bed" (or any other project) is illustrative of the inner torment experienced by those who feel powerless. If placed in the story of Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus," Kafka's protagonist would spend his whole time struggling to lift up the boulder, and one can only imagine him unhappy.

Kafka's protagonist is similar in "The Metamorphosis," "The Trial," and "The Castle." In "The Trial," the protagonist Josef K., is carried away by authorities he does not know for a crime he is not aware of. At the end of his thirty-first year of incarceration Josef K. is executed. In "The Castle," the protagonist K. is sent (story never says by whom) as a land-surveyor to a remote mountain village surrounding a Castle. He is sent to and fro, never being able to meet Count Westwest and begin his task. He ends up in a constant war against the invisible, but potent, bureaucracy and social norms of the village. He dies there, never knowing what his purpose was, never completing his task, and never coming to terms with the strangeness of the village. Each of these characters, Josef K. and K., are subject to the whims of powers outside of their control. Although they try, they never accomplish any meaningful changes in the lot they were given. They "prolong...out of weakness," as Sartre would say.

Each of these authors portrays something true about human experience. Many times we are placed under conditions beyond our control, and many times it seems the choice is up to us. Wisdom, as I understand it, is knowing when you can change things and when you cannot. Reinhold Niebuhr contemplated this and composed his famous "Serenity Prayer," which asks God to "grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; Cour-

age to change the things I can; And wisdom to know the difference” (1986, 251). Without asking God, or even believing in God, the serenity prayer contains a kernel of truth. Whether or not we ought to orientate ourselves in a manner similar to Nietzsche or Kafka is a different question. I am of the opinion that even though the world is much like how Kafka depicts it, that we should still have a Nietzschean orientation. We ought to act as if we can change things, conquer fears, and affirm our lives. As Sartre constantly points out, the responsibility of our lives, our projects, and our personalities is on our-selves. We are the authors of our own life story.

Absurdity

Absurdity is another important theme in the existentialist corpus. Kierkegaard wrote about the concept of absurdity in his “Fear and Trembling” (1843), “The Sickness Unto Death” (1849), and in his posthumously collected “Journals and Papers.” In “Fear and Trembling” Kierkegaard praises Abraham because he “believed on the strength of the absurd” (1985, 65). In his “Journals and Papers” (1967) Kierkegaard juxtaposes “understanding” and the “absurd”: “Faith hopes for this life also, but, note well, by virtue of the absurd, not by virtue of human understanding” (1967, 4). He also thinks that “to see God or to see the miracle is by virtue of the absurd, for understanding must step aside” (1967, 4). Kierkegaard uses absurdity, in this way, to express the limits of reason and especially the idea of “pure reason.” In this sense, Kierkegaard is in agreement with atheistic existentialists who often speak of the impotence of human reason, but he is in disagreement with them when he speaks of a God beyond the leap of faith.

Against Kierkegaard, Camus treats absurdity, not simply as something opposed to reason, but as a central quality of human existence. In “The Stranger” (1942) Camus’ protagonist Meursault does not conform to the social system he is born into. Camus says of the protagonist, that he is “condemned because he does not play the game” (1968, 335–336). In “The Plague” (1947) Camus shows how an epidemic reveals the absurdity of the human condition. Those caught in the plague have to deal with their own existential crisis, but eventually find themselves bound together with the rest of the plagued. Camus says of this story that it “represents the transition from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared” (1968, 339). These writings and more show Camus to be the grandfather, or father, of the concept of Absurdity in philosophy and literature.

Many religious persons have argued that Sartre and Camus’ thoughts on meaninglessness and absurdity lead people to immorality, nihilism, and

despair. Camus responds to a question like this in the "Three Interviews" section of "Lyrical and Critical Essays." Camus is asked: "Doesn't a philosophy that insists upon the absurdity of the world run the risk of driving people to despair?" He responds by saying: "accepting the absurdity of everything around us is one step, a necessary experience: it should not become a dead end. It arouses a revolt that can become fruitful" (1968, 346). As a motivation for revolt, absurdity can give the impetus for positive social change.

A few decades before Sartre and Camus' famous fictions the Dadaist's acted out their own philosophy of the absurd. Tristan Tzara (Samuel Rosenstock), the Romanian and French essayist, poet, and artist, wrote a manifesto for the Dadaist movement in 1918. At the beginning of the Manifesto Tzara explains why he is writing:

"I'm writing this manifesto to show that you can perform contrary actions at the same time, in one single, fresh breath; I am against action; as for continual contradiction, and affirmation too, I am neither for nor against them, and I won't explain myself because I hate common sense." (Tzara xxxx, xx)

(Tzara
xxxx, xx)

x2

As this quotation shows, many of the ideas of Tzara, as well as other Dadaist's, focus on the absurdity of the world. Tzara explicitly says, "Logic is a complication. Logic is always false" (Tzara xxxx, xx). At the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Hugo Ball, Marcel Janco, Tristan Tzara, and others, put on plays and artistic performances, which revolted against what they considered the bourgeoisie political systems of the day. It was anarchist "anti-art" at its finest. Dadaism is a great example of a cultural movement that based its ideas in an absurd view of the world and challenged the status quo in art, literature, and philosophy. One could argue that they were putting into practice the "revolt" Camus speaks of.

Response to the themes

Atheistic existentialists take them seriously

It is my argument that atheistic existentialists take existential themes seriously. They take them seriously because they do not try to remedy them with faith, mystery, or paradox; they are taken on their own terms. It is disturbing, but not threatening, for the world to be completely and utterly tragic and absurd. It is my contention that religious or theistic existentialism is incompatible with what Jaspers calls "absolute and radical tragedy." In religious existentialism there is always something to which tragedy and absurdity point. I agree with Sartre and Camus that tragedy and absurdity point nowhere. Existence is just that way. Tragedy and absurdity are phenomenological given, partially

understood by the intellect, and deeply felt at the level of the emotions. They are not means to an end.

To take something serious is to accept it as a real and legitimate issue, not to be solved by resorting to “rational answers” or “mystery and paradox,” but to be pondered and investigated. Tragedy and absurdity can also be heuristic devices used to show the pain and emptiness humans feel when contemplating their insignificance. But how does God’s existence or non-existence factor into this equation? Does God’s existence or non-existence really make any difference whatsoever? Sartre says of some “French teachers,” who “tried to set up a secular ethic,” that they thought of God, like Pierre-Simon Laplace, as a “useless and costly hypothesis” (1957, 21). “This, I believe,” said Sartre, “is the tendency of everything called reformism in France—nothing will be changed if God does not exist” (1957, 22). Sartre, against this type of French reformism says, “the existentialist, on the contrary, thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him” (1957, 22).

The atheistic existentialist thinks tragedy and absurdity are only salient if God does not exist. If God did exist, it would be strange to think of life as absolutely and radically tragic, because God, as is traditionally thought, gives meaning to existence. Mary Warnock says the exact opposite of Sartre when referring to existentialism. She says, “We may note in passing how little difference it makes to Existentialist theory whether it includes or does not include belief in God. For in practice there is no help to be found in believing in God” (1970, 134). I find the opposite to be true: it makes all the difference if a God exists or not. If a God exists there are radical consequences to be taken into account—not only metaphysically and ontologically—but also existentially, psychologically, and in practicality. If God does not exist there are similar radical consequences, many of which Sartre notes. Taking tragedy and absurdity seriously, in my opinion, requires the non-existence of God, gods, and the afterlife.

Many existentialists, Sartre included, think that the non-existence of God is “distressing,” and “disturbing,” since it negates universal and normative values. The idea of a Godless world, one where humans are forlorn and abandoned, is frightening to many persons. The thought of a Godless world, along with all of its consequences, may be what keeps people believing in God. I think, as Christopher Hitchens does, that God’s non-existence may be disturbing at first, but eventually you come to understand how horrific the idea of the existence of God is. We may be without universal or normative values, the “values in a heaven of ideas,” but at least we are not constantly watched,

judged, and determined by God. The idea of God is similar to the Orwell's idea of Big Brother; the elusive ruler who controls everything, whom you must fear and love, and who watches your every thought. This kind of world, a God created world, is "distressing," and "disturbing."

Atheistic existentialists take them to their obvious conclusions

When Sartre says, "God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences of this," he is saying that we should take the fact of a Godless world to its obvious conclusions. Tragedy, anxiety, powerlessness, and absurdity fit perfectly with a Godless world, but when they are given religious significance they lose their strength and fecundity. Tragedy, taken to its obvious conclusion, is absolute tragedy; anxiety, taken to its obvious conclusion, is anxiety without an answer; powerlessness, taken to its obvious conclusion, shows how imbedded we are in this Godless world; and absurdity, taken to its obvious conclusion, is absolute absurdity. By "obvious" I do not mean "objective," but "honest" and "authentic." To live authentically in the face of these themes is not to supply an answer, but to know there is none.

One of the main reasons why I think atheistic existentialism is more authentic than religious existentialism, is that the former accepts the idea of radical responsibility. This kind of responsibility, usually associated with Sartre, says that we cannot look beyond ourselves in order to find fault and blame. It is true that Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Marcel place responsibility in the agency of the individual, but they do so thinking that God is paying attention to this agency. Even if we did not take an inner leap of faith, or accept the mystery of being, transcendence, or the Encompassing, God would still be there, watching. This is simply incompatible with human freedom and responsibility. Walter Kaufmann said it right when discussing Sartre: "All man's alibis are unacceptable: no gods are responsible for his condition; no original sin; no heredity and no environment; no race, no caste, no father, and no mother; no wrong-headed education, no governess, no teacher" (1956, 46). The God of religious existentialism, no matter how elusive, mysterious, and paradoxical, is still an alibi for human use.

Camus wrote an interesting short story showing the uselessness of God when facing despair and other existential crises. In "Irony" (1937), Camus tells of an old woman who is slowly dying and who is terrified by her isolation, loneliness, and fear of dying alone. The interesting part is that she is a religious woman: "her whole life was reduced to God" (Camus 1968, 19). She finds comfort only in a young man who tries his best to listen to her and care for her. Camus says, "You felt that this old woman had been freed of

everything except God, wholly abandoned to this final evil, virtuous through necessity” (Camus 1968, 20). When the old woman’s young relatives leave for the movies the young man hesitates out of pity: “she saw that the one person who had taken an interest in her was leaving. She didn’t want to be alone. She could already feel the horror of loneliness, the long, sleepless hours, the frustrating intimacy with God. She was afraid, could now only rely on man” (Camus 1968, 21).

The old woman felt trapped by her condition and trapped by God. “God was of no use for her. All He did was cut her off from people and make her lonely” (Camus 1968, 22). After telling to the story of an old man, facing the same despair of old age and death, Camus concludes by saying, “Death for us all, but his own death to each” (Camus 1968, 29). What this short story shows is that not even God can experience your pain and death for you. Your pain and your death are only yours. Even in the face of the most difficult existential experience, death, “God is of no use to us.” The responsibility can only be on the individual. Camus wants us to realize this, so that we stop “pushing off” our responsibilities and placing them on things exterior to us (e.g. God, gods, external forces).

Atheistic existentialists provide a life-affirming philosophy for the twenty-first century

If atheistic existentialism takes tragedy, anxiety, powerlessness, and absurdity seriously and to their obvious conclusions, than it is easy to see how it can give us a radical and life-affirming philosophy for the twenty-first century. If all responsibility is on us, and if we accept the common themes of the existentialist literature with seriousness, than what follows is a philosophy of existence and action. Since the themes of existentialism cannot be answered, remedied, or overcome, they should be embraced and used as a way of affirming one’s individuality and as an impetus towards living authentically. If there were ever a time when an existential philosophy of human responsibility was needed, it would be now, in our day.

Shakespeare’s Brutus, in Julius Caesar says, “There is a tide in the affairs of men”: this is especially true of the twenty-first century. Political unrest, globalization, social change, and the loss of modernist sureties, are only a few of the “paradigm shifts” occurring in the present time. The feeling of powerlessness is an all-too-common phenomenon in the twenty-first century. It is primarily a response to the forces beyond our control that seem to “intrude” into our individual lives. Resignation and life in the modern world have become almost synonymous, since political, social, and individual change appears to

be utterly beyond our control. The bombardment of information, since the beginning of what has been called the "technological revolution," stirs in the millennial generation a sense of confusion, skepticism, and disdain. This, in turn, leads to resignation.

The millennial generation mirrors atheistic existentialism in many ways. Its focus on the individual, Cartesian doubt, and disenchantment with political systems, echo's the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s of French intellectual life. The problem we face is that, although we are offered many "solutions" to our current predicament (i.e. new age spirituality, religious beliefs, psychics, consumer commodities, life-style enhancers, pharmaceuticals, etc.), none of the offers come across as authentic or real. They are simply simulacrum, a type of veil that feeds the void between the "haves" (who present themselves as happy) and the "have not's" (who have limited venues to present themselves). Instead of examining and evaluating manners in which people orient their lives, we are offered quick and easy "answers" to our problems. We may not need answers as much as we need honesty.

The way that atheistic existentialism can help people in modern society is by providing them a philosophy that accepts the tragedy and absurdity of existence while also promoting responsibility and authentic living. It can help people move past resignation into a mode of orientation that affirms the uniqueness of the individual and her projects. Her subjectivity, when seen in relationship to others (e.g. inter-subjectivity), can create a sense of sympathy and empathy. Against the idea of an "infinite distance between the self and the "Other," I believe there are genuine and authentic communications that can exist amongst "selves." This communication may be difficult to interpret since there is also the distance between the individual's authentic private self, and her public expressions. Even if this is the case, there still exists an ethic that honors individual projects, social responsibility, and encourages the sympathy and empathy that arises throughout inter-subjective communication.

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DATE?

God? No and Yes: A Skeptic's View

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ABSTRACT

After a mild indoctrination into the Christian faith, at the age of 15 I discovered myself to be a non-believer: the idea of an invisible, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent God suddenly seemed simply unbelievable. Years later I decided to re-examine the question. Perhaps I had missed something. This in turn led to a fascination with God questions and religious belief, but a re-confirmation of my earlier discovery: the traditional Christian concept of God was not only unbelievable, but incoherent and morally muddled. But further reflection has yielded a qualifying conclusion: God—or rather gods, many gods—do exist but as ideas, tremendously powerful ideas that shape our reality. The crucial concern is that these be good ideas, which has not always been the case.

KEYWORDS

humanist argument

Introduction

Although I have been a skeptic for approximately 58 years and cannot now even imagine becoming a Christian, unlike most “new atheists” I am not generally hostile to religious beliefs, Christian or other. I have a beloved sister and brother-in-law who are devout Christians. Although I cannot share their belief I respect it and see the value they find in it. I listen to grieving parents of the Sandyhook massacre saying their only consolation is knowing their five year old child is now with God, that someday they will be reunited. For me this is a delusion, and in their situation I could find no comfort, but how cruel it would be to attack, to even question their belief.

It cannot be denied that many people find value in religious belief. It can and does inspire empathy, comfort the suffering, motivate acts of charity, draw people into communities. As a skeptic and a secular humanist, I feel my first obligation is to do no harm. Let well enough be. I have no right to impose my conclusions on others, to overwhelm them, if this is possible, with evidence that the God they believe in does not exist. But certain circumstances, I feel, justify the expression of my conclusions, even in some cases to those who might prefer that I remain silent.

One such circumstance is in response to evangelism, to those believers who argue for the *necessity* of belief, “*That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven, and on earth...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.*” (Philippians 2: 10–11). For example, N. T. Wright, an Anglican scholar with impeccable academic credentials and exalted status, in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, concluded that the evidence is overwhelming: Jesus died on the cross, was physically resurrected, left an empty tomb, and appeared in the flesh, alive, to both his followers and some who had not been his followers. Wright asserted, “I regard this conclusion as coming in the same sort of category of historical probability so high as to be virtually certain, as the death of Augustus in AD14 or the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70” (Wright 2003, xx). Wright’s implication is clear: anyone who fails to accept the physical resurrection of Jesus is either perverse or ignorant. I responded with a review essay in *Skeptic* magazine arguing that despite Wright’s tome of over 800 pages, the evidence of the physical resurrection of Jesus falls far short of any claim to historical certainty—or even probability. History does not demand that I become a Christian believer (Stecher 2005) Publishing in *Skeptic* magazine I was, of course, preaching to the choir.

Another example, but this of a less militant evangelist. When I read British Christian apologist Peter Williams’ *The Case for God*, (1999) I sent him a long letter indicating where I thought his case fell short. Peter responded with a much longer and more scholarly letter of rejoinder. Over the next several years our correspondence extended to hundreds of pages which I eventually edited and which we published online at www.bethinking.org under the title *God Questions*. This is a spirited debate of considerable sophistication which Peter and I both enjoyed, neither convincing the other. Believers like Peter Williams who invite debate open the opportunity for better understanding and for the testing of one’s beliefs—or disbeliefs. Since we all are prone to seeking only reinforcement of our beliefs and tend to ignore or dismiss contrary arguments and evidence, such debates are valuable.

I think it also allowable to challenge religious belief when that belief is unhealthy and potentially dangerous. For example, I hope both Muslims and non Muslims will dispute the belief that God (or Allah) commands the indiscriminate slaughter of infidels, including non-combatants. Another example: several years ago I was driving a rental car in Milwaukee and listening to Christian radio. The radio pastor was preaching of the necessity, the parental duty, to terrorize children. Paraphrasing his message, “Children must learn that God hates disobedient children, and the fate of those God hates is everlasting torment in hell. If your child fails to pick up his clothes, or is disrespectful, remind him of the time he burned his hand on the hot stove. Then warn him if he dies outside of God’s love, it won’t be just his hand that will burn, but his whole body, and he will burn for ever and ever, and the pain will be unbearable and unending.” In fairness, the “Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God” sort of Christianity is perhaps now a minority view among believers, but those who preach it can easily, as in this case, descend into something at least akin to child abuse.

And last, I address myself to those who are unsettled in their religious views, who seek for the truth about God, about whether God exists, and if He does exist, what his relationship is to the world we live in. These are questions I have pondered for many years, reading across a wide spectrum of religious positions. I hope that the exploration of religious belief that follows will resonate for others and contribute to a clearer understanding of these most fundamental questions.

God? No.

Do I believe that God exists? The first time I gave the question serious consideration, I was a high school sophomore. I had recently completed the mild indoctrination of my parents’ Congregational Church and had been confirmed a fifteen-year-old Christian. I was saying my dutiful bedtime prayer (“...and God bless Mom and Dad and...”) when something resembling a reverse revelation occurred—a considerable shock. Everything that I had been taught about Him suddenly seemed nonsensical, even preposterous. The experience has since reminded me of St. Paul on the road to Damascus, except that I was lying in bed, and the voice was saying “Carl! I DON’T EXIST!”

As I now recall, my disbelief then was based upon a sudden realization of the gigantic gulf between the world I perceived and the fundamental assertions of Christianity: that an invisible spirit is everywhere, listening to and watching over all human beings simultaneously. The idea seemed contrary

to all common sense. In fact, God seemed no more real than that Santa Claus who, in a single night, delivers Christmas gifts to all the world's children. Santa, at least, was not invisible. The one perplexing fact was that so many otherwise normal adults, having outgrown Santa Claus, still seemed to believe in God.

Despite years of searching since then, my answer to the question of God's absolute, objective existence has not changed. The God of my fathers, of the Bible, and of orthodox Christian confession—eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, morally perfect, the Creator of heaven and earth, the supernatural Father who listens to our prayers and sometimes answers them, who is angry at our sinfulness but who so loves the World that He offers his only Son as a blood sacrifice to Himself so that whosoever shall believe in this Son shall not be tormented forever in hell, but shall have eternal bliss in heaven—this God is not my God nor the Father of my personal Lord and Savior. Mind, this realization was not the result of any philosophical analysis. Rather, just the bare recitation of Christian beliefs suddenly seemed a statement self-evidently untrue. This God—or any personal god, for that matter—was no more real to me than Jupiter, Wotan, or the Tooth Fairy.

And yet, paradoxically, gods, and even the God of Christianity have, over the years, attained for me a very real existence. The only way of clarifying this apparent muddle, this contradiction between disbelief and belief, is to carefully define terms.

What does the Christian believer actually assert in the statement, "God exists"? First, what does the word *God* signify in this context? In the imagination of children and other unsophisticated believers, God is a bearded, robed figure seated on a great white throne in heaven, but omnipresent and invisible on earth. Many modern believers modify or abandon this naïve view; the problem is how to replace this concept of God and still remain within the fold of the faith. For all Christianity, The Bible is a bedrock source; Protestantism has traditionally proclaimed The Bible as God's sole revelation of Himself. But the Bible is a product of primitive religious communities believing in an essentially anthropomorphic God, armed with supernatural powers. According to this view, He made us in His image, He speaks our language, and He has clearly human emotions. But the Bible, supposedly his self-revelation to humankind, reveals in Him some of the most unworthy human impulses and motives: favoritism, jealousy, rage, callousness to suffering, cruelty, even sadism. In fact, the Biblical God reveals Himself to be very wicked.

God's own testimony is replete with self-incriminating evidence. Consider the most serious of these charges: that the God of The Bible is cruel, cruel

even to the point of sadism. In *Genesis* God compels Abraham, his most favored human, to “Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest...and offer him there for a burnt offering.” Abraham follows God’s orders. “And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.” Only at the last second does God relent and allow Abraham to sacrifice a ram instead (22: 1–13). According to standard exegesis, this ordeal was imposed upon Abraham to test his fidelity, but Christian doctrine also holds that God is omniscient. If so, God knew that Abraham would pass the test, and Abraham’s emotional trauma and Isaac’s terror were therefore pointless. Even if God were not omniscient, the test was appallingly cruel.

True, Abraham was not forced to actually murder his son, but just to prove his willingness to do so. And this is just one small episode in an epic-sized text. The case of Job, however, is equally distressing. According to God’s own testimony, Job is “a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil” (*Job* 1: 3). Yet to prove to Satan Job’s dog-like fidelity, God allows Job to be tortured. As a result, Satan reduces Job to squalid poverty, murders all his children, and covers his entire body with painful boils. Finally, even the ultra-pious Job challenges God’s justice: “For he breaketh me with a tempest, and multiplieth my wounds without cause... He destroyeth the perfect and the wicked... He will laugh at the trial of the innocent. The earth is given into the hand of the wicked” (8: 17–24). God responds by browbeating Job into abject submission, but never answers his charges. How could He? According to God’s own words, He has destroyed Job without cause (2: 3). True, God finally restores Job’s wealth and gives him new children, but this hardly excuses the misery inflicted on Job so that God could win a wager with Satan.

Haven’t we all met Job? Don’t we all know some decent but miserable person whose life seems one catastrophe followed by another? And don’t we see that there often aren’t happy endings, that those who suffer terribly are seldom recompensed? We are fascinated by the story of Job because he is all around us—Job is legion. We know, too, that some day we may share Job’s fate—to paraphrase Pogo, we have met Job and he is us.

Still, the stories of Abraham and Job are small-scale—God and an individual. The story of the Flood enlarges God’s field of action. He is displeased with human wickedness and violence; His response is to exterminate, with the exception of one family, the entire human race—men, women, children, babies. This exceeds genocide. No word exists for a crime on this scale. And to what end? The earth is eventually repopulated by humans who seem to be no better than those who were destroyed. (*Genesis* 9–19).

In *Exodus*, God established the moral code of the Ten Commandments for His people. But what is to be made of the morality of God Himself in this book? The Egyptians have enslaved His tribe, the Hebrews, so God visits plagues on the Egyptians to force them to release His people from bondage. But the plagues are punishment for an entire people, not just for Pharaoh, who alone makes decisions. And Pharaoh is at several times willing to free the Hebrews, but God again and again hardens Pharaoh's heart—the text is explicit on this point—so that Pharaoh does not release the Hebrews and God has the opportunity to place ever-more severe plagues on the Egyptians (9:12, 10:2, 10:27). God is not satisfied until He has slaughtered all the first-born of the Egyptians, "...to the first-born of the maid-servant that is behind the mill." And to what purpose? In God's own words, "Pharaoh shall not hearken to you [Moses] that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt." Wonders indeed. Cruelty and slaughter.

In Deuteronomy we again encounter a God of murderous cruelty. God commands His special people, the Hebrews, to invade the lands of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, Gergashites and Jebusites burn their temples, and kill them all—men, women and children. "...you must exterminate them." (Deuteronomy 7:2) God's genocidal command is reiterated in several other passages in Deuteronomy and Numbers, and Joshua similarly conquers many lands: "He left no survivor, destroying everything that drew breath, as the Lord the God Of Israel had commanded." (Joshua 10:40.) No Geneva Accords in God's moral universe. And yet, despite all the Biblical evidence to the contrary, God is asserted by Christian teaching to be morally perfect, just and merciful. As R.C. Sproul, Chancellor of Knox Theological Seminary insists, God is "Holy." Rather, on the evidence of His own testimony, God is guilty of crimes against humanity.

This God can be indicted not only on evidence from The Bible, His Holy Word, but also on evidence from the universal experience of humankind. Traditional Christianity teaches that this morally perfect omniscient and omnipotent God is also the creator of the world, and that nothing can happen against His will. But everyone, even the most pious believer, acknowledges that the world this God created is filled with both moral and natural evil. Moral evil is the wickedness committed by human beings; natural evils are the destructive elements found in nature—plagues, hurricanes, diseases, earthquakes. Mark Twain added flies to the list.

Christianity traditionally excuses God from any blame for moral evil, saying these wicked deeds are the free choices made by man. But this free-will defense, a mainstay of Christian apologetics for centuries, is only a shabby

attempt to blame the victim. According to Christian teaching, God is our creator. If we consistently exercise free will unwisely or wickedly—if we sin—this argues for a defect in our nature, a nature given us by God. This is not to excuse the agent. But consider, if a manufacturer with perfect quality control puts on the market a product which he knows will self-destruct, and in self-destructing bring misery and death to innocent bystanders, we would judge such a man a scoundrel. God should not be held to a lower standard.

Defenders of the free-will doctrine sometimes hold that it is a precious gift, a gift which confers on us our full humanity, but a necessary consequence is that we will sometimes misuse this free will and choose wickedness. This argument will not withstand careful scrutiny. If God had made us sufficiently wise, sufficiently noble, we would always freely choose good rather than evil. Surely there are many goods to choose from. According to Christian teaching, God's only begotten Son was so good that he never sinned. Yet God did not deny Jesus the precious gift of free will. Why did God not love us sufficiently to make us, like Jesus, proof against sinful temptation? Given the power, is this not what any good parent would do for his children? Again, God should not be held to a lower standard. If He had made us defect-free, all the pain and misery caused by moral evil would have been avoided. What satisfaction can God find in the suffering we too often bring upon ourselves and others?

One further thought. If free will is such a precious gift, surely God will not deny His chosen this gift when they reach the heaven Christians believe in. But if a necessary consequence of this gift is that it will sometimes be misused, will not this also be the case in heaven? Recall that according to Christian tradition, a great part of the angelic host did precisely this, rebelling against God and suffering expulsion from heaven and eternal torment in hell. If such was the fate even of angels, can God's chosen saints anticipate anything better? Given Christian teaching, there is no reason to expect an end to this pattern of sin and punishment. Unless God repairs the defects in our nature—defects which He is responsible for in the first place—happiness will be no more secure in heaven than it was on earth.

And a final perspective on moral evil. If God is a loving Father to all of us, why did He, in His omnipotence and omniscience, allow Pol Pot and Stalin to survive long enough to slaughter millions, to destroy entire nations? When Hitler almost miraculously survived an assassination attempt, he attributed his deliverance to God. Can any traditional Christian contradict him? And so the prayers of millions were unanswered, and the ovens at Auschwitz, Treblinka, Bergen-Belsen continued changing human beings, many of them children and babies, into ashes and smoke. This same God gave pitifully short

lives to Keats and Mozart, who brought joy to so many. If the Christian God existed He could effortlessly reduce moral evil in this world by the timely removal from our midst of the most wicked, those who bring only suffering and death, rather than the most worthy, those who bring joy. But often this does not happen.

Consider this testimony of a survivor of a Nazi Death Camp:

I'll tell you why I lost my faith in God in the Holocaust. Because if God exists then He's a monster. And Hitler was God's deputy on earth. Do you want me to believe that? I'd rather be an atheist...I refuse to believe God is a horrible sadist. There are no other choices at all. God either does not exist or He is the Devil. I'd simply prefer to believe in no God at all. (Brenner, 1980)

As to natural evil, when children die painful, protracted deaths from cancer or other hideous diseases and in dying blight the lives of those who love and would nurture them, an omniscient, omnipotent God cannot escape responsibility. Emily Dickinson suggested this in one of her most chilling poems:

Apparently with no surprise
To any happy Flower
The Frost beheads it at its play—
In accidental power—
The blonde Assassin passes on—
The Sun proceeds unmoved
To measure off another Day
For an Approving God.

In 2004 a tsunami in the Indian Ocean killed 230,000 people and left a million homeless. We call earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, droughts, “acts of God.” But can the God who so acts be good? More fundamentally, can the God of traditional Christianity, exist? Can the cruel, mass-murdering tribal deity of The Bible, the Creator of the earth with all its evil, be also an infinitely good, just, merciful, knowledgeable and powerful Father of all mankind? Asserting this seems no more rational than asserting the existence of a good evil, or that an elephant is a carrot. The moral dilemmas in this portrait of God seem to me to be irresolvable; I find, as a result, the traditional Christian idea of God to be incoherent, unintelligible. It is incompatible with God's supposed self-revelation and to the world as we experience it.

Contemporary Christian teachings have several responses to these moral dilemmas. One response is to differentiate between the Old Testament God, who is sometimes admitted to seem somewhat harsh and judgmental— or is perhaps only partially revealed and understood—and the New Testament

God, the God of forgiveness and mercy. And many passages in the New Testament do portray this kinder, gentler God. "Blessed are they who show mercy; mercy shall be shown to them...Blessed are the peacemakers; they shall be called God's children." (Matthew 5:7–9) But it is the Christian God, not the God of the Hebrews, who presides over hell. The Old Testament God contented Himself with mass murder; the New Testament God pursues his hapless victims beyond the grave to torture them for all eternity. In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994):

Jesus solemnly proclaims that he "will send his angels, and they will gather ... all evil doers, and throw them into the furnace of fire," and that he will pronounce the condemnation: "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire!" (1995, 292)

And his victims, according to Christian orthodoxy, are a large majority of the human race, his own defective, doomed and damned children. Is the human imagination capable of an evil more fiendish than this?

Many liberal Protestant churches, such as the Congregational church of my childhood and the United Church of Christ church I attended for several years in the 1980s, simply ignore the repulsive elements in God's Biblical self-revelation. The focus of pulpit teaching and worship is restricted to all the most positive Biblical passages. Praise God from whom all blessings flow. God never orders the extermination of foreign tribes, and Hell is never mentioned, or becomes only the loneliness and emotional pain of being alienated from the kind, loving, Heavenly Father. In effect, if not literally, The Bible is expurgated, bowdlerized, but the God who emerges from this process is not the God of our fathers. These churches do leave us with a semi-Biblical God who is loving and good. But alas, these churches are clearly in decline.

The more conservative Protestant churches are, by contrast, robust and growing. They generally condemn this liberal temporizing, seeing it, perhaps rightly, as a way station on the road leading to that dreaded secular humanism. Conservative Protestantism, unlike the liberal branches, insists that The Bible is historical and inerrant; thus, the God of The Bible must be embraced in His entirety and pronounced good, just and merciful even in those episodes where He appears far otherwise. Did God command His people to exterminate the Canaanites—men, women and children? Well, the Canaanites must have deserved such treatment, and the Good Lord was right in demanding it. So I have been told by a true believer, and so argues William Lane Craig, perhaps America's foremost Christian apologist. But such thinking perverts the words, the very idea of goodness, justice and mercy. And the

God who sanctions, who commands such behavior, is also the engineer of the train that goes to Auschwitz.

Another response sometimes forthcoming from the faithful is that God is simply beyond human understanding. Indeed, one Roman Catholic believer informed me that God is “*utterly beyond human comprehension.*” But this having been said, no other statement about God can be made. The Biblical God who has revealed Himself to mankind is abandoned, replaced by God as an indeterminate blank, a word without semantic content.

God? Yes.

All that I have said to this point should make clear why I am not a Christian, why I do not believe, indeed cannot believe, in the God of traditional Christianity. What then did I mean when I stated my belief that God does exist? Am I just as confused, muddled, as I think traditional Christians are?

Again, we must carefully define terms. We’ve examined the Christian concept of *God*. What does the word *exist* signify? Let’s begin with the most familiar and comfortable sense of this word, involving the existence of material objects in the world about us—trees, frogs, chairs, rocks. Our knowledge of these things comes to us through our senses—we see, hear, taste, smell, touch them. Most of us seldom or never consider them in any other light. We are materialists, in the philosophical sense of the word.

When I taught Emersonian idealism to my American literature students, to make the concept accessible I found I first had to undermine their unreflecting materialistic assumptions. I quoted Emerson: “The senses give us representations of things, but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell.” Then I asked “Is modern physics essentially materialistic or idealistic in its understanding of nature?” Almost invariably the students responded “materialistic.” So I gave them a quick survey of twentieth-century physics, which also says, in varying vocabularies, that the senses do not reveal the ultimate nature of the world of objects. Atomic physics teaches a universe of elusive particles; field theory teaches a universe of electromagnetic waves and gravitational fields. Both have been empirically verified, as has a third model, quantum physics. Yet the three seem in conflict with each other, and the cosmos exists, simultaneously, as particles, waves, and units of energy. And our unaided senses reveal nothing to us of the mysterious underlying structure of the material world. Consider further, whether the theoretical framework is atomic physics ($E=MC^2$), field theory, or quantum physics: all three assert that everything, everywhere—all matter—is essentially energy. I asked my students to think of energy, energy itself, and then to think of a

chair as energy, despite the partial, misleading report of the senses. Emerson's idealism was pantheistic, identifying everything in nature with spirit, with the Oversoul, with God. But modern physics makes a parallel assertion in a different vocabulary, substituting energy for spirit.

But asserting the identity between the universal underlying energy of the universe and God unfortunately muddles the debate about the existence of God; it is bad science and bad theology. Common sense precludes denying the existence of the universe; if the universe *is* God, the theists win the debate by radical redefinition. But this "God" is completely other than the God asserted by Christianity, who is supernatural rather than nature itself, known through Faith, not science. And "God" conceptualized this way has one other difference from the Christian God: the energy that is the cosmos itself is completely amoral, entirely alien from any human concept of good and evil, and unresponsive to prayer. This "God" is embodied equally and indifferently in flowers and fungi, in saints and slugs, in a grain of dust, a puppy or a turd. At least this "God" lacks the appalling malice of the traditional Christian God.

But I think we—I think I—need more from God. To understand that the universe is essentially energy is to see this universe more truly, but to identify this energy with God accomplishes nothing, and it leaves unsatisfied aspirations almost everyone shares to goodness, to a sense of a better, more fulfilling human existence. To find a God relevant to such aspirations I think it necessary to once again examine the concept of existence itself, this time beginning in a realm somewhat removed from the world of material objects: our dream worlds. What we see and hear in our dream worlds has a reality of its own, may truly be said to exist, but in a different way than material objects. To understand this, perhaps we must first wander a bit in Bishop Berkeley's forest—or, more precisely, be absent from that forest when the tree falls.

The familiar conundrum—"If a tree falls in the forest, and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?"—recently came to mind when I was strolling through Ipswich Wildlife Sanctuary. And again I experienced a kind of revelation. No, the tree falls in absolute silence. A sound is not identical to a sound wave (which would be one result of the falling tree) any more than a sound is identical to a radio wave—say, one broadcasting a weather forecast. Somebody has to turn on the radio before there can be a sound. And beyond that, whether the source be a falling tree or the voice of a meteorologist on a radio broadcast, there must also be a functioning ear and a perceiving brain. So, too, the tree falls (or stands) invisible, unless there is light, eye, brain to perceive it.

A strange thought: we live in a world of silent, invisible objects except as we or someone or some creature perceives them. A chocolate bar has no

flavor until someone tastes it; to a fly, excrement tastes like candy. That is, even though what we apprehend through our sense organs is ordinarily initiated by a material object, the actual image, sound, taste is in the brain itself. Nevertheless, visual images and other sensations are real; they do exist. But, as common experience attests, all our sense experiences can and do happen independently of the immediate external world. I have sometimes lain in a semi-dark room, with muted household and neighborhood sounds surrounding me—the refrigerator cycling in, a cricket chirping—and heard, seen, none of this. Instead, I have seen streets that will be found on no map, I have heard words never uttered—seen and heard things existing only in my dream world. But I have seen them, heard them, as absolutely as if they had been waking experiences. The images and sounds are electrical brain activity and are the same whether I sleep or wake. In fact, I remember becoming aware more than once that what I was seeing was a dream vision because everything was so wonderfully vivid, the colors brighter, the outlines sharper, than anything I experience when awake. And I awoke with a sense of loss, of a retreat into a waking world less perfect and beautiful than my dream world.

Although dreams of the kind I have described are not immediately connected to objects in the external world, they have their ultimate origin there: I dream of an unmapped street, I hear words not spoken, but only because I have known other streets, heard other voices.

Besides the brain realities of dream images and dream sounds, there exists another kind of non-spatiotemporal thing, of real nonentities. We know the words *love*, *justice*, *mercy* to represent an order of reality, even though they attach to no specific visual or audio image, even though they occupy no space at any specific time. Ideas of this kind relate not to things, objects, but to actions. Love, mercy, justice are known in the external world, the world of objects, by human deeds.

Buckminster R. Fuller once wrote that God is a verb, not a noun. The statement, of course, is linguistic nonsense—just try to write an intelligible English sentence with God in the verb slot. Nevertheless, the statement is somehow true, another way of saying that God is not a thing or a person, but an ideal that is made manifest only by human actions. In a non-human world, an ocean world, for example, inhabited by starfish and sharks, algae and plankton, there is no love, no mercy, no justice. And the only God is the amoral energy of nature, a God undeserving of the name.

By contrast, in our world, in the world of human societies, love, mercy, justice, do exist. And so does the real God, the God of good and evil. Or rather, many Gods: Roman Catholic Gods, Protestant Gods, Jewish Gods, Muslim

Gods, a God for each believer. The problem is that most believers, I think, accept a composite God who is a preposterous muddle of contradictions, a God infected with the gravest moral evil. But this makes that God no less real.

I don't believe that Christians worship a God they know to be evil. Many worship as they have been taught to worship, never seriously exploring the moral implications of the Biblical God. Other believers are capable of bizaare feats of rationalization to protect themselves from uncomfortable challenges to the orthodox conception of God. Richard Swinburne for example, one of the most respected academic advocates of Christian orthodoxy, argues that God provides the earth with natural evil so that humans have the opportunity to take actions based upon free choice that would otherwise be unavailable to them. God provides devastating earthquakes, for example, so that humans can choose to avoid building where earthquakes are likely to occur. Swinburne asks, "And how are they to come to know this unless earthquakes have happened due to natural and unpredicted causes, like the Lisbon earthquake of 1775?" (Swinburne 2004, 312) At the same time, Swinburne argues, "the operation of natural laws producing evils gives humans knowledge...of how to bring about such evils themselves." Swinburne argues this increases human moral freedom—we learn how to be truly wicked, or refrain from wickedness. But Swinburne does not make it clear how the Lisbon earthquake provided a template for human evil, "to make available to humans specially worthwhile kinds of choice...which the free-will defense extols" (Swinburne 1996, 107). Or why a supposedly good God would empower humans to commit monstrous acts by committing such acts Himself. Try applying this at a human level: "Your honor, I plead not guilty. I committed this heinous crime to increase the moral freedom of other people." Swinburne's defense of God seems almost a Swiftian satire, but apparently he's serious.

Others might worship out of fear and denial. Reading the works of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American Puritans, I sense that they sometimes saw the Biblical God as I see him, but feared hell fire so utterly that they would say, believe, whatever this God required of them. Since they believed that the only alternative to belief and worship was eternal torture, can they be blamed? Perhaps some modern believers respond to the same fear. But I can't help wondering whether belief in and worship of a God for this reason isn't a moral failure, a betrayal of worthy human values. Should we really wish to spend all eternity worshipping a God who is for all eternity torturing most of the human race, including, in all probability, people we knew and loved on earth? Make no mistake; this is a widespread Christian belief. A 2004 Gallup Poll revealed that 92% of Americans who attend church weekly believe in hell.

Seventeenth century Michael Wigglesworth, whose *Day of Doom* was the best-selling book in America for almost a hundred years, revealed this loathsome implication of the Christian doctrine of heaven and hell:

The godly wife conceives no grief,
 Nor can she shed a tear
 For the sad state of her dear mate,
 when she his doom doth hear....
 The pious father had not much rather
 His graceless son should lie
 In hell with devils, for all his evils
 Burning eternally,
 Than God most high should injury
 By sparing him sustain;
 And doth rejoice to hear Christ's voice
 Adjudging him to pain.

Yet this God, the God of traditional Christianity, is real, as real as any idea. And God is a tremendously powerful idea, an idea that can transform individuals and worlds. "God will help me overcome this sickness." "God will save me from despair." "God inspires me to serve my unfortunate brethren." But also "God commands me to kill my beloved son, Isaac." "God commands me to exterminate the Canaanites." Or the Jews. Or witches, heretics, Papists, infidels, Indians, homosexuals, Bosnians. And so God too often becomes an incarnation of our most wicked impulses.

I believe that first, we must take responsibility for our God. To do this, we must recognize the nature of His existence. This God, the God of good and evil, is not a spatiotemporal thing like a tree or a frog. This God is instead an idea, like love, mercy and justice, and so He is whatever we think Him to be, believe Him to be, dream Him to be. God's only existence is in the realm of our ideas.

Another way of understanding the reality and power of God as an ideas, as opposed to the traditional concept of God as an independent supernatural being, is to consider the reality and power of music. To do so is to grasp how complex and puzzling are the varying ways things exist. Take, for example, the Mozart Requiem. Does it exist? Undeniably, and it can have powerful effects. But what is the nature of its existence? It is not a spatiotemporal entity like a tree, although it is expressed in time. Clearly, it began as an idea, a tremendously complex idea in the mind of Mozart. Then Mozart translated this idea into musical notation on pages of paper. This musical score is not the Mozart Requiem, but a symbolic representation. It is no more the thing itself than are the letters G O D God Himself, however understood. The

Requiem's most meaningful existence, perhaps its only true existence, is in performance, both for the musicians and the audience. And this existence requires the active participation of both musicians and audience, as it exists as sounds in discreet units of time, meaningful only when these sounds are apprehended in sequence. Music is essentially non-verbal human ideas and emotions expressed in sounds, sounds which can profoundly move listeners. I have argued the concept of God as a supernatural being with the attributes of omniscience, omnipotence and moral perfection does not withstand rational inquiry; God is better understood to exist like music, a creation of the human mind with great potential to deeply move those who revere it.

Perhaps one reason that the nature of God's existence is so widely misapprehended is that unlike a musical creation, God's origin is corporate rather than individual, and after centuries has the authority of a tradition passed from generation to generation.

Sometimes believers and even organized religion itself seems to touch upon the true nature of God's existence. "God is love." "The Kingdom of God is within you." Or God is identified with a spirit of good will and community, with a life freed from the shackles of greed, a life of sharing and forgiveness. William Blake wrote of this God in his poem, "The Divine Image":

To Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love
All Pray in their distress:
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness
For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is God, our father dear,
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is Man, his child and care.
For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.
Then every man, of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine,
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.
And all must love the human form
In heathen, turk or jew:
Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell
There God is dwelling too.

The God of traditional Christianity—the God who is claimed to be omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect, but Who also is identified as the creator of our world, with all its suffering and evil, and Who reveals himself in His own written word as a moral monster—this God is very much alive, but only as a confused, incoherent belief of millions of traditional Christians. I believe that God—gods—exist, but not in the same sense that seagulls and rocks exist. Nor does the evidence and common sense suggest that God exists as an invisible, omnipresent being independent of any human conception.

God is an idea. And ideas have great power for both good and evil. Unfortunately, sometimes God is a bad idea. If we are going to have a God, let us conceptualize a truly good God, a God freed from the barbarism of primitive origins, a God who does not need editing, or sanitizing, or rationalizing. Let us have a God who embodies only our highest ideals.

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HUMANIST REFLECTION

A Born Again Humanist

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ABSTRACT

still needed

KEYWORDS

philosophy, Humanism, death

I died on February 10, 2000, a few weeks before my fiftieth birthday. I was in an indoor shopping mall in Cambridge, Massachusetts and I had a massive heart attack. My heart stopped, my breathing stopped, blood stopped delivering oxygen fuel to my brain so my brain stopped and with it all conscious awareness for me completely ceased. That's about as dead as you can get, wouldn't you say?

What it's like to die

I had been having minor cardiac issues for some time previous to this incident, and as I was walking to the shopping center that day, I began to feel an increasingly strong pressure in my chest and difficulty breathing. By the time I reached the mall, I felt sufficiently ill that I lay down across one of the benches there. I suspected I was having a heart attack and managed to motion to a passing shopper and ask him to please phone 911. Cell phones were not as ubiquitous then as they are now but fortunately this man happened to

have one and phoned.

I remember a little while later, some people, apparently paramedics, being around me talking, putting an aspirin in my mouth, and asking me how I felt. I didn't see them because at this point I was in enough of a state of fatigue and discomfort that I didn't even want to open my eyes, but whoever they were, I am in their debt. One man with a rather high pitched voice kept asking me "How are you doing, Joe? Are you still with us, Joe?" I vaguely recall the feeling shortly thereafter of being jostled a little and moved about on what I suppose was some kind of wheeled stretcher, as I was presumably being taken to an ambulance. My consciousness totally vanished at that point or at least all memory of anything ended. I assume an attempt was made around this time to administer whatever was possible in transit in terms of basic CPR, but I have no remembrance of any awareness of it.

From that moment on, I recall nothing at all until awakening into bewildered, dazed semi-consciousness as I lay on some kind of operating table in what was the emergency room of a local hospital with nurses and doctors bustling about me. At this point I remember being uncertain as to whether I was dreaming or awake. A nurse leaned over and whispered "You've had a heart attack. We're going to take care of you," and I turned my head away and vomited. Later, I was told that my heart had stopped (or was fibrillating spasmodically) and electric "paddles" had been applied when I reached the emergency room to shock it, after which it fortunately began beating again, and I revived. After convalescing for a week in the hospital, I was released under follow-up care of a cardiologist.

I believe I can literally say that I am one of the few human beings who has ever lived on this earth who has actually experienced a bona fide "moment of death" and yet was later able to recall it. Here is the reasoning that I believe allows me to say this: the last thing I remember before being revived in the emergency room was lying on that bench in the mall and hearing that paramedic saying "How are you doing, Joe? Are you still with us, Joe?" after which I became unconscious, and since my breathing, heart and brain had ceased functioning, presumably the very beginnings of the process of the now oxygen deprived machinery of my body, including my brain, decomposing into random matter had begun at that point. It was only because my heart was electrically shocked back into normal activity before sufficient decomposition in vital areas of my body had yet occurred, which would have made subsequent recovery impossible, that I am able to relate this narrative. Now, let us suppose that traffic or any other obstructing events had delayed the ambulance and paramedics who brought me to the hospital in time before I

reached the critical point beyond which recovery would not have been possible by any medical means. Or perhaps the delay could have been due to the emergency room not being immediately available or the ambulance having to divert to a hospital further away for any of a number of reasons. Had that happened, the decomposition of my body would have continued to progress forward beyond any possibility of resuscitation, my consciousness would have never ever returned, and the last experience of awareness I would have had in my life would have been that very moment lying prone in the mall, hearing that paramedic saying “How are you doing, Joe? Are you still with us, Joe?” and the slight feeling of being moved about. That experience would have been the last experiential moment of my life after which I would have begun the inexorable and irrevocable descent into physical, bodily entropy with I suppose the permanent end of any further mentation. It is only because I was later re-animated, my motionless machinery electrically jump-started back to activity, just before reaching the point of no return through an advanced technological tool that was luckily within access that I can now retrospectively remember that moment which would have otherwise been my last. My final moment of life only lost its status as such *post hoc* through unusual happenstance without which it would have stood exactly as it was as my genuine last perceived, conscious moment of life, and my corpse would now be in a fairly advanced state of decomposing in some grave somewhere; my “quintessence of dust” just dust.

So let me describe to you as best I can remember (hopefully my memory itself was not distorted in the process), what it is like to die, as one who has experienced it.

I’m sorry if I may have built things up to a let-down, but there really isn’t too much to say actually—which is the point I’m trying to make. Dying was for me very much like the phenomenon of falling asleep. I was in a somewhat more uncomfortable state than is usual when falling asleep—I remember the paramedic also asking me at one point to tell him, on a scale of 1 to 10, how severe my pain was, and I responded “8” (I’m a statistician by profession). However, the process was still remarkably similar to simply dozing off into dreamless slumber, and was actually somewhat peaceful. I was disappointed not to hear a swell of classical music or the majestic refrains of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir as appropriate and fitting accompaniment to the monumental, metaphysical, symbolic significance of my experiencing my very last moment of life. No lush musical soundtrack by Jerry Goldsmith or Elmer Bernstein played in the background. In fact, the whole event was rather ordinary and unremarkable. I did not see any visions of Heaven or

Hell, or tunnels with light at the end or see my grandparents, Jesus, Moses, Allah, Buddha, Vishnu, Zeus, Satan, our deceased family dog Mickey nor even a departed televangelist or two to welcome me to the afterlife with a smug “I told you so.” My “soul” didn’t manifest itself when my brain stopped functioning, just as it hadn’t in the innumerable times I’d slept in my life or lost consciousness for other physical reasons. My phenomenological world just evanesced into nothingness—nada, zip, zilch. [Note to myself: there may be a lucrative literary opportunity here in dissembling a memoir about my ethereal experiences in Heaven. Who’s gonna know?] The universe showed no sign that it gave any more weight to my demise than to that of a withered leaf sheared off a branch in some remote forest somewhere by a random wisp of breeze. Since the cosmos seemed to shrug with benign indifference at my death, I remember coming to the resigned acceptance of the possibility myself. And there was nothing I myself could do about the situation anyway. I don’t recall praying, not as a matter of principle—I think I just felt I had tried to live a reasonably good life and there was no point in pleading for special exemptions now.

After recovering from my heart attack, it turned out that my serious health problems were not over. About a year afterwards, I descended into a clinical depression, severe enough that I required a brief hospitalization and treatment with medication. The profound ennui I felt at that time was tied to issues involving my fundamental philosophical bearings or lack thereof, possibly stressors also contributing to my cardiac problems. I experienced a kind of mental or spiritual death as a sort of aftershock, echoing my physical “death” of a year before.

Rebirth

Though I didn’t know it at the time, this physical and spiritual death of mine at the beginning of the new millennium were the first pangs of a new birth for me. I resurrected into a new kind of life, not based by chance on my subculture’s particular sectarian indoctrination forcibly seeded at infancy into my completely uncritical, cognitively defenseless *tabula rasa*, but rather one founded on something more of my free choosing.

I was baptized, raised and educated in the Catholic faith but since young adulthood I had had increasingly serious misgivings about religion, and for most of my adult life, I was confused and not clear about just what it was I believed in. I faced life without any benefit of a firm philosophy and rational value system to hold onto to help steady me, give me perspective, and shield me from “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” No explicit guiding

principles were there for me to consult regarding right and wrong conduct. There was a constant tortured conflict within me between the faith inculcated in me from the very “age of reason” of my childhood and my reason itself, between what I wanted to be true and what now seemed to *be* true. My culture had essentially offered me a binary, forced choice of only two alternative viewpoints of life. One was a euphoric faith commitment which was understood to be superordinate to reason (only among religious people have I found an implied pejorative connotation and accusatory tone sometimes attached to the word “logical”). The other option was implicitly, if not explicitly presented as amoral meaninglessness. I spent a large part of my adult life trying to reinforce the crumbling infrastructure of that first edifice and sustain transient religious ecstasy which was sooner or later followed by collapse into a kind of bleak nihilistic dysphoria whenever I stumbled over one of those inconvenient seams between illusion and reality. I believe the clinical term for this ailment is “bipolar religiosis.” I did not know there was a third option, another point of view. But there was, and this choice offered me some semblance of stability, peace, and a chance to strive for something like ordinary natural happiness, of which I’d experienced little since childhood. It was a belief based on ethics, realism, rationality and freedom of thought constrained only by that rationality, an ancient and noble philosophy of life called “Humanism.”

During my depressive illness, I had tried to re-evaluate with self-honesty what it was I believed in. I decided I would no longer commit to believe in a thing unless I believed it. Perhaps the truth would set me free. My faith was dying, but a fledgling hope was being reborn. My melancholia eventually lifted, and after some surgery, my heart condition also improved. At the end of that whole process of dissolution of body and soul, I decided what was left of me, the distilled remnant of my former being, was a Humanist—if not an atheist, certainly an agnostic, and a believer first and foremost in rationality and compassion as having precedence over all other values, which for me defines what a Humanist is. Human happiness as an end in itself, desired axiomatically for its own sake, with compassion, ethics and reason as the necessary means to that end—meaning, motivation, means, method—it sounded good to me. I became interested in the American Humanist Association (AHA) partly upon learning that a writer who had been influential in my thinking, the prolific science/sci-fi author, Isaac Asimov, had been a past President of the AHA. Dr. Asimov was the evangelist most instrumental in my conversion to secularism. I read up about Humanism, joined the AHA and have been fairly content and happy with that.

I'll always retain a certain wistful nostalgia for the positive, charitable aspects of the religion in which I was raised ("God, the joy of my youth"), the compassionate teachings of Jesus and the Jewish prophets, as taught to me, and appreciate with affection the kindly, dedicated nuns and priests who helped to inject some education into my sometimes thick skull. However, like it or not, my old belief system died away and I was reborn into a new one that seemed to me to be truer than the old. Having given up all religion, I suppose some people would say I now believed in nothing, but if those religious beliefs I found increasingly hard to hold are merely illusions, then it is those beliefs that represent nothing, and perhaps it is the people who believe in them who believe in nothing. Although humanity is not as lofty and exalted a concept as God or the celestial panoply, it is indisputably real; it is at least that—it's *now* that I do believe in *something*. And my new belief system didn't require regular debits from my reason as lease payments. The new one was free—free thinking, for free. Well-meaning Christian friends tell me salvation is a free gift when you accept their faith. You get everything they say, for nothing. Sounds inviting, but before I signed their consent form, I checked the small print. My copy reads "I hereby agree to adhere without question to proscribed limits on my honesty, critical analysis, and curiosity, to relinquish any and all future claims to my reason, and to waive henceforth any right to think for myself or exercise freedom of conscience or freedom of thought." The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is forbidden to us still or at least any of it thought toxic to revered illusion. As I read it, that acceptance clause states that my reason is to be bartered for this "gift," and that is my *self*. The hidden fee is me, and of what value can a gift to me be if I am no longer there to receive it? A subtle slight of hand. I have to sell my "soul" for that salvation—not save it, sign it away. And that is everything to me. I must give up everything for what looks to me like nothing. Whatever that is which is being offered to me, it ain't free.

Having said all this, I feel compelled to digress with a word of conciliation. I think we should never forget to treat our fellow humans who are religious with tolerance and kindness as much as possible, and as Carl Sagan use to say, with wisdom. Keeping in mind that we can probably never have absolute certainty in any philosophical position and recognizing the consolation that religious beliefs gives to many people who have great troubles in life that we may have been luckily spared, I think we need to be tactful, considerate, and patient. If one is dealt a bad hand, isn't it only human to hope for better cards on another draw? And should we harshly judge people in unfortunate circumstances for trying to sustain their faith that this can't be all there is? In

a sense, as Humanists, we might even recognize religiosity as a uniquely and very human characteristic itself, not without deserving of some respect and forbearance, and be careful not to cross the line of trying to forcibly impose our ideas on others anymore than we would want others to do that to us. It may be best to confine our criticism of religion to aspects of it that are coercive, theocratic, hypocritical, anti-science, obstructive of progress, and that otherwise clearly do more harm than good for humanity. As for the rest of it, especially charitable and ecumenical sentiments, maybe we should heed Paul McCartney's advice and "let it be." Some of my Humanist friends probably would not agree, but I would even stretch my concept of Humanism to be inclusive of people who have religious, theistic faith provided they regard commitment to rationality and human betterment as a preeminent, inherent part of those beliefs and are always open to adjusting and enlarging their current concepts and metaphors regarding religion to allow unbiased, objective assimilation of new scientific knowledge. Humanistic beliefs should be independent of theism and supernaturalism, but I don't think we need to be rigidly exclusionary. Apparent conflicts between science and religion could be viewed rather as temporary misalignments between science and current, outmoded metaphors for understanding religion. No one has sure answers to the mysteries of our existence anyway, and Dr. Sagan also said "There is no necessary conflict between science and religion." In my opinion, the enemy is not necessarily religion per se, but irrationality and inhumanity, which, as you may recall, we have seen in abundance in some fanatical, closed-minded atheistic ideologies, as well as in religion.

What it's like to live

Thus, in my second life, I was reincarnated still a human, but a Humanist human. Actually, however, I think I was born a Humanist the first time. It's become clearer to me in recent years, that I always had been a latent, closet Humanist. I just didn't know there was a word for what I was. I was Humanist hardware but with superstition software downloaded as soon as I had booted up. Deep down I had always felt one should use one's reason to the best of one's ability to strive for a better world, to be happy, and as much as possible to help others attain that also, not because God was going to give me a lollipop in an afterlife as a reward for it, or kick me in the butt if I didn't, but because this was simply something that I wanted for its own sake. I think most of us are that way. We seem to have a dark side too carried over from our primitive past, but it's not clear to me how much religion restrains that and how much it inflames it. In any case, I think most religious people are

Humanists too. If the Bible tells them to stone someone to death for working on the Sabbath (*Exodus* 31:12–15) or orders parents to execute their son if he's disobedient (*Deuteronomy* 21:18–21), all the Christians and Jews I know are not going to do that. Why? Because it says not to do that in the Word of God? No, in fact the literal Word of God commands that they *should* do that very thing. Although they might engage in some argumentative gymnastics in “interpreting” the scriptures, they're not going to do it because they know by their sense of human reason and compassion that to do such a thing is unthinkable—it unnecessarily and excessively hurts people, it's irrational and cruel, and that's why they won't do it—it's just plain *wrong*, period, and it doesn't matter what any holy book says. In other words, it's not humane, not humanistic, and Humanism takes precedence over religion, even for the religious, excluding some terrorists, zealots who work to facilitate the End Times, and parents who let their children die of treatable diseases because it's “God's will.”

God seems to have given us many commandments, some irrational and mutually contradictory. But I believe Humanists have only one fundamental precept, voluntarily self-imposed because we want to—do not unnecessarily harm any sentient being, including yourself. Our lives have meaning and value not because some despot in the sky says so, but because *we* say so. When the Humanistic values of reason, compassion, ethics, open-mindedness, tolerance, and moral courage take precedence over the values of superstitious, unquestionable faith commitments, zealotry, and forced, rigid ideology and orthodoxy, we see civilization and progress; when blind faith in the supernatural and destructive, lethal, unnecessary, tribal macho “courage” take precedence, we get the enforced ignorance of stagnant dark ages, 9/11, the mass murder of innocents in unnecessary warfare, and who knows what other horrors to come now incubating in the minds of those who would be the instruments of God's wrath. It seems there are fundamentally two methods of resolving human disagreement: reason and force, and religion often takes the first option off the table, the results of which are, in recent times, amply manifest in the seemingly endless, insolvable violence in the Middle East, the Balkans, at the Indian/Pakistan border, in Northern Ireland, Central Africa, and elsewhere where the one true faith butts up against a different one true faith and compromise is sacrilege. Life isn't all good, but a lot of it is very good, and if we use our reason and compassion, we are more likely to avoid or minimize the bad and maximize the good in this, probably the only life we'll ever know. Better to find joy and wonder in that, and not in forcibly defended, fragile illusion. If we be wise, it's there to be found. It's what God

would want for us if He were anything like the benevolent being they say He is. I think it's better to live for the sake of living, enjoying one day at a time, doing the best we can with this one sure life rather than bargaining away all we have for a better deal hoped to come later but which may be nothingness, invigorated, not frightened by the unknown around us, and free to wonder unrestrained by imagined supernatural thought police and a slave to their presumed, self-appointed mental overseers here on earth. Faith is a burqa that hides us from illusory fears born of a dark, ignorant past at the price of separating us from most of the joys and wonders of what is probably our one moment of reality in eternity.

I see now I've long been an embryonic Humanist. For me personally, without being taught so, I always felt humanistic in groping toward a profession that was intellectually interesting to me and that helped others. I felt my identity as a Humanist, the first time I felt hope and a quiet admiration for someone who spoke calmly and rationally with sensible group-mindedness in the midst of people inflamed with destructive emotions and indoctrinated, self-defeating, inconsistent values, anti-intellectualism, and proud ignorance. I felt my Humanism the first time I questioned the unquestionable, and questioned why I shouldn't question it—when I found myself skeptical about something that most people around me seemed to thoughtlessly accept just through social convention, indoctrination or fear, or when I asked a nun or priest why something was so and wondered why they didn't seem to like my asking. I sensed I was a Humanist when, in the midst of a paroxysm of mindless, nationalistic war hysteria led by staunch devotees of the Prince of Peace, I seemed to be among a minority of people who stopped to consider questions like whether there might be an ethical equivalence between initiating unnecessary war and murder, whether supporting our troops ought to include protecting them from exploitation by war-profiteers who avoided service, where the dividing line was between justice and indiscriminant vengeance, or between interrogation and torture, and how you reconcile loving your enemies with torturing and killing them and their noncombatant friends and relatives, en masse, without first exhausting peaceful solutions to problems. I sensed it when I rejected as equally irrational living just for myself or trying to live just for others; the first time I found atheism interesting, not frightening or repugnant; and when I saw that human goodness had nothing necessarily to do with religion. I was already philosophically a Humanist when I couldn't figure out why something was wrong if it didn't hurt anyone, or why something was "right" when it unnecessarily *did*. And I felt my identity as a Humanist when as a young child my mother pointed out

a blind man to me for the first time and I felt spontaneously sorry for him and wished I could help him and wondered if we might be able to figure out a way. Or the time I saw a crow trapped in the mud down in a river bed and went to ask the firemen at a local station if they could do something to save it. No religion taught me to feel those hurt feelings of sympathy. They welled up on their own—an automatic, instinctive reaction to noxious stimuli, insistent on some compassionate response to assuage them, evidently hard-wired products of evolution from which we derive the survival benefits of cooperation and mutual aid—just there, happily, in most people. (Occasionally, I feel *physical* pain, a brief burning sensation in my torso, elicited by the sight of others in pain. I don't know how common this is.) In fact, the few of us who don't seem to possess some innate empathy toward other living beings are regarded by the rest of us as being mentally disordered "sociopaths". I think these are the ways a Humanist thinks. It seems like most of us are just born that way to one degree or another—before we're fitted with our subculture's particular cognitive strait-jacket (some more binding than others it seems). Most humans are just natural born Humanists. You don't need to be born again like I was. Once is enough.

And when the Grim Reaper appears again someday too soon at my doorstep, come this time not just to visit, but to stay, as he does for us all, I'll let him in, take a last look, and close the door on my span of time on this earth, knowing that in my second attempt at life at least, if not the first, I attained some measure of natural happiness and peace—mixed with some equally natural sadness of course. And at any rate, I'll know I had been free, not in my first incarnation perhaps, but I happened to be born again, and that time free.