

Poisoned Ground

The Roots of Eurocentrism: Teleology, Hierarchy, and Anthropocentrism

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ABSTRACT

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The dissertation starts with the premise that Eurocentrism, in philosophy and many other areas, continues to be a problem. It comes from the belief in teleological history, which itself rests on hierarchical, anthropocentric metaphysics. To combat the negative effects of Eurocentrism, we must establish alternatives to the metaphysics it rests on and the historical attitudes that it constructs and maintains.

The dissertation is divided into three main parts, each with a number of subdivisions. Part one sketches the history of academic Eurocentrism and demonstrates that it is built on a combination of historical ignorance and certain presuppositions associated with Western religious thinking. Specifically, Eurocentrism, since the modern era, has substituted the monotheistic Deity with a peculiar notion of Reason, and has constructed a myth that Reason, and all the positive things it signifies, are uniquely European.

Part two is the longest section and it examines Hegel's influence in building the Eurocentric world. He expounds a history that is unequivocally teleological, in which non-European people and ways of thinking are stepping-stones to the more highly evolved European, Christian culture. The events of history have been the unfolding of a code, and that code, or *Logos*, was discovered in his *Science of Logic*. This underlying Logic explains both the life of the mind—described in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*—as well as the life of the world, described in other works, such as his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* and *Philosophy of History*. However, is the *Logos* truly the source-code for historical events showing them to be completely determined by a preexisting fate? Or does it merely explain the *conditions of the*

possibility for events to arise, the way that they constantly do arise and have arisen? These are completely different alternatives and their implications are massive. I then compare diverging interpretations of Hegel that choose to focus on either his anthropocentric historical teleology, or else his more abstract and spacious metaphysics, which may undermine much of his historical theory. The thrust of these chapters is to show that anthropocentric metaphysics support beliefs in teleological history, which leads to political and social practices of inequality and injustice (e.g., Eurocentrism). To counter this tendency of Hegel's, I consider Darwin's insights against teleology, as well as contemporary object-oriented-ontology, which help us move beyond philosophical anthropocentrism. Rather than being absolute antipodes to these developments, Hegel's theories are adaptable enough to be a useful resource for non-teleological, non-anthropocentric, and non-Eurocentric theories.

Part three focuses on the role of language and metaphor in the Eurocentric canons of philosophy. For example, Hegel famously employs the metaphor of the master and slave to describe the dialectical process at work in both the mind and history. The metaphor has significant heuristic power, but it is still a metaphor. When taken literally, it can lead to dangerous misunderstandings about history and justifications for violence. Moreover, when Hegel writes about the *Oriental* and the *African*, those terms are hidden metaphors: they do not denote any real persons. However, what he says about them has historically been taken literally, thus leading to warped attitudes about real Asians and Africans in the world. I also analyze the role of literary style in establishing Eurocentric canons, suggesting that an important critical development against Eurocentrism would be the proliferation of alternative writing styles to the entrenched norms of the argumentative monograph and journal article.

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Preface

This dissertation is the end of an unforeseen byway I entered when I first read Hegel in 2009. I entered Columbia's Department of Religion in 2004 with the intention of pursuing Tibetan philosophy, Buddhism, and philology, which had been my primary personal and intellectual interests for about a decade. However, being surrounded by brilliant people and ideas at Columbia, I took the bait and waded deeper and deeper into western philosophical traditions, particularly those with some concepts in common with the comprehensive metaphysical theories and phenomenological methods of the Buddhist *mādhyamaka*, *yogācāra*, and *dzogchen* that were my specializations. Since I cut my teeth on Asian philosophy, the process of learning other traditions has always been one of translating terms and synthesizing ideas. Over time, it became clear that this comparative method provides certain benefits, and that Hegel could be a powerful resource for synthesizing with other thinkers. However, the comparative method also suffers from certain obstacles—some of which can be traced to Hegel. This dissertation arose from these considerations.

It was not merely a matter of intellectual curiosity that led me into new domains. Right when my academic commitments demanded that I pick up the pace, an untimely, lingering depression was rendering me academically unproductive and spiritually listless. With expectations of myself to write on some Buddhist topic with spiritual and even esoteric implications, I realized I was in no position to do so at the time. Reflecting on why, I realized I had been resting on dogmas, maintaining naive expectations, and suffering when I failed to meet the ideals I had set up much earlier. To feel better, I had to loosen my grip on false certainties and imagine new ways of being and feeling. Fortunately, I had plenty of philosophical and spiritual raw material around me for building new orientations toward

myself and the world. In academia, I was heartened when writers like Judith Butler explaining that her often-abstract work was coming from a place of personal need. In the preface to her remarkable book *Gender Trouble*, she writes, “Despite the dislocation of the subject that the text performs, there is a person here” who seeks to

Uproot...ordinary and academic discourse on sexuality. The writing of this denaturalization was not done simply out of the desire to play with language or prescribe theatrical antics in the place of “real” politics, as some critics have conjectured (as if theatre and politics are always distinct). It was done from a desire to live, to make life possible, and to rethink the possible as such. What would the world have to be like for my uncle to live in the company of family, friends, or extended kinship of some other kind? How must we rethink the ideal morphological constraints upon the human such that those who fail to approximate the norm are not condemned to death within life (xx).

Her book took shape not through academic ambition but a personal need to combine her work with her personal life. She says, “At the same time that I was ensconced in the academy, I was also living a life outside of those walls, and though *Gender Trouble* is an academic book, it began, for me, with a crossing-over, sitting on Rehoboth Beach, wondering whether I could link the different sides of my life (xvii).”

I had my Buddhist background, but I had developed habits around it that turned it into an antagonistic paradigm that I couldn't relate to as I once did. I was somehow keeping myself from starting with the first Noble Truth of Buddhism that demands acknowledging your unromantic, unwanted painful condition before being able to move on to any approximation of ataraxia. Needing to feel more at home in that state of dis-ease, I found company in Cioran, Jean Améry, Kristeva, William Styron, Andrew Solomon's *Noonday Demon*, and Sartre's remarkable book on self-reinvention, *Saint Genet*. That is also around the time that I attended Mark Taylor's seminar on Hegel and his interpreters, Kojève, Hyppolite, and Nancy, all of whom play an important role in the present work. Under this set of circumstances, I wrote

something on comparative depression for my MPhil exams, drawing on Buddhist discourses on suffering, Western melancholia, Hegel's "unhappy consciousness" and so forth, and I intended to pursue the topic for my dissertation. Fortunately, working on that project was cathartic, and in combination with many other shifting conditions, I emerged from the hole I was in. The topic of comparative depression was still compelling to me, however, and I was going to start with a justification of my comparative methodology. As I started to write on comparative methodology, I began to see how thick was the wood of the history of philosophy, and that I needed to clarify what Western and Eastern canon even are, and how they could be brought together.

During this time, a minor event on my Facebook news feed made an impression on me. An old friend had posted a link to a CNN article with the headline, "Mindfulness as good as antidepressant drugs, study says." Comments to the article included sentences like, "So long to the naysayers! Awesome.", as well as, "But then the AMA can't sell their billions of \$\$\$\$ of brain-numbing toxic anti-depressants!" These commentators came from a Buddhist sub-culture with which I have a long and complicated history. They perceived the article to be vindicating their own positions—Buddhist, spiritual, organic—over all others—presumably nihilist, materialistic, corporate and so forth. To them, Buddhism was triumphing over science and the psychotropics industry. To them, science had lent itself to the analysis of Buddhist teachings, and then laid down at the feet of Buddhist truth. Truth in the form of the syllogism *Life is suffering; it has a cause; it can be mitigated; and the best way to do that is to follow the Buddhist teachings.*

Was this what the article truly said? No. It outlined how some contemporary psychotherapists have incorporated "mindfulness therapy" into their treatment regimens for patients with moderate clinical depression. Those patients had already been treated with

psychotropics, and their doctors were trying to prevent relapse. According to the findings, mindfulness therapy was roughly *as* effective as psychotropics at preventing relapse. To me, this hardly seemed like a *coup de grâce* for any single ideology. The mindfulness therapy used in the study was part of the Buddhist meditative tradition; the therapists were trained and licensed by western psychiatric institutions; and the patients were benefiting from both as prophylaxes against something that tormented their quality of life. If there was any occasion for triumphalism, it was not of one credo over another, but of a discovery of new approaches to a major problem, a validation of alternative problem solving, and the possibility to contribute to the mitigation of suffering.

Often, converts to a heterogenous traditions like Buddhism take a competitive posture toward everything else. They believe they have discovered an ethics and metaphysics uncorrupted by the failings of the West, and they feel it their duty to balance the scales, cutting western hubris down to size. But this is really a correlate to western denigration of non-western thought. They compare in order to triumph. It is still a general truth that analytic philosophers scoff at the idealism of the East, which is often brought to them through pop-culture or anti-intellectual pseudo-mysticism; continental philosophers remain tied to the Christian trinity or other such theistic roots, and they continue to claim a Greco-Roman copyright on philosophical thinking; adherents of Abrahamic religion glare at those without the Book, skeptical that any ethics or metaphysics is tantamount to their own.

But all of these orientations make it more difficult to find new paths away from the things that hurt us. Inhibiting prejudices shrink us and best us with pins and needles. Comparative philosophy, insofar as it demands some broadening, can help with that. One way is merely by providing more material to collide with other material, producing new reactions and combinations. Thus, comparative philosophy and interdisciplinary inquiry can ameliorate

a wide range of problems from institutional conservatism and cultural ignorance to personal dogmatism and failure to imagine new possibilities for being. Yet, despite the passage of considerable time, little progress has been made in building an institutional or coherent tradition of comparative philosophy. This is especially true compared to many other philosophical sub-fields like queer theory and feminism that have become much more relevant in a much shorter span of time. Those fields have succeeded because they have been looking for new ways for people to be and think; they affirm life and anything short of that is incomplete. Comparative philosophy, on the other hand, has often been an autistic cataloging of details and differences, or an obsession with scoring points in debate. For comparative philosophy to be anywhere as enriching as feminism and queer theory, like the method of natural sciences, it mustn't settle on absolute conclusions but restlessly strive to go to new places beyond relativism and circular skepticism. On this point, the late Christopher Hitchens writes,

It's quite a task to combat the absolutists and the relativists at the same time: to maintain that there is no totalitarian solution while also insisting that, yes, we on our side also have unalterable convictions and are willing to fight for them. After various past allegiances, I have come to believe that Karl Marx was rightest of all when he recommended continual doubt and self-criticism. Membership in the skeptical faction or tendency is not at all a soft option... To be an unbeliever is not to be "open-minded." It is, rather, a decisive admission of uncertainty that is dialectically connected to the repudiation of the totalitarian principle, in the mind as well as in politics.¹

He also spoke of how dispiriting it was for him to, "Have spent so long learning relatively so little and then to be menaced in every aspect of my life by people who already know everything, and who have all the information they need."

What is standing in the way of realizing non-dogmatic methodologies? A major problem is that so many voices are simply not allowed into the conversation, or if they are,

¹ Hitchens, Christopher. *Hitch-22: A Memoir*. New York: Twelve, 2010 p. 420

they are misheard. This is generally what happens when trying to work seriously on non-European philosophy in the western academy. Why is Eurocentrism so powerful and stubborn? It feeds off of the power of historiography. Who is arguably the most powerful modern historiographer? Hegel. How has Hegel fed the problem of Eurocentrism? In my case, I was immediately impressed with the subtlety and profundity of Hegel's metaphysics, but I had no idea what to make of his historical philosophy, so deeply flawed in its Eurocentrism. For anyone with much knowledge of the traditions that Hegel so easily dismisses, many of his statements are hard to take seriously at all. At the root of this Eurocentrism I saw strong commitments to historical teleology, ontological hierarchy, and anthropocentrism, all of which struck me as anathema to the more abstract and expansive metaphysics of his *Logic*, especially the versions of it refined by commentators like Jean Hyppolite and Jean-Luc Nancy.

Teleology, hierarchy, anthropocentrism: *Teleology* posits that history had to look the way that it did because it is expressing some noble destiny, it is the unfolding of a primordial code. By *hierarchy*, I mean that Eurocentrism is aided by theories of ontological hierarchy, in which some things *exist more* than other things—some things are the beneficiaries of teleological destinies, and others not. Historically, this has manifested as the Eurocentric bias that other *peoples* are somehow less essential, that they are stepping stones lagging behind the crest of history. And the problem with anthropocentrism is that it always overlaps with teleology and hierarchy: If humans are what it's all about, then we will naturally believe that humans have some destiny—some absolute is working through and for them. These attitudes in place, human subjectivity is more essential than anything else—it grants being to things less essential than it. A proliferation of ontological hierarchies ensues.

Hegel inscribed all of these problems with very dark ink into the canons of philosophy and historiography, treating the African and the Oriental as inessential kindling feeding the European light. Having spent the bulk of my academic life engaged with Asian philosophies, I was not able to accept the conceptual accuracy of such a view, nor was I willing to accept its ethical implications. Eventually, I came to see that my focus on Eurocentrism was a pretext: teleology, hierarchy, and anthropocentrism also fuel misogyny, homophobia, and any number of other orientations that require *a priori* access to fixed essences, as well as an *othering* of inessential people and things. Yet Eurocentrism, especially in the academy, is a particularly good place to start. The academy is where canons are built and guarded. Our three-headed monster calls it home.

I.

1.

The Separation of East and West: Eurocentrism and Canonization

At the risk of stating the obvious, the canons of philosophy that we study in western academies are very small; they are very white; they are not very representative of the diversity of the world they claim to represent. The pillars of the canon, no doubt, attain their position through their own merits, which combine with external political, social, and economic factors that led to their entrenchment. Thus, merit is not sufficient for canonization, and many excellent resources are left on the margins, and the people connected to those resources are marginalized. Those on the outside of the canons suffer from illegitimacy—their voices are drowned out and their agency is weakened. Those on the inside evidently enjoy their position of power, but upon analysis, it can be shown that they are made small through their use of exclusion—they are not the open and expansive figures we have expected them to be. And yet, this state of affairs must be justified, and the self-interest at its core must be masked. Advantages and disadvantages must be explained as natural, and since canonization is a historical process, so history itself must be explainable as purposeful, as the expression of a necessity.

The social, political, and economic hierarchies that constitute what we would call Eurocentrism may be adequately explained as aleatory outcomes of geographical, nutritional, bacteriological processes, but such explanations do not satisfy our impulse to be more than aleatory beings. When we are down-and-out we do not go to the psychic reader to hear that this is our only life and that our situation is extremely circumscribed. We want to know that

the kernel of our being was shared by Cleopatra or some courageous warrior, and that greatness will once again be ours someday. We like to know that we are of a noble code, that even if we are not at the very top, we are not at the very bottom, and that is for a reason.

In any society, individuals with advantages appeal to this reasoning, and on a global level, those who benefit from Eurocentrism have tried very hard to justify such beliefs. The process of canonization has been one of the most successful methods for justifying teleology. Not only do the canons need to be populated by the demographic in need of justification, the canonized theories themselves must sketch an elegant narrative of history as necessity.

Many left outside of the circle of legitimacy will not be happy to think that they belong there, but to convince themselves and others that the hierarchies are not unassailable, they must destabilize the canonical bulwarks set up to oppress them. We cannot stop thinking of others as inferior without an expansion of the canons we look to explain the world. Canons must open themselves to more voices within the very demographics they claim to represent, and they must also open to demographics that have been historically left out. This can be done through the practice of cross-cultural, comparative, or hybrid philosophy.

Most people who have engaged in comparative philosophy up to this point have been philologists—of Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, etc. Philology allows them to engage in the hermeneutics of culturally heterologous texts. But to those invested in the dominant historiography, the many years the philologist has to spend acquiring odd languages leaves them with a suspicious air. Greek, Latin, and German, of course, are essential for philosophy, we're told, but careful study of non-European languages simply indicates time wasted that could have been spent doing real scholarship. Brimming with these prejudices, Western philosophers, with the exception of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and a few others, have

generally not taken scholars of Buddhist and Indian philosophies seriously. The conversation, therefore, has been one-sided, with Buddhist philosophers showing great eagerness to present their ideas in more presentable Western terms, and Western philosophers rolling their eyes and sighing at the mention of non-European theories.

We can and should call this a willful, and frankly racist philistinism. We see a patronizing relegation of all Asian philosophies to the field of religious studies, as if the entire canons of thousands of philosophical texts are irreparably compromised by their proximity to eastern “religious” elements. This is still the reason you will not find Nagārjuna, Candrakīrti, Āryadeva, Dharmakīrti etc. taught in a philosophy department of a western university (with some very few exceptions, though the most common exceptions are most likely the addition to a syllabus of a one hour unit on Confucianism or some other non-canonical philosophy). Ironically, in many of the writings of these philosophers just mentioned one finds barely a mention of the word Buddha or any other term with overt religious connotations. Certainly one finds no more use of what might be considered religious-sounding terminology than one finds in the writing of Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Hegel, and so forth. Yet those in a position to loosen this pinching of philosophy’s canon show no inclination to do so, and people with adequate knowledge to teach non-European philosophical traditions are not welcomed into the departments of philosophy. Scan the faculties of the top philosophy departments of Western research universities and you will find very few exceptions.² Philosopher Owen

² Exceptions include the University of Durham and Liverpool University, neither of which grant PhDs. An informative list can be found here: <http://www.h-net.org/~buddhism/GradStudies.htm> The list is a fairly comprehensive compilation of post-graduate institutions offering Asian philosophy programs. The only universities whose philosophy departments house Asian philosophy experts are The University of Hawaii; Hong Kong University; University of Mumbai; University of Tasmania; and the University of Utah (I would add the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and SUNY Binghamton). Every other specialist in Asian philosophy is housed in a Religion department, with the exception of places like University of Tokyo and several Korean institutions, which have their own Buddhist philosophy departments or other culturally specific programs.

Flanagan, who works in one of the few philosophy departments that does tolerate non-European research (at Duke University) has observed the elephant in the room that I am describing:

There are some excellent Buddhist scholars, but almost none of them teach in philosophy departments at research universities in America that offer PhDs (although many excellent ones teach and do research in religion departments at research universities and in philosophy departments at excellent liberal arts colleges). This is strange given that Buddhism is so philosophically rich, contains ideas about personal identity and the metaphysics of nature and causation that ought to appeal to contemporary philosophers, and especially given that as many as one in twelve people on earth are Buddhists.³

One would think that chairs of philosophy departments, provosts and other gatekeepers of the Academy have justifications for the exclusion of non-European traditions, but we hear fewer and fewer explicit reasons for such exclusion. It definitely does not come from having studied canonical texts from other cultures, such as the rich and rigorous commentarial (*śāstra*) literature of India. Contemporary philosophers and scholars know better than to take up overtly biased cultural stances, and so they remain silent on the matter, relying on the sheer momentum of the dominant historiography constructed on the pillars of Plato, Christianity, German Idealism, and Anglo-empiricism. Philosophy has been considered a certain thing for so long, why rock the boat? But Western philosophy has already supplied the categories that undermine any claims of having a monopoly on philosophy. Those categories are the traditional branches of the discipline: metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology. To deny that non-Europeans have philosophy proper is to deny that they worked on metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology in any systematic way. When Western philosophers and scholars remain silent on the inclusion of non-Western metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology, they betray reservations about whether or not non-Europeans have ever achieved those levels of

³ Flanagan, Owen. *The Bodhiattva's Brain*. Boston: MIT, 2011

thinking. The accusation I am making is indeed broad, and I would not expect anyone to admit to it. Therefore, much of this essay will be dedicated to drawing out just how strong an influence the historiography of philosophy has had on our minds and institutions.

Philosophical advances result from considering something from another's point of view, and then adding something of one's singular experience to it. This is the basic notion of the history of philosophy and what sets philosophy apart from revelation. If a philosopher sees no benefit in considering the points of view of thousands of thinkers outside of his own socio-cultural sphere, then it is hard to see how this does not add up to a certain intellectual penury. Of course, if he critically engages a significant portion of those philosophical canons and finds them lacking, that is another matter. That would be proper criticism, and the rigorous engagement with disparate philosophies would yield properly dialectical results. This is often what happens generationally within a single vein of philosophy: for example, the branching of Husserl to Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre — each of whom are trying to correct blind spots; or in good polemic, like we might find in the Tibetan philosophical debates between luminaries like Tsongkhapa, Dolpopa, and Gorampa...

An important point must be made now and repeated often: comparative philosophy cannot demand that everyone become expert in a non-European tradition — it must be a matter of attitude more than of content. To ask a specialist in ancient Greek philosophy to spend several years plumbing the depths of medieval Chinese theories, or of modern Tibetan philosophy, is unreasonable. Such a person able to split their time and interests so evenly would be supernatural. There is simply not enough time in the day for most people to do so. Moreover, academic accomplishment rides on the wings of taste. People follow their unique interests and do what they like. To do otherwise is to invite burn-out or boredom. Also, is such evenhandedness even a virtue in philosophy? How can objectivity coexist with polemic,

criticism, and dialectics? Philosophy without conviction is philosophy that nobody wants to read. One has to take a stand on something. Only the most ineffectual relativist will deny that there are degrees of right and wrong, true and false. But there is a difference between taking a stand and being dogmatic. The exclusion of non-European philosophy from the canons of philosophy is not the result of measured criticism, but of dogmatic, knee-jerk reactions to material that is historically and culturally alien to the West.

In his book *Orientalism and Religion*, Richard King analyzes the racial and cultural tension inside our historiographies of philosophy and religion:

Specifically the characterization of Indian religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism as mystical has also tended to support the exclusion of Hindus and Buddhists from the realm of rationality... Indian forms of systematic thought have usually been excluded from the realm of philosophical debate on the grounds that they are tainted with “theological” assumptions that are culture-specific (as if this were not the case in the West).⁴

Despite ontological proofs of God’s existence, rationalizations of the Trinity, proofs of the immortality of the soul and so forth, Western philosophers stubbornly insist that their tradition is free from superstition and has been the exclusive realm of reason since the Greeks—or at least since the Enlightenment; or if not, then Kant. This is possible because of the weight and influence of the historiography behind them. This historiography, paradoxically, begins with the planetary figures of Socrates and Plato and their successors contraposed to a handful of antagonistic figures: cynics, sophists, Epicureans, Pythagoreans, and so forth. Their crime? Mostly, they failed to bifurcate the world, to conjure a transcendent world. They kept their eyes on the ground and hence failed to see the Truth above their heads, above their own world.

⁴ King, Richard. *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India, and the “Mystic East”*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

The next pillar in our historiography is neo-Platonism and its great monotheistic proponents, particularly Christian ones such as Aquinas and Augustine. But this historiography did not grow organically out of preëxisting systems of thought. It was constructed carefully and willfully. It was imperative for Christianity to find a foundation for its vision of transcendence, denial of the material world, and Pauline fear of the body. A symbiosis was possible with Platonism and its realm of hovering, transcendent truth

The third pillar of this historiography is German Idealism: Kant, Hegel, and the long chain of phenomenological and existential philosophers from Germany and France. Before them, Anglo-empiricism had its dawn and was taken up by the encyclopedists of Enlightenment France, Hume, Utilitarians, and then merged with the explosion of scientific discovery in the 19th and 20th century and Pragmatism to create the powerful sub-genres of contemporary analytic philosophy and cognitive science. However, the Enlightenment capitulated to theology by allowing it the unassailable fortress of Deism — something that was only half offensive to both theists and advocates of a Reason antithetical to it. Through the political power of European Christian institutions, God remained alive in the hearts of the people, and he stayed alive in the minds of philosophers, either for reasons of utility — “it is useful for people to believe in God, otherwise they will be unruly” — or as a depository for all the useful Platonic Ideas that had been carefully guarded by Neo-Platonist Christian writers.

Kant, though, gets the credit for uniting the empiricist tradition with the Idealism he inherited via his Christian European heritage. By sublimating both these traditions, Kant manages to maintain Plato-Christian Idealism while simultaneously buttressing it against any comparison to more primitive mystical-religious modes of thinking. Idealism becomes pure science. Ideas that were formerly part of the realm of scholastic theological philosophy now get divided between philosophy, which has no brook with anything beyond the pale of reason,

and theology, which goes after the intuitions of mystical experience. Figures of the latter project include influential theologians such as Swedenborg and Schleiermacher, and the progenitors of what we now call Religious Studies: Rudolph Otto and Max Müller especially. According to Kant, between rationality, mysticism, and empiricism, it is empiricism that puts all philosophical value in jeopardy:

Guarding against the *empiricism* concerning practical reason is much more important and advisable; for, the *mysticism* [concerning practical reason] is in fact still compatible with the purity and sublimity of the moral law, and, besides, stretching one's power of imagination all the way to suprasensible intuitions is not exactly natural and commensurate with the common way of thinking, so that on this side the danger is not so general. By contrast, the empiricism [concerning practical reason] eradicates by the root the morality in attitudes (in which, after all, and not merely in actions, consists the high worth that humanity can and ought to procure for itself through morality), and substitutes for it something entirely different, namely in place of duty an empirical interest, with which inclination as such traffic among themselves. Precisely because of this, moreover, empiricism—along with all inclination which (no matter what style they are given) degrade humanity if they are elevated to the dignity of a supreme practical principle, and which are nonetheless so indulgent to everyone's mentality—is for this reason far more dangerous than any fanaticism, which can never amount to a lasting state of many human beings.⁵

Thus, empiricism that would insist that moral actions be judged in terms of their possibilities and effects in this world, is condemned as degrading, indulgent, and nihilistic. The supreme law standing under Kant's ethics is not empirical, and so can make use of mystical discourse about other unempirical things, such as religious experiences. Like a Deist who keeps God around for his value as an ethical heuristic, Kant tolerates mystical discourse as one of the few avenues for taking seriously the a priori categories of Idealism. His aim is not as simple as dividing the world into that which you can say something about and that which you can't—we will see other philosophers who do this, without less of the theological foundation that I am pointing out in Kant. The more one engages in Kantian criticism, the more one is expected to

⁵ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002 p. 93-94

see that *belief* — in a priori ethical and metaphysical principles — becomes *necessity*. Reason is the source of and the explanation for everything:

In case practical reason were presupposed as pathologically conditioned, i.e., as merely administering the interest of the inclinations under the sensible principle of happiness, this demand could not be made on speculative reason at all. *Mohammed's* paradise or the *theosophists'* and *mystics'* fusion with the deity, each [thinker] after his own mind, would have no reason at all as to surrender it in this way to all sorts of dreams. But if pure reason by itself can be practical and actually is, as is evinced by the consciousness and moral law, it is always one and the same reason which, whether for a theoretical or a practical aim, judges according to a priori principles.⁶

Reason stands alone and becomes science, independent of religion or the religious history of all the terms that it uses. It sublimates Christian discourse into science: this formulation of Kant's, which grew out of Plato-Christian Idealism, becomes the measure of all modern sciences, social and natural. Kant lets the deity out of the house and Reason steps in as custodian.⁷

This secularized idealism leads to what Georges Palante calls the secular priestly spirit:⁸ an outgrowth of Plato-Christian Idealism given yet another layer of credibility through secular inversion.

The secular priest considers himself a laborer in a disinterested task. Nothing selfish must be mixed in with his mission. He works for the pure idea; at least he claims so, and sometimes even believes it. Nietzsche noted devotion to truth among our free-thinkers and atheists, the final incarnation of the ascetic ideal.

⁶ *ibid.* pg. 154

⁷ A rigorous analysis of how Kant arrives at this can be found in Amos Funkenstein's *Theology and the Scientific Imagination: from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986 chapt. VI:

“Within the domain of pure reason, the infinite judgment permits the transformation of the concept of a “sum total of all possibilities” into that of a “most perfect being” or most real being. The methodological concept of God was banned from the interpretation of nature, but is still retained a certain role as a regulative ideal of reason (as the principle of complete determination). In our language we might say: God remained, even in the Critique of Pure Reason, a metatheoretical assumption, an assumption that, albeit redundant in the explanation of nature, is nonetheless almost “natural” to our reason. Kant expelled the methodological concept of God from the theory of science and grounded the universality of natural law and uniformity of nature without it; but its shadow persisted. The concept of God, he argued, is a natural shadow or projection of principles we used to structure nature. The shadow, Kant seems to have claimed, is virtually inescapable. But it is only a shadow.”

⁸ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/palante/1909/secular-priest.htm>

Despite the protestations of Nietzsche, Palante and a few others, the secular priestly spirit became the standard orientation of both Idealists and self-professed non-Idealists (nominalists, materialists, empiricists etc.). A major figure in the latter group is the British empiricist, Bertrand Russell, who receives much credit for the doxographical split between Idealist Continental Philosophy and Analytic Philosophy. The former, it is argued, subjects Truth to cultural and social contingencies and remains distracted by metaphysical and theological speculation. Analytics, on the other hand, are seekers of Truth alone, and they find it by following Reason alone, unpolluted by any contingencies. Richard King analyzes Russell's *Mysticism and Logic* (1914) pointing out how he attributes four damning characteristics to non-rational, non-scientific discourse:

(1) valuing insight (intuition) over discursive analytical knowledge (reason), (2) belief in unity (i.e. a monistic inclination), (3) a denial of the reality of time and an assertion of the timeless (following on from 2.), and finally, (4) a belief that all evil is mere appearance (again derived from 2 and 3).⁹

What does all this intellectual history have to do with race? While Russell does not necessarily fix these characteristics to races, these are the very characteristics that, since at least the Enlightenment, came to characterize the thinking of non-Europeans (subsequent chapters will demonstrate this, especially as it manifests in Hegel's corpus). Kant made the clear distinction between systems of mystical intuition and those of discursive reason ("Oriental religions" belong to the former, whereas Christianity is sublimated into the latter), and we will see the large role that Hegel played in racializing this distinction.

The association of monism and intuition to the "mystical East" has been an indelible feature of western intellectual history: one only need to recall the popular joke about the proverbial Zen master or the Dalai Lama: "The Dalai Lama walks up to a hot dog stand and

⁹ King 32.

says, 'make me one with everything'.¹⁰ While the West does harbor a good deal of intuitive¹¹ monist thinkers like Plotinus, Meister Eckhart, Tertullian, and so forth, they evidently do not fatally corrupt the Western tradition, because the Western tradition, it is assumed, invented Reason and maintains unique purchase on it. Any thinkers who drift into intuition and Spinoza-esque monism, or pantheism, simply render the history more colorful, but they are purified of their mistakes by proximity to the lights of Reason—lights that are invariably white and European.

Attempts to bring Asian and African philosophy into the discourse seldom get past the terminological redoubt set up against them. Perhaps except for some contemporary Neo-Confucian/Marxists in China, and the figures of Japan's Kyoto School of the mid 20th century, almost no philosophers of Asia escape a qualifying prefix that relegates their thinking to a pseudo-philosophical pigeonhole, an "ethno-philosophy" or theology far removed from the discursive realm of Reason so carefully described by Kant and his successors. They become "Buddhist Philosophy," or "Hindu"—both bugaboo words embodying every negative connotation loaded onto the words mystical, monist, intuitive. Perhaps less mystical, but equally exotic and therefore problematic are Confucians; and even more obscure: some strangers who advocate something called Nyāya,¹² or sundry other Indian pretenses of rigorous thought. Terms like "Buddhist philosophy" and "Hindu philosophy" are bandied about with confidence, but the guardians of Western philosophical history have yet to consider the history of those terms. These guardians are often the same people who bristle at reductionistic broadsides against Religion, Christianity, and Monotheism, for example, from

¹⁰ Youtube hosts an amusing video of a reporter addressing the Dalai Lama with the joke, "the Dalai Lama walks into a pizzeria and says, 'make me one with everything,'" which is entirely lost on him.

¹¹ Implying paradoxical direct perception or direct knowing of the ineffable, the sublime.

¹² One of the most logic-heavy, epistemologically rigorous systems of thought in India, or the world.

those of the New Atheism movements. Outright rejection of the monotheistic paradigm, they argue, fails to appreciate the diversity of religious outlooks, many of which do not resemble fundamentalist caricatures. We must recognize the epistemological advancements made by someone like William of Ockham and his nominalists; the radical Idealism of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne; of course the Catholic scholastics; the philosophical implications of Luther and Calvin; Hegel's exegesis of the Trinity, and so forth. These thinkers made such revolutionary additions to the canon; it would be absurd to reduce them all just because they hail from the monotheistic tradition, however prone that may be to criticism. We recognize their philosophies, and we recognize that those philosophies arose from places with their own histories and conditions. We have no problem with the philosophical renaissance associated with the Protestant Reformation. We are even ready to attribute many new directions of European thinking directly to that very event, so deeply embedded in context. Hegel, as we will see in the next chapter, even goes so far as to identify the Protestant Reformation as a necessary condition of high-level philosophy and absolute knowledge.

In pointing out these problems, I mean to suggest that rigorous deductive reasoning has always coexisted with esoteric, non-deductive, alternative ways of thinking in the West just as much as in the East. However, the West has never acknowledged that the East possesses something akin to Reason — some sense of a distinction between different modes of thinking: one that is linked to intuition, the sublime, ineffability, and another that tries to cultivate knowledge based on reasoning, verifiable propositions etc. In the intellectual history of Europe and the rest of the world, it is important to continue to uncover the variety of traditions that follow the mode of Reason in the sense just explained, while remembering that they developed alongside modes of thinking that fall outside the strictures of Reason. Rational and non-rational thought enjoy a complex and productive relationship in the West, and the

same goes for other parts of the world. The main difference is that elsewhere; intellectual traditions emerged from radically different contexts than we know in the West (systematic atheism, polytheism etc.). For example, the Tibetan philosophical tradition theorizes extensively about various modes of knowing: one that is conceptual, discursive, language-bound, based on ordinary object-subject dualist-epistemology; and another mode that unmediated by language, unlinked from the chain of thought-after-thought, one in which dualist epistemology loses traction. The former mode of knowing is the domain of study, logic, reasoning and rational thought, while the latter mode is the domain of meditation, of letting those frameworks drop away and having a subtly different mode of experience.¹³ There is

¹³ Such matters are discussed endlessly in Tibetan commentarial and polemical literature—the two literary forms that house arguably the bulk of its massive philosophical canon. See, for example, the following summary of the views of the Tibetan philosopher Gorampa (15th c.), which mentions his famous polemics with the great Tsongkhapa (14th c.), arguably the most influential Tibetan philosopher of all time: Kassor, Constance, "Gorampa [go rams pa]", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2011 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/gorampa/>>:

“In order to explain the difference between a conceptual understanding and a nonconceptual realization of the ultimate truth, Gorampa divides it into two types: the nominal ultimate (*don dam rnam grangs pa*) and the actual ultimate (*don dam dngos*). The nominal ultimate corresponds to an ordinary person's understanding of the ultimate, while the actual ultimate is what is perceived by enlightened beings. Similarly, Gorampa contends that the conventional truth is also divided according to the perspective of ordinary and enlightened beings: the former perceive conventional truth (*kun rdzob bden pa*) while the latter understand it as mere convention (*kun rdzob tsam*).

Again, the conventional *truth* is that which is true for ordinary, unenlightened beings (such as the Eiffel Tower). *Mere* convention, on the other hand, is a term that corresponds to the perspective of enlightened beings. When highly realized beings (*āryas*, who are superior to ordinary beings on the Buddhist path, but not yet fully enlightened buddhas) engage in meditation (*rnyam gzbag*), they directly and nonconceptually perceive the ultimate truth. Once they emerge from their meditative states (*rjes thob*), however, they realize that the things that they had previously understood to be conventionally “true” are not actually true. After an *ārya* has directly realized the ultimate, conventional things appear as *merely* conventional. This mere convention is not false; it is simply understood as a mode of perception that is subordinated to the ultimate truth that has been directly experienced in meditation.

It is important to note that conventional objects, such as the Eiffel Tower, tables, persons, ideas, and so on, are the same regardless of whether their existences are understood as conventionally true or mere conventions. The difference between conventional truth and mere convention is based entirely on the subject who apprehends these objects. The same table appears as truly existent to an ordinary being, and as a mere conceptual imputation to an *ārya*. (Tsongkhapa, on the other hand, distinguishes the two truths on the basis of the object, arguing that every object consists of an ultimate and a conventional aspect (*ngo bo gcig la ldog pa tha dad*). Tsongkhapa contends that these two aspects are not substantially different, but only differ conceptually. Nevertheless, the important distinction here is that for Tsongkhapa, the difference between the two truths is made on the basis of the apprehended object (*yul*), while for Gorampa, the distinction is made on the basis of the mind of the apprehending subject (*yul can*).

such an awareness of the distinction between these different modes of knowledge that rich lexicons developed to denote their subtlety. For example, there is an elaborate system outlining the proper progression of knowledge. First one “listens,” or studies by means of language and empirical evidence (Tib: *thos*), attaining what they call the “acumen arising from listening” (*thos pa las byung ba'i shes rab*);¹⁴ then one reflects (*bsam*), synthesizing what one has learned, making judgments, clarifying understanding; then finally one meditates (*sgom*), bracketing the frameworks that guided the previous two steps, suspending judgment and relaxing the machinations of the mind. This final stage is meant to give the opportunity for insights or breakthroughs to occur spontaneously. These insights are important as subtle destabilizers of habitual epistemes. Without them, learning and thinking may only be a fruitless cycle of exhaustion.

In his memoir, former Tibetan monk and current professor at Williams College, Georges Dreyfus writes about these three stages of learning that guided his many years of study in a Tibetan monastery:

A similar model exists in the Western Christian tradition, particularly in the monastic culture of the High Middle Ages. Then, too, the path to wisdom involved three levels of practice. First, texts were read with reverence and often memorized. There were then meditated on to pierce their deeper meaning. This meditation, the equivalent of what I described above as *thinking*, leads us to a higher perception (contemplation) that is not unlike what Buddhists call *meditation*. The similarity between these two is obviously only partial, but it suggests substantial converges between Western monastic culture and Indian monasticism that are quite relevant to our exploration of Tibetan scholasticism.

This threefold model of monastic culture was gradually replaced during the late Middle Ages by a scholastic model based on commentary, debate, and preaching.

With respect to the ultimate truth, the nominal ultimate is an ordinary being's conceptual understanding of what the ultimate truth is like. After studying Buddhist scriptures and learning philosophy, ordinary beings come to understand the ultimate truth in the Madyamaka sense as emptiness. The actual ultimate truth corresponds to that which is directly experienced by fully enlightened buddhas, and *āryas* in meditation. The real ultimate truth is free from all concepts, including the concepts of emptiness and interdependence. It is a state that is entirely nonconceptual, and is the end goal of the Buddhist path.”

¹⁴ See Dreyfus, 2003:165.

Rather than focus on cultivating wisdom by ruminating on texts, Christian medieval intellectuals moved toward an ideal of useful knowledge, which could be used in preaching, teaching, and so on. Similarly, Tibetan scholasticism has tended toward high intellectual culture less directly tied to the process of meditative internalization; the change began in the twelfth century, and culminated around the turn of the sixteenth century with the consolidation of scholastic institutions in the Ge-luk tradition. But Tibetan scholasticism never severed its connection with the ideal of developing wisdom.¹⁵

Awareness of a distinction between epistemological modes shows itself in distinct bodies of Sanskrit and Tibetan literature, as well as distinct institutions. One can attain the rank of great scholar (Sanskrit: *paṇḍita*) by mastering the “five sciences” (*pañcaviḍyāsthāna*): science of language (*śabdaviḍyā*), science of logic (*hetuviḍyā*), science of medicine (*cikitsāviḍyā*), science of fine arts and crafts (*śīlakarmasthānaviḍyā*), and science of spirituality (*aḍhyātmaviḍyā*). These sciences composed the curriculum of the ancient world's most illustrious university, Nālandā, founded in the fifth century. The university attracted tens of thousands of students from as far as Sumatra and Korea until its demise at the hand of Turkish invaders in the twelfth century. I will have much more to say on the topic throughout this essay, but when Eurocentric intellectuals cite the West's relatively higher rate of discovery in the material sciences as proof of teleological history, it is fair to speculate on what may have been accomplished at Nālandā and similar institutions had they not been completely destroyed by the savage spillover of the crusades happening to the West.¹⁶ To defend teleological western historiography one must

¹⁵ *ibid.* 167

¹⁶ Consider the scholars at work for the few hundred years that Nalanda and its sister university, Vikramashila were functioning: at Vikramashila were: Buddhajñānapāda; Dīpaṅkarabhadra; Jayabhadra; Śrīdhara; Bhavabhaṭṭa; Bhavyakīrti; Līlavājra; Durjayacandra; Samayavajra; Tathāgatarakṣita; Bodhibhadra; Kamalarakṣita

As well as Vāgīśvarakīrti, Ratnavajra, Jñānaśrīmitra, Prajñākaramati, and the extremely influential Naropa.

Nalanda's roster was even more impressive, including many of the most influential Asian philosophers of all time who continue to grow in influence as the western world discovers them: Nagarjuna (c. 2nd century C.E.); Aryadeva (c. 3rd century C.E.); Asanga (300-390 C.E.); Vasubandhu (c. 4th century C.E.); Dignaga (6th century C.E.); Dharmakīrti (600-660 C.E.); Gunaprabha (c. 9th century C.E.); Shakyaprabha; Buddhapalita (470-550 C.E.); Bhavaviveka (500-578 C.E.); Dharmapāla (530-561 CE.); Chandrakīrti (600-650 C.E.); Silabhadra (the Chinese philosopher Xuanzang, 7th century); Shantarakṣita (725-788 C.E.); Kamalashila (c. 8th

systematically demonstrate how a intellectual hub like Nālandā was conceptually misguided, showing how the internal logic of their work could not lead to modern knowledge. I suspect that this will not or cannot be done. The other alternative is much easier: simply explain the history retrospectively, as if Iikhtiyar Uddin Khilji, the Turkish destroyer of Nālandā, was truly a messenger of the noble plan of history that was unfolding itself through the orgiastic violence that produced him. Perhaps it really was the pre-destined end for the land that first developed nearly every major mathematical concept,¹⁷ the world’s first formal grammar system,¹⁸ and countless major astronomical discoveries. Meanwhile, China completely dominated the realm of technology until the colonial age.¹⁹

To further the comparison, there is also a massive body of doxographical literature that exhaustively ranks and criticizes all the known philosophical positions of the Indo-Tibetan world. The word for that literature, (Tib.) *grub mtba’*, can, and many argue should, be translated as the English word “theory.” There are “schools of teaching” (Tib. *bshad grwa*), where one studies academic treatises (*gzhung*) including those of the highly developed field of reasoning (*rigs pa, tshad ma* etc.);²⁰ and there are “schools of meditation” (*sgrub grwa*), where texts are generally abandoned and the focus is directly on the practice of meditation, though the genre of “songs of realization” (Skt. *dhāra*; Tib. *namo mgur*) for inspiration. The stages of learning and thinking lead one to ever-refined levels of conceptual thinking (Skt. *vikalpa*; Tib. *rnam rtoq*). The subtlety of one’s learning sets up conditions conducive to insights, “non-

century C.E.); Haribhadra (700-770 C.E.); Vimuktisena (c. 6th century C.E.); Shantideva (c. 8th century C.E.) ; Atisha (980-1054 C.E.)

¹⁷ zero, the decimal system, algebra, trigonometry, negative numbers, Pi etc.

¹⁸ Pāṇini’s Sanskrit grammar, 6th century BCE.

¹⁹ printing, gunpowder, crossbow, compass, paper, seismoscope, saddle and stirrups, porcelain, canal locks, mechanical clock, paper money, land mines, natural gas fuel, to name just a few.

²⁰ See, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology-language-tibetan/>

conceptual” states of meditation.²¹ Different teachers from different lineages emphasize one episteme more than another: depending on one’s inclinations and abilities, one can follow the path of study, like scholastic monks, or one can almost wholly reject study in favor of arduous meditation and solitude, like Tibet’s most famous meditator, Milarepa. Most of Tibet’s famous philosophers tried to strike a perfect balance between these two.

These examples are adduced to show how a non-European tradition has distinguished between different levels of epistemology, and how the differentiation of discourses is not a Western invention. Drawing these connections is one valuable function of comparative philosophy, but it is not the intent of the present work. I will limit myself to just a few more examples.

A pioneering scholar of Indian logic, Theodor Stcherbatsky, whose 1930 book, *Buddhist Logic* influenced a generation of specialists, writes in his preface:

There is a widely spread prejudice that positive philosophy is to be found only in Europe. It is also a prejudice that Aristotle’s treatment of logic was final; that having had in this field no predecessor, he also has no need of a continuator. This last prejudice seems to be on the wane. There is as yet no agreed opinion on what the future of logic will be, but there is a general dissatisfaction with what it at present is. We are on the eve of a reform. The consideration at this juncture of the independent and altogether different way in which the problems of logic, formal as well as epistemological, have been tackled by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti will possibly be of some importance.

The philosopher in thus considering and comparing two different logics will perceive that there are such problems which the human mind naturally encounters on

²¹ See Thurman 1991: 158 (glossary):

“conceptualization (*vikalpa*). This brings up another important group of words that has never been treated systematically in translation: *vikalpa*, *parikalpa*, *samarōpa*, *adhyarōpa*, *kalpanā*, *samjñā*, and *prapañca*. All of these refer to mental functions that tend to superimpose upon reality, either relative or ultimate, a conceptualized reality fabricated by the subjective mind. Some translators have tended to lump these together under the rubric “discursive thought,” which leads to the misleading notion that all thought is bad, something to be eliminated, and that sheer “thoughtlessness” is enlightenment, or whatever higher state is desired. According to Buddhist scholars, thought in itself is simply a function, and only thought that is attached to its own content over and above the relative object, i.e., “egoistic” thought, is bad and to be eliminated. Therefore, we have chosen a set of words for the seven Skt. terms: respectively, “conceptualization,” “imagination,” “presumption,” “exaggeration,” “construction,” “conception” or “notion,” and “fabrication.” This does not mean that these words are not somewhat interchangeable or that another English word might not be better in certain circumstances; it only represents an attempt to achieve consistency with the original usages.

his way as soon as he begins to deal with truth and error. Such are, e.g., the problems of the categories and of relations; of the synthetical and analytical judgments; of infinity, infinite divisibility, of the antinomies and of the dialectical structure of the understanding. From under the cover of an exotic terminology he will discern features which he is accustomed to see differently treated, differently arranged, assigned different places in the system and put into different contexts. The philosopher, if he becomes conversant with the style of Sanscrit compositions, will be tempted not only to interpret Indian ideas in European terms, but also to try the converse operation and to interpret European ideas in Indian terms.²²

However, since these words were written in 1930, very few people have ventured into such comparative work. Granted, three quarters of a century ago, it would have been difficult indeed to become “conversant with the style of Sanscrit compositions” without knowing Sanskrit one’s self. Translations of primary texts were scant. But the same was true of texts from any language. For example, it took fifty-seven years for Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* to be translated into English. Access to texts is no longer a valid excuse for completely ignoring vast swathes of literature. More than a hundred years of philological toil combined with modern technologies of distribution have produced a critical mass of material that is easily available. While it is wonderful to learn Sanskrit or some other canonical language, and the work of translation is virtually inexhaustible and should continue, it is now possible to use translated non-European texts, just as we in the Anglophone world use translations of everything from Plato to Derrida. Thus, rather than unfold a lengthy apology of another tradition, I believe it suffices to refer people to the shelves and shelves of material now available in English, but which collects dust, except in the hands of a very few.²³

The highly regarded contemporary logician, Graham Priest, is one of the few “Western” philosophers to engage with translated material germane to his field. In a 2010

²² Stcherbatsky, Th. *Buddhist Logic*. vol. 1. New York: Dover, 1962 pg. xii

²³ The work of Stcherbatsky, K.N. Jayatilleke, Tom Tillemans, John Dunne, and Georges Dreyfus are exemplary, but there are countless others who have contributed to the field. So much so, that it is quite absurd to still wonder if there are proper non-European logical traditions. cursory internet searches for

article, he analyzes an idea central to classical Buddhist logic, the *catuskoṭi* (Greek: *tetralemma*). Eighty years after Stcherbatsky's suggestion, Priest suspects there is something to be gained from looking closely at this logical concept, which does not quite fit with the canons of Western logic. He does not make a show of his open mindedness, as if as a great Western logician he is doing some favor to the Indian tradition by speaking about them. He just wants to understand an important logical concept, assuming that he is missing out by not studying it:

The catuskoṭi is a venerable principle in Buddhist logic. How it was deployed seems to have varied somewhat over the thousand-plus years of Indian Buddhism. However, it was clearly a contentious principle in the context of Indian logic. It is equally contentious to modern commentators, though the contention here is largely in how to understand it—including how to interpret it in terms of modern logic. As one modern commentator puts it (Tillemans 1999, 189):

Within Buddhist thought, the structure of argumentation that seems most resistant to our attempts at a formalization is undoubtedly the catuskoṭi or tetralemma.

For a start, the catuskoṭi, whatever it is, is something which sails very close to the wind of violating both the Principles of Excluded Middle and of Non-Contradiction. Commentators who know only so-called “classical” logic, in particular, are therefore thrown into a tizzy.

The point of this article is to make sense of the catuskoṭi from the enlightened position of paraconsistent logic. I shall not attempt to discuss all the historical thinkers who appealed to the catuskoṭi. I shall be concerned mainly with how it functioned in the thought of Nagarjuna and his Madhyamaka successors. Here, its use is, perhaps, both the most sophisticated and the most puzzling.²⁴

Priest shows an awareness of the catuskoṭi's provenance—that it is quite different from what he and his colleagues are accustomed to. However, he simply acknowledges this and proceeds to study it. It's foreignness is not turned into an epistemological obstacle. Once he studies it, he understands it. He does not see this particular logical problem as hopelessly tangled in webs of Oriental obscurity.

“bibliography+Buddhist logic” yield extensive results: <http://www.ontology.co/biblio/buddhist-philosophy-biblio-one.htm>

²⁴ Priest, Graham. *Comparative Philosophy* Volume 1, No. 2 (2010): 24-54 Open Access / ISSN 2151-6014 www.comparativephilosophy.org

Such context is not usually a stumbling block in Western philosophy. Philosophical developments may very well have been constituted out of a complex of social, technological, and political conditions, but as long as those conditions are white and European, their legitimacy is ensured. Kant's Reason rises out of the raw material of the contingent world and abides over and above it as a decontextualized Idea, however, one that is still inexplicably linked to white Europe.

Long ago, Augustine argued that Reason, the will to choose, was a gift from God belonging to an ordered system conceived by God himself: "Our wills themselves are in the order of causes, which is, for God, fixed, and is contained in his foreknowledge, since human acts of will are the causes of human activities."²⁵ The Reason given to human beings is structurally the same as God's Reason; it is a splinter of it with the same molecular make up, so to speak. It is the cause of good action, because it can be the efficient cause of those actions, whereas, it cannot cause bad actions, since those actions have an intrinsically different character that cannot have been part of the wholly positive causal chain that comes from God's order. Aquinas developed this rational theology even more, rendering God's Reason the organizing principle and first cause of everything in the natural world.²⁶ Abstracted away from the turmoil of all sentiment and contingency, God's Reason, and by implication our own

²⁵ Augustine. *City of God*. New York: Penguin, 2003 p. 192

²⁶ Not all that much had changed by the mid 17th century when Milton wrote the following theological verses in *Paradise Lost*:

but that the will
 And high permission of all-ruling Heaven
 Left him at large to his own dark designs,
 That with reiterated crimes he might
 Heap on himself damnation, while he sought [215]
 Evil to others, and enrag'd might see
 How all his malice serv'd but to bring forth
 Infinite goodness, grace and mercy shewn
 On Man by him seduc't, but on himself
 Treble confusion, wrath and vengeance pour'd.

-http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/pl/book_1/index.shtml

Reason, is the perfect basis for the philosophical visions of Kant and Russell much later. Mark Taylor summarizes Aquinas' contribution to this kind of thinking in his book, *After God*:

He makes this all-important point concisely in his *Summa Theologica*: "There is will in God, just as there is intellect: since will follows upon the intellect." Because God's will is informed by his reason (or intellect), the world is always rational. "Now God is the cause of all things by His intellect," Aquinas explains, "and therefore it is necessary that the exemplar of every effect should pre-exist in Him, as is clear from what has gone before. Hence, the exemplar of the order of things ordered towards an end is, properly speaking, providence." In brief, Aquinas concludes: "*Providence is the divine reason itself, which seated in the Supreme Ruler, disposes all things.*"²⁷

Importantly, Aquinas was writing at the time when the Catholic Church was the strongest it had ever been. Whatever he published had more than enough economic and political support to catch on. This does not only mean that his version of Christianity would come to dominate, but also his version of Platonism and Aristotelian essentialism on which he based his theological system. Michel Onfray observes the historiographical implications of the Church's power:

Christianity, having become the official religion and philosophy, discards that which generated its lineage — Abderitan materialism; Leucippes' and Democritus' atomism; Epicurus and the Greek Epicureans; the late Romans; cynical nominalism; Cyreniac hedonism; sophist perspectivism and relativism — privileging what can pass as a propedaetic to the new religion: dualism, the immaterial soul, reincarnation, the denigration of the material body, hatred for life, the taste for the ascetic ideal, and the post-mortem salvation or damnation of the Pythagoreans and Platonics suited it perfectly... Later on, Christianity watched, with unfeigned gladness, the flourishing of the spirit and tone of medieval scholasticism, experiencing the joy of its greatest hours again with the German idealism initiated by Kant and glorified by Hegel...²⁸

While the Protestant Reformation certainly destabilized a great deal of Augustine and Aquinas' edifice and planted seeds for radical new visions to emerge, it did not, generally, assassinate the divine Subject operating under the principle of divine Reason, as is evident in

²⁷ Taylor 52

²⁸ Onfray 58. My translation.

Kantian Idealism and even the absolutization of Reason promoted by Idealism's Anglo-American analytic antagonists.

Again, what does all of this have to do with race? When Reason becomes the defining characteristic of philosophy, and when Reason is defined in highly contextual, specifically theological ways, any people — though possessing analogous knowledge — who do not share the same terms and history are excluded from the realm of philosophy and the social and political capital it provides. While every philosopher today repudiates Aristotle's taxonomy of intrinsic natures which render some humans slaves and others masters (corresponding to their geographical provenance, and by implication, skin color), it is fair to ask if such repudiations are sometimes only lip-service. Nearly every syllabus and every lecture on the introduction to philosophy²⁹ starts with something like Daniel N. Robinson's influential lectures for the Teaching Company, an institution that is very representative of the canons of the western academy. Robinson starts his lecture series with the question "What is philosophy and did the Greeks invent it?" The answer to the latter question, clearly enough to him, is yes, and he offers compelling reasons for why it is so. In chapter twelve we will see others influential writers like Antony Flew and Pierre Hadot arguing the same thing. Robinson defines "philosophy" in simple enough terms, saying, "The central aspect of the philosophical perspective, is a critical one, criticality, criticism, self-criticism. This is what is at the very center of the philosophical project, the philosophical way of thought, it's at the very center of the philosophical enterprise." Despite the accomplishments of Homer, Aeschylus, the Egyptians, and others, Robinson argues — in chorus with the western tradition — that the truly critical and skeptical mind did not manifest until Pythagoras and Parmenides in the sixth

century BCE. But the justifications for this myth are far from clear. Despite his lasting contributions to mathematics and geometry—two favorite tools of later philosophers—Pythagoras was nothing if not a mystic and believer of eternal truths unaffected by criticism and doubt. As summed up by Arnold Hermann in his book *To Think Like a God: Pythagoras and Parmenides, The Origins of Philosophy*, “A ‘philosophy’ that has to advocate *corporeal* purification and death for the potential obtainment of a more reliable insight does not inspire much confidence as a well-thought-out approach (123).” The Pythagorean worldview was one of profound faith and belief in a non-empirical truth awaiting one in the afterlife, an unfounded confidence in the transmigration of the soul that included Pythagoras’ own claim to recall his previous existence. This could be a tale right out of the Indian or Tibetan esoteric traditions. However, those traditions—no matter how philosophical they may appear—must remain merely religious and not sufficiently critical to be included in the category in which we place the Greeks. We over-mine the rationality of Pythagoras at the altar of Reason, and we undermine his radically esoteric elements. Pythagoras’ esotericism does not and should not discredit him as a philosopher in the world canon, but we see similar esoteric commitments discrediting the entirety of Buddhist or Hindu traditions, not to speak of African, Pacific Islander, and other possible styles of systematic thought. In an excellent article for the New York Times’ philosophy column, Justin E. H. Smith concludes the following about “Philosophy’s Western Bias”:

The West has an extremely rich philosophical tradition — one of the two or three richest, in fact — and it is eminently worthy of preservation and transmission to future generations. But its richness has always been a result of its place as a node in a global network through which ideas and things are always flowing. This was true in 500 B.C. and is no less true today. Increasingly, moreover, this interconnectedness is something

²⁹ For example, Columbia University’s Core Curriculum course, “Introduction to [the foundations of] Contemporary [Western] Civilizations,” (brackets mine) begins with Plato’s *Republic*; it is up to individual instructors’ discretion to say anything at all about pre-Socratic philosophy.

that is not only of interest to the antiquarian trivia collector who can't wait to tell you where the printing press really comes from. It is fast becoming the defining fact about our geopolitical reality. In this reality, Western academic philosophy will likely come to appear utterly parochial in the coming years if it does not find a way to approach non-Western traditions that is much more rigorous and respectful than the tokenism that reigns at present.³⁰

He notices that non-European philosophy is no longer closed off to only the few determined philologists that can penetrate difficult foreign languages. Geopolitical reality, including technology and the cumulative scholarship of generations, have piled the philosophical banquet tables high, but most of us stick to the bread and potatoes of European ancestors. It's not that we taste the other food and dislike it, we seldom acknowledge that it's there, don't know it's edible, or don't know how to take off the shell. More important than even eating it and liking it is to simply acknowledge its place at the table—that somebody made it or harvested it—and not to dismiss it out of hand. The Western canon is parochial enough in its dismissal of pre-Socratic philosophy and those thinkers who retained its spirit through the centuries; it needn't repeat the same mistake by trying to wall out everything else too. As Smith suggests, the opening of the canon in the coming decades may be inevitable, but whether the gates swing open smoothly or creak on rusty hinges will depend on how philosophy reforms the rationales of exclusion. These rationales, I believe, are fueled by metaphysics that reify teleology and thus lead to faith in a teleological history of the world—a history that includes the building of the canons of philosophy. The following chapters will criticize these metaphysics, mostly by looking into the ideas of a giant of metaphysical and historical philosophy: Hegel.

³⁰ Smith, Justin E. H. *NY Times*, The Stone. "Philosophy's Western Bias." June 3, 2012.

2.

The Special Case of African Philosophy

With the help of *Orientalism* and the studies it inspired, Asian philosophies have managed to legitimize themselves slightly over the last fifty to one hundred years, even if they are still not sanctioned by university philosophy departments. African philosophy, however, has faced similar but even more intransigent resistance from the philosophical establishment. Standard questions persist in academic conferences, classrooms, and conversations amongst white western philosophers: “Can we even speak of African philosophy? Has anything like philosophy arisen from Africa (excepting the Mediterranean regions with long ties to the Greco-Roman world)? Or most famously, Saul Bellow’s NY Times interview in which he asked, “Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulu’s? The Proust of the Papuans? I’d like to read him.” These questions are not as innocently historical as they try to sound. They are not so much concerned with excavating an African philosophy by looking at its cultural productions; nor are they much interested in explanations about all the historical factors that may have put African culture on a much different path than that of Europe. They assume an *African ontology* that lacks the necessary conditions for doing philosophy.

Of course, Aristotle told us, “The deliberative part of the soul is entirely missing in the slave”;⁵¹ and European history told us that the slave is nearly always African. Furthermore, when the Christian scholastics began to define human beings as those endowed with reason, those with slave natures who lacked the deliberative part of the soul were by necessity

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/03/philosophys-western-bias/>

⁵¹ Aristotle. *Politics*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998 p. 22

excluded from humanity itself. However, while slavery very slowly went out vogue, presuppositions about populations from whom slaves used to be drawn and their capacity for thinking remained. Mogobe B. Ramose inveighs against the damage this has not only caused Africans, of course, but also philosophy writ large and the institutions that support it:

To deny the existence of African philosophy is also to reject the very idea of philosophy. It is to foreclose in advance the doors of communication with what we do not know. Yet, if the philosopher is the lover of wisdom, surely it is common sense that one cannot acquire wisdom by improving one's skills to avoid listening to others. Hearing others is one thing but listening to them is quite another matter. The latter involves the possibility for communication. Accordingly, to deny oneself the opportunity for dialogue is to reject the possibility condition of becoming a philosopher. Dialogue being the basis of deliberation, it is clear that the liberation of philosophy is possible only through dialogue. For this reason it is imperative to take seriously Gracia's warning to Continental and Anglo-Saxon philosophers, namely, that '...the sorts of questions raised by Continental philosophers are frequently dismissed by analysts as illegitimate, and the questions they regard as legitimate are dismissed by Continental philosophers as trivial ... This technique of dismissal is a serious matter, for it clearly points to a kind of antiphilosophical dogmatic attitude that runs contrary to the very nature of the discipline as traditionally conceived... To reject at the outset any attempt and possibility of communication with those who oppose us is something that has always been criticized by philosophers and that, nonetheless, is generally accepted in the profession today. The curiosity to understand those who don't think as we do is gone from philosophical circles to the detriment of the discipline. The situation, therefore, is intolerable not only from a practical standpoint but more important, because it threatens to transform the discipline into one more of the many ideologies that permeate our times, where differences of opinion are settled not through argument but through political action or force.'³²

The source of this problem, Ramose argues, is that European philosophies have unabashedly arisen out of European lived experiences, but similar productions from non-Europeans have been resisted or denied. Therefore, it is imperative for non-Europeans, and even disaffected Europeans to push back with their own philosophical productions that arise from life experience. For Ramose, "Resistance to this is tantamount to the rejection of liberation. It is precisely standing firm in the position of the de-liberation of philosophy"(6). For Africans to be liberated from an episteme that does not accurately process their experience, Ramose and

other African philosophers advocate the positive construction of new philosophies that are not mere “ethno-philosophies”; not meager and mimetic attempts at rigorous thinking, but philosophies that arise from the time and place of real living Africans, just as Western philosophies arise out of the real lives of Western men (and, much later, women).

Richard King argues, “The introduction of a variety of epistemic traditions is, in my view, the single most important step that post-colonial studies can take is to look beyond the Eurocentric foundations of its theories and contest the epistemic violence of the colonial encounter” (199). The violence of the colonial encounter and the historiography that it built even affects the way we read King’s prescription: “Indigenous epistemic traditions” do not have the ring of legitimate epistemological systems on the level of those of Western philosophy. However, the building of alternative models of doing philosophy is precisely what is needed to unchain majuscule Philosophy from its Platonic-Christian-Idealist pillars. It is also what is needed so that people outside of those three overlapping epistemes can still benefit from the perennial consolations of philosophy. As extant and future African, Indian, Chinese, and other non-European philosophies are better understood, they not only empower those associated with them, but they critically destabilize the static field of philosophical history and philosophical possibility. Richard King explains the benefits of this very clearly; and while he is speaking in the context of religion (I suggest that simply replacing ‘religion’ with ‘philosophy’ makes the same point):

...It is important that the proliferation of such perspectives does not lead to fragmentation, and scholars wishing to explore alternative cultural models for understanding religion must be prepared to consider this to be a truly *comparative* exercise. Replacing Western models of religion with Indian, African, or Chinese conceptual frameworks not only creates the danger of falling into the trap of cultural isolationism and a chauvinistic indigenism, but may also into the heterogeneity of these cultures themselves. There is no single ‘Indian’, ‘Chinese’ or ‘African’ way of looking at

³² Ramose, Mogobe. *The African Philosophy Reader*. London: Routledge, 1998 p. 7

the world, just as there is no definitive ‘gender-critical stance’ from which to approach the study of religion. A lesson to learn from the explosion of feminist approaches to the study of religion, I think, is not to fear a heterogeneity of perspectives, so long as the goals of such approaches remain reasonably consonant with each other (that is, the critique of patriarchy and the end of masculinist oppression of women and men), however differently conceived.³³

Subsequent chapters will unpack much of what King suggests. While Orientalist scholarship has made a good deal of Asian philosophy accessible to those with an interest in it, there has not yet been an adequate proliferation of such interest. Around the 1970’s, Orientalist scholarship yielded slightly to scholarship done by practitioner/converts to Buddhism or Hinduism, and they effectively carried out a “second-wave” of scholarship on those traditions’ religious beliefs and philosophies. Quite often, though, these scholars did fall into the trap the King recognizes—that of simply advocating a replacement of current values with alternative ones. As noted, this not only ignores or misunderstands the heterogeneity of those alternative traditions, it also does very little in the way of escaping the rigid paradigms that bother such scholars to begin with.

However, a phase of advocating alternative approaches remains necessary. They must find their feet and make noise to be heard. If we have made any progress in equality between the sexes, we cannot discount the role played by radical, militant feminists such as Mary Daly, who called for literal gynæcocracy and described the benefits of a world without—or with fewer—men.³⁴ Similarly, for Africans of the continent and diaspora to be heard, they must pass through the stage of Afrocentrism, advocated by Professor Molefi Kete Asante of Temple University and many of his colleagues. Many of us, trying to go beyond the moral systems handed down to us, read the scatological erotics of Marquis de Sade, Masoch and Georges Bataille. Their radical inversions of the Christian ethics of purity and chastity help us dislodge

³³ King 212

certain habits and achieve a degree of freedom from repression. However, simply flipping the model on its head, holding the Christian ideal in place and raising a middle finger to it, does not necessarily sunder the pernicious structure itself.³⁵

There will always be a place for proponents of alternative approaches. Both philologists and more biased converts are the excavators of ideas that have been swept under the rug. What they uncover provides material for constructing new visions. In some cases, as with Asian philosophies, ample amounts of material have been excavated. It remains up to the guardians of the main traditions to look at that material; to simply use it as material for building, not as something to be competed against—something from which the dominant traditions need to be protected. Again, the point is not to expect those interested in classical European philosophy to become pseudo-Buddhists or Afrocentrists, but until those voices are listened to and given a place within the institutions of philosophy, we can continue to charge the gatekeepers and guardians of those institutions with racist and willful ignorance.

One place to begin this critical work is to uncover the influence that Hegel has on the construction of the philosophical canon, and the way that his metaphysics can and has affected our relationship to other people and things. At its worst, Hegel's corpus has provided ample fuel for a view of the world as the expression of a necessity, of history as unequivocally teleological, and of some things being ontologically superior to others by virtue of their share in the *Logos* that structures them and moves them along. But to reduce his corpus to these points is to ignore its expansiveness and to miss out on some of the resources he developed that could work against his own commitments to teleology, hierarchy, and anthropocentrism.

³⁴ Bridle, Susan (Fall/Winter 1999). "No Man's Land". EnlightenNext Magazine.

³⁵ For an entire book promoting a post-Christian "solar sexuality" that indeed goes beyond the structures in place, refer to Onfray, Michel. *Théorie du corps amoureux: Pour une érotique solaire*. Paris: Grasset, 2000.

II.

3.

Hegel and His Legacy

Despite evident revolutionary contributions that Hegel made to philosophical method, he also did some egregious damage to its historiography. One of his great strengths is the expansiveness that earned him the reputation as *the* great totalizing philosopher, the system-builder par excellence. Hegel saw himself as the apogee of a great ideological march. His thought was the free flowing waters of the ocean, collected from the glacial snows of all thought that came before him. Unlike a prophet of revelation, Hegel knew that his thinking was not performed in a vacuum and that it was built of the disparate elements that would become the parts of his all-encompassing dialectic. In one sense, he divested philosophy of the “purity” that so many thinkers of the past insisted upon: the purity of reason, the purity of mathematical universals, the purity of the Word that transcends the World. For him, there could be no such functioning of a mind or Spirit outside the milieu and context of the concrete world. Spirit, the object of all our difficult philosophical operations, is like the mist that must be fathomed by traversing the ground it lies on. Or more accurately, Spirit and the concrete are mutually penetrating, co-dependent, and co-emerging. Philosophy is not the descent of ideas from the sky, but is an expression of history and the work that builds it. Though in being constructed of the totality of events, History itself is a universal that provides the backdrop for the unfolding of all things particular. So Hegel endeavors to account for the different threads that make up the vast fabric of History, which is nothing other than the history of philosophy. But in doing so, Susan Sontag observes, “Hegel could not help presenting his own

system as true — that is, beyond history — because of its incorporation of the historical perspective.” He writes, famously, of an "end of history" that results from the Absolute Knowledge that his system conveys. In other words, Hegel gathers the disparate threads of history together and discovers their hidden code, like a contemporary biologist mapping organisms' genomes. Those who populated that earlier history had not yet attained absolute knowledge, so they were bound by the limits of their historicity. Hegel, however, uses the material history as a ladder that he is finally able to dismount into a boundless and ahistorical Absolute. Sontag adds that this hubris, which allowed him to carry out a project of such scope, contributes to making “Hegelianism bankrupt as a system, though not as a method” (76).

Hegel’s method succeeds in its rigorous description of the mind and the mind’s activity — phenomenology — and in its attempt to place that mind in a context, to connect it to the concrete world. But where it fails, it drags behind it a bramble of contradictions, willful ignorance, and racial prejudice that have retarded the development of the history of philosophy and the institutions built around it. This is a result of an overemphasis on historical determinism — something that is present in Hegel’s writing, but which exists in tension with its opposite. There is a sense in Hegel that history had to happen the way that it did: Europe became dominant and Africa and Asia fell behind because of a certain destiny. Napoleon’s reign, Robespierre’s Terror and the revolutions that followed Hegel were all part of a movement from and toward something. Such events were the expression of a code, just as the images of a computer program are the unfolding of an anterior language. This language, in Hegel’s philosophy, is called *Logic*, *Logos*, and is the underlying structure, an irreducible heart-matter of reality in all its multiplicity. It is the Word of God in *John* 1:1, to which Hegel is profoundly indebted. It is what is described in the hundreds of nearly impenetrable,

marvelous pages of his book, *The Science of Logic*. This underlying Logic explains both the life of the mind—described in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*—as well as the life of the world, described in other volumes, such as his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, *Philosophy of History*, and so forth. However, it is not always clear in what way the Logic *explains* these things. Does it explain them by supplying us with the source-code for those events, showing them to be completely determined by a preexisting fate? Or does it merely explain the *conditions of the possibility* for events to arise the way they do and have? These are completely different alternatives and their implications are massive.

4.

The Historical Confusion of Anthropocentrism

Hegel left behind an ocean of words, and within that ocean are many currents leading in different directions. As already mentioned, Hegel had the great ambition to explain the course of the world by the very same logic that he could explain the course of the mind. He believed it possible to discover and show that diachronic history and the events that constitute it have exactly the same structure as the units that make it up—the synchronic structure of mind is simply another mode of expression of a single logic. In his system there is only one underlying logic, however, since he follows a phenomenological method—that is, since the mind is the only medium through which we can discover the logic—the mind ends up hypostetized as the guarantor of all existence. As such, the human subject follows a different logic than other things: it is primary, the only true substance, and the objective world is merely fuel for its self-expression. This formulation, in which the objects and events of the world submit themselves before the absolute Being of the subject, makes perfect sense of the violence and hierarchy that we find all around.³⁶ The subject preexists and is always in the process of carrying out the teleology intrinsic to it. It doesn't need to *become*, to construct its own teleology, and it gazes out at the objective world complacently, believing that all previous moments have been the fuel for its inexorable self-expression. Whatever things there are in the world that cause pain, they do so for a reason; they are ineluctable elements constituting the noble unity of the self-expressing human subject.

³⁶ For example, misogyny benefits from this metaphysics, since it posits subordination and hierarchy as natural and justified—it is just the structure of reality. Judith Butler writes of this problem in *Gender Trouble* p. 17: “In the philosophical tradition that begins with Plato and continues through Descartes, Husserl, and Sartre, the

Alexandre Kojève advanced an historical, anthropological, and diachronic reading of the relationship between Hegel's *Logic* and the world of appearances. Hegel himself said plenty to warrant this reading, as we will see in many selections below, but it was championed by the influential Kojève in a series of lectures in France in the 1930's that were attended by the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre, Raymond Queneau, Georges Bataille, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, André Breton, Jacques Lacan and Raymond Aron. While those thinkers absorbed Kojève's influence and went on to build their own nuanced philosophies, others took advantage of his thesis' political tone and used it to justify and spur on Eurocentrism in politics and the Academy. These included Leo Strauss, Allan Bloom, and Francis Fukuyama.

Based on his reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Kojève asserts the existence of—indeed the metaphysical centrality of—an “essential” human subjectivity. This human subjectivity enters into, even produces, an essential relationship to the world of objects: one in which there is a definitive metaphysical split between them. The subject establishes itself as ontologically supreme, while objects become dependent on it. This creates an immovable ideal: human subjectivity must either fulfill its ontological destiny, or it falls away from it, losing its being, its value. Therefore, the subject is ruled by a teleological imperative to *be* a certain way. The possibility of non-teleological “becoming” is thereby foreclosed, along with the phenomenological, social, and political benefits that might accompany such becoming. Subsequent chapters will explore the possibility of a non-teleological Hegelianism, but Kojève takes us in the other direction.

ontological distinction between soul (consciousness, mind) and body invariably supports relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy.

Kojève's interpretation was based on Hegel's famous Master-Slave Dialectic—the multivalent discourse of the struggle for recognition that takes places in the subtle inner journey of consciousness toward self-consciousness, and also plays itself out macrocosmically in the events of history, especially the violent ones.

To summarize briefly, the dialectic begins by positing Desire as the a priori element of animal life. Animals have desire, and the same basic force exists within the human, compelling it to act. An animal desires something, for example food, and consumes it. Thus desire is essentially destructive and negative. By destroying or consuming the desired object, desire is not fulfilled (only for a brief moment), but it creates a division between those objects and the subject that beholds them. This is consciousness.

Self-consciousness, the special characteristic of the human, requires more than this relationship. It must behold something that beholds it back: another consciousness, another desire. This unfolds internally, with consciousness turning back on itself, becoming self-consciousness; and it unfolds externally, as society—a group of self-consciousnesses looking back and forth at each other. Kojève says, “Man can appear on earth only within a herd,” and that “human history is the history of desired Desires”(6). For neither Kojève nor Hegel, is this process affectionate or erotic.³⁷ It is a struggle, it is violent. Hence the very terms it is couched in: the Master-Slave Dialectic. Unlike animal consciousness, human self-consciousness does not satisfy itself by directly consuming or destroying others self-conscious humans. To do so would be to take away the only means one has to validate oneself as human. The two self-consciousnesses stare at each other and battle for recognition, for a way to come into being and remain self-consciousnesses. The victor of this battle is the master and the one

who gives up—out of fear of death and nothingness—becomes the slave. This is human nature. Much more Hobbes than any of the innate empathy espoused by others like Rousseau, Smith, or Mill. And therefore, society and history will be marked by the inequality and violence that is part of this structure: “The first anthropogenetic action necessarily takes the form of a fight...(11),” “He must, therefore, ‘provoke’ the other, force him to start a fight to the death for pure prestige” (13).

However, the master does not satisfy himself through this victory. He comes to realize something awful. By risking his life and coming to dominate, he has alienated everyone and finds himself in barren isolation. There is another self-consciousness there that could validate him, but he has stripped that other of its dignity. As a master, his relationship to his slave is essentially lonely. Moreover, he is the master only in relation to this degraded being before him. His identity depends on a wretch who is not his equal. Still more, the wretch makes the things the master needs for his own survival. The master is idle, the slave works, producing things that the master relies on. At some point, they both come to realize this and they start to change places. By working and producing things outside of himself, the slave sets himself up against the objective world, thereby developing his subjectivity. Kojève notes, “It is only by work that man is a supernatural being that is conscious of its reality; by working, he is ‘incarnated’ Spirit, he is historical ‘World,’ he is ‘objectivized’ in History”(25). The slave, though once the loser, gains his freedom through work, while the master comes to the cold realization that he remains unfree. He must go through the same struggle that the slave went through and submit to the fear of death in order to work his way back into the fullness of life. For Hegel and Kojève, this happens through political activity. Specifically, it was

³⁷ For a philosophy that describes a similar movement as erotic, see Jean-Luc Marion’s *The Erotic Phenomenon*. Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2006. Also, for a discussion of Hegel’s ideas about the limited role of love in his

Robespierre's Terror that ushered in the dominating shadow of death that would allow European man to submit to negation and then rise up like a phoenix. Outwardly, this phoenix was Napoleon, "the wholly 'satisfied' Man, who, in and by his definitive Satisfaction, completes the course of the historical evolution of humanity" (69). However, Napoleon is simply the full expression of this moment of satisfaction, of a completely immanent man, but he does not necessarily have self-consciousness of what he is. His being and actions are spontaneous and unreflective, like the animal that consumes what it desires. It is Hegel who supplies the self-conscious element to Napoleon's immanent manhood. Posterity can then never shake off the combination of Being (Napoleon) and self-consciousness (Hegel) that came to be through this process. Hegel made humanity self-aware to a degree it never was before. Kojève sums up some of the implications of Hegel's system:

...If we see that Hegel's system actually is circular, we must conclude in spite of appearances (and perhaps even in spite of common sense) that History is completed and consequently that the State in which this system could be realized is the perfect State. This, by the way, is what Hegel himself did, as we know. After the fall of Napoleon, he declared that the Prussian State (which, in other respects, he detests) was the definitive or perfect State. And he could not do otherwise, given that he was convinced of the circularity of his system.

Therefore, the whole question for us reduces to this: if the *Phenomenology* is actually circular, we must accept it outright, along with everything that follows from it; if it is not, we must consider it a hypothetical-deductive whole, and verify all the hypotheses and deductions one by one (98).

Hence, Kojève's reading of Hegel, which is clearly justified by many of Hegel's own statements, demands that we accept that the way that history has unfolded *could not have been otherwise*. If we accept the compelling arguments that define what animal and human life are — that they are processes of desire and becoming *through* desire — then we will understand history and the moments it is composed of as being inevitable expressions of an underlying logic. The subtle structures of consciousness and self-consciousness, then, are like a source

system, see Kojève's footnote #32 pg. 243, as well as pages 241-245.

code that produces what we are seeing in the World, just like the code of a video game produce the phantasmagoric images that are its expression. Since that code preexists, the images that result from it *could not be otherwise*. Appearances are fated. There is an eternal order and reason behind every event. The rise and fall of every community, the proliferation of species and types of human, the forms and trajectories of religions and cultures, the pogroms, bloodbaths, and plagues of the world are all inscribed in the structure that Hegel identified at the heart of all of it. Like Kojève says, if we accept that the system is indeed circular—without openings—then we must accept this picture of fated appearance. The truth is arrived at through a theodicy that differs from Calvin’s only in its terminology.³⁸ But should we accept this? What are some of the consequences of this kind of determinism?

This worldview would mean that there is no such thing as human potential, let alone perfectibility. Man would always already be all that he can be. We could not have been without Robespierre, Napoleon, or by extension, Hitler and Pol Pot, since what those people expressed was simply a natural outpouring of the Logic. There would be no point imagining a world in which those things didn’t happen. There were no mistakes. Christianity and its dominance are justified merely through their mere being. The same can be said for conditions endured by oppressed and wretched groups.

The problem here is Kojève’s and often Hegel’s conflation of history with the structure of consciousness. They are used as false synecdoches for each other. In fact, Logic, the structure of reality and the mind, which has as its essential characteristic *negativity*, “the genuine motor of the dialectical movement” (253), is a restless generator of contingent appearances. “Individuals, Freedom, and History,” Kojève’s three elements of Hegelian Totality, all appear not because they are pre-inscribed in the Logic, but because the Logic

³⁸ This comparison clarified later in this chapter.

allows them to be. It is the infinite field of codependence and contingency that is the condition of the possibility for any of these things to arise. It is also the condition for their opposites to arise—things that might completely destabilize this recipe of Totality the way that Kojève has imagined it. Things that have appeared, which are the world before us, share a structure with the mind only insofar as they are both contingent appearances out of a common, insubstantial ground. They follow different arches and are not co-extensive.

In his discussion of Individuality, Kojève says that because man is “never only ‘this particular man here’” (237), and must be a part of a community that perceives of him as a mere part of a whole, he does not achieve the recognition demanded by the movements of his mind (from consciousness to self-consciousness).

That is why he actively and freely (i.e., by negation) transforms the given social and political reality, in order to make it such that he can recognize his true Individuality in it. And this progressive realization of *Individuality*, by the active and *free* progressive satisfaction of the desire for Recognition, is the “dialectical movement” of *History* which Man himself is.

According to Hegel and Kojève, Individuality can be fully realized, the desire for Recognition can be completely satisfied, only in and by the universal and homogenous State. For, in the *homogenous* State, the “*specific-differences*” (*Besonderheiten*) of class, race, and so on are “overcome,” and therefore this State is directly related to the particular man as such, who is recognized as citizen in his very particularity. And this recognition is truly universal, for, by definition, the State embraces the whole of the human race (even in its past, through the total historical tradition which this State perpetuates in the present; and in its future, since henceforth the future no longer differs from the present in which Man is already fully satisfied).

By fully realizing Individuality, the universal and homogenous State completes History, since Man, satisfied in and by this State, will not be tempted to negate it and thus to create something new in its place (237).

Even in Kojève’s time, such a conclusion must have had a pernicious ring. Is this the best that human kind can do? Satisfaction through a universal and homogenous State? Since we are demonstrably mortal, we are historical, we have a beginning and an end and we do things in between. That is what makes us individuals. We do not possess some atomic particularity. We are free in that we can affect history in our short time within it, by changing courses and

destroying things as necessary. “Individuality ‘reveals’ Totality to the extent that it implies Identity; Freedom ‘manifests’ this same Totality as implying Negativity; and Historicity is the “appearance of Totality as such”(241).

So far in this analysis, Kojève is not wrong. A human being is historical insofar as she is limited, finitely determined by his possibilities and impossibilities (250). “Therefore, Man can be individual and free only to the extent that he implies in his being *all* the possibilities of Being but *does not have the time* to realize and manifest them all”(251). To speak of Man, the term and idea can only be formed by posing him against all that is not Man. Hence, Man, who lives but shortly in a particular time and place, is implicated in—that is, carries within him—the infinite things that are not him but which are everything else.

It is solely because he is potentially infinite and always limited in deed by his death that Man is a free Individual who has a history and who can freely create a place for himself in History, instead of being content, like animals and things, passively to occupy a natural place in the given Cosmos, determined by the structure of the latter (251).

This is where Kojève becomes murky. In his view, Man is a free actor and not determined by the structure of the Cosmos, but once a man acts, it is shown that he could not have acted otherwise. In a rich footnote, Kojève comments,

If an animal, or a man as animal, comes to a fork in the road, it *can* go to the right *or* to the left: the two possibilities are compatible as possibilities. But if it actually takes the road to the right, it is impossible that it has taken the road to the left, and inversely: the two possibilities are incompatible as realized. An animal that has set forth on the road to the right must retrace its steps in order to take the road to the left. Man as animal must also do this. But as Man—that is, as *historical* (or “spiritual” or, better, dialectical) being—he never retraces his steps. History does not turn back and nevertheless it ends up on the road to the left after it has taken the road to the right (251).

He admits that there were once possibilities for the world and the things within it to go this way or that, but they went this way. They had to have gone this way, because now that they are done, they cannot be undone. Moreover, things did not go this way by chance, or even

through Man's whimsy; they went this way for a reason; they went this way for a hidden reason. This hidden reason is actually the structure of reality which expresses itself in one way only: as a world that is the reflection of the code of Being. This is a highly theological claim.

Compare it to Calvin's worldview, summarized in Mark C. Taylor's chapter on the Protestant Revolution in his book, *After God*:

From the beginning of time, the direction of the world has been predestined in God's omniscient gaze. Within this theological framework, there is no such thing as fortune or chance, because everything "is directed by God's ever-present hand." God's hand is not, of course, always visible; to the contrary, God's hand is "secret" because "the true causes of events are hidden to us." The hand of providence, in other words, is *invisible*; though never properly present, God is never absent from creation. (73).

In Kojève's discussion of possible paths, when he says that someone "takes" a path, he cannot mean that he *chooses* it, or even that a path simply *happens* for someone (which would be the case from the point of view of a natural—biological—determinism, which we will examine in the next section). He only figures out how history works based on the present state of affairs. Things are the way they are because they had to be this way. From current appearances we can figure out the code that wrote them.

For Kojève, history is a diachronic march forward. And as we already saw, for him it is one of the three elements of Totality, along with Individuality and Freedom. We know inductively that History is unidirectional and diachronic. Even if, like Hume, we are skeptical of such inductive certainty, we still infer that it is the case since we have never observed History behaving any other way. We have seen how Kojève thought that the movement from consciousness to self-consciousness and the attainment of absolute knowledge (the synchronic structure of the Logic) was inextricably linked to the unfolding of History in just the way it has unfolded. He thought they were mirrors of each other; even though we speak of two discourses—the synchronic and diachronic, the Logic and the Phenomenology/History—they

are indistinguishable and always follow the same movements. They are each other's hidden reasons. Hegel had convinced himself that his metaphysics (the synchronic) and his history (the diachronic) were consistent.

However, *and this is the heart of the matter*, the diachronic History of the world—which Kojève and Hegel both lay out—does not follow by necessity from the synchronic structure of reality laid out in Hegel's Logic. Put more plainly: the way that Hegel says reality is structured does not necessarily lead to the same World that Hegel describes in his Histories. The world could have turned out very differently. That it did not turn out another way does not mean that there was a code it *had* to follow. Current appearances cannot be traced back to a hidden cause. Following these traces back to some primordial source code would be the kind of backward time travel that Kojève admits is impossible (251). It would be theodicy, which Hegel himself did not object to, but which, for ethical and metaphysical reasons that will become clearer, we should now demand a moratorium on. Current appearances, i.e., the World, might lead us to a synchronic insight about how they came about, but that cannot be reduced to or conflated with the diachronic history of the World. If they are linked at all, it is in language and metaphor. Historical events can only be metaphors for the movements of the mind; they are not the literal events of the Mind. A mistake occurs when we believe that the movement of the mind is pegged to the movements of History in their specificity.

The theodical attitude has always turned the mistakes of history into ornaments. Tsunamis and death camps are not real, they are only shadowy forms passing through the ultimate substance of the subject, drawing attention back to the subject as if it can never be satisfied in its need for validation. In the face of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake and Auschwitz, Voltaire and Adorno respectively pointed out that historical catastrophes are as ugly as they seem, they are absolute tragedies that are not party to some cosmic expression of a primordial

teleology.³⁹ The gravity of their pointlessness rends the fabric of the theodical veil and gives us the opportunity to understand the utterly contingent genesis of things, which also gives us a chance to play an active role in that contingency. We can enter into networks with other things in order to shape and steer an undetermined future instead of abiding in a self-absorbed present that understands itself as some kind of effulgence constituted by the all the moments of the past. Not only does this theodical ignorance make us calloused toward tragedies, it is the foundation for all kinds of pain-inflicting habits, since it justifies any and all hierarchies as historically necessary and reflective of the fundamental ontological hierarchy that holds subject and object apart. For all of these reasons, misogyny, homophobia, and the xenophobia of Eurocentrism can only be addressed through a critique of the metaphysics that allows for the belief in historical necessity.

³⁹ Adorno, Theodor. *Negative Dialectics* (1966), trans. E. B. Ashton, New York: Seabury Press, 1973.

5.

TELEOLOGY AFTER DARWIN?

Hegel and Kojève's anthropocentrism demands that all things figure into a noble plan, that all objective appearance manifest through and for the human subject. To support this claim, they focus on human intellectual and political history, imputing patterns onto the flux of events and imagining a secret purpose behind the patterns of history. As suggested in the conclusion to the last chapter, the ontological stratification that results from such anthropocentrism displays itself concretely as social and political stratification of all types, including the type isolated in this study, Eurocentrism. However, this cleaving to planned history is shockingly anachronistic. After Darwin, we have almost entirely abandoned faith in the teleology of mosquito evolution or the morphology of lichens; but because of our anthropocentrism, human evolution expresses something organized. Our ability to describe the complexities of societies, economies, aesthetics and so on provide us with a vast field of significance. We then argue from significance to necessity, loading aleatory complexity with teleological fantasies. But if Darwin shows us the uselessness of teleological fantasy in explaining the complexity of speciation, it should also show us the error of explaining the recent history of the West and East in terms of their participation in a cosmic plan.

To repeat a bit, the approach that Hegel lays out in his *Philosophy of History* is deeply theological, an upgraded version of Leibniz's theodicy. As Leibniz wanted to justify the ways of God through understanding God's creation, Hegel wants to understand Reason, through understanding what has unfolded according to Reason. In some ways, merely the terms are

different⁴⁰. Hegel says, “‘Reason’—which is said to rule the world—is just as indefinite a word as ‘Providence’”(PH 18).⁴¹ Hegel does not have a problem with this. It is his task to figure out what Reason is, as well as where it fits into the big picture: Totality consisting of Spirit, World, and History, or to use other terms Logos, Absolute Knowledge, and Philosophy of History.

His view of the active, creative role of Reason is not only theological, but specifically Pre-Darwinian. In the same section of the *Philosophy of History* he backs up his methodology with the following reasoning:

For some time, it was customary to admire God’s wisdom at work in animals, in plants, and in the destinies of individuals. If we grant that providence reveals itself in such objects and materials, then why not also in world history? Here the material seems too great. Yet the divine wisdom, i.e., Reason is one and the same on the large scale as on the small scale, and we must not consider God to be too weak to apply His wisdom on a large scale. In our knowledge, we aim for the insight that whatever was intended by the Eternal Wisdom has come to—as in the realm of nature, so in the realm of spirit that is active and actual in the world. To that extent our approach is a theodicy(18).

It is not fair to expect Hegel to know the things that Darwin would discover a couple of decades after his death. However, the statements he makes here should not be dismissed as insignificant lacunae based on the scientific ignorance of the time. He argues that Reason (Divine Wisdom, God’s Will etc.) works the same way on the natural world of objects as it does in the human world of consciousness and self-consciousness. Observing the clear order and Reason that governs objects (e.g., oaks from acorns and not from rice seeds) then we can inductively reason that the all other things, all of human History, must also be bound by rules, and that these rules have a purpose. This purpose, moreover, is a human purpose. The rules exist *for us*. History is the unfolding of Spirit, which is the becoming of self-consciousness.

⁴⁰ I qualify that because of the fundamentally different metaphysics undergirding Hegel’s and Leibniz’s philosophies, even if Hegel himself did not always appreciate how far away he had drifted on the raft of his discoveries.

Natural history—the history of objects—is only important insofar as it gives us insight into the structures that guide human history. History is entirely anthropocentric. So if this is Hegel’s project, how can it hold up in today’s world in which very few well-informed people would subscribe to such a view of the natural world as divinely engineered? After Darwin, how can we keep chasing the trail of providence through natural and human histories?

Contemporary philosopher Levi Bryant sums up how Darwin’s contributions have much wider implications than they are usually given credit for.⁴² They are not limited to biology and the theological controversies that followed his discoveries. Darwin’s methodology and conclusions also have major philosophical impact. Bryant explains how in the pre-Darwinian idealist world, “the individual and the species were understood as two distinct entities, with the species functioning as an *ideal norm* defining individuals, an essence, distinct and existing in its own right, and individuals being *measured* in terms of how closely they approach this ideal form.”⁴³ To this one might object that Hegel did not see the world in such an atomized way, citing his rigorously built metaphysics of relation and preservation of identity and difference in all things. That is true, but he would still see the development of a species as the playing out of a teleology. He holds a “firm and unconquerable belief that there is Reason in history, together with the belief that the world of intelligence and self-conscious will is not subject to chance, but rather that it must demonstrate itself in the light of the self-conscious Idea”(PH 13). The comparison holds. Bryant continues:

Darwin’s remarkable contribution was to show that individual difference is the motor of speciation or the genesis of form. As a result, form is no longer treated as an ideal norm or eternal essence to which the individual is subordinated, but rather form becomes a result or product of these individual differences. Species become not ideal

⁴¹ Hegel, G.W.F. *Introduction to the History of Philosophy*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988

⁴² April 2, 2012. From Bryant’s excellent philosophy blog, *Larval Subjects*: <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2012/04/02/eight-darwinianposthumanist-theses/>

⁴³ July 3, 2009. <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2009/07/03/darwin-philosophy/#more-1854>

and eternal, unchanging essences, but rather become statistical regularities within a population, produced as a result of the accumulation of individual differences through natural selection and reproduction. Where essentialist thought faces the problem of how it is possible to explain the heterogeneity of individuals, the issue now becomes that of it is possible to explain homogeneity insofar as heterogeneity is the norm. As Whitehead famously observes, “the abstract does not explain, but must be explained.

Whitehead’s statement is especially applicable to Hegel. The “self-conscious Idea” must be explained; it is too obscure to shed explanatory light on other things. Moreover, it must be explained through a theodicy that simply takes it for granted and then seeks to justify it. The natural world of objects and matter cannot be the starting point for such a theodicy, since it a different substance, and not the primary substance. The self-conscious Idea is presupposed to be inherently reasonable, but after Darwin we can no longer defend a Reason that guides the natural world. Either the natural world and the self-conscious Idea have profoundly different structures, or they share a single one, but that structure would have to be profoundly different from the one that Hegel emphasizes.

Elsewhere, Bryant has noted five specific ways in which Darwin has (or should have) changed philosophy. Some of them are harmonious with Hegelianism, other are not. The most important disagreement with Hegelianism (at least its Kojèvean strand) is

1) *Nature is not supposed to be something.*⁴⁴ With Darwin this conception of nature as Nature is thoroughly abandoned. There is no way things are supposed to be, there is only the way things are and the way things are becoming.

The vast majority of Hegel’s words argue the contrary. His approach is a theodicy⁴⁵ because things are *supposed* to be the way they are. To be fair, his philosophy is also deeply concerned with the “becoming” that Bryant mentions, and we will see later how other interpreters shift the emphasis of his system to *becoming* and away from the archeo-teleological project of using

⁴⁴ For Bryant’s full essay: <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2012/04/02/eight-darwinianposthumanist-theses/>

⁴⁵ PH 18, “Our approach is a theodicy...”

the present given world to discover the eternal truth that underlies it. However, before Hegelianism can benefit from such apologetics we must recognize its firm belief in teleology.

Darwin's discoveries not only made sure that teleology had no place in discussions of Nature, they also problematized the entire notion of Nature with a capital N. Abstract nouns like Nature are Platonic. They employ capital letters to mark their pregnancy. To speak of Truth, Justice, Happiness, and Nature is to speak of normative ideals that are *supposed to be* this or that. Justice speaks of ought and ought not because Justice is *supposed to be* something. Even if it remains inchoate or inaccessible to us directly, we still believe that there is something out there behind the veil that is some kind of saturated object, *Justice*, that distinguishes itself from all that it is not. Teleology is inherent to it. We know that Justice is different from justice because justice is not what it is *supposed to be*. Then it would be Justice. The same holds for Nature. When we speak of it in the majuscule, we endow it with an otherness that set it apart from the objects that it consists of. Each of those objects must conform to the plans that Nature has for it. Thus, Nature is inherently teleological and the nasty things that happen within it are justified as means to an end. However, as Richard Dawkins, one of today's preeminent Darwinists notes, "Nature has no evil intentions. Things simply follow from 'laws acting all around us'" and "For something to happen in nature, the only requirement is that the same happening in ancestral times assisted the survival of the genes promoting it"(Dawkins 400). The world that appears to us is not a set of first principles we can use to deduce the design behind it. If Nature itself is teleological, then all the things within it—every object!—is not the appearance of an infinitely complex set web of causes and conditions, but the manifestation of a code—a pixelated image written in ones and zeros by some primordial programmer.

Diogenes and Nietzsche, until most recently, were nearly alone in their opposition to the idealist thinking that would posit a majuscule Nature. It was as harmful in Diogenes' day as it is now. In ethics, we have seen countless people burned and oppressed for contravening what is natural. In politics, we have seen perverse justifications for the natural rights of kings, the natural wretchedness of women, and the natural stratification of people in all different kinds of hierarchies. In modern times, interdisciplinary theorist Timothy Morton describes the pernicious effects of idealism on ecology. Since the inception of ecological thinking, it has depended on the idea of majuscule Nature. Nature has had to be pristine, replete with qualities that can only be sullied by Man, its less-pure, antagonistic inhabitants. Industry became the enemy; development a cancer. For modern thinkers, Man cannot do his thing without hurting Nature and also himself. Morton Reflects,

In Nature, they saw the reflected, inverted image of their own age—and the grass is always greener on the other side. Nature was always “over yonder,” alien and alienated. Just like a reflection, we can never actually reach it and touch it and belong to it. Nature was an ideal image, a self-contained form suspended afar, shimmering and naked behind glass like an expensive painting. In the idea of pristine wilderness, we can make out the mirror image of private property: Keep off the Grass, Do Not Touch, Not For Sale. Nature was a special kind of private property, without an owner (Morton 2010: 5).

Nature as Mother can, at best, merely cradle humanity within its arms. But humanity will always grow up to break her heart. Humanity and Nature remain oppositional in this model: Humanity is the antagonistic force, the dark energy, while Nature is pristine and light. Nature is harmonious and sturdy, forever adjusting to balance out the disruptive, sickly influence of parasitic Humanity. However, Nature only obtains this seat of privilege because, as Morton says, it is Man's mirror image. Man has really placed himself on the throne; He is the center of things. Anthropocentrism invented its own Other in Nature. Seeing itself as sickly in contrast to the boundless health of Nature, Humanity justifies everything it does as ineluctable—the

deterministic outcome of its faulty essence. In this model, Man can never be part of Nature; they are not interconnected. Nature seems to transcend Man, who merely putters around in its shadow, but in fact, it's Man in his anthropocentrism that transcends Nature. Therefore, if ecology is to ever accomplish anything other than the reinforcement of this opposition that has likely been the cause of the ecological problems we find, Morton proposes a rethinking of the model to recognize the interdependence between Humanity and Nature, and indeed all objects. He calls for an *Ecology Without Nature*,⁴⁶ a doing away with the idealized image of nature as a something autonomous and transcendent. Unless we knock Nature off of its throne, it will remain inaccessible to us and there will be no way to enter into a real ecology. Nature always *ought* to be a certain way, some way that is wrapped up in its own nature. Having a different nature of its own, Humanity can never know the nature of Nature. Of course, it is not only Nature which must be demystified. It is just as important for Man—or any other object for that matter—to be divested of his transcendence. The contemporary militant anti-idealist, Michel Onfray, explains Diogenes' attempt to do this:

Diogenes looks around for a *Man* in the streets of Athens. He holds out a lit lantern in broad daylight... Hegel calls this a “schoolboy’s farce” and passes over it. But the true sage would call this a philosophical lesson. He is looking for a Man, with a capital M, the idea of Man, his concept, his immateriality that manifests his nominalist materiality. Of course, he doesn’t find it, since it doesn’t exist, because all that exists is tangible, material, concrete reality.⁴⁷

Man has no more of this than Nature, as Morton points out. To bring it back to Bryant’s original observation, Darwin’s greatest contribution was to so clearly demonstrate that idealized Man and Nature are merely nominalist man and nature. They are useful terms for labeling appearances of like type; nothing more. Neither of them are *supposed* to be this way or

⁴⁶ The title of one of his rich, virtuoso books: Morton, Timothy. *Ecology Without Nature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.

⁴⁷ Onfray, Michel. *La Puissance d'exister*. Paris: Grasset, 2007 p. 166. My translation.

that, they just happen to be this-way-and-that through unintentional processes. In evolutionary terms, organisms do not adapt, *in order to survive*; it simply happens that organisms with certain adaptations are the ones that survive. Man, Nature, Truth are not *supposed* to be this or that way. And Nature and Truth do not exist *for* Man. So when Kojève says,

Truth, in the strict sense of the term is supposed to be a thing that cannot be either modified or denied: it is, as we say, “universally and necessarily” valid—i.e., it is not subject to changes; it is as we also say, *eternal* or nontemporal. On the other hand, there is no doubt that it is *found* at a certain moment of time and that it exists *in* time, because it exists through and for Man who lives in the World (100).

It is difficult to corroborate these claims. Man is another object in the World. The World does not exist for Man, and neither can man be the conduit for and the subject of Truth, which Kojève has claimed exists “through and for” him.

For Hegel and for Kojève, all this Truth and Purpose are found in Self-Consciousness. It is the goal and it is what gives meaning to life. Man’s existence is unique in its ability to be philosophical—to enter into self-consciousness and take it as a path. This sets him apart from the animal and vegetable world and it is what allows Being/Truth to be revealed. Being—the underlying Truth—is revealed by Man’s being because man possesses the self-consciousness that allows him to call himself “I”, thereby opposing his being as revealer to the being of things as revealed. By doing so, Being has unfolded through and for Man. But, Tim Morton points out how “We assume that consciousness is a special bonus prize for being more ‘highly evolved’—a suspicious idea from a Darwinist point of view.”⁴⁸

Self-consciousness is simply an occurrence, however complicated it may be. The objects that appear to its intentionality are just occurrences too. It is not the Truth that gets revealed through and for self-consciousness. Truths are just the apodictic appearances that happen for no *reason* at all. There are causes for them, but not *reasons*. The Truth that lies

behind things is not eternal and unchanging, as Kojève and Hegel say. Such a Truth could only be a code written by a designer so that whatever happens, happens as it *was* supposed to. If we said they happen as they *are* supposed to, the statement wouldn't mean as much; it could simply be interpreted that things happen as they are supposed to, simply because they happen to have turned out that way and there is no point in wondering about the reason behind it. This is what Darwin does by abandoning teleology, which provides us with the philosophical opportunity to adopt an orientation toward what things are now and what they may become. Such an orientation is represented by Nietzsche's *amor fati*—turning his back on *ressentiment*, which is all about the “*why?*” of things.

Teleology, a remnant of theology, has always been an unnecessary appendage to Hegel's philosophy, which was pointed out only a generation after his death when Marx adopted his dialectic and criticized his teleology. Darwin's ideas, especially as supporting evidence has built up to this day, make the world a much less hospitable place for teleology, just as it has done for theology. Žižek, who has dedicated a large part of his career to reconciling Hegelianism with Marx and Darwin, agrees that one of the keys is to embrace contingency: things happen because somehow enough conditions came together for them to happen. Moreover, each of these conditions, individually, comes about through its own conditions, so that none of them can ever be pinned down. Certainly no source code for the entire show can be excavated. In his massive new book *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, Žižek cites Marx's famous passage from the *Grundrisse* about how the structure of today's bourgeois society tells us very much about what societies must have

⁴⁸ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*. 73

preceded it—which is analogous to how the current human anatomy can tell us much about the ancestors we must have come from.⁴⁹ Žižek observes,

It is a profoundly materialist thesis in that it does not involve any teleology (which would propose that man is “in germ” already present in ape; that the ape immanently tends toward man). It is precisely because the passage from ape to man is radically contingent and unpredictable that one can only retroactively determine or discern the conditions (not “sufficient reasons”) for man in the ape.⁵⁰

Once we stop believing in the myth of sufficient reasons, for which there is no reliable evidence, the clouds break and Hegelianism becomes the vast and useful system it aspired to. Going back to Levi Bryant, he lists several Darwinian discoveries that this kind of Hegelianism would not necessarily object to:

2) *Difference is creative, not deviant*: Difference is now the motor, the engine, by which nature creates. The three pillars of speciation in Darwin are random variation (difference), heritability (the transport of difference across generations), and natural selection (the selection of differences carried on). It is now difference, not God, that creates.

No problem here at all. Open nearly any page of the *Logic* or *Phenomenology*, and you will find Hegel making this exact point. There is never a flat oneness in Hegel, no homogeneity. His metaphysics of internal difference insists on the ever-present abundance of difference, which is always accompanied by identity. We naturally assume there is identity, so we can call that the static aspect of reality, but it is really difference that is the engine of appearances. Of course, Hegel does not adumbrate the same categories as Darwin or explain the process of

⁴⁹ Marx, Karl. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: Norton, 1978. p. 241: “Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allows insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along within it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance within it, etc. Human anatomy contains the key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known.”

⁵⁰ Žižek, Slavoj. *Less Than Nothing*. New York: Verso, 2012 p. 230.

speciation, but there is an undeniable linguistic and conceptual agreement between the two systems on this point.

- 3) *Nature is creative*: We now know that matter is capable of generating pattern, of self-organizing, of maintaining pattern across time, and so on. Matter is not simply billiard balls bumping into one another on a pool table, it is not simply “stuff”, but is also energy, forces, flows of energy through systems and all the rest... And it is all this without need of recourse to vitalistic and animistic hypotheses. At the core of Darwin’s thought is the thesis that matter has the capacity to self-organize, to form pattern, to generate life.

Again, a completely Hegelian thought. Life, Spirit, etc., are self-organizing. They require no extrinsic forces to spur them along. The contradiction that each thing carries within it ensures its own motility. This is why Hegel has been useful for contemporary complexity theory and systems theory.⁵¹

- 4) *Design without a designer*: Pattern is something that emerges from blind and stupid processes, not something that is directed by any aim at the outset. It is for this reason that nature is not supposed to be any particular thing. There is no aim that directs these processes, no God that “selects” and “arranges”, for example, “eternal objects” or “potentialities” for the sake of “intensifying” being.

While Hegel does have faith in teleology, and teleology has theological implications, Hegel’s descriptions of genesis do not attribute it to an intentional designer, and certainly not an anthropomorphic designer. His God remains ambiguous; it is the very creative force at the

⁵¹ For example, Taylor, Mark C. *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture*. Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2002. Taylor, a contemporary Hegelian, sees no conflict between the principle of self-organization and Darwinian evolution:

“A new morphological type emerges, remains relatively stable for a period, and then unexpectedly transforms or disappears. The unpredictability of this process does not necessarily mean it has no direction. Rather than a teleological process, self-organizing systems can be understood as following a teleonomic trajectory tending toward increasing complexity. While each organism ‘is itself on the boundary between sub- and supra-criticality, by trading their stuff, they collectively produce a supracritical biosphere, one that inexorably becomes more complex’”(193). And citing theoretical biologist Stuart Kauffman, he writes “Kauffman notes that Hegel actually anticipated the logic of networks over two hundred years ago: ‘Hegel gave us thesis, antithesis, synthesis... These ideas now stand discredited. Yet thesis, antithesis, synthesis sound more than a little like the evolution of the hundreds of millions of species that have come and gone, or the evolution of technologies that have come and gone.’ While Kauffman overstates the similarities between Hegel’s dialectical logic and the logic of evolving self-organized networks, his reference to Hegel deserves careful consideration. Hegel realized long ago that nature and culture, as well as objectivity and subjectivity, are spun together to form dangling threads in the the complex composition I have been weaving...”(194).

heart of his metaphysics; the Absolute writ large.⁵² So while Hegel does not admit a theological designer, and Kojève even less so, they both keep faith in an aim that guides the processes of human and natural history. Hegel certainly retains the sense of a march toward the goal of absolute knowledge—he is the one who coined the much used phrase “the end of history”—and for Kojève the goal was the subject’s absolutization of itself and its appropriation of the non subjective world. Kojève’s philosophical protagonist takes control of history and becomes itself through concrete action on the world. But it is possible to remove teleology from Hegel’s system without too much violence. Above all, Hegel’s system is not sensitive or brittle. And when we do, he complements Darwinian understandings of becoming and change. Which brings us to Bryant’s final Darwinian thesis:

5) *Humans are animals*: Insofar as being is without teleology or aim, humans are, like all other creatures, an *accident*. If the evolutionary processes that led to us were rewound and started all over again, it’s entirely probable that we wouldn’t come to be. Likewise, as the becoming of being continues apace—as it *always* and unceasingly does—humans⁵³ will at some point pass out of existence either through being destroyed as a result of our own agency or the agency of some other cause or we will evolve into something else.

This is a crucial point for modern Hegelianism to figure out. Kojève’s Hegelianism can never accept this Darwinian insight. For Kojève, an absolute truth has been revealed by Hegel, and this truth is anthropological: History is *for* man. The only things of value are intentional acts carried out on the wings of desire, which is man’s essence. The absolute subject that Hegel discovered has taken over the natural world so that the natural world has become the subject’s mirror. The subject either acts on the world, or the things of the world unfold *for* the subject

⁵² The theologian John Milbank acknowledges this when he writes, “Hegel points toward a more consistent nihilistic materialism, since he dispenses with all voluntarism and vitalism. If, for Hegel, both thought and reality really begin with nothing, then it is this very ‘atheism’ which requires the dialectical principle of determinate negation. Hegel radicalizes the Christian *creatio ex nihilo* by God into a spontaneous generation of something from nothing...” (Žižek and Milbank, 149).

⁵³ I take Bryant to mean “humans” not as Humanity, but just what we currently classify as humans. That is why he allows for us to “evolve into something else.”

to relate to, therein obtaining to some level of reality. The natural world does not act on the subject, because the natural world lacks desire. Therefore, the natural world is not dialectical. It is the fuel for and ground upon which the subject performs its own dialectics. But since it lacks the element of negativity—desire—it cannot join in the adventure of becoming, except through the (human) subject. Only something endowed with desire can achieve and bestow recognition, one of the main goals of Hegel’s system, and one that carries with it all sorts of other benefits—like a universal State. Human beings, therefore, realize this goal through a State of radical democracy in which all members are mutually recognized. Because they cannot even recognize each other, let alone court the recognition of the all-powerful subjects that have conquered them, objects are left out of this final State. For Kojève, even though subjects only come to their self-understanding by recognizing themselves in objects, subjects are not objects. They remain ontologically apart and elevated. Thus, there can be no “democracy of objects,” as Levi Bryant and Timothy Morton call for.⁵⁴ If subjects cannot be reduced to objects, then an ontological stratification is necessary, and where does it end? Whose job is it to interpret it? If subjects are above objects, then mustn’t there—logically,

⁵⁴ Bryant, Levi. *The Democracy of Objects*. Anne Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011.

“The democracy of objects is not a *political* thesis to the effect that all objects ought to be treated equally or that all objects ought to participate in human affairs. The democracy of objects is the *ontological* thesis that all objects, as Ian Bogost has so nicely put it, equally exist while they do not exist equally. The claim that all objects equally exist is the claim that no object can be treated as constructed by another object. The claim that objects do not exist equally is the claim that objects contribute to collectives or assemblages to a greater and lesser degree. In short, no object such as the subject or culture is the ground of all others. As such, *The Democracy of Objects* attempts to think the being of objects unshackled from the gaze of humans in their being for-themselves.

Such a democracy, however, does not entail the *exclusion* of the human. Rather, what we get is a redrawing of distinctions and a decentering of the human. The point is not that we should think objects rather than humans. Such a formulation is based on the premise that humans constitute some special category that is *other* than objects, that objects are a pole opposed to humans, and therefore the formulation is based on the premise that objects are correlates or poles *opposing* or standing-before humans. No, within the framework of ontology—my name for the ontology that follows—there is only one type of being: objects. As a consequence, humans are not excluded, but are rather objects *among* the various types of objects that exist or populate the world, each with their own specific powers and capacities.” -<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/idx/o/ohp/9750134.0001.001/1:4/--democracy-of-objects?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>

structurally—be some subjects above other subjects? Which subjects are which? Does history tell us about the ontological value of different subjects? Are those subjects that express power and are not as fragile as others the ones with more Being? Is ontological status pegged to maleness? Whiteness? Social and economic status?

However, if subjects can be reduced to objects, true democracy is possible, without much of the deleterious political and social fallout of a metaphysical hierarchy lorded over by the human subject.

For Kojève, though, History, and indeed the universe, must remain anthropocentric. We cannot speak of “accidents” having a role in the appearance and development of man. Logically, as a mere thought experiment, we may be able to entertain the notion that perhaps man may never have existed if things had gone differently many millions of years ago. But an anthropocentrist like Kojève must dismiss these thoughts. It would be like contemplating the present King of France or the traits of the son of a barren mother. Once man appeared and his consciousness appropriated the world that preceded him, the world became real. The same cannot be said for the more ancient, hypothetical world that preceded him. Given the general tendency for things to end, as well as the evident fragility of life, we can deduce that human kind will someday vanish. But at that time, the natural world that remains will no longer be “real,” for it will have lost the conqueror that gives it meaning.

Hegel himself, however, was not so confident that his “absolute knowledge” would result in a reorientation of the universe around man. In a famous passage at the end of his preface to the *Phenomenology* he writes,

At a time when the universality of Spirit has gathered such strength, and the singular detail, as is fitting, has become correspondingly less important, when too, that universal aspect claims and holds on to the whole range of the wealth it has developed, the share in the total work of the Spirit which falls to the individual can only be very small. Because of this, the individual must all the more forget himself, as the nature of

Science implies and requires. Of course, he must make of himself and achieve what he can; but less must be demanded of him, just as he in turn can expect less of himself, and may demand less for himself (72).

This is hardly the man-as-ruler worldview constructed by Kojève. Of course, when Hegel says “Science” he does not have Darwin in mind. Hegelian Science is that which systematically aspires to universality. In this context, the objectivity of the Truth uncovered by real Science takes priority over merely individual, subjective truths. While Hegel’s Spirit is usually talked about as subject-oriented—its main characteristic being self-consciousness—there is also another level, a more hidden discourse in which the Subject is not necessarily the main protagonist in the drama.

Judith Butler points this out in her excellent study of French interpretations of Hegel since Kojève. Describing Hyppolite (the topic of the next section), she notices, “Hyppolite distinguishes two tendencies in Hegel’s work, one that begins with the point of view of the subject and one that begins, as it were, with the point of view of substance, the ‘adventure of being,’ the subject-less sojourn of metaphysics” (Butler 1987:82). Despite Hegel’s tendency to privilege human subjectivity, it is not all that there is in his system. Butler frequently mentions that Hegel believes in “ontological harmony”: there is but one substance between subjects and objects, and their common structure is the one he plumbs in his abstruse *Logic*. If this ontological harmony is true, then the essential structure of one thing will be the same for all other things. Hegel, evidently, found the subject more accessible and built his system around it, as did later phenomenological thinkers—as the etymology of the term suggests. But if, as Hegel writes in the quote above, the individual needs to humble itself and reconcile itself with its own relative insignificance, then Hegel is leaving his system open to a democratization of objects and to the Darwinian embrace of accidents, contingency, and the sundering of teleology and anthropocentrism. Hegel and Darwin’s ontological harmonies can be combined

to inform our view of the world and ourselves. Stuck with subjectivity, we must, as Hegel said, do with it what we can. But this will never be the kind of dominance promoted by Kojève—or that Hegel admired in Napoleon. A democratization of objects—including the reduction of the human subject to an object—may give us as individuals a much easier garden to tend, since we no longer feel obligated to stake claims on the entire terrain of metaphysics: there are objects that do not reply on us and that we cannot master.

An ontological leveling of subject and substance does not erase that subject's own experience. Those experiences remain vivid and primary. But if the subject having those experiences does not believe it has a privileged place in an ontological hierarchy, it will let itself change, adapt, and live through its experiences rather than appropriate them as fuel that strengthens its essential Being. Kojève's subject is a Being identified with itself and enhanced through its relations to other things. A Being like this has difficulty acting on things, which will forever remain apart from it. It *confronts* things rather than *moving through* them and picking up traces of other things in the passage. As a hypostasized Being, it must be a certain way. It has duties to live up to itself and the identity that it holds. Even if Darwin was right that this subject appears fortuitously, the now discounted external teleology of history gets internalized, and the subject must carry out its private purpose. This puts an imperative on the subject to *be* how it *ought to be*, so one either is the way one is supposed to be, or one is falling away from that. Going about it this way, the subject cannot *become*. Its restlessness and anxieties become attributes contained within the vault of Being rather than mere occurrences that make up part of a boundless flux of objects, some of them characterized by subjectivity and some not. Those who possess subjectivity must, for their own comfort, work with it and "achieve what it can," but they should also understand their status as elements in an indifferent universe of objects rather than as the creators and givers of meaning to the world.

Only then does the world and subject's experience of the world make sense; only then can we really come to terms with the evidence all around us that tells us we crawled out of the mud for absolutely no reason; and only then can we stop believing that the present state of affairs is the way that it is because it *needs* to be this way.

As has already been mentioned, pick an injustice and it can be partially attributed to these subtle anthropocentric, teleological, and hierarchical metaphysical orientations. Misogyny and homophobia are among the most important consequences of faith in unmovable ideals and anxiety about the violation of those ideals. In this study, however, I focus on the racism of Eurocentrism since Eurocentrism is so deeply inscribed in the canons of intellectual history; it is so well-reasoned and justified. Misogyny and homophobia are defended on theological and vaguely naturalistic grounds, but Eurocentrism tries to up the ante by appealing to rational philosophical discourse. Eurocentrism fantasizes about the invention of philosophic reason, supposes that this reason can uncover the world's purpose, and then explains that the writers of this story—their desires and self-preservation—are *the purpose*. Such error is the foundation of our historiography, which shapes the scope of our canons and the structures of our academies. It is thus locked in a circle of reinscription until its linchpin of anthropocentric and teleological ignorance is knocked out of it.

6.

Subject as Thing, Not King

The previous chapter focuses on many of the unwanted consequences of anthropocentric teleology in light of Darwin's gutting of those two orientations. The present chapter will come at the same problem from an ethical perspective. So far, I have been describing the dissatisfactory content of the canons of philosophy and the deluded version of that those canons construct and maintain. These are dissatisfactory because they cut many people off from a means of intellectual legitimization that could ameliorate the pain caused by being in positions of political and social disadvantage. Moreover, they are dissatisfactory because they are deluded on their own terms: anthropocentric metaphysics and teleological versions of history do not stand up to analysis. Finally, they are dissatisfactory because they result in the insularity of those who create these deluded canons and histories to begin with, and thus become invested in their preservation. Anthropocentric teleology fails to recognize suffering, and having posited the subject as transcendent, fail to understand the subject's role in networks that create suffering. Thus, paradoxically, the suffering of human subjects is an effective starting point for undermining the human subject's supreme ontological status.

As human subjects we are constantly suffering. We are sensitive and react in pain to a great deal of what we encounter. Our anxieties surge up out of nowhere and spill out onto those we come in contact with. People stab each other, terrorize each other, get electrocuted, or simply drop dead in the middle of a round of golf. Because we are self-aware, we call these things tragic, and this puts us at a higher level than the beetle being gutted by the wasp. At the same time that we are surrounded by affliction and hostility very much beyond our control, we think of ourselves as free and self-determining. When people do awful things to

other people, we assume that there is accountability because the harm-doers are free to act or not to act; the victims become sacrifices to some higher principle. Those opened up on history's slaughter-bench are giving themselves up to progress toward a goal, toward the fulfillment of some latent potential in the species. This is the sense in which Hegel reconciles the tragic with the rational. There are no accidents. All is for the best.

But as discussed in the last chapter, Darwin has shown that accidents are amazing engines. They are collisions of objects and need no sanction from human subject to do their work. Thus, the human subject is not the primary substance that feeds off of objective appearances and abides in roiling self-absorption. Rather, subjectivity appears and operates in groundless space that allows for the productivity of the aleatory. When the subject loses its seat in this way it no longer serves as the one absolute substance, the ontological North Star that all other entities use as a reference point. When this ontological hierarchy no longer makes sense, neither do the teleological destinies of different things, or of different people associated with different cultures, geographies, and ideologies.

It is unthinkable for Hegel and Kojève that human beings would not have appeared if the clock had been rewound and the universe had to start all over. For the former, the world is what it is through the dance of constantly interpenetrating subjects and objects; for the latter, absolute knowledge is arrived at through anthropology, because the human subject is all that matters. This is the way it has been at least since Kant, who turned Being into a matter of a subject's access to objects. If a subject cannot access the Being of an object, its Being is nonsense. Things that are not bestowed their being by the mind that knows them are, tautologically, unknowable, and therefore have no being. We might speculate on the possibility of things in themselves, independent from minds, but those things can never

appear, they must pass through space and time — the primary mediums of our knowledge — and then be synthesized into intelligible objects (phenomena) by an active mind. Thus, the entirely anthropocentric world of Kojève and much of Hegel is part of a lineage going back to Kant’s radical *correlationism* — a term coined by the contemporary French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux.⁵⁵

Meillassoux asks Kant some simple but difficult questions that come down to “How can we speak of a universe four million years before the appearance of humans?” Kant, Hegel, and many other giants of philosophy have a hard time address such an inquiry. For them, it is thoroughly established that there can be no Being except in relation to a human subject: one that either synthesizes intuitions, gains recognition through desire etc. So in order to talk about an ancient universe before man, we must talk about its prior existence as *for* man. It must have been something like a nest lying in wait for its occupant. Based on geological and chemical observation, scientists can infer what the world would have been like prior to human subjects living in it, but those conclusions are only arrived at through data given to human subjects, therefore, that ancient world remains a construction of the human mind, and gains its sense/being from it.

Despite its self-assuredness, this position does not handle these questions with much grace. For one thing, it fails to define human subjectivity and seems to posit a static universal entity that exists more or less the same way at all times. If human subjectivity does what correlationists say it does, then it must have somehow been hatched full-grown, so to speak, like the legendary *garuda* of Indian mythology.⁵⁶ Human consciousness/self-consciousness

⁵⁵ Meillassoux, Quentin. *After Finitude*. London: Continuum, 2010.

⁵⁶ The *garuda* is an important mythological beast resembling a giant eagle with arms. It is born from an egg, but when it hatches, it immediately flies with fully developed skill and power, unlike a typical egg-born animal that must still come to maturity after hatching.

could not have developed over time, going from an animal-like consciousness to something more complex. The correlationist position would scarcely seem to accept a kinship between the two types of consciousness, let alone account for the original genesis of consciousness out of unconscious matter. At what point, exactly, did consciousness or self-consciousness become what we call them today? Like a seed turning into a sprout, it may be impossible to locate any distinct advent of those things.

Hegel and Kojève, might admit that these are difficult questions, but that we can make sense of them in retrospect. Given our current perfectly developed self-consciousness and its sense-bestowing powers, a coherent story can be constructed of the past. Indeed, these questions have only arisen because of and *for* self-consciousness as it stands now. There never was anything prior. A preconscious, organic realm is still just a more abstract, less vivid shadow of the world given to self-consciousness now. Scientific data suggests an ancestral world, but it is still just a distant thread in the narrative that has brought us to the present.

Judith Butler discusses this issue of Hegelian retrospective knowledge:

Throughout the commentary [*Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*], Hyppolite argues that phenomenological presumptions regarding the progressive movement of history and the satisfaction of the subject are historically conditioned ideas. Hence, only from a perspective beyond the *Phenomenology* do the historical origins of the text become clear. This very claim, however, is a result of the "structure" of the *Phenomenology* itself: the privilege of the retrospective point of view as the most wise, the most all-encompassing, the one that can discern the condition that makes any given unified picture of the world break into dissension and dissolve. In effect, Hyppolite makes use of the principle of retrospective wisdom to criticize the *Phenomenology* for its presumptions of progressivity, elaborating the reflexive structure of Hegel's narrative transitions to effect a transition beyond the *Phenomenology* itself. That the *Phenomenology* requires a commentary at all indicates the problem of reading this text within an historical experience that can no longer support the optimism of Hegel's ever-buoyant narrative. To question the teleological model of history, and still to remain an Hegelian, one must find the posthistorical prefigured in the text itself. Kojève finds this experience of modernity embodied in the slave who, shaken with terror, flees from the body to a life of dissociated abstraction and becomes the philosophical craftsman, carving out history and metaphysical truth in a single act.

Hyppolite stops Hegel's phenomenological narrative further back, at the moment of Life and the infinite labor of desire (Butler 1987: 80).

She quotes Hyppolite on the necessity to adjust where we lay our emphasis in Hegel: "In the modern world, the tragic never seems to disappear. We can well perceive that human existence, in its precariousness, is jeopardized, but we are not sure, as Hegel was, that this coincides with the rational. This coincidence is once again a kind of optimism that we can no longer postulate" (Butler 1987: 79). Hegel's faith in the rationality of history, including its bloodiest and most chaotic chapters, flies in the face of Darwinism. As Bryant noticed, one of Darwin's main insights was that all things—their appearance and development—are entirely accidental. They come about because of conditions that are ungoverned, except by an infinite mesh of other conditions. The parasitic wasp bores through the body of its host not in pursuit of a rational goal, but simply because its ancestors had done the same thing and it seemed to work out for them: they survived and reproduced. Male black widows have no sense of tragedy when they submit to the cannibalistic embrace of their stronger mate; they do it because they have fallen into a pattern in which the conditions of their existence depend on their self-destructive act. Hyppolite starts to question if these kinds of concrete events are indexed, ontologically, to some rational order. Hegel's *Logic* provides us with a map for comprehending the synchronic structure—the ontology—of appearances, but Hyppolite is not satisfied that it proves that the chain of concrete events—diachronic history—are the *teleological* expression of such an ontology.

This is what Butler is getting at with the somewhat cryptic, but telling statements: "Kojève finds this experience of modernity embodied in the slave who, shaken with terror, flees from the body to a life of dissociated abstraction and becomes the philosophical craftsman, carving out history and metaphysical truth in a single act. Hyppolite stops Hegel's

phenomenological narrative further back, at the moment of Life and the infinite labor of desire.” Kojève adopts Hegel’s faith in theodicy as *the* effective methodology for arriving at the Absolute. They both start by surveying the present state of affairs—the world of appearances organized into a diachronic History. Then, recognizing patterns and discovering a certain structure in this diachronic History, they *trace it back*, logically, to discover the hidden synchronic truth that underlies it. However, for Hyppolite, it is not necessary or even desirable to reach Hegel’s Absolute by means of a theodicy. We do not necessarily need to wait for the complex fabric of diachronic History to unfold in order to comprehend the structure of reality. The structure of reality is not pegged to the patterns that happen to be recognizable in the world of myriad appearances. The structure of reality is a palate of conditions of possibility. This is why Hyppolite “stops Hegel’s phenomenological narrative further back, at the moment of Life and the infinite labor of desire.” Obviously, having dedicated his life to expounding its merits, Hyppolite is impressed with the power of Hegel’s phenomenological narrative, but he sees a subtler, personal narrative as the essential one. The narrative of human history unfolding over hundreds of thousands of years is something else. They can be linked metaphorically, as we will look at in more detail later, but they are not metaphysical fractals of each other. The long chain of human history is composed of consciousnesses doing things, so it is with the first stirrings of this consciousness that we should begin our analysis. Subjects and objects grappling with each other is the beginning of the narrative, which can be translated into the metaphor of masters fighting with slaves. It doesn’t start with the concrete masters and slaves that populate history. The very subtle story of phenomenology’s beginning, with the quivering of subjects and objects and their relationship to each other, is where we get an insight into the synchronic structure of reality. From there we can see how it was possible for what constitutes diachronic, concrete history to

appear. But the reverse is not true. If we start from the diachronic and trace it back—as in theodicy—we can't see the wood for the trees; we take metaphors literally.

In light of Meillassoux's questions about the preconscious world, don't we need to stop the phenomenological narrative even further back than Life? All the way back to the vast and ancient, pre-biological universe? This is not an easy task, but Darwinism has been nudging us toward such a speculative endeavor for more than two hundred years. The Darwinian retrospective glance doesn't explain the mess of history in terms of its underlying sense; it merely describes the paths that led to the present. The invisible hand that guides the Protestant universe is shown to be, like so many invisible things, nonexistent. Instead, we begin to notice the things we didn't see before, out there in the background: tiny and random mutations, shifting phenotypes with no more bedrock than writing on water, massive, utterly senseless geological calamities. Darwin showed us what Hume had suspected: that causality only describes what has already happened. Evolution is a great edifice of causality, but it does nothing to predict the future, nor does it discover the first principle and final causes of things. By tracing and cataloging the mutations that organisms went through for millions of year, evolutionary biologists now speak of species as a helpful way of organizing living things with similar phenotypes. However, evolutionary biologists may be the only ones who realize the illusoriness of the term "species" itself. As Tim Morton notes, "Causality works backward. You can name something only retroactively. Something identical happens in evolution. When you look at a 'species,' you are looking at the past" (*ET* 62). He quotes Darwin himself, who sounded utterly confident in his insight on this point: "Nothing can be more hopeless than to attempt to explain [the] similarity in pattern in members of the same class, by utility or by the doctrine of final causes" (64). Yet we have continued to explain nearly everything in these ways, shutting our eyes and ears to Darwin's discoveries and refusing to open up to the world

of contingency that he opened up for us. Hegelianism, with its obfuscation and abstraction, has been a perfect bastion for this cryptoteology, but Hyppolite was the first to show that Hegel could survive in post-Darwinian world, the first major commentator to consider Hegel's system without the Subject at the absolute center. Judith Butler writes that Kojève's point of departure is the fully developed self-conscious subject fully capable of relating to and acting on its objects, whereas Hyppolite stops the Hegelian narrative at the moment that life begins. I would go a step further and posit that the groundless metaphysics that can be got from Hegel requires no life at all, but comprehends and enhances the life that can and does appear. Without the human subject at the center, metaphysics must speculate into what allows for the accident of the subject to enter into accidental networks with other objects. If subjects can understand themselves as the products of processes, and not the beginning of all processes, they may stop looking for the teleological first principle that is the essence of their self-absorption. They may stop inventing their purpose through the construction of deluded theodicy, and they may stop justifying past and habitual present social and political affairs as outpourings of fictional destiny.

7.

Negativity as Condition, Not Property

If anthropocentric teleology is untenable metaphysically and ethically, what alternative is there? Does it have to be positivism? Do we have to accept a single slab of being that obviates Hegel's insights about difference and negativity? Must Hegelian difference and negativity always be implicated in the anthropocentric and teleological structures that produce and perpetuate injustices for the benefit of those who prosper from imaginary ontological differences? They do not. If Hegelian negativity can cease being a *quality of* the human subject, and instead become a condition for being in general, a new horizon opens in which Hegel becomes a resource for overcoming the pernicious structures of anthropocentric teleology.

Hyppolite's *Logic and Existence* extends his critique of Hegel's *Phenomenology* as Butler already mentioned above. Unable to reconcile his appreciation for Hegel's metaphysics with the world of contingency and suffering that he saw all around him, Hyppolite abandons the tidy narrative of the *Phenomenology* in favor of the subtle and more pliable *Science of Logic*. The *Logic*, at first glance, is a very un-Darwinian text. It analyzes the a priori structure of the Logos, the very underlying principle or set of principles that Darwin makes impossible. The *Phenomenology*, on the other hand, represents concrete history, a narrative with details and events. When taken together, the *Logic* unfolds as history (or "experience" as in the title of the book). Therefore, the *Logic* explains history in some important ways, but neither is reducible to the other, unlike Kojève's formulation in which the *Logic* is reducible to human experience.

Hyppolite, however, admits “It is true that the historicity of this absolute knowledge poses at the very heart of Hegelianism new and perhaps unsolvable problems” (*LE 156*).

Unlike Kojève, Hyppolite does not believe there is an ontological difference between man and nature, or between Logos and Experience, for that matter: “*The Logos is nature*” (126). However, it is not a hidden cause that magically produces nature. Were the Logos the final cause of things, like a god, it would have some kind of ontological primacy distinguishing it from its results. But Hyppolite can’t support such a claim. He insists,

We have to take appearance just as it is, and not as the appearance of a hidden being; what Hegel calls the Logic of Essence is this apprehension of reflection as the movement of appearance in which there is really a duality, a division, the very division of being which reflects itself. This duality, however, is entirely in the appearing; it is not beyond. Thus immediacy is reestablished in reflection, actuality as self or concept, the concrete unity of mediation. Essence would be like the secret of appearance, but this secret is itself only an appearance. Absolute knowledge means the elimination of the ontological secret... The only secret is that there is no secret (90).

Hyppolite, therefore, can’t accept Kojève’s ontological hierarchy that put human subjects at the top. This passage is representative of any analysis of Hegel’s *Logic*, since it removes the narrative of the subject that we are so used to and which frames the entire discourse of the *Phenomenology*. Or, rather than removing it, this analysis is looking at the state of things prior to the emergence of the human subject and its complicated story. Kojève’s philosophical goal is intimately tied to the destiny and duties of the human subject, so he is unwilling to relinquish its privilege and prefers to keep it apart from everything else. It stands firmly in the middle of reality and acts upon it like a magician acts on his magical display. Nature and its objects don’t penetrate the subject; they are its fuel and material for constructing a reality that is definitively *for* human consciousness. But Hyppolite follows “Hegel’s postulation of an ontological unity that conditions and resolves all experiences of difference between individuals and between individuals and the external world...” (Butler 1987: 63). This ontological unity,

or “harmony” (Butler’s other term) leads to a kind of “monism”(81), in which there are no special ontological statuses between things, whether subjects or not. One thing that tipped Hyppolite off about this was Kojève’s blindness to the obvious limitations of his hero-subject. All our evidence and good sense tells us that no subject is eternal and omnipotent, as the Kojèvian story would have us believe. Just like things, subjects come into being and either turn into other things, or are squelched into nothing. Since even the great historical heroes who embody Kojève’s ideal must succumb to temporality, temporality is a great ontological leveler, not allowing the subject to get too presumptuous about its place among things. Without this ontological leveling, the proud human subject continues to ride into the teleological sunset. According to Butler, “Although Kojève criticizes the notion of teleological history, he has not cured himself of the belief in a *telos* to human existence. Hence, For Kojève, the teleological view of history is less rejected than internalized as a potential feature of an individual life...”(81). But for Hyppolite, an internalized teleology or any suggestion that the human subject is perfected throws into relief the completely tragic nature of the human condition. How can human acts be the one thing that has ultimate ontological value? Human acts are brittle and ineffectual, just as subject to the negating force of time as anything else. As Butler puts it, any responsible Hegelian who attempts to think about the world the way that it is now, must “learn to think time itself, and this thought is of necessity an experience of anxiety, placelessness, inevitable transience”(83). But these terms are not only applicable to the human experience — anxiety, placelessness, and transience are the marks of any object passing through time and space — humans are just one of infinite objects that have no place and succumb to time.

Hyppolite’s most cogent criticisms of Kojève’s Hegelianism are contained in the concluding chapter of *Logic and Existence*. Without naming Kojève, he highlights the difference

between his own interpretation of Hegel's significance, saying, "We can extend Hegel's philosophy in two different directions. One direction leads to the deification of Humanity; the other, the one that we have followed in this work, leads to the Absolute's self-knowledge across man"(177). Hyppolite's attachment to human subjects as the center of his philosophy is slightly misguided, however, his essential insight into Hegel's flat ontology⁵⁷ rehabilitates the latter's system and allows it to remain relevant in the contemporary world. Not only does it allow for the appreciation of tragedy that Hyppolite thinks has become necessary for us, it also reconciles Hegel's system with the radically non-teleological discoveries of Darwin. Only by going in this direction can Hegelianism start to become post-theological, which is to say, post-teleological. It will always have its roots in the Teutonic Protestantism of its time, but the elements emphasized by Hyppolite can be used in combination with other ideas to begin to reshape the world instead of simply describing the world as we find it.

One of the most famous statements in the entire *Phenomenology* is Hegel's claim that "Appearance is the arising and passing away that does not itself arise and pass away, but is in

⁵⁷ "Flat ontology" is a term coined by the contemporary philosopher, Manuel Delanda. When he uses it, he means that all things are of only one ontological type, namely, *individuals*. Bryant explains:

"Thus for DeLanda the relationship between species and organism is not a relationship between the universal or essence that is eternal and unchanging and the particular or the organism as an instance of the species. Rather, both species and organisms are *individuals* that are situated in time and space. If species are not eternal essences or forms defining what is common to all particulars of that species, if they exist in space and time, then this is because species, as conceived by biology are not *types* but rather are really existing reproductive *populations* located in a particular geography at a particular point in time. For DeLanda, then, being is composed *entirely* of individuals."

-<https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2010/02/24/flat-ontology-2/>

However, for others like Bryant and Harman — and the way that "flatness" will be used in this essay — flatness is less about type (i.e., individual vs. universal) but about whether there is *ontological* difference between type. It is not inherently misguided to speak about individuals and universals as different kinds of things, but there is not enough reason to project different ontological statuses onto them. For Plato and other idealists, universals are *more real* than individuals. For Delanda, the opposite is true. Even Harman speaks of "real objects" vs. sensual objects, the latter being incomplete phenomenal showings of the former. For this reason, Harman does not fully embrace the term "flat ontology", though he does maintain that both his "real" and "sensual" objects are the same *ontologically* in being *objects*. Bogost clarifies this position with an aphorism: "All things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally." - <http://www.bogost.com/blog/materialisms.shtml>

itself and constitutes the actuality and the movement of the life of truth” (174), for which Hyppolite provides the following exegesis:

Actuality is conceived necessity, and the analysis that Hegel provides of the relations of the possible, of the real and the necessary, is perhaps the most illuminating of all the dialectics of essence. Actuality does not have its ground in a possibility that would be beyond it. It is itself its own possibility. Certainly being is grounded, but it is grounded upon itself; it is because it is possible, but it is possible because it is. This transcendental chance, which Kant spoke of in *The Critique of Judgment* and which was the encounter of contingency and conditional necessity, is for Hegel absolute necessity, because actuality refers to nothing else, and yet it is grounded, it is conceived. The Logos is not the possibility of the existent, outside of the existent; it is the conception of the existent, and the existent as other is included in its own conception. The possible, which is only possible, is impossible; it contradicts itself. This is why it is possible because it is, just as it is because it is possible... Comprehended necessity, however, is not necessity comprehending itself (175).

There is only appearance. Appearance is not the shadow or emanation of essence; they denote the same thing, which is really just appearance. If things that appear could only do so according to some prior plan, then appearances would always be references pointing back to something ontologically prior and transcendent. This leads to the problem of Hegel’s unhappy consciousness, for which the truth is always somewhere else, or Nietzsche’s nihilism, which amounts to the same thing. But if there is only appearance, only surface, then things stand on equal footing and there is no hopeful pining for the truth behind the veil of appearance. In an early attempt to bring Hegel’s system down to earth, Marx criticized the use of the term Self-Consciousness at the center of the system. Self-Consciousness was too vague and disembodied to serve any purpose, which for Marx was above all the amelioration of injustices between men. It too much resembled a God sitting above and beyond the realm of man, even though man could supposedly partake of it. Such an ontological hierarchy could only blind men to the world around them and to each other, leading to political and economic hierarchies that are

That is, the most fleeting hallucination and the sun both exist as objects, but the sun’s existence will matter much more in the big scheme of things; it is an example of what Morton calls “hyperobjects.”

the scourge of existence. To put things right, Marx replaces Self-Consciousness with, quite simply, man. This gets rid of the idealist Self-Consciousness and turns history from a pseudo-mystical unfolding of some Spirit into the concrete history of human beings and their experiences. For Marx, the human being is situated in a material world that preceded him, and there is nothing about the human being that makes him ontologically superior to the material world, we simply have to carve out the best existence he can within it. This ontology is the source of the Marxist positions against gods and other imaginary abstractions, such as a transcendent Logos, or even the alienation of man from nature and from his fellow men, which is the basis of capitalism. Like Epicurus, Marx's world is intrinsically positive: man and the objects that surround him are irreducible things that populate and are distinct from empty space. This has been a valuable reevaluation of Hegel's ideas, but Hyppolite warns us not to overlook something very important in Hegel:

Hegelianism preserves in its immanence the negation at the heart of every position; in actual history, there is a real negation, but the Logos comprehends this negation since negation is ontological... While remaining an anthropology, he opened perspectives that Marx neglected, and these perspectives bear precisely on the fact that for him every determinate objectification is an alienation. He discovered this dimension of pure subjectivity *which is nothingness*. (184).

But if negation is truly ontological the way that Hyppolite highlights here, then negativity cannot belong only to subjectivity. This would render a pre-human, or pre-animal world impossible, since such a world would be lacking one of the principle conditions for being, which for Hegel is objective positivity and subjective negativity. But Darwin and Meillassoux's insights should now have us thinking that it is important to be able to think of the pre-conscious world in-itself, and the mind-dependent reality of Hegel and Hyppolite is still not getting us where we need to go. But he is on the right track. By shifting the focus away from man as the culmination of a teleology and turning it to the ontological issue of how

positivity and negativity play together to produce appearance, Hyppolite is shining light on the prehuman world in which appearances still appeared, though not to consciousnesses. In such a world, objects appeared to each other and related to each other, without the aid of the human observer naming everything and arrogating the realm to himself.

In Levi R. Bryant's book *The Democracy of Objects*, he summarizes Quentin Meillassoux's simple argument against correlationism, the idea that we cannot think a world without our subjectivity implicated in it: it is like trying to removed a piece of double-sided tape from our finger, it only gets stuck to the one trying to remove it. Like the creationist argument that God must have planted dinosaur bones in the ground for us, the correlationist argument says that to imagine the pre or post-human world is simply to imagine a world that carries us in it as an absence, since its very existence relies on our thinking it in the first place. This, Meillassoux contends, is about as satisfactory as arguing that we cannot die, because by imagining death and the world without us, we make that world dependent on our thought of it. Therefore, I must simply go on living since the thought of my nonexistence depends on my existence, thereby making my nonexistence an impossibility."⁵⁸ Not only does this offend most rules of logic, it also offends the psychological anxieties produced by the thought of death, the gut feeling, fed by logic, of the inevitability of our absence through death. Bryant continues in his summary, "If it is conceded that our annihilation is, *in principle*, thinkable, then we are also conceding that a world without humans is thinkable." Yet it would make little philosophical sense to posit two separate ontologies for the unconscious world and the conscious world. We would like to think that any ontology we can discover for our own conditions of existence would apply universally to the world without us—when the conditions for our existence have tilted against our favor, but for the favor of other things. Therefore, the negativity that

Hyppolite emphasizes cannot be equated with subjectivity, even if it can be shown, phenomenologically, that a major quality of subjectivity is negativity. In another dense passage, Hyppolite talks about the negativity of being less in terms of subjectivity and more as an irreducible ontological category:

Existence, however, as mere sublation, as the impossible adventure of man, is also an impasse. It defines man by the freedom of being-for-itself which is simultaneously always opposed to being-in-itself and always related to it. Man does not possess the freedom that allows him to wander from one determination to another or to be dissolved in abstract nothingness; rather, freedom possesses man. Nothingness is not then between the for-itself and the in-itself; it is the very nothingness of being or the being of nothingness. It opens to man, not the mere real negativity that makes history objective, but the dimension of the universal at the heart of which all sense is determined and engendered. Through this freedom, which Hegel says is immanent to all history, which Hegel says is the absolute Idea of history (and of course equivocity is evident in the relation of the philosophy of history to the Logos in Hegel, and in this very term “freedom”), man does not conquer himself as man, but becomes the house (*le demeure*) of the Universal, of the Logos of Being, and becomes capable of Truth. In this opening which allows the existents of Nature, and history itself, to be clarified, to be conceived, Being comprehends itself as this eternal self-engendering; it is Logic in Hegel’s sense, absolute knowledge.⁵⁹

Man does not accomplish being by breathing life into the barren objective world that depends on his gaze. Man is one of the members of the objective world. His coming to absolute knowledge is something meaningful and satisfying for himself and can indeed change the way he and his fellow sentient beings experience the world, but he does not act as a conduit for being to express itself. In other words, being does not lie in wait for self-consciousness. It is already there and self-consciousness starts to relate with it in a different way than the pond-scum and amoebas relate to it. Natural history was already going on in a dramatic way, leaving behind thousands of feet of shale deposits, cliff faces, subterranean oil reservoirs, aquifers, mountains, and icebergs. Human history then grafted itself onto this foundation, adding to it only variety and drama, but no extra being, no ontological upgrade. As Hyppolite

⁵⁸ Bryant. *The Democracy of Objects*. 54

says, “Being is grounded in itself. It is because it is possible; but it is possible because it is”(188). Being is appearance, a surface, with no depths. The Logos is not any code expressing itself from the reaches of some rich sea of being beyond our access to it. The Logos is the negativity of being that can’t help but appear as any and all things. After Darwin, we are fools to talk of the present in terms of the plan that produced it. The present appears as it does because it was possible for it to appear this way; but the only way that it was made possible was by appearing. In retrospect, we can explore and talk about *how* things took the path they did, but not *why*. Following Hyppolite’s focus on Hegel’s prehuman ontology, we can start to rehabilitate Hegel’s insights and use them against the residues of teleologies and invisible hands that we find in his histories of the world and of philosophy.

⁵⁹ Hyppolite. *Logic and Existence*. 187.

8.

The Relationships Between Things

Jean-Luc Nancy (b.1940) is an heir to Hyppolite's ontological refocusing of Hegel. In his concise, accessible, but scarcely read work *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, he ventures even further away from identifying negativity with the human subject, and posits it as something purely ontological that recedes from our attempts to pin it down to this or that. While negativity and subjectivity are intimately related, negativity is the primary term. It is the ontological ground that allows for subjectivity to emerge. Thus, subjectivity unsurprisingly maintains negativity as a quality, but it is not the same negativity that was already effectuating itself in subjectivity's absence. Subjectivity is an event in the world, an instantiation of negativity that dwells anywhere that a positivity can or will be found. It has become particularly important for us humans, because it is the site of the drama that fills up our existence and from which we can't escape except through death. Subjectivity changed the world by introducing a new kind of relationship between things—a new wrinkle of complexity in the community of objects—but it did little to nothing to change the way that grains of sand relate to each other in a Sahara windstorm, or the activity of sea vents and thermal currents. We know of many kinds of subjectivity already, and there are surely ones we don't yet even detect or may never be able to. Human subjectivity is just a peculiar kind among them. Things manifest to themselves and each other, not necessarily in an epistemological way, but first ontologically. There doesn't need to be perception in every manifestation, for any perception presupposes the presence of at least two objects that achieved themselves as if by magic. Nancy shows us how Hegel imagined a ground of being that was not dependent on his thought, a groundless ground that is the ground of object

relations as much as for subject-object relations. Thus, he helps us rethink the caricature of Hegel's system as closed and totalizing, instead following him on a speculative adventure that steps off of the firm ground of certitudes.

It is important to note that Hegel's negativity is ontological instead of epistemological. Unlike Kant or Berkeley, Hegel does not posit the negativity of being based on any kind of direct access to it: one does not *perceive* it as one would a flame or an orange. You could say it is *inferred* through his dialectics, but his inferences are not necessarily pegged to sense perceptions. As Bryant explains, "Epistemologically-driven arguments will always pitch questions of what beings *are* in term of our access to these entities" (*DO* 63). So for Berkeley, the only thing we have access to is the ever-changing flux of the mind, which is capable of taking an infinite variety of forms and can perceive itself. Since independent objects are inaccessible, he reasons that the only thing that *is* mind. Likewise, Kant's metaphysics are second to his epistemology. Our perceptions give us access to phenomena, but their being is only partial, since true being lies beyond the pale of any perception or human knowledge. Epistemological metaphysics like these tend to result in ontological hierarchies. What really *is* is either perceived or not perceived—the perceived and unperceived cannot exist equally.

Hegel, however, shows that epistemology must not have anything to do with it. Of course, as conscious beings, we are circumscribed by our perceptions, but those limits do not bear on anything's *being*. We might only have phenomena at our disposal, but, as Kant suggests, it would seem that there is more out there than just phenomena. However, we do not need to conclude that the phenomena have a different ontological status than those things that are not accessible. For a perception to happen and for a phenomenon to manifest, the two sides of the transaction must already be present. Such simultaneity goes against any assumption that it is the perceiver that really exists, and therefore, cancels out the purported existence of other

things. How else can we understand being, if it does not depend on a subject-object epistemology? Nancy describes Hegel's vision:

The "phenomenon" is not appearance: it is the lively transport of self and the leap into manifest existence. Manifesting itself, it is in relation. It singularizes itself. Every thing is singular, and the totality is also singular: it is the singularity of manifestation, or of the world: it is that singularity manifests itself to nothing other than itself, or to nothing. Manifestation surges up out of nothing, into nothing. The manifested is something, and every thing is manifested. But there is no "manifester" that would be yet another thing than manifestation. Me with my knowledge, I am also in manifestation: I am manifest and I manifest, in turn, that I am manifest. Manifestation is therefore of itself or it is nothing; it is of itself as much as it is nothing (33).

If the manifester and the manifest are of the same ontological status, then they do not efface each other's being. The subject for whom epistemology matters, cannot denigrate the being of its objects, since it can do nothing to add or subtract from its existence. Each of them must be spontaneously present, equally existent. In this way Hegel starts with some suppositions: there is some ground that must be the condition for all the things that are, but this ground is not spatial or temporal; it cannot be a progenitor or some dense positivity that pumps itself out as purely positive manifestation; there can be no beginning to manifestation, since nothing could muster the resources to become the fountain of being out of nothing; neither can there be an end to manifestation, since there is no source that can be squelched.

Kant and Berkeley are not the only philosophers to demand that epistemology validate metaphysics. The same issue is very much alive in the phenomenological tradition of Husserl and his heirs. This tradition began when Descartes stripped away the objectivity of the world by doubting its autonomy and stability. All that was left was the pure cogitating ego whose absence is inconceivable. Husserl refined this reduction, or rather radicalized it by saying that we cannot even establish the ontological status of internal psychic phenomena that make up the subject. This transcendental reduction radically splits the objective and subjective, distilling everything down to the transcendental-phenomenological ego. There is not a violent

negation of the objective that requires a radical epistemological shift, but a gentle epoché, a suspension of its truth status. With this, one realizes that the entire objective world “derives its whole sense and its existential status, which it has for me, from me myself, *from me as the transcendental Ego*, the Ego who comes to the fore only with transcendental-phenomenological epoché” (CM 65). It would seem, then, that everything of the objective world is a genetic product of an underlying synthesizing subjectivity.

Such a view has a strong temporal quality: there is a primordial, absolute foundation out of which come temporally subsequent objects and meanings. Jacques Derrida, in his early book *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy* writes, “...in order to be authentically genetic and phenomenological, it must describe the conditions of the founding without deforming them, that is to say, it must describe the arising of meanings in the becoming of experience, conceived in the largest and most originary sense as including the experience of the founding itself” (PG xxvi).⁶⁰ Husserl's phenomenology relies on the starting point of a consciousness

⁶⁰ One of the most satisfactory descriptions of this phenomenological arising of subjectivity is found in a lecture by the contemporary Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Chogyam Trungpa:

Fundamentally there is just open space, the *basic ground*, what we really are. Our most fundamental state of mind, before the creation of ego, is such that there is basic openness, basic freedom, a spacious quality; and we have now and have always had this openness. Take, for example, our everyday lives and thought patterns. When we see an object, in the first instant there is a sudden perception that has no logic or conceptualization to it at all; we just perceive the thing in the open ground. Then immediately we panic and begin to rush about trying to add something to it, either trying to find a name for it or trying to find pigeonholes in which we could locate and categorize it. Gradually, things develop from there...

This development does not take the shape of a solid entity. Rather, this development is illusory... The beginning point is that there is open space, belonging to no one. There is always primordial intelligence connected with the space and openness. *Vidyā*, which means “intelligence” in Sanskrit—precision, sharpness, sharpness with space, sharpness with room in which to put things, exchange things. It is like a spacious hall where there is room to dance about, where there is no danger of knocking things over or tripping over things, for there is completely open space. We *are* this space, we are *one* with it, with *vidyā*, intelligence, and openness.

But if we are this all the time, where did the confusion come from, where has the space gone, what has happened? Nothing has happened, as a matter of fact. We just became too active in that space. Because it is spacious, it brings inspiration to dance about; but our dance became a bit too active, we began to spin more than was necessary to express the space. At this point we became *self*-conscious, conscious that “I” am dancing in the space.

At such a point, space is no longer space as such. It becomes solid. Instead of being one with the space, we feel solid space as a separate entity, as tangible. This is the first experience of duality—space

that is *intentional*, that is, as always aimed at an object. For him this was an empirical fact; but its worth remains heuristic, and not philosophical. While Husserl's method facilitated a kind of descriptive observation and analysis of the experience consciousness, it did not resolve the issue of a founding experience, as demanded by Derrida. If the foundation of the transcendental consciousness is something different from that of objective being, then consciousness is autonomous and therefore not intentional: there must have been a moment where subject was unaccompanied by an object. But if somehow objective being is self-constituted—or naturally constituted somehow through transcendental conscious—then this

and I, I am dancing in this space, and this spaciousness is a solid, separate thing. Duality means “space and I,” rather than being completely one with the space. This is the birth of “form,” and “other.”

Then a kind of blackout occurs, in the sense that we forget what we were doing. There is a sudden halt, a pause; and we turn around and “discover” solid space, as though we had never before done anything at all, as though we were not the creators of all that solidity. There is a gap, Having already created solidified space, there we are overwhelmed by it and begin to become lost in it. There is a blackout and then, suddenly, an awakening.

When we awaken, we refuse to see the space as openness, refuse to see its smooth and ventilating quality. We completely ignore it, which is called *avidyā*. *A* means “negation,” *vidyā* means “intelligence,” so it is “un-intelligence.” Because this extreme intelligence has been transformed into the perception of solid space, because this intelligence with a sharp and precise and flowing luminous quality has become static, therefore it is called *avidyā*, “ignorance.” We deliberately ignore. We are not satisfied just to dance in the space but we want to have a partner, and so we choose space as our partner. If you choose space as your partner in the dance, then of course you want it to dance with you. In order to possess it as a partner, you have to solidify it and ignore its flowing, open quality. This is *avidyā*, ignorance, ignoring the intelligence...

Suppose in the beginning there is an open plain without any mountains or trees, completely open land, a simple desert without any particular characteristics. That is how we are, what we are. We are very simple and basic. And yet there is a sun shining, a moon shining, and there will be lights and colors, the texture of the desert. There will be some feeling of the energy that plays between heaven and earth. This goes on and on.

Then, strangely, there is a sudden someone to notice all this. It is as if one of the grains of sand had stuck its neck out and begun to look around. We are that grain of sand, coming to the conclusion of our separateness. This is the “birth of ignorance” in its first stage, a kind of chemical reaction. Duality has begun.

The second stage of ignorance-form is called the “ignorance born within.” Having noticed that one is separate, then there is the feeling that one has always been so. It is an awkwardness, the instinct toward self-consciousness... It is the attitude that one is a confused and separate individual, and that is all there is to it. One has identified oneself as separate from the basic landscape of space and openness...

In a sense, it might be said that the primordial intelligence is operating all the time, but it is being employed by the dualistic fixation, ignorance. In the beginning stages of the development of ego this intelligence operates as the intuitive sharpness of feeling. Later it operates in the form of intellect. Actually it seems that there is no such thing as the ego at all; there is no such thing as “I am.” It is an accumulation of a lot of stuff. It is a “brilliant work of art,” a product of the intellect that says, “Let's give it a name, let's call it something, let's call it ‘I am’,” which is very clever. “I” is the product of the

constitution is not apperceived by consciousness as it happens; it too is autonomous and we have not established a genetic link between subject and object. Even if we argue for a radical idealism (which Husserl does in his later *Ideas*) with a self-sufficient subjective production “that does not refer to any objective natural history, it has to be turned into a ‘content of consciousness’ with all the plenitude of an ‘in itself’ closed up on itself” (xxix). But the point Nancy has pulled out of Hegel is that obsessing over the temporal primacy of either subjective or objective being presumes an ontological split between them. The earlier must be ontologically more authentic than the latter. But there is no such difference between types of being, ontologically. Derrida’s question of genesis in Husserl’s philosophy is epistemological, not ontological, but he conflates the two. For him, ontology is at the mercy of our access to being, therefore, he demands that Husserl give an epistemological account of the “arising of meanings,” from which all things derive their being.

Husserl was not unbothered by these dilemmas. He proceeds with extreme subtlety and is reluctant to grant primary status to either side of the dialectic. However, his aim was to describe the experience of consciousness, and this was performed under the microscope of the transcendental-phenomenological reduction. This method does not radically negate, but only suspends or [temporarily] neutralizes objective existence. The most salient aspect of his reduction is the relatively easy suspension of objective reality; but it also demands the more challenging suspension of the absolute status of subjective content. So what is the fate of the absolute subjective substrate in Husserl’s system?

Since Kant, or even since Descartes, correlationist thinkers hold the subjective self as the center; its experience is the point of departure for all inquiry. After that, we can ask what

intellect, the label that unifies into one whole the disorganized and scattered development of ego (Trungpa 2005 pp. 85-89).

either precedes or follows the self. Subjectivity seems so present, so undeniable and stable, yet we doubt its provenance. We would like to know what it is made of, but knowing that it may be produced and thus unstable disquiets us. Likewise, we long to fully appreciate its multifarious productions and expressions. These comprise the world in which we find ourselves; they are the content of our consciousness. Yet knowing that they issue, as echoes, from a more inaccessible, cavernous self, divests meaning from our life-world. In his study, *The Work of Georges Poulet*, Paul de Man observes an equation with virtually the same structure as that found in the phenomenological problem. De Man analyzes Poulet on the problem of the self and its relationship to language:

The quest for the source, which we have found constantly in his thought, can never be separated from the concern for the self that is the carrier of this quest. Yet this self does not possess the power to engender its own duration. This power belongs to what Poulet calls "the moment," but "the moment" designates, in fact, the point in time at which the self accepts language as its sole mode of existence. Language, however, is not a source; it is the articulation of the self and language that acquires a degree of prospective power. Self and language are the two focal points around which the trajectory of the work originates, but neither can by itself find access to the status of source. Each is the anteriority of the other. If one confers upon language the power to originate, one runs the risk of hiding the self... But if the subject is, in its turn, given the status of origin, one makes it coincide with Being in a self-consuming identity in which language is destroyed. Poulet rejects this alternative just as categorically as he rejects the other, although much less explicitly. The concern for language can be felt in the tone of anguish that inhabits the whole of his work and expresses a constant solicitude for literary survival. The subject that speaks in the criticism of Georges Poulet is a vulnerable and fragile subject whose voice can never become established as a presence."⁶¹

The demand for a foundation is never satisfied as long as we insist on the absolute reality status of one or both of the self and its object. Derrida devotes hundreds of pages to exposing the irresolvable problem of foundationalism at every subtle twist and turn of the phenomenological method. He uses this as a starting point for a radical new method of philosophy, his deconstruction, which at the very least casts the same problem in refreshing

⁶¹ Man, Paul de. *Blindness and Insight*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983 p.100.

terms. At the heart of the problem is what Derrida calls “the impossibility of an originary that is absolutely simple” (xl). But Derrida’s focus on meanings, semiotics, and language already presume the primacy of the subject.

Levi Bryant notices the same assumption in Žižek’s Lacanian Hegelianism. Parts of Žižek’s ontology resemble Hyppolite and Nancy in its focus on the paradox between reality and appearance. Arguing that there is no ontological split between appearance and some underlying reality behind it, he approaches the flat ontology we have seen is possible in Hegel’s system:

[Appearance implies that there is something behind it which appears through it; it conceals a truth and by the same gesture gives a foreboding thereof; it simultaneously hides and reveals the essence behind the curtain. But what is hidden behind the phenomenal appearance? Precisely the fact that there is nothing to hide. What is concealed is that the very act of concealing conceals nothing.

⁶²This description is not teleological, and it identifies appearance with reality: there is not more reality hiding behind appearances, however, appearances appear in a way that seems to hide something and does not satisfy some demand full the full disclosure of being. This, he argues, is simply the way that appearance works, and it is the source of our belief in hidden reality. The split is an illusion. But Žižek does not stop there; Bryant quotes him from another place:

What we experience as “reality discloses itself against the background of the lack, of the absence of it, of the Thing, of the mythical object whose encounter would bring about the full satisfaction of the drive. This lack of the Thing constitutive of “reality” is therefore, in its fundamental dimension, not epistemological, but rather pertains to the paradoxical logic of desire—the paradox being that his Thing is retroactively produced by the very gesture of its loss. In other (Hegel’s) words, there is nothing—no positive substantial entity—behind the phenomenal curtain, only the gaze whose phantasmagorias assume different shapes of the Thing.

⁶³ The major point here for Bryant is Žižek’s focus on the *symbolic*, a domain that only has meaning for human subjects. Reality, in this system, takes place in, or is *inscribed* in subjectivity, which is the negativity that opposes the positivity of things that appear. Therefore, “For Žižek the object is a *pole* in a relation between subject and object. In other words, there is a type of being, the subject, and another type of being, the object” (*DO* 130). Therefore, despite the earlier suggestion of the identity of appearance and reality, there remains an ontological hierarchy that is essentially anthropocentric, as Bryant notes, “Beings are hegemonized under the signifier or language, just as they

⁶² Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. New York: Verso, 1989. p193

⁶³ Žižek, Slavoj. *Tarrying With the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham: Duke, 1993. p.37

are hegemonized under mind in Kant”(131). And we saw the same conclusion in Husserl and Derrida.

So are we to abandon epistemology and semiotics as obsolete forms of inquiry? Of course not. Bryant remarks, “The point here is not that we should ignore the signifier, language, and signs, but that the signifier cannot function as the *ground* of being” (132). We have to find a better ground, or get by without one. This is Nancy’s main contribution, and one that helps us rehabilitate Hegel, who has too much of value to say to be vilified entirely. He helps us overcome the teleology and anthropocentrism that has clung to Hegel and his legacy, and by doing so we can begin to reverse some of the damage that has been done under those banners.

In the search for an alternative ground of being—one that is not language, symbols, signs, objectivity, or subjectivity—Nancy finds that,

The Hegelian *ground* is neither a fundament nor foundation, neither groundwork nor substrate. It is the depth in which one is submerged, into which one sinks and goes to the bottom. More precisely, this ground founds only to the extent that it sinks in itself: for foundation should be a hollowing out... Still further: this hollowing neither attains nor brings to light a secure groundwork. It hollows out the point of passage, and the point itself is such a hollowing out: work of the negative, but right at the surface (15).

He has an insight here, but he does not go beyond the correlationism of the phenomenological tradition from which he comes. Like Žižek, Nancy equates the negativity of this ontological groundlessness with Thought; that is, human subjectivity. But this is a mistake for which Nancy must be forgiven. He says enough in his *The Restlessness of the Negative* to help us achieve a purely ontological groundlessness that does not fall back into the trap of figuring out whether subjects or objects are primary.

If we take seriously the prehuman world speculated by Meillassoux and if we succeed in understanding subjectivity as just another kind of thing and not something superior to other things, then we don’t need to equate negativity with the subject. Things exist, come about, and manifest owing to the ontological negativity within them. All things have this quality, from

inert gases, to grains of sugar, to tiger cubs. To say that one object—namely human subjectivity—has endowed all these things with being is to posit an unjustifiable metaphysical hierarchy. But philosophy can bring us back to things themselves and allow for an appreciation of their spontaneous presence. Nancy writes,

Philosophical decision is the decision not to settle for the manifest, and this in the name of manifestation itself. This decision is the decision not to entrust the manifest to something else: to something occult, hidden, or secret. It is the decision of a world without secret, or a world whose whole secret lies in its *logos* or its revelation (38).

As we noted earlier, the theories of Darwinian speciation reveal that there is no grand design to the way things have happened. In a world of objects, subjectivity emerged as just another thing. But this new thing—subjectivity—opened up new relationships between things. As far as we know, objects in the pre-conscious world enjoyed very different relationships with each other than we enjoy with them. However, this does not justify the construction of a mythology that puts the newcomer-thing—human subjectivity—at the *center* of everything. Nor is there any reason to identify subjectivity with negativity *tout court*. Negativity has to be subjectivity's condition or source. Subjectivity may have negativity as a major characteristic, but negativity already pervaded the ground of being, even before subjectivity manifested. Negativity as the ground means that there is no ground in the usual sense: no fundament or substrate. Temporal primacy falls away. Nancy observes, "The concretion of negativity begins with the other. The self that negates itself, instead of coming back to itself, throws itself into the other, and wills itself as other. This is why the other is not second, does not come after" (57).

Since Epicurus and even well before him, we have speculated into the magic dance between atoms and the void—positivity and negativity—as the condition of appearances. As we became more adept at analyzing our subjectivity as something quite unique among things, we

inflated it, giving it so much spaciousness that it seemed synonymous with ontological negativity. Negativity, then, was no longer space, or the void—a categorical indeterminacy; paradoxically, it became a possession of the human subject: the subject first posited itself as negativity, then hypostatized itself and kept negativity as a property it possesses. There was thus a split in the fabric of the world: an ontological ground of subjectivity in opposition to its epiphenomena. This original split initiated a habit of arranging entities in ontological hierarchies: male entities *are* more than female entities; white entities more than brown entities. This habit's momentum would not even let the subject repose in itself, happily knowing that its objects are just the waves and not the water; it took the form of theological machinations that projected its own being to a hinterland beyond access, setting itself up as something less absolute than an ever receding God. The theological stage, with its transcendent absolute, marks an extreme limit to the habit of hierarchization. Later on—perhaps with Descartes' phenomenological reduction—the transcendent absolute falls back into the subject (“I think, therefore I am [God]”)⁶⁴. But he, and especially Kant, continued to demand that being can only be a gift of subjectivity—there is an inescapable *correlationist* loop. There is a transcendental subject that is the sole condition for the manifestation of objects. In Hegel, this transcendental subject is identified with negativity and it becomes an ontological category, rather than an epistemological organ. For him, the transcendent God becomes present through the historical event of the Incarnation and Crucifixion, and that God never leaves the realm of immanence again; he continually shows up *as* history; he is the Logos underlying each event. Death of God theology tries to push the transcendent even more deeply into immanence, believing that the literal event of the crucifixion spilled God out all over the world and was absorbed there. This event established the world's divinity and

⁶⁴ The thesis of a forthcoming essay by Hanny Hindi.

ensured that every event, every objective manifestation, has *significance* by virtue of being imbued with what was once the transcendent God.

But all of these moves toward immanence don't really accomplish it. These formulations are of a transcendence *hiding*. They continue to privilege certain entities over others, and those entities are invariably anthropocentric: human subjects, the Word at work in language and culture etc.⁶⁵ These ontological privileges proliferate in varying degrees of subtlety, and there is no real break from the hierarchies that they all wanted to break from, which were represented most radically in the paradigm of the transcendent God. Mark Taylor points out the shortcomings of someone like Thomas Altizer's attempt to theorize radical immanence:

What Altizer has never been able to accept is that the Incarnation actually collapses high and low into each other in such a way that the divine is embodied not only in high culture and the fine arts but also in nature as well as low, or popular, culture. In other words, Altizer cannot follow where Hegel surely would have dared to go—he is unwilling and unable to extend theological and philosophical argument to nature, history, and culture as a whole.⁶⁶

This is because nature continues to be seen as fuel for the human subject, which is primary; history continues to be seen and teleological—carrying out anthropocentric destinies; and culture continues to be seen as the means by which these anthropocentric destinies express their lineage back to the transcendent absolute that created them.

Not only do these tries at immanence fail to achieve it because of their fundamental anthropocentrism, they are also Eurocentric and they create and maintain social, political, and academic prejudices. They invariably privilege the events of western history: the Crucifixion, the French Revolution, etc., claiming that any and all truth, any and all human development, could only have happened through these events. They claim that there can be no realization of immanence without arriving at it by thinking through western events like the crucifixion.

⁶⁵ The latter is from the theories of Death of God theologian, Thomas Altizer.

Habitual self-centeredness inspire someone like Altizer to hyperbole like, “Only Christianity knows that absolutely primordial which is absolutely “first,” an absolutely primordial which is absolutely other than the absolutely new, one which could never be manifest or actual apart from the advent of the absolutely new, and one only possible by way of a full and actual negation and reversal of the absolutely new.”⁶⁷ It seems the only reply to such a statement would be, “If you say so...”. Such statements are tautological, saying essentially, “XYZ are developed thus in Christianity. Therefore, XYZ can only be known in this Christian way by Christianity.” When you formulate and then target some exalted intellectual realization and then say that it can only be reached via Christianity, you set up the conditions for Christianity to exclude, isolate, and oppress. Likewise, beyond their own tautological logic, I fail to see what is either accurate or helpful about the statements like the following from Altizer: “A full and actual atheism can only be found in the modern Western world”(5); “Only Christianity knows an absolutely dichotomous body”(150); “it is only Christianity that embodies ultimate historical and interior dichotomies”; “only Christianity and the Christian world know an actual body of abyss”(155); “it is only Christianity that calls forth the ultimate depths of sin, death, and Satan”(97); “Only Christianity knows an ultimate self-negation or self-emptying of the Godhead”(148). Each of these statements appears in the context of extremely profound metaphysical speculations, and Altizer constantly achieves insights into the synchronic structure of things. Like Hegel, however, he erroneously indexes the synchronic to diachronic history, and he assumes that any understanding of what “self-negation” or “self-emptying” mean is entirely dependent on Christianity’s power to express those concepts. The emptying of the Christian Godhead was just an example of emptying, it was not the only emptying that

⁶⁶ *After God* p. 203.

⁶⁷ Altizer, Thomas J.J. *Godhead and the Nothing*. Albany: SUNY, 2003. p.149

ever occurred. Insofar as any modern western atheism is temporally subsequent to the promulgation of Christianity in the West, then tautologically, “full and actual atheism can only be found in the modern Western world.” But such a statement implies that the non-West has nothing to contribute to improved human understanding—2500 years of Buddhist atheism are not a resource for modern atheology. Such sweeping claims and dismissals are just not rigorous, nor are they ethical since political and social exclusion that follow from them.

Aspirations to immanence must be supported by a rooting out of anthropocentrism and metaphysical stratification. Attempts throughout Western intellectual history have failed to achieve an understanding of immanence most often because they continued to invest the human subject with the same character as the once transcendent God. When Nancy adjusts Hegel’s negativity away from being a property of the subject, and toward being an abstract ontological category that is the condition of appearance, he provides us with a helpful resource for breaking down our philosophical anthropocentrism. When this is done, the individual things that make up nature, history, culture etc. can be understood as ontologically dignified things that take part in complex networks that shift around in profound contingency rather than bearing within them some pre-given teleological destiny.

9.

Object-Oriented-Ontology and Neo-Epicureanism

In order to really understand networks and how they produce things, it is imperative to remove human subjects from the role of conductor of the symphony, and to try to get a clearer picture about how things relate to each other. Doing this will clarify how things affect humans, once we enter into the network, and allow us to have a different vision of those networks and the other actors within them.

We saw how Nancy's anti-foundationalism approaches this goal by reconciling Hegel's metaphysics with contemporary scientific knowledge and does away with its theological link to teleology. He rescues Hegel from dismissal by those who cannot accept his idealistic dependence on the subject, but he also refuses to grant the objective world the full autonomy that materialists demand of it: as one of the great phenomenologists of that tradition, the subject remains at the heart of things, and perhaps the correlationist loop has just been rendered more subtle, and objects do not attain full autonomy. This puts him at odds with one of the most promising and interesting contemporary metaphysical theories, the object-oriented-ontology championed by Graham Harman and adopted by Levi Bryant, Tim Morton, Ian Bogost, and others. Generally associated with *posthumanism* or "the speculative turn,"⁶⁸ Object-Oriented Ontology is not trying to make the human irrelevant, or to denigrate humanity. Neither is it attempting to negate *relation* or *networks* altogether, even as it seeks to rehabilitate the ontological integrity of objective substance. It pushes deeper into the territory

⁶⁸ Compiled in Bryant, Levi, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman eds. *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Melbourne: re.press, 2011.

of non-anthropocentric helping us attenuate the faith in teleological history and ontological hierarchies that leads to so many nasty consequences.

Graham Harman's goal has been to rehabilitate *metaphysics* as systematic speculation into what is not visible. But he wants to do this without appealing to theology. For Harman, the linguistic turn that dominated twentieth century philosophy shifted all inquiry away from metaphysics — things, substances, depths of being — throwing its entire lot into epistemology. We saw the problem with this earlier in Bryant's criticism of epistemological reductionism that makes the entire universe and the objects contained within it dependent on the human subject. But Harman is the real champion of this push to know objects, not just to reify them as scientific realists do, but speculate about the inner life of objects and the hidden layers of the world that are full and alive, and independent from human interference.

For Harman, theology and phenomenology, in most of their incarnations, are “blood brothers”⁶⁹: theology relies on God standing by to create things and endow them with being, while phenomenology does the same thing with the human subject. There are objects, of course, but those objects are bound, inextricably, to a consciousness injecting them with meaning. Those objects do not exist in their own right, they have no hidden depths. Rather, for most phenomenologists, objects are like the western ghost town constructed by the characters of Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles*: they are all facade; there is nothing inside. Or if there is something inside, as a theologian might concede, it is entirely dependent upon God's power. For Harman, “whichever of these two camps one enters, phenomenology or theology, objects are reduced to the lackeys and menials of a unified lofty power” (14). Neither of them can appreciate the beauty of the ancestral world that is at the heart of Meillassoux's elegant

⁶⁹ Harman, Graham, *Geurilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Chicago: Open Court, 2005 p.14.

criticism. In these systems, “The world’s pulsating landscape of palm trees, lizards, obsidian, salt, motorboats, and viruses is granted no hidden layer whatsoever”(13).

Hegel, in his teleological moments, grants a hidden layer to things in the idea of the Logos as a primordial code that contained the secret destiny of world and that would reach its zenith in the people of Europe and their cultural trappings. Kojève’s metaphysics eviscerates the objects of the universe and offers them as a feast to the people of the world, proving their supremacy in the ontological hierarchy. But Hyppolite and Nancy begin to wonder if Hegel’s Logic could not make us better neighbors to our fellow things. They ask whether we are subject to the same structure as them and obey the same laws. While they remain focused on the subjective and they equate the negativity so important in Hegel’s dialectic with subjectivity, by refusing to grant temporal primacy to the subject, they open the door to ontological democratization and subtle humbling of the human species.

Both Hyppolite and Nancy were profoundly influenced by Husserl’s phenomenology, a subject-oriented system *par excellence*. As has already been noted, the centerpiece of phenomenology is the insight that consciousness is always aware of *something*, and so it posits the simultaneity of subject and object. However, like Kant and others, Husserl knew that it was not possible to have complete, unfettered access to things in themselves. We are limited to the parts of things that are given to our perception. These representations are phenomena, and they constitute the tapestry of our experience in all its multiplicity. Since we have no access to the fullness of objects and they always seem to hide much of themselves from us, we tend to doubt that they exist at all beyond the way that we see them. Yet we are not alone in a world with nothing but sense data keeping us company as phenomena. Those sense data already imply some objectified form out there that is either somehow playing a role in furnishing those sense data. But we can’t access them. As Harman puts it, “In short, we live in a strange

medium located somewhere between substances and qualities, unable to touch either of them”(24). Qualities are given to us and they suggest the presence of a substance, but the substance remains aloof, stubbornly, leaving us to build philosophies that do without it and deny its existence. If substance won’t show itself, we will make do with a universe of phenomena, though this is never fully satisfying and leaves us in the loop of intentionality, always wondering how we got to this strange chicken-and-egg conundrum in the first place.

Husserl’s answer to the problem of objective existence was to “bracket” the issue, to suspend it in his phenomenological *epoché*. This amounts to putting-out-of-play any concern with the ultimate status of objects and phenomena—flattening them ontologically, at least temporarily, at least to get into enough open space to be able to analyze the mesmerizing display of phenomena that inhabit our minds. And for Husserl’s purposes, this operation was effective. Husserl was a great champion of experience; for him the noblest object of philosophy is to understand the processes by which our experiences take shape. Because of this concern for experience *as experience*, Husserl bracketed, or put philosophically out of play, concern for things ontological status. All things are the same within experience. We are able to think about giant dinosaurs breathing fire and marauding through Tokyo, and we are able to write stories about these thoughts. Or even more close to home are the experiences we have almost nightly in dreams. The content of these experiences is not real, but we experience them nonetheless, so why obsess over their reality status? Against the natural-science influenced psychologism of his day, Husserl did not want to grant *more* reality to the empirical materials of the world than to experience itself, so full as it is with blatantly unreal sprites and unicorns. Our experience, and thus our universe, is phenomenal, and thus there are things that lay beyond our reach, but those things don’t matter very much. As Harman puts it, “For phenomenology, the drama of the world plays itself out *within* specific appearances, not behind

or beneath them”(21). Thus, he approaches the kind of democratic ontology that we find being worked out in Nancy and explicitly theorized in Bryant.

Concerned as he was to put experience back in the center of philosophy, Husserl enriched western philosophy dearly, but he left us in the lurch about the ontology of objects and subjects, keeping us suspended in the phenomenological *epoché*. Philosophers in this tradition have been happy to remain in this ontological no-man’s land, positing the correlation of subject and object, not getting beyond the problem of which comes first, and eliciting critiques like Derrida’s *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl’s Philosophy*. For Harman, it is time to move on and we should no longer brook the “‘what difference does it make?’ approach to philosophy”(41). For him,

The question of whether the world is real or not for phenomenology makes a *huge* difference, since it bears directly on the internal structure of phenomena themselves. The middle-ground position of claiming that “it makes no sense to ask” is not as neutral as it appears, for it entails a *de facto* reduction of objects to phenomena. Those who try to remain agnostics about the reality of any extraphenomenal realm still do not hesitate to strip such a realm of its philosophical role. The question of whether phenomenology deals with realities or only with human access determines whether philosophy can range freely over the whole world, or whether it will remain restricted to self-reflexive remarks about human language and cognition [...]

A simple litmus test can be used to pin down the difference. Of any philosophy we encounter, it can be asked whether it has anything at all to tell us about the impact of inanimate objects upon one another, apart from any human awareness of this fact. If the answer is “yes,” then we have a philosophy of objects [...] If the answer is “no,” then we have a philosophy of access, which for all practical purposes is idealism, even if no explicit denial is made of a world outside of human cognition. To remain “neutral” on this question is to condemn philosophy to operate only as a reflexive meta-critique of the conditions of knowledge. It is to trim the hair of Samson while he sleeps, imprisoning philosophy in the human realm while stripping it of the power to conduct nocturnal raids on trees, boulders, lizards, and stars (42).

Harman’s answer to this widespread problem is to rehabilitate the philosophical notion of substances. He believes that substance-denialism has become a serious problem in modern philosophy, and is the primary reason for the trap of correlationism that he, Meillassoux, Bryant, Morton and others decry. By denying substances, we deny objective reality, and by

default give sole ontological validity to subjectivity. He does not, however, want to swing the pendulum to the other side and affirm substance as pure materiality or metaphysically simple objects. Substances are not even necessarily physical; they are *metaphysical*. The unreal phenomena whose existences are bracketed in Husserl's system are also substances. Xuanzi's butterfly is a substance as much as my landlord. They both contain depths that I cannot penetrate entirely, as I am limited to their phenomenal representations. In Harman's words,

They are not ultimate materials, but autonomous *forms*, forms somehow coiled up or folded in the crevices of the world and exerting their power on all that approaches them. This is my definition of substance, a term well worth salvaging: an object or substance is a real thing considered apart from any of its relations with other such things (19).

So his object-oriented-ontology is not a naturalism that simply privileges the material at the expense of the ideal. He, "sees objects existing not just at some ultimate pampered layer, but all the way up and down the ladder of the cosmos, so that all realities gain the dignity of objects"(19). It is this flattening move, this ontological democratization, that puts Harman, despite vast differences in terminology and emphasis, in harmony with Nancy, and thus indirectly with Hegel. Harman's writings resist this comparison at every turn, so it bears more explanation.

One philosophical mountain Harman has chosen to climb is perhaps the highest peak of Hegel's thinking, and one that I have been sympathetically describing in this essay: the metaphysics of relationality. Whereas most of us deny the validity of autonomous substances, Harman denies the all-penetrating interrelations posited by Hegel and modern social theory, perspectivism, systems theory, and so forth. Again, it is not because substances are irreducible materials that are metaphysically simple; it is rather because substances always hold something back, not just from human perception, but also from each other. Even in the case of violent physical collision, things do not fully co-penetrate, they retain something of themselves

even through change; a substance never fully unfolds itself but keeps something bound up in itself that always flees from the touch of others. If this demure relationship only held between objects and subjects, then we would perhaps be satisfied by Kant or Husserl's inaccessible objects; but even in the pre-conscious world, objects must have withheld from each other, interacting, sure, but never giving of themselves fully, always holding back some private store of power.

Harman does not necessarily try to decode the Logos at the heart of each substance. Each substance's essence is its own business, though it *vicariously* affects its neighboring entities by partially deploying some of its potentiality. While we may not be able to plumb substances to their bottom, philosophically they remain fullnesses, and this explains how even though the phenomena of experience do not fully disclose themselves, "we do not just float through a void, pointing sadly at the ineffable"(20). If all things, regardless of their materiality, remain full and aloof, then science and metaphysics can grant them an ontological dignity, they do not just remain "luminous personae crowding a narrowly human space"(16).

Harman's insistence on non-relational substances, it seems to me, is more of a heuristic than a hard stance. He has already made it clear that direct empirical perception is not the most reliable means to metaphysical truth. The correlationist circle is built on the premise that objects are second class things because they do not disclose themselves fully to the subject that relies on empirical data. Therefore, Harman has no qualms about the epistemological value of inference. We don't see substances; very well, then let us not be afraid to infer them in order to make some sense of the world. But he has also made it clear that these inferred substances are not simple, irreducible materials, but rather metaphysical objects. This gives his theory great flexibility and allows him to escape the dark corner of dogmatic assertions about things being what they are, *tout court*, as Ayn Rand would have them. Harman has discovered, for

himself and his quickly growing readership, a productive philosophical byway that bucks against the now orthodox anti-essentialist camp of continental philosophy. For him, “a return to substance is no more inherently reactionary than Foucault’s retrieval of ‘power’ from Thrasymachus”(81). This is because

There is nothing inherently ‘naive’ in saying that something lies behind appearance. There may well be a naiveté associated with certain theories as to the *character* of the real world... It might be altogether flawed to suggest that one specific layer of pampered entities explains all the rest”(79).

Again and again Harman responds to his critics who accuse him of dogmatically positing essences to the very objects that can never be known in themselves. His essences and substances are real precisely because they can never be accessed; their inaccessibility does not detract from their ontology. To this point he explains,

I am not speaking of some preexisting lump of atoms that remains the same despite all external changes: to be physical in this sense is already to be stationed in a world, to occupy a distinct space, and thereby to take up a definite stance toward other such spaces and the entities that occupy them. Spatial objects are to some extent always relational, whereas objects simply are not. To say that the world is filled with objects is to say that it is filled with countless tiny vacuums, like those bubbles that the Pythagoreans thought had been inhaled by the universe itself. What [my] guerrilla metaphysics seeks is the vacuous actuality of things. (82)

Harman chooses to emphasize the fullness and positivity of reality. We may very well have to concede that appearances come from nothing, since we can never access, epistemologically, the origin of things; but that nothing is clearly productive, it harbors a fullness and a mystery. So to talk of the hidden as essence, or as substance, is not necessarily the philosophical transgression that it appears to be in light of modern anti-essentialist continental philosophy. Harman is concerned that when we think purely in terms of relationality, we enter into an ontological “house of mirrors”(82), in which a things’ potentiality is never founded in any kind of depth. Moreover, he is convinced that if a thing is a product of its relations, it would be

forced to remain static: since it would be nothing but a surface suspended between relations to other things, it would hold nothing in reserve, including its own ability to change.

I believe these concerns of Harman's are exaggerated, and that a thing's fullness need not be obviated by its relationality. Hyppolite and Nancy help assuage some of these concerns, as does a massive tradition of Buddhist *mādhyamaka* metaphysics. However, I am sympathetic to Harman's arguments because, as mentioned before, they have a heuristic thrust that addresses the important flaw of anthropocentrism that often emerges in systems of relationality. To repeat, Harman's relationless objects are not physical, saturated, atomic realities, but are philosophical objects. His objects do not gain their positivity by siphoning their character from the infinity of other objects that are "equally parasitical in their dependence on relationships for any identity" (83). Rather, "The thing apart from its relations is actually not an empty bare particular, but remains torn apart in its private vacuum between its irreducible unity and its colorful particularity" (83). This characterization is significant because of how impossible it is epistemologically. These objects are completely isolated from any kind of knowledge one could have about them; they also harbor the contradiction of being both unitary and florid. This position alone brings him much closer to Hegel than Harman wants to be, which is not a failure.

Relationality, for Harman, too often entails that the linchpin of all relations is the human mind. Harman's objects are so full that they contain the One and the many, positivity and negativity in their own depths. Unlike the forms of Hegelianism that identify negativity with the human subject—as if it has a monopoly over the negative—Harman insists that the universe needs no such gift from the human mind.

...We can never repeat enough that the difference between an object and its relations is a difference that permeates the entire cosmos, and not some sort of poignant psychic feature found only in human beings. It is not the tender particularities of the human

soul that first put the flaw in the cosmic jewel, cutting reality apart into substance and relation. Quite the opposite: there is no object at all, whether animal, floral, or mineral, capable of caressing the skin of another object so perfectly as to become identical with it or otherwise mirror it perfectly. When a gale hammers a seaside cliff, when stellar rays penetrate a newspaper, these objects are no less guilty than humans of reducing entities to mere shadows of their full selves. To repeat, the gap between object and relation is inherent in the nature of things, and not first generated by the peculiarities of the human mind. The fact that humans seem to have more cognitive power than shale or cantaloupe does not justify grounding this difference in a basic ontological dualism (83).

It is just as important, according to Harman, to reject the assumptions of vitalists and panpsychists who claim that while the human mind may have been absent in the early phases of the universe, it remained latent, as if the objects that populated space were conspiring together to figure out the best way and the most fruitful time to allow the human mind to emerge like a butterfly from its larva. Darwin helped us see past this temptation with his great extirpation of teleology and ontological and biological hierarchies. Harman drives it home eloquently:

What is lacking is the most sensible alternative, which is to say that human knowledge, just like glass, backbones, reptiles, music, and mushrooms, arises at a certain point in the history of the universe, but without necessarily forming some sort of root metaphysical dualism in the world (84).

So the heuristic bent of Harman's militant essentialism is meant to combat the irresponsible conflation of human subjectivity with negativity. Negativity is a fundamental feature of reality, regardless of what that reality consists of. There is no more or less negativity with or without subjects around. Harman's philosophy is avowedly "object-oriented" because for him, objects are all that there are, and none of them is more of an object than any other. Objects contain a mysterious and even inexhaustible store of fullness as well as negativity. They are not founded upon any privileged ontological ground other than that inaccessible secret that somehow allows for their appearance. And while Harman sees himself as offering a sobering ballast to the wispy phantom entities of Hegelian idealism, his objects are as dream-like as

those of Nancy who looks at things as writhing in some self-hollowing depth (Nancy 15), a groundless ground in which negativity and positivity do not cancel each other out but restlessly produce all that there is and can be. For Harman,

The reason we call these objects ‘substances’ is not because they are ultimate or indestructible, but simply because none of them can be identified with any (or even *all*) of their relations with other entities. None of them is a pristine kernel of substantial unity unspoiled by interior parts. We never reach some final layer of tiny components that explains everything else, but enter instead into an indefinite regress of parts and wholes. Every object is both a substance and a complex of relations (85).

Not falling back on kernels and unities, Harman’s essentialism remains as open as Nancy’s essenceless metaphysics, and this heuristic contribution is to be admired. Harman is mostly shifting the terms of continental discourse, not for the sake of novelty, but because the old terms tether us to a subtle or not so subtle anthropocentrism in which all things are not given their due ontological dignity.

The most obvious objection to Harman’s system—and one that I have grappled with in my own reading of him—is a knee-jerk repugnance for any reifying of things that are clearly socially constructed. These would include the hoary philosophical topics of Right, Wrong, Beautiful, Good, Bad, and the even more problematic Woman, Marriage, Man, Normal etc. Harman is very aware of the tension that his system brings up vis à vis these topics, and he ready to deny that his philosophy leads to political dogmatism. It comes down to the same problem that Bryant explained about the difference between ontological and epistemological arguments; and Harman repeats that the problem is not that there are ontological essences;

The problem lay only in the assumption that they could somehow be delivered to us *in person* in order to serve as normative criteria. There is no obvious political problem with saying that the world has an essence; there is a *huge* problem as soon as we say that Germany rather than Russia, or a male rather than the female (or vice versa), or the “Greeks” rather than “the Senegal Negro,” most fully *embody* this essence. In other

words, present day philosophy suffers from a deep and widespread confusion of two *different* kinds of essentialism.⁷⁰

Essences, as Harman and Bryant will have them, are not the theological or ethical eternal truths that modern continental philosophy has been diligent in dismantling. Because Harman and Bryant's essences are epistemologically inaccessible, any claim to know them is a lie and pretense. An object, they insist, is anchored in something more than mere relation, since mere relation would spread it so thin as to have no gravity, no ability to affect anything. Yet where the chain of its being leads to is beyond our grasp. It descends into the abyss of the object and, somehow, indifferent to knowledge, grounds itself and finds repose. Harman describes the world as objects wrapped in objects wrapped in objects; each one sealed off mysteriously from the others while still interacting directly and indirectly. It is as if each object hollers into the mouth of the other's cave: the echo resounds and things are heard, but they are unable to plumb all the way into the depths of the other thing. Cut off in this way, object-oriented-ontology's essences are far from stable foundations on which to build systems of ethical and political certainty, yet one of the most persistent critiques of Object-Oriented-Ontology (OOO) is that its essentialism can only lead to ethical absolutism. Given the general political leftism of the main proponents of OOO, it is important to consider their self-justifications of rejecting the post-modern paradigm of pure relationality.

Does OOO, in rejecting pure relationality, hypostatize abstract universals like Good, Bad, Beautiful, Man, Woman, Marriage and so forth by calling them objects and granting them a mysterious essence? People like Harman, Bryant, and Morton are, it would be safe to say, motivated precisely by the damaging effects that such hypostatizing has had on our world and experience of it. Why not grant that things are real? If we were asked to compile a list of

⁷⁰ Harman, Graham. *Tool Being*. Chicago: Open Court, 2004. p. 173

things that seem to have the most impact in the world, it would be filled with abstract universals and non-empirical objects. Perhaps God would even be at the top. The hand of God is everywhere, despite Reason's dismissal of the concept entirely. The atheist intelligentsia can deconstruct the fiction of God into thin air, but he keeps popping up. So why not just concede some ontological dignity to the idea? An adversary is not nothing, it is an adversary and it makes us think things about it. Zeus caused things to happen, whether he has been relegated to a fictional myth figure or not. The same goes for the Judeo-Christian God. In this regard, OOO's position is not so far from a nominalist position like Michel Onfray's, one of the most virulent anti-theists in Europe. In an explanation of his atheism, Onfray explains, "God exists, for sure, but as a fiction, a character in a novel, a creature useful against the secular rejection of death, a crutch we need in order to deal with the negation that awaits us."⁷¹ Onfray, who I believe is a OOO thinker *avant la lettre*, makes it clear that his

⁷¹ Onfray, Michel. *Manifeste Hedoniste*. Paris: Stock, 2011. p. 24. Fr.: "Car Dieu existe, certes, main comme une fiction, un personnage de roman, une créature utile au déni séculaire de la mort, une béquille nécessaire à la gestion de néant qui nous attend."

Bertrand Russell objects to this dignification of patently false objects, but in doing so, he evinces a belief in an inverted ontological hierarchy in which the objective is privileged, not just temporally, but ontologically. For Russell, the objective watches over the subjective, so to speak, making sure that it does not pretend to equal ontological status. This would seem the surest way to counteract idealism, but OOO suggests that it still does not make sense to privilege the objective, since such privileging depends on an ontological split that is unwarranted. An elegant solution that has already been cited comes from Ian Bogost who suggests that "All things exist, yet they do not exist equally" (Bogost 11), meaning that there is no reason to say that fictional things do not exist on the same plane as objective, "real" things, however, however, they do not exist *in the same way*. Their ontological difference is one of *quality* rather than of degree:

Bertrand Russell, Introduction to *Mathematical Philosophy*: (169-70):

"For want of the apparatus of propositional functions, many logicians have been driven to the conclusion that there are unreal objects. It is argued that we can speak about "the golden mountain," "the round square," and so on; we can make true propositions of which these are the subjects; hence they must have some kind of logical being, since otherwise the propositions in which they occur would be meaningless. In such theories, it seems to me, there is a failure of that feeling for reality which ought to be preserved even in the most abstract studies. Logic, I should maintain, must no more admit a unicorn than zoology can; for logic is concerned with the real world just as truly as zoology, though with its more abstract and general features. To say that unicorns have an existence in heraldry, or in literature, or in imagination, is a most pitiful and paltry evasion. What exists in heraldry is not an animal, made of flesh and blood, moving and breathing of its own initiative. What exists is a picture, or a description in words. Similarly, to maintain that Hamlet, for example, exists in his own world, namely, in the world of Shakespeare's imagination, just as truly as (say) Napoleon existed in the ordinary world, is

staunch materialism does not entail a barren universe devoid of the mystery that fascinates so many idealists and spiritualists: “I defend a materialist ontology and metaphysics: beyond the known physical, there is the unknown physical—and there you have the object of immanent metaphysics”(Onfray 2011: 13).⁷² The “Realism” part of “Speculative Realism” amounts to the same claims. Bryant and Harman are perhaps more explicit about how there will always be an unknown realm that is beyond the probe of knowledge, but Onfray recognizes this too when he celebrates the Epicurean infinitude of the material world. It is not material because it is fathomable by empirical knowledge now or in the future—we simply call it material because it exists. Astrophysics and quantum theory has imagined expanses that may never be fathomable even theoretically, and it gives human kind some perspective about its miniscule place in the cosmos.

None of this is to say that human problems are insignificant, a facile charge leveled against anyone who denies an anthropocentric cosmos. Onfray’s work is generally bent toward existentialist ethics, the reimagination of what humans are capable of doing and should do. But his ontology allows him to dispense with the old paradigms that he finds so noxious. He even echoes Morton’s ecological thesis “Ecology Without Nature,” saying “When those who defend the idea that nature is some kind of transcendental conceptual object, and not a

to say something deliberately confusing, or else confused to a degree which is scarcely credible. There is only one world, the “real” world: Shakespeare’s imagination is part of it, and the thoughts that he had in writing Hamlet are real. So are the thoughts that we have in reading the play. But it is of the very essence of fiction that only the thoughts, feelings, etc., in Shakespeare and his readers are real, and that there is not, in addition to them, an objective Hamlet. When you have taken account of all the feelings roused by Napoleon in writers and readers of history, you have not touched the actual man; but in the case of Hamlet you have come to the end of him. If no one thought about Hamlet, there would be nothing left of him; if no one had thought about Napoleon, he would have soon seen to it that some one did. The sense of reality is vital in logic, and whoever juggles with it by pretending that Hamlet has another kind of reality is doing a disservice to thought. A robust sense of reality is very necessary in framing a correct analysis of propositions about unicorns, golden mountains, round squares, and other such pseudo-objects.

real material reality, end up forgetting nature or appropriating it, this goes hand in hand with contemporary nihilism” (Onfray 2011: 14). For there to be any effective ecology, the *oiko* has to be real, and to be real, it can’t be slave to the human subject; its reality doesn’t depend on our knowing it. Ontologically, God and Madame Bovary exist, just as rebar and quarks do. The former are unreal things, the latter we say are real, but not of them demand a special ontological place.

We may see how Śiva and Uriah Heap may be granted an ontological seat at the table because of their ability to act vicariously on things via their human conduits, but the same applies to other abstract universal fictions. Something like Gender is no more real than God, but its power is just as considerable.⁷³ Modern philosophy impressively deconstructs such things, shattering their idea but leaving their form unscathed; we can intellectually know that Gender is a construction, but why does this not dispel the influence of such an object? What OOO does is show how epistemological triumphs are not always so powerful against ontological bulwarks that stubbornly remain no matter what knowledge claims are made about them. Those claims militarize what are originally neutral entities. We claim to know

⁷² “Je defends une ontologie et une métaphysique matérialistes: après la physique connue, c’est la physique inconnue—voilà l’objet de la métaphysique immanente.”

⁷³ This is not to deny the appearance of certain biological differences between people. However, those biological differences are exaggerated when they are indexed to a hypostetized idea of Gender. Transgender theorist Julia Serrano has the following remarks to make:

“...I believe that both social constructionists and gender essentialists are wrong (or at least they are both only partially right). The fatal flaw of the gender essentialist argument is the obvious fact that not all men are masculine and not all women are feminine. There are *exceptional* gender expressions...” (Serrano 97) And, “...I don not think that there is necessarily any harm in us recognizing that there are two major categories of sex, so long as we realize that these categories are neither discrete nor mutually exclusive, and that we remain respectful of the fact that many people have exceptional sex characteristics and gender inclinations” (104).

In another excellent work on gender and sexual difference, Thomas Laqueur writes, “I have no interest in denying the reality of sexual dimorphism as an evolutionary process. But I want to show on the basis of historical evidence that almost everything one wants to *say* about sex—however sex is understood—already has in it a claim about gender. Sex, in both the one-sex and two-sex worlds, is situational; it is explicable only within the context of battles over gender and power” (Laqueur 11). And, “My goal is to show how a biology of hierarchy in which there is only one sex, a biology of incommensurability between two sexes, and the claim that there is no publicly relevant sexual difference at all, or no sex, have constrained the interpretation of bodies and the strategies of sexual politics for some two thousand years” (23).

what Gender is and then assign it to people with strict orders about how to treat it and what to do so as not to violate its sanctity. Then all of a sudden a kid grows up and finds that her experience does not fit the mold handed down to her. Somebody with bogus knowledge has impinged on the freedom of her body. She has to do this or that with it, she has to get married, she can't ingest this or that, she has to procreate. There are infinite variations on this kind of tragedy. And this is what really matters. To say that OOO denigrates such problems because they are human and humans don't matter that much is either gravely confused or disingenuous. The great victory of relational thinking (a very powerful one that should not be disparaged) is the unveiling of networks that produce things that we may have thought are *sui generis*. OOO does not, despite some of its language that would suggest otherwise, deny this. If anything, networks actually expand, since they are no longer tethered to humanity.

In the first chapter of this *The Democracy of Objects*, and in a series of earnest posts on his *Larval Subjects* blog, Levi Bryant addresses the political criticism of OOO with grace and force:

Oil and fossil fuels are an *organizing* set of entities within our social assemblages. A big part of changing our social world—not the *only* part—consists in responding to these nonhuman actors and how they organize relations among human actors...⁷⁴ We find

⁷⁴ <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2012/05/29/worries-about-ooo-and-politics/>

There is too much rich material from the same post to quote at length above:

“With my ontology, I have proposed a praxis called “terraism” as integral to political practice. Terraism has three dimensions to it: cartography, deconstruction, and construction. Cartography is a mapping of social assemblages that discerns what actors or entities are present in the assemblage (signifiers, ideologies, people, groups, bubonic plague bacteria, toilets, rice, etc.), how they are linked together, and how these assemblages are organized or what power or gravity they generate in perpetuating certain ongoing patterns of relation. Deconstruction is the practice of strategic intervention designed to target those various entities that exercise power or gravity in particular ways so as to produce social change. Such interventions can be of the semiotic-critical variety such as Žižek, Adorno, or Foucault practices that we're all familiar with, but can also consist in more material interventions such as changing finance law to blunt the power of corporations. Construction, finally, consists in building new assemblages through the introduction of new discourses (as OWS has done in the American situation), introducing plumbing and irrigation in impoverished parts of the world, building alternative ways of living in fossil fuel economies, and so on. OOO does not so much reject representation, the discursive, and signification as see it as one element in an assemblage among others.”

ourselves surprised when we've adequately critiqued and debunked signifying systems and the social system *doesn't change*. Perhaps this would clue us into the possibility that perhaps there are other actors involved in these social assemblages, holding people in place in particular ways.

Morton is concerned with the same thing when he theorizes "hyperobjects" like uranium and styrofoam, as well as abstract entities like climate, global warming, racial tension etc.⁷⁵, which Bryant puts into context clearly:

What Morton's concept of hyperobjects opens is the possibility of thinking the fraught interactions of a *variety* of different hyperobjects such as economy, technospheres (Stiegler), culture, language, and so on, and how they enter into both conflictual relations with one another while also locally manifesting one another in a variety of ways. We get a rich ecological concept of (non)-relations among different objects at all levels of scale without being able to reduce any one object to another.⁷⁶

The dignification of the objective world is what Nietzsche was talking about when he called the body our faculty of "Great Reason" and that philosophy should stop its foolhardy explorations of the transcendental and focus on food, the earth, water, and air. Our neighboring entities are far more interesting than we usually give them credit for, unless we

⁷⁵ In Morton's own words:

"In a previous post I argued that hyperobjects are viscous—they adhere to you no matter how hard to try to pull away, rendering ironic distance obsolete. Now I'll argue that they are also nonlocal. That is, hyperobjects are massively distributed in time and space such that any particular (local) manifestation never reveals the totality of the hyperobject.

When you feel raindrops falling on your head, you are experiencing climate, in some sense. In particular you are experiencing the climate change known as global warming. But you are never directly experiencing global warming as such. Nowhere in the long list of catastrophic weather events—which will increase as global warming takes off—will you find global warming. But global warming is as real as this sentence. Not only that, it's viscous. It never stops sticking to you, no matter where you move on planet Earth.

How can we account for this? By arguing that global warming, like all hyperobjects, is nonlocal: it's massively distributed in time and space. What does this mean? It means that my experience of the weather in the hic et nunc is a false immediacy. It's *never the case* that those raindrops only fall on my head! They are always a manifestation of global warming! In an age of ecological emergency—in an age in which hyperobjects start to oppress us with their terrifying strangeness—we will have to get used to the fact that locality is always a false immediacy."

— <http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com/2010/11/hyperobjects-are-nonlocal.html>

⁷⁶ <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2010/11/11/hyperobjects-and-ooo/>

are naturalists or mountaineers, and we are much more the product of other things than those things are the product of anything we have done.

Onfray, mostly known for his atheology and anti-platonic ethics, takes up Nietzsche's challenge in many volumes of his prolific corpus, including *The Philosophers' Belly* and his lyrical exploration oenology and metaphysics, *The Forms of Time: a Theory of Sauternes*.⁷⁷ Here, Onfray meditates on the very "ancestral time" before humans, which is so important for Meillassoux, through the development of biological life, and finally to the production of the fine, fragile, and expensive sweet wines from the little Sauternais corner of Bordeaux, France.⁷⁸ Generally, Onfray is content with the Epicurean world and thinks that we have only made things worse since then, starting with Plato and his successors. The Epicurean world is one of things and the products of things—epiphenomena that can be extremely complex, but

⁷⁷ From <http://www.easy-french-food.com/sauterne-wine.html#.UAMaDo7mue4> :
"What Makes Sauternes Different?"

Whereas a Sauterne wine is made from many different combinations of grapes, the grapes used to elaborate Sauternes are specifically the same used to make other Bordeaux white wines (although in different proportions): Sémillon, Sauvignon blanc, and Muscadelle. While they are still on the vine, these grapes are exposed to humid nights and damp mornings as mist rising from the nearby confluence of the Garonne and Ciron rivers spreads across the vineyards. And as we all know, where there's humidity, there is mold. Yes, Sauternes is made from moldy grapes! The mold that develops on these grapes is no ordinary mold, however. This is *pourriture noble* or noble rot and it is this that distinguishes Sauternes from other sweet white wines. Because small changes in weather conditions can have large effects on the development of noble rot, Sauternes can not be produced consistently every year, and you should be careful to buy a reputed vintage if you are going to enjoy a Sauternes. Even within the small region where Sauternes can be officially produced, there are pronounced differences in the soil. These differences also play a large part in determining the final quality of the wine. It is officially considered that the cream of the crop of Sauternes wine comes from Château d'Yquem. Enjoying a *Château d'Yquem Premier Cru Supérieur* could be considered a peak life experience and would certainly never be confused with drinking a Sauterne wine. A good Sauternes becomes denser and more flavorful as it ages. They are among the rare white wines that can and should be enjoyed at 20, 50 and even 100 years!"

⁷⁸ Onfray, Michel. *Les Formes du temps: Théorie du Sauternes*. Paris: Mollat, 2009.

As an appendix, in the spirit of Charles Fourier's great *Hierarchies of Cuckoldry*, Onfray offers a taxonomy of times: "genealogical time; immemorial time; geological time; congealed time; spatial time; primitive time; anarchic time; cyclical time; discernible time; seminal time; tragic time; circular time; natural time; cultural time; singular time; pantheistic time; aleatory time; meteorological time; climatological time; ontological time; negating time; destructive time; affirming time; federating time; augustinian time; transfigured time; slowed time; modified time; sculpted time; entropic time; agricultural time; chronometric time; slow time; hurried time; irenic time; magic time; insipid time; technological time; georgic time; feudal time; alchemical time; chemical time; hedonistic time;

which do not require separate ontological strata. It is possible to string an elegant thread through all the different eras and types of existence. Early in *The Forms of Time*, Onfray describes the story of the pre-conscious world, the condensation of the oceans, the bubbling of lava, and the crystallization of stones. During that time, already, fundamental categories like relation, being, movement, and vitality were in play. They were not instantiated by the language of humans, or any other human operation. For Onfray, the presocratics grasped this with their metaphysics and were able to account for it with their stories about the world.

The emergence of the earth is the inauguration of *the real*. Its appearance between disorder and love, between an enduring absence of meaning and the beginnings of an already present meaning, is the birth of *relation*. Out of the real and relation, out of the earth and its possibilities, surges *Being*. The presocratics developed a number of poetic variations on this theme. The tragedy of castration became a metaphor for separation and of a cutting that preserves the autonomy of identities. It allows for things to flow, and thus is responsible for *movement*. Hence vitality, energy, and flux make up the *world*. The real, relation, being, and movement are what constitute it. Could we ask for a more lovely metaphysics?⁷⁹

The object-oriented philosophers are, I believe, aiming at the same understanding as Onfray's epicurean materialism. First it is important to appreciate the way things work independently from the presence of humans who introduce so much confusion into the world with their advent. Once we can imagine the prehuman world, with the help of natural science and whatever other disciplines we have access to, we can then think differently about the human place in networks that had already achieved incredible complexity before humans were ever around. Onfray describes the process of going back in time through our contrived disciplines to uncover the subtle transition between the unconscious, aleatory world to one that becomes conscious and starts to recognize cycles and patterns:

dionysic time; spermatic time; elementary time; human time; wrought time; magnified time; transcended time; sublimated time; local time; global time; pinpoint time; compressed time; quintessential time; multiple time (87).

⁷⁹ Onfray, 2009:20.

Genealogy, geology, mythology, geography, cartography, and etymology: there are many paths leading to Sauternais which carry us from primitive and immemorial times to those more recent. From the traces of stones to those of names—mineralogy and onomastics, from roiling oceans to the roots of words, eternity is rendered less imperious when cut into more modest periods. Boiled down to its essence, time becomes palpable, it becomes incarnate in the objects it haunts like memories. Inside this earth, so full of magical soils, there is another time in gestation, one of roots and seminal forces. Out of chaos emerges the first kind of time that we have access to. It is no longer anarchical, but cyclical.⁸⁰

Prior to that there was only the mad activity of climatological, meteorological, geological, and other types of time completely beyond the pale of any Apollonian epistemology that imposed any order to it. But this Apollonian knowledge is all that we have, it is structurally indelible from us as humans inscribed into this universe, and so it must be used to enhance our immanence, since only immanence can make us feel at home in the only place that we have.

Here, Onfray starts to sound surprisingly like Harman with his dignification of objects:

No need for anthropomorphism or ecologicistic projection, no more discourses inspired by earthly and earthy logics in which the soil, just like blood and race, is associated with some metaphysics or mysticism. Rather, there are just elements, and combinations, that provide new material and help us think differently. This is important because we need a poetic materialism in order to express the forces and give shape to the forms that orbit around objects, things, matter. In this way of thinking, there is nothing but concern for the immanent that recalls in many ways the practices of pre-socratic philosophers in places like Ephesus, Milet, Velia, Klazomenai, Agrigento, and other sunny terrains (48).

Thus, objects, the fundamental building blocks of the universe, are to be understood; but is philosophical cerebration the most efficient way of doing this? A true Epicurean, Onfray proposes that objects and the mysteries they hold are probably best understood through direct consumption, direct interaction, a transgressing of boundaries between us and them. Hence, his study of wine and where it came from. He hails from a country where few things have more cultural and economic influence than wine, yet wine culture and wine economy are not *sui generis* fields. They emerge from a network that started with the formation of the most

⁸⁰ Onfray 2009: 23.

fundamental objects, object that began their journey billions of years ago and carry those immense histories inside of them:

Drinking a wine is to fill yourself with time that has been sculpted, wrought, worked upon, and which is capable of nourishing a soul that is subject to entropy. There where time, which passes and manifests, becomes consubstantial with a body, we accomplish a transfer of energy as real as it is symbolic, in which the drinker partakes of an eternity that preceded the liquid, in a way. An imbibed Sauternes is less a content [of a bottle] than a container [whose contents] we incorporate into us (80).

Do these descriptions of things entail strict and dogmatic foundationalism and essentialism that are irreconcilable with Nancy and damning for Hegelianism? I believe they more a matter of style and rhetorical emphasis, which I will explore in the next chapter. The bottom line is that these figurations are compelling alternative to our habitual appeals to theological transcendence, ontological dualism, anthropocentric essentialism and so forth. These theories do not pigeonhole all things into hierarchical metaphysical orders, so that these orders do not spill out into concrete social and political hierarchies. They allow that history bungled along in an interesting but aleatory cacophony, and they do not demand that all history, for it to have any meaning, must travel through the conduit of the European theist and his cultural accretions.

III.

10.

Language and Metaphor

The preceding chapters have been largely concerned with the ill affects teleology has on the world and the people within it, as well as the faulty bases for beliefs in teleology. These beliefs inscribe themselves in exclusionary theories that lead to exclusionary canons, which lead to exclusionary attitudes and prejudices. It is not true that Europeans or theists are the only people in the world who believe in teleology; rather, Europeans, with particular intellectual resources in combination with aleatory circumstance such as geography, soil, food, and germs,⁸¹ arrived at certain positions. They then enhanced their theories to justify those positions. But it is even likely that advancements in knowledge marched along in spite of the dead weight of theo-teleological beliefs.⁸² The versions of history built up around these beliefs

⁸¹ I have already mentioned Nietzsche's concern with these topics, as well as Onfray's attempt to understand them better. For a popular and clear exposition of history as aleatory, see Jared M. Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.

⁸² For example, see Ray Brassier's point on this:

“As for nihilism and religion: well, religion's rational credibility can be rebuked without evoking modern science or nihilism: Democritus and Epicurus did so over two thousand years ago, using arguments that are still valid today, even if theists prefer to ignore them. But of course, the irrationality of religious belief has never impeded its flourishing; indeed, it is precisely what immunizes it against rational refutation, since religion is designed to satisfy psychological needs, not rational requirements. Marx was right: religion will never be eradicated until the need for it evaporates. Obviously, this evaporation will have to be accomplished practically as well as cognitively.

I have not read Meillassoux's *L'inexistence divine* so do not know what sorts of arguments he adduces to legitimate the hypothesis of an inexistent 'God-to-come'. I am sure they will be exceptionally ingenious. But I remain skeptical, since I see no need for any such hypothesis. Indeed, I view this continuing philosophical fascination with monotheism as deeply pernicious and think a moratorium ought to be declared to prevent any further 'God talk' by philosophers. I do not think it mere coincidence that the critique of scientific rationality in much 20th century philosophy goes hand in hand with a revival of theological themes. Religion obviously satisfies deep-seated human needs, but it has been a cognitive catastrophe that has continually impeded epistemic progress—contrary to the pernicious revisionism that claims monotheism was always on the side of science and truth. Human knowledge has progressed in spite of religion, never because of it. Philosophers should simply have no truck with it.”

do not respect the individual peoples and events that history is made of. They describe the people and events of the world in metaphorical language that bears the weight of chauvinistic attitudes and habits. These descriptive metaphors, which are not essential but fungible, are then interpolated into the diachronic history of the world and are taken for expressions of its essence. By looking at the ways that such metaphors are constructed and change over time, we can disabuse ourselves of believing they are linked to transcendent referents, and thus open ourselves to alternative, hopefully more expansive and inclusive, understandings of history.

Each thinker I have emphasized, from Hegel to Kojève, to Harman and Onfray, has cultivated and employed a unique voice in order to communicate their message. Not only do these writers represent different languages, they choose qualitatively different terminologies, focusing on certain images and not others, and using metaphors to express insights that are difficult to express directly. When we compare Hegel's most famous metaphors to the more recent thinkers, questions arise about the implications of Hegel's emphasis on violence and struggle. Were his metaphors of master, slave, desire, and alienation the only way to express his insight? Do those metaphors share something essential with the content of the things they describe? When he speaks of violent historical events, figures like Napoleon, abstract terms like the Oriental, African, or the Trinity, are these terms essential and fixed to some definite referent, or are they also symbolic and therefore interchangeable with other words that would carry different significances?

Hegel, of course, is not alone in couching his discoveries in the discourse of struggle. It is well known that Darwin was deeply influenced by the social theory of Thomas Malthus,

and many of the metaphors that Darwin used to explain natural selection were borrowed from the struggle-ridden worldview of Malthus and realist social scientists. To summarize, in his *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Malthus analyzed the issue of overcrowding in London, concluding that populations are self-regulating, and that the mechanism by which they regulate themselves is economics (or more simply, food). That is, when a population becomes more comfortable economically, as London was at the dawn of the industrial revolution, people have more children. At some point, the new generations end up consuming the resources that were there to sustain them, and those who fail to secure enough resources starve or get sick and die off. Thus, populations remain relatively stable, despite the economic and cultural changes they go through. This made perfect sense to Darwin, who had observed the mysterious homeostasis of animal populations for many decades. Darwin was able to extrapolate this elegant explanation, finding it an adequate framework for explaining how populations of all species maintain their numbers over time. However, Darwin added the important amendment to Malthus' theory, explaining that stability was not really an end in itself. Stability is only significant insofar as the individuals of a stable population carry heritable traits, so when those traits are passed from generation to generation according to the individual organism's success at staying alive, over time there is "*change in adaptive structure in a population.*"⁸⁵

Part of what made Malthus' analysis compelling was the cold hard look it gave to pure survival as the underlying issue of economic and cultural activities. His London was roughly the same as that of Dickens' *Hard Times* and *Bleak House*—not a pretty picture. Cholera, starvation, and general filth were serious problems. The countryside, where conditions were Spartan, was sparsely populated, while London, teeming with resources, was overcrowded.

⁸⁵ Carroll, Joseph. Introduction to *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin. Ontario: Broadview, 2003. p 49.

The competition for resources was just waiting to be theorized, and Malthus answered the call. His theory made even more sense in light of the social and economic conditions that he emerged from, and that were possible only in England at that time: a leisure class bourgeoisie that could choose whether or not to have children based on the resources they were able to guarantee for them. Children had come to resemble pets in England—objects of financial expenditure—whereas in most of the world, as in the third world today, they were still seen as a reliable means for a family to secure more resources in the long run. Given these circumstances in England at the time, Malthus' theory of population did well to explain many facets to London's population problem, and could reasonably be extended and applied to some other major urban centers with similar conditions. When we observe the life of the poor (who are the majority of the world's population) existence is indeed a struggle full of injustice, cruelty, and violence. Hence, when Darwin read Malthus' metaphor of human existence as a struggle, he immediately saw how the same holds for the animal kingdom (he was deeply moved by his observation of the wasp that lays its eggs inside of a host and then eats its way out of the host). The metaphor even held for plant populations in which the organisms that get more light and water survive, and those that get less die. Since his audience was the lettered English bourgeoisie, all of whom had witnessed the animal like struggles of the poor of London or some other urban center, the "struggle" metaphor resonated deeply with the common sense argument he was presenting through the ample empirical evidence contained in his great works like the *Origin*, *The Descent of Man*, and his less synthetic but exhaustive study of barnacles, *A Monograph of the Cirripedia*. When one organism perishes for lack of resources, while its neighbor thrives when those resources are obtained, it makes sense for any human to compare this to competition, to the struggle that each of us has known to whatever small

degree. The expression does not account for everything, it merely helps us think about how the systems he is describing work.

Darwin was keenly self-aware about his use of Malthusian “struggle” in his theory of evolution. D.P. Todes, in a rich study of Darwin’s “struggle” metaphor, *Darwin Without Malthus*, quotes him at length:

I use the term Struggle for Existence in a large and metaphorical sense, including dependence of one being on another, and including (which is more important) not only the life of the individual, but success in leaving progeny. Two canine animals in a time of dearth, may be truly said to struggle with each other which shall get food and live. But a plant on the edge of a desert is said to struggle for life against the drought, though more properly it should be said to be dependent on the moisture. A plant which annually produces a thousand seeds, of which on an average only one comes to maturity, may be more truly said to struggle with the plants of the same and other kinds which already clothe the ground. The missletoe is dependent on the apple and a few other trees, but can only in a far-fetched sense be said to struggle with these trees, for if too many of these parasites grow on the same tree, it will languish and die. But several seedling missletoes, growing close together on the same branch, may more truly be said to struggle with each other. As the missletoe is disseminated by birds, its existence depends on birds; and it may metaphorically be said to struggle with other fruit-bearing plants, in order to tempt birds to devour and thus disseminate its seeds rather than those of other plants. In these several senses, which pass into each other, I use for convenience sake the general term of struggle for existence.⁸⁴

As central to the struggle for existence was the notion of “natural selection.” Quite literally, this meant the inheritance of traits dependent on the processes of nature, as opposed to the decision of man or deity. In the *Origin* Darwin confronts early criticism of this expression:

Others have objected that the term selection implies conscious choice in the animals which become modified; and it has even been urged that, as plants have no volition, natural selection is not applicable to them! In the literal sense of the word, no doubt, natural selection is a false term; but who ever objected to chemists speaking of the elective affinities of the various elements? —and yet an acid cannot strictly be said to elect the base with which it in preference combines. It has been said that I speak of natural selection as an active power or Deity; but who objects to an author speaking of the attraction of gravity as ruling the movements of the planets? Every one knows what is meant and is implied by such metaphorical expressions; and they are almost necessary for brevity. So again it is difficult to avoid personifying the word Nature; but I mean by Nature, only the aggregate action and product of many natural laws, and by

⁸⁴ Todes, Daniel Philip. *Darwin Without Malthus*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989. p. 8.

laws the sequence of events as ascertained by us. With a little familiarity such superficial objections will be forgotten.⁸⁵

Yet both of these metaphors have been persistent stumbling blocks: they either prevent certain readers from embracing the theory because of possible ethical and political consequences of using violent or pseudo-teleological metaphors, or these metaphors appeal too much to certain readers who are eager to buttress their own violent or teleological world-views. He is rightly respected as an elegant stylist, and part of his success rested on his ability to clearly express his scientific discoveries with a wide audience. Not only did Darwin's discoveries throw some light upon the causes of Malthusian urban squalor, they also contributed profoundly to the millennia-old discourse around the problem of evil and injustice. Theology had still not been able to give satisfying answers to why there always seems to be struggle despite an omnibenevolent Deity, but Darwin, however reluctant he was to step onto theological ground, offered the insight that struggle was a deeply structural part of biological life in general—something that could be understood and perhaps mollified, but not entirely avoided. Despite his emphasis on struggle and “selection,” these were not the only metaphors he employed. Looking at the plant kingdom, he spoke of life as an “entangled bank”⁸⁶ of interdependence, and he compared the diversity of biological forms to a “great tree.”⁸⁷ He even used a geometrical, carpenter's simile in which “Nature may be compared to a yielding surface, with ten thousand sharp wedges packed close together and driven inwards by incessant blows, sometimes one wedge being struck, and then another with greater force.”⁸⁸ And, famously, he uses the expression “contrivances”⁸⁹ when speaking about the specialized

⁸⁵ Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. The Harvard Classics. Charles W. Eliot ed. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14. vol 11. Ch. IV para. 2. (This quotation missing from the Broadview edition.)

⁸⁶ Darwin 2003 p. 397 (*Origin* ch. 14, final paragraph).

⁸⁷ *ibid.* 176

⁸⁸ *ibid.* 136

⁸⁹ *ibid.* 211

functions of the different parts of the eyeball, without for a minute believing that they were literally “contrived” by an intelligent designer. Despite his use of these important metaphors, Darwin is always associated with struggle and “survival of the fittest.” When his views are reduced to these metaphors in their most literal senses, the result is egregious misunderstanding:

This biased account of Darwin's thinking has had two unfortunate consequences. First, it has given to the idea of struggle the form of *polarized struggle* between two opposed forces (as in human warfare, or as in a contest between Breeder and Nature). In Darwin's own thinking, "struggle" clearly means something else: the complex interplay of many factors, leading to the differential survival of organisms, depending on their varying adaptation to all the conditions of life.

Second, this biased account of Darwin's thinking puts all the emphasis on forces of selection and destruction in nature, those aspects of the entire process in which stronger organisms flourish and weaker ones die, depicting a world of nothing but winners and losers. But this selective use of Darwin's ideas destroys the dialectical unity of his thought. The creative and explosively productive metaphors of contrivance, tangled bank, and branching tree were equally essential features of Darwin's image of nature.⁹⁰

Even a contemporary leftist biologist like Richard Dawkins employs the terminology of an “evolutionary arms race” and describes all biological forms as being interconnected in a vast “solar economy.”⁹¹ These metaphors are chosen to help the audience visualize the complex systems being explained. Of course it is unlikely that any non-human biological forms have any awareness of an “arms race,” however, since Dawkins’ audience consists of post-Cold War Anglophones, he uses a metaphor of competition—invoking the threat of extinction—that resonates with those who have lived through that particular geopolitical era. Dawkins’ metaphors absorb and reflect the cultural conditions surrounding him and his audience, just as those of Malthus and Darwin reflected the reality of Victorian English bourgeoisie. Thus, while such culturally specific metaphors may help specific audiences assimilate the material

⁹⁰ Howard Gruber quoted in Todes 1989 p. 19

⁹¹ Dawkins 2009 ch. 12

being described, they sometimes have an alienating affect on those who do not share the same cultural presuppositions. Such was the case with the reception of evolutionary theory in post-Revolutionary Soviet Russia.

Steeped as they were in Marxist anti-competitive values, Soviet intellectuals were at first generally repulsed by Darwin's ideas, particularly those couched in the discourse of struggle, competition, and survival of the fittest. The entire communist ethos was built on the concept of harmony and mutual aid, and they were convinced that these things were more powerful and more creative than mere selfish competition. Therefore, to posit struggle and competition as the generative forces of evolution was to construct a craven worldview in which all hellish crimes are justified.

Unlike England with its overpopulated urban centers and limited usable land and resources, Russia was nothing but vast swathes of pristine forests, steppes, mountains and plains containing unlimited resources. While it had its own aristocracy, there was nothing like England's leisured bourgeoisie whose procreative habits depended upon the resources available to sustain their offspring. It's resources could sustain populations hundreds of times its size, so competition was not necessarily the prevailing issue in Russia, but lack of mutual aid and harmony, both of which were goals of the communist regime. What did Marx call for, if not the elimination of superfluous suffering caused by competition and exploitation?

Coming from such a point of view, many Russian intellectuals criticized Darwin's theories, not because of any faulty scientific methodology, but because of the noxious Malthusian metaphors they contained. Todes explains how, for the Russians,

The problem, then, lay, not in Darwin's theory itself, but in the false analogy between struggle in the natural and social worlds. In nature struggle was a necessary, "fundamental fact" and the essential cause of organic development. In society it was the artificial product of exploitative economic relations and the source of human misery. Only in "the language of a poet" did the struggle for capital, the battle of landowners

and factory owners among themselves and against workers, have anything in common with "the struggle of some mollusk with an ammonite (38).

This criticism is sound, except that it should be leveled against Darwin's more Malthusian interpreters than against Darwin himself. While Darwin certainly saw competition and struggle as powerful forces for evolutionary change, he never explicitly claimed that such struggle was necessarily beneficial—it simply occurred and should be accounted for. Russia's preeminent 19th century botanist, Nikolaevich Beketov, chose to transpose Darwin's theories, which he generally praised, into a more felicitous metaphor of harmony. Harmony, he felt, served equally well as a heuristic metaphor for understanding the science of evolution, but it did not carry the deleterious political and ethical consequences that went along with the discourse of struggle. Todes explains:

He praised Darwin and Wallace for demonstrating the evolutionary role of the struggle for existence, but warned naturalists not to substitute this metaphor for a more rigorous, mechanical appraisal of organic relations. Beketov insisted, as he had earlier with respect to his own metaphor of harmony, that the struggle for existence must ultimately be understood as "simply the interaction of general physical forces at greater or lesser complexity." Only by demystifying the struggle for existence—by breaking it down into its component parts and understanding it in terms of physical laws—could science develop the ideas "at the foundation of the great theories of Lamarck and Darwin."(55).

However, if Beketov and other Soviet scientists based their criticisms on the ideological baggage that went along with the struggle metaphor, it is not difficult to see how their own metaphorical choices were not untainted by metaphysical assumptions. In one essay, Beketov writes, "The Creator did not establish immutable laws in order that chaotic phenomena would predominate over harmonious ones."⁹² Thus, for Beketov, science was still a kind of theodicy. It was just a matter of recognizing the order and harmony of God's creation; this knowledge would lead us to knowledge of God himself. And those Soviet scientists who had relinquished

⁹² Todes p. 61

theism were not necessarily freer from ideological projection. Most of them were already looking for evidence in the animal and plant world that would point toward the universal truths embodied in Ideas like Harmony and Mutual Aid. Encouraged by an observation of bees working together for the common good, or a cat adopting stray kittens, they often jumped to the conclusion that such instances pointed teleologically, toward some ultimate harmony that was the unachieved birthright of all biological entities. Darwin, as I have mentioned, argued no such thing. While Malthus may have claimed that struggle and unfortunate demographic purges were necessary in order to achieve sustainable homeostasis, Darwin never argued that the calamities of existence that we encounter everywhere are good or bad. Of course they are bad insofar as we are sentient being who must endure them, but they point to nothing on the horizon, there is no eschatological purpose to the events of the world, nor do they reflect a universal metaphysical order. Metaphysical disorder is precisely what generates movement, vitality, change, and life.

Another prominent Soviet botanist, Sergei Korzhinski, continued the Russian criticism of the Malthus-Darwin struggle metaphor, proposing an alternative theory called heterogenesis. This theory argued that it was not struggle that produced evolutionary change, but lack of struggle. In fact, struggle is what inhibits creative change, which is a natural capacity of all things.⁹³ Given enough conducive circumstances, an organism, in its own life or through successive generations, will naturally adapt to its surroundings and spin off new and various forms of itself. Often these new forms immediately perish, but when conditions allow, they survive and count for an addition to the biological “tree of life.”⁹⁴ Thus, “In order to

⁹³ An interesting comparison can be made here to Graham Harman’s vacuum-sealed, volcanic objects that forever sit upon a vast store of power to change. When an object does change, it is not entirely attributable to exogenous circumstances, but to its own capacity to *be* differently. The exogenous forces act on it vicariously.

⁹⁴ Todes p. 79

understand the origin of higher forms from lower ones it is necessary to allow for the existence in organisms of a special tendency to progress, either connected to or identical with a tendency to variation, and which leads organisms to improve, insofar as external conditions permit." However, like Beketov, Korzhinski adheres to a teleological metaphysics. His organisms are objects that continually emanate their own progress, yet this progress is usually chipped away by the non-conducive circumstances that surround it and cause its outgrowths to immediately wilt and evaporate. Things naturally tend toward their own perfection, and if only struggle and competition could be eliminated, they would achieve it. For Korzhinski,

The superiority of the theory of heterogenesis was "especially striking" when "we transfer our conclusions to the world of human relations." Everybody knew that in human society "hunger and need do not lead to progress" and that "adaptation does not at all signify improvement." Individuals and entire peoples remained ignorant and backward if preoccupied with the need to acquire their daily bread. Many great intellects had been physically weak and sickly, and would surely have perished had their lives been too trying. Nor were great cultural figures, who constituted "the pride of humanity," always well adapted to their environment—sometimes they remained entirely unrecognized by their contemporaries. Conversely, adaptation to one's environment often attested to a weakness, rather than strength, of character (Todes 80).

At the level of plants and animals, Korzhinski's theory relies heavily on an inference about the mysterious change-capacity that dwells within each organism. So while it may not satisfy all standards of rigorous empirical scientific method, its conclusions do indeed ring true when applied to human kind. While Anglo-Saxon thinkers like Mill and Smith believed that thriving minds and vibrant, humanistic culture depended upon faculty-sharpening competition, they would admit that no high-order mental activity would be possible in conditions of serious depravity. These thinkers, who were strong influences on Malthus and Darwin, argue that human beings need a certain base-level of comfort in order to live up to their potential as human beings, and within this realm of relative stability, they can then

engage in non-mortal competition with each other. It is not true that Smith's capitalism advocates cold disregard for those who fail to keep pace, as contemporary neo-liberals would have it. The same author of the *Wealth of Nations* founded his entire system on his equally important, but almost universally ignored *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which establishes empathy as the single most important feature of human nature. Far from praising unfettered competition or condoning exploitation as inevitable, Smith argues that every sane human has a moral imperative to restrain themselves from harming the interests of others. This imperative takes precedence over the virtue of competition and the individual liberties it feeds on.⁹⁵ The same truths hold for Mill who advocates for the maximum possible amount of individual freedom, as long as the enjoyment of that freedom does not impinge on the freedom of others.⁹⁶ In these systems, ethics becomes an ongoing calculus that demands one's full attention at all times. It is not acceptable to make an excuse out of "following one's nature" since one's nature is reflexive and capable of self-criticism, empathy, and restraint. For Smith and Mill, there are no adequate metaphors that express the complexity of human behavior, and their writings are reflect such distrust. Smith, of course, employs his famous "invisible hand" metaphor to explain markets' tendency to regulate themselves, but his *Moral Sentiments* is generally a straight-forward description of human psychology. Mill too, avoids metaphor at all costs, writing more like a lawyer than a philosopher from the country of Shakespeare and

⁹⁵ Quotations like the following one abound: "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it." - Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Amherst: Prometheus, 2000. p. 3

⁹⁶ "The maxims are, first, that the individual is not accountable to society for his actions, in so far as these concern the interests of no person but himself. Advice, instruction, persuasion, and avoidance by other people, if thought necessary by them for their own good, are the only measures by which society can justifiably express its dislike or disapprobation of his conduct. Secondly, that for such actions as are prejudicial to the interests of others, the individual is accountable, and may be subjected either to social or to legal punishments, if society is of

Hobbes. In his *A System of Logic*, Mill explains the ambiguity-creating quality of metaphors, which is why he did his best to leave them out of his own writing:

And one of the commonest forms of fallacious reasoning arising from ambiguity, is that of arguing from a metaphorical expression as if it were literal; that is, as if a word, when applied metaphorically, were the same name as when taken in its original sense: which will be seen more particularly in its place.⁹⁷

Had Mill written after Darwin and Malthus, he may have taken exception to their use of metaphor in the place of clear denotation. As we have seen, the metaphors of struggle and natural selection were misinterpreted in just the way Mill warned against. Their metaphors were unable to transcend their cultural milieu which was still tied tightly to the teleological thought of Christian theology, and so Darwin's metaphors were imputed with a teleology they did not have—the same teleology present in Hegel's history of the world: a belief in inexorable progress toward perfection. By presenting the structural truths of the natural world as universal metaphors, Darwin set himself up for criticisms that did a better job of appreciating the complexities of human psychology. Thinking like Smith and Mill, the nineteenth century Russian scientist Ilya Mechnikov reflected on Darwin's *Descent of Man*:

Two tribes conflict, not because the means for survival are inadequate for their large numbers, but as a result of mutual hatred and the desire to enslave others; generally, from laziness and the desire to exploit another. Consider an example. On an island resides a certain number of people with plentiful resources for their existence. Still, there is a lazy person among them who will exploit others based on his simple desire to do nothing, in other words, to satisfy his desire for idleness. Being shrewder, he becomes richer and stronger, without working, than his industrious, but less shrewd neighbors. Here the source of inequality, and consequently of struggle, lies not in heightened reproduction but in human inclinations. Therefore, we see that even in a country where there are many sources of nourishment (even Russia) there appears a struggle conditioned by inequality (Todes 91).

opinion that the one or the other is requisite for its protection." — Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1998. p. 104

⁹⁷ Mill, John Stuart. *A System of Logic*. Project Gutenberg [Ebook #27942]. Release Date: January 31, 2009 p. 45

This passage alludes not only to Malthus and Darwin's metaphors, but also the famous Hegelian metaphor of master and slave.

The master-slave metaphor is so central to Hegel *Phenomenology* that Kojève isolated it as the essence of Hegel's thought. Just as animal life was based on one beast's ability to dominate another to ensure its own survival, human life is a perpetual struggle for recognition and power. This is true on the scale of an individual lifespan, as well as human history as a whole. What gives human history this character is the metaphysical truth that supports it. Always thinking in fractals, Hegel posits that events that play out objectively are following the same movement of individual subjectivity, which also reflects a more universal movement of a more universal Spirit, that permeates both the individual subjective realm and the objective realm of history. In the abstract discourse of consciousness, an individual subject undergoes a struggle in which it finds itself in opposition to an object and is bewildered. It perceives a gulf between itself and the object, something is different between the two. Given this unsettling feeling, it assumes that the object is real, and somehow, it is false, its essence is not there within itself, but perhaps out there in the vault of the object. However, a reflection occurs in which the subject realizes that the object is an object by virtue of its opposition to the subject. The object owes its identity to the subject; it indeed holds part of the subject's essence within it, but that essence becomes accessible again to the subject, so it is no longer alienated.

This abstract and subtle phenomenological process describes the way in which consciousness makes sense of itself and the world, and becomes self-consciousness. It describes the developments of a sense of relation and interdependence between things, rather than one in which consciousness sadly trundles along, unable to enjoy its own essence and always longing after it. That is what Hegel calls the unhappy consciousness, and it, as we saw earlier, is the essence of Hegelianism for Hyppolite.

At this level of subtle, individual phenomenology, which is the focus of Hyppolite and Nancy, this process uses gentle terms like reflection, recognition, comprehend, web, mingling, mediation, movement etc. But transposed to the register of outer human history, it adopts the more violent metaphor of master-slave and its attendant verbs and adjectives. Human beings, motivated by the “desire” for recognition, confront one another; the one that is willing to risk its own “annihilation” “dominates” the “weaker” who becomes the “slave” while he becomes the “master;” the slave feels that he is dependent on the master, who can destroy him, and thus he is alienated from his own essence; however, the master is unfulfilled by his relationship to the slave, since the slave’s inferiority make his recognition meaningless; moreover, the master lives off of the slave’s labor; they both start to realize this, and with the recognition of their interdependence, the tables are turned and the slave becomes reunited with his essence, while the master must go through what the slave just went through.

This metaphor mirrors exactly the movement of the phenomenological subject, and it seems to explain a lot about the undeniably violent character of human activity. However, does the master-slave metaphor say exactly what it means? If we concede that it is indeed a metaphor, then its meaning is not entirely straightforward. It is not to be taken literally, and if it is taken literally, it can be dangerous, as we saw when Darwin’s metaphor of struggle was taken literally by nazi social Darwinists. We may not object to the gentle way that the subject-object dialectic is described in Hegel’s *Logic* and early in the *Phenomenology*, but if we start to believe that the master-slave dialectic is an *exact* mapping out of the same process in concrete life, then the language of that dialectic may have serious affects on our orientation to the world. Hyppolite, in his exhaustive commentary on the *Phenomenology*, writes about the master-slave dialectic, “Human consciousness can take shape **only** through this **anguish** throughout the *whole* of its being. At that point, specific attachments, the dispersion of life in

more or less stable forms, disappear, and in that **fear** man becomes cognizant of the totality of his being"⁹⁸ [bolds added]. This suggests that the master-slave metaphor is therefore the only possible way to express the development of human consciousness, but what if you object to the political, ethical, or even logical implications of such wholesale acceptance of a violent metaphor?

As we saw with the Soviet assimilation of Darwinian evolution, couldn't we simply substitute more innocuous metaphors for the that of the master-slave? What about love? Doesn't it encompass the longing that goes on between two things? Recognition and fulfillment? Hyppolite draws out why love is inadequate as a metaphor that could replace master-slave:

Love is the miracle through which two become one without, however, completely suppressing the duality. Love goes beyond the categories of objectivity and makes the essence of life actually real by preserving difference within union. But in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel takes a different tack. Love does not dwell sufficiently on the tragic nature of separation; it lacks "the seriousness, the torment, the patience, and the labor of the negative (*PE*, I, 18; *PG*, 20; *PM*, 81)."⁹⁹

Hyppolite says elsewhere in his commentary that the master-slave dialectic is renowned "as much for the graphical beauty of its development as for the influence it has on the political and social philosophy of Hegel's successors, especially Marx" (172). The symmetry of the master-slave dialectic makes it quite easy to remember, much more so than the abstract and confusing development of consciousness on its journey to self-consciousness. Using the course metaphor as a pneumonic device, we can easily remember the parallel movement that goes on in Hegel's more subtle phenomenology. Like Malthus and Darwin's metaphor of struggle, it accounts for the mysterious violence of the world, the obvious contradictions, injustices, and

⁹⁸ Hyppolite 1974: 175

⁹⁹ *ibid.* 164

constant manifestation of destructive negativity. However, it does not explain everything, all that happens is not directly indexed to the terms of the metaphor. However, just as social Darwinists believed that the metaphor was the literal truth, Hegel and many of his successors believed that the master-slave dialectic was essential, and the more familiar it became, the easier it was to work with, and the more they viewed it as the indispensable expression of the truth.

For Hegel, the things signified by the master-slave metaphor — violent events — were directly linked to far more fundamental truths that were the unique domain of philosophy.

Hyppolite explains that

Hegel takes the historical events he is discussing, which he witnessed — the revolutionary thought of the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment’s struggle against faith, the French Revolution, and the domination of Napoleon — as metaphysical *code*, and he seeks to draw from these events a philosophy of spirit (*GS* 377).

Thus, as we discussed before, Hegel’s philosophy of history is a theodicy, everything has a reason behind it; a reason that is decipherable and that gives us access to absolute knowledge. Hence, history is like a novel or German *Bildungsroman*, in which the events of the story direct us to the intent of the authors of the event, in this case the *Logos* underlying everything that occurs. Therefore, Napoleon, Caesar, Christ, and the other heroes of Hegel’s story of human history are not symbols — i.e., signs that embody a meaning that might be expressed in another way — but literal embodiments of spirit directed by a metaphysical code that can be known just as it is. In the introduction to his translation of Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, Leo Rauch remarks on the suitability of the *Bildungsroman* metaphor for Hegel’s philosophy, with its vague and expansive terminology: “world history is a process of development which he likens to that of the individuals’ mind growing up — and that metaphor could not work unless there

An interesting attempt at building a comprehensive philosophy based on love can be found in Marion, Jean-Luc.

were that ambiguity in the universal and individual sense of '*Geist*'" (*PH* xii). *Geist*, or Spirit, is at the heart of Hegel's system because of the myriad of valences it carries. It does not denote something altogether clear, but only a rich and complex movement that can be discovered at the level of individual phenomenology, and even less clearly in the events of concrete history.

Following the more phenomenological bent of Hyppolite and Nancy, I believe it is easier, and indeed necessary, to first comprehend Spirit at the individual level, which then invites us to speculate on the metaphysical possibilities of the events going on around us. We first understand that our subjectivity is not autonomous or uniform, but that it relies on an orientation toward something quite different from itself: it is structurally intentional—the great insight of Brentano and Husserl. Paying attention to this split between subject and its objects, we are a bit confused and wonder which one is more real, which one is generating other. Are we an illusory product of the other things, or are they illusions made by this subjectivity? We keep going to find that neither is the case. That the two forever entail a codependence. So does this mean that the positive, concrete fullness of the objects relies on the subjective, which is negative in character? This would back us into the idealist trap of correlationism which has been highlighted as a problem through this essay. If the subject is truly the vector of negativity, as Hegel constantly contends, then it makes little sense to speak of it as some autonomous entity that is full, concrete, and positive. If that's the case, then the subject becomes something like a metaphor, or a symbol that signifies negativity, something purely metaphysical that can only be pointed to symbolically. Objects, the concrete, positive entities, likewise signify the metaphysics of fullness. The ebb and flow and interaction of these two vague metaphysical things are what cause, or just allow, manifestation, appearance, history.

Neither the subject or the object are monarchs of the processes that go on between them. Following OOO's insight, they are equally things, neither bestows Being to the other. If we follow Hegel down the path of granting ontological priority to the subject, then indeed some objective manifestations, some historical events, embody the absolute truth of that generating subject more than others do. But without that ontological priority, no manifestation is a more successful embodiment of an invisible truth than any other. They are all equally true as manifestation. They happen, and it is not a question of to what degree they express a teleology. This was the Darwin's insight.

The events of history are metaphorical in that they are expressions of the metaphysical conditions that allowed them to be, metaphysically. That is their signification. Of course, in the realm of human activity, signification knows no bounds and it becomes the fabric of aesthetic thinking that informs the tenor of human existence. In the unavoidable human realm of aesthetics, individual manifestations reflect one another as in *Indra's Net*, where each knot of an infinite net contains a mirror-like jewel, so that each knot contains an image of all the other knots of the infinite net. However, the individual manifestations cannot transcend the net, they do not point to something outside of it that is ontologically superior.

But Hegel's historical events claim to signify just that. They are not metaphors that are interchangeable, but precise images generated by a precise code that lies beyond. The characters of his historical novel are not mere characters, but direct embodiments of a destined Spirit. He writes in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*,

If we take another look at the final destiny of these world-historical individuals, who had the calling to manage the affairs of the World-Spirit, we find that their destiny was by no means happy. They attained no calm enjoyment, their entire life was toil and trouble; their entire nature was nothing by their master-passion. Once their goal is achieved they fall away like empty shells from the kernel. They die young, like Alexander; they are murdered, like Caesar; they are exiled, like Napoleon to St. Helena. There is a horrible consolation in the fact that these historical men did not

achieve what is called happiness—a happiness found only in private life, and under very different external circumstances—and this is a comfort that can be drawn from history by those who need it. But those who need that consolation are also the envious, who resent greatness and eminence, who seek to belittle greatness and to find fault with it. Thus, in modern times it has been demonstrated all too often that princes are not at all happy on their thrones—so that we are not to begrudge them their position, and are to be glad that it is they who are there, not we. The free man, however, is not envious, but gladly recognizes what is great and exalted, and rejoices in it (*PH* 34).

Hegel's world-historical men with their onerous destinies are not just mythical characters like Dionysius and Damocles.¹⁰⁰ This passage does not just point to the common human psychological issues of envy, duty; it says that the destinies of Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon were coded and that they are indexed directly to an absolute truth which they express. They are indispensable in this sense and nothing else—no other characters or stories—could have expressed what they do. For him they are not metaphors.

But I suggest that that is all that they are. The people and events of human history are not indexed to a transcendent truth, just as the evolution of the field mouse is not the expression of a destiny. Not only do Darwinian insights suggest that Hegel is wrong in his conception of history, so does literary criticism.

When Hegel talks about world-historical people and events, he is using them as metaphors without even realizing it. He was deeply entangled in the milieu of German Romanticism that marked his time and place. Part of that aesthetic movement was the proliferation of metaphorical and symbolic signification. As Gadamer writes, “The basis of aesthetics during the nineteenth century [...] was the freedom of the symbolizing power of the mind¹⁰¹” and Hegel was no exception to his era's fascination with symbolization; he just did not always admit (if he ever admitted it) that what he was doing was symbolizing. De Man, in

¹⁰⁰ The myth of the Sword of Damocles in which King Dionysius allows his envious courtier, Damocles, to take his throne. However, Damocles immediately notices a massive sword above the throne, suspended by a single thread. Realizing the throne comes with such anxiety, he is unable to cope and renounces the position.

his essay “The Rhetoric of Temporality”¹⁰² explains the connection between nineteenth century German aesthetics and metaphysics. If, as discussed above, we hold to an ontological superiority of the subject, that subject starts to assert itself onto the objects it perceives:

Since the assertion of a radical priority of the subject over objective nature is not easily compatible with the poetic praxis of the romantic poets, who all gave a great deal of importance to the presence of nature, a certain degree of confusion ensues. One can find numerous quotations and examples that plead for the predominance, in romantic poetry, of an analogical imagination that is founded on the priority of natural substances over the consciousness of the self. Coleridge can speak, in nearly Fichtean terms, of the infinite self in opposition to the “necessarily finite” character of natural objects, and insist on the need for the self to give life to the dead forms of nature.¹⁰³

With this metaphysical presupposition, romantic poets worked on blurring the lines between the objective and subjective realms, since it was assumed that the subject had the capacity to fully consume or comprehend the objective. De Man adds,

The fluent transition in romantic diction, from descriptive to inward, meditative passages, bears out the notion that this relationship is indeed of fundamental importance. The same applies to a large extent eighteenth-century landscape poets who constantly mix descriptions of nature with abstract moralizings...¹⁰⁴

This is precisely what Hegel does in his writing. His *Phenomenology of Spirit* forms a bridge between the entirely inward, meditative *Logic* and his various historical writings, which claim to deal with the concrete world. But there is unabashed moralizing throughout all of his historical writings.

Some of the most salient metaphors that Hegel uses are the caricatures of the Oriental and the African. They are metaphors because what Hegel calls the Oriental and the African do not exist in the way that he says they do. They are not real objects but fantasies that allow

¹⁰¹ Quoted in de Man 1983 p. 191.

¹⁰² p. 193-196 in *Blindness and Insight*

¹⁰³ de Man 1983 p. 196

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.* p. 193

him to construct rich metaphorical significations that betray his worst myopias and biases and that have had profound affects on the academic and political worlds.

11.

Hegel's Africans and Orientals

In 2011, Teshale Tibebu published a devastating and thorough criticism of Hegel's words on African and Asian history, culture, and religion: *Hegel and the Third World: The Making of Eurocentrism in World History*.¹⁰⁵ While I have criticized Hegel from multiple angles and I have drawn heavily on insights that appeared after Hegel's own life (Darwin, OOO etc.), Tibebu attacks Hegel head-on, declaring, "I happen to believe that one can critique Hegel's eurocentrism and his depiction of Third World humanity on the basis of the moral standard he himself set" (xxvii). He analyzes the incoherence and ignorance of Hegel's writings on Africans and Orientals, showing, in example after example, how essential his racism is to his vaunted philosophical system. Hegel's subtlety and opacity save him from accusations of being a crass *biological* racist, but, Tibebu argues, they bring him to new heights as a *geocultural* racist. I believe this criticism is important, but I will focus on the metaphysical issues that allowed Hegel to codify and propagate the geocultural racism that Tibebu identifies. For the Africans and Orientals he writes about have never existed except as chimera's of Hegel's German-Protestant imagination. It is too late for Hegel himself to realize it, but all of the people and events of his historical writings should be recognized as metaphors, mere placeholders, buckets of meaning.

For Tibebu, the following passage embodies Hegel's philosophy of history:

In Africa proper, man has not yet progressed beyond *merely sensuous existence*, and has found it *absolutely impossible to develop any further*. Physically, he exhibits great muscular strength, which enables him to perform arduous labours; and his temperament is characterized by good-naturedness, which is coupled, however, with completely unfeeling cruelty. Asia is the land of *antithesis, division, and expulsion*, just as Africa is the

¹⁰⁵ Tibebu, Teshale. *Hegel and the Third World: The Making of Eurocentrism in World History*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011

land of concentration. One pole of the antithesis is that of ethical life, the universal rational essence which remains solid and substantial; the other is the exact spiritual opposite, that of egotism, infinite desires, and boundless expansion of freedom into the particular, of *control of the immediate and elevation of the particular to the universal*, and of the *descent of the spirit into itself*. (xiv. Emphasis Tibebe's).

This passage clearly shows a movement that shows up all over Hegel's writings on history: history moves from East to West, undeniably, and for a reason. After the beginnings of history in Asia, the Greco-Roman world ushers in the dawn of Reason, which becomes perfected in European modernity. But what are these East and West, really? Regarding the West, there has been much debate over what Hegel saw as the essential characteristics of the community that signify the end of history. His own politics were unspecific, just vaguely conservative. All that is really clear is that Christianity is important, but even that great religion can be surpassed by the potentialities of truly great art. The West, for Hegel, becomes a semiotic repository for all things relating to spiritual maturity, well-being, vitality, and intelligence. For example, characterizing the Greek World (whatever that means), Hegel writes, "This background—gradually emerging out of self-differentiating Spirit into individual spirituality, and rebirth in the full daylight of knowing—is moderated and transfigured into beauty and the ethical life of freedom and happiness" (*PH* 104). Here, Hegel appeals to the metaphor of light ("daylight of knowing"), something that's monopolized by the West, and which is one of Hegel's favorite modes of expression.

Under the heading "The Division of History" from his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, Hegel encompasses all of world history in his metaphor of light:

The Sun, the Light, rises in the East. Light, however, is simple self-relatedness: and the light that is universal in itself is also a self-enclosed subject, in the sun.

The scene has often been pictured in which a blind person suddenly gains sight, sees the dawn, the growing Light, and then the Sun as it blazes up. At first, in his complete amazement, he forgets himself utterly, in his pure clarity. But when the sun has fully risen, his amazement is lessened; he looks at the objects around him, and from them he goes on to see his own inwardness, and the relation of outer to inner. He

proceeds from inactive contemplation to activity: by evening he has constructed some sort of building, by the use of his own inner sun — and when he contemplates it in the evening, he values it higher than that first external sun. For he now stands in relation to his own creative spirit and hence in a relation of freedom [because that spirit is related to itself]. If we keep this image before us, we can see the course of the world history in it, the great daily work of the Spirit. (92).

This passage is an evocative description of the kind of inner phenomenological process that is at the heart of Hegel's *Logic* and that is transposed into the master-slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology*. It provides a textured roadmap for the sensitive reader who can follow the phenomenological path being described. Remembering fresh morning sunrises, the reader will be touched by the image of the dawn and the feelings that attend it. Having learned and matured in the course of her life, the reader can related her own cultivated knowledge to an "inner sun," and this metaphor adds something subtle to her perceptions. She is no passive observer, but is interacting with the world.

On these terms, Hegel's metaphors are valuable and skillful, like those of a poet or a mystic. Compare them, for example, to a description of meditative perception written by the fourteenth century Tibetan philosopher and mystic, Longchen Rabjam:

Before, you perceived outer manifestations — sense objects — as existing in their own right. But now that you have realization, the very essence that you have certainty of is such that your holding to things as having true existence is overturned. So you think, "I perceive all these reified sense objects as though dream images, or the reflection of the moon in water, or forms in mirages — they are unobstructed, vivid yet ephemeral." Whatever manifests arises as awareness's own manifestation, randomly and without any particular reference point, leaving you wondering whether any of it exists or not.

You might wonder whether the conduct and character of ordinary beings are different from what they were before. As things seem to manifest with no reference point, you might think, "Does everyone realize this?" With all reference point fading away in emptiness, you experience, feel, think, and are aware as never before, so that you experience awareness as an infinite evenness. You might wonder how you have ended up in such a state in which thoughts never arise, for your consciousness is completely open and your ordinary experiences are naturally pristine, inherently pure. Occasionally you may burst out laughing at the way your behavior and all that you see and hear are continually without any frame of reference. You may become aware of thoughts like "Am I crazy? Is everyone else crazy? Is this a dream or the intermediate state after death?" The thought may occur to you: This awareness, bursting forth in all

its nakedness, in which all reference points fade away, is present in everyone. What, then, is the problem in realizing it? It's right here!" With your unconditional compassion arising unchecked, you also speak of these things to others, sing vajra songs, and act without inhibition, all of which show that your awareness has no fixation. All sensory appearances manifest unobstructedly in the moment.¹⁰⁶

Here, Longchenpa is just describing a taste, the ineffable textures of an inner mental experience. The metaphorical terms being used (dreams, mirages, and reflections) signify phenomena that are not strictly verbal. They are phenomenological phenomena, merely pointed at with metaphors of this and that. From the same tradition, the metaphor of light (of the sun, of a butter-lamp etc.) abound, and are used just as Hegel does in the passage above. Light and the sun are apt metaphors for self-knowledge, confidence, and clarity; but as metaphors, they must be understood as such. The sun can denote a giant ball of gas—its natural-science meaning—or it may connote something else. By doing the latter, it loses its direct, denotative link to the concrete world. However, for Hegel, metaphors retain, miraculously, their denotative power, even while serving double-duty as signs beyond themselves.

He extends his metaphor of light from his *Philosophy of History*:

World history goes from East to West: as Asia is the beginning of world history, so Europe is simply its end. In world history there is an absolute East, *par excellence* (whereas the geographical term "east" is in itself entirely relative); for although the earth is a sphere, history makes no circle around that sphere. On the contrary, it has a definite East which is Asia. It is here that the external physical sun comes up, so sink in the West: and for that same reason it is in the West that the inner Sun of self-consciousness rises, shedding a higher brilliance. (92).

Here is a bizarre conception of time, place, and language. There is a "definite East which is Asia," but this is not necessarily a geographical term, it is a term of "world history." While opaque, it connotes something much more significant than mere geographical dirt materialism.

¹⁰⁶ Longchen Rabjam. *A Treasure Trove of Scriptural Transmission: A Commentary on The Treasury of the Basic Space of Phenomena*. Junction City: Padma Publishing,

Real geographical locations, their flora, fauna, climates, food, waters, and so forth, are of little importance to Hegel. Asia is not a place, but a placeholder. It is merely the symbol of spiritual immaturity. Asia is what he says it is, it is merely a metaphor. He is explicit about this:

It is not our task to get to know that ground as an external locale, but only as the natural type of the locality which corresponds to the type of character of the people that is the child of such ground [...] Nature ought not to be rated either too high or too low in all this. The mild Ionian sky surely contributed much to the charm of Homeric poetry; yet that sky alone could produce no homers after the one, and if it could such poets would not always be coming forth, for under Turkish domination no such bards arose (*PH* 83).

This is the antithesis of Nietzsche's imperative, picked up by Onfray in his *Forms of Time*. Nietzsche exhorts in *Ecce Homo*, "these small things—nutrition, place, climate, recreation, the whole casuistry of selfishness—are inconceivably more important than everything that one has taken to be important so far. Precisely here one must begin to *relearn*."¹⁰⁷ For Hegel, these things are trivial; he has found a way to know essences that transcend concrete manifestation. Despite the profound relationality of his metaphysics, it is not important to understand the mild Ionian sky, nor the olives of Anatolia or the Aegean waters. Homer was produced through a magical surge of Spirit, wholly autonomous from the material world. The details of the material world are mere secondary accompanying circumstances. This is because Hegel is firmly on the side of idealist correlationism; things do not exist in themselves, but only for subjects. Therefore, time is wasted trying to know those things, except insofar as they serve as speculums for our own consciousnesses. Better is to know the mysteries of Spirit, which is the real force behind the appearance of anything meaningful in the world. Hyppolite explains this well in the section "The Observation of Nature" in his *Genesis and Structure*. He writes, "That things can be said, that their external existence can be expressed is a description, is already a

¹⁰⁷ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Walter Kaufman trans. New York: Vintage, 1989

sign that in-itself they are concepts, that the human logos is at once the logos of nature and the logos of spirit” (*GS* 237). Thus, Nature and its things are not fully devoid of reason or Spirit, despite being contraposed to it. Spirit can realize itself through man’s reflection on Nature and its things; those things alone cannot reflect on themselves, and thus cannot be conduits of Spirit. Because of things’ apparent impotence, Hegel finds things trivial. Hyppolite explains: “Seeking to give nature a conceptual transparency, he abandoned it more and more to itself and saw in it the fall of the idea” (245). There is no real need to know objects as objects, situated in geographical spaces and made of real organic chemicals. It suffices to know things as sterile mirrors for subjective reason. Objects express Reason, and so it is Reason that should be plumbed to its depths, not objects.

Despite this denigration of the sensual world, Hegel is deeply invested in what Tibebu calls “sensual rationalism,” “consciousness frozen at the level of sense-certainty” (Tibebu 344). In Hegel’s social and historical philosophy, Spirit achieves its most retarded forms in the non-white races of the world, particularly the African. The African is a deformation of Spirit. Hegel writes, authoritatively, “It must be said in general that, in the interior of Africa, the consciousness of the inhabitant has not yet reached an awareness of any substantial and objective existence.¹⁰⁸” Of course, Hegel says this without the benefit of having carried out, or even having access to legitimate ethnographic studies of Africa. Yet he evidently knows the African in his essence. Not just the “African” writ large, he can even distinguish between various kinds of African—in this case the African from the “interior of Africa.” A fine example of the logic of difference in identity?

Tibebu’s book is largely a litany of Hegel’s absurdities on race and history. And Hegel’s writings on these topics would scarcely be worth a derisive laugh if they were not so

fundamental to the Eurocentrism and racism that plague both the academy and the socio-political world. Therefore, we have to address them and figure out a way to get beyond them. A person whose “has not yet reached an awareness of any substantial and objective existence” is not a real person but a metaphor, a semiotic dumping ground for racist presuppositions.

He does exactly the same thing with Asia and its people. Hegel’s treatment of Asian thought (as if there is such a thing and it pervades all of Asia) arrives at some stunning conclusions. For example, in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* he avers,

So the Oriental domain is on the whole to be excluded from the history of philosophy; later we shall offer just a few comments about Indian and Chinese thought. On earlier occasions I have passed over this topic, for we have only recently been in position to form judgment about it.

We might ask what it was that allowed him to so confidently dismiss the intellectual piddlings of the majority of the world’s population: it was, of course, the British scholar Henry Thomas Colebrooke’s *On the Philosophy of the Hindus*. Until then, Hegel confesses, too little was known of Indian or any other Asian systems of thought to include them in the discussion of the history of philosophy. After such a comprehensive study, all of Asia’s traditions can be definitively dismissed.

These dismissals were not mere oversights. Pervasive European ignorance of Asian writings and intellectual traditions were not to be addressed through learning, which might allow Asian populations to be incorporated into world history. Rather, Asians were to become straw men set up to demonstrate the irrefutable superiority of white European civilization rooted in overwhelming superiority of white Europeans’ ability to think. Hegel pronounces in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*:

¹⁰⁸ Hegel quoted in Tibebe 177.

What comes to our attention first in history is the Oriental World. No philosophy in the proper sense, however, can be found there. The character of this world is, in short, such that while spirit does arise in the Orient, nevertheless in this relationship the subject, or individuality (my I on its own account), is not a person but is simply submerged, is determined only as negative, as submerged in the objective domain as such. In the Oriental Character the substantial relationship prevails; substance is represented as supersensible, as thought, or even in a more sensuous way.....

This is not even presented as a hypothetical phenomenology of an Asian person. It is not a thought experiment akin to Thomas Nagel's "What Is It Like To Be A Bat"¹⁰⁹ that would help the reader understand "What Is It Like To Be An Oriental." It presents itself as the description of fact. One only comes away with the impression that to be an Oriental is to be very different from a European Christian, and it is certainly worse to be an Oriental.

1) Is what Hegel says about Asian thought accurate internally? 2) Is it accurate historically? The answer to both is no. If his depictions are historically non-existent and are not verifiable by anything on earth, they are metaphors, placeholders, mere signs.

In an essay on Hegel and Buddhism, Tim Morton analyzes a very curious example of Buddhist (actually Hindu) iconography that was one of Hegel's favorites.¹¹⁰ In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel takes as exemplary of the Buddha "The image of Buddha in the thinking posture, with feet and arms intertwined so that a toe extends into the mouth—this [is] the withdrawal into self, this absorption in oneself."¹¹¹ This image is what the Buddha and his religion are all about. Unimportant if such an image has never, to anyone's knowledge, appeared in any Buddhist iconography (In fact, it can almost certainly only be an image of the baby Krishna sucking his toe). It doesn't matter how Buddhists or their texts explain

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Nagel (1974). *What is It Like to Be a Bat?* *Philosophical Review* 83 (October):435-50.

¹¹⁰ Morton, Timothy. "Hegel on Buddhism" from *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*. February 2007. <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/buddhism/morton/morton.html>

¹¹¹ Hegel, G.F.W. *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. Ed. Peter C. Hodgson. Tr. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart, with the assistance of H. S. Harris. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1988. p. 252

themselves, they simply are what Hegel say they are: they represent self absorption, infancy, and some vague, disturbing sensuality or proto-Freudian oral-fixation. Showing his skill as a literary critic, Morton riffs on Hegel's image:

The toe sucker is practicing literal, physical introversion. The body turns round on itself and disposes of itself down one of its own holes. To be "retired within itself," Being loses its spiritual or ideal aspect and actually *becomes* this very image, as in Hegel's telling syntax: "The image of Buddha . . . this [is] the withdrawal into self." Hegel repetitively adds "this absorption in oneself," as if he himself cannot get away from the fascinating, sucking maw. There is a little eddy of enjoyment in Hegel's own text, a sucking backwash that is not simply dialectics at a standstill, but rather an entirely different order of being. This Buddhist being is only recognizable in Hegel's universe as an inconsistent distortion, at once too insubstantial and too solid. Buddhism stands both for an absolute nothingness, a blank zero that itself becomes heavy and dense, unable to shift itself into dialectical gear, and for a substantiality that is not even graced with an idea of nothingness. Contemplation, meditation, is tantamount to reducing the body to a horrifying inertia, a body without organs in the Deleuzian-Guattarian terminology (Deleuze and Guattari 149-66). The nearest approximation is a black hole, a physicality so intense that nothing escapes from it. On the other hand, the image is made of organs rather than a single, independent body. If he is terrified of the static body without organs of the meditating ascetic, in which the inside of the body threatens to swallow all trace of working limbs, perhaps Hegel's description also evokes an even greater panic concerning the possibility of *organs without bodies*. As one starts to examine the image, nothingness proliferates into a veritable sea of holes. The zero of the open mouth, stuffed full of the body of which it forms a part, while the body curls around in a giant, fleshy zero, like a doughnut: this is the inconsistent, compelling image, the *sinthome* of Hegel's ideological fixation.[8] It is ironic, then, that for Buddhist meditators, physical posture is indeed not only a support for meditation, but also embodies it, quite literally, as in the notions of yoga and mudra (gesture), where certain postures enact forms of being awake. These are indeed "thinking postures," to use Hegel's phrase, the textual ambiguity brilliantly (accidentally?) betraying his anxiety about the idea that *aposture* could *think*. There must be an infinite distance between *posing* a philosophical proposition, conceptually *positing*, and this *posturing* thought, this thinking that postures and postures that perform thinking. As any Buddhist meditator could have told Hegel, meditation is a highly physical process.

In case it is not clear enough yet, not only are Hegel's Africans and Asians pure fictions, metaphorical fantasies, so are every other people, person, and event that he talks about.

Central to his philosophy of history are the metaphors of the Greek and Roman worlds, each containing subsidiary metaphors. Within the Greek, there are the Pre-Socratics, Socratics,

Sophists, Cynics etc., each representing some kind of insight and failure. The Romans gave us Stoicism and new forms of imperial government. And of course there are the Jews—embodiments of unhappy consciousness and self-alienation—and the Muslims, and the Oriental, who is responsible for “wild hordes breaking forth from the highlands” and for whom “that which in our world belongs to the sphere of subjective freedom proceeds there from the universal totality” (*PH* 94). And so on... Each of these People corresponds not to anything concrete, localizable, or sensual, they are simply placeholders for a collection of spiritual and intellectual attributes. To one he affixes self-absorption; to another he affixes self-abstraction etc. For him, each of these People evince, in their historical becoming, a teleological necessity that is revealed after their disappearance or sublation into some other People. Merely affixing such general predicates to a vanished people is good enough. Their physical being was gone, but their spiritual history remains, and that is what we have access to, and that is what matters—our twisting and embellishing are not violent.

In his contemplations, Hegel had gone through the subtle and difficult work of dissecting his mind and mapping a phenomenological movement. He then universalized this movement, projecting it onto the concrete world, turning the events and the people of the world into metaphors that represent aspects of the complex and flowing subject. It is too bad he didn't realize this or admit to it, since its results in the academic, social, and political realms have been disastrous.

Susan Sontag, in her 1977 essay *Illness as Metaphor*, writes passionately about the suffering that is generated by conflating metaphor with reality. Her essay is about falling ill with cancer, which is bad enough; but what's worse, people have invented metaphors about cancer which exacerbate the pain of those who have it. She writes, “I want to describe, not what it is really like to emigrate to the kingdom of the ill and live there, but the punitive or

sentimental fantasies concocted about that situation: not real geography, but stereotypes of national character.”¹¹² Combing through several centuries of western literature, Sontag finds examples of writings about cancer, where the cancer itself is described as a kind of malevolent force, and the person afflicted by it a victim. What’s more, the victim is implicated in the illness’s onset. Even after the etiology of cancer became well-understood by science, there remained a mythology surrounding cancer in which psychological repression — failure to live up to your full potential — turns your body against itself, deforms its tissues, and embodies itself as tumors. While these have no basis in science, they remain powerful psychological burdens for cancer patients who not only have to contend with the physical pain and mental distress of the disease itself, they also become confused and terrified by the possibility that everything that is happening to them is their fault. Likewise, in her 1988 follow up, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, she analyzes the favored metaphor used to describe AIDS, that of a military invasion, a body under siege by pernicious beings and militarized against them. Regarding both of these, Sontag continues,

My subject is not physical illness itself but the uses of illness as a figure or metaphor. My point is that illness is *not* a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness — and the healthiest way of being ill — is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphorical thinking (3).

Just as illness is not a metaphor but a discrete event that happens in time and place to a real person, neither is History a metaphor. Being African is not a metaphor; nor is being Asian; nor is whatever bloody revolution has occurred in your home country; nor is the climate you live in; nor is whatever lowly status you might be stuck in. All of these things listed are themselves abstract objects implicated in complex systems of relations with other abstract, particular, and hyper-objects. They should not be taken to be the half-shine of some invisible

¹¹² Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York: Picador, 1988 p. 3.

Spirit struggling to manifest itself. They do not express an ultimate teleology anymore than the development of an extra fin on the bum of sunfish. Their lack of teleology should not, as the accusation often goes, make things and events any less fascinating or mysterious.

Evolutionary biology continues to flourish without the hand of God, and OOO has started to show us fertile philosophical inroads into appreciating objects both in themselves and in their relations. But Hegel and historical teleologists find this hard to swallow, especially when speaking about relative positions of power and weakness in the world. If you are strong, let me tell you why you are strong, philosophically. If you are weak, take solace in the Will that makes you a necessary sacrifice. Regarding metaphorical understandings of disadvantage, Sontag observes, "Nothing is more punitive that to give a disease a meaning—that meaning being invariably a moralistic one. Any important disease whose causality is murky, and for which treatment is ineffectual, tends to be awash in significance"(58).¹¹⁵

Hegel's compulsive conflation of metaphor and reality throughout his historical writings are at least, and probably more, pernicious than Darwin's problematic use of struggle, or the metaphors of illness discussed by Sontag. They have been rich stores of fuel for Eurocentric

¹¹⁵ A similar problem can be found in the struggle for transgender rights. For example, from a press release by the International Campaign to Stop Trans Pathologization:

STP 2012 demands the removal of the diagnostic categories 'Gender Identity Disorder' and 'Transvestic Fetishism' / 'Fetishistic Transvestism' from the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) published by the American Psychiatric Association, and from the ICD (International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems), edited by the WHO, World Health Organization. Furthermore, this campaign calls for state-funded coverage of trans health care, as well as the substitution of the current evaluation model for accessing trans-specific treatments, for an approach based on autonomy and informed decision making. With the aim of facilitating state-funded coverage, STP 2012 proposes the introduction of a non-pathologizing reference of trans health care in the ICD-11, as a health care process not based on illness or mental disorder. Furthermore, the International Campaign STP 2012 demands the removal of medical requirements from existing gender identity laws, as well as the approval of new gender recognition laws based on a depathologization and human rights perspective.

- <http://www.stp2012.info/old/en/news>

Not surprisingly, the pathologization of the transgender experience leads to normative structures that oppress transgender people since their experience is not respected as a dignified iteration of humankind, but is rather laden with condescending signification. See also, Ben-Asher, Noa. "The Necessity of Sex Change: A

racism in academia, politics, and society. His metaphorical use of people and events borrows from the most opaque theological beliefs in teleology, and augment those with a profound and subtle microcosmic phenomenological discourse, in which the process described actually makes sense. His master-slave metaphor, and the general distortion of his African and Asian, Jew and everyone else condition us to think of people as abstract totalities to which awful things occur because they must. Wait patiently for the end to come, then you will understand why it had to go down the way that it did. Graham Harman, in an interesting aside chapter of his *Guerrilla Metaphysics* analyzes Ortega y Grasset's theory of metaphors. He makes the following observation:

The chess metaphor does not only pick out chesslike features from the military scene before us. Instead, it actively *shapes* our perception of the battle, perhaps playing up the brilliant tactical positioning of the two armies while suppressing the shock and trauma of those wounded horribly in action—a gruesome feature of warfare for which chessboards provide little analogy. The same thing happens when we say “man is a wolf.” For as long as this metaphor rings in our ears, we tend to forget all instances of human musical skill or mathematical ability, the invention of airplanes, and all other human things that have no name in wolf-speak” (*GM* 120).

While the master-slave metaphor has a powerful symmetry and seems to gracefully explain away much of the world's complexity, that complexity still remains on the other side of the veil. People are, to speak like Harman, irreducible objects and cannot evaporate in an idealist rapture because they have been affixed with metaphorical significance that is greater than them. The point is not to stop trading in metaphors but to use them more skillfully and to know where to draw the line between metaphor and lived experience. Sontag, speaking for people who have experienced illness declares, “The body is not a battlefield. The ill are neither unavoidable casualties nor the enemy [...] About that metaphor, the military one, I would say, if I may paraphrase Lucretius: Give it back to the war-makers” (183). When we see how entire

epochs and populations of billions of people have been washed over by metaphorical narratives that dismiss and obscure them (the true night in which all cows are black!), Eurocentric history makes much less sense. The objects that are the basis of metaphor must be respected as ontologically dignified things: these include all of the people written out of history, as well as all that they ever produced. No history of the world is comprehensive, reliable, or healthy when based on willful denial and taking what is figurative as literal.

12.

Doxography

Hegel's history of the world and of philosophy can be seen as a kind of doxography. Like all doxographies, it justifies the author's own positions by means of criticizing all other positions that came before it or presently compete with it. As such, it is just a form of criticism, about which there is nothing inherently pernicious. However, doxographies differ immensely with regard to their historical and conceptual accuracy, as well as their political agendas. The more conscientious an author is of the historical claims he makes—the more he argues based on his own observations, reliable ethnographies, and so forth, and the less works to contort rabid, biased fantasy into the semblance of something real—the better the doxography. Hegel's, however, is an example of taking all of these dangers to the extreme, and the people who are buried by his doxography have had to pay for it.

As an absolute idealist, Hegel holds the Subject, or rather, the even more abstract and indeterminate Idea to be the one sole Truth.¹¹⁴ It is this Truth as Idea that unfolds as the world and as history. The things of history are mere containers for this, its ultimate content. Thus, history is a theodicy, as we have discussed before, and the appearances of history are unimportant except as expressions of the absolute. The appearances have no ontological significance of their own. This results in the strange conclusion that the appearances of history, whilst being unessential as appearances of an essence that stands behind them, are yet fixed; they could not have appeared differently because, as expressions of a *Logos*, they are bound to its bidding.

¹¹⁴ "The Idea, and it alone is truth." Hegel. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E S Haldane, 1892-6. section A.1.a. <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hp/hpintroa.htm#A1>

The Idea, for Hegel, has the nature of seeking development, or striving to unfold. Thus, it unfolds through the phantasmagoria of historical events, but what we must do is decode those events to understand their essence. He writes, “ That the Idea should have to make itself what it is, seems like a contradiction; it may be said that it is what it is,” therefore, what appears is essential, but appearances have no ontological status of their own, they are just the vehicle of essence, shrouds. In genuine philosophy, which he constantly argues is a science (*Wissenschaft*), these shrouds should be lifted so that we can get to the Idea itself, which is truth. He explains the guiding principles of his history of philosophy in the following way:

Only a history of Philosophy thus regarded as a system of development in Idea, is entitled to the name of Science: a collection of facts constitutes no science. Only thus as a succession of phenomena established through reason, and having as content just what is reason and revealing it, does this history show that it is rational: it shows that the events recorded are in reason. How should the whole of what has taken place in reason not itself be rational? That faith must surely be the more reasonable in which chance is not made ruler over human affairs, and it is the business of Philosophy to recognize that however much its own manifestations may be history likewise, it is yet determined through the Idea alone.

However, such faith in the teleology of things is on thin ice in the post Darwin world; so too should be the view that no science can be built on a bed of facts, as attested to by object-oriented-ontology and the neo-presocratism of Michel Onfray. Even microbiologist Carl Woese sees object-orientation as the most promising path for future biology. Speaking of the pre-conscious world (Meillassoux’s ancestral world), Woese speculates,

Although we can infer essentially nothing about the hypothetical primitive entities under discussion, it is nevertheless worthwhile to consider their possible relationships to one another. Were they communal relationships only in an abstract sense, a virtual community defined only by genre transfers, or did they form actual physically structured groupings, perhaps resembling modern bacterial consortia but even more diverse in makeup and mode of interaction? Some time ago I said what I now call the pre-Darwinian era “may be more a world of semiautonomous subcellular entities that somehow group to give ‘loose’(ill-defined) cellular forms.” The panoply of interactions that such an image evokes... is strongly suggestive of physical communal organization, one not only of “cells” but of a spectrum of biological entities, many of them not self-replicating in their own right (and not all on paths to become “modern” cells) (14).

For Hegel, it is a mistake to invest too much in object themselves, or in people as they exist on the ground. It suffices to generalize about them. There are, of course, sections of Hegel's writings that are rigorous and penetrating criticisms of philosophical eras and movements. Part II section three of his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, for example, are exemplary analyses of neo-Aristotelian philosophy from Pomponatius through Cicero, Bruno, Vanini, and so forth. They are paraphrastic, but clearly show in-depth study of these philosophers' works, and even include brief but informative biographies of each major figure. The same can be said of his presentations of scholastic philosophy. However, the further back in time we go, or the further abroad we travel geographically, the less rigorous Hegel becomes and the more he projects and bastardizes. His treatment of the pre-Socratics like Diogenes Laërtius¹¹⁵, Democritus, and Epicurus are famously shallow. Marx, for one, dedicated his doctoral dissertation to rehabilitating the latter two thinkers who he believed Hegel had treated unjustly because they did not conform to the idealism that he believed was the only way to Truth.¹¹⁶ Despite writing brief biographies of the major figures of philosophy and providing a little bit of historical context, Hegel does not believe that any of these outer conditions really matter in the scientific history of philosophy he is doing. He writes,

¹¹⁵ The book of Diogenes Laërtius (*De vilis, &c.*, Philoss. lib. x., ed. Meibom. e. notis Menagii, Amstel. 1692) is an important compilation, and yet it brings forward copious evidence without much discrimination. A philosophic spirit cannot be ascribed to it; it rambles about amongst bad anecdotes extraneous to the matter in hand. For the lives of Philosophers, and here and there for their tenets, it is useful." Ch. 1, Period I, division I of *LHP*. <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hp/hpearlygreek-intro.htm>

¹¹⁶ Marx wrote, "To be sure, *Hegel* has on the whole correctly defined the general aspects of the above-mentioned systems. But in the admirably great and bold plan of his history of philosophy, from which alone the history of philosophy can in general be dated, it was impossible, on the one hand, to go into detail, and on the other hand, the giant thinker was hindered by his view of what he called speculative thought *par excellence* from recognising in these systems their great importance for the history of Greek philosophy and for the Greek mind in general. These systems are the key to the true history of Greek philosophy. A more profound indication of their connection with Greek life can be found in the essay of my friend Köppen, *Friedrich der Grosse und seine Widersacher*." Forward to *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*. Marx-Engels Collected Works Volume 1. Progress Publishers. 1902

In the progress of Greek philosophy men were formerly accustomed to follow the order that showed, according to ordinary ideas, an external connection, and which is found in one philosopher having had another as his teacher — this connection is one which might show him to be partly derived from Thales and partly from Pythagoras. But such a connection is in part defective in itself, and in part it is merely external. The one set of philosophic sects, or of philosophers classed together, which is considered as belonging to a system — that which proceeds from Thales — pursues its course in time and mind far separate from the other. But, in truth, no such series ever does exist in this isolation, nor would it do so even though the individuals were consecutive and had been externally connected as teacher and taught, which never is the case; mind follows quite another order. These successive series are interwoven in spirit just as much as in their particular content.

What matters is whether or not a style of philosophy is properly idealist. If it is too concerned with objects, it is misguided and not oriented toward the truth. In the passage above, Hegel suggests that things like geography and chronology are secondary, since Spirit operates on a different plane and merely expresses itself in these secondary appearances. Therefore, in the West, a philosophical position can be considered a kind of worldview, one that can be adopted at any time or place by any person. Thus, Hegel's doxography of Western philosophy tells us that we all have a bit of Democritus in us, all of us can fall into the same mistakes as Epicurus, so we should familiarize ourselves with their blunders in order not to perpetuate them. The individuals of Western philosophy are metaphorical, each movement signifies a different phase in the flowering of Spirit. However, geography is significant when we talk about non-Western thought:

The geographical distinction makes its appearance in the manifestation of Thought, in the fact that, with the Orientals a sensuous, material side is dominant, and in the west, Thought, on the contrary, prevails, because it is constituted into the principle in the form of thought. Those philosophers who turned to the east knew the absolute in a real determination of nature, while towards Italy there is the ideal determination of the absolute. These explanations will be sufficient for us here; but Empedocles, whom we find in Sicily, is somewhat of a natural philosopher, while Gorgias, the Sicilian sophist, remains faithful to the ideal side.

Thus, geographical details are unimportant, except metaphorically, since the "East" represents a dividing line on the other side of which lies pure opacity. At least when presenting the

doxography of the West, Hegel is informed by substantial historical documentation and the facts that he culls from them give his history of philosophy the air of authority. We might not even ask ourselves why he continually blurs the lines between philosophy as earthly and embodied by people in terrestrial places, and philosophy as floating Idea, and as the things of the world as metaphors pointing to it. But his presentation of Asian and African thought makes it very clear that everything Hegel says about a people or a movement, or an event are only metaphors and that they should not be confused with anything on earth.

When we get to the Orient, Hegel does not even bother with details to give a semblance of authority. He writes,

The first Philosophy in order is the so-called Oriental, which, however, does not enter into the substance or range of our subject as represented here. Its position is preliminary, and we only deal with it at all in order to account for not treating of it at greater length, and to show in what relation it stands to Thought and to true Philosophy.

After such an introduction, Hegel whole doxographical method changes. Gone are the biographical details of those who represent different styles of thought. He reassures the reader of his doxography that non-Europe need only be known as a giant abstraction, a dumping ground for everything foolish: "It is true of the Chinese as well as of the Indians that they have a great reputation for culture; but this, as well as the amount of Indian literature which exists, has largely diminished through a further knowledge of it."¹¹⁷ He therefore, does the work of debunking Oriental claims of knowledge, citing the household names of Confucius, Buddha, and Lao Tzu, and he paraphrases Henry Thomas Colebrooke's *On the Religion and Philosophy of the Hindus* regarding the *Sāṃkhya* philosophy of Kānada and the *Nyāya* philosophy of Gotama. There is no discussion of any of the dozens of other schools of Hindu and Buddhist thought in Asia, including the many idealist schools that may have complicated his ultimate conclusion

that, “The Idea has not become objective in the Indian Philosophy; hence the external and objective has not been comprehended in accordance with the Idea. This is the deficiency in Orientalism”(146).

Is there any other way to do the history of philosophy? How else can we look critically at all the possible stances we could take in philosophy? If we have a position, then aren't all others simply mistakes leading up to the right one? Do any other models, perhaps from Asia, suggest an alternative way of doing doxography?

Fortunately, the Asian tradition I am most familiar with, that of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, has a rich doxographical literature going back for more than a thousand years. In the early centuries of the millennium, there were immense stakes in defending your own position against competing views. Public debates were frequent, and if your opponent soundly beat you, the institution with which you were affiliated may be contractually obligated to forfeit its resources to the victor. There were always political ramifications. Joseph Walser, in his study of the most illustrious Buddhist philosopher of all time, Nāgārjuna, writes, “By refuting these opponents, Nāgārjuna secures an alliance with his spectator audience and thereby secures a place for Mahāyāna within their monastery.”¹¹⁸ Later on with the rise in importance of publication, these debates were often waged on paper, enabling philosophers to engage with each other from thousands of miles away. In Tibet, the most talented and charismatic writers were able establish veritable philosophical empires around monasteries housing hundreds of thousands of monks nuns, and affiliated lay people.

The standard format of their doxographical texts was similar to a history of philosophy as we know them in the west. Since western colonialism never penetrated Tibet, and since its

¹¹⁷ Hegel. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. Lincoln: Nebraska, 1995. p. 119

¹¹⁸ Walser, Joseph. *Nāgārjuna in Context*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

cultural exchanges with China were extremely limited, Tibetan writers knew even less about the outside world than Hegel did. Fortunately they limited their doxographies to the philosophies of India and their country. Like Hegel, they took a straw man approach, usually starting with the most well-known non-Buddhist traditions of India. Their arguments would be paraphrased and caricatured, refuted, and the author would move on to the “lower” schools of Buddhist thought. This method, nearly indistinguishable from Hegel’s continues until the author presents his own position as the one that corrects all errors and arrives at the absolute truth.

As with Hegel, each of the schools that these doxographies (Tibetan: *grub mtha'*) deals with are transparently oversimplified. The authors of them are also not always immune to the kind of absolute claims that Hegel makes against competing philosophies. For example, the great scholar and philosopher of nineteenth century Tibet, Mipham, writes,

The beliefs of the five tarka systems and of the Vedanta are knitted together in a web of darkness. But no one in the world, not even a god, is able to overturn the ultimate nature of things. No words, no theories can conceal this nature, any more than dry tinder wrapped around a piece of incandescent metal. The ultimate nature itself destroys all false tenets.¹¹⁹

This representative passage suggests that Tibetan doxography cannot be distinguished from Hegel’s in terms of authorial conviction, or even qualitatively, since Mipham’s statement seems about on par with Hegel’s idealism. Nor can we necessarily claim that Mipham’s doxography is less militant than Hegel. In fact, it might be even more so:

With regard to other traditions, if they do no harm to the Buddhadharma, they should simply be left alone. As it is said in the *Chandrapradipa-sutra*:

*Have no hatred for the non-believers
That you find established in this world.
Instead regard them with compassion.
Let this be the first sign of your forbearance.*

¹¹⁹ Mipham. Commentary to *The Adornment of the Middle Way* by Shantarakshita. Boston: Shambhala, 2005. p. 232.

On the other hand, one should not delight in them, for then one would be an idiot preferring brackish water to the amrita of the gods. Especially for those who sincerely uphold the tradition of the great abbot Shantarakshita, the teachings of the Buddha Shakyamuni, it would be quite out of place to show enthusiasm for them. For Shantarakshita was the one who proscribed the teachings of the Bonpos,¹²⁰ and they consequently looked upon him as their enemy.¹²¹

As this quote shows, Tibetan doxographies have an unambiguous political element. In his doctoral dissertation on Tibetan doxography, Albion Butters writes,

Because value structures in Tibet were also inextricably linked with religious concerns, the role of *grub mtsha* [doxography] in that country's larger socio-political power dynamic must not be disregarded. Being classified together with other heterodox view at times led to serious repercussions in the socio-political sphere.¹²²

He continues with the following analysis:

One might argue that, by default, all doxographies achieve their ends by means of a violent or "tyrannical appropriation of the systems that they treat... As Wilfred Cantwell Smith notes, "every comprehensive Weltenschaung, insofar as it achieves the coherence at which it aims, therein reduces every alternative one: misunderstanding, distorting, its neighbors' world-view."...

According to a popular rubric of social anthropology, power is derived from the reinterpretation of different types of values—be they cultural, social, or economic. As Bourdieu put it, "What is at stake in the struggles about the meaning of the social world is power over the classificatory schemes and systems which are the basis of the representations of the groups and therefore of their mobilization and demobilization: the evocative power of an utterance which puts things in a different light."

To a great extent, doxographies are metanarratives. Grounded in a critical analysis of belief systems, doxographies are supposed to be unbiased and accurate. Like metanarratives, they also both work with determinate facts at an unequivocal limit of meaning where it is assumed that objective readers will come to the same conclusion as the author... (89).

Is there any way around this consequence of classification and criticism, which is the model of both doxography and the history of philosophy? If we wish to avoid such political and political implications, how can we use criticism in a more productive, and less destructive

¹²⁰ The indigenous religion of Tibet, which Buddhism displaced.

¹²¹ Mipham p. 233

¹²² Butters, Albion. Doctoral dissertation: *The Doxographical Genius of Kun mkhyen kLong chen rab 'byams pa*. Columbia University 2006. UMI Dissertation Services. This quotation continues to give an example of a Tibetan philosopher, Bo dong Pan chen, whose view were linked to a philosophy that had been proscribed (*gzhan stong*)

way? Butters adds that although there are both political motivations and consequences of the doxographical text he is analyzing, Tibetan doxography generally,

balances the hegemonic apparatus with an awareness that the ‘inferior’ views have their own role to play in the spiritual development of people on the path... By presenting in sufficient detail the greater scope of Buddhist philosophical thought, *grub mtha*’ texts provide practitioners with an opportunity to reference their current position against an entire series of views. It is at this level of reading doxography that personal evolution is possible (90).

It is this last suggestion — that doxography can be read in a way that is personally transformative — that I believe is important. Even if a doxography is blatantly political and biased toward an eventual winner, which they are by their very structure, there is a difference between being purely dismissive of “inferior” views, and in genuinely engaging with them. Hegel’s history of philosophy (and general history of the world) does not encourage the reader to have a go at each of the world-views being adumbrated. His list of philosophies is not an invitation to actively climb a spiritual ladder toward the most true and most profound, one arrives at the highest level by purely extrinsic circumstances: if you are born at the right time in the right place, you happen to be a handmaiden to the Truth unfolding itself through you. If you are white and born into a Christian community, you’ve already arrived. Even better if you are German. Skepticism, stoicism, Judaism and so forth needn’t be traveled through on the level of individual phenomenology; timeless Spirit has already done that for you earlier in history. From one’s present, serendipitous position at the peak of history, it suffices to look at earlier and other modes of thinking with an interpretive glance rather to engage in them first hand. When presenting other philosophies, seldom does Hegel give anything resembling a summary of their own arguments. He may have gone through them

by the most powerful Buddhist lineage in Tibet (the Geluk). As a result, that philosopher’s followers were disbanded and their resources appropriated (p. 89).

himself, but he does not invite his audience to do the same. Instead, he provides us with an abstract interpretation of their views:

Now if Cynicism made reality for consciousness the fact of being immediately natural (where immediate naturalness was the simplicity of the individual, so that he is independent and, in the manifold movement of desire, of enjoyment, of holding many things to be reality, and of working for the same, really keeps up the external simple life) the Stoic elevation of this simplicity into thought consists in the assertion, not that immediate naturalness and spontaneity is the content and the form of the true Being of consciousness, but that the rationality of nature is grasped through thought, so that everything is true or good in the simplicity of thought.

But philosophies are more than artifacts to be spoken of as if their time has passed. They can be taken up at any point, their logics followed, and their insights seen clearly in the mind's eye. The stoic, cynic, and epicurean perspectives can be traversed and assimilated to lead to new philosophical perspectives. Thus, the terms that name philosophical movements are metaphorical references for possible phenomenological experiences, which should not be confused with real people in real places.

In an essay about Tibetan doxography, Jeffrey Hopkins claims that the genre has a very specific and efficient didactic role for Tibetans. Like the history of philosophy in the West, they introduce the student to the diversity of opinions in the world and get them to evaluate them critically. Of course, influenced by their teachers and institutions, Tibetan students start with the presupposition that there is a highest truth, but they accept that they are not ready to be exposed to it yet. The "lower systems" are considered rungs on a ladder. Only after truly appreciating the perspective of a particular system, inhabiting it for a time, can you move up the ladder to a more subtle and profound view. After each perspective is grasped, a skillful teacher introduces the student to a flaw in it, and then guides them to find out how another perspective corrects such a flaw. Hopkins explains,

Systems of tenets, therefore, are primarily studied not to refute other systems but to develop an internal force that can counteract one's own *innate* adherence to misapprehensions. These innate forms of ignorance are part and parcel of ordinary life. They are not just learned from other systems, nor do they just arise from faulty analysis. Thus the stated aim of studying the different schools of philosophy is to gain insight into the fact that many of the perspectives basic to ordinary life are devoid of a valid foundation. This leads the adept to then replace these with well-founded perspectives.¹²³

For these purposes, simplification and condensation are permitted. For example, many sub-schools of thinking are often reduced to a single theme they all have in common. Also, some schools are linked to ideas or movements they themselves would probably object to. Hopkins adds, "This pretended amalgamation of many schools into one is a technique used to avoid unnecessary complexity that might hinder the main purpose of this genre of exegesis..." (175). In his memoir of his career as a scholar in a Tibetan monastic university, Georges Dreyfus analyzes the purpose of debating various philosophical positions, which he practiced for thousands of hours. To many outsiders, Tibetan debates looks like dry and formal exercise in rote learning and repetition. But Dreyfus describes how the practice of debate is designed to keep the student's mind constantly active, never reposing into an intransigent position of certainty. Remembering his teacher, Dreyfus writes,

Gen Nyi-ma would use debate as a way to undermine students' attempts to stop the investigation and fasten on any one answer, especially the traditional one. In this way, he was illustrating the full potential of the practice as a mode of inquiry, not just a useful pedagogical tool... Debate develops the ability to explore ideas and take a stance while keeping in mind the fragility and uncertainty of those ideas... Only long intellectual training can lead us to realize that the questions raised by debate are worth thinking about not because they bring final clarity but because they oblige us to grow by relinquishing our tendency to cling to ideas.¹²⁴

¹²³ Hopkins, Jeffrey. "The Tibetan Genre of Doxography." from *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*. Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1996. p.171

¹²⁴ Dreyfus, Georges. *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: the education of a Tibetan monk*. Berkeley: University of California, 2003. p.288

What to make of the many examples of explicit political motivation, prejudice, and downright nastiness in Tibetan doxographical and polemical texts¹²⁵? I suggest they are examples of the prerogatives of highly influential authors with a lot at stake in their writings. Until very recently, it was extremely difficult all over the world to gain access to publishing. You had to be very well connected and you had to have a substantial population interested enough in your work to make it worth all the trouble of putting it to press. In Tibet this even involved the painstaking and expensive process of carving of wood blocks. Therefore, in general, only those who had already built their intellectual careers through teaching and institution building found their way into print. This explains a lot about many of the politically aggressive statements that you find in Tibetan texts. The authors had their reputations at stake, and those reputations were the foundation of control over vast resources and hundreds of thousands of followers. The softer, seemingly ecumenical attitude that Hopkins describes is not another invention of a utopian western convert to Tibetan Buddhism, but a common teaching in the Tibetan Buddhism's extremely important oral tradition. These oral teachings generally overlook the political element of the canonical texts, often whitewashing them as "skillful means," and it is very common for a lecturer to emphasize how dangerous and misguided it is to externalize the opponent of a polemic, or to disrespect the so-called "lower" traditions of a doxography. What the terms of a doxography represent are your own tendencies to hold mistaken views as correct. When we criticize non-contemporaries or those who are not around to defend themselves, we should be rooting out our own potential to make the mistakes that we are calling out.

¹²⁵ For example, the brilliant philosopher of the Sakya lineage, Gorampa, regularly addresses the earlier great Gelug philosopher, Tsongkhapa, with highly abusive epithets.

For Hegel, European populations have already, by proxy of previous generations, gone through the spiritual progressions represented by various philosophical movements. Whatever was represented by terms like cynics, skeptics, stoics etc., has been incorporated into more recent evolutionary movements, snowballing together with Christianity and the French Revolution to lead up to the acme of human development that is represented by his own time and place. Those Greco-Romans are not really around anymore. In this sense Hegel himself takes cynics, skeptics, and stoics to be metaphorical; they represent innate philosophical tendencies, but ones that were collectively overcome through history; they don't need to be grappled with all the time. Who loses out, however, are those who are still around: the Jews, Africans, Asians, and other Others. Those terms don't denote distant movements or innate universal tendencies; they denote real people in real places, and thus, they suffer the political and social consequences of Hegel's doxography and influence. Hegel does not engage any of the arguments put forth by these Others themselves. Rather, he treats them as fictional people, making up what they say and placing them at the bottom of the teleological evolutionary mountain. He does not acknowledge that he is only talking in metaphors and that the people he is talking about do not really exist. Unfortunately for them these metaphors have defined their concrete existence in Western canons and minds.

13.

Style Wars

If Eurocentrism stands on the foundation I have tried to expose, in what other ways does it express itself? Clearly, race has plenty to do with it, but race is only one element in the complicated aggregate of what we call Culture.¹²⁶ Religion is another major element, and we have seen how it is at least partly responsible for the teleological orientation of Eurocentrism. Thus, clearly Eurocentricity opposes itself to the conceptual content of heterogeneous religious (atheistic, polytheistic etc.) and philosophical systems, but it is also important to remember that those foreign modes of thinking most likely convey themselves in foreign styles of presentation. These also become targets in the competition to guard canons and write history.

Andrew Nicholson, an Indologist working at SUNY, presented a paper in April 2012 at the Columbia Seminar for Comparative Philosophy that analyzes literary style as a major factor in the marginalization of non-European philosophical texts in the contemporary academy. He argues that the form and content of philosophy are more bound to each other than people often admit. The consequence of this relationship is that when philosophers (especially of the “professional” ilk) are confronted with texts that conform to unrecognized or unaccepted literary conventions, the content of the philosophy itself is often denied.

In the West, philosophy conforms to two literary genres: the monograph and the journal article. Of course there are notable exceptions, such as the Nietzschean aphorism or

¹²⁶ A notoriously difficult word to define, but we can use Geertz’s famous definition as an example. For Geertz, culture is ““an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their

Sartre and Camus' philosophical fiction, but this general fact is difficult to refute. In fact, the range of philosophical styles, if anything, has become even more pinched since the time of Nietzsche, with very few forays into truly experimental and original stylistic philosophy. For example, Alfonso Lingis may be credited with stylistic freedom, but his influence has remained minimal and he is often dismissed because of his style, deemed unserious by "serious academics."¹²⁷ Nicholson opens his essay with the hypothesis that "had philosophical conventions developed differently, Donald Davidson might have presented his ideas in dialogue form, or Quine might have written rhymed couplets."¹²⁸ I take this statement as support for my own formulation of history as contingent. Philosophical styles like the monograph and the journal article did not come to dominate western philosophy because they had some ontological code impelling them; their rise is complicated and their stories are deeply connected with the history of the romantic novel, the economics of publishing, the politics of peer-review and tenure committees etc.¹²⁹ We are already seeing, at least in this

knowledge about and their attitudes toward life" (Geertz 1973d:89). 1973d Religion As a Cultural System. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Pp. 87-125. New York: Basic Books.

¹²⁷ For example: Jackson, Peter A. "Spurning Alphonso Lingis' Thai 'Lust': The Perils of a Philosopher at Large." *Intersections: Gender, History and culture in the Asian Context*. Issue 2, May 1999.

¹²⁸ Nicholson, Andrew J. (forthcoming 2013). Dialogue and Genre in Indian Philosophy:

Gītā, Polemic, and Doxography. In *Dialogue and Early South Asian Religions: Reading the Sources* (first book in the series "Dialogues in South Asian Traditions: Religion, Philosophy, Literature, and History," series editors Brian Black and Laurie L. Patton). Hampshire: Ashgate Press. Thanks to Andrew Nicholson for providing a rough draft of the essay.

¹²⁹ Harman has written many opinions of the issue of open-access publishing:

"Bottom line: there are an increasing number of independent scholars out there who, unlike many of us, do not have university positions and university library staffs able to get us copies of just about any article on interlibrary loan. The idea that they should pay a \$35 fee to read one of my articles is ridiculous. And why did I ever agree to publish in a journal that has such conditions? Simple: I was working within a tenure/promotion system where those sorts of journals have more credibility with faculty and administrative committees who were judging my work. But now, for me... who cares what they think? The academic freedom that comes with tenure (and now full professorship) is not supposed to be merely hypothetical. Nor does it only mean that I can criticize capitalism if I want. It also means that I can publish wherever I want, based on speed of publication, and based on audience characteristics, rather than on what might impress a group of older university colleagues because of the conditions operative in their own day rather than in mine?"

- <http://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/2012/06/28/a-readers-views-about-the-idea-of-self-publishing-everything-other-than-books/>. And:

essay, the estimation short and medium blog posts as legitimate philosophical forms — perhaps a new kind of pseudo-aphorism — and the inexorable growth of electronic media in all academic and literary fields is very likely to be accompanied by a proliferation of new styles that take advantage of new media. Thus, to think of western philosophy’s literary style (or lack thereof) as some teleological realization is foolishness.

Yet this assumption is a big part of why non-European philosophy continues to be marginalized. Nicholson writes “This, I believe, is one of the biggest obstacles to having Asian philosophy recognized as philosophy *per se* — the texts of philosophers in India and China just do not look like the sorts of texts that students of philosophy...are trained to read”(1). In contrast to someone like philosopher-of-mind Antony Flew’s insistence that philosophy is defined by strict adherence to explicit argument, Nicholson cites a passage from Parmenides poem *On Nature*, which offers virtually nothing in the way of explicit argument. Rather, the text “takes the form of a supernatural being addressing mortals and exhorting them to think in a certain way”(2). This approach, Nicholson shows, is typical of many Indian texts such as the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and it lasted much longer as a literary style in India than it did in the West. In fact, in Sanskrit literature, the *gītā* is a distinct genre that follows self-conscious conventions, such as the use of a supernatural interlocutor.

Next, Nicholson summarizes another distinct genre of Indian philosophical text, which he classifies as “polemic, and which generally follow a structure developed by the *Mīmāṃsā*

“I am now sorely tempted to self-publish everything other than books. I may just set up a website and post every one of my articles instead of going through the lengthy journal review process every time. We’ll all be doing that in 10 years anyway, so why not now? In the future, journals will still exist as seals of quality, clearing houses, and clutter-reducers. But I already have my readership, and may as well feed that readership more quickly than the journal system allows.”

-<http://doctozamalek2.wordpress.com/2012/06/28/the-value-of-open-access-journals/>

school that was based on a systematic hermeneutics of the Vedas.¹³⁰ These texts resemble Socratic dialogues insofar as they take dialogue form, however, they abide by different philosophical rules. For example, philosophical cliffhangers are not permitted. When Plato and his friends fail to agree on a definition of Justice, they embrace the ambiguity and move on. However, in the polemical texts of the Mīmāṃsā and the Nyāya, failure to advance a superior argument after criticizing other arguments would result in a merely “destructive argument’ (*vitaṇḍā*), the lowest of the three types of debates in their typology”(12).¹³¹

The third type of text from Indian literature that Nicholson believes has been ignored is doxography. As discussed in the last chapter, Nicholson points out that Indian doxographies—the earliest being a Tamil text from the sixth century—are not so different from Hegel’s history of philosophy in that they present a series of philosophical systems, each correcting the one before it, and ending up with the truest and most sublime philosophy of the author. It would be interesting to see further studies in Indian doxography as a genre—which flourished since the sixth century—compared to what we call the “history of philosophy” in the West, the original conception of which we credit Hegel.

After these discussions of genre, Nicholson asks whether they can be considered properly philosophical. Just like the texts of the ancient Cynics, they can only be called

¹³⁰ The texts take the form of a dialogue between a teacher and student, and the structure is usually divided into five sections: 1) topic (*vijaya*). 2) doubt (*śaṃdeha*). 3) prima facie view (*pūrvapakṣa*). 4) response (*uttarapakṣa*). 5) final decision (*nirṇaya*).

¹³¹ Not addressed in Nicholson’s paper is the famous antipode to this standard developed by the Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna in his radical system of “absurd consequences” (skt: *prasaṅgika*). Nāgārjuna argues for the universality of emptiness; that is, all things, without exception, do not possess an autonomous, sui generis core or demonstrable essence. Given the universality of his claim, it also applies to his own thesis. Contemporary Nāgārjunist, Jan Westerhoff sums it up:

“Nāgārjuna claims that he does not have any thesis himself. This does not amount to the paradoxical claim of someone asserting that he is not asserting anything. What Nāgārjuna wants to say is that he does not hold any substantially existent thesis, that is, any thesis which is to be supplied with a realist semantics that spells out meaning and truth in terms of correspondence with a mind-independent reality. The Mādhyamika will have to interpret his statements in terms of a purely convention-based semantics in order to avoid reintroducing substantially existent objects by the back door.”

philosophical if our definition of philosophy includes more than Flew's demand for explicit argumentation. Nicholson refers to Pierre Hadot's influential distinction between proper philosophy and the work of the Cynics, which is a distinction between theory (philosophy) and practice ("only a way of life").¹³² It is interesting to note that the "way of life" argument is also often made in modern times for Buddhism, which people hesitate to call a religion — because of how different it is from the Abrahamic traditions, its general atheism — and can't call a philosophy proper because it still maintains a number of supernatural elements, such as belief in reincarnation. Hadot doesn't count Cynicism as a philosophy not for its supernatural beliefs, but because it

was exclusively a choice of life: it was the choice of freedom... Such choice obviously implied a certain conception of life; but this conception, which was probably defined in conversations between the master and disciple or in public speeches, was never directly justified in theoretical philosophical treatises (109).

In the later Western world, this approach of the Cynics was absorbed into religious mysticism, or later on, was able to express itself as artistic antinomianism; but this style of semi-philosophical living — where life is informed by intellectual concepts, but those concepts are means to a more important end — is carried on to this day in most of the non-Western world: the Indian *sādhu* and Tibetan wandering *yōgin*, for example. If the Cynics are not philosophers, Nicholson asks the important question, "What if the problem is that we mean something different by philosophy than the ancient Greeks did?" (19). Clearly, he notes, non-Cynic ancient Greeks considered them to be philosophers, according to their own doxographies. Also, medieval Indian doxographies like the influential *Sarvadarśanasamgraha* (*Compendium of Philosophical Systems*) happily list India's Cynic-like antinomians, the *Pāśupatas*, among the "four [great] wisdoms" of the world (19). The issue then, is not that these pre-

- Westerhoff, Jan. *The Dispeller of Disputes*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010. p 12.

modern texts are unphilosophical. Rather, it is the professors in our modern philosophy departments who are often not doing philosophy in the traditional sense of the word.” That sense, of course, is *philo-sophia*, love of wisdom. To drive this point home, Nicholson cites analytic philosopher Colin McGinn’s 2012 *New York Times* article¹³³ that proposes we abandon the word philosophy, precisely because it implies a concern for figuring out some “way of life” that is better than others. Instead, he proposes “ontics,” which would put things like philosophy of mind, metaphysics, epistemology, on par with natural sciences, while softer disciplines like ethics and aesthetics could remain in the humanities and keep the name philosophy if they like.

McGinn’s view shows a striking compartmentalization of the branches of philosophy, as if metaphysics and ethics have no effect on each other. It seems to me that every great metaphysician worked hard on their metaphysics because they believed it would affect the way that people act. If your metaphysics holds to an eternal, omnipotent, and omniscient God/Creator, that worldview will undoubtedly inform the actions you make in life. If your metaphysics is stubbornly immanent, if you are limited to the here and now, this will also change the way you live. If your metaphysics describes the universe as the expression of a primordial code, you may adopt a teleological view of history and the political and intellectual biases that go along with that. If the world is a display of contingent, spontaneous restlessness, then you may be headed in some other direction, perhaps deeper into your body, perhaps into new relationships to the stuff of the world. However, McGinn thinks that such transformations shouldn’t concern contemporary philosophers, or at least that they are premature until we get to definitive “knowledge of abstract theoretical matters” as if this

¹³² Hadot, Pierre. *What Is Ancient Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. p. 110

¹³³ McGinn, Colin. “Philosophy by Another Name.” *New York Times*, Opinionator section. March 4, 2012

entire quest is carried in a disembodied realm, and as if the abstract will have no relation to its concrete correlate.

Nicholson's concludes with the following remark:

If McGinn is correct—and he certainly seems to be on to something—then we can say with some relief that texts like the *Bhagavad Gīta* and Parmenides' *On Nature* are probably not philosophical after all. Perhaps by exploring new modes of expression and cultivating a philosophical orientation toward our daily lives, someday we may join Parmenides and Diogenes in being able to call ourselves philosophers too (20).

This is precisely what Nietzsche did. Finding the state of philosophy severely lacking, Nietzsche abandoned the vapid structures and conventions of the dominant Western canon, instead developing his own vital, acerbic, and poetic style whose originality put him on the margins, but whose brilliance ensured its irruption into the canon. Nietzsche himself had no problem calling himself a Cynic, seeing it as a noble way of thinking far superior to the craven dogmatism at the heart of nearly every other world-historical creed¹³⁴. Ian Cutler argues convincingly in his book *Cynicism from Diogenes to Dilbert*,¹³⁵ that Nietzsche can be considered a Cynic *par excellence* for many reasons, including his stylistic incorporation of autobiographical sketches and political incorrectness, as well as his overriding concern with philosophy as a life-transforming, almost ascetic practice. It was Nietzsche's aim to revive the cynical-*pāśupati*n concern with living, *immanently*, and to provide an alternative to the empty vaults of the dominant idealist canon.

Against the Hegelian vision of a teleological history of philosophy and the world, Nietzsche saw the world as merely happening, and philosophies that try to organize it into events constituting a metaphysical historical hierarchy were to him patent dogmatisms. Unlike Flew, Nietzsche saw the glorification of explicit dialectics as a perversion of rigorous and

¹³⁴ In section three of "Why I Write Such Good Books" in *Ecce Homo*, he writes that his books "achieve the highest thing achievable on earth, cynicism." - Nietzsche 1989: 264.

imaginative philosophical thinking. Socrates and Plato marked a sinkhole in the history of philosophy, not an inauguration of the category. In the Socratic impulse to universalize virtue and morality via argument, philosophy became cerebration, it looked to the skies and became the pastime of wan hermits (Christian monks, Kant etc.). Thoughts of virtue and the proper way to live split away from any thought of *where* one lives, where philosophy and life play out. He writes, “*In praxi*, this means that moral judgments are torn from their conditionality, in which they have grown and alone possess any meaning, from their Greek-political ground and soil, to be naturalized under the pretense of sublimation.”¹³⁶ When philosophy changed and skepticism was deemed an immature stance afraid of commitment, this was not an advance. Rather, it signifies a calcification of thought into dogma. Seeking to prove the truth, every argument starts with digging in the heels. The post-skeptic philosopher has an epistemological claim or fantasy that he feels duty bound, or perhaps simply wants to convince us of¹³⁷, and he assures himself that his skill in argumentation need only live up to the veracity of his epistemological breakthrough. With the dialectical method, philosophy became something like target shooting: the goal is in sight and the task is clear. Either you settle the matter and convince a good many people, or you fail as a thinker. Thesis, sentence, paragraph, conclusion: these are the perfect forms to accomplish such an aim, as Western philosophy for the past two millennia has proved.

However, what of the person (can we even say “philosopher” here?) who feels within them a “Profound aversion to reposing once and for all in any one total view of the world? Fascination of the opposing point of view” refusal to be deprived of the stimulus of the

¹³⁵ Cutler, Ian. *Cynicism from Diogenes to Dilbert*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2005.

¹³⁶ *Will to Power* §430

¹³⁷ *ibid.* §446

enigmatic.”¹³⁸ What if one has no single-minded epistemological revelation to prove? What if one wants simply to reintegrate theory and practice and would like for reading and writing to be one means among many for doing that? To fold our philosophy into our life practice, it is essential to have access to alternative forms of expression, something that may have an unexpected aesthetic impact. We have to question why we have been offered so few forms of expression and why the ones we have access to now are said to be the best. This starts with interrogating the established history of philosophy with all of its teleological presuppositions. Nietzsche, backs up his innovative style with a theoretical justification against the kind of teleology that would have him bow before canonical forms of writing:

Against determinism and teleology. — From the fact that something ensues regularly and ensues calculably, it does not follow that it ensues *necessarily*. That a quantum of force determines and conducts itself in every particular case in one way and manner does not make it into and “unfree will.” “Mechanical necessity” is not a fact: it is we who first interpret it into events. We have interpreted the formulatable character of events as the consequence of a necessity that rules over events. But from the fact that I do a certain thing, it by no means follows that I am compelled to do it. Compulsion in things certainly cannot be demonstrated: the rule proves only that one and the same event is not another event as well. Only because we have introduced subjects, “doers,” into things does it appear that all events are the consequences of compulsion exerted upon subjects — exerted by whom? again by a “doer.” Cause and effect — a dangerous concept so long as one thinks of something that causes and something upon which an effect is produced.

a. Necessity is not a fact but an interpretation.¹³⁹

As I have argued throughout this essay, the first place to apply this critique of teleology is in the area of history. Once the thread that connects every event in a teleological rosary has been cut, the canons that shape our vision of history will open and alternative forms can flourish.

One way of cracking open the canons is to engage in a destabilizing “counter-history of philosophy.” This has been the project of Michel Onfray, who, in addition to his dozens of monographs rehabilitating the integrity of well-known but marginalized Epicurus,

¹³⁸ *ibid.* §470

Democritus, Diogenes, and Nietzsche, has written seven volumes of his “counter-history of philosophy,” and many more are likely forthcoming. His method is relatively straightforward: let us simply excavate as many voices as possible from the tombs that the dominant historiographers put them in. It is not that we should, in retaliation, try to silence Platonism, Christianity, and German Idealism — those traditions are, of course, extremely important — however, we must recognize that they are not the voice of reason and that they achieved their dominant position through complicated games of power, and not always through philosophical merit. Simply by acknowledging the existence of a sea of alternative voices running parallel to the dominant historiography, and by listening to those voices sincerely, we open ourselves up to different ways of seeing things, giving ourselves more resources to employ in living and shaping the world. Between the broadcasts of the Platonic megaphone, let us listen for the murmurs of Empedocles, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Abderitan atomism, Pyrrho, Antisthenes, and Aristippus. In the rests of the Pauline liturgy, let us hear the prayers of Carpocrates, Epiphanes, Simon Magus, Valentinus, Bentivegna de Gubbio, Heilwige Bloemardinne, Lorenzo Valla, and Pierre Gassendi. Through the Middle Ages and Renaissance, let’s not buy into the trope that all that mattered was nee-Aristotelianism, Aquinas, and Descartes. Let’s look at Pierre Charron and Montaigne and the roots of secularism, free thinking libertines like La Mothe Le Vayer, Saint-Evremond, and Cyrano de Bergerac, and the materialists Jean Meslier, La Mettrie, Helvetius, and d’Holbach.¹⁴⁰ Such is the focus of the curriculum at Onfray’s Popular University of Caen in Normandy, a free university he founded in 2006 in Normandy.

¹³⁹ *ibid.* §552

¹⁴⁰ Onfray. *La puissance d'exister*. Paris: Grasset, 2006. p. 62.

We do not study these writers as a mere philological exercise, or to just preserve them as entries in history's catalog. We study them because their visions of the world were profoundly different from those who happened to be in power during their era, and it is for this reason that they found themselves to a large extent written out of history. Their writings have something to offer us, a valuable resource for gaining momentum when mainstream resources ring flat. They teach us that the loudest voice is not the only voice, and that we should keep our ears tuned for the constant hum of an alternative world, perhaps one right around us, one more immanent than the one favored by the establishment. Not only does opening ourselves to alternative voices furnish us with valuable resources for thinking and living, it has the added political benefits of lifting hushed voices out of isolation and the suffering caused by it. For Onfray, with his own personal history and certain areas of expertise, it is important to legitimize and rehabilitate hedonism, atheism, and materialism from the centuries of reductionism heaped on them at the hands of Plato-Christian-Idealism. But the methodologies of Queer Theory and Feminism are based on the same principle; and these two fields have been some of the richest, most productive, and most impactful intellectual realms of modern times. They are essentially counter-histories that voice what the dominant historiography does not want to be heard.

All of these counter-histories function by displaying alternative styles and methodologies to the ones contained in the dominant canon, once thought exhaustive. An equally effective way of doing this, which should be carried out in parallel, is to open the canons to non-Western sources of ideas. This is important not as an exercise in documenting the world's diversity—though that is an added benefit—but as a way of accessing different styles of thinking and expression. A philosophical style, vague as the term is, is a posture toward things, a way of approaching them, seeing them, and feeling them. One style can be like

handling an object with gloves, another with fine, soft hands, another with the calloused mitts of a mason. They are borne by long and deep swells of history that stand behind every author, yet they are personal. Talking about Merleau-Ponty's writing style, which was fully integrated with his philosophical method, Harman writes, "Even philosophy, he holds, is less a set of arguments than an animating impulse by which a thinker sees the world in a unique fashion."¹⁴¹ As we saw in the previous section on doxography, one can either take the posture of a fighter or a dancer toward the world. One can stand firm in hoary forms of expression, batting away all comers, or one can adopt new postures and moves, if even briefly, thereby embodying a character one may never have met, or may have rejected out of hand. Both these moves have personal and political repercussions. The former makes us unsupple, unadaptable, unseeing, and certain; everything that has been has led up to us for a reason. By opening the canon, through the proliferation of styles and the visions they convey, we see things a new way, we see things *with* others, and accord them and ourselves the dignity of individuals.

¹⁴¹ *Guerilla Metaphysics* 56.

Conclusion

This essay has been somewhat schizophrenic about Hegel—a document about a love-hate relationship. I began by talking about comparative philosophy and the impasse represented by Hegel when it comes to taking non-European thinking seriously. Tibebu takes exception to those who whitewash Hegel’s historical and social writings, as if they should be pardoned because his *Logic* and *Philosophy* were so brilliant and profound.¹⁴² Such Hegelians tend to argue that there are two Hegels, one ontological and the other social/political. Much of what I have written may suggest such an approach, since I do agree that his ontological and historical writings are as different as night and day, but that he employs his vague and malleable metaphysics to the service of his thoroughly misguided political and historical philosophy. His historical philosophy needs to be discredited, but the way to do that is not through book burning or *ad hominem* criticism. Many have, and still do claim that Heidegger should be purged from the canons of philosophy¹⁴³ because of his nazism—that his metaphysics must have been an engine that led him to his execrable political ideas. However, the vast majority of philosophers, even if to their chagrin, believe that the brilliance and radicalness of his writings make him a more than worthy figure to think about and against, if not always *with*. Heideggerians now pick up the challenge not of rehabilitating their teacher from his unforgivable aspects, but of using his considerable insights as new material for new ways of thinking.

¹⁴² For example, he has little sympathy for Philip Kain’s *Hegel and the Other: A Study of the Phenomenology of Spirit*. New York: SUNY, 2005.

¹⁴³ For example: Romano, Carlin. “Heil Heidegger!” *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Oct. 18 2009. <http://chronicle.com/article/Heil-Heidegger-/48806/>

Hegel presents just this same problem. His offenses did not seem egregious until more recently, and people like Tibebe have done the noble work of pointing out the severity of his damage and the need to go beyond the paradigm he constructed. However, just as with Heidegger, it is foolish to reduce any thinker, especially Hegel, to one theme, claiming it to be their essence that all other themes point to. At times, Tibebe is guilty of this reductionism, as when he roundly criticizes Philip Kain,¹⁴⁴ who he reads as saying “that even though Hegel is a racist, his work is not *all* racism. We should throw out the bad, the racism, and keep the good in Hegel. There is more good to be had in Hegel than bad”(340). While I think it is disingenuous to maintain sympathy with Hegel’s historical philosophy, I do not generally have a problem with the take-some-and-leave-some approach to Hegel, or any philosophy. This is what we do when we study the history of philosophy, this is what criticism is about, and as I alluded to in the early parts of this essay, it should be at the heart of any comparative methodology. Accepting and discarding, putting things together, evaluating, blowing them up again, and on and on — this is philosophical method. That said, I believe unequivocally that his historical philosophy should be entirely rubbished. Tibebe exposes Hegel’s deep racism and the racist legacy that he left behind, to which so many Eurocentrists adhere to with no self-awareness, and this exposé is absolutely necessary for waking people up to the roots of Eurocentrism and the way that it affects canon-formation, social norms, and politics. A similarly pointed exposé should attack the noxious affects of Hegel’s theism. But theism and racism, I believe, have a more fundamental cause, which is teleology. And so it is Hegel’s essential teleology I have tried to expose and criticize. However, I am not interested in or willing to reduce all of Hegel’s philosophy to this, my least favorite of its aspects. Getting rid of his racism, theism, and teleology, what is left is empty space, negativity and whirling

¹⁴⁴ Kain, Philip. *Hegel and the Other*. Albany: SUNY, 2005.

restlessness. These are the metaphysical conditions in which things can come about without a teleological maker and without reliance on human perception. Rejecting teleology and the ontological hierarchies that invariably attend it, appreciating objects and people as individuals and as actors in networks, only then will we be on the road to open canons and open minds. Carl Woese, describing the outdatedness of microbiology's evolutionary tree, writes that we must do a better job of understanding the variety of organisms and "Only then can living systems finally be conceptualized in discreet, ideosyncratic species terms."¹⁴⁵

Tibebu is naïve when he says "As someone who professed to follow the teachings of Jesus regarding love, peace, and reconciliation, Hegel had all that he needed to place himself outside the camp of racism and bigotry of his era"(xxvii). It would be fascinating to see a list of people in the history of Christianity who lived up to this seemingly easy standard. It is the talk of a Christian cravenly insisting on the nobility of his bias, which is inherently teleological and thus metaphysically wrong and socially dangerous. If we are to get beyond the Eurocentrist paradigm, we must start with teleology, and Hegel is only one prominent representative of long and powerful lineage.

To bring this back to my starting point of speculating on academic Eurocentrism and a comparative methodology that can get out of it... The answer to the monstrous history that Hegel constructs, and the institutions that crystallized around it is not to simply replace it with a contrasting system. People with an affinity a more dominant philosophy need not renounce those systems and become madhyamikas or Epicureans. However, they ought to take enough steps to bring their tightly held presuppositions under real criticism. Sometimes an effective way to do this is to inoculate our prejudices with destabilizing principles from other cultures.

¹⁴⁵ Woese, Carl R. New Biology for a New Century." *Microbiology and Molecular Biology Reviews*. vol 68 no. 2 p. 173-186, June 2004.

But they must be taken seriously and not set up to be knocked down because they lack the necessary pedigree. The point is to engender new possibilities of seeing old problems.

Comparative philosophy began as a historical project, where Orientalists sought to document more of the diversity of the world's ideas. Eventually (and my remarks here are limited to the area of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism) — especially since the 1970's increasing access to communities of people who actually live and practice different styles of philosophy and religion — erstwhile philologists and ethnographers began to convert with zeal to the new systems of thought they encountered. This led to a flourishing of philology and exegeses of those traditions on their own terms¹⁴⁶. These scholars generally resisted the temptation to force Indo-Tibetan philosophy into a European conceptual framework, and because of their translations and exegeses, it is now really possible to study those philosophical traditions in English, just as one can study Heidegger and Hegel without knowing proper German (though of course it would be preferable to read in the original!). However, for reasons talked about ad nauseum in this essay, these philosophical traditions have been left stranded in isolation, held together mostly by a coterie of enthusiasts, with no access to the legitimizing power to institutionalized philosophy departments. Such a state of affairs has led to an air of competitiveness and resentment on the side of the excluded philosophical traditions. This manifests in more desperate engagements with western philosophy in which enthusiasts seek to prevail over a canonical position, done under the guise of a "dialogue" or the innocuous term "comparative philosophy." There is a big difference between comparative, collaborative,

¹⁴⁶ For example, in the area of Tibetan Buddhism there have been impressive waves of translations of important canonical treatises and commentaries, beginning with the work of scholars like Robert Thurman and Jeffrey Hopkins, and prolific translators like Richard Barron and Erik Pema Kunzang. Publishing companies like Shambhala, Snow Lion, and Wisdom continue to patronize translations of long commentarial literature, which is probably the style of work that will be of most use for comparative philosophy, since it is where we can find exegeses of major themes that are analogous to many aspects of Continental and Analytic Western philosophy. See the translations and introductions of Karl Brunnholzl, Padmakara Translation Committee, and so forth.

or interdisciplinary work that attempts to produce something new, and that which simply means to poach the resources of other fields in order to shore up its own sense of supremacy.

Philosopher Owen Flanagan analyzes this problem in his book *The Bodhisattva's Brain*. In it, he talks about his involvement with a group of philosophers, scientists, and religious practitioners who are all ostensibly interested in the mystery of consciousness, and in exploring the question of happiness and the paths that may lead to it. Part of these explorations included neuro-biological analyses of the brains of meditation practitioners to see if they had any discernable unique qualities.¹⁴⁷ While the experiments were very interesting and opened a new channel for acquiring empirical data, the subsequent press and some of the conclusions that were jumped to bemused Flanagan:

There were widespread discussions, and many published expressions, which continue, of the idea that neuroscience was actually in the process of empirically vindicating the calims of one lived philosophical tradition, namely Buddhism, to yield happiness and flourishing, or something in the vicinity, at a higher rate of return than other contenders. The hyperbole was (and continues to be) jaw-dropping.¹⁴⁸

Clearly Flanagan, as a participant in these discussions and experiments, was not convinced by the finality of the results. No matter how badly Buddhist practitioners wanted it to be true, *believed* it to be true, they would have to be patient like everyone else—indefinitely patient—for any vindication of their creed. The victory cries that were published and the self-congratulating that spread among Buddhist communities (like the claim in the preface here that meditation can *fix* depression) are simple cases of triumphalism; they are unimaginative and unproductive; they keep people mired in narrow mindedness; and they make people judgmental.

¹⁴⁷ Performed by Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin's Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience with results published in articles such as "Buddha's Brain: Neuroplasticity and Meditation." *IEEE Signal Process Mag.* 2008 January 1; 25(1): 176–174.

¹⁴⁸ Flanagan, Owen. *The Bodhisattva's Brain*. MIT Press, 2003. p. x

While I written a great deal about the flaws of Eurocentrism, I have also observed a great deal of the reverse triumphalism that so displeases Flanagan. A great many of the papers presented in the field of comparative philosophy end with the ground-breaking conclusion that since altruism has remained such a difficult problem in Western philosophies, and that it is a presupposed ideal in a tradition like mahāyāna Buddhism, it follows that if everyone engaged in Buddhist meditation practice, they would gain insight and access to to true altruism. Such a claim may have merits, but when presented in such a ham-handed way, coming from a place of personal commitment, the argument vitiates itself philosophically. For such an argument to be accepted, it demands something of a conversion experience. In order to verify the claims of the argument, a person would have to undergo a dramatic life-style change and practice a program of learning and meditation for many years. Someone who is predisposed to or subconsciously receptive to such a radical shift may indeed benefit from what the argument suggests, however, as a philosophical argument to be shared with people who may have strong contradicting views, it is simply alienating. The person making such an argument suggests that they have epistemological access to some *a priori* truth that the other person does not have. It suggests that the all philosophical insights have already been exhausted by the wisdom traditions of the past, and that the task at hand is simply to choose the best among them. It supposes that all people can be reduced to a finite set of categories, all of whom can and should adopt a certain stance toward their selves, others, and objects.

While I am a proponent of meditation practice as a way to explore oneself, I have great reservations promoting it as a universal epistemological framework. In my experience, meditation and its glorification are usually at the center of the “triumphalist” approach to comparative philosophy. One example I have seen repeatedly is the insistence that a universal ethics can be constructed and promulgated on the basis of Buddhist meditation techniques: if

only we “pay attention” closely enough to the mind, we can objectively intuit what is “good” and “bad” and thereby demystify the problem of ethical choice. The right choice will become clear to us. Moreover, if we just “pay attention” closely enough, we can unlock the indwelling capacity we already have to overcome whatever adventitious addictions we might have, or any depression that haunts us. Some evidence, no doubt, has been accumulated over the years to suggest that mindfulness meditation has a number of salubrious affects on the individual, from decreasing stress to promoting self-control, and it would take a dour one indeed to claim that the cultivation of more subtle self-awareness would not be desirable. However, there is danger in universalizing something like meditative awareness and insist that it alone is a reliable foundation for a unified theory of ethics.

The proponent of Buddhist meditative ethics—an ethics based on supremely subtle “attention”—becomes unaware of the oppressiveness of their arguments. First of all, they claim to have epistemological access to a private object, but one that can become public if only everyone else tries as hard as they have. This is a theological stance. Second, advocates of altruism and compassion often callously hold the rest of the world to their standard. “You are depressed? I have shown you the tools to get over it, so if you don’t, then it’s your fault.” “You have an addiction? Use my incisive technique to excise it from your self.” Of course Attention and awareness and self-discovery are important components of personal maturation and overcoming all sorts of suffering, but when people are held to a standard by means of a self-righteous and judgmental imperative, if they fail to live up to the expectation, it can exacerbate the suffering they already feel. This is what Žižek is getting at when he rather bluntly rejects “new age” teachings, along with their more traditional allies in Buddhism and other Asian religions. He summarizes the ethos of the self-righteous self-knower:

You must do your duty of achieving full self-realization and self-fulfillment because you can. This is the reason why we feel, at least I do, a kind of terrorist pressure beneath the compliant tolerance of New Age preachers. They seem to preach peace and letting go and so on but there is an implicit terrorist dimension in it.¹⁴⁹

Self-discovery, self-realization, and self-fulfillment are thus not methodologies, they are results of some very complex work, most likely not an algorithm but something very personalized and unique to each individual. But they are too often treated as starting points: “First intuit your self and all the subtle things that make it up (never mind the depth of your experience of this intuition, what it actually consists of, and so forth) then universalize it and adumbrate the path for others.”

In a particularly contemplative piece titled “Giving an Account of Oneself,” Judith Butler questions both the reliability of self-knowledge as well as the implications of an ethics built on such self-knowledge. She notices that “The ‘I’ cannot tell the story of its own emergence, and the conditions of its own possibility, without in some sense bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present.¹⁵⁰” As with Meillassoux’s ancestral world or Harman’s vacuum sealed “objects wrapped in objects” that never fully divulge themselves, self-knowledge requires that we become artists trying to give form to a self; we have to get at it speculatively;¹⁵¹ it is not given to us whole in intuition. Even our own bodies have a history we are not privy to: the soft bundle we were as an infant may as well as been someone else, and the growth and decay of our tissues and cells is something we can only paint a mental picture of through inference and imagination. Perhaps its very hiding character, its absenteeism, is the Self’s greatest secret. Any claim to fathom the self from all sides, to intuit it cubistically, must be looked at with suspicion. The person who claims

¹⁴⁹ Lecture at the European Graduate School, August 1999.
<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/the-superego-and-the-act/>

complete self knowledge must be able to describe its genesis and history, in all its detail. If they are unable to do so, if their story has blind spots or contradictions, then they have no right to hold others to the standard they pretend to. In the context of the Hegelian dialectic of recognition, this means that the Self does not achieve some ultimate satisfaction in being recognized by another self-consciousness, for that would lead to a kind of deflation — the impelling desire behind the whole movement would evaporate or drain away. Rather, the Self and the Other constantly withhold something from each other; a mystery remains and the ember of desire still glows. This is no reason, however, to condemn the Hegelian dialectic since,

There is lots of light in the Hegelian room, and the mirrors have the happy coincidence of usually being windows as well. In this sense, we might consider a certain post-Hegelian reading of the scene of recognition in which precisely my own opacity to myself occasions my capacity to confer a certain kind of recognition on others. It would be perhaps an ethics based on our shared, and invariable, partial blindness about ourselves. The recognition that one is, at every turn, not quite the same as what one thinks that one is, might imply, in turn, a certain patience for others that suspends the demand that they be selfsame at every moment. Suspending the demand for self-identity or, more particularly, for complete coherence, seems to me to counter a certain ethical violence that demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same.¹⁵²

A methodology or ethics that starts with a claim to complete self-knowledge has already set up an ontologically hierarchical structure: it is their fully-plumbed self that bestows meaning on things. Others are magnetized by the density of their Self and thereby emerge into a world of meaningful relations.

¹⁵⁰ Butler, Judith. "Giving an Account of Oneself." *Diacritics*. Johns Hopkins University Press vol. 31, No. 4 (Winter, 2001), p. 26.

¹⁵¹ *ibid.* 37

¹⁵² *ibid.* 27

Hence the long discussions herein about the need to get beyond hierarchical ontologies, belief in the sublimity of one's destiny and that of one's tribe, and so forth. Such critiques are the starting place of envisioning different ethics. Butler continues in this direction:

And though I am certainly not arguing that we ought never to make judgments—they are necessary for political and personal life alike: I make them, and I will—I think that it would be important, in rethinking the terms of culture and of ethics, to remember that not all ethical relations are reducible to acts of judgment. The capacity to make and justify moral judgments does not exhaust the sphere of ethics, of either obligation or ethical relationality. Indeed, prior to judging the Other, we must be in some relation to him or her, and this relation will ground and inform the ethical judgments we finally do make. We will, in some way, have to ask the question, “Who are you?” If we forget that we are related to those we condemn, even those we must condemn, then we lose the chance to be ethically educated or “addressed” by a consideration of who they are and what their personhood says about the range of human possibility that exists, and even to prepare ourselves for or against such possibilities.¹⁵³

In order to arrive at a non-oppressive human ethics of relation, ironically, it is necessary to go through the post-human movement described in earlier chapters. It is a possible way to understand something about the relations that preexist us, and which therefore undermine our own supremacy as Creator-Subjects. The most persistent, obnoxious, and lazy mode of criticism against OOO and Speculative Realism philosophers is that their post-human theories will lead to a denigration of the human, into some *Matrix*-esque dystopian hell, as if they are part of a conspiracy to collaborate with a nascent android takeover. Harman, Bryant, and Morton continually address these criticisms, with little success at quelling them, and Onfray continues to write prolifically in favor of his epicurean materialism—itsself closely related to post-humanism—as the foundation for a truly humanist ethics that does not appeal to the heavens or acknowledge an ontologically privileged actor. The post-human turn is a way of criticizing the anthropocentrism that makes us put ourselves at the top of a metaphysical hierarchy, and which results in personal and political chauvinism. Any

¹⁵³ *ibid.* 30

productive “comparative methodology” needs to keep these issues in mind, being careful not to fall into reverse triumphalism and dogmatic competitiveness.

This is why Flanagan still sees value in the kind of interdisciplinary, comparative, "inter-faith" projects that have proven to, at times, exasperate him. Despite his skepticism, he is still confident that comparative work is essential to

disabuse us of several... blind spots: ethnic chauvinism, the view that non-Western traditions are esoteric in a bad way, for reasons beyond their unfamiliarity; the idea that Religion (with a big "R") is inevitable for psychological reasons; and that it is required, true or false, to shore up meaning and morals.¹⁵⁴

For him, a self-described platonic-hedonist who does not believe in absolute truths, comparative philosophy is useful for its cosmopolitanism. Take an ignorant, narrow-minded bigot out of a backwater and introduce them to the finest minds of a cosmopolis, and before long their habits and attitudes will change and open. The same goes for philosophy. Open the canon, look over your self-imposed fence, and you will start to see and hear new and wonderful things. Again, these are not important *because* they are different, but they offer us new material with which to forge new ways of living.

Comparative philosophy, as a project of opening, excavating, and proliferating, is not so different, methodologically, from feminism and queer theory. They have similar traps and successes. Feminist philosopher Sandra Harding has argued that feminism, like comparative philosophy, when it is too sure of itself methodologically, becomes dogmatic and unhelpful. Just as some comparativists call for all ethics to be subjected to some universal meditative epistemology, there are feminists who desperately forward a particular methodology as essential to an ultimate goal. Some argue that what feminists should be doing is “consciousness raising,” others insist on historical materialism, others “feminine

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.* xi

phenomenology.” All of these, Harding admits, have great merits, but she sees no reason to declare winners and runners up.¹⁵⁵ Feminism’s accomplishments are not counted in individual major breakthroughs, but cumulatively, over a wide range of categories and fields. Among its broad successes, she lists just a few, so as not to suggest any limit to further inquiry and discovery. They include: “The ‘discovery’ of gender and its consequences”; “women’s experience as a scientific resource”, i.e., the idea that truth claims must hold up epistemologically for women, not just for men; and a “robust gender-sensitive reflexivity practice.”¹⁵⁶ While there are surely other contributions, her point is that it is foolish to focus too much on figuring out what *the* feminist method ought to be. Meditation on the method question in feminism leads us to the recognition that feminism is fundamentally a moral and political movement for the emancipation of women:

It may be unsatisfying for many feminists to come to the conclusion that I have been urging: the search for a distinctive feminist method of inquiry is not a fruitful one. As a consolation, I suggest we recognize that if there were some simple recipe we could follow and prescribe in order to produce powerful research and research agendas, no one would have to go through the difficult and sometimes painful—if always exciting—processes of learning how to see and create ourselves and the world in radically new forms demanded by our feminist theories and practices.¹⁵⁷

Likewise, comparative philosophy, even when performed as the most drudging philology, has moral and political implications. It chips away at the lock on a canon that is guarded by people who are wrong in their metaphysics and politics. If comparative philosophy can become reflexive, if it does not content itself with cataloging the differences between heterologous traditions or trap itself in ideological triumphalism, it will not only find wisdom in more and more places, it will start to produce it here and now.

¹⁵⁵ Harding, Sandra. “The Method Question.” *Hypatia*. Vol. 2, No. 3., Feminism & Science, 1 (Autumn, 1987). Blackwell Publishing.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.* 31

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.* 32-33.

APPENDIX:
AXES OF OMNISCIENCE:
Diachronic and Synchronic Models

Very few philosophical considerations seem as anachronistic as those about omniscience and absolute knowledge. Only a few extant systems of philosophy have the hubris to maintain that absolute knowledge or omniscience is possible. Most have banished any such notions to the mists of theology. Mainstream metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, have generally embraced unknowing, turning doubt and lacunae into the insignia of their rigor and humility. Among those who stubbornly insisted that their speculations led to the elusive pinnacle of knowledge are G.W.F Hegel and several representatives of the Indo-Tibetan tradition mahāyāna tradition.

Omniscience, generally speaking, implies *maximal epistemic greatness*. It is an epistemological concept that entails an awareness of the *limits* of knowing. Limits do not contradict the absoluteness of the knowledge, they only mark the line past which knowledge has no purchase. Though Hegel and the Buddhists in question are confident about the realizability of absolute knowledge, they construct vastly different theories about what such knowledge consists in.

For Hegel, absolute knowledge is a retrospective knowledge that understands the Reason at work in the unfolding of world history; it is the view from the top of a mountain that understands the structure of everything that has led up to the present. It is an immanent awareness, but one that can always opens up onto the past. It is a self-recognition and self-confidence that has a causal thread going through it, connecting it absolutely to the past and future, which can be decoded with the perfection of knowledge. This knowledge unfolds inexorably, motivated by a *telos*. Moreover, it is cumulative and shared by all of humanity; hence, omniscience is eschatological.

For the Buddhists, absolute knowledge resembles an aesthetic awareness of the

present—an awareness that penetrates all that comes into its immanent sphere. This thorough comprehension, or *seeing through* the present brackets the past and the future. It entails the same penetration of the past and future. It lies in wait for them, since the past, present, and future all share the same structure. The past can be analyzed according to its causal details, and the future can be reasonably inferred sometimes, but those have nothing to do with omniscience for the Buddhists. Collective knowledge may pile up, but no matter how vast its mass, it will not be maximal epistemic greatness. Omniscience worth the name must be soteriological.

To put the Hegelian and Buddhist attitudes into an analytical framework, they can be best compared by using two unfamiliar, if not entirely novel terms: *diachronic omniscience* and *synchronic omniscience*.

While the category of omniscience marks the extreme limit of all possible knowledge, these divergent types of omniscience betray very different attitudes about knowledge itself, what types of knowledge are superior, and why. These different attitudes mobilize intellectual resources in different directions, yielding different productions, including different attitudes about history and ethics. However, the gulf between them is not simply the proverbial gulf between East and West. The orientations that these two orientations represent are transcultural and transhistorical; even though the two philosophical streams aim at one type of absolute knowledge or the other, the distinction does not entail that no one in the surrounding social milieu aspires to the other type. It may be that those aspirations simply express themselves through diverse means. For example, a great number of western poets could be said to believe in synchronic omniscience, while in Asian contexts, believers in diachronic absolute knowledge may be found amongst grammarians and proponents some of the innumerable lesser known schools of philosophy on that vast continent.

HEGEL'S ABSOLUTE KNOWING: DIACHRONIC OMNISCIENCE

One of Hegel's most enduring statements comes from the preface of his mature work, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, where he writes:

Only one word more concerning the desire to teach the world what it ought to be. For such a purpose philosophy at least always comes too late. Philosophy, as the thought of the world, does not appear until reality has completed its formative process, and made itself ready. History thus corroborates the teaching of the conception that only in the maturity of reality does the ideal appear as counterpart to the real, apprehends the real world in its substance, and shapes it into an intellectual kingdom. When philosophy paints its grey in grey, one form of life has become old, and by means of grey it cannot be rejuvenated, but only known. The owl of Minerva, takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering.¹⁵⁸

Coming near the end of Hegel's prolific writing career, when his accomplishments were presumably in full bloom, this is among the clearest windows into what it means for him to achieve the acme of his philosophical program. What is striking about this statement is that through the metaphor of the owl it describes absolute knowledge (or wisdom, or, by extension, omniscience) as a backward gaze; a retrospective. Its present aspect is a synthetic act that interprets what has come before it, understand its etiology, and continues to discover the mysteries of its own causes. Yet, as a phenomenological experience, it remains notoriously indeterminate. It does not seem to be reactive; it is not a lens through which you encounter the rush of the world's ever-manifesting phantasmagoria. Rather, it *understands* that phantasmagoria according to its causes. The world's appearances come on too fast to know them *absolutely* in their immediacy. Training to react to them is less important than understanding them after they have impacted us; first the storm of the present must pass, then the mud can settle and clarity, absolute philosophical knowledge can unfold. Thus, Hegel's

¹⁵⁸ Hegel, GWF. trans. S W Wyde, 1896. Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche Books, 2001.

absolute knowledge is significantly abstract; no affective content describes it. Its phenomenology consists in a kind of reflective confidence in which the mind recognizes its own centrality in the drama that unfolds to it. Its experience is like riding the crest of a wave with one's gaze fixed on the water below and back out to sea. It understands the wave to be caused by that water, and looks into it for deeper and deeper explanations about how one ended up on the crest. This retrospective gaze leads to various insights of very different character. There is a lot of water to account for beneath that lifting wave. It demands curiosity about the etiology of the present, encouraging scientific analysis and rigorous historical work.

The subtlest insight the gaze produces is into the character of the knowing subject itself. Looking at the path behind him, the antecedents to his own mind, he discovers his destiny—that he was already entailed in antecedents. Thus, objective reality loses its foreignness, recognized as structurally and substantially the same as the subject. This is the threshold of absolute knowledge, for it uncovers the fundamental secret that was previously obscured. In his foreword to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, J.N. Findlay describes Hegel's absolute knowledge as

. . . the realization that all forms of objectivity are identical to those essential to the thinking subject, so that in construing the world conceptually it is seeing everything in the form of self, the self being simply the ever-active principle of conceptual universality, of categorical synthesis. In its conceptual grasp of objects it necessarily grasps what it itself is, and in grasping itself it necessarily grasps every phase of objectivity.¹⁵⁹

The mind with absolute knowledge then gazes confidently out over the objective world—all that has concretely manifested—and sees itself entailed there, making it feel at home, justified, no longer alienated. But this absolute knowledge knows itself in more detail than this vague

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/pr/preface.htm>. Or

¹⁵⁹ Hegel, GWF. trans. A.V. Miller. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford University Press, 2004. p. xxviii.

phenomenology of recognition. It understands the fullness of the Absolute Truth that it knows. “The True is the Whole,” he writes in the preface to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, presaging his “Owl of Minerva” statement later in his career,

But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a *result*, that only in the *end* is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, viz. To be actual, subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself. Though it may seem contradictory that the absolute should be conceived essentially as a result, it needs little pondering to set this show of contradiction in its true light(11).

Thus, the absolute is conditioned by causality, an *a priori* category he inherits from the tradition he is embedded in—a tradition resting heavily on both Aristotle and Kant, two of the preeminent theorists of causality *qua a priori* category. Aristotle in particular firmly established causality at the heart of all epistemological endeavors. In laying out the principles of his *Physics*, he says, “For our inquiry aims at knowledge; and we think we know something only when we find out the reason why it is so, i.e., when we find its primary cause.”¹⁶⁰ If knowledge in general is qualified in such a way, it must also apply to absolute knowledge. Absolute knowledge, like the Absolute, is caused by something, and the path of knowledge consists in bringing to light the chain of causes that are responsible for it. The absolute is the result of the mind going through the process of perceiving objectivity, penetrating it, recognizing itself within it, and then reemerging with a new self-confidence. Thinking, by passing through objects in this way, ends up thinking itself, which is another characterization of the Absolute, and one that accords perfectly with Aristotle’s conception of God (the Absolute) as self-thinking thought. Findlay explains:

¹⁶⁰ Book II, chapter 3 of Aristotle’s *Physics* found in Aristotle. *Selections*. Terence Irwin and Gail Fine trans. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995.

The subject or Ego is thus for Hegel not what we ordinarily understand by a personal thinker, but the logical function of universality in a peculiar sort of detachment from its species and instances. The mind for Hegel, as for Aristotle, is thus the place of forms, a bustling Agora where such forms are involved in endless transactions and conversations, and though it is by the intermediation of such forms that there is a to their individual instances, they none the less enjoy a relative independence there, a detachment in the thought-ether, that they never enjoy elsewhere. (*Phenomenology of Spirit* xi).

The mind with absolute knowledge therefore sees itself everywhere. In every object of the world bound by laws of causality and finitude, self-consciousness learns its secret history and understands its own necessity. It knows that it is the *end* of a rational process that always aimed at it. On this point Hegel writes in the “Absolute Knowing” section of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, “self-consciousness *knows* the nothingness of the object, on the one hand, because it externalizes its own self—for in this externalization it posits *itself* as the object, or the object as itself” (§788).

This self-recognition is central to absolute knowing. It is a new way that the mind experiences the world, rising out of that world and reflecting on it. It is not a spontaneous insight but is the culmination of a process that then retrospectively understands its own history.

Absolute knowledge as the structural reality of the interpenetration of subject and object is the perspective of his *Science of Logic*. However, the *Logic* only unveils the final truth about *pure being*, an indeterminate immediacy with nothing to grasp. It describes the fundamental structure of reality, which is the theoretical substrate of the whole system, and thus, in a sense, the beginning. But paradoxically, it is a beginning that only comes to light at the end of a process that illuminates it. The *Science of Logic* says,

The beginning must then be *absolute* or, what means the same here, must be an abstract

beginning; and so there is *nothing* that it may *presuppose*, must not be mediated by anything or have a ground, ought to be rather itself the ground of the entire science. It must therefore be simply *an immediacy*, or rather only *immediacy* itself.¹⁶¹

Rolf Ahlers, in an excellent essay entitled “The Absolute as the Beginning of Hegel’s Logic” clarified how the so-called “beginning” adumbrated in the *Logic* is really the end: “But the beginning of that development cannot start with that explication. This beginning of the dialectic remains rather something which is ‘inconceivable’” (292). He continues,

It is important to note how unconstructed this notion of the absolute is. The very call to keep distant the categories of reflection and to simply look at the dynamic of thought itself by immersion into this dynamic prohibits a forced interpretation, such as that of Kojève, indicating that “Hegel becomes God in thinking or writing the *Logic*”

The unconstructed Absolute of the *Logic* is only possible as the end result of the path taken in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which relies on an investigation of objective reality that slowly yields the hidden secret about that reality. Hegel explains how “In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which is the doctrine of consciousness, the ascent to the understanding is made through stages of *sensuous consciousness* and then of perception.”¹⁶² When we follow the *Phenomenology* on the path to absolute knowledge, we are playing detective with the objects of our environment, and with the record of history. In those things we must dig for the causes of the appearances of the present. We must tell the story of what we are. Imagination, creativity, rigor and intelligence are required to tell the *right* story, the one that most fully explains the necessity of the things of the present, that shows they were always intended by their causes. Since the Absolute of the *Logic* would never have been revealed without the retrospective gaze that constitutes the narrative of reality’s history, Hegel had to tell the entire story of world history. The more that he could tell, the more the Absolute would be revealing itself, since the Absolute is entailed

¹⁶¹ Hegel, GWF. *The Science of Logic*. George di Giovanni trans. Cambridge University Press, 2010. p 48.

there, hiding in the material of history. Absolute knowing is not the direct experience of the *Logic's* immediacy, but immersion in the mediation that reveals it. Thus, historical events constitute the path to it and make it possible.

As discussed extensively in earlier sections of this essay, Hegel's historical attitude is grounded in the Aristotelian belief in teleology. All things have their ends—e.g., “But the end of action is not the individual act but the total betterment of the world” (*Phenomenology of Spirit* §619)—and the end of the march of history is the self-revelation of its own secret Reason:

The realm of Spirits which is formed in this way in the outer world constitutes a succession in Time in which one Spirit relieved another of its charge and each took over the empire of the world from its predecessor. Their goal is the revelation of the depth of Spirit, and this is the absolute Notion... The *goal*, Absolute Knowing, as Spirit that knows itself as Spirit, has for its path the recollection of the Spirits they are in themselves and as they accomplish the organization of their realm. Their preservation, regarded from the side of their free existence appearing in the form of contingency, is History; but regarded from the side of their [philosophically] comprehended organization, it is the Science of Knowing in the sphere of appearance... (§808).

Thus, all of reality, unfolded as History, is guided by the inner teleology that aims at the self-knowing Spirit. The only possible conduits of this revelation are human beings. They are the site of history's apotheosis. Their activity, which follows the revelation of the absolute knowledge that is their essence, constitutes the teleological end of history. Hegel's faith in this teleological account of history is explained easily enough. As his writings on the history of philosophy clearly express, he sees himself as the acme of the western philosophical tradition; and each element of that tradition is an indispensable brick in the edifice. Aristotle's teleological view of nature, and his epistemology based on the elucidation of first causes are not to be abandoned. Rather, Hegel dialectically synthesizes Aristotle's ideas, combining them with their equally teleological Judeo-Christian descendants. Both those traditions—along

¹⁶² *Science of Logic* p. 517

with most of the other canonical figures of the western tradition—hold dearly to a belief in the beginning and end of time, as well as to a faith in the linear causal relationships between all things and events that appear between that beginning and end. Tracing the causal relationships between things, according to the Aristotelian/Judeo-Christian paradigm that pervades Hegel's thinking, is what yields knowledge. Thus, his absolute knowledge follows these standards, perfecting them to the highest possible degree.

In a fascinating exposition of the core presuppositions of classical Chinese thinking, French Sinologist François Julien describes the operations that render historical knowledge, describing it, as we did before, as a kind of imaginative detective work. He writes,

A fictional procedure is also involved here, since imaginary evolutions are used to gauge the efficacy of causes: What would have happened “if,” i.e., in the absence of this or that antecedent? We engage in a retrospective evaluation of probability (a “backward” kind of prediction or a “retrodiction”), which, of course, is never exhaustive, since each fact and/or event is situated at an intersection with countless others, each of which could be traced back *ad infinitum*.¹⁶⁵

The complete integration of this knowledge with time and history is why Hegel's absolute knowledge can be described as *diachronic omniscience*. It's confidence in the linear causal chain at the heart of reality's historical unfolding encourages an endless refinement of historical understanding. It invites complex intellectual histories of the world, producing a fecund literary tradition in which each version of world history competes for the place of the most accurate and subtle revelation of the world's *telos*, the thread holding history together.

Hegel's corpus reflects this attitude in its very structure. While the ultimate end is the subtle, nearly ineffable immediacy of the self-knowing whole, but the bulk of his letters narrate the history of the world, the history of philosophy, religion, art, and all other aspects of human thought and culture. Unlike evolutionary biology or geology, Hegel's retrospective

storytelling privileges the *Ideas* at work through the unfolding of time; e.g., the *thoughts* of the Greeks matter much more than their soils and crops. As Julien points out, these histories engage in a “retrospective evaluation of probability” (212) under the guiding principle that all knowledge is grounded by linear causality. Many stories can be told about the past, but they can all be graded according to their accuracy, subtlety, and the depths of the truths at which they arrive. It is a perpetual competition to refine our understanding of the primary causes of things and of their internal logic, and what makes this long slog to absolute knowledge tolerable is our faith that there *is* an absolute end to it, one that is intuited as the natural Reason inherent in all appearance.

The orientation toward *diachronic omniscience* has certain implications for the character of western intellectual productions. In the quote above, Julien voices some skepticism about the potential for the retrospective method to yield the absolute knowledge it aims at. He points out that no story that we tell about history can ever be exhaustive. If our knowledge rests on the causal links between things and events, thoughts and people etc., we still must concede that we have made certain limiting choices regarding the events, things, people, and thoughts that we train our analysis on. We construct stories about the relations between certain items, but those are only stories about *those* items. They are themselves situated in an infinite mesh of other conditions. Substitute certain terms, and the story changes like an alternative narrative of a Mad Lib game. There is also little to stop us from telling a different story about the same isolates. However, the diachronic paradigm is firmly bound to linear causality, and confident in the retrospective narrative building that leads to absolute knowledge. Thus, it has managed to sustain an almost quixotic—but perhaps justified—stream of energy on fleshing out the details that would actualize this diachronic omniscience.

¹⁶⁵ Julien, François. *The Propensity of Things*. New York: Zone, 1995.

In contemporary times, stunningly successful projects like the sequencing of genomes and the Global Ocean Sampling Expedition¹⁶⁴, which seeks to catalog the genetic structure of the infinite bio-organisms in the world's oceans, reflect the ideology of diachronic omniscience. With the data collected by that project, the idea is to extrapolate conclusions about all life from it, greatly refining our understanding of the causal links between things in the world. These projects benefit from the regularity of nature, on causal laws. We can reasonably infer that the laws of nature will not change anytime soon, so we can exploit those laws to increase our knowledge, which continues to expand as it swallows up more data.

Since these laws are taken to be constant, the diachronic orientation also encourages speculation into the future, for example into artificial intelligence—its inevitability or impossibility. The diachronic orientation is essential for the work of someone like Ray Kurzweil, a wildly successful, some would say slightly crackpot, inventor and computer scientist affiliated with *Singularity Theory*. This theory relies on the “law of accelerating returns,” which claims that the rate of change in evolutionary systems, including technology, increases exponentially, producing ever more frequent revolutions that bring us closer to omniscience. Kurzweil is famous for making accurate bold predictions about technological and political developments, which he arrived at by extrapolating from the conditions of the present and the structures he recognized in the past. Because of the constant structure of reality that is revealing itself to us at an ever-increasing rate, Kurzweil and others believe that soon we will be in an age in which humans meld seamlessly with the technology that they created. Our bodies will be swarming with nanotechnology that will conquer sickness and aging, and our minds will have unfettered access to all knowledge in the form of databases linked to our nervous systems. We will quite literally be omniscient, since all knowledge will

¹⁶⁴ Both projects of the pioneering biologist Craig Ventner

be right before us. It is an updated version of Hegel's *End of History* speculation.

Despite the dystopian frissons that people like Kurzweil's theories may inspire, these contemporary knowledge-building projects are successful examples of the Hegelian method since they look at the past and pick it apart to better understand the causal genesis of the present. Once constant, universal laws have been established, we can then even make predictions about the future based on them. The Human Genome Project provides invaluable knowledge by telling a reliable story about the causal link between molecules and their ends, which manifest as our bodies, including all of its proportions, ailments and so forth. It is tremendously useful knowledge and there is nothing pernicious about it; nor is there anything inherently pernicious about the method used to arrive at it.

However, as the bulk of the other sections of this essay contend, the method goes off track when it produces dogmatic narratives that can be criticized for their cultural, religious, and ethnic biases. When one tells the story of the world, it is a story pulled from the air, for infinite alternatives are also available. It depends on the elements one isolates. These are the basic principles of historiography. Therefore, an episteme oriented toward diachronic omniscience, which relies on narratives, is bound by these same historiographical limitations. It yields precious knowledge, but this knowledge can never be exhaustive.

To echo earlier arguments, when we are so concerned with means and ends, as we have explored in previous chapters, we end up with an anthropocentric and hierarchical metaphysics. We believe that all objectivity is in service of the Subject as the ultimate end. Nature's organic elements have been intending the Human Subject all along. It has been manifesting infinite abortive attempts in the form of animal and plant life. Those attempts finally got it right through European man who was able to understand his own Spirit. While there are many other parts of the world inhabited by humans, they did not achieve this same

absolute knowledge, since they were cut off from the same causal determinants that make it possible. Thus, non-Europeans, like plant and animal life, represent abortive attempts of Spirit striving to unfold in the world.

Another limitation of diachronic omniscience is that—with all its glorification of the Subject—it does not necessarily train the subject to deal with the immediacy of its own experiences. Since it is always facing backward, experiences wash over one's back and are only made sense of after they have entered into the past. Everything is to be *interpreted* in the diachronic orientation, including works of art. Even the aesthetic experience is interpretation. For Hegel, the secret of Beauty is that it is the unfolding of Freedom, which is itself a characteristic of the Subject, of self-knowing Spirit. Susan Sontag finds fault with this “perennial, never consummated project of interpretation,” in which “all observable phenomena are bracketed, in Freud's phrase, as *manifest content*.”¹⁶⁵ By treating the world as a hermeneutic work, we betray “a dissatisfaction (conscious or unconscious) with the work, a wish to replace it with something else” (19). She proposes a much different kind of aesthetic experience, which we will explore in the sections that follow.

For now, what the diachronic paradigm needs us to believe is that all appearances are the unfolding of something else. If we fail to interpret each thing for what it really is in terms of its cause and end, then our reality is only half-lit, our knowledge full of shadows. Since it is based on interpretation—upon drawing on exponentially expanding resources to make sense of each moment of reality—this kind of absolute knowledge does not achieve full bloom in individuals' affective realm. It achieves itself gradually through humanity as a whole. It is eschatological and not soteriological. Individual wisdom is telling the best story about reality to oneself and others. It is not about the private experience of the individual as reality

impinges on them and demands reaction. For an alternative orientation toward knowledge to be possible—a paradigm of synchronic omniscience—the presuppositions we have discussed so far must somehow be exchanged for others. The following sections will explore what these alternatives may be.

CHINESE CLASSICAL THOUGHT AS A BRIDGE TO A PARADIGM OF SYNCHRONIC OMNISCIENCE

If the entire western paradigm rests upon the Greek and Judeo-Christian confidence in causes and ends, is there a parallel foundation for one of the other great civilizations of the world, China. It is one that has managed to remain so foreign to the West, one about which Hegel writes, “everything which belongs to Spirit — unconstrained morality, in practice and theory, Heart, inward Religion, Science and Art properly so called — is alien to it.”¹⁶⁵ He comes to this conclusion in his cursory investigations of Chinese texts because he does not see any evidence that the Chinese intellect is guided by the analysis into causes that grounds his own episteme. Because of his own certitude, Hegel does not grant even provisional validity to an alternative vision of reality. It is simply benighted. However, what may have been going on throughout Chinese intellectual history that has made it so different? Is it really just a stunted branch of humanity? Or is it just operating within a very different spectrum of presuppositions?

Part of Hegel’s disappointment with Chinese thought comes from its seeming lack of

¹⁶⁵ Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation*. New York: Laurel, 1964. pp. 15-16.

¹⁶⁶ Hegel, GWF. *Philosophy of History*. Part I: The Oriental World.

structure, or at least not one that readily presents itself to him. He dismisses Confucius, for example, as perhaps a good man, but a mere popular moralizer with no grasp of the interrelation of the parts to the whole. However, as explains comparative philosopher Young Kun Kim,

A careful reader of the *Analects* will discern what might be called a deep structure of the book. For Confucius' sayings revolve around notions such as human-heartedness (*jen*), rules of propriety (*li*), and knowledge (*chi*). It is noteworthy that Hegel does not comment on any of these concepts at all. Hegel has done us a service by noting similarities between the sayings of Confucius and the Proverbs of Solomon and the moral ideas of Cicero. But we wish he had examined carefully the theological and philosophical presuppositions on which the ideas of the three thinkers are based.¹⁶⁷

We know where Solomon and Cicero are coming from, permeated as they are with considerations of prime causes and ultimate ends, striving toward diachronic omniscience. Kim is suggesting, however, that it is futile to evaluate Confucius in terms of his system's failure to conform to those standards. Confucius and other classical Chinese thinkers have very different priorities.

Turning again to François Julien's *The Propensity of Things*, we find a lucid explanation of the mysterious alternate orientation of classical Chinese thinking. For him, the principle we should all have a grasp of centers around the single Chinese term *shi*. This term, Julien shows, is as important as the concept of teleology in the western paradigm; yet it is a slippery, polysemous word that adapts to different contexts and field. It can be rendered as "position," "circumstances," "disposition," "propensity," "setup," "configuration," and even "tool," "deployment," or "instrument." He writes, "nothing bestows on it the consistency of a proper concept—the kind that Greek philosophy has taught us to insist on—that can be used for a neutral, descriptive purpose"(14). If there is one word that betrays the classical Chinese

characterization of reality's structure, it is *shi*, which claims that

Reality—every kind of reality—may be perceived as a particular deployment or arrangement of things to be relied on and worked to one's advantage. Art, or wisdom, as conceived by the Chinese, consequently lies in strategically exploiting the *propensity* emanating from that particular configuration of reality, to the maximum effect possible (15).

It posits that reality is governed by order or logic, but it decouples logic from what usually grounds it in Western thinking: teleological ends and linear causality. Julien continues:

When compared with the elaboration of Western thought, the originality of the Chinese lies in their indifference to any notion of a *telos*, a final end in things, for they sought to interpret reality solely on the basis of itself, from the perspective of a single logic inherent in the actual processes in motion. So let us once and for all discard the Hegelian prejudice to which Chinese thought had remained forever in its infancy, never able to evolve beyond the cosmological point of view common to all ancient civilizations toward the more "self-conscious" and therefore superior stages of development, represented by "ontology" and "theology." On the contrary, let us recognize the extreme coherence that underlies the Chinese mode of thought even though it never valued conceptual formalization at all (18).

From ancient philosophers like Confucius and Zhuangzi to more modern historians and poets like Wang Fuzhi and Gu Yanwu, all of them have shared a common understanding of reality as a dynamic groundless arrangement or configuration of which they are a part, and which they can learn to ride with grace in proportion to wisdom. The concept of *shi* sheds some light on China's unique aesthetics and political affairs. For example, China produced few, if any, systematic or popular myths. Hegel saw this as a sign of retardation, since he extolled the *content* (remember Sontag's criticism) of myth as spiritual substance. For him, it is through myth and tragedy we recognize Spirit struggling to express itself. The Western tragic hero clashes against his environment, which is impeding the flourishing of his Spirit. He fails to overcome them, and after his demise we realize that it was his destiny to fall short all along. It

¹⁶⁷ Kim, Young Kun. "Hegel's Criticism of Chinese Philosophy." *Philosophy East and West* vol. 28, no. 2,

could not have been another way.

In contrast to the tragic man torn between the absoluteness of his own Freedom and the limitations imposed on him by the teleological workings of the Whole, Julien notes that “the Chinese strategist prides himself on his ability to manage all the factors in play, for he knows how to go along with the logic behind them and adapt to it” (35). Such an attitude, at first blush, does not sound so different from Hegel’s, but the Chinese strategist goes along with the logic of appearances without believing that there is an ultimate end to the process; there is no solace through faith in eschatology. He is an element adrift in the swarm of other elements. His self-interest is also one of these evolutes. In this framework, his well-being is the most immediate goal—but not the teleological end—of reality’s ever-shifting configuration. In ancient times, Julien shows how this orientation to reality and to knowledge of it contributed to China’s precocious military theory. When the Greeks were still lining up phalanx to phalanx, gambling on their destinies that would be revealed through the thunks of the broadswords, the Chinese were exploiting the conditions of war, understanding that one’s destiny is never fixed but is completely contingent on infinite other conditions, a few of which are within one’s control. Thus, Chinese generals from the earliest times embrace guerrilla warfare, proto-Machiavellian statesmanship, and “dishonorable” technological battle aids like the crossbow and gunpowder.

Neither Julien nor I suggest that such an orientation is intrinsically better than the teleological, diachronic orientation of the West. Julien is clear that the Chinese imagination of historical situations as non-teleological operations of a certain “setup” of factors has tended to promote the kind of authoritarian politics that we are used to associating with the region. Factors can be manipulated, and a situation can then run itself more efficiently,

mechanistically, like a water-wheel. Mastering the complex of one's conditions can even have the homogenizing effect that Hegel sees as a virtue of the ultimate State in which "each man exists only through and for the whole, and the whole exists through and for each man."¹⁶⁸ In much classical Chinese political thought, such as that of the authoritarian Legalists, the goal is to achieve a historical "setup" in which it is no longer possible for the individual to disrupt the flow of smooth-running order. When a political regime is not master of its conditions, disorder rules, even if the realm is full of upstanding individuals; "The historical situation of its own accord either leads to order or, instead, to disorder"(Julien 178).

For the Chinese, there is a way to understand the "propensity of things" — the directional energy of a certain configuration of factors — that benefits from the Hegelian retrospective gaze, but it does not constitute absolute knowledge by reading the past to interpret the present. That orientation of the Owl of Minerva, as already discussed, does not turn toward the stream of the future or seem to develop strategies to adjust one's immediate experience of it. It remains looking backward, and understands moments of reality as they become past moments. In the orientation of *shi*, however,

every moment produces a different situation, and one should neither lag behind one's own age, placing faith in outworn policies, nor become bogged down in circumstances, clinging blindly to the present. One should evaluate the present by realizing that times moves forward; the newness of each successive moment must be appreciated. At the same time, however, one can also assess the precise logical nature of the situation and exploit the historical opportunity it offers by stepping back to acquire an abstract perspective (180).

Here, the abstract perspective that one gains by stepping back, by using the retrospective gaze, is that history has not been governed by prime causes and ultimate ends; its essence is not one of progress, it is alternation and dynamism. Historical cataclysms are not, as they are

¹⁶⁸ Kojève, Alexandre. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.

for Hegel, sacrifices that fuel progress, they are contingent shifts in an infinite dynamic web. Julien ventures that “this concept of a tendency toward alternation (*shì*), an upward surge followed by a decline, is shared by all the Chinese theorists of history and constitutes their dominant perspective”(188).

The great heroes of ancient China are people like the emperor Qin Shi Huang (259-210 BCE), the great uniter of disparate warring state, the inaugurator of Chinese imperialism, and prolific builder of the most advanced infrastructure of his time. He is not, however, revered for the same reason as Caesar or Napoleon. Hegel saw them as pure conduits of Spirit, which streamed into the world through their short-lived ejaculations of ambition. Qin Shi Huang is not admired for his classical Virtues, but because he was the master of his historical conditions. He was dealt a certain slice of time, and he exploited it, manipulating it in a direction that would endure for millennia. His accomplishments were not entirely his own; he was not raging against the tide but thoroughly embedded in that tide, riding it. His submission to it is part of his strength. His reign was the perfect expression of the understanding that “phases of upward surging are not simply brought about by great sovereigns but are inherent tendencies in the regularity of historical processes. In this view, history loses in creative heroism but gains in internal necessity”(188).

There have been Chinese historical theorists who turn the logic of alternation into a closed system of predictable and understandable cycles of history “as though it were simply an uninterrupted chain of ‘reigns’: all of these are imagined as harmonious, united totalities, with one dynasty spontaneously giving way to the next and the successor taking over in all equity”(189). Yet the 17th century materialist philosopher Wang Fuzhi criticizes this view as reductionistic and misguided. While we can speak of internal necessity in history, it is so non-

linear, so contingent and conditioned, that it does not reveal an ultimate end or any predictable or probabilistic pattern. Thus, “even the sage cannot foresee the next mutation” (191).

If the sage, or one who has achieved absolute knowledge cannot foresee the future—à la Kurzweil—based on an understanding of the causal laws of the past, then what does the sage know? He is poor in diachronic knowledge; he must be exchanging it for a different kind of knowledge, a synchronic one.

THE *I CHING*'S SYNCHRONIC INSIGHT

Hegel was no more impressed with the *I Ching*, the famous *Book of Changes* than he was with Confucius. In his *Philosophy of History*, he does consider the text, finding it to be a quaint attempt at abstract reasoning. However, it is one that fails to achieve the end of such reasoning, specifically the full exposure of spiritual substance. The problem with the *I Ching* is that it represents reality in symbols, which are reduced down to the system's canon of hexagrams. The lines of the hexagrams symbolize different fundamental elements of reality—Heaven, Earth, Water, Mountain, Rain etc.—which are read as a peculiar arrangement with a unique potentiality dwelling within it. However, Hegel believes it is a mistake for them to focus on such coarse elements without dialectically sublating those elements into their essence as spiritual substance. According to Kim, “Hegel maintains that the attempt to explain the nature of the reality by symbols denoting, for example, mountain and rain, reveals that they were approaching the reality as if they were dealing with ordinary objects of sense perception” (Kim 175). Understanding the causal relationship between the elements of sense

perception, for Hegel, is only the very first step toward understanding the deeper end of those causal laws, which is, of course, the unfolding of Spirit. For him, the Chinese are admirably conceiving of reality as a whole by looking into relations and attempting to uncover their inner logic, but they are barking up the wrong tree, since “they could not probe beyond the external order, or they could not investigate the inner order of the reality” (175) as teleologically bent toward the effulgence of Spirit. The *I Ching's* reduction of reality into units and their representation in pseudo mathematical arrangements is inferior to western representations of reality through language, myth, and epics, since those mediums take a spiritual reality as their content. Western aesthetics in general, and particularly the mythical literature it developed from the Greeks to, most significantly, the myths of Christ and the Trinity, are indications of western spiritual superiority. They transform the sensual data of reality into spiritual substance by telling the story of how Spirit stands behind those raw elements, swelling with teleological potentiality. Heroic figures, whether they are fictional or as real as Alexander or Napoleon, are the purest symbols of the proper, spiritual substance of reality, a reality with its own ineluctable destiny.

Hegel's interpretation of the *I Ching's* methodology is, however, completely determined by his certainty that reality has the teleology he says it does. The *I Ching*, though, is equally confident that the teleological model does not work. There is no point in telling a narrative about reality's “long game,” since its own rules are forever shifting. While there is an inner sense, it is not pegged to an eternal end. Julien explains what Hegel was missing in the *I Ching*:

The interior of each hexagram illuminates still more about this process of transition and inversion. For while the opposite principles (*yin* and *yang*, rise and decline) are categorically exclusive and mutually repulsive, at the same time they condition one another, each implying the existence of the other. An open conflict and a tacit entente: whichever principle is actualized, it always latently contains its opposite. At

every moment the progress of either principle necessarily leads to its own future regression. The future is already at work in the present, and the expanding present will soon pass away. Becoming is gradual; only transition actually exists (196).

Rhetorically and structurally, this is very Hegelian language, especially the language of the *Science of Logic* that accounts for the coextension of identity and difference as the most fundamental condition of being/becoming. Julien's description, however, totally departs from the method of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, whose retrospective gaze sees the present as the linear product of the past. The *I Ching's* logic leads to a synchronic comprehension of a cross-section of reality. That cross section, of course, is embedded in a stream of diachronic time, but it is not logically bound to the rules of the past, nor is it leading to any predictable diachronic result. It is about the present, which entails all relevant knowledge. There is no imperative to *interpret* the present as a product, but rather to intuit the potentiality of the immediate arrangement of conditions; "True skill lies in being able to *ride* the change and always derive the greatest profit from it"(199). Tragic-heroic figures are fools for assuming that they stand above their situation, and we are fools for believing that their "destiny" is connected to some transcendental source: "the wise man, with minimum personal intervention, can reorient everything in the right direction and recuperate the situation. The course of things naturally meets us halfway, and we profit from the dynamism inherent in the situation at the heights of its intensity"(199).

Were we to modify Hegelianism with some of the criticisms contained in the earlier chapters of this essay, we would not have to entirely abandon the Hegelian retrospective method, just its metaphysical presuppositions. Of course there is value in reading the past and appreciating its observable regularities. There is nothing stopping a European from achieving Julien's description of the Chinese sage who "can understand the regulatory logic behind the

circumstances as well as perceive an opportunity as it begins to arise, thanks to his understanding of the processes”(203). The only difference between the advanced Hegelian and this sage is that the Hegelian’s knowledge is bookended by a prime cause and an ultimate end. It is rather more accurate to say that he is caught within a loop, the famous circularity of Hegel’s system, in which the end is also the beginning. Such a loop explains the curious order of Hegel’s corpus, in which the description of the ultimate end in the *Science of Logic* is also the beginning of things, but our knowledge of that beginning/end must be arrived at through the retrospective narrative building of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In classical Chinese thinking, however, there are no bookends to history. Citing 17th century materialist philosopher Wang Fuzhi, Julien explains:

“If the moments differ, the tendencies which result from them (*shi*) also differ, and if those tendencies differ, the logics which govern the processes also differ”; “the tendency depends on the opportunity of the moment just as the internal logic depends on the tendency.” One cannot deliberate generally and hence abstractly on the course of things: “One must appraise the moment in such a way as to detect its tendency and, consequently, seek to conform with its coherence.” Once a historical moment is perceived as a particular setup to be exploited, every individual situation becomes intelligible; and it is from its tendency—and from it alone—that one can deduce what we are today accustomed to call “the meaning of history.”(209).

Such an attitude has been scarce in the western philosophy until quite recently. Beginning with the resuscitation of Epicureanism in the 18th century, and down through the radical anti-idealism of post-modern theories, the West has been looking for ways to cut away at its teleological tethers. Most recently, the Object Oriented and Speculative Realism movement that has been covered in previous chapters has approached what Julien is describing in the quote above. When we dislodge the human subject from the center of the universe, human-linked teleologies make much less sense, especially as regulating principles of the history of reality writ large. Anthropocentric theories have loved to ponder the historical “long game”

but that long game is invariably human-bound, and thus clearly, not very long. History cannot be bookended by the advent of the Subject that endows the world with Being, and the ultimate end of the complete self-absorption of this Subject. Why not, rather, analyze more deeply cross sections of time, respecting the ability of each individual factor—human or non-human—to contribute to a direction, propensity, or vectored potentiality of that particular moment of reality? Helping OOO and SR in their theories have been Epicurus and Lucretius, Nietzsche and Heidegger, but to study these Chinese ideas would certainly not distract them from their points.

Carl Jung, ignoring Hegel's previous dismissal, was one of the earliest to understand the subtle logic of classical Chinese thought. In his foreword to Wilhelm's 1950 translation of the *I Ching*, Jung writes sympathetically about the *I Ching's* refusal to sublimate its hexagrams into spiritual substance—something that was such a failure in Hegel's eyes:

The actual form [of the hexagrams], seems to appeal more to the Chinese sage than the ideal one. The jumble of natural laws constituting empirical reality holds more significance for him than a causal explanation of events, that, moreover, must usually be separated from one another in order to be understood... While the Western mind carefully sifts, weighs, selects, classifies, isolates, the Chinese picture of the moment encompasses everything down to the minutest nonsensical detail, because all of the ingredients make up the observed moment (Jung 4).

He realizes that the Chinese sage should first be understood on his own terms before judging him. How is he able to so calmly dispense with the teleology that so comforts the West? Why is the Chinese sage so disdainful of our diachronic knowledge? Again, it is because he exchanges it for the synchronic. Jung sees this with surprising clarity, describing a principle that,

I have termed synchronicity, a concept that formulates a point of view diametrically opposed to that of causality. Since the latter is a merely statistical truth and not absolute, it is a sort of working hypothesis of how events evolve one out of another, whereas synchronicity takes the coincidence of events in space and times as meaning

something more than mere chance, namely, a peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves as well as with the subjective (psychic) states of the observer or observers (6).¹⁶⁹

Finally, with some echoing of earlier comments, this orientation toward a synchronic paradigm of absolute knowledge results in a far different man or woman than the diachronic model. The sage is not the one who can tell the most complex story about the causal genesis of the present. The sage's activity has nothing to do with constructing a communal, ever-larger edifice of knowledge consisting of details, such as the great database projects of contemporary material science. It is not about making probabilistic predictions about the future, confident in the coming "Singularity" in which we will all, eschatologically, achieve omniscience *qua* unfettered access to all diachronic knowledge. Of course, rejecting the presuppositions that undergird these projects, one also forfeits their benefits, which are substantial. But that is a choice the Chinese tradition has been willing to make. To what degree contemporary China still holds these attitudes is up for debate among experts greater than I, but it remains true that contemporary China continues to exasperate the West with, on the one hand, its willingness to bend to Western expectations, but on the other hand, its unwillingness to adopt Western presuppositions wholesale. There is evidence that the the logic of (*shi*) is alive and well today:

The advice of the Chinese thinkers is always to aim to evolve, to adapt totally to the movements of the enemy, rather than to attack him head on. A general should always act with a view to profiting from the dynamism of this partner, his enemy, for as long as it operates, so as to allow himself to be renewed by it at the expense of his

¹⁶⁹ Just as causality describes the sequence of events, so synchronicity to the Chinese mind deals with the coincidence of events. The causal point of view tells us a dramatic story about how *D* came into existence: it took its origin from *C*, which existed before *D*, and *C* in its turn had a father, *B*, etc. The synchronistic view on the other hand tries to produce an equally meaningful picture of coincidence. How does it happen that *A'*, *B'*, *C'*, *D'*, etc., appear all in the same moment and in the same place? It happens in the first place because the physical events *A'* and *B'* are of the same quality as the psychic events *C'* and *D'*, and further because all are the exponents of one and the same momentary situation. The situation is assumed to represent a legible or understandable picture (Jung 6),

opponent and at no cost to himself. In this way he will be maintain his own energy as completely as at the beginning. Any head-on attack will always be costly and risky. All one needs to do is remain safe.(Julien 263).

In this attitude, while the Subject is not the *metaphysical* end of the processes of reality, it is the practical one. The person is part of the psychophysical swarm of realities aggregates, and its self-interest is taken for granted. It could be characterized as hedonistic in that it aims at the subject's ataraxia. The subject waits, prepares, "rides" and exploits, all in order to maximize its benefit and minimize its pains. Thus, there is a greater degree of *affectivity* in the Chinese system that we find in the Hegelian. A notoriously hard question to answer is "how should a Hegelian act?" since the conclusion seems to only be that the Hegelian sage is a consummate interpreter, the perfect reader and critic who employs his backward gaze to understand reality as a perpetual past-tense history. He is very intelligent, compensating for his lack of spontaneity and for turning away from the onrush of the present-future. His conduct is undetermined. In the case of Hegel himself, it was to adopt the prevailing Protestant conventions of the time. The Hegelian sage does not really believe in the moral maxims of his time, but he is able to tell an ingenious story about why the things of the present are *necessary*. Those without absolute knowledge follow, and the sage *understands*.

Just as ethics must be imported from elsewhere, the sage of diachronicity sometimes even abandons the Epicurean, Stoic, and Socratic project of overcoming the fear of Death. Cryogenic science subsists on the presupposition that we need not overcome the fear of death, since there is no reason we can't simply overcome death itself through the construction of a critical mass of diachronic knowledge. The diachronic sage looks forward to a time when omniscience, as a cumulative, shared, eschatological knowledge, will dispel our mortal fears.

This attitude is ubiquitous in contemporary technology advertising. Sprint Mobile, for

example, adopts the diachronic omniscience model to market its unlimited data plans. Their commercials highlight the building up of such a critical mass of knowledge through the image of all humanity uploading their experiences into the digital realm. This cumulative knowledge then becomes accessible to anyone else with a data connection. All of this uploading is teleologically heading toward diachronic omniscience. The language they use perfectly encapsulates this attitude:

*My Iphone 5 can see every point of view,
every panorama,
the entire gallery of humanity.
I need — no,
I have the right —
to be unlimited!*

This leads to the hopeful mantra, “I am unlimited!” Another of their ads states, “*for all the unlimited potential of life, Sprint offers unlimited data.*”¹⁷⁰

The Chinese sage, by contrast, is concerned with his reactivity to the moment; he wants it to be as spontaneous and unimpeded as possible. Eschatological deliverance is impossible, since there is no teleological thread through humanity’s drama. Since it has an affective dimension, it is soteriological. However, it strangely gives no ontological privilege to the individual subject that would be soteriological freed. Despite its soteriological and hedonist elements, there is very little interest in introducing universal ethical imperatives into the picture, since ethics are always entirely relative to each particular “setup” of a reality-moment. The classical Chinese sage deconstructs the metaphysical foundation of causality,¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ Sprint commercial 2012: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=frKZyFYxQCY>

¹⁷¹ As a reminder that there is nothing “Chinese” about this kind of skepticism about causality, we can look at Nietzsche, who deserves much more involvement in this conversation. Section 287 of *The Gay Science* dismisses the extrapolation of diachronic lessons,

Delight in blindness. — “My thoughts,” said the wanderer to his shadow, “should show me where I stand;

despite its apparent coherence, but does not train that same deconstructive analysis on the subject itself. To do so may problematize the ethics of self-preservation and profit that the system promotes. What happens if the concrete subject and all of its experiences is shown to be as illusory as causality itself? Not only will diachronic knowledge that relies on causality be demoted, the very character of synchronic knowledge will have to be amended to account for it.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF SYNCHRONIC OMNISCIENCE: INDO-TIBETAN BUDDHISM

Unlike China, the Indian milieu that produced Buddhism abounds in myths. In the Hindu tradition of course there are the famous *Ramāyana* and *Mahābhārata* depicting the deeds of heroic figures in a way not unfamiliar to Western heroic literature. In such epics, the heroes are conduits for a greater truth that unfolds through them. Otherwise, gods representing those truths reveal themselves to them. In Tibetan and Mongolia, there is the massive *Epic of*

but they should not betray to me where I am going. I love my ignorance of the future and do not wish to perish of impatience and of tasting promised things ahead of time.”

This attitude is based on his refutation of teleological causality. For example, in section 477 of *The Will to Power* he writes,

I maintain the phenomenality of the inner world, too: everything of which we become conscious is arranged, simplified, schematized, interpreted through and through—the actual process of inner “perception,” the causal connection between thoughts, feelings, desires, between subject and object, are absolutely hidden from us—and are perhaps purely imaginary. The “apparent *inner* world” is governed by just the same forms and procedures as the “outer world.” We never encounter “facts”: pleasure and displeasure are subsequent and derivative intellectual phenomena—

“Causality” eludes us; to suppose a direct causal link between thoughts, as logic does—that is the consequence of the crudest and clumsiest observation. Between two thoughts all kinds of affects play

Gesar, a bricolage of ancient central Asian shamanism, Turkik poetry, and Buddhist syncretism. It depicts a hero with supernatural abilities and alliances taming all kinds of forces hostile to the order that he represents. In general, however, the Buddhist tradition builds its myths around its buddhas and bodhisattvas, who are not necessarily heroic for being conduits of a higher truth; for telling the most detailed narrative about the past; for predicting the future; or for exploiting the present for their own benefit. They are wise in a very different way.

A common epithet for a buddha, or for a bodhisattva (among them many of the great philosophers of India) is the Sanskrit term *sarvajña* or *sarvajñatva*, “one who possesses” *sarvajña*, (“everything-knowing; omniscience”). The Tibetan Buddhist tradition has even more enthusiasm for this epithet, granting the directly translated title *kun mkhyen pa* to several learned and accomplished scholar-meditators in each generation. They also frequently use the related term *duw gsum mkhyen pa* (“knower of the three times”: past, present, and future) for anyone who has attained the highest levels of knowledge. But what do they mean by these terms? *Kun mkhyen pa*, seems to imply encyclopedic knowledge of all the details of the world’s causal relations. This would be like the diachronic knowledge that is aimed at in contemporary technological sciences. Similarly, *Dus gsum mkhyen pa* (“three-time-knower”) seems to imply the knowledge that is the fruit of the Hegelian method: reading the past to interpret the present and predict the future. However, the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist framework cannot grant such meanings to these terms; it lacks the metaphysical presuppositions that would fuel them, including the teleological: prime causes and ultimate ends.

However, unlike the classical Chinese thinking, Indo-Tibetan Buddhism does not reject diachronic omniscience because of an indifference to diachronic causal reasoning. In

Chinese Buddhism, unsurprisingly, we find theoretical adaptations that favor a vision of synchronic causality such as that put forward in the *I Ching*. For example, Fazang's (643-712) remarkable essays "On the Golden Lion," "On a mote of Dust," and "A Jewel In Indra's Net" embody the buddhification of Chinese synchronicity perfectly. The Indo-Tibetan tradition also reserves an important place for the contemplation of synchronic causality, but in certain discourses it privileges the investigation of diachronic causality. In fact, the highly developed epistemological theories of Buddhist philosophers like Dharmakīrti and Dignāga conclude that an entity is "real" or "unreal" based on whether it performs a causal function. However, careful investigations of causality do not always lead to its absolutization. As with Hume, Indian mahāyāna philosophers are led to an acceptance of the explanatory power of diachronic causality, while refusing to grant it any ontological transcendence. In her philological and philosophical *tour de force*, *Omniscience and the Rhetoric of Reason*, Sarah McClintock couches the Indian Buddhists Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla's views on omniscience firmly in the discourse on causality:

The example that Kamalaśīla cites is of farmers, and even though the details of the process are not spelled out, they are nonetheless fairly clear. That is, farmers know that certain seeds, when planted and tended, have the capacity to produce desired crops. When they examine their seeds at the beginning of the planting season, there arise for them a definitive determination that the seeds that appear in their present awareness are capable of fulfilling their goal of raising crops. However, because the goal is distant in time, the farmers cannot be sure that some obstacle to the development of the crops will not arise between the time of their planting and the time of their harvest. In this sense, the farmers can be said to have doubt, despite the presence of the definitive determination of the capacity for the accomplishment of their goals. Nonetheless, for Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla, the farmers are not irrational to plant crops. Indeed, as Śāntarakṣita explains, in such cases "the intelligent person acts precisely due to doubt, and no diminishment of that person's intelligence is entailed thereby." (McClintock 294).

Again, just as Hume exploits observable diachronic regularity to build a skeptical-empirical epistemology, Indian mahāyāna philosophers take it as the foundation of inference, which

along with direct perception, is the only other form of “valid cognition” (*pramāṇa*). Diachronic knowledge is thus valued, but its ontological absoluteness runs into trouble as it is subjected to further analysis. If *śarvajña* means the kind of absolute knowledge we might get from investigating diachronic causality, we need to be able to explain how we could construct an infinite mass of this kind of knowledge, such that we could call it omniscience. Can we really know *all things* at any given time? Is it possible to access some kind of database that lays all the details of existence out before us?

In their idiom, the mahāyāna philosophers ask if the person (such as the Buddha) who we call omniscient knows how many bugs are in the world, or if they know how many hairs are on the head and body. Their opponents raise the same questions. On what grounds do they claim that their source of authority, the Buddha, is trustworthy? Of what does his knowledge consist? To answer this, they develop two different models of omniscience, and ask if they mutually entail one another.

The first theory of omniscience they call *total omniscience*, and it corresponds to what we have been calling diachronic omniscience. It is the sort that would simultaneously discern all of the details of the world, including their causal relations with each other. But they are aware of the epistemological hurdles that must be overcome for this to be possible; not least of all that causality is an occluded object of knowledge that always seems to slip away when we try to pinpoint it.

On this very point, Dharmakīrti asks in his famous *Pramāṇavārttika*,

Of what use to us is that person who’s knowledge of the number of bugs in the world? One who knows the reality of that which is to be abandoned and that which is to be taken up, together with their means, is asserted to be a means of trustworthy awareness (*pramāṇa*); not, however, one who knows everything.” (McClintock 135).

Dharmakīrti, and after him Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla, change the course of the discussion.

They remain agnostic regarding the possibility of someone who “knows everything,” relegating such knowledge to an epistemologically inaccessible category. What *is* epistemologically available to us is the structure of our own minds, which seems to only be able to cognize things it turns its attention to. Moreover, that faculty of attention is limited. It does not perceive four dimensionally etc., nor can it perceive more than a few objects at a time. If, as humans, the same limitations apply to those we might call omniscient, then what is special about them?

One theory put forth in the *Abhidharmakośabbāṣya* of Vasubandhu is that of “capacity omniscience.”¹⁷² This theory argues that the omniscient person does not in fact know the number of teeth on fish X in the Amazon River, nor do they necessarily know the causal details of igneous rock formation or the winner of next week’s greyhound race. What sets them apart from other people is that they are *capable of knowing* whatever object comes into their attention.

“Know what about that object?”, we must ask. They know the object synchronically, they what *matters* about the object that passes before them.

Causality comes back into play here. The details of an object’s causal genesis are significant, but they cannot accumulate into omniscience. However, the investigation of causality reveals something much deeper about the object, which is what matters the most. What the investigation of causality reveals is the exact opposite of the teleological bookends of the diachronic orientation: it reveals that there are no prime causes and ultimate ends. In fact, *becoming* is only possible because of the incoherence of causes and ends. This is the conclusion of Nagārjuna’s famous “diamond splinters” analysis that opens his seminal text, the

¹⁷² This theory of omniscience is also found earlier, in the writings of the fifth century Theravādin scholar Dhammapāla (McClintock 32).

Mūlamadhāyamakakārikas:

Not from self, not from other,

Not from both and not from neither—

Not from any entity at all anywhere,

Is there ever any production.¹⁷³

These four verses encapsulate the incompatibility between the Buddhist and Western teleological tradition. A thing cannot produce itself, since its self-production would be redundant if it already preexisted its own self-production. The classical example used in this refutation is that of a seed and a sprout. Does a seed produce itself? It does not. Otherwise it would produce itself *ad infinitum*, in total stasis, never allowing for the irruption of a sprout or anything else. There would be a Parmenidean block of “seedness.” If somehow the seed and the sprout are the same entity, on what basis could one assign the different terms? If we can’t resolve this problem, then are cause and effect really different things? If a seed is other than a sprout, those two entities exist separately, and what need is there for the sprout to be produced from the seed? At what point does the seed cease and the sprout begin? And where can we isolate the causal relation between them? Moreover, if a seed and sprout are truly different entities, would it not be that any two different entities could produce each other? What is stopping darkness from producing light? Of course we don’t observe this happening, and we *do* observe rice seeds transforming into rice shoots—so on the *conventional level* it is coherent to speak of a rice seed and shoot belonging to a single causal continuum. However, that causal continuum cannot be verified on the *ultimate level* of analysis. A more modern

¹⁷³ Pearcey, Adam (translator). “The Four Great Logical Arguments of the Middle Way.” Taken from Mipham Rinpoche’s མཐུག་པོ་འཇུག་, with supplementary material from Khenpo Nüden’s commentary.

representative of this same philosophical tradition, Mipham Rinpoche (1846-1912) summarizes this point saying,

As it is said, the appearances of dependent origination cannot withstand logical analysis, and when investigated using reasoning that inquires into the ultimate, not even the slightest so-called ‘production’ may be observed. Yet, when left unanalyzed, just like the appearances during a dream, a sprout appears to be produced from a seed. This is simply the way in which the conventional is presented.¹⁷⁴

Thus, investigations into causality yield valuable knowledge into *conventional* reality, such as what seeds you ought to plant if you want to eat throughout the year, what medicine you should take for a particular ailment, and so forth. But such knowledge, even if expanded to somehow encompass simultaneous knowledge of all causal relations between things, could ever be considered omniscience, since they would not fit what we would call *maximal epistemic greatness*.

The important secret about causality is that two things with autonomous existence cannot possibly enter into a causal relation. The very appearance of causality that organizes our conventional reality is possible because all the appearances themselves are not ontologically grounded—they have no essence or nature or self. As McClintock writes,

Causal function is then shown to be incompatible with an eternal or unchanging self (i.e., nature), leading to the position that what ever is real is necessarily selfless. Selflessness is thus shown to be a quality of all real things. Furthermore, selflessness is not just a quality like other universal qualities. As we have seen, selflessness for these authors is a quality that, when directly cognized, is deeply transformative, leading both to freedom from saṃsāra and to *dharmic omniscience*.(224).[Emphasis added].

This *dharmic omniscience* is a type we have not yet seen in either the diachronic or Chinese synchronic model. *Dharma* in this context, simply refers to the Truth, which we find through

<http://www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/mipham/four-great-logical-arguments>

¹⁷⁴ *ibid*

analysis, is selflessness. The Buddhist tradition goes much farther with this insight, however; it is not just an epistemological breakthrough. They posit that when our epistemology is not in accord with reality (selflessness) we suffer. When we fail to overcome our habit of reifying our personal Self/Soul, assuming its permanence and inviolable coherence, we surround it with disturbing emotions like hostility, craving etc. The ways that we misperceive reality as being full of intrinsic natures is what is called, *epistemic obscuration* (*jñeyāvaraṇa*), and the disturbing emotions that accompany such misperception are called the *afflictive obscurations* (*kleśāvaraṇa*). Omniscience, then, relies on a strange circle. As the full comprehension of selflessness, it comes about through the removal of these two obscurations, “which itself is achieved through the long, continuous, and intense meditation on the antidote to ignorance, the vision of selflessness”(131). This is, for Indo-Tibetan mahāyāna philosophers, *maximal epistemic greatness*. It is not maximal because of its inexhaustible detail, but because the removal of the two obscurations removes the sting from existence. It is affective and soteriological. What need to develop advanced cryogenic technologies in order to avoid the pain and loss of death when we can avoid the pain and life of death affectively, by understanding that the self we are trying to save cryogenically has no Self to save? This imperative is what drives Dharmakīrti to ask ““Of what use to us is that person who’s knowledge if the number of bugs in the world?”, which should not be read as a complete denigration of conventional knowledge about the causal relations of the world’s appearances. Rather, it’s a statement about the absurdity of calling even the most detailed and subtle diachronic knowledge maximal epistemic greatness, since it never seems to entail the elimination of existential pain.

Vasubandhu’s *capacity omniscience* implies the same understanding. His omniscience has is distinct from the following account of diachronic omniscience as it could relate to contemporary global security:

Archives of satellite-image data create the potential for diachronic omniscience—vision through time—because they enable us to generate, in the present, views of the past that have never been known to exist, much less been seen.¹⁷⁵

While the construction of such diachronic is extremely useful, even if were to attain infinite proportions, it could not be called omniscience *qua* maximal epistemic greatness. That exalted term demands what most deeply matters, freedom from existential pain. This is attainable, since it only requires the perfection of the vision of selflessness in any given appearance, including the appearance of the subject.

With these presuppositions, the Buddhist model remains highly skeptical or outright denies the perfectibility of diachronic knowledge. It is fair game then to ask if these attitudes about knowledge have contributed to the Buddhist tradition's relatively modest historical contribution to advanced physical technologies. The same observation/accusation cannot be made about classical Chinese thought, however, so it would seem that the Buddhist emphasis on deeply personal soteriological knowledge causes it to mobilize its intellectual resources in a direction opposite to that which would produce archives of satellite images etc. Omniscience consists in a sustained aesthetic experience.

THE AESTHETIC CHARACTER OF BUDDHIST SYNCHRONIC OMNISCIENCE

As mentioned before, Indo-Tibetan mahāyāna philosophers do not accomplish a damning logical refutation of the theory of diachronic omniscience, they merely push it to the side as a jumble of information that is not soteriologically relevant. Because of this agnosticism, there

¹⁷⁵ Parks, Lisa. "Satellite Imaging and Global Security." *Rethinking Global Security: Media, Popular Culture, and the*

remain plenty of practicing Buddhists who still believe that those who presumably have *dharmic omniscience* necessarily have diachronic omniscience as well. They believe people with a reputation for being wise can be relied on for iron-clad advice about the future, for they literally see what will happen down the line. This is based on the assumption that if an omniscient one's knowledge includes maximal *affective* or *moral* greatness—which amounts to leading all beings out of the suffering of delusion because of the *two obscurations*—they must also have infinite practical wisdom regarding all the things in the world, including their causal potentiality. Dharmakīrti, more than Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla, thinks it is safe to infer that the Buddha has such diachronic knowledge. For him “it is impossible for a buddha not to be paying attention to all things at all times, for otherwise he might miss something necessary—something to be abandoned and something to be taken up—in his quest to help sentient beings” (136). However, we have seen that this is not the crux of omniscience, only a vaguely inferable by-product of Dharmakīrti's own *dharmic omniscience*, the thorough comprehension of selflessness and the concomitant elimination of the epistemic and afflictive obscurations. With diachronic omniscience still a theoretical possibility, many people are drawn to it; they would like to know if they will get a job next month, or how their health will hold up. Hoping to get a glimpse into the future, acolytes will frequently request divinations from teachers who are presumed to have wisdom, presenting them with offerings in exchange for advice. Thus, the specter of diachronic omniscience becomes central to the hierarchical institutions of the tradition. In Tibet, there is a significantly numbered class of semi-educated lamas, often referred to pejoratively as “village lamas,” who make a living off of common people's expectations that the details of the future are graspable. These lamas are often lampooned by sophisticated, nuanced meditators and philosophers like Milarepa and Paltrul

Rinpoche as embodying the wrong approach to spirituality: they privilege soteriologically irrelevant knowledge over that which is soteriologically relevant.¹⁷⁶ In fact, according to the rationale of the tradition, the point of divination is not to peer clearly into the details of the future at all, but to act as a gateway to synchronic insight into the way that reality works. As the 41st Sakya Trizin writes,

The central, most profound teaching of the Buddha is *Pratitya Samutpada*, which may be translated as interdependent origination, or co-dependent arising. This teaching simultaneously explains the essence of the interplay of causes and conditions on the relative, worldly level of reality and the essence of emptiness, or selflessness, on the ultimate level of reality. Although diligent efforts are needed in concentration and insight to attain a realization of interdependent origination, a system such as *Mo* [divination] reveals a glimpse of the interdependence and causal play of the world in which we live and may hopefully induce one to investigate it on a deeper level.¹⁷⁷

While even the most educated Tibetan often employ divinations to make decisions, the implication is that the synchronic insight that the divination inspires—by taking a cross-section of diachronic reality and examining its relational structure—prepares one to encounter *whatever* comes to be. In the *I Ching*, the same synchronic logic is at work, but the Buddhist tradition stresses the soteriological potential of the insight instead of the potential to exploit conditions for personal gain etc. What really matters is that whatever appearances unfold to you, neither your own subjectivity, nor the appearances' objectivity are taken as ontologically grounded—they are like a magic show or a dream and can be experienced as such, in repose and levity.

The tension between the diachronic and synchronic paradigms for knowledge is nicely illustrated by an anecdote about the prophetic tradition of Tibet told by the important

¹⁷⁶ For example Milarepa:

*“Divination, astrology, and Bon rituals —
These three Dharmas-of-the-town are like swindler’s tricks...”*(Chang 155).

¹⁷⁷ Mipham. *Mo: Tibetan Divination System*. Jay Goldberg trans. Ithica: Snow Lion, 1990. p. 8

contemporary figure, Thrangu Rinpoche. In it he recounts a time in his youth, just before the Chinese invasion, when he got to meet the famously eccentric lama Khenpo Gangshar. One day the Khenpo appeared distant and suddenly uttered a cryptic and ominous statement that concluded with the lines,

*Within the Sixth [month] the Chinese shout So! will ring out.
 Within the seventh, they'll control the realm of Tibet.
 If... you do not go to a hidden land, delaying,
 There is no doubt you will be made Chinese.¹⁷⁸*

By that time the writing was on the wall with the Chinese; their propaganda was already streaming into Eastern Tibet, making people uneasy. Therefore, it would be rather cynical if all that Khenpo Gangshar was doing was venturing a prediction about impending trouble. He was, however, using reason and inference to construct some very useful diachronic knowledge. His disciple Deshung Rinpoche recounts Khenpo Gangshar's activities at the time:

...Khenpo Kangshar had been a strict monk and a highly respected scholar, but in the intervening period he had gone through a radical transformation. News had reached Tharlam about the unusual teachings he had been giving at Surmang. He convoked large public meetings. He had also begun to practice tantric rites openly and literally, like a realized adept. Many monks and nuns who had been in retreat for years he suddenly called back into normal life. Many he encouraged, directly or indirectly, to disrobe.

Some people later interpreted these actions as showing great foresight in preparing them for the radical secularizing changes that were just around the corner; others attributed them to his enlightened siddhis [spiritual attainments]. But a few remained skeptical about his behavior and strongly opposed radical breaches of the monastic rule. "the *khenpo* has gone mad!" they uttered. (Jackson 211).

In this context he was, in fact, acting as a skillful diachronic sage. He was piecing together whatever he could discern about the Chinese to make an educated prediction about what

would soon happen. This is just like the role of the skillful intellectual historian, who often successfully predicts stock markets collapses, political crises, or warns us in time for us to avoid effect X coming from cause Y. However, if some considered Khenpo Gangshar to embody the highest attainments of the tradition—enlightenment or omniscience—it is not because of this practical intelligence about diachronic causal relations. His *siddhis* are soteriological.

Regarding his previously quoted “prophecy,” Thrangu Rinpoche unpacks what the Khenpo’s deeper intentions may have been. The prophecy’s allusion to “hidden lands” has a history in Tibetan literature. The towering eighth century figure Guru Rinpoche issued a very similar prophecy, which were exploited as harbingers of every invasion of the region from the Mongols to the British. In his prophecy, Guru Rinpoche explicitly referred to the regions of Assam, Bhutan, Sikkim, and Nepal as refuges from hostile outside forces. Many people throughout Tibetan history took the prophecies quite literally and benefited from the safety those areas provided. However, Thrangu explains in detail the deeper, often ignored soteriological meaning of Guru Rinpoche’s prophecies:

What Guru Rinpoche’s prophecy says is that when we want to go to the hidden lands, first we will come to a great river. We could try many different ways to cross it, but we will not find any way to cross it except for one. What is this one way? On the banks of the river there grows a great tree. We need to chop the tree down, but it cannot be felled by any ordinary axe or saw. So how can we chop it down? We need to dig at the base of the tree, and there at its very root we will find a crystal axe. We can use this crystal axe to fell the tree, and when we do, it will fall across the river, becoming a bridge that we can walk across. this is how we will be able to cross the river and reach the pure island of a dharmakaya, enjoyment body, or emanation body.¹⁷⁹

...Khenpo Gangshar said that the words of the prophecy were actually quite

¹⁷⁸ Thrangu, Khenchen. *Vivid Awareness: The Mind Instructions of Khenpo Gangshar*. Boston: Shambhala, 2011. Kindle Edition chapt. 2 “Prophecies of Hidden Lands.”

¹⁷⁹ These are the names of the aspects of the mahāyāna’s tripartite conception of reality. The *dharmakāya* (truth-body) is the abstract undetermined principle of reality, basic space as the precondition for any kind of appearance. The *sambhogakāya* (enjoyment body) the *dharmakāya*’s latent potentiality appearing in subtle, astral form. The *nīrmanakāya* is the full concretization of this potentiality.

good, but we have to read them symbolically, not literally. So what does the great river mean? It is the great river of samsara, filled with the afflictions and our bad karma. It is something we must cross, but how? We need a method, and that method is the tree on the riverbank. What does the tree represent? It is the tree of clinging to a self. We need to cut down this tree of ego-clinging, which means we need to get rid of it. But after we have chopped it down, it becomes something we can use—this is what we call “taking ego-clinging as the path.” We can practice relative bodhicitta,¹⁸⁰ saying, “I am going to attain buddhahood in order to bring benefit to all sentient beings.” Then we can use it as a bridge to cross the river of samsara and arrive in the great city of omniscience and freedom.

We cannot chop down the tree of ego-clinging and make it into a bridge in the ordinary way. But if we dig next at its root, we will find intelligence that realizes the lack of a self. That intelligence is the crystal axe. The only place you can find it is at the base of the tree of ego-clinging. If we find that intelligence, realize that the self actually has no essence, and look at what the nature of the self really is, that is the crystal axe. We can then use this crystal axe of the intelligence that realizes selflessness to cut down the tree. Once we have cut down the tree of ego-clinging, we can take it as the path to cross the river of samsara... Khenpo Gangshar stressed that this means that it is critical for us to practice meditation—it is on the basis of our practice that we will be able to reach the hidden lands. (Thrangu 10).

Thus, Khenpo Gangshar’s own activities reflect the benefits of diachronic intelligence, while his teachings emphasize the importance of soteriological, synchronic insight. When theorized the right way, that insight is eminently accomplishable.

Despite all of the nearly impenetrable philosophy and the florid rhetoric of the poetic tradition, accomplishability is a major priority for the Buddhist theory of omniscience or enlightenment. Confusing and paradoxical terms are, as we see in the logic of Japanese koans, invitations to insights that come in the wake of a paradox’s resolution. These include the aforementioned terms “all-knowing one” (Tib. *kun mkhyen pa*) and “knower of the three times” (*das gsum mkhyen pa*). Once we understand the soteriological, synchronic orientation

¹⁸⁰ There are relative and ultimate *bodhicittas*, “minds of enlightenment.” Relative bodhicitta entails no particularly sophisticated wisdom. It is the affective yearning to eliminate all beings’ suffering. Nevertheless, it is a prerequisite for the attainment of enlightenment, since it is precisely our lack of compassion and ego-clinging that has us stuck in ignorance and its concomitant pains. Thus, to cultivate relative bodhicitta, one vocalizes aspirations to help beings, and one pays close attention to the motivations and consequences of one’s actions. Relative bodhicitta paves the way for ultimate bodhicitta, which is synonymous with the full realization of

underlying the meanings of those terms, they are demystified and can be incorporated into the overall theoretical structure of the system.

A related phrase that is quite popular in Tibetan literature is “Knowing One Liberates All” (*gcig shes kun grol*). This phrase is so widely used as a title of texts that it has nearly attained the status of genre. Such texts always present what the author believes is the key point of soteriology—always some version of the insight into selflessness. It suggests that only *one* (*gcig*) essential insight is needed to completely transform our relationship to the world. The same idea is expressed by cognate terms like “enough by itself” (*gcig chod*), and “the one that makes all possible” (*gcig thub*). Samten Karmey points out the ubiquity of such terminology in Tibetan literature: “The conception of *gCig thub* already occurs in songs of Milarepa: “As I know on I am learned in all” (*gCig shes kun la mkhas pa yin*)” is later adopted to denote a similar idea with regard to *rDzogs chen* by certain Nyingmapa masters eg. Guru Chowang (1212-1270) who has composed several treatises on *rDzogs chen* entitled *gCig shes kun grol*” (Karmay 198). Thus, the orientation toward synchronic omniscience spawns its own lexicon and variations on the theme abound. For example, the same Khenpo Gangshar we just discussed wrote a highly respected text entitled, “Naturally Liberating Whatever You Meet” (*phrad tshad rang grol*), which is itself a well-worn title. As is demanded in high Tibetan literature, the text’s entire contents can be gleaned from the title.¹⁸¹ The title encapsulates the synchronic

metaphysical selflessness.

¹⁸¹ This is a literary convention adopted from the highly developed Sanskrit tradition. For an example of it, see Longchen Rabjam 2001 p. 5 where Longchenpa offers a commentary to his own verse-work entitled *The Precious Treasury of the Basic Space of Phenomena* (*chos dbyings mdzod*):

“In this case I have carefully chosen the title by the method of combining a metaphor and its underlying meaning. The metaphor is “The Precious Treasury,” while its underlying meaning is “the Basic Space of Phenomena.” The basic space of phenomena—naturally occurring timeless awareness, totally pure by nature—is mind itself, ultimate truth. The metaphor and underlying meaning are thus connected, because all phenomena of nirvana and samsara without exception occur due to awareness or a lack of recognition of awareness. This is analogous to all that is desired coming from a treasury of jewels that grant whatever one imagines...”

paradigm: “Whatever You Meet” means that no matter what appearances unfold to you — appearances often unforeseeable through diachronic inference — they have no intrinsic nature; they are not good or bad, painful or pleasant in themselves, and they needn’t be experienced that way. With the synchronic, soteriological insight that those very appearances are selfless or empty, they are “naturally liberated” to simply unfold as they will, according to their own diachronic causal laws, and we are liberated from the anxiety we used to experience in the face of appearances. This synchronic insight is the subject of a great deal of phenomenological description, hard as it is to describe.

Traditionally, when someone has such an insight, they are expected to express it in a poem, and such poems are innumerable. A felicitous example is “Gampopa’s Song When He Reached Enlightenment,” which Gampopa (1079-1153) purportedly addressed to his pupils:

*...If you wish to realize what all this is actually about,
Make it a living experience like the continuous flow of a river.
Don't get into lots of maneuvers, rest loosely.
Don't seek further, just leave it in its own place.
Don't ruffle your mind, leave it just as it is.*

*Experience and realization have become one.
If you realize this uninterruptedly, that's it!
If it is as even as space, that's it!
If you see your own mind as Buddha, that's it!*

*I think, the nature of phenomena is directly realized.
I think, characteristics are liberated in their own place.
I think, this is not thought up, but spontaneously present...*

The explanation of the title goes on for several more pages.

*Do you realize in this way, all you great meditators?
It is not some kind of thing that you tell just everybody.*¹⁸²

This is a description of Buddhist omniscience, buddhahood. Of course, classical exoteric texts describe the qualities of a Buddha in much more exalted terms,¹⁸³ but in the esoteric tradition, to quote Gampopa, “*that’s it!*”

This is an important point that is often lost sight of by scholars of Buddhism who don’t pay attention to the phenomenological side of the tradition. I once found myself at an informal table of such scholars, one of whom posed the question, “do you think maybe the term ‘enlightenment’ in all the buddhist literature has always just been a heuristic term designed to get people to study and simply have better ethics?” In the case of some of the strange exoteric characterizations of enlightenment, this might be a fair question, but there is a vast obverse literature that deals with the question of enlightenment directly, as an eminently accomplishable, essentially aesthetic sustained experience. Gampopa’s verses give a window onto this, but it is also discussed more prosaically. For example, the fourteenth century philosopher/meditator Longchen Rabjam is famous for his nuanced theories and phenomenological descriptions of the ultimate synchronic, soteriological insight. In his commentary to his own *Precious Treasury of the Basic Space of Phenomena*, he describes what is, at the end of the day, the experience that defines an enlightened person, a buddha. The experience, while perhaps unfamiliar to us, strikes us as disarmingly possible, not at all a weird mystical rapture:

Before, you perceived outer manifestations — sense objects — as existing in their own

¹⁸² Brunnholz, Karl. *Straight From the Heart: Buddhist Pith Instructions*. Ithica: Snow Lion, 2007. p. 218

¹⁸³ For example, the 32 major and 80 minor marks of the Buddha, including all kinds of physical criteria and telepathic capabilities.

right. But now that you have realization, the very essence that you have certainty of is such that your holding to things as having true existence is overturned. So you think, “I perceive all these reified sense objects as though dream images, or the reflection of the moon in water, or forms in mirages—they are unobstructed, vivid yet ephemeral.” Whatever manifests arises as awareness’s own manifestation, randomly and without any particular reference point, leaving you wondering whether any of it exists or not.

You might wonder whether the conduct and character of ordinary beings are different from what they were before. As things seem to manifest with no reference point, you might think, “Does everyone realize this?” With all reference point fading away in emptiness, you experience, feel, think, and are aware as never before, so that you experience awareness as an infinite evenness. You might wonder how you have ended up in such a state in which thoughts never arise, for your consciousness is completely open and your ordinary experiences are naturally pristine, inherently pure. Occasionally you may burst out laughing at the way your behavior and all that you see and hear are continually without any frame of reference. You may become aware of thoughts like “Am I crazy? Is everyone else crazy? Is this a dream or the intermediate state after death?” The thought may occur to you: This awareness, bursting forth in all its nakedness, in which all reference points fade away, is present in everyone. What, then, is the problem in realizing it? It’s right here!” With your unconditional compassion arising unchecked, you also speak of these things to others, sing vajra songs, and act without inhibition, all of which show that your awareness has no fixation. All sensory appearances manifest unobstructedly in the moment. (165).

And also,

In my case, the concept that I previously had—that naturally lucid dharmakaya in all its nakedness was some amazing “thing”—was left behind, leaving no trace of where it had gone. Thus, with any concept of “is” or “is not” or any reification of the way of abiding having now been cast aside, what previously seemed relevant did not exist in the natural place of rest that is the true nature of phenomena. So what was there for me to do about freedom or confusion or some fruition state of dharmakaya? As I looked out outwardly at sensory appearances, there were unobstructed, vibrantly clear, ephemeral, and not to be reified. They did not fall within any extreme or division of being something or not, or of being located anywhere. As I looked inwardly at the conscious quality of self-knowing awareness in its natural place of rest, it could not be pinned down but faded into emptiness, indivisible, clear of concept—a decisive experience that left no trace. Having merged with the empty space of openness that is my nature, it I am nothing whatsoever in the present moment, where do that leave all of you? Ha! Ha! (342).

Rather than shoehorning this description into the Religious Studies discourse of mysticism, it

is more productive to relate to it as a type aesthetic experience, even if it does not correspond to anything we know about classical Greek, Romantic, or Western “modern” aesthetics. In Japan, a comprehensive, fecund aesthetic theory, *Wabi-Sabi*, developed out of the Buddhist synchronic insight. That untranslatable term connotes a sense of immanent awareness of the absolute contingency of the present, an instant recognition of its transitoriness. Indian aesthetics also accounts for it in the theory of *Rasa*, “flavor;” “juice” etc.). It was first developed by the early advaita (non-dualist) philosopher Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka, and expanded by the eleventh century polymath Abhinavagupta. Raniero Gnoli summarizes it as an induced state of generality or freedom from individuality that occurs when a work of art particularly “hits the mark”:

This state of generality, implies the elimination of any measure of time and space (time and space belong to discursive thought) and, by implication, of the limited knowing-subject, who is conditioned by these, but who, during the aesthetic experience, raises himself momentarily above time, space, and causality and, therefore, above the stream of his practical life, the *samsāra*.¹⁸⁴(xxi).

One common preconception, even in classical India, is that this kind of aesthetic experience differs from the more “mystical” experience of the meditating yogin, in that “The yogin remains, as it were, isolated in the compact solitude of his consciousness, far beyond any form of discursive thought. In aesthetic experience, however, the feelings of everyday life, even if they are transfigured, are always present.” (xxiv). Indeed there are meditative traditions that fit that stereotype, however, it should be clear that the experience described by Longchenpa is something quite different. His experience is marked by the vibrancy of the ordinary, the total preservation of the appearances of the world; even the appearance of innocuous somewhat

¹⁸⁴ Gnoli, Raniero. “Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta.” *Serie Orientale Roma*. Roma: Istituto

wandering thoughts. The point is to let them occur naturally (Tib. *rang 'bab*, lit. “dropping into itself”), without becoming entangled in a self-constructing quagmire of antagonistic subject and object. In *Rasa*s theory, “There is a sense of repose in consciousness (*saṃvīdviśrānti*) when we are immersed in the aesthetic object to the exclusion of everything else. The feelings evoked do not struggle for an outlet. They enact themselves on the stage of our consciousness.”¹⁸⁵ Important metaphysical principles notwithstanding, the Buddhist synchronic insight essentially transforms the entire world of appearances into this kind of aesthetic object.

Approaching Buddhist synchronic omniscience as a sustained aesthetic experience, helps to demystify and de-romanticize it. It is not intrinsically bound to anything “Buddhist,” much less “Oriental” or any other limiting category. In many ways, it resonates with the synchronic insights of so many poets all over the globe. A certain kind of poet isolates a cross-section of time and penetrates it; she understands what it’s made of, that it is fleeting and contingent; all of the elements of the moment, including the perceiver and the perceived, relate unobstructedly, naturally. I believe it is the what Wallace Stevens is describing in his poem “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven:”

*We keep coming back and coming back
To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns
That fall upon it out of the wind. We seek*

*The poem of pure reality, untouched
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,*

Italiano Per Il Medio Ed Estremo Oriente, 1956.

¹⁸⁵ Thampi, G.B. Mohan. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Oriental Aesthetics. (Autumn, 1965), pp. 75-80.

Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

*At the exactest point at which it is itself, Transfixing by
being purely what it is,*

A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye,

*The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight
Of simple seeing, without reflection.*

We seek Nothing beyond reality. Within it,

*Everything, the spirit's alchemicana
Included, the spirit that goes roundabout
And through included, not merely the visible,*

*The solid, but the movable, the moment,
The coming on of feasts and the habits of saints,
The pattern of the heavens and high, night air.*

Contemporary meditation teachers in the West, including respected old-school figures like Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche, have had to answer many questions about the similarity of this kind of aesthetic experience and the one aimed at in meditation, often simply referred to as “awareness” (Tib. *rigpa*). I have been present for many personal communications in which the similarity was fully acknowledged; at times acknowledged as identical. The same sometimes for moments of hallucinogenic experience. These experiences often happen accidentally haunt the person who had them. Some stumble into meditation looking for a way to access that kind of insight again. What sets the experiences apart, however, is the both their duration and the reliability of the method for achieving it. The aesthetic experience is almost by definition unsustained, likely unsustainable. It comes and goes with the thief-like muse who almost

always abandons its tragic supplicant. Thus, the meditator makes what is perhaps the most unpoetic of decisions: to systematize the aesthetic experience; to sneak up on it from every possible angle — analytical, phenomenological, physical, and aesthetic.

Nietzsche has been a silent interlocutor throughout this discussion. His entire corpus inveighs against the teleological causality that founds the diachronic paradigm of knowledge.¹⁸⁶ Moreover, he adopts the same buddhist negation of the self that makes it incoherent as a diachronic, causal entity, and demands that it be made sense of with a synchronic insight into its apodictic but groundless appearance.¹⁸⁷ An aesthetic experience accompanies this insight:

Will and wave. — How greedily this wave approaches, as if it were after something! How it crawls with terrifying haste into the inmost nooks of this labyrinthine cliff! It seems that it is trying to anticipate someone; it seems that something of value, high value, must be hidden there. — And how it comes back, a little more slowly but still quite white with excitement; is it disappointed? — But already another wave is approaching, still more greedily and savagely than the first, and its soul, too, seems to be full of secrets and the lust to dig up treasures. Thus live waves — thus live we who will — more I shall not say.

So? You mistrust me? You are angry with me, you beautiful monsters? Are you afraid that I might give away your whole secret? Well, be angry with me, arch your dangerous green bodies as high as you can, raise a wall between me and the sun — as you are doing now! Truly, even now nothing remains of the world but

¹⁸⁶ For example *Will to Power* § 477. See note on p. 28 of this paper. In *Human, All Too Human* § 106, he clearly theorizes what diachronic omniscience would be, though he doesn't think it much worth pursuing:

By the waterfall. — At the sight of a waterfall we think we see in the countless curving, twistings and breaking of the waves capriciousness and freedom of will; but everything here is necessary, every motion mathematically calculable. So it is too in the case of human actions; if one were all-knowing, one would be able to calculate every individual action, likewise every advance in knowledge, every error, every piece of wickedness. The actor himself, to be sure, is fixed in the illusion of free will; if for one moment the wheel of the world were to stand still, and there were an all-knowing, calculating intelligence there to make use of this pause, it could narrate the future of every creature to the remotest ages and describe every track along which this wheel had yet to roll. The actor's deception regarding himself, the assumption of free will, is itself part of the mechanism it would have to compute.

¹⁸⁷ *Will to Power* § 485:

The subject: this is the term for our belief in a unity underlying all the different impulses of the highest feeling of reality: we understand this belief as the *effect* of one cause — we believe so firmly in our belief that for its sake we imagine "truth," "reality," "substantiality" in general. — "The subject" is the fiction that many similar states in us are the effect of one substratum: but it is we who first created the "similarity" of these states; our adjusting them and making them similar is the fact, not their similarity (—which ought rather to be denied—).

green twilight and green lightning. Carry on as you like, roaring with overweening pleasure and malice—or dive again, pouring you emeralds down into the deepest depths, and throw your infinite white mane of foam and spray over them: Everything suits me, for everything suits you so well, and I am so well-disposed toward you for everything; how could I think of betraying you? For—mark my word!—I know you and your secret, I know your kind! You and I—are we not of one kind?—You and I—do we not have one secret? (*The Gay Science* §310).

And this experience demands familiarization. It has to be embraced, and as systematized as far impossible, though no formal approach will do. it demands an aesthetic outlook, one of immanent spontaneity in the face of things:

One thing is needful.—To "give style" to one's character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a large mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of original nature has been removed—both times through long practice and daily work at it. Here the ugly that could not be removed is concealed; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime. Much that is vague and resisted shaping has been saved and exploited for distant views... In the end, when the work is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything large and small. Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste! (GS, 290).

Here *maximal epistemic greatness* is affective and aesthetic. *Taste*, "*Rasas*", *Juice*, *Flavor*: the essences of Abhinavagupta's aesthetic transports. In Tibetan literature, one of the descriptive terms of the pinnacle of spiritual experience is *ro gcig*, "single taste"—a sustained, aesthetic, spontaneous naked awareness of each thing as it appears to you¹⁸⁸. These things lack any intrinsic nature whatsoever and are thus naturally free, freeing us as a matter of course. This kind of aesthetic experience allows us to escape the endless deferral of presence that

¹⁸⁸ The *mabāmūdra* tradition theorizes four subtle variations on this experience: one pointedness (*rtse gcig*); simplicity (*apros bral*); one taste (*ro gcig*); and non-meditation (*sgom med*). Its sister tradition, *dzogchen*, echoes these essentially aesthetic themes: ineffability (*med pa*, "non-existence"); openness (*phyal ba*); spontaneous presence (*lhun grub*); and oneness (*gcig pu*).

happens when we always *interpret* things. Sontag sensed this when she called for us to experience works of art more nakedly, to see them as themselves, and in a sense to see through them. She writes,

Transparence is the highest, most liberating value in art—and in criticism—today. Transparence means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of the things being what they are[...] The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than what it means[...] In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”(23).

Likewise, if we transform the things of the world into aesthetic objects, *interpretation*—the heart of the diachronic paradigm—is not the only way to relate to them: naked synchronic erotics remains an option.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps I have not been able to escape Hegel after all. An Hegelian dialectic has brought us here to the end. I started by criticizing Hegel’s instance that we sublimate the concrete into spiritual substance, *seeing through* the concrete, interpreting it as its own occluded *content*. The antithesis to this is the Chinese paradigm that stops at the concrete, *seeing it for what it is* in a synchronic slice of time. And then we have the Buddhist view, which synthesizes both orientations. It looks at the concrete synchronically, but still *sees through it*, not into its hidden substance, but into its total groundlessness, basic space.

Regardless of this overall structure of the paper, the terms *diachronic* and *synchronic* omniscience are valuable for the way that they highlight two very different paradigms of

knowledge. Those paradigms are general and ultimately not culturally and historically bound. Not only do they help us isolate two radically different ideas about what constitutes valid knowledge, they help us envision the implications of such knowledge, including what kinds of cultures might adhere to one or the other, and why those cultures produce the things that they do.

At the most reductionistic level of analysis, it should be clearer now why cultures that privilege a diachronic paradigm have recently been and continue to be prolific in the creation of technology, which is an essential instrument for the accomplishment of that paradigm's absolute knowledge. Likewise, the synchronic paradigm should in some ways justify the quietistic caricature of cultures that value it. Such reductions, however, should be put aside and we should see how any given culture contains those who dissent from the prevailing episteme. There are engineers and rebel poets in every corner. Understanding the two paradigms of knowledge a bit more subtly should help us unite the two, benefitting from what they both have to offer.

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