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SPIRITUALITY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

DUHOVNOST I SVEST

EDITORS' NOTE

Mark Losoncz, Bence Péter Marosán, Max Velmans

When discussing spirit(uality) within Western culture, we access a rich tradition encompassing philosophical, religious, and other thought (cf. *pneuma*, *spiritus*, *Geist*). This framework, however, inherently has limitations, as many non-Western cultures lack a direct, conceptual equivalent for “spirit.” Nevertheless, recent statistics indicate an exponential rise in the number of individuals who identify as “spiritual but not religious”, also known as “spiritual but not affiliated”, or, less frequently, “more spiritual than religious.”

In parallel with this trend, many contemporary thinkers are striving to radically rethink the concept of consciousness from diverse perspectives, thereby creating various intellectual movements. It is no exaggeration to assert that the spiritual turn occurring today is accompanied by a profound rediscovery of consciousness.

In keeping with these developments, the editors of this special issue of *Philosophy and Society* invited authors who have been engaged with this subject for many years, focusing on the rethinking of consciousness and spirituality itself. Accordingly, Ed Kelly’s article, “Spirituality and consciousness: An emerging vision for the 21st century,” points out the tensions between contemporary sciences and spirituality, with a specific emphasis on the limitations of physicalism and potential alternatives that regard consciousness as ontologically fundamental. Treading a similar path, Paul Marshall seeks to answer the question, “What is it like to be the universe?” within the framework of cosmopsychism, one of the most significant contemporary alternative currents. Closely connected to this, Itay Shani proposes a conception of spirituality that posits this cosmic consciousness both as the ground of all infra-cosmic subjects –albeit subjects possessing different ontological depths– and as an ultimate source of meaning and value. In contrast, Wouter Kusters’ article focuses on the experience of madness, while also considering visionary experiences during which the boundaries are blurred between madness, spirituality, and insight. Bence Péter Marosán concentrates on Michel Henry, a prominent figure in phenomenology, whose spiritually-tinged phenomenology helps to radically rethink consciousness and subjectivity. Finally, this special issue features two articles



analyzing meditation. One is Mark Losoncz's article, which explores the ultimate limits of experience by analyzing the concept of pure consciousness and the question of whether meditation as a spiritual practice has privileged access to this state of consciousness. The other is Rick Repetti's prolegomenon, which, despite its brevity, provides a comprehensive philosophy of meditation, addressing numerous challenging dilemmas.

As the editors of this special issue, we wish to express our gratitude to the editorial board for their openness toward this bold subject, which our authors analyzed by testing the boundaries of consciousness and experience.

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Edward F. Kelly

SPIRITUALITY AND CONSCIOUSNESS: AN EMERGING VISION FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

ABSTRACT

The rise of science over the past four centuries has undeniably brought with it a wealth of extraordinary intellectual and practical achievements, but it has also arguably contributed to a host of serious and worsening societal problems including destructive commercial exploitation of our planet's natural resources with its cumulative negative effects on the environment and global climate; relentless commodification, marketing and consumption; extreme and increasing inequity in the distribution of wealth and opportunity; the prevalence of zero-sum "transactionalist" approaches to relationships at scales ranging from individuals to nations; widespread militarism and the ever-present threat of nuclear holocaust; and the pervasive "disenchantment" of contemporary civilization. Numerous social commentators have connected these problems directly or indirectly with the deep split between science and spirituality that has been fostered in particular over the past century by advocates of *physicalism*, a philosophical doctrine anchored in late nineteenth-century physics that claims to speak for science as a whole and that sees nothing in our human spiritual traditions but irrational vestiges of our intellectual childhood. In this paper I will describe how a path has opened up toward a radically different but still science-based picture of reality, one that takes consciousness as ontologically fundamental and celebrates human spiritual experiences and capacities, that is more consistent than physicalism itself with leading-edge science, and that can potentially help prevent our struggling modern civilization from sleep-walking into self-annihilation.

KEYWORDS

consciousness, spirituality, physicalism, dualism, dual-aspect monism, idealism, brain/mind theory, psychical research, near-death experiences, mystical experiences

Background

The science-based conception of reality that currently constitutes the received wisdom of opinion elites worldwide is *physicalism*, an austere philosophical descendant of the *materialism* of previous centuries. It comes in a variety of subtly different flavors, but its underlying core ideas are really quite simple. Anchored to the mature classical physics of the late nineteenth century, this

doctrine pictures reality as a whole in much the same way that foundational scientists such as Galileo and Newton conceived of its physical aspects alone – i.e., setting aside consciousness and all other things mental or spiritual (which they themselves took very seriously) for the sake of progress in physics as the prototypical observational and mathematical science. On this view, in its modern philosophical form, *all* facts are determined by *physical* facts alone. Space and time exist absolutely and independently, providing a ready-made container for everything that exists or happens. The world we experience consists at bottom of tiny bits of some sort of solid, enduring, insentient, self-existent material “stuff” moving about in accordance with mathematical laws under the influence of fields of force, and all else gets manufactured somehow from that basic stuff. Some of what we know, and our capacities to learn more, are built-in genetically, as complex resultants of biological evolution. Everything else comes to us by way of our sensory surfaces, through energetic exchanges with the environment of types already largely understood. All aspects of mind and consciousness are created by (or in some mysterious way identical to, or supervenient upon) neurophysiological processes occurring in our brains. We are nothing but immensely complicated biological machines, operating deterministically. Our everyday experiences of enduring and purposeful selfhood, seemingly supported by mental causation and at least a modicum of free will, belong only to a pre-scientific “folk psychology,” and in reality are just illusory by-products of the grinding of our neural machinery. We are “meat computers” in artificial intelligence pioneer Marvin Minsky’s chilling phrase, or “moist robots” in its Dilbert parody. Furthermore, and contrary to the teachings of most world religions, the fact that mind and consciousness are entirely the products of neurophysiological processes occurring in our brains entails that there is no possibility whatsoever for postmortem survival of any sort. On a more cosmic scale we see no sign of formal or final causes or indeed any sort of transcendent order. On the contrary, the overall scheme of nature appears in the end to be utterly devoid of purpose or meaning. To paraphrase physics Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg, the more we learn about the universe the more it all seems pointless.

Views of this bleak sort have permeated all “advanced” societies and fueled the pervasive disenchantment of the modern world with all of its evident and pressing ills. They have also accumulated enormous cultural momentum and become essentially self-perpetuating by deliberately and systematically gaining near-total control of key structures of modern society such as our educational institutions and the media. Over the past century our secondary schools, colleges, and universities have in effect mostly become advocates for the prevailing physicalist worldview, which by now not only dominates mainstream *scientific* disciplines such as biology, neuroscience, psychology, and the social sciences, but also has destructively colonized other academic specialties including the humanities in general and—perhaps most shockingly—religious studies in particular. There can be little doubt that it has also contributed to the steep worldwide modern decline in traditional forms of religious belief

with their associated capacities to support ethical and moral order (Smith et al. 2025). Indeed, recent years have witnessed scathing attacks on religion by defenders of physicalism such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Steven Pinker, who clearly regard themselves and current mainstream science as reliably marshaling the intellectual virtues of reason and objectivity against retreating forces of irrational authority and superstition. For them the truth of physicalism has been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt, and to think anything different is necessarily to abandon centuries of scientific progress, unleash the black flood of occultism, and revert to primitive supernaturalist beliefs characteristic of bygone ages. These attacks by prominent academics on traditional faiths, especially the Abrahamic faiths, have in turn engendered pushback in the various forms of fundamentalist religious fanaticism we observe with depressing frequency in the daily news.

The “Sursem” Project

Many academics, including myself, however, do not embrace the physicalist worldview and its dismissive attitude toward spiritual realities. I speak here in particular as the leader of a long-running project – initially organized in 1998 by Michael Murphy, co-founder of Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California and Director of its Center for Theory and Research (CTR) – whose members take a starkly different view: we think it requires astonishing hubris to dismiss summarily the collective experience and wisdom of our forebears, including persons widely recognized as pillars of all human civilization, and we believe that the single most important task confronting all of modernity is that of *meaningful* reconciliation of science and spirituality.

I hasten to add that for us any such “reconciliation” involves much more than merely segregating science and religion in their current forms into hermetically sealed “magisteria” where they can go their separate ways in uneasy coexistence, as originally decreed by Descartes and recently advocated again by Stephen Jay Gould. Instead, following Alfred North Whitehead, we think “the clash is a sign that there are wider truths and finer perspectives within which a reconciliation of a deeper religion and a more subtle science is to be found” (Whitehead 1967/1925: 185), and that emerging developments within science itself are leading inexorably toward an enlarged conception of reality, one that can address human spiritual needs while rejecting untenable “over-beliefs” of the kinds routinely targeted by critics of the world’s institutional religions. We advocate no specific religious faith, and we aspire to remain anchored in science while expanding its horizons. We are attempting in this way to find a middle path between the starkly polarized fundamentalisms – religious *and* scientific – that have dominated recent public discourse. Both science and religion, we believe, must evolve.

In this paper I will summarize our efforts to date in this direction. Over its decades-long duration our project has involved over fifty participants in all, roughly twenty of whom were actively engaged during any given year. Our core

membership has remained largely constant, but as the project evolved some members dropped out for various reasons while others were recruited to help us address specific new issues and needs as these came into focus. Each year typically included at least one intensive five-day face-to-face meeting of currently active members in the magnificent Pacific Oceanside ambience provided by Esalen, supplemented by occasional smaller meetings elsewhere and by extensive background interactions among particular members as needed.

Our membership has always been uncommonly diverse, including social, biological, and physical scientists, scholars of religion, philosophers, and historians of science among others, but in general terms most of us are scientifically minded adults with broad interests who think of ourselves as at least somewhat “spiritual,” although not “religious” in any conventional sense, and who are profoundly skeptical of the currently dominant physicalist worldview but equally wary of uncritical embrace of any of the world’s major faiths with their often conflicting beliefs and decidedly mixed historical records.

We focused initially on the various forms of existing evidence for post-mortem survival, our fellowship thereby acquiring the nickname “Sursem” for “survival seminar.” As Mike Murphy had clearly recognized, survival is a watershed issue theoretically, because the beliefs common to traditional faiths cannot be true if the physicalist worldview is correct, and yet there already exists – mostly unknown to believers, skeptics, and the general public alike – a large body of substantial evidence indicating that survival in personal form *does* at least sometimes occur.

By the end of our second annual meeting, it had become clear that although we held somewhat differing views on the survival issue itself, we were unanimous in believing that the prevailing physicalism is fundamentally flawed and needs to be superseded by a more comprehensive science-based picture of reality. Accordingly, we formulated a two-stage plan that has constituted my primary occupation for the past twenty-five years and that has already resulted in three large books (Kelly et al. 2007; Kelly, Crabtree and Marshall 2015; Kelly and Marshall 2021). What I want to do next is to convey an overall sense of what we have done and what we have accomplished (so far).

Irreducible Mind

The central goal of the first phase was to assemble in one place a large amount of empirical evidence for human psychophysical capacities that clearly defy or strongly resist explanation in conventional physicalist terms, and here I should supply some relevant philosophical background. Brain events and mental events normally seem strongly correlated, of course, and that universally accepted fact has generally been taken as unambiguously supporting the “production” model of brain-mind relations – in a nutshell, the idea that brain creates mind, full stop. Now, it is indisputable that your consciousness can be radically altered if you get hit sufficiently hard on the head, drink too much, or develop an invasive brain tumor, and such facts clearly demonstrate that physical changes

can causally impact your mental life. But what about causation in the opposite direction? Suppose for example that you develop an urge to raise your hand in order to ask a question, and your arm rises into the air – is that not an example of something mental causing a physical effect? “No,” says the physicalist, “you’ve simply misunderstood what’s actually going on. That intention or idea of yours, you see, was really just a pattern of neuroelectric activity in your brain. That *physical* process is what caused your arm to move – no problem!”

That sort of argument is impossible to rebut under everyday circumstances such as raising an arm, but it can be overcome by identifying empirically validated psychophysical phenomena that cannot plausibly be accomplished by the unaided brain. That is precisely what we set out to do in the first phase of our project, revisiting in light of a century of subsequent research many of the phenomena discussed by William James’s colleague and friend F. W. H. Myers (1903) in his masterwork *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (henceforth *HP*).

First on any list of relevant capacities come supernormal or “psi” phenomena such as extrasensory perception (ESP) and psychokinesis (PK, or “mind over matter”) that are studied in experimental parapsychology and in psychical research more generally. The defining attribute of all such phenomena is that information somehow passes between an organism and its environment despite the presence of a barrier of some sort (such as isolation in space and/or time between ESP targets and their would-be percipients) which on widely accepted physical principles should prevent that from happening. The conflict with physicalism is extremely clear in this arena, and that undoubtedly accounts for the extraordinary hostility the subject often provokes in persons for whom physicalist ideology amounts to a secular faith. Here I will simply state my informed and considered opinion as an experimental scientist who has worked in this area for decades: serious scientific effort on this subject has now been going on for something over 150 years, beginning even before the formation of the Society for Psychical Research in England in 1882, and the accumulated evidence from large numbers of case and field studies plus something like a couple of thousand experimental studies should be more than sufficient, in my opinion, to convince any reasonably open-minded person who takes the trouble to study it that these phenomena really do exist as facts of nature, and that our science-based worldview *must* therefore expand in some way in order to accommodate them. Let me also underscore here the irony that it is precisely the strength of the evidence for psi phenomena generally that undermines the empirical case for postmortem survival! That is, the only credible explanations for the direct evidence of multiple kinds that now exists for postmortem survival of human mind and personality involve either survival itself or psi processes involving only living persons (such as a medium, for example). Both horns of this dilemma are lethal to the physicalist worldview.

My co-authors all shared my own positive attitude toward psychical research, and we all wanted to include it somehow in our book, but at the same time we did not want ours to be a book mainly or even in substantial part about this

subject. Instead, we incorporated the entire literature of psychical research by reference and provided an annotated bibliography pointing to what we view as especially significant parts of that enormous literature.

Now, many mainstream cognitive scientists and neuroscientists would like to imagine that psi phenomena represent a uniquely intractable anomaly that can simply be set aside or quarantined and safely ignored while we continue to advance triumphantly on all other fronts. That is emphatically not the case, however, and our 800-page first book *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century* (Kelly et al. 2007, henceforth *IM*) goes on to examine in detail a number of other problematic phenomena. These include, for example, manifestations of extreme psychophysiological influence such as highly localized and specific placebo effects, “stigmata” (spontaneous replications of the wounds of Christ on the bodies of exceptionally fervent and imaginative devotees), and hypnotically induced blisters of pre-specified geometric shape; prodigious forms of memory and calculation; the concurrent existence of multiple and overlapping centers of consciousness associated with single human bodies (particularly in cases where a normally hidden or subliminal personality is conspicuously more gifted and knowledgeable – or suffers different allergies, or requires different eyeglass prescriptions – than the everyday personality itself); powerful and transformative “near-death experiences” (NDEs), especially ones occurring under extreme physiological conditions such as deep general anesthesia and/or cardiac arrest in which no experience whatsoever should be possible according to contemporary mainstream neuroscience; genius-level creativity on the staggering scale of persons such as the Indian mathematician Ramanujan; and life-changing mystical experiences whether spontaneous, induced by psychedelics such as psilocybin or LSD, emerging in conjunction with transformative practices such as intense meditative disciplines of one or another sort, or precipitated by a close brush with death.

Collectively, these well-documented phenomena greatly compound what contemporary philosophers of mind have increasingly recognized as the severe explanatory difficulties posed for physicalism by perfectly ordinary, everyday properties of our conscious mental life. These properties include, for example, our ability to grasp general word meanings and to deploy them in an infinite variety of semantically appropriate contexts, including metaphorical contexts; the “intentionality” or “aboutness” of language and thought; the presentation of conscious experience in the form of unified wholes observed from a subjective point of view; and perhaps most crucially, the qualitative “feels” of consciousness – the “what it’s like” to experience a particular sensation or to be in a particular conscious state. The plain fact is that we currently have no understanding whatsoever of how a consciousness with these properties could be manufactured by physical processes occurring in brains, and recent theoretical work in philosophy of mind has convinced many that we can never achieve one.

Physics itself has of course moved on as well, and the classical conception of a material universe that was introduced for methodological reasons by Galileo

and Newton and developed to near-perfection by the end of the nineteenth century was radically undermined early in the twentieth by the rise of quantum and relativity theories. These seismic events in modern physics have been easy for most of us to ignore, because they are associated with happenings on spatial and temporal scales so different from those of everyday life, but they too have eroded the *scientific* foundation of the prevailing physicalist worldview as described above. That worldview, I repeat, is not itself part of science but a metaphysics, a *philosophical* doctrine that is in fact no longer consistent with our deepest physical science.

In summary, I believe that *IM* accomplished two main things: first, it added a rich new *empirical* dimension to a rising and multifaceted tide of dissatisfaction with physicalism as a philosophical doctrine. Second and more fundamentally, it provided strong support for a radical alternative to the conventional *production* model of brain-mind relations. On that conventional view, which of course dominates today's psychology and neuroscience, everyday consciousness is all the consciousness each of us has, created and supported by unconscious neurophysiological processes in our brains, and encased within our skulls. Myers and James, however – in company with philosophical colleagues such as Henri Bergson and F. C. S. Schiller – long ago developed a very different and much richer model of the human psyche, one that I and many others believe is closer to the truth and merits intensified attention today.

James made the essential logical point in his Ingersoll lecture at Harvard (James 1898/1900): the strong correlations normally holding between mental events and brain events – which everybody accepts, and which have routinely been interpreted as supporting the production model – can in fact be interpreted at least equally well in terms of *transmission* or *permission* or *transduction* or *filtering* of conscious mentation originating outside the brain. Such models portray the brain not as the *generator* of mind and consciousness but as an organ of adaptation to the demands of everyday life, in large part a sensorimotor interface that under normal conditions selects, focuses, channels, and constrains the operations of a mind and consciousness inherently far greater in capacities and scope than the everyday conscious mind itself. As Myers himself put it (*HP*, vol. 1: 12, 15): “There exists a more comprehensive consciousness, a profounder faculty, which for the most part remains potential only...but from which the consciousness and faculty of earth-life are mere selections...[N]o Self of which we can here have cognizance is in reality more than a fragment of a larger Self, – revealed in a fashion at once shifting and limited through an organism not so framed as to afford it full manifestation.” The everyday or “supraliminal self” in Myers's theory is simultaneously both itself and part of a larger consciousness, the “Subliminal Self” that is the source of supernormal phenomena and that survives bodily death.

James argues specifically that although this alternative understanding of brain-mind relations may at first seem purely metaphorical and difficult to understand, it is in reality no more so than the production model itself, and it has the great advantage of potentially explaining a variety of things beyond

the reach of that model such as the phenomena then being uncovered by Myers and his colleagues in psychical research. Note also that it potentially solves the “hard problem” of consciousness by locating the source of consciousness outside the brain, and that it circumvents the logical objection to postmortem survival based on supposed one-way causal dependence of mind and consciousness on brain activity.

The evidence we assembled in *IM* demonstrates clearly, I believe, that the correlations between mind and brain are actually much looser than generally supposed, and can be conceptualized in the alternative fashion of permission or filter models without doing violence to other parts of our scientific understanding including leading-edge neuroscience and physics (see especially *IM*, Chapter 9). More specifically, evidence for the expanded picture of human personality advanced by Myers and James has grown far stronger in the century following their deaths. Unfortunately, their pioneering efforts were soon pushed aside by the rise of radical behaviorism with its self-conscious aping of the methods of classical physics, and that influence persists in modified form even now in mainstream cognitive neuroscience (see *IM*, Chapter 1). In our view, psychology has taken an extremely lengthy albeit probably necessary detour, and is only now becoming capable of building upon the broader empirical foundation that our predecessors had already created so long ago.

The normally hidden region of conscious mind, the “Subliminal Self” of F. W. H. Myers or “The More” of William James, is the wellspring of the latent human potentials which historically have comprised Esalen’s main practical focus. But it is especially the *transpersonal* products of this region with their deep psychological and historical interconnections – genius in its highest expressions, powerful and transformative mystical experiences occurring under an astonishing variety of circumstances, and the various forms of paranormal or psi phenomena including postmortem survival – which jointly demonstrate that physicalism must give way to some richer form of metaphysics. What is at issue here, I hasten to add, is *not* whether we will have metaphysics – because we inevitably *will*, whether aware of it or not – but whether we will have good metaphysics or bad.

Beyond Physicalism

Irreducible Mind required plenty of hard work, but it was actually the easier part of our Sursem project, consisting mainly of the clerical-type task of digging enormous amounts of relevant information out of the past century or so of refereed biomedical literature and assembling it all in one place in coherent form. Far more difficult is the philosophical part, which is to identify a possible successor to physicalism: if the world is not constituted in the manner described by physicalism, that is, how might it be constituted differently, in order that the “rogue phenomena” catalogued in *IM* – along with everything else we find in nature—can occur? I took a first stab at this question in the final chapter of *IM*, bracketing a range of possibilities from a modernized form

of interactive dualism to an idealist monism along the lines pioneered by Alfred North Whitehead, and became convinced that scientifically and philosophically respectable alternatives to physicalism are definitely available. The central task for the second phase of our project thus became that of examining a wider variety of alternatives in greater detail and attempting to identify the most promising path(s) forward.

As we began to work in this direction we recognized that a central element of our strategy should be to pay special attention to worldviews both past and present that explicitly attempt to accommodate at least some “rogue phenomena” of the relevant sorts. We approached this comparative material not with the expectation that any of the systems we would be able to study would contain all the right answers, ready-made, but in the interest of prospecting for common themes and useful clues as to how best to advance our theoretical purposes.

These more theoretical efforts initially resulted in a second large volume, *Beyond Physicalism: Toward Reconciliation of Science and Spirituality* (Kelly, Crabtree, and Marshall 2015; henceforth *BP*), also published by Rowman & Littlefield. It includes a survey by philosopher Michael Grosso of the long and illustrious intellectual history in the West of permission-type conceptual frameworks, ranging from pre-Socratic and Platonic philosophers to the Neoplatonic revival inspired by Vico, Ficino and others in Renaissance Italy, to the Romantic tradition in poetry, literature and philosophy, to Myers, James, and Bergson around the beginning of the twentieth century, and finally to more contemporary figures such as philosopher C. D. Broad, psychologist Cyril Burt, chemist and discoverer of LSD, Albert Hofmann, and the novelist and social theorist Aldous Huxley. Scholars of religion in our group argued in general terms for the theoretical importance of mystical experiences, construing them as providing windows into normally inaccessible parts of reality (Paul Marshall), and developed individual chapters on specific mystically-informed religious philosophies including Neoplatonism (Greg Shaw), Yoga and Vedanta (Ian Whicher), and Kashmir Shaivism (Loriliai Biernacki). We also devoted several chapters to relevant parts of the Western metaphysical tradition, including one by Paul Marshall on a modified version of Leibniz’s monadology that enhances its power to help make sense of our rogue phenomena; one by Adam Crabtree on the contributions of William James’s friend and colleague Charles Sanders Peirce, who took both psi and survival seriously and believed his metaphysics could explain them; and one by Eric Weiss that combines an updated version of Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy with insights derived from the modern Tantric philosopher and sage Sri Aurobindo.

In keeping with our general orientation, we also emphasized contributions from the scientific side. Neuroscientist David Presti and I, for example, examined permission or filter models from a psychobiological point of view, again concentrating on psi phenomena, flights of genius, and mystical experiences as key expressions of the deeper resources of the psyche, and attempted to understand what sorts of brain conditions might permit or actively encourage access to these resources, and why. Parenthetically, one of the most exciting

practical implications of our project, going forward, is precisely that conventional tools of brain-mind research, skillfully applied, should enable us not only to identify brain conditions conducive to the expression of these normally latent capacities, but also to develop improved technological means for instantiating or stabilizing them. What we are doing, that is, also has an important *applications* dimension, potentially contributing to more effective harnessing of these elusive human potentials for personal and collective good.

BP also includes chapters by several prominent physicists: quantum theorist Henry Stapp presents his physics-based model of mind-brain interaction and explores its possible extensions to rogue phenomena including psi and survival; quantum theorist and cognitive scientist/philosopher Harald Atmanspacher describes the dual-aspect monism of Wolfgang Pauli and Carl Gustav Jung, and shows how it leads naturally to a theoretical taxonomy of exceptional experiences matching those actually occurring in clinical practice; and Bernard Carr, a cosmologist and former president of the Society for Psychical Research, provides expositions of his own and other forms of “hyperdimensional” theory, again emphasizing their compatibility with leading-edge science (in this case with relativity and string theory) and their potential to help make sense of rogue phenomena including psi, survival, and various types of altered states of consciousness including mystical experiences.

The overall sense we developed during this initial period of more philosophical work was that theorizing based upon an adequately comprehensive empirical foundation – i.e., one that includes our various rogue phenomena along with the problems posed by consciousness itself – inevitably moves into metaphysical territory shared in part with the world’s traditional religious faiths. In general terms, we concluded, what seems to be needed philosophically is some realist form of *idealism* – essentially the metaphysical opposite of the prevailing physicalism.

In the concluding section of *BP* I made a preliminary case for one particular system of that type, following the trajectory of William James in the last decade of his life. Although this is not widely realized or remembered today, James specifically and repeatedly acknowledges in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that he is using Myers’s model of personality to provide explanations for all of the religious phenomena he discusses, treating them primarily as incursions from the “near side” of Myers’s subliminal region. Then in his last great work, *A Pluralistic Universe* (James 1971/1909), he begins to explore what might lie on the “far side” of that same region. Encouraged by persons such as Gustav Fechner and Henri Bergson, James in effect generalizes Myers’s well-grounded *psychological* theory of the Subliminal Self in the direction of a *metaphysics* which postulates a nested hierarchy of progressively more inclusive consciousnesses, culminating in one that while “highest” in some sense is different in humanly important ways from the abstract, static, timeless, all-encompassing, and already-perfect One – characterized by James as “the unintelligible pantheistic monster” (p. 271) – postulated by various forms of absolute idealism that were still popular in England at that time. James points out,

for example, that his highest consciousness is more like us and hence perhaps more accessible to us, and that since it is not all-inclusive it need not bear full responsibility for the problem of evil.

As I observed in Chapter 14 of *BP* this late trajectory brought James very close to an idealist metaphysics that is well known and increasingly respected in theological circles, and that should rank high among the candidates to succeed physicalism: specifically, I argued that emerging developments in science and comparative religion, viewed in relation to centuries of philosophy and natural theology, point toward some form of “evolutionary pantheism” (a subset of the larger family of idealist positions) as our current best guess about the metaphysically ultimate nature of things.

In brief, pantheisms in general attempt to split the difference between classical theisms and pantheisms, conceiving of an ultimate consciousness or God as pervading or even constituting the manifest world, as in pantheisms, but also as having some sort of higher-level mental structure, as in theisms (see especially Hartshorne and Reese 2000/1953). As Biernacki and Clayton (2013) had already shown, pantheistic elements or tendencies are clearly present, even when not well-developed, in essentially all of the world’s traditional faiths. The version I tentatively embraced in *BP* further conceives the highest consciousness as in some sense slowly waking up to itself as evolution of more complex biological forms enables fuller expression of its inherent capacities. Most importantly, from a practical point of view, it holds that we humans are intimately linked with that ultimate reality in the depths of our individual psyches, that we can connect with it and experience it directly in a variety of ways, and that we can potentially aid the global evolutionary process through our own conscious choices and efforts. As F. W. H. Myers himself more succinctly and poetically expressed it in the final sentences of *HP*: “That which lies at the root of each of us lies at the root of the Cosmos too. Our struggle is the struggle of the Universe itself; and the very Godhead finds fulfillment through our upward-striving souls” (Vol. 2, p. 277).

Mike Murphy and I portrayed evolutionary pantheism in the concluding section of *BP* as an emerging metaphysical vision—a “stealth worldview” in Mike’s apt phrase – which potentially integrates the long philosophical tradition of idealist and dual-aspect monisms with shared lessons from the world’s mystical traditions, *and* with the incipient expansion of science itself as previewed in *IM*—in effect, an expanded science-based worldview that can embrace and potentiate empirical realities of spiritual sorts while remaining faithful to science.

The consensus we developed to first approximation in *BP* naturally invited further elaboration of the identified worldviews and examination of additional systems of related type, as well as empirical explorations involving many kinds of research (especially important going forward, in my view, will be laboratory research on meditation and psychedelics as gateways into mystical-type states of consciousness). A great deal obviously remained to be done to narrow the identified general class of worldviews to its most viable member(s), but we gradually became confident that we were headed in the right overall direction.

Theoretical interlude: taming idealism's alleged "inverse hard problem"

Before proceeding further, I wish to insert here a brief account of my own movement toward idealism, because I think it may help others make the same difficult journey. I am an experimental psychologist and neuroscientist by training, and not by any stretch of the imagination a professional philosopher. I was undoubtedly a conventional physicalist most of the way through graduate school, like virtually all of my fellow students, although most of us were at best only dimly conscious of that fact. The physicalist worldview was just an implicit part of the intellectual environment, so to speak, like water to a fish – something from which one absorbed things passively, as if by osmosis. I was subsequently roused from my dogmatic slumbers, however, by prolonged first-hand encounters with what I could not fail to recognize as compelling experimental evidence for the reality of psi phenomena that I knew were unexplainable in conventional physical terms.

Finding myself driven by evidence to abandon physicalism, I gravitated initially toward interactive dualism as the most natural and comfortable philosophic alternative (and see *IM* chapter 9 for a serious attempt of my own to justify it). I should also confess that even now, when I am functioning as a working psychologist, I lapse readily into that way of thinking, with its residual if only partial allegiance to the physicalist conception of nature. I eventually became convinced, however, that once one abandons physicalist monism there is no tenable stopping point short of some form of idealism. This was by no means an easy journey, because like most other scientifically trained modern persons steeped in the physicalist worldview, I initially found idealism extremely counterintuitive, notwithstanding the plain historical fact that idealist philosophical systems recur widely in mystically-informed Eastern thought and have risen to prominence repeatedly albeit temporarily here in the West.

One standard physicalist objection in particular held me back until I finally recognized that it is actually much weaker than I had originally thought. That objection goes like this: "OK, it's true that we physicalists are having a difficult time explaining how the brain creates consciousness and all that, but we'll probably succeed eventually, and anyway idealists have a problem that is exactly the opposite and equally intractable: specifically, *how does consciousness create matter?*"

The correct response here is to recognize that there is a subtle but crucial asymmetry between the two challenges: on the physicalist side we know beyond doubt that consciousness exists as a fact of nature because we all have and experience it directly, and a large amount of evidence and argument have by now accumulated showing that it cannot be explained in physicalist terms; on the idealist side, however, the challenge has not been posed in quite the correct way. "Matter" and other elements of classical physics are conceptual entities that we laboriously developed over a period of centuries in order to explain various sorts of empirical regularities we discovered in our experience of the

natural world, but we now know from more modern developments in physics itself that matter *as classically conceived* does not really exist. What the idealist needs to explain, that is, is not “matter” as classically conceived but those regularities themselves, and as I will explain shortly that is precisely what a number of my idealist-leaning colleagues are attempting to do. Conceptual frameworks such as theirs cannot be ruled out *a priori*, as many are reflexively inclined to do, but must be judged in terms of their ability to help us better understand both in general terms and in the necessary realist detail the world we live in. It remains to be seen, of course, how far any of them can actually be taken. The central question that remains to be answered, in my view, is whether a full-fledged realist-idealist monism will ultimately be needed, or whether some sort of panpsychism or cosmopsychism or dual-aspect monism that attempts to extend the conventional physicalist picture by incorporating consciousness and mentality in some less radical fashion will serve us better in the end. Conceptions of these latter sorts are represented elsewhere in this special issue.

Consciousness Unbound

Our continuing efforts have already led to a third volume, *Consciousness Unbound: Liberating Mind from the Tyranny of Materialism* (Kelly and Marshall 2021; henceforth *CU*) which carries forward the empirical and theoretical themes of its predecessors. Part I provides state-of-the-science summaries for some of the empirical phenomena that we view as especially challenging for theoreticians. The first, by Bruce Greyson on near-death experiences, presents an overview of decades of NDE research, using some impressive recent cases as illustrations. He also discusses evidence for and against prominent attempts to explain NDEs in reductive physicalist terms, and highlights the remarkable transformative power of NDEs as evidenced by subsequent spiritual growth and emergence of psi abilities. The emphasis throughout is on key findings from NDE research, such as the common occurrence of deep and transformative NDEs in conjunction with cardiac arrest, suggesting that mind can function independently of the brain and thus possibly continue in some form after death.

Next is a chapter by Jim Tucker on “Cases of the Reincarnation Type” (CORT). Over the past six decades – beginning with psychiatrist Ian Stevenson, who founded the research group at the University of Virginia to which Bruce, Jim and I belong – researchers have investigated children’s reports of memories of previous lives, cumulatively studying more than 2,500 such cases from around the world. In many of these a child’s statements have proved accurate and detailed for an individual who lived and died in the recent past, someone about whom the current family knew nothing before the child began reporting or enacting the memories. The children are often barely able to speak when they begin describing a past life, and they often show unusual affect or behaviors that appear appropriately related to that life, such as an intense fear of water when the previous personality had died by drowning. Some also display extremely unusual birthmarks or birth defects corresponding to

fatal wounds suffered by the previous personality. The chapter also includes descriptions of two recent and strong American cases and some representative findings from the cumulative database.

The final Part I chapter, by Bob Rosenberg on precognition, surveys case-study and experimental evidence and discusses the two great philosophical issues – causality and free will – that lurk behind it. The causal conundrum arises from the conventional view that the future does not yet exist and therefore cannot be the cause of any present perception or intuition, while the problem about free will arises from the physicalist notion of a predetermined and hence potentially precognizable future, which seems to preclude it. Both concerns are inextricably intertwined with each other and with our understanding of *time*, a key frontier of contemporary physics.

Part II of *CU* explores further horizons on the theoretical side, introducing five additional non-physicalist conceptual frameworks or metaphysical perspectives that are closely related conceptually to those previously presented in *IM* and *BP*. A first chapter by Jung scholar Roderick Main demonstrates clearly that late in Jung's career, under the impact of mystical experiences of his own that occurred in conjunction with a near-fatal heart attack, he himself moved sharply in the direction of evolutionary panentheism as his ultimate metaphysical position.

The following chapter by Max Velmans describes his "Reflexive Monism" – a science-driven version of dual-aspect monism with clear affinities to the Indian philosophical tradition. This model provides a nonreductive, integrated way of understanding in general terms how the first-person phenomenology of ordinary conscious experience relates to the conventional third-person understanding of mind within current psychology and neuroscience. In his *CU* chapter, Max goes on for the first time to consider ways in which his model can be extended to accommodate extraordinary experiences as well as ordinary ones, thereby deepening its convergence with Indian philosophical thought (see also Max's contribution to the present special issue).

The next chapter, by Glenn Magee, argues that a slightly modified version of Hegel's metaphysics provides an illuminating, comprehensive, and intellectually satisfying account of the nature of mystical experience. This account of mystical experience also sheds light on paranormal phenomena, which Hegel himself accepted as genuine. Indeed, Hegel's metaphysics entails that paranormal phenomena are to be expected, and not at all mysterious – a position which in fact was Hegel's own.

A chapter by computer-scientist-turned-philosopher Bernardo Kastrup presents the ontology of his "analytic idealism," according to which a spatially unbound, universal phenomenal consciousness is nature's sole fundamental ground, all natural phenomena being ultimately reducible to that universal consciousness. Bernardo argues explicitly that analytic idealism is superior to physicalism on the basis of internal logical consistency, parsimony, and empirical adequacy, and points to a broad pattern of empirical observations in psychiatry and neuroscience that is suggestive of idealism and consistent with

psychological permission or filter models. He also sketches how our various rogue phenomena can be understood as natural occurrences having a coherent basis within his idealist ontology. Parenthetically, Bernardo is also the creator of *Essentia* Foundation, the website of which contains numerous excellent papers and interviews relevant to the subjects under discussion in this special issue.

The final *CU* theory chapter, by physicist and microelectronics pioneer Federico Faggin (inventor of the silicon gate junction and designer/builder of several of the first microprocessors), sketches another new science-driven conceptual framework in which consciousness is ontologically fundamental and our rogue phenomena find a natural place. Faggin had a powerful spontaneous mystical experience decades ago which immediately convinced him that consciousness must somehow be brought into our understanding of reality at a foundational level, and with help from theoretical physicist Giacomo D’Ariano he is working out a possible way of doing so. Specifically, they are jointly developing a model in which classical physics derives from quantum physics, quantum physics derives from quantum information, and quantum information itself is grounded in consciousness (D’Ariano and Faggin 2022). A central postulate is that quantum information, associated with “pure” states of quantum systems, corresponds to conscious experiences of those systems and in fact represents the interiority of nature in general, from the quantum fields associated with elementary particles on up. Like conscious experience itself, quantum information is definite, inherently private, cannot be copied or cloned, and can only partially be made available to an external observer through first-person reports or objective measurements. They further contend that this conception enables them to escape the “combination” problems of constitutive panpsychisms, and that the entire evolutionary process is driven by an ultimate consciousness or “One” that has the capacity and desire to experience and know itself by elaborating progressively more complex forms. The resulting model has much in common with Whitehead’s “organismic” process metaphysics, and as shown especially clearly in the *CU* chapter’s only figure it also strongly resembles the general Myers/James/Sursem framework as set forth in *BP*. Federico has recently published a book which presents his overall vision to the educated public in more detailed form (Faggin 2024), and he and D’Ariano are jointly preparing a formal textbook-level presentation designed specifically for physicists. Note that to the extent their project succeeds, it will in effect move the foundational concepts of physics in the direction of realist idealism.

Part III of *CU* provides some initial reflections on the implications of these emerging post-physicalist worldviews for consciousness science, the humanities, and philosophy. Neuroscientist David Presti first explains how an abundance of empirical data has made clear that in order for the science of consciousness to flourish, it will be necessary to expand the metaphysical stage upon which that science is conducted. There is nothing “unscientific” or even particularly difficult involved in doing that, and no fundamental scientific findings to date are threatened. It does, however, represent a true paradigm shift

in the ongoing development of science – a shift that necessarily has profound implications for how we humans view ourselves and our place in the cosmos.

Scholar of religion Jeff Kripal next expresses with passion and erudition his sense of the need for the humanities in general and religious studies in particular to resist and if possible reverse their destructive colonization by the aggressive and outmoded physicalism that has come to dominate contemporary academia and civilization generally. Only by finding and taking to heart an expanded science-based vision like that developed through our Sursem books, he believes, will his own discipline and the humanities in general recover their former academic standing and regain their full potential to exert positive influence on the shaping of future human affairs. See also Jeff's contribution to this special issue.

In *CU*'s final chapter my co-editor Paul Marshall provides a map of the conceptual territory occupied by mind–body metaphysical systems, situates the views of our contributing theoreticians within that territory, and reviews in depth and critically the relatively few philosophical approaches that seem potentially able to answer our central question – what kind of world do we live in, in order that the various kinds of phenomena surveyed in *IM*, *BP*, and Part I of *CU* can occur? The chapter elegantly and compactly summarizes the overall state of mind–body metaphysics, and amounts in effect to the culmination of our collective theoretical efforts up to that point in time (2021). It can profitably be studied in combination with the far more comprehensive landscape provided by Robert Lawrence Kuhn (2024), which faithfully reflects the current dominance of physicalist theorizing but also – and commendably! – devotes significant space to post-physicalist theories of the kind emphasized here.

More recent theoretical developments

A further stage in my own theoretical efforts was precipitated by the appearance in 2020 of a landmark book titled *Untying the Gordian Knot*, by space plasma physicist and process philosopher Timothy Eastman, which updates and enlarges Whitehead's organismic metaphysics in light of more recent developments in disciplines including physics, logic, mathematics, biosemiotics, and complex systems theory. Like Whitehead himself, Tim aspires to accommodate all forms of human experience, and he specifically includes the rogue phenomena catalogued in *IM*. Central to his expanded conceptual scheme is the recent confluence of several key physics research programs focused on the technical foundations and proper philosophical interpretation of quantum theory. Most critically, and building on the original work of Werner Heisenberg, these programs advocate elevation of a normally hidden realm of possibilities or *potentiae* to ontological parity with *actuality*, a move that creates a parallel in physics to the recognition by Myers, James, and Jung et al. of a normally hidden region of the psyche that is the source of the interconnected super-normal capabilities catalogued in *IM*. Tim explicitly conceives of actuality as secondary or derivative, with the experienced dimensions of space and time

undergirded by more fundamental relations of extension and succession that structure the realm of the possible. He also emphasizes that the realm of possibility is fundamentally richer than that of actuality due to its radically different (non-Boolean) operational character, and highlights Peirce's vision of triadic semiotic relations grounded in consciousness as metaphysically fundamental. He and I along with a number of others have begun exploring ways of reducing the current gaps between his framework (driven primarily by hard science) and the Myers/James/Sursem framework (driven mainly by psychology and neuroscience), focusing again on our rogue phenomena and consciousness itself as key test cases. A fourth CTR book is currently in the early stages of construction, one which we believe will move things significantly further in the direction of a detailed realist idealism of viable sort.

Additional support from some surprising new directions

The recent advances I have just described in our group's own theoretical efforts are consistent with, and supported by, significant recent developments in some neighboring academic areas. One involves theoretical biology, which is undergoing a rapid revival of concern for the "organismic" aspects of that subject. This concern was already well developed early in the twentieth century, especially in Germany, but it was temporarily pushed aside by the rise of the currently prevailing physicalist orthodoxy. Its most central and essential feature is an explicit recognition that organisms at all scales down at least to the level of single cells have capacities to detect favorable vs. unfavorable properties of their unpredictably changing environments and to make appropriate behavioral adjustments as needed (see for example Shapiro 2022, and also Kauffman and Radin 2023 who briefly survey this recent trend in theoretical biology and connect it directly with psi research). Note that this returning picture clearly entails the presence and functional significance of consciousness far deeper in the tree of life than acknowledged by contemporary neuroscience with its exclusive focus on central nervous systems, and that this is right in line with expectations clearly flowing for example from Whitehead's process philosophy and from Federico Faggin's model as described above.

As a consequence and correlate of this organismic turn in biology, a major revision of the standard Neo-Darwinian picture of evolution is also poised to emerge, one that will incorporate various modern discoveries in molecular biology and genetics (most but by no means all quite recent) by allowing for Lamarckian-style heritability of at least some characteristics acquired by individual organisms in the course of their adjustments to their specific environments (Shapiro 2022; Noble 2021). This gives both individual organisms and consciousness in general much larger roles in evolution than the current standard picture allows – a view much more in line with those held by Darwin himself as well as many others including Myers, James, Whitehead, and Faggin. Parenthetically, there is also a strong element in this story of long-standing and deliberate suppression of "heretical" *scientific* findings and opinions by

high-ranking academic defenders of the standard view, providing a potentially instructive historical parallel to the treatment of psychical research.

Last but not least, recent decades have also witnessed a remarkable renaissance of *natural theology*, leading to a profusion of serious philosophical arguments for the existence of some sort of highest consciousness at the source of things. These evolving theoretical discussions do not invariably seek to justify a “God” of the traditional monotheistic or Abrahamic sort, and in fact some of the participants appear to come very close to the sort of empirically-grounded evolutionary panentheism advocated in *BP* (see for example Craig and Moreland 2009; Hart 2024).

Conclusion

The converging developments summarized in this paper clearly show, I believe, that we are at or very near a major inflection point in Western intellectual history, with potentially viable successors to the prevailing physicalism already in view and a process underway to help us choose among them. Several are represented in this special issue, and there are numerous others as well. I cannot pretend to know which if any of the currently available contenders will ultimately prove best, but what is most important here is that they are far more similar to each other than to the prevailing physicalism, and collectively presage the emergence of a radically new and deeply improved science-based picture of the reality we humans inhabit.

Worldviews have consequences, as we have surely learned from our cumulative experience with physicalism! It is not by accident that the words “materialism” and “idealism” connote both opposing philosophical doctrines and contrasting modes of life (not that philosophical materialists are necessarily bad people, of course, or philosophical idealists uniformly good, but there are certainly tendencies in these directions). The sort of synoptic vision that is currently struggling to emerge seems to my colleagues and me to harbor potentially tremendous practical implications – its “cash value,” as William James would say – by virtue of providing humanity individually and collectively with a revised science-based worldview that is fundamentally life-affirming and optimistic, profoundly ecumenical in character, and potentially capable of addressing the multitude of societal ills and threats to our planet that can be seen as flowing directly or indirectly from the currently prevailing physicalism. What is ultimately at stake here seems nothing less than recovery, in an intellectually responsible manner, of parts of our Western cultural heritage that were prematurely discarded in conjunction with the meteoric rise of science that began four centuries ago. And what seems especially significant at this critical juncture – and the fundamental new factor that can finally enable this recovery to succeed after a number of historical failures – is that it is now being driven not only by traditional philosophic and religious concerns, amplified perhaps by our increasing horror at the overall state and direction of our global civilization, but by leading-edge developments in science itself.

What we see emerging, in short, is a middle way between the religious and scientific fundamentalisms that have dominated contemporary public discourse. This emerging vision appears both scientifically defensible and spiritually satisfying, combining the best aspects of our scientific and religious heritage in an intellectually responsible effort to reconcile these two greatest forces in human history. It can provide sustenance in particular to persons who view themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” and to those who remain anchored in a traditional faith but are troubled by conflicts between specific elements of religious doctrine and findings of modern science. At the same time, and like traditional faiths, it makes room for the possibility of postmortem survival and can therefore provide comfort to persons who are facing the reality of death, whether for themselves or for loved ones such as aging parents or siblings. It can also help the large numbers of persons who have encountered powerful mystical-type experiences to make sense of their experiences and to utilize them productively in service of positive self-transformation.

The vision sketched here in barest outline provides an antidote to the prevailing postmodern disenchantment of the world and demeaning of human possibilities. It not only more accurately and fully reflects our human constitution and our place in the overall scheme of reality but engenders hope and encourages ego-surpassing forms of human flourishing. It offers reasons for us to believe that freedom is real, that our conscious choices matter, and that we have barely scratched the surface of our latent human potentials. It also addresses the urgent need for a greater sense of worldwide community and interdependence – a sustainable *ethos* – by showing that under the surface we and the world are much more deeply and widely interconnected than previously realized.

Our individual and collective human fates in these dangerous and difficult times – indeed, the fate of our precious planet and all of its passengers – may ultimately hinge upon wider recognition and more effective utilization of the expanded states of being that are potentially available to us, but largely ignored or even actively suppressed by our struggling postmodern civilization with its strange mixture of self-aggrandizing individualism and fundamentalist tribalisms. Availability of an improved worldview does not guarantee its acceptance, of course, and even widespread acceptance would not guarantee that its potential benefits will be fully realized, or its potential abuses adequately controlled. But a conception of reality much richer than the prevailing physicalism – one that is greatly superior in human terms and at the same time *more* consistent with leading-edge science – is now definitely within reach.

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Ed Keli

Duhovnost i svest: nova vizija za dvadeset prvi vek

Apstrakt

Porast nauke tokom protekla četiri veka nesumnjivo je doneo izuzetna intelektualna i praktična dostignuća, ali je, može se tvrditi, takođe doprineo nizu ozbiljnih i sve gorih društvenih problema, uključujući destruktivnu komercijalnu eksploataciju prirodnih resursa naše planete sa njenim kumulativnim negativnim posledicama po životnu sredinu i globalnu klimu; neprekidnu komodifikaciju, marketing i potrošnju; ekstremnu i rastuću nejednakost u raspodeli bogatstva i mogućnosti; prevlast transakcionih, „nulto-sumnih“ pristupa odnosima na svim nivoima, od pojedinaca do država; rašireni militarizam i stalno prisutnu pretnju nuklearne katastrofe; kao i sveopšti „odčarani“ karakter savremene civilizacije. Brojni društveni komentatori povezali su ove probleme, direktno ili indirektno, sa dubokim raskolom između nauke i duhovnosti, koji su tokom proteklog veka posebno podsticali zagovornici fizikalizma – filozofske doktrine ukorenjene u fizici kasnog devetnaestog veka, koja tvrdi da govori u ime nauke u celini i koja u našim duhovnim tradicijama ne vidi ništa drugo do iracionalne ostatke našeg intelektualnog detinjstva. U ovom radu opisaću kako se otvorio put ka radikalno drugačijoj, ali i dalje naučno zasnovanoj slici stvarnosti, onoj koja svest postavlja kao ontološki fundamentalnu i koja afirmiše ljudska duhovna iskustva i sposobnosti, koja je doslednija savremenoj nauci nego sam fizikalizam i koja potencijalno može pomoći da se naša posnula moderna civilizacija spreči da u budnom stanju sklizne u sopstveno uništenje.

Ključne reči: svest, duhovnost, fizikalizam, dualizam, dualno-aspektni monizam, idealizam, teorija mozga/uma, psihička istraživanja, iskustvo bliske smrti, mistična iskustva

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WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE THE UNIVERSE?

ABSTRACT

Cosmopsychism attributes subjectivity to the universe as a whole. What might that subjectivity be like? There are differing opinions in the philosophical literature, ranging from "simply a mess" to highly advanced. Mystical experience, if it genuinely brings unity or identity with the universe, could provide some insight. The evidence points to conscious mind of extraordinary quality and perhaps a universe with many cosmic subjects, an intersubjectivity that can be interpreted through the lens of a modified Leibnizian monadology.

KEYWORDS

cosmopsychism,
panpsychism, mystical
experience, cosmic
consciousness,
Plotinus, Leibniz,
monadology

It was all so natural and simple. It was divine. The Universe was conscious. I was not separate from it at any point. . . . More, I was conscious with it.

Algernon Blackwood, *Julius LeVallon*

Introduction

The idea that the universe is conscious has attracted attention in recent years under the name "cosmopsychism," an extension of the panpsychist view that consciousness is distributed widely through nature, perhaps even intrinsic to small-scale building blocks such as biological cells, molecules, and atoms. Cosmopsychism elevates panpsychism to the largest of scales, attributing consciousness to the universe as a whole: the universe is a conscious being, an experiencing subject. One question that can be asked of cosmopsychism concerns the phenomenology of the universe's experience. While it will be significantly different from human experience, it cannot be completely dissimilar, for the cosmopsychist supposes that the universe's experience grounds human experience. If the two were radically different, there would be a discontinuity problem comparable to the mind–body problem, although not between mind and matter but between two types of experience, cosmic and human. There

is, then, reason to think that the universe's experience will possess, at the very least, some basic qualitative properties, such as colour, although not necessarily quite as they are found in sense-mediated human experience.

In view of the uncertainties, it is not surprising that cosmopsychists have had differing opinions on the character of the universe's experience, some regarding it as very basic, even proto-conscious, while others attribute it characteristics of conscious mind, perceptual, cognitive, affective, and volitional, and suppose that it is self-conscious and perhaps far superior to human mentality. The universe so understood can be an object of religious and spiritual interest. For one thing, the conscious universe can be construed as *divine*, worthy of reverence and even worship, and identical to God (*pantheism*) or at least contained in some sense within God (*panentheism*).¹ Clearly, the character of the universe's experience has a bearing on whether the universe will be considered worthy of devotion, although even a basic consciousness could draw reverence as the matrix in which conscious beings emerge and evolve. Second—and of particular significance for the present study—there are *spiritual* experiences in which the universe is intuited as conscious and alive.² These experiences become somewhat comprehensible if, as cosmopsychism asserts, the universe is indeed conscious, and we are able to intuit its consciousness, perhaps by virtue of being grounded in it. The most intense and revelatory of these spiritual experiences fall into the *mystical* category: they give mystics a strong impression that the universe's own consciousness is fundamentally theirs.

Given the diversity of views on the character of the universe's experience, how can the matter be investigated? In “Transforming the World into Experience” (Marshall 2001), I suggested three ways to explore the character of cosmic experience. One is to extrapolate tentatively from everyday human experience, which as noted will share some characteristics with it. Another is to look into the “behaviour” of the universe, that is, into the possibility that physics reveals something relevant. This could be the case if mathematical descriptions of the natural world afforded by physics, notably those of relativistic and quantum physics, reflect the structural organization and transformation of experience at large. A third approach, the one to be considered here, is to draw on the afore-mentioned mystical type of spiritual experience, which ostensibly reveals the deeper nature of things, including the natural world and even, it would seem, the universe in its totality. The question “What is it like to be the universe?”, a philosophical way of expressing cosmic subjectivity, takes on a whole new meaning, becoming an empirical question that can be directed at mystics (Marshall 2022: 9). If claims of mystical identity with the universe are well-founded, then mystics will know what it is like to be the universe.

The introduction of mystical experience into the discussion calls for some terminological nuance. Let's refer to experience of the universe enjoyed by

1 See for instance Brüntrup, Göcke, and Jaskolla (2020).

2 On the categories of religious, spiritual, numinous, and mystical experience, see Hood (2005).

mystics as *cosmic mystical experience* and the universe's own experience as *cosmopsychic experience*. Since the late nineteenth century, the term *cosmic consciousness* has very often been used in the former sense, to refer to cosmic mystical experience, but it is best avoided in the present context because contemporary philosophers who discuss cosmopsychism have also used it in the second sense, to refer to the universe's own consciousness (and even to an undifferentiated consciousness).³ This is understandable, but it blurs a real distinction. Cosmic mystical experience and cosmopsychic experience will, however, intersect if the former partakes of the latter, if a mystical shift of consciousness makes cosmopsychic experience available to the mystic. There has, however, been much debate over whether mystical experience reflects anything other than the mystic's neurophysiology or religious conditioning, and so the reality-disclosing capabilities of the experiences cannot be taken for granted, and caution is required.

After introducing cosmopsychism and some of the ways in which philosophers have depicted cosmopsychic experience, I take a look at cosmic mystical experience and what it might imply about the character of cosmopsychic experience. Finally, I draw attention to a perplexing but potentially important feature that cosmic mystical experience sometimes exhibits: a mirror-like multiplication of cosmic subjectivity.

The cosmic view from within

Cosmopsychism is the idea that the universe as a whole is conscious. "There is a cosmic subject" is how Justin Gaudry (2008) put it when he introduced the term. Subjectivity is commonly expressed in the philosophical literature by invoking the "what it is like to be" locution. X, whether a human being, Martian, or bat, is conscious if there is something it is like to be X (Farrell 1950; Sprigge 1971; Nagel 1974).⁴ Similarly, the universe is conscious if there is something it is like to be the universe.

Only a bat really knows what it is like for a bat to be a bat, and the same will be true of the universe if it is indeed conscious (for the sake of discussion, I henceforth assume that it is). In the case of bat experience, the felt reality is inaccessible to non-bats, but there are general experiential characteristics that can reasonably be inferred from bat neuroanatomy and behaviours (Nagel 1974: 439). For example, bats have a visual sensory system not too different from the human equivalent, and it is therefore reasonable to conjecture that bats enjoy

3 "Cosmic consciousness" is also used in the Transcendental Meditation movement, where it refers to the fifth of seven states of consciousness, a dualistic state in which awareness of the pure self is experienced alongside waking, dreaming, or deep sleep consciousness (Marshall 2005: 171). The term "universal consciousness" is also problematic, having been used in several ways and not necessarily applied to the universe.

4 Farrell and Nagel bring up both Martians and bats, and Sprigge neither. Not everyone likes the "what it is like to be" construction: for criticism, see for instance Hacker (2002).

visual experiences, if not quite like those of humans. It is not, however, the visual experience of bats that has caught the attention of philosophers, but the animal's use of echolocation, which seems unfamiliar and therefore unrelatable to human experience. Whether it is unrelatable can be disputed, for humans, notably the visually impaired, have developed echolocatory skills (Allen-Hermanson 2018). Whatever the case, it can be granted that some features of non-human experience, such as the bat's visual experience, are relatable in general terms to human experience.

When it comes to the universe, the character of its experience seems at first glance impenetrable, so different is the universe structurally and behaviourally from a human being. Analogies have been made between the cosmic web of galaxies and neuronal networks in the brain (Vazza and Felletti 2020), but these concern the distribution of matter, with no serious suggestion that the functioning of biological neural networks is paralleled at the cosmic scale. Despite the obscurities surrounding the phenomenology of cosmopsychic experience, philosophers have expressed opinions, attributing low-grade experience to the universe at one extreme and high-grade conscious mind at the other. In Western philosophy, a classic example of the latter is Plato's concept of the world soul (Gk. *psyche tou pantos*, L. *anima mundi*), further developed by Platonists and Stoics, and continuing to have representation well into the modern era (Vassányi 2011; Helmig 2020; Wilberding 2021). In a "likely story" told in the *Timaeus*, Plato portrays the universe as a living being, a creature fashioned by an intelligent craftsman or demiurge—by a divine intellect. The created, transforming universe, made by the demiurge in the image of an eternal, ideal model, consists of a cosmic body suffused and animated by an intelligent, thinking soul—by the world soul.

The arrangement has a dualist feel, although not of the kind that emerges in the seventeenth century, when mind and matter came to be viewed as radically dissimilar substances. Plato does not of course employ "consciousness" terminology, which again emerges in the early modern period, so it would be anachronistic to say that he attributes consciousness to the universe. Rather his discussion centres on *psyche* or soul, understood as a thinking agent responsible for motion. Plato infers the advanced intelligence of the world soul in Pythagorean fashion from the harmonious motions of the heavens—a deduction from the "behavioural" characteristics of the cosmic organism. Because the human soul is made in a way similar to the world soul, it too is rational, although subject to disturbances owing to embodiment. In the hands of the Stoics, the Platonic ontology is flattened, the transcendent demiurge and eternal model being replaced by a fully immanent divine maker or "god" that is both the intelligent world soul active in the universe and the universe itself—hence a kind of pantheism (Baltzly 2003). According to Zeno of Citium, only if the world is a living intelligence can it give birth to creatures that are living and intelligent, as Cicero reports in *De Natura Deorum* (II. viii).

Contemporary cosmopsychism also has a top-down approach, but it is not committed to following in Plato's or Zeno's footsteps by attributing high-grade,

divine mentality to the universe. Under its current name, cosmopsychism arose out of renewed interest in panpsychism as a possible solution to the hard problem of consciousness, the challenge of bringing brain states construed as purely physical into relation with the experiences they support. One form of panpsychism, *constitutive micropsychism*, attributes a basic level of experience to the microconstituents of the world and supposes that their combination in the brain yields the higher-grade experiences that human beings and similar organisms enjoy. There have been long-standing doubts about bottom-up combination (Seager 1995; Chalmers 2016),⁵ which has motivated the top-down approach offered by cosmopsychism. Subjectivity is attributed to the cosmic whole, with limited, individuated subjectivities derived from it. This so-called *constitutive cosmopsychism* (Goff 2017) or *priority cosmopsychism* (Nagasawa and Wager 2017) faces a well-known challenge, which is to explain how the derivation takes place, dubbed the differentiation problem by Gaudry, and also known as the derivation, individuation, decombination, decomposition, and limitation problem.

The problem has its counterparts in spiritual philosophies that dwell on the mysterious concealment of divine consciousness that ultimately leads to circumscribed subjects and their partial experiences. These systems often set out an elaborate sequence of stages, the first few of which typically occur out of time as ordinarily understood. Moreover, the universe itself is commonly taken to be derivative (as it is in Plato's story), manifested by a deeper reality, perhaps by way of a higher form of the cosmos (such as Plato's ideal model or the later Platonic intelligible universe). Limited subjectivities such as ours are ultimately grounded in those deeper ontological strata. Sophisticated and influential examples include the Neoplatonic philosophy of Plotinus in the West and nondual Kashmir Shaivism in the Hindu sphere (Marshall 2019: 249–265; Shani 2023). Although such schemes devote much attention to metaphysics and cosmogony, their purpose is soteriological and their practical application contemplative, offering a road map to spiritual aspirants who seek to overcome limitation by reversing the process of manifestation. The cosmogonic way down becomes a mystical way up. Contemporary cosmopsychisms tend to be “Stoic” rather than “Platonic,” in the sense that they do not typically have a role for consciousness transcendent to the universe, although some thinkers who engage with cosmopsychism do bring up the matter in their own different ways. These include Miri Albahari (e.g., 2020) in her perennial idealism, Max

5 It is well known that William James cast doubt on the compounding of consciousness as early as 1890, but the point had already been made by Leibniz in 1676 when, rejecting the idea of the world soul, he raised an “aggregation” problem: “There can be no soul of the world, because a continuum cannot be composed of minds, as it can be composed of spaces ... a soul cannot be an entity by aggregation” (Leibniz, quoted in Vassányi 2011: 15). As Vassányi observes, Leibniz's criticism is not applicable to Plato's world soul, which is not compounded from individual souls. The contention that soul cannot be an aggregate becomes central to Leibniz's later concept of the mind-like monads, which are uncompounded wholes (see below).

Velmans (2021) in his reflexive monism, Itay Shani (2023) in his generative monism, and myself (e.g., 2019) in my neo-Leibnizian idealism, all of whom have a more than passing interest in mystical philosophy and experience.

Cosmopsychic experience: low or high grade?

If the universe's experience is primitive, what might it involve? Perhaps vague perceptions, feelings, inclinations, with no reflective awareness, no self-consciousness—in Leibnizian terms, primitive perception and appetite.⁶ If the universe has advanced consciousness, then we might expect it to have distinct perception, reflective awareness, intellection, high-level feeling, conscious volition, imagination, sense of self, and even personality. It is not possible to speculate with any assurance, for the universe is very different from human beings and to attribute some of these characteristics may be fanciful and anthropomorphic. At the very least, though, the contents of cosmopsychic experience can be expected to exhibit some of the familiar “qualitative” and “quantitative” properties, although not in exactly the same way as in sense-based experience.⁷ Without those properties, cosmopsychic experience would be unable to ground our everyday perceptions. It can therefore be conjectured that cosmopsychic perception involves extended bodies with colour properties, as well as sound and perhaps other familiar properties, and unfamiliar ones too, although it is difficult to imagine what form they would take. It is easy enough to envisage a cosmic field of experience filled with luminous, extended contents, since colour and shape go together naturally in our familiar experiences (Marshall 2021: 443–444). By contrast, sound—and even more so taste, smell, and touch—are more difficult to situate on the cosmic stage. One possibility is that all the properties are “fused” into one in cosmopsychic experience, colour, sound, taste, and so forth not differentiated into distinct sense modalities there (see below).

Cosmopsychic experience presumably does have a perceptual character, an intentionality, an experience *of* something—of some or all the contents of the universe. Would cosmopsychic perception be organized from a point of view, as it is for sense perception, or can there be perspective-free perception? We strain to imagine what perspective-free perception would be like, and it is tempting to suppose that perception of objects is always organized from a

6 Leibniz's appetite is the active component of experience, driving transformation of perception from state to state. In primitive form, it is unconscious but in more developed form it is evident as conscious appetite, desire, will, and emotion that urges action. Feeling can be given pre-eminence in perception, as Whitehead does in his theory of *prehension*, by which an entity, whether primitive or advanced, feels another and is “affected” by it. For feeling as basic to all experience, see Shani (2022).

7 Qualitative properties include colour, sound, touch, and taste, while quantitative ones are those readily open to numerical measurement, notably length and time characteristics, the subject matter of the quantitative sciences. On the distinction, see Marshall (2021: 409–411).

particular subjective stance (Marshall 2001: 70). The universe would then have its own point of view—a series of points of view if it transforms from state to state. What, indeed, are the temporal characteristics of cosmopsychic experience—moment-to-moment transience or all times contained within? Does the experience evolve, developing more sophisticated states?

It may be thought that cosmopsychic perception must be primitive, if it is assumed that distinct perception depends on the differentiating, organizing, and augmenting activities of sensory systems. There is no compelling evidence that the universe has such systems of its own—no cosmic receptors, organs, brain. Would the lack of cosmic sensory processes mean that cosmopsychic perception is rudimentary? Not necessarily so, for if cosmic perception is not mediated by sense organs, it will be *direct* and therefore possibly very clear and all-encompassing. According to one line of thought, sensory systems have limited data collection capacity and resolution, and therefore work to limit and obscure perception, selecting only relevant data, a limitation that confers survival and utilitarian advantages at the expense of detail and comprehensiveness. If cosmopsychic perceptions are direct, they would be very different from our sense-mediated ones. For instance, there would be none of the opaque colour patches that we have in our visual perceptions, which follow from the reliance of visual sense organs on light collected largely from the surfaces of objects, not from their interiors (Marshall 2001: 71–72). Instead of opaque surfaces, cosmopsychic visual experience would involve transparent films and volumes.

The evaluation of cosmopsychic experience as primitive or advanced will depend in part on the type of metaphysics that cosmopsychists use to flesh out their positions. Constitutive cosmopsychism requires elaboration because it does not provide a complete solution to the hard problem of consciousness if it is simply the claim that the universe, by virtue of being conscious, grounds the subjectivities of limited beings. To give an account of *how* the universe is conscious, cosmopsychists can call upon various types of mind–body metaphysics, such as idealist, dual-aspect, and neutral monisms. The choice of metaphysics has a bearing on the quality of consciousness that will be attributed to the universe. Take, for instance, idealist monism, which views all things, including material structures, as fundamentally mind. What exists is perception, feeling, thought, imagination, will, and so on, as types of experience. For cosmopsychism in idealist mode, the universe not only *has* experience but *is* experience.

An example is Timothy Sprigge’s panpsychic idealism, which attributes high-grade consciousness to the universe. Sprigge’s universe is a “single absolute all-embracing experience or consciousness,” containing all streams of experience but not itself subject to the “restless urges” that drive those streams onwards temporally, for it is an eternal whole and as such has contentment, even joy (2006: 486, 522). Cosmopsychic experience has, according to Sprigge, a temporally all-inclusive character that distinguishes it from the transient feel of ordinary human experience. This eternalistic character is sometimes reported by mystics (the “Eternal Now”) and chimes with the interpretation of special relativity that locates events in a spacetime whole (Marshall 2006,

2015a). Although Sprigge's Absolute is not God as commonly understood, it merits the label "divine" and qualifies as a proper object of personal religion.

Dual-aspect monism, another approach to the mind–body problem, is also able to ascribe high-grade consciousness to the universe as a whole. The dual-aspect theorist agrees with the cosmopsychist idealist that the universe has experience but does not go so far as to claim that the universe is experience. Rather the universe, like all systems, has two sides to it, two concomitant, mutually irreducible mental and physical aspects, an approach exemplified by the thought of Gustav Fechner and George Romanes in the nineteenth century, and sometimes traced to Baruch Spinoza in the seventeenth century. Fechner and Romanes were more than willing to view the cosmic mental aspect as very high-grade, as is the contemporary proponent of dual-aspect monism Max Velmans (2021).

Idealist and dual-aspect monisms are not tied to an understanding of cosmopsychic experience as high-grade. Sprigge took some inspiration from the idealisms of F. H. Bradley and Josiah Royce, and also from Spinoza, and his estimation of the absolute experience is accordingly positive. By contrast, if Arthur Schopenhauer's idealism, with its nonrational will as the thing-in-itself, is inspirational, then the quality of cosmopsychic consciousness will be assessed as low-grade, lacking self-consciousness and instinctive in nature (Kastrup 2021). The low estimation of cosmopsychic experience can be taken further by proponents of neutral monism, a mind–body metaphysics that regards the stuff of the world as neither mind nor matter but the basis of both. In classic neutral monisms, notably those of Ernst Mach, William James, and Bertrand Russell, this neutral stuff is not really neutral, being primitive experience, although with some qualification in the case of Russell, who came to refer to "events," a more neutral term than experience or sensation (Marshall 2021). If cosmopsychism absorbs this form of neutral monism, then cosmopsychic experience as a whole will be portrayed as rudimentary, as a field of primitive experience. Moreover, if neutral monism maintains that experience does not require a subject to experience it (e.g., Lockwood 1989; Coleman 2014), then there will be no cosmic subject and nothing that it is like to be the universe.

Philip Goff (2017: 243) seems to take on board the classic neutral monist view that experience is essentially rudimentary. He stated categorically that the universe is not "a highly evolved conscious creature" and that its consciousness is plausibly "simply a mess." Goff supposed that advanced mind is the outcome of long-term evolution driven by natural selection, an evolutionary pressure to which the universe is not subject. It follows that cosmopsychic experience remains in a primitive state. Goff (2023) has since modified his stance somewhat, entertaining the idea that the universe is purposeful, fine-tuning itself at the beginning to bring about the emergence of life and rational beings, and having a sense of the possible consequences of the fine-tuning decisions it could make.

The above examples illustrate a range of views on the character and quality of cosmopsychic experience. What light can mystical experience shed on the matter?

Mystical encounters with the universe

In the interdisciplinary field of consciousness studies, mystical experience has had a presence, with particular attention paid to so-called pure consciousness, often said to lack any content. Mystical experience and other “rogue phenomena” can be drawn upon to help address some classic metaphysical issues, including the mind–body problem and the nature of time (e.g., Marshall 2006, 2021, 2022; Kelly 2007, 2015), an idea given further impetus by the recent explosion of interest in psychedelics and ensuing debates about the status of the mystical experiences they trigger and the role the experiences play in therapeutic outcomes (Ritchie 2021; Hauskeller and Sjöstedt-Hughes 2022). Mystical experience typically brings a profound sense of contact with reality and so offers a potential resource for metaphysical enquiry. Indeed, mystical experiences may have provided stimulus in the early days of philosophy, for instance in the thought of Parmenides and Plato, and the authors of the Upanishads, although in the modern era it has been underutilized and largely spurned. Sprigge (2006: 540–541) wondered why the absolute idealists had paid little or no attention to mystical experience, given that their philosophies resonate well with it, a resonance that Anthony Perovich (2021) has brought out in the case of Bradley’s absolute idealism and Glenn Magee (2021) in connection with Hegel’s thought.

These two authors specifically bring extrovertive mystical experience into their discussions, a type of experience that has the natural world and its contents as its mystical focus.⁸ It is this type of experience that is most immediately relevant to the cosmopsychist’s claim that the universe is conscious, which is not to say that other types of mystical experience are irrelevant. If it is supposed that the universe and its consciousness are derivative of a more fundamental level of reality, then mystical experience that takes that deeper level of reality as its focus will be relevant too.

At its most expansive, extrovertive mystical experience is cosmic mystical experience. In lieu of a full-scale survey of these experiences, which is not possible here, I shall give just three examples. These are not the most extensive and descriptively rich available, but they will serve to give some sense of the experiences in question. The following demonstrates the dramatic changes to self-identity that the experiences can bring. There is, however, little qualitative detail, although luminosity is mentioned. The report was, it seems, set down in 1890 by a young man prone to “cataleptic” trances:

I felt a kind of soothing slumber stealing over me. I became aware that I was floating in a vast ocean of light and joy. I was here, there, and everywhere. I was everybody and everybody was I. I knew I was I, and yet I knew that I was much more than myself. Indeed, it seemed to me that there was no division. That all

8 For what counts as the “natural world” understood broadly, see Marshall (2005: 28–29; 2019: 23–24).

the universe was in me and I in it, and yet nothing was lost or swallowed up. Everything was alive with a joy that would never diminish. (Nomad 1913: 115)⁹

The ordinary sense of self seems to be retained (“I knew I was I”) but is supplemented with a cosmic sense of self (“all the universe was in me”) and a recognition of mutual identity with others (“I was everybody and everybody was I”). Joy is emphasized, in connection with the ocean of light and the aliveness of everything.

Transformation of self-experience is also described in the following account by David Spangler, who provides a little more qualitative detail. The experience took place in 1952 when Spangler was only seven years old. It unfolded through several stages, and at one point Spangler felt “embraced by a great presence” in which “all things seemed to exist in profound oneness, filled with an indescribable love and serenity and with an irresistible power as well” (1984: 63). Once again joy and light feature. This stage of the experience proceeded as follows:

As if a curtain were drawn aside, I had a visual impression of the universe, a great wheel of stars and galaxies, suffused with the golden glow of billions of suns, floating in a sea of spirit. It was as if I were seeing as this presence saw, and for one instant we were as one. In that instant, it was as if I were one with everything that existed, every atom, every stone, every world, every star, seeing creation not from some great distance but from the inside out as if it were my very body and being. Even more powerful than this perception was the awareness of the flow of creativity throughout everything I saw and the joyous embrace of life and unfoldment in response; the rhythm was that of a ballroom. (Spangler 1984: 63)

It seems that Spangler first experienced the universe as somewhat separate, as “a great presence” that embraced him, a presence filled with love, serenity, and power, but he then became fully one with it and seemed to perceive as the universe perceives. There is a suggestion of cosmopsychism here, of the universe as an experiencing being.

A strikingly similar description, even down to the cosmic dance, is provided by Jean Houston.¹⁰ The experience brought no unusual lights or sounds, but she now apprehended everything as a unity:

My mind dropped all its shutters. I was no longer just the little local “I,” Jean Houston, age six, sitting on a windowsill in Brooklyn in the 1940s. I had awakened to a consciousness that spanned centuries and was on intimate terms with the universe. Everything mattered. Nothing was alien or irrelevant or distant. The farthest star was right next door and the deepest mystery was clearly seen. It seemed to me as if I knew everything. It seemed to me as if I was everything.

⁹ The case is given in *Cosmic Consciousness* by Ali Nomad, a pseudonym of the flamboyant hypnotist, mind-reader, and New Thought exponent Alexander J. McIvor-Tyndall, who apparently was himself prone to cataleptic attacks.

¹⁰ The full accounts given by Spangler (1984) and Houston (1982) can also be found in May (1993).

Everything—the fig tree, the pups in the closet, the planets [...] and all the music that ever was—were in a state of resonance and of the most immense and ecstatic kinship. I was in a universe of friendship and fellow feeling, a companionable universe filled with interwoven Presence and the Dance of Life. (Houston 1982: 186–187)

Again sheer vitality comes across, and there is a tremendous reach of awareness and a sense of identity with the universe. Interestingly, music is mentioned too, as part of what Houston calls a single Unity, a “glorious symphonic resonance in which every part of the universe was a part and illuminated every other part” (Houston 1982: 186). This last statement hints at an interconnection of parts in the cosmic whole. There is no explicit suggestion that the universe is conscious, but if Houston’s new “I” is both the universe and conscious of the universe, it would follow that the universe is conscious of itself. It is a subject that has itself as its object. Houston’s account, like the other two, portrays a dynamism in the universe. Although not illustrated by the first two cases, this vitality can be a feature of mystical experiences that have a temporally inclusive character, dynamic and eternal qualities apparently not excluding each other (Marshall 2005: 72–73). In Houston’s case, temporal inclusiveness is suggested by her statement that the consciousness spanned centuries.

Cosmic mystical experiences have much in common with the less expansive extrovertive mystical experiences. They draw on a shared pool of characteristics, the most common of which can be listed as follows: sense of contact with reality, various kinds of unity, changes to the sense of self, heightened perception, all-inclusive knowledge, profound understanding and meaning, altered-time experience, special luminosities, all-embracing love, beauty, peace, bliss, and joy (Marshall 2005; 2019). Several of these characteristics, such as enhanced perception, knowing, understanding, meaning, and love, if taken as indicative of cosmopsychic experience, suggest that it is highly advanced perceptually, cognitively, and in feeling. Sprigge and thinkers like him seem to be on the right track. But is there cosmopsychic “contentment,” as Sprigge suggests, the universe satisfied with itself in its eternal completeness? For the mystic, cosmic mystical experience can certainly bring peace, joy, bliss, relief, freedom from fear, and a sense of coming home, but is this enough to suggest the universe’s own contentment? Plotinus thought not, reserving true contentment for unity with the ultimate ground, the One, the source of cosmic mind and the goal to which the whole creation aspires.

What do extrovertive/cosmic mystical experiences suggest about the qualitative properties of cosmopsychic experience? In many cases, there is a visual component to the experiences, a visual perception in which seer and seen are not separate. It is plausible that cosmopsychic experience will have this character, including a transparency or translucency appropriate to the unobstructed reach of the vision (Marshall 2006: 71–72). Auditory and other non-visual properties are not so clearly evident, sound being much less frequently reported than sight, and the other properties barely at all, at least if the accounts I have studied

are representative (Marshall 2005: 71–72). If cosmopsychic experience has an eternalistic “all times together” character, sound experience there will be very different from the temporally successive character that it ordinarily has for us.

One possibility is that all the various qualitative properties we distinguish in sensory experience are unitary in cosmopsychic experience. When Plotinus tried to give a sense of the intelligible world, he described “one quality” that contains all the qualitative properties associated with the senses:

They all flow, in a way, from a single spring [...] as if there was one quality which held and kept intact all the qualities in itself, of sweetness along with fragrance, and was at once the quality of wine and the character of all tastes, the sights of colours, and all the awareness of touch, and all that hearings hear, all tunes and every rhythm. (Plotinus, *Ennead* VI. 7. 12; Armstrong 1988: 127)

Mystical experience does sometimes have a “synaesthetic” feel, especially when induced by psychedelics, bringing a unification of qualitative properties, notably light and sound (Marshall 2005: 79–80). The English socialist Edward Carpenter raised this when he discussed cosmic consciousness: “all the senses unite into one sense” and “sight and touch and hearing are all fused in identity” (Bucke [1901] 1989: 198, 206).¹¹

When cosmic mystical experience received attention from the late nineteenth century onwards under the name of cosmic consciousness, it pointed to a deeply spiritual universe. Systematic if somewhat eccentric investigation was undertaken by the Canadian psychiatrist Richard Maurice Bucke in conversation with Carpenter, both of whom had personal familiarity with the experience and knew its exalted character (Marshall 2005; Ganeri 2022). For Bucke, however, cosmic consciousness was *not* the universe’s consciousness but a psychological faculty recently emergent in humankind, a faculty of intuition that has evolved naturally from earlier stages of mental development. When the faculty suddenly crystallizes in an individual, it brings luminosity and “a consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe” ([1901] 1989: 2). The universe is found to be ordered in such a way that “all things work together for the good of each and all,” with love the foundational principle ([1901] 1989: 61). The universe is intuited to be entirely immaterial, spiritual, and alive, and also in some sense divine, for “the universe is God” and “God is the universe” ([1901] 1989: 14). Bucke does not explicitly state that the universe is conscious, but arguably his characterization of it, drawn from the intellectual illumination brought by cosmic consciousness, implies that it is.

Carpenter’s understanding of cosmic consciousness is rather different, although similarly located in an evolutionary framework. Drawing on Romanticism, idealist philosophy, and Hindu mysticism, Carpenter was attuned, unlike Bucke, to the significance of the sharp subject–object distinction that marks

¹¹ Carpenter’s observations could reflect his own experience or draw on the spiritualization of synaesthesia in the late nineteenth century and even on Shaiva teachings about the reunification of the senses in a higher space (*akasha*) consciousness (Marshall 2005: 80).

ordinary human consciousness but which is overcome in cosmic consciousness. Carpenter's cosmic consciousness is a nondual mystical experience in which unity with other selves and the world is recognized. More than that, it is a metaphysical reality, a nondual consciousness in which the universe has its existence, for things exist only by being known (Carpenter's idealism). Does this mean that the universe is itself conscious? Perhaps so, since the universe is a unity of knowing self and known cosmic object. But the universe is also the manifestation of a deeper dimension of self that differentiates into the many selves in pursuit of self-knowledge (Carpenter 1904: 72–74; Marshall 2005: 128–129).

The situating of cosmic consciousness in evolutionary frameworks by Bucke and Carpenter points to another consideration. Although mystical experience gives the impression that consciousness at large is highly advanced, there is a possibility that some of its advanced characteristics are the result of the age-long evolution of the individual subjects it supports. It is only through the trials and joys of limited experience and the consequent maturation of limited beings that the whole gains some of its advanced characteristics, such as meaning, love, and compassion. While cosmic mind might be a vast, all-knowing intellect, able to support within itself limited forms of consciousness, its spiritual depth could be a developmental achievement (Marshall 2019: 97).

A word of caution amid all the speculation. There are difficulties in pursuing a mystically informed metaphysical line of enquiry, some practical, some theoretical. An example of the former is the selection of mystical accounts, for the researcher can introduce bias by selecting those that support preconceptions. I have quoted from just three accounts here, and these should not be taken as representative of all cosmic mystical experiences. In fact, a distinction can be made between experiences that clearly incorporate culturally sourced astronomical and cosmological imagery and symbolism, and those that present details well outside the range of familiarity and which are therefore less likely to be culturally mediated. This does not mean that imagery-mediated experience, drawing on the imagination, has no reality-disclosing value, only that it is indirect and therefore not to be taken at face value (Marshall 2019: 143). Another difficulty is the challenge that mystics may have in assimilating and accurately reporting their extraordinary experiences. On the theoretical side, the reality-disclosing credentials of mystical experience have been vigorously challenged by those who regard the experiences as simply pathological, biological, psychological, or cultural phenomena. I shall not comment on these views here, as I have addressed them elsewhere (Marshall 2005, 2022).

It could be objected that a human being cannot possibly be one with the universe and so access its cosmopsychic experience. "I am the whole universe," declare alike the modern extrovertive mystic and the ancient Upanishadic seer. Scholar of mysticism R. C. Zaehner had a low estimation of the natural world and thought it both inappropriate and *illogical* to seek unity with it. There is nothing to be gained from achieving oneness with a universe that, in Zaehner's estimation, is "mindless, devoid of consciousness, and amoral" (1972: 60). Even

more damning, it is irrational to think that a human being can be identical with it (1958: 76). Reason shows that “such an identification cannot be literally true on *any* plane of consciousness” (1958: 76). Zaehner, however, misrepresented the situation, for it is not a matter of the limited human organism, with its limited mind and body, being literally identical with the universe (Marshall 2005: 214). The “I” that was everything was not “Jean Houston, age six,” but an expansive consciousness that Houston more profoundly was.

The intersubjective universe

Cosmic mystical experience can have a solipsistic feel, marked by a prominent cosmic “I,” but it also brings a strong sense of other beings, even of community. Houston writes, “I was in a universe of friendship and fellow feeling, a companionable universe.” Those other beings may be recognized as not different from oneself: as the first account above puts it, “I was everybody and everybody was I,” although the precise meaning of this statement is unclear. One way in which I can be you, and you can be me, is if we are both subjects who have the universe as our common object. I am the universe, you are the universe, and therefore you and I are one, although also different in some way that makes us distinguishable (Carpenter 1904: 68). As the cosmic whole, we share a core identity. It is a kind of holism: the whole gives us a common core of identity. As an adult, Houston (1982) found attractive the metaphor of the hologram, which had become popular in the late 1970s and early 80s, the hologram being expressive of a holism in which the whole is present in each of its parts (Wilber 1982).

If we are indeed cosmic subjects with experiences of the universe, there is an unexpected consequence—an unending multiplication of experiences. If my experience is truly inclusive, it contains your equally inclusive experience. Your experience will contain mine too, including my experience of yours, and so on, ad infinitum. Some excellent descriptions of this infinitely elaborated cosmic intersubjectivity can be found in the writings of the seventeenth-century Anglican churchman, poet, and mystic Thomas Traherne. For example, in the *Centuries* (II. 72), Traherne writes,

One soul which is the object of mine, can see all souls, and all the secret chambers, and endless perfections in every soul: yea, and all souls with all their objects in every soul: Yet mine can accompany all these in one soul: and without deficiency exceed that soul and accompany all these in every other soul. (Traherne 1908: 129–130)

Traherne employs mirror analogies to convey the multiplication of spatially and temporally all-inclusive souls within one another (Marshall 2019: 198–214), multiple mirrors being the analogy of choice before the hologram and fractal came on the scene. The universe is like a hall of mirrors in which subjects and their objects are infinitely multiplied.

Plotinus describes something similar, although in connection with the intelligible universe, not the familiar sensible world. However, a case can be made for understanding the two worlds as just one world apprehended in two different ways, directly by the intellect and indirectly via the senses (see Marshall 2005: 44–45). There all things are seen in each thing, for the parts are wholes:

They see themselves in other things; for all things there are transparent, and there is nothing dark or opaque; everything and all things are clear to the inmost part to everything; for light is transparent to light. Each there has everything in itself and sees all things in every other, so that all are everywhere and each and every one is all and the glory is unbounded; for each of them is great, because even the small is great. (Plotinus, *Ennead* V. 8. 4; Armstrong 1984: 249)

Comparable descriptions of interpenetration are found in the Indian Buddhist *Avatamsaka Sutra*, which portrays the universe as the Buddha and advanced bodhisattvas experience it. Metaphors such as Indra’s Net and the Tower of Vairocana’s Adornments convey the interpenetrative character of the experience (Marshall 2006, 2019). Chinese Huayan Buddhism, drawing on the *Sutra*, employed interreflecting mirror demonstrations to give a sense of it.

All this interpenetration of experience is rather mysterious, and surely it makes no sense to suppose that the cosmic experience has more than one cosmic subject. Surely one experience has only one subject? Perhaps Leibniz’s monadology can shed some light on the matter, for it posits not one cosmic experience but a multiplicity of them, each with its own subject. According to an idealist reading of the metaphysics, there are numerous transforming perceptual agents (“monads”), each of which expresses the entire universe from its own perspective, from its own sequence of points of view. The universe is therefore multiply instantiated and inherently perspectival, existing concretely only as the all-inclusive perceptions of each monad. Each monad represents all the other monads within its perceptions, and the clarity of those perceptions differs considerably between monads, depending on the kind of body a monad represents itself as having, whether that of a micro-organism, plant, non-human animal, human being, or superhuman being (Leibniz includes extraterrestrials in this category). It follows that “what it is like to be the universe” depends on the individual monad. For very many, the cosmic experience will be highly confused, but for those with more advanced bodies, there will be relatively distinct sense perception and conscious mind, and for still more advanced monads there will be very clear intuitions of the universe. Thus, “What is it like to be the universe?” has no single answer in Leibniz’s monadology. It depends on the sophistication of the individual monad.

Monads have cosmic subjectivity, confused though it is in most cases, so it seems fair to regard the monadology as a kind of cosmopsychism (and panpsychism too, since monads represent all the other monads within themselves). It is untroubled by the combination problem of constitutive micropsychism, since monadic perceptions are wholes, not compounded from smaller perceptions. However, if it is a cosmopsychism, it is an atypical one, for there are many

instantiations of the universe and its cosmic subject. Monadology is a numerical pluralism, not a monism, and the question of derivation is pushed up the ontological ladder to the emanative source of the plurality, which for Leibniz is God. The challenge is to explain how the multiplicity of monads—mutually accommodated, inter-representational cosmic trains of perception—are generated. Leibniz has little to say on the matter, but we can look for hints in mystical philosophies that go into details, such as that of Plotinus (Marshall 2019).

Leibniz’s version of monadology does not quite fit with the mystical evidence. As human beings, our monadic perceptions have some distinctness, but in Leibniz’s system there is no way that they could achieve the expansive clarity and advanced mentality of cosmic mystical experience. I have therefore sought to revise certain aspects of the monadology (as many have before, for different reasons, including A. N. Whitehead) by supposing that all monads have perfectly distinct perceptions of the universe, like the intellections of Plotinian intellects, while confused perceptions pertain to partial representations within the monad, such as those afforded by the senses (Marshall 2015b, 2019). Cosmic mystical experience is made possible by those perfectly clear perceptions. Mystical experience of the divine source of the monads is possible too, if the source constitutes the ultimate core of each individual consciousness. Precisely how the source reality is to be understood is open to discussion, for there are alternatives to Leibniz’s classical theism.

What is it like to be the universe? If cosmic mystical experience is indicative, cosmopsychic experience will be highly noetic, unitive/nondual, perceptually clear, luminous, blissful, joyful, temporally as well as spatially inclusive, and perhaps organized intersubjectively, to name a few noteworthy characteristics. Love and compassion will feature too, innately as a foundational principle, as Bucke put it, or fostered by the social development of limited subjectivities as they trace their personal and evolutionary paths together in the cosmic whole.

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Pol Maršal

Kako je to biti svemir?

Apstrakt:

Kosmopsihizam pripisuje subjektivitet svemiru kao celini. Kakav bi taj subjektivitet mogao biti? U filozofskoj literaturi postoje različita mišljenja, u rasponu od „jednostavne zbrke“ do veoma naprednog mišljenja. Mističko iskustvo, ukoliko zaista donosi jedinstvo ili identitet sa svemirom, moglo bi pružiti određeni uvid. Evidencija ukazuje na svesni um posebnog kvaliteta i moguće, svemir sa mnogim kosmičkim subjektima, intersubjektivnost koja se može tumačiti kroz prizmu modifikovane lajbnicovske monadologije.

Ključne reči: kosmopsihizam, panpsihizam, mističko iskustvo, kosmička svest, Plotin, Lajbnic, monadologija

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CONSCIOUSNESS, SPIRITUALITY, AND ONTOLOGICAL DEPTH

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to achieve two complementary goals. The first goal is to outline and motivate a general account of spirituality along the lines of the so-called *perennial philosophy*. From this perspective, the essence of spirituality lies in establishing an orientation towards, and an inspirational connection to, a cosmic consciousness where the latter serves both as the ground of all infra-cosmic subjects and as an ultimate source of meaning and value. The second goal is to demonstrate that one of the advantages of this outlook on the nature of spirituality consists of the fact that it opens up the door for a potential rehabilitation of an important yet neglected idea, namely, the idea that concrete reality admits various grades of *intension*, or ontological *depth*.

KEYWORDS

Cosmic consciousness,
depth, intension,
perennial philosophy,
self-transcendence,
spirituality

“But Thou wert more inward to me, than my most inward part; and higher than my highest” (St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book III, 6, 11).

Introduction

To the eyes of a perceptive observer, the fact that philosophical interest in matters of spirituality, and in the very meaning of the subject, is on the rise should hardly constitute a surprise. Recent decades have witnessed a steady growth in research into pertinent topics such as consciousness studies, philosophy of religion, cross-cultural philosophy, environmental philosophy, virtue ethics, and the quest for meaning in life. All of these areas of inquiry overlap to various degrees with the question of spirituality, and the concept itself is presupposed, if not explicitly discussed, in at least some of their investigations. It is only natural, therefore, that the time is ripe for a more systematic consideration of spirituality as a recognizable philosophical problem (see, e.g., Goff 2023, chap. 7; McPherson 2017; Salazar and Nichols 2019; the present volume).



Yet, there is also a wider reason for this newly emerging interest in a “philosophy of spirituality”, a motive force which emanates from, and reflects upon, society at large. One of the intriguing dialectical features of contemporary popular culture is that it is, at once, profoundly non-spiritual, or even anti-spiritual, while, at the same time, harbouring in its midst a flourishing of interest in various forms of spiritual conduct, beliefs, and ways of life. This spiritual void, the hunger which accompanies it, and the remarkable availability of alternative options on display, have led to the somewhat paradoxical concept of a *spiritual marketplace* (Roof 1999). In such an arena, various players and products compete for the attention and purchasing power of seekers, offering a wide range of goods: from gemstones and shamanic lore; to techniques of meditation, yoga, and transformative thinking; to full-fledged spiritual teachings and religious doctrines.

One of the implications of this remarkable pluralism of supply and demand, of aims, tastes, ideas, and objects of desire, is that the very concept of spirituality becomes somewhat protean – a shape-shifter befitting all circumstances, whose essential characteristics are, as a result, more than a tad amorphous. Whilst it is true that, when it comes to such a concept, a certain amount of vagueness may well be tolerable and perhaps even inevitable, excessive liberalism comes with a heavy price tag. In particular, if spirituality is interpreted in such a manner that it comes to mean little more than, say, uplifting self-fulfilment and a positive attitude to life, then I, for one, would argue that this is an overly shallow conception which confuses certain potentially visible symptoms with the more essential attributes of a true spiritual orientation.¹

Put differently, while the profusion of practical attitudes towards spirituality may well be a good thing, we should not interpret it as a license for an “anything goes” approach in the realm of theory. A philosophy of spirituality worthy of the name must strive to comprehend its subject matter from a perspective as deep and as fruitful as possible. This, in turn, means that it must be prepared to approach the question of spirituality from the vantage point of a theory grounded in certain basic principles, principles which, if the theory is at least partly correct, may shed valuable light on a host of relevant explananda. Hence, while a robust explanatory power is certainly a desideratum, the principles from which explanations are derived need not necessarily be palatable to all individual tastes.

At the risk of offending certain contrary sensibilities which some, perhaps many, may share, I shall therefore venture to offer a definite view on the nature of spirituality, and to base the rest of the discussion upon it. From the perspective I espouse, the essence of spirituality lies in an orientation towards, and an

1 Consider, for instance, this quotation from Roof (1999 137): “Spirituality, I think, is what enters you and lifts you up and moves you to be a better person, a more open person”. Granted, this was taken during an interview, and the interviewee might have meant more than what this selected quote suggests, but it nevertheless furnishes us with an example of a potentially problematic flattening of the very notion of spirituality.

inspirational connection to, a *transpersonal* source of meaning and value. More specifically, on this view, to be spiritually oriented is to exemplify a steadfast aspiration to transcend the limitations of one's individual person in order to establish an authentic connection to the universal Spirit – be it God, Brahman, Teotl, Cosmic Consciousness, the Tao, Mind at Large, or however one prefers to name it and to conceive it. The means of achieving such authentic contact are variable. In particular, they may involve direct revelation, or they may rely on the mediation of scripture, religious authorities, and communal prayers and rituals. The important point, for our present purpose, is the emphasis on the following triad of related claims:

- 1) That the phenomenon we call spirituality revolves around a *seeking* relation whereby one aims to establish an authentic connection to a transpersonal consciousness.
- 2) That spiritual *growth* consists of making progress along this journey.
- 3) That spiritual *realization* marks the terminal point of achieving permanent beatific transformation through the grace of, or through peak experiences of direct contact with, the abovementioned transpersonal fountainhead of consciousness, meaning, and value.

The above characterization is intentionally general. It is my hope that it is sufficiently wide so as to accommodate various distinct stances on the question of spirituality – whether these are anchored in traditional theism, or in mysticism, or in certain philosophies such as idealism and pantheism. The motivation is clear. It is of considerable advantage to be able to point to a conception of spirituality which, while being substantive enough to resist deflation into the trivial and the banal, is also broad enough so as to subsume in its midst a significant array of alternatives.

With that said, however, I shall proceed to present a more restricted angle on the question of spirituality, one which adds the important proviso that the capacity for establishing an authentic connection to a transpersonal source of meaning and value lies ultimately in the fact that the spiritual seeker, and the source it seeks after, are fundamentally *united* in a single continuum of consciousness. It is this fundamental unity, I shall argue, which explains why creatures like us are spiritually *driven* in the first place; why the *transcendence* of self is pivotal for spiritual achievement; and why it is that self-transcendence is constitutively related, in a most intriguing manner, to the capacity of seekers to delve into the profoundest depths of *their own* conscious being.

While this continuum postulate may be dismissed by certain advocates of traditional theism, as well as, no doubt, by sceptics, it marks the essence of a mystically inspired approach to spirituality, often named *perennialism*, an approach which binds the question of spirituality to that of consciousness and, ultimately, to being as such. In the next two sections, I will proceed to discuss and to motivate, in more detail, this perspective. Section 2 provides a concise account of the perennialist standpoint on consciousness and spirituality.

Section 3 complements the account by considering some possible objections to the perennialist outlook on spirituality.

I then turn to concentrate on what, to my mind, is yet another significant advantage of the approach, namely, that it opens the door for the rehabilitation of an important metaphysical idea, now sadly in disrepute, that is, the idea that there is a qualitative *depth* dimension to concrete reality. Put differently, it is the idea that depth of being – or as I shall call it, *intension* – is at least as important, metaphysically speaking, as the contrastive concept of *extension*: the spatiotemporal and quantitative spread, or breadth, of existence. Sections 4 and 5 will cover the discussion of this topic, narrating both the demise of the concept of ontological depth as well as its potential recovery under the auspices of the perennialist perspective on spirituality advocated in section 2.

The Innermost and the Highest: A Perennialist Perspective on Consciousness and Spirituality

The position that constitutes the focal point of the present section is an old one. Possibly as old as civilization itself, which is why it is sometimes referred to as the *perennial philosophy* (see, e.g., Coomaraswamy 1977, chap. 1; Huxley 1945; Schuon 2005; Smith 1987). Its angle on the question of spirituality can be characterized by the following pair of core tenets.

The first core tenet concerns the constitutive ontic dependency of ordinary subjects upon an underlying cosmic consciousness. We may describe it as the *cosmic ground* principle (CGP).² According to this doctrine, all created selves, or individual centres of consciousness, are ultimately grounded in the base-level consciousness of a universal, cosmic Self.³ Significantly, cosmic consciousness, or at any rate the most basic form of cosmic consciousness, is identified as *pure consciousness*, where the term ‘pure consciousness’ designates consciousness as it is, purportedly, *in itself*, that is, in its ground-level state of purified immanence. Such consciousness, perennialism maintains, is *self-luminous*: an intrinsically radiant and clear awareness suffused with a vast oceanic feel. At the same time, the epithet ‘pure’ implies also a transcendence of the structure and characteristics of ordinary empirical consciousness, and therefore marks a contrast with the latter. In particular, pure consciousness is depicted as bereft of intentional content, and as freed from the structural

2 In more traditional contexts of discussing the *perennial* view, there is often a reference to this cosmic ground as *divine*. See, for example, Huxley’s reference to the “divine ground of all existence” (1945, 21). The terminology offered on the present occasion is intentionally less involved, but the general logic of the view is preserved.

3 In previous work (Shani 2015; Shani 2022) I argued that the relation between cosmic consciousness and the consciousness of created beings is more accurately described as *partial grounding*. However, none of this makes much difference in the present context.

limitations imposed by individual egos and their partial, self-centred, and object-oriented perspectives on things.⁴

To return to the main point, however, the idea behind CGP is that empirical subjects arise *within* cosmic consciousness as temporarily constructed ego structures of limited scope and depth. Each such self is, thus, a bubble-like abode of phenomenal consciousness, experiencing itself as the centre of a continuous stream of experience, the “I”, while confronting the rest of reality as “others”, namely, as possible objects of presentation in one’s stream of consciousness, capable of imposing constraints upon one’s field of action as well as upon the quality, and even the very continuity, of one’s existence.⁵ In short, ordinary selves are bounded pockets of ongoing private experience, endowed with a unique partial view on things and motivated by their own impressions, drives, inclinations, desires, needs, beliefs, convictions, and so on.

At the same time, all selves are ultimately united at the core. For, on this view, they all originate in, and are immanently sustained by, a single noumenal Self. To make the point clearer, the idea is that, deep down, far beyond the familiar streams of ordinary subjective experience, all restricted selves share a *single* transcendental *centre* of subjectivity, which centre is none other than the pure, universal consciousness of the one cosmic Self.

The second core tenet may be called the *spiritual realization* principle (SRP). It holds that the ultimate expression of spiritual achievement consists in the revelatory *union* of one’s limited self with the unlimited cosmic Self. In other words, from this point of view, the highest act of spiritual realization consists in transcending the boundaries of one’s egocentric consciousness and entering the inner sanctum of the unitive consciousness of the cosmic Self, which, as mentioned above, lies at the very core of one’s own being. The discovery that one’s innermost nature, the “citadel in the soul” (Meister Eckhart, 2009, Sermon 8, 81) is one with the cosmic Self, or the *Ātman*, is enshrined in the famous Sanskrit phrase “*tat tvam asi*”, “that thou art” (*Chândogya Upanishad*, 6.9.4), as well as in the assertion that “he, my self within the heart, is that *Brahman*” (*Chândogya Upanishad*, 3.14.4).⁶

4 For more on pure consciousness see Albahari (2019); Forman (1990); Gupta (2003: 106); Metzinger (2020), and Shani (2024). Significantly, on my understanding, pure consciousness does not imply the absence of *selfhood* as such, for where there is consciousness (however non-ordinary!) there is *that-which-is-conscious* (for a strong advocacy of this conviction see Strawson 2024; for the contrary view see Albahari 2019, and Garfield 2022).

5 Noticeably, the description above ignores the important phenomenological distinction between the perception of others as *co-subjects* and the perception of others as mere objects (in particular, inanimate objects). Although important in general, this distinction plays no significant role in the present discussion.

6 I should stress, in passing, that, on the present occasion, I consider the perennial view only insofar as it bears directly on the question of *spirituality*. A systematic account of the perennial perspective, *per se*, is likely to stress certain points in addition to those on which I focus here. That said, my account bears certain striking similarities to Albahari’s recent analysis (2024: 4-5). Nevertheless, there is one significant point on

From these two fundamental principles, several interesting deductions can be made. First, the perennial perspective offers a clear and intuitive answer to the question of *what* is spirituality. As Huston Smith explains (1992: 87), in many spiritual traditions the infinite cosmic self is identified as *Spirit* (or as one with Spirit). Thus, from the perennial standpoint, spirituality consists of a concerted effort, collective or individual, to draw one's heart and mind, one's thoughts and actions, closer to Spirit. Whether ultimate spiritual realization is achieved or not, the spiritual path is the path of striving – passionately, honestly, and persistently – to draw near to Spirit, transforming oneself in the process.⁷

Second, the perennial view also offers an informative explanation for the very existence in us of a primal spiritual impulse. It lies in our basic predicament of existential *incompleteness*. We are, essentially, fragments, temporarily abstracted from the whole to which we fundamentally belong. And because of that, we carry within ourselves a sense of privation, and a yearning (however deemed sighted and compromised as it may often be in practice) for self-transcendence which, ultimately, is a longing for a reunion with our native cosmic ground.

This motif is superbly articulated in Plato's discussion of Eros in the *Symposium*, in particular as conveyed in Socrates' speech (which, in turn, relates the words of the seeress Diotima). The insight which Plato's notion of Eros captures so well is that the human predicament is that of restless suspension between heaven and earth, between "wealth" and "poverty".⁸ In other words, that we are driven by an inherent sense of incompleteness and a primal impetus to seek completion through self-transcendence (poverty being a symbol of want and insufficiency). The erotic drive, the impetus that moves the philosophically minded in their quest for the true, the good, and the beautiful is, in essence, a striving for wholeness and completion.⁹ The path taken along this quest, and the distance covered, depend, of course, on the particularities of personal and social circumstances, and Plato makes it very clear that there are substantive qualitative differences between those whose nature is coarse and those who are more attuned to the life of the spirit. But all are united in being incomplete and in seeking (knowingly or unknowingly, wisely or foolishly) greater completion. The erotic impulse is, therefore, "the impulse of man's

which our respective accounts differ. Albahari associates the perennial standpoint with the notion that ordinary selves, as well as the objects they perceive and interact with, are ultimately *illusory* (following the lead of Advaita Vedānta). My own interpretation of the perennial view carries no such illusory connotations (for a critique of Albahari's stance on perennialism see Medhananda 2022, chap. 10, sec. 5).

7 For a concise and interesting genealogy of the term 'spirituality' see Huss (2014).

8 *Eros* is said to be born out of the nuptial unity of wealth and poverty (1871/2018: 203).

9 Needless to say, for Plato, as for so many other ancient philosophers, philosophy was not merely a theoretical inquiry into the nature of reality but also a *way of life*, with ethical as well as spiritual implications. The point is vigorously stressed by Pierre Hadot, as evidenced, for example, in his book *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (2002).

higher nature towards the good and virtue” (Copleston, 1962/1993: 198); “the “pull” of all things to actualize their own highest potential” (Wilber 1995: 356); or, in the words of A.N. Whitehead, “the urge towards the realization of ideal perfection” (1933/1967: 275).

Ultimately, however, the Platonic narrative of erotic ascent reaches its climax in an ecstatic apprehension of divine absolute beauty, which, at the same time, is absolute goodness and absolute being. Hence, as mentioned above, the final goal and the uppermost achievement of self-transcendence is a reunion with our native cosmic ground. Consequently, although, as we have just seen, the erotic impulse is often described as directed towards the realization of one’s loftiest nature, one’s greatest potential, or one’s ideal perfection, such realization is, as a matter of fact, none other than the realization of our unity with the ground of all things.

So far, I have argued that the spiritual drive is a drive away from the agony of fragmentation and separation, and towards wholeness and wholesomeness realized through the transcendence of self and the alignment with Spirit. Metaphorically, self-transcendence conveys the idea of moving upwards – surpassing, climbing, or ascending – which is why in the *Phaedrus*, another dialogue in which Eros is discussed, Plato refers to him as the “winged one”.¹⁰ Yet, as should be clear by now, from the perennial viewpoint, self-transcendence is not merely a *going-beyond* but also a *going-within*. Since, from this perspective, that which constitutes the ultimate ground of all things is also the ultimate ground of subjectivity and selfhood: it lies at the innermost core of one’s individual subjective existence, while, at the same time, transcending all finite forms of consciousness. In short, from the perennial standpoint, spiritual *orientation* is simultaneously an inward and an upward affair. The way *in*, towards the deepest recesses of one’s conscious being, is the way *up*, towards a transcendence of self, because Spirit itself is both immanent and transcendent: undergirding and permeating all things, while, at the same time, surpassing them. Or as Eckhart puts it “And when I say the innermost then I mean the highest, and when I say the highest, I mean the innermost part of the soul” (1994: 123).

A Commentary on Two Objections to the Perennial View on Spirituality

While the perennial view offers a substantive and informative outlook on the question of spirituality, one could easily identify certain concerns that critics are likely to raise against this particular conception of the matter. In the present section, I address two critical regards which readily come to mind.

One charge likely to be directed against the perennial approach is that the account of spirituality it offers is too narrow to do this venerable subject matter proper justice. In particular, it may be objected that it is wrong to conceive of spirituality as being necessarily tethered to the idea of standing in proper

¹⁰ See *Phaedrus*: 252.

relationship to a *transpersonal* source of meaning and value. The postulation of such relationships, it may be argued, ties spirituality to mystical and religious conceptions of reality, thereby excluding from consideration expressions of spirituality which may be more secular in character and alienating those who are neither mystically nor religiously inclined.

To make the point more directly one might reference various phenomena which could be conceived, with good reason, as authentic expressions of spirituality yet, arguably, do not necessitate coming into contact with a transpersonal consciousness. Among such phenomena one might consider, for example, being engulfed in the grand beauty of a natural landscape; feeling a sense of awe in front of a boulder, a giant tree, or a masterful work of art; experiencing a sense of the sublime; undergoing a psychedelically-induced euphoric expansion of mind; or the ecstatic immersion resulting, at times, from sexual union. All of these varied types of experience, one might argue, are available to atheists and naturalists as much as they are available to mystics and to followers of religious faiths.

The problem with this objection, however, is that it overlooks the fact that the perennial view can fully accommodate such phenomena. The types of experience mentioned above seem to exhibit certain remarkable characteristics such as a sense of immersion in the moment and in the present situation; an attenuation of one's normal sense of self and of the boundaries between oneself and one's surrounding; being in the presence of something vast which defies one's expectations and conventional understanding of the world; temporary, yet dramatic modifications to one's characteristic patterns of thought, perception, and imagery; and perhaps certain other similar attributes. Such attributes, however, are indicative of at least some measure of self-transcendence, and they are often identified as stepping stones on the path of seeking realization through union with the cosmic ground of being.¹¹ In other words, the perennial view is entirely consistent with such experiences, and can readily acknowledge their existence as well as their spiritual relevance.

Moreover, it goes without saying that the perennial view does not deny that one might pursue, as well as undergo, experiences that are spiritual in character without adhering to the perennial perspective regarding the nature of such experiences. Doubtlessly, one might be awestruck, experience the sublime, or lose oneself in the beauty of a natural scene without *interpreting* such experiences as being related, in any shape and form, to a transpersonal source of meaning, value, beauty, and goodness. Certain experiences are spiritual in nature, regardless of the precise convictions and interpretative tools of the

11 To mention a few examples: tantric rituals use sexual intimacy as a vehicle for achieving transcendence (see Maliszewski et. Al. 2011); shamanism resorts to various practices such as exhaustive dancing, rhythmic chanting, and sensory deprivation (Winkelman 2010); while the use of psychoactive substances (peyote, ayahuasca, psilocybin and many others) is, or has been, prevalent in many cultures in connection with spiritual practices of religious and mystical orientation (Diaz 2010).

individuals harboring them. No proponent of the perennial view should deny this truism. Therefore, the charge that the perennial standpoint is overly exclusive and fails to accommodate important types of spirituality appears to me to be ill-founded.

That said, it is of course true that the perennial view imposes certain constraints on our understanding of the nature of spiritual experiences. For example, it implies that some types of spiritual experience are more profound than others (in correlation with the “distance” to which they carry us towards union with the ground of being); that attaining a profound form of spiritual realization is far more likely to occur with proper training; that, contrary to superficial appearance, nature-invoked spiritual experiences (such as awe, immersion in the moment, and a sense of the sublime) truly are related to the existence of transpersonal consciousness, and so on.

Needless to say, while such claims ought to be properly motivated, they are, in any event, unlikely to draw universal consent. However, such is the lot of *any* substantive theory: it provides *explanations* for widely accepted facts, explanations which may not be as widely accepted as the facts themselves, and may be resisted by some parties involved in the relevant ongoing debate.¹² The perennial view is no exception, and like all theoretical perspectives we should judge it by the scope, depth, and fecundity of its explanatory schemes. Thus, in the absence of compelling reasons to conclude that the experiences discussed in this section are strictly incompatible with the perennial view, the mere claim that such experiences are spiritual in nature, and that they can be had by individuals who care little for the perennial standpoint, poses no insurmountable difficulty.¹³

Before closing this critical interlude, I would like to briefly address a well-known critique of the perennial view, a critique whose mentioning is virtually unavoidable whenever perennialism itself is mentioned in a positive light. I’m referring, of course, to Steven Katz’s critique, in his influential article ‘Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism’ (1978). Katz challenges the very idea of a *perennial philosophy*, namely, of a worldview based on the presumed validity and universal content of mystical experiences. The argument builds heavily on the alleged variety of mystical experiences across different cultures, and on the substantive degree to which such experiences are shaped by diverse cultural factors. Katz’ argument stimulated a lively debate which continues to the present day.¹⁴ My purpose, here, is not to provide yet another detailed as-

12 This rule is especially applicable when it comes to theories, or to general outlooks, concerned with *mind* and with *human nature*. While certain theories in the natural sciences command near consensus for a period of time, this is hardly ever the case in the realm of human affairs.

13 I thank Geoffrey Lee for a stimulating conference exchange which sparked some of these thoughts. I should note, however, that since the exchange was verbal and happened some time ago, I do not wish to imply that Geoff’s concerns are reflected here accurately.

14 For some reactions to Katz see Forman 1990; Hick 1989; Huston Smith 1987; Kukla and Walmsley 2004; Maharaj 2018, chap. 5; Marshall 2005, chap. 6.

assessment of Katz' critique but, rather, to point to its limited relevance to the position defended in the present paper.

One important line in Katz' critique consists in challenging the claim that mystical experiences across varied times, places, and cultures, are essentially identical in respect of their nature and content. Against such monism, Katz advocates a *pluralism* according to which “[t]ypes of mystical experiences and reports of the experiences are specific to traditions and sub-traditions” (Marshall 2005, 182). Significantly, however, such pluralism need not threaten the position on the nature of spirituality identified in the current paper as the “perennial view”. In the context of the present paper, this view was articulated in terms of the *cosmic ground principle* (CGP), and the *spiritual realization principle* (SRP) – making no further comments regarding the nature of mystical experiences, or concerning reports of such experiences.¹⁵ CGP, recall, consists of the idea that all individual centres of consciousness are ultimately grounded in the base-level consciousness of a universal, cosmic Self; while SRP proclaims that the ultimate expression of spiritual achievement consists in a revelatory union of one's limited self with the unlimited cosmic Self. To my judgment, none of these principles necessitate taking a decisive position on the pluralism debate. It is perfectly possible to affirm both principles while acknowledging various symbolic and phenomenological differences in the mystical experiences of Advaitins, Sufis, Zen Buddhists, or Christian mystics.

There is, nonetheless, a more radical line of argument which could be drawn from the constructivism defended by Katz and others. According to this line, it is utterly impossible to come to *direct* contact with a transpersonal source of meaning and value because humans are, necessarily, enveloped by the mediating particularities of their cultural settings.¹⁶ If this were the case, if there really isn't any possibility of genuine transcendence and a union with the ground of all things, then the position defended here is, of course, in dire straits, as is any appeal to the epistemic authority of mystical revelation. However, this radical form of constructivism – with its utter dismissal of the possibility of transcendence, notwithstanding historical and personal evidence – is far more controversial than the argument for pluralism per se, and I, for one, see little reason to be much alarmed by it.

15 While my treatment of the perennial view is partial, focusing only on its direct stance on the question of spirituality, it may be worth referencing Huston Smith's claim that key advocates of the perennial philosophy, such as Frithjof Schuon and Aldus Huxley did not conceive of their position in the strictly monolithic terms targeted for criticism by Katz (Smith 1987: 554).

16 Katz himself seems to remain *agnostic* concerning the possibility that mystical experiences convey perceptual knowledge of a transcendent reality, but others have taken a more radical skeptical line. For discussion see Maharaj (2018, chap. 5), and Marshall (2005, chap. 6).

Depth of Being and the Flattening of Reality

Having outlined a general account of spirituality, at the core of which lies the idea of standing in appropriate relations to a cosmic consciousness, I would like, next, to draw attention to a significant if under-appreciated aspect of such an account, namely, that it paves the way to a rehabilitation of the concept of ontological *depth*. In the present section, I focus on clarifying and motivating this idea: commenting on its history, decline, and potential resurrection.

As seen earlier, the perennial standpoint ties spiritual progress to the paradoxically sounding idea that the key to the *transcendence* of one's limited egoic self lies in delving deep into the furthestmost recesses of one's private consciousness. For it is assumed that there, at the very core of one's being, lies the Atman or universal Self: "greater than the earth, greater than the sky, greater than heaven, greater than all these worlds" (*Chândogya Upanishad*, 3.14.3). The paradox is resolved when we remind ourselves of the cosmic ground principle, namely, that behind all particular selves lies a universal cosmic Self, whose selfhood – unlimited in its depths of existence – is their ultimate ground and centre. The way *in* (to the centre of one's being) is the way *up* (towards self-surpassing) precisely because bounded selves are anchored in the unbounded existence of a transpersonal cosmic Self.¹⁷

Given such a perspective on the matter at hand, however, it follows that there is a graded *continuum* of consciousness and subjective existence. For if, by plunging into the private depths of one's own being, it is possible to come into contact with more profound levels of subjectivity, transpersonal in character, then the underlying picture, no doubt, is that of a layered *hierarchy* of heights, or depths, of conscious existence. More informatively, the idea is that cosmic consciousness is endowed with unfathomable depths of subjectivity, and that, with concerted effort or by sheer grace, spiritual seekers might tap into this inexhaustible reservoir, transcending the limited boundaries of their ordinary selves and reaching a heightened level of consciousness.¹⁸

That the perennial view entails such a graded picture of consciousness is not in the least surprising. However, we should bear in mind that since, on this view, consciousness is the ultimate foundation of reality, the depth of consciousness amounts, also, to the *depth of being*. Now, the idea that concrete reality could be meaningfully characterized by a dimension of depth is anything but trivial. For it is one of a number of ideas which were central to pre-modern

17 For a more comprehensive discussion of the subtleties involved in the idea that infra-cosmic selves are grounded in cosmic consciousness see Shani (2015); Shani and Keppler (2018); Shani (2022).

18 When it comes to the differences between various created beings, say different species of organisms, the perennial view maintains that these, too, differ with respect to the characteristic depth, or intensity, of their consciousness. Naturally, such differences are explained in terms of the capacity of each type, and of each individual within a given type, to partake in the inexhaustible depth of the cosmic "reservoir".

western philosophy but went largely out of favor with the rise of the modern era.¹⁹ Its potential rehabilitation is, therefore, I think, of considerable interest.

Today, we live in a world in which the idea of ontological depth, the depth of being, is bound to be met with suspicion if not downright scorn and ridicule. As Ken Wilber stresses, the dominant ontologies of the modern age, down to the present, are *flatland* ontologies (2000, 70). They strive to characterize reality in purely objective terms, that is, in terms of empirically discoverable patterns of matter/energy. Evidently, such endeavor implies a reduction of the inner, subjective dimension of reality to outer, objective appearances. However, as many critics have stressed over the years, since *observables* (i.e., the discoverable patterns mentioned above) presuppose the reality of *observers*, and since *observations*, which constitute the meeting points of these two complementary terms, lie at the very hub of the scientific enterprise itself – the ideal of a purely objective world is of dubious coherence. Put differently, a scientifically-based notion of objectivity is one in which subjectivity inevitably plays a key role.²⁰

That said, the main point, insofar as our present topic is concerned, is that such an “objectivist” reduction collapses reality into its observable *exteriors*. The world is effectively identified with its external appearances, namely, with observable phenomena available to third-person scrutiny. The inner, subjective dimension of things, hidden from public view, is denied a place in the true makeup of reality. The result is a world with no place for interiority. A world of surfaces upon surfaces, without a center or core. A world characterized by spatiotemporal spread but no mental strain, breadth but no depth, extension but no intension. In short, it is a conception of reality aptly summarized by Carnap, Han, and Neurath, senior members of the Vienna circle, as one in which “dark distances and unfathomable depths” are rejected since “In science there are no ‘depths’; there is surface everywhere” (1929/1973, 306). Depth of being, to which I shall also refer as ‘intension’, is dismissed from this picture as an illicit concept lacking proper application.²¹

Reaffirming ‘Intension’ as an Ontological Category

In order to shed further light upon the concept of depth of being, and upon its historical ebbs and flows, it behooves us to pay attention to the concept of *intension*, since the history of this concept reflects an interesting transformation

19 Other prominent ideas that went out of favor around the same time include such notions as *final causality*, *substantive form*, and the idea that nature is suffused with real *qualities*.

20 The point is made even more apparent in the context of *quantum physics*, where reference to acts of observation and measurement enters into the fundamental vocabulary of describing the ways of the world.

21 While I quote some analytic philosophers, Ken Wilber (2000, 169-170) nicely illustrates how the commitment to a depthless world was enthusiastically endorsed by *continental* thinkers.

in cultural attitudes towards the notion that existence, or being, contains a dimension of depth.

We may begin by fixing our gaze on the antithetical pair of *intension* and *extension*. Today, these terms are mostly known through their canonized use in logic. ‘Extension’ marks the compass of a term, that is, the set of *entities* to which it applies, or of which it is truly predicated; while ‘intension’ stands for the meaning the term conveys, namely, the *attributes* it ascribes to the things subsumed under its scope. For example, the extension of the term ‘prime number’ is the set of all prime numbers, while the intension of the term consists in the ascription of “being a positive integer bigger than 1 that has no positive integer divisors other than 1 and itself”. Significantly, the two are inversely related: the greater the intension of a term, conferring more attributes upon its designated objects, the smaller is the range of such objects, i.e., their extension. The more opulent the predication, the lesser its spread (and vice versa) – which is why the set of primes is a proper subset of the set of natural numbers. It is for this reason that Sir William Hamilton advocated the use of the terms ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’ as aptly corresponding to ‘extension’ and ‘intension’, respectively (1861: 629).

It is a mistake, however, to conclude on the basis of this familiar picture that the antithetical pair of ‘intension’ and ‘extension’ is applicable only in the fields of logic and semantics. For, noticeably, both terms have been used, to profound effects, in the realm of metaphysics. Yet, while the metaphysical sense of the term ‘extension’ is widely recognized by philosophers, that of ‘intension’ is rather occult, and is scarcely known to anyone who is not an expert in medieval philosophy.

The story of ‘extension’ is familiar. It was the term that Descartes used to identify the essence of corporeal substance. In other words, Descartes argued that it is the nature of matter, or body, to *extend*, namely, to occupy 3-dimensional space, and that this attribute of matter is more basic than all other characteristic features (or “modes”) of bodies such as motion, figure, and the like. In short, matter, for Descartes is a *res extensa*. Descartes concept of extension is symptomatic of the rise of the mechanistic conception of nature in the 17th century, and its introduction parallels that of another influential idea prevalent at the time, namely, the notion that nature is characterized solely by the so-called *primary qualities* such as size, motion, figure, or mass. Both concepts reflect a transition in thought, where nature came to be identified in purely quantitative terms; while sensible qualities, along with thought, meaning, purpose, and value, were relegated to a separate realm of mind, if they were to retain any hold on reality at all.

Be that as it may, given that the same term, *extension*, is used in two different contexts – in logic as well as in metaphysics – we may rightly wonder whether these two uses are meaningfully connected. I believe that the answer is positive, and that the two are linked both historically and conceptually. From a historical point of view, it is worth noticing that the term ‘extension’ was introduced into logical discourse in the famous *Port Royal Logic*, written by

Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, and published in 1662. The text is heavily influenced by Descartes's metaphysics (see Alan and Buroker 2022), and Arnauld, in particular, was a famous correspondent of Descartes and was receptive to his ideas. There is, therefore, contextual evidence to suggest that the introduction of the term 'extension' into logic was under the influence of Descartes's employment of the term in the context of his metaphysics and his physical theory. This conclusion gains further support in view of the conceptual linkage between the metaphysical and the logical senses of 'extension'. For it can reasonably be concluded that the logical concept of 'extension', namely, that of a term ranging over a class of entities, is a metaphorical extension (pun intended) of the original and more concrete sense of the word 'extend': which designates something that stretches out, unfolds, or expands. Needless to say, Descartes's geometrically articulated concept of 'extension' retains close proximity to the original sense of the word.

Our main concern, however, is with the counterpart concept of *intension*. For it is this concept which corresponds to our interest in the notion of ontological depth. I therefore turn next to consider the concept of intension as it was known in the context of scholastic metaphysics, since it is in this context that the concepts' metaphysical significance becomes apparent. The concept of 'intension' came into use during the High Middle Ages, with key figures such as Albert the Great and Aquinas, in conjunction with the opposite concept of 'remission' – the former designating a qualitative increase, the latter a decrease. There were two related uses of 'intension' and 'remission': the one more restricted and technical; the other more general and lofty.

The more restricted use pertains to the theory of the intension and remission of *forms* and *qualities* (see, for example, Clagett 1950; Shapiro 1959; Frost 2019). The central idea here was the notion that a given quality, or accidental form, can vary in *degree*, gaining or losing intensity, without necessarily turning into a different form or quality. For example, an object can lose or gain in brightness while remaining bright overall; likewise, a person's degree of charity (love of God) may vary over time. Thus, in this context, the distinction between 'intension' and 'remission' pertains to quantitative changes in qualitative determinations. During the Late Middle Ages, this emphasis on the quantifiability of qualities was much developed, and it is now regarded as an important landmark on the road leading to the development of modern science (Grant 1977, chap. 4).²²

Yet, there was another important context (albeit related to the former) in which medieval and renaissance thinkers utilized the antithetic concepts of 'intension' and 'remission', and it is this latter context that is of direct relevance

22 Remnants of these discussions are reflected in the modern concepts of *intensive magnitude*, i.e., a (qualitative) magnitude which can increase or decrease in degree, and of *intensive continuum*, viz., a continuum whose constitutive units exemplify qualitative heterogeneity. Each of these concepts is contrasted, in turn, to its *extensive* opposite (see Carnap 1966, chap. 7; Diehl 2012).

to our concern with the question of ontological depth. As Edward Mahoney explains at great length (1982 and 1987), ‘intension’ and ‘remission’ were also employed in the context of a general *hierarchy* of being. In this hierarchy, thoroughly Christian and scholastic yet heavily influenced by Neoplatonism, God was seated at the summit while prime matter marked the ultimate bottom.²³ Conceived as being itself, as well as the measure of all things, God was thereby considered to be the ultimate ground of the existence of all lesser beings. The latter, in turn, were said to partake in being to various *degrees* in correspondence with the respective measures in which they participated in God’s perfection. The closer a thing is to God, in virtue of partaking in his perfection to a higher degree, the more it possesses of being and actuality. Conversely, the less a thing partakes in God’s perfection, the less hold it has on reality and the more it approaches prime matter and non-being (prime matter, recall, was Aristotle’s term for an indeterminate pure potentiality, which therefore lacked actuality and determinate character).

Noticeably, in this scheme of things, intension (*intensio*) signifies being closer to God in the hierarchy of being, enjoying greater depths, or heights, of existence; while remission (*remissio*) signifies the opposite condition of being further removed from God and suffering a consequent lessening in being. This association of intension with perfection and a heightened level of existence is expressed poetically by none less than Milton, in his *Paradise Lost*, when he describes how Adam, alone in Paradise among birds and beasts, beseeches God to provide him with a female companion. The lines, I believe, are worth quoting:

“Let not my words offend thee, Heavenly Power;
My Maker, be propitious while I speak.
Hast thou not made me here thy substitute
And these inferiors far beneath me set?
Among unequals what society
Can sort, what harmony or true delight?
Which must be mutual, in proportion due
Given and received, but, in disparity,
The one *intense*, the other still *remiss*
Cannot well suit with either.”

(*Paradise Lost*, 1981, Book XIII, 380-389; italics mine).

Earlier, we observed the historical and conceptual connections between the employment of the term ‘extension’ in the sphere of metaphysics and its consequent use in logic and semantics. The case of ‘intension’ is no different. It is well known that it was Leibniz who introduced the term ‘intension’ into logical discourse, as a counterpart to ‘extension’ (and as a substitute for ‘comprehension’,

²³ The most famous scholarly treatise on this subject is Arthur Lovejoy’s *The Great Chain of Being* (1933). Yet, oddly enough, Lovejoy makes no mention of ‘intension’ and ‘remission’.

the Port Royalists' term of choice). What is less known is that, in doing so, he was building upon the scholastic notion of *intensio*, in precisely the sense we have examined. In comparing the terms 'animal' and 'man' Leibniz states that the first has more instances and therefore greater extension, while the second has more degrees of reality and hence a greater intension.²⁴ Strictly speaking, it is, of course, not concepts which enjoy degrees of reality but, rather, the objects or subjects they designate. Nevertheless, the conceptual resemblance to the ontological use of 'intension' discussed above is undeniable. Moreover, as Mary Spencer (1971) stresses, in a rare paper exploring this esoteric subject, Leibniz was well-acquainted with the relevant scholastic literature.

It transpires, then, that the contrastive logical terms of 'extension' and 'intension' are both rooted in prior historical uses in the context of metaphysical discourse. It is interesting to observe, however, that while contemporary metaphysics still considers the concept of *extension* useful and relevant, it has all but completely eschewed the complementary concept of *intension*. No doubt, this is partly due to the fact that contemporary philosophers treat the notion of degrees of being with grave suspicion.²⁵ Things either exist or they don't exist, and it makes little sense to argue that one thing exists more than another. While this conclusion appears obvious when viewed at face value, it is not so obvious that the concept of degrees of being fails to make sense when considered in the context of a perennialist, consciousness-based ontology. If consciousness is the cement of reality, and if depth is a constitutive dimension of consciousness, then perhaps it is not so unintelligible to argue that gradations of depth of consciousness correspond to gradations of being.

Be that as it may, let us not debate the question of degrees of being any further but focus, instead, on what matters the most to the present discussion, namely, the idea that there is a *depth* dimension to being. As mentioned in section 4 above, this idea, too, is largely rejected by modern philosophy. Indeed, the decisive dismissal of depth constitutes yet another reason for the disappearance of the concept of *intension* from modern and contemporary metaphysics (arguably, a more significant reason than the one mentioned in the last paragraph) since the two – depth of being and intension – are intimately intertwined. Yet, as I have argued, given the perennial perspective on consciousness and spirituality the notion of depth of being makes perfectly good sense.

It is useful, in this respect, to pay heed to the similarities between (i) the perennialist conception of spiritual progress described in section 2 above, and (ii) the scholastic understanding of *intension* as participation in divine perfection, discussed in the present section. Spiritual progress, when pursued far enough, necessitates self-transcendence, which, in turn, involves coming into meaningful contact with the heightened reality of a transpersonal consciousness. To do so is nothing other than to partake in the perfections of such a being, accessing greater depths of experience in the process. In other words,

24 G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding* (Bk. IV, chap. 17, part 8).

25 For a notable exception see McDaniel (2017).

the spiritual journey is an *intensive* one: at various points, one may progress, regress, or remain stagnant, but the relevant gradients are clearly depth-gradients, clearly intensive.

We may therefore bring our metaphysical excursion to a close by concluding that the distinction between *breadth* and *depth*, *extension* and *intension*, should not be considered of pertinence merely in the context of logic and semantics. Instead, we shall do well to seriously consider its relevance and importance in the context of a general conception of reality, a general metaphysics. It is, in any event, a distinction of great significance in the context of thinking about spirituality – at least insofar as we do so from a perspective similar enough to the one espoused here.

Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted two goals. First, to present the outlines of a general account of spirituality, described here as the *perennial view*, which, in turn, presupposes the existence, and the ontological primacy, of cosmic consciousness. Second, to argue, on the basis of such a view, that there is a case to be made for a potential rehabilitation of the kindred notions of *depth of being* and *intension* as important ontological concepts. The latter project is, I believe, substantial for two major reasons. In the first place, because the concept of the depth of being is an integral aspect of the perennial view of spirituality. Secondly, because I share the conviction of various critics that the flattening of reality, i.e., the collapse of the idea that existence possesses a dimension of depth, and therefore also of height, plays an important role in some of the most conspicuous crises of modernity and post-modernity up to the present time. This is nowhere more conspicuous than in the so-called *crisis of meaning* so potently felt at the present. It is, however, beyond the pale of the present paper to comment further on this fascinating topic. I shall therefore leave the last words to one of the thinkers who best appreciated the problem, Huston Smith: “If deep is answering to deep less today it is not because the depths have changed, certainly not on their objective side. If our world has changed, this only reflects the change of the idea we now have of it” (1992: 80).

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Itaj Šani

Svest, duhovnost i ontološka dubina

Apstrakt:

Ovaj rad ima za cilj da ostvari dva komplementarna zadatka. Prvi cilj je da izloži i motiviše opšti prikaz duhovnosti u skladu sa takozvanom „perenijalnom filozofijom“. Iz ove perspektive, suština duhovnosti leži u uspostavljanju orijentacije ka kosmičkoj svesti i u inspirativnoj povezanosti s njom, pri čemu kosmička svest služi i kao temelj svih infrakosmičkih subjekata i kao konačni izvor značenja i vrednosti. Drugi cilj je da pokaže da jedna od prednosti ovakvog pogleda na prirodu duhovnosti jeste to što on otvara mogućnost za potencijalnu rehabilitaciju jedne važne, ali zanemarene ideje, naime ideje da konkretna stvarnost dopušta različite stepene intenzije, odnosno ontološke dubine.

Ključne reči: kosmička svest, dubina, intenzija, perenijalna filozofija, samotranscendencija, duhovnost.

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Wouter Kusters

DEVIATIONS IN THE DARK. ABOUT BATS, VETERANS, VISIONARIES AND PHILOSOPHERS

ABSTRACT

This article explores psychosis not primarily as a medical disorder but as a phenomenon that calls for understanding rather than explanation. While psychiatry and neuroscience focus on causal, biological or psychological mechanisms, such approaches fail to capture *what it is like to be psychotic*. Through three figures of thought – the bat, the veteran, and the visionary – I aim to develop a plural, imaginative, and philosophical understanding of madness. Drawing on Thomas Nagel's notion of the "single point of view," the bat symbolizes the limits of empathy and the need for narrative multiplicity. The veteran reveals the moral and social dimensions of trauma and conflict underlying psychosis. The visionary represents the blurred boundary between madness, spirituality, and insight. The final sections argue that psychosis involves "perplexity" and "hyperreflection," concepts closely related to philosophical wonder and reflection. Madness, then, can be viewed as a proto- or hyper-philosophy: a radical questioning of meaning and reality. This article concludes that psychiatry requires not only doctors and patients but also sages – philosophers – to engage madness as a "livable deviation in the dark."

KEYWORDS

Madness, Philosophy,
Psychosis, Trauma,
Phenomenology,
Hyperreflection,
Perplexity, Spirituality,
Psychiatry

Introduction

Psychosis is often regarded as something pathological, as a mental disorder, social disruption or brain disease. And no doubt it is all of those things. If you dig deep enough, you may well find abnormal neurological processes or structures under the brain scanner. In people's life histories, determining circumstances can also be found (trauma, drug use, stubbornness) that can be linked to later psychosis. Epidemiological research may also show that there is a correlation between the size of the city where one lives and the likelihood of psychosis (Vassos et al. 2012). Such research is relevant insofar as one wants to prevent and cure psychosis. Here, psychosis is regarded as an event, a process or a condition that is causally linked to other events at various biological,

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psychological and social levels. In order to try to prevent or cure psychosis, one can then intervene at one or more of these levels.

Such research is valuable for the purposes of care and self-care, management and self-management. However, explanations, prevention and cures do not automatically lead to understanding. Do you understand how an alcoholic feels by researching the chemical structure of alcohol? Do you understand a painting when you have analysed the quality of the paint or researched the life of the painter? The difference between explaining a phenomenon and understanding a phenomenon is essential to the distinction between the natural sciences and the humanities. In section 2, I show how we can gain a clearer understanding of madness in the humanities using three figures of thought: the bat, the veteran and the visionary. In section 3, I show how we can directly address the question of madness with philosophy, and I will show how and why, in the practice of psychiatry, in addition to the archetype of ‘the doctor’, that of ‘the sage’ – in the guise of the philosopher – is also necessary. In this article I will use the terms psychosis and madness interchangeably, the former more in contexts where a medical, psychological or psychiatric association and discussion is dominant, the latter more when it comes to the psychotic experience itself and the way in which it is connected to areas of meaning that are communal, cultural and philosophical.

Three figures: bats, veterans and visionaries

Bats

In 1974, Thomas Nagel wrote his famous article *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?* in which he discussed many thorny issues surrounding consciousness, experience and subjectivity. He argued that an organism has consciousness only when ‘there is something that it is like to be that organism’. Consciousness does not exist without subjective experience, and if we do not understand experience, we cannot say that we have explained consciousness. According to Nagel, subjective experience is connected to ‘a single point of view’; a unique position that is fundamentally inaccessible to others. Nagel argues that no matter how hard we try to analyse and describe a particular form of perception (in his example of the bat, echolocation), we will never truly understand what it is like to be a bat. Translated to our case of psychosis, this means that no matter how much knowledge we may have of psychological factors or neurological abnormalities, something escapes our knowledge: we still do not understand what it is like to be psychotic. However, we can try to imagine and empathise with the experience (see also Dings, 2023). Just as someone without a womb can try to imagine what it is like to give birth to a child. Or just as someone living in the Netherlands can imagine what it is like to live in Gaza. In all these attempts to understand the other, our own frameworks, our own ‘single point of view’, our own perspective, background and way of speaking continue to play a guiding, stimulating but also limiting role.

In order to get closer to another person, to understand him or her better, it is desirable to relativise and transcend one's own perspective, to break through one's own role, to suspend one's own initial judgement – and to multiply 'single points of view'. When promoting understanding of bats, this can be achieved by allowing and investigating stories about bats that are different from the usual ones. The researcher leaves the anatomical laboratory and immerses himself in the ecology of bat colonies, their interactions with other life forms, and their way of life, foraging, communication and reproduction. In addition, the bat researcher can also go to the library or listen to folk tales about bats. The question then is: how do mythical animal stories, fairy tales, fables and their modern cinematic variants (Batman!) influence our views and interactions with bats? In the case of psychosis research, this would mean avoiding endless, monomaniacal observations, categorisations, data analyses, and generalising theories based on a single point of view. Instead, one would argue for a shift towards the multifaceted and unruly practice, where real, living, insane people walk around, and by doing participatory fieldwork there, to gain a better understanding of the ecology of madness, language, and expressions in art and culture (think also of Van Dongen 1994; Bock 2002). In the library, researchers or other interested parties can also find masses of literature, outside the psychiatric discourse, that undermines the assumptions of the medical view. Questions such as those posed by Thomas Nagel concerning the basis of experience, language, and life, have been asked by many philosophers and other thinkers with regard to madness. And stories in which suggestions for answers are given are part of the canon of literary and non-literary fiction and non-fiction. (See Ramirez et al. 2024). A value such as 'respect for (neuro)diversity' is indispensable in this context of the pluralistic search for understanding of madness and other variations in experience. In order for single points of view to interact productively with each other, and possibly merge, and to arrive at a story about – or if not, perhaps a glimpse of it – the foundation, the core or the essence of the bat, a leap of imagination is needed, a receptivity to the radically different, a shift in language from identifying description to expression and groundless metaphor. Since everyone's single point of view ultimately remains essentially unattainable, it is more a matter of a plurality of stories circling around single points of view than of striving for proven but meaningless evidence and generalisations. Which interpretation, which story sounds best, which one is most plausible in which context? Who makes themselves heard, at what pitch, and from what point of view? Nevertheless, the fact remains that at the end of the day, it is only the bat that is a bat, an anomaly in the homogeneous darkness, and it continues its night flight.

Veterans

Now I turn to the second analogy, that of veterans. From the considerations of Nagel and other philosophers who deal with experience, consciousness, interpretation and subjectivity, we can learn about what it means to 'understand

something/someone', and about our relationship with psychosis, with madness, with the other. Nagel's bats themselves, however, are not particularly concerned about this. They do not talk back to biologists and ecologists. Outside of fables, they do not transform themselves into humans. Those who do talk back are war veterans, war refugees and other people who – willingly or unwillingly – are experts in the field of war. Here I will discuss the case of veterans, since there are such inspiring analogies between this group and people with psychosis. To understand what war is, it might suffice to study history books that explain why wars break out, how the fighting proceeds, and how they end. You could learn lessons about international relations, about how war can be prevented, and how it can be waged. But would you then understand what war really is? For that, you need the stories and eyewitness accounts from those who have experienced it themselves. But why would you want to hear these stories in the first place? Is it curiosity or a thirst for sensation? Sometimes it is similar to the kind of interest that exists for madness, namely, out of a thirst for sensation, but often it is more than that.

Let us consider war as an analogy for psychosis, and traumatised soldiers and war refugees as people who have experienced psychosis. People listen to the stories of veterans, refugees and people with psychosis in order to care for them and help them. And a great deal of research has already been done on people who have been traumatised by war. As a result, terms such as shell shock, trauma and PTSD have been around for a long time (see Bistoën, 2024). Trauma therapy can be used to treat refugees and (former) soldiers with PTSD, and in a similar way, (former) psychotic patients receive therapies in which they learn to recover further. These are desirable therapies for the management and (self-)management of people with problems. However, in recent years, people have taken a different view of such individual-focused trauma therapy. According to many trauma theories, trauma – and, analogously, psychosis – is an individual, psychological and/or biomedical problem. However, many of those who have escaped war are struggling with feelings and memories that have social, moral and existential implications. They have been 'affected' by the war and changed by it, but not necessarily only because they are victims or personally traumatised. Their problem is not a disturbance of their own psychological balance, but concerns the war itself – just as madness is often not about the 'experience of it' or the psychological disturbances it causes, but about the madness itself.

Anthropologist Tine Molendijk (2021) and social scientist Hend Eltanamly (2024) show that many of the problems experienced by (former) military personnel and refugees revolve around guilt and shame, and that they are not only victims, but can also be perpetrators, bystanders or witnesses. I will describe the case of refugees in the same way as that of veterans, which is not to imply that there are no significant differences between these two groups, but I will refrain from discussing this in this article. War experiences prove to be complex, just like war itself; some long to return to it, while others 'see' – and experience – war behind the façades of a peaceful society. In her research into

moral injury among returning military personnel, Molendijk discusses issues such as moral disorientation, value conflicts, moral detachment, and ethical struggles. She demonstrates that the dynamics between experiences, memories, thoughts, and feelings are not merely an individual process, but are embedded in the way these issues are discussed and perceived in their immediate environment, as well as in the media and society. As with the bat, archetypal images, myths, and stories also play a role in the background. For (self-)control and (self-)restraint, the individual perspective on war trauma is sufficient in some cases. But in order to relate to good and evil, to war and peace as a society, it is important to gain a better understanding of what war is, and it is not just about getting the traumatised back on track to normality.

Similar lessons apply to psychosis. To know what psychosis really is, observational research into individual experiences and individual behaviour is insufficient. In some cases, my metaphor of war for madness coincides with the madness of war: war trauma can manifest itself as psychosis. Think, for example, of high-profile cases such as that of terrorist schizophrenic Andreas Breivik, the Unabomber, or some of those who joined IS, but also of all those who fled war zones and later became ‘psychotic’. Just like war trauma, psychoses are about something, which can be paraphrased as a different world, or a different kind of reality, and only by connecting with the underlying deeper motives can we learn something that is useful to us beyond (self) management. Finally, with regard to the war comparison: we can take this even further, as madness often involves conflict or struggle, although this may refer less obviously to a ‘real’, observable struggle such as that in war. In philosophy, philosophical anthropology and psychology, there is a long history, a library full of theories, views of humanity and the world, according to which life and the soul are fundamentally characterised by struggle, conflict and contradictions. Heraclitus should be mentioned as the first philosopher in this regard, and from there we can follow a family of thinkers, from Hobbes to Nietzsche, Hegel, Deleuze and Haraway, but also Freud and Lacan. In ideas and theories about madness that refer to these thinkers, there is often a tacit assumption that the primary fundamental state is one of chaos, madness or war, and that order, normality and peace are only secondary temporary masks of the deeper truth: deviations in the darkness. Be that as it may, when psychosis is reduced to a neurological abnormality or a mental disorder, we miss the opportunity to reflect on such deeper motives, packed in inevitable tensions and paradoxes within subjectivity and reality, on questions of good and evil, on ontologies and alternative complex meanings, which would be a missed opportunity for all those involved in war and madness. For the case of war, this means that we could better speak of “moral injury” instead of PTSD (see e.g. Molendijk 2021). For the case of madness, we could coin a term like “existential injury”. The crux in both cases is that the “injury” is not only located within the psyche, within the individual, but also reveals something about the situation outside the war, outside the psychosis. In the case of war, this means that a certain moral hypocrisy within society is revealed by the returning veterans.

In the case of psychosis, this means that a certain ontological uncertainty is revealed that is also present beneath common sense reality (see Feyaerts et al. 2021, and Kusters, 2020).

Visionaries

In addition to a comparison with bats and veterans, I would like to bring the theme into the domain of prophets, visionaries, religious founders and sect leaders. In earlier times, there was more receptivity to what we now characterise as religious language, religious beliefs and religious experiences. Those who reported on their experiences, adventures and developments, their worldview and views on reality, as well as their inner struggles and conflicts, did so against a backdrop in which supernatural, religious or spiritual spheres and concepts were self-evident. For concerns, special thoughts and insights, one could turn to religion and to those who claim to know more about it. This is still possible today, as God's house has no locks on the door, but the first choice in cases of spiritual distress is often that of the doctor or psychologist in the agnostic medical field, which is permeated by a scientific secular attitude and a single point of view on knowledge. Moreover, when one attempts to understand madness in such a detached 'expert' manner, one does so from a worldview in which there is little or no room for religious experiences or spirituality.

Nevertheless, people often talk about something like spirituality, both those who were 'in the madness' themselves and their loved ones. We could consider this spirituality as part of those possible metaphorical stories revolving around that single point of view (see the bat parallel), or as expressions of experiences and feelings that cannot be reduced to an individualistic trauma approach (see the veteran parallel). However, much of what is classified as spirituality has its own dimension: a language with accompanying practices that can be called religious. As far as madness is concerned, this dimension includes messages from self-proclaimed prophets, visions from alleged visionaries, complex expressions of religious ecstasy from those who have seen the light or received other signs from the other side. Sometimes, however, all this is just accepted as 'part of a possible metaphorical story'. Then the first acute religious/psychotic experiences, the first ecstasies and raw expressions are somewhat tempered, cast into a narrative form, thereby normalised and thus made communicable. That is to say, a narrative approach may reveal something, but may also hide those aspects of experience that essentially resist narration (see Saville Smith 2023). Incorporation into a narrative can be done by the person making the interpretations – whether that is the 'mad(wo)man' herself, a second person addressed, or a third person who observes and analyses the mad state. The unfolding, storage and interpretation of mad language and experience within an appealing larger and protective discourse, such as that of religion, nevertheless seems attractive, and it is understandable that compartmentalisation in mental health care has also led to the specialism of spiritual care.

But then still, even if the proverbial bat and the stray sheep are welcomed by a spiritual counsellor into the bosom of a religious circle, each specific religious movement also imposes its own standards. There is a long tradition of separating the wheat from the chaff, the ‘good news’ (the ‘evangelism’ – etymologically: eu- angelos, good news) from the bad, namely the devilish whisperings and temptations of selfishness and evil. In other words, the spiritual counsellor must also distinguish between supposed individual pathology and genuine religiosity (see, for example, the many discursive twists and turns that spiritual counsellors such as Ypma and Arends have to contort themselves into). Questions about authority, the legitimacy of judgements, interpretations of experiences and choices of interpretative frameworks are just as thorny and complex problems here as they are in neurobiological or psychological approaches.

In addition, in the larger context of society, with its diverse range of care practices, there is also a tendency to promote and sell one’s own discourse, practices, and religion in a market of well-being and happiness, in competition with neurobiological medicines and psychological talk therapies. Results are measured in terms of success, normalisation, healing – and ultimately in terms of financial profit and loss. And so religion and a religious approach to madness can gradually change from an attempt to understand madness into a tool for managing madness. The religious sphere is then changed and transformed, ‘made productive’, into one of the many tools that can be used not so much to understand madness, but to suppress or destroy it (think in this context of empirical quantitative research into ‘the usefulness’ of religion as protection against mental disorders; for an overview study, see e.g. Hoenders and Braam 2020). For pragmatic purposes within our fluid, fast-paced, production-consumption society, this may make sense, but in order to refine and broaden our understanding of madness, a broader and deeper reflection on and critique of religion itself is needed (compare Saville-Smith’s attempt (2023) to safeguard what he calls ‘acute religious experience’ from both reduction and instrumentalisation by established religions and by established psychopathological frameworks). Finally, a reflection on madness that focuses on the question of the degree of religiosity in the experience can say little about actual cases of violent religious madness when the social, moral and political context is left out of consideration.

Mad philosophising

So far, I have described philosophical circumlocutions, via the bat, the veteran and the visionary, to show what kinds of philosophical and other considerations play a role in the broad field of psychiatry and philosophy. In a narrower subfield, research questions and philosophical reflections are often reduced to a few key questions, largely driven by the concerns, problems and discussions between psychiatrists and other healthcare providers. An important one is the classic discussion surrounding body-mind issues: should patients be treated for something psychological or something physical? Is a psychiatric disorder

something that can be remedied by talking – affecting the psyche, or primarily by medication – affecting the body? Within this narrower type of philosophy of psychiatry, the question of this bio-psycho pair is leading, and the philosophical discussion revolves around that apparent contradiction. Those who speak about psychosis, about madness, are experts in either the bio or psycho approach to human beings, and insofar as there are any ‘real patients’ involved in this debate, they function more as data suppliers or consumers (with questions such as: ‘Was what you experienced something with which talking helped, or did you mainly benefit from medication?’) who function more as numbers in statistics than as experts intimately informed about madness.

In this kind of philosophy of psychiatry – in the narrower sense – the problematic position in the workplace is in fact repeated: the observer, the psychiatrist or psychologist, has knowledge of statistically substantiated generalisations, reflects on them, and the patient has a problem that needs to be managed and solved with the cheapest possible tools. Therefore, much of this philosophy of psychiatry ultimately revolves around the question of what the most efficient (self-)management methods are, whereby understanding what is being managed away is considered irrelevant. In the paragraph above, I argue that the language and experience of madness itself already escapes the framework of psychopathology, and that it boundlessly follows its nocturnal flight, its deviation in the dark, through domains that are fundamentally terra incognita, proverbial war zones, where in harmonious times of peace and harmony one would rather not set foot, and where one prefers to keep everything controllable and manageable from a distance. Better no people there! But robots, drones and ‘fighting machines’! Better to combat the disturbed, non-functional functioning of the amygdala or hippocampus with a laboratory-tested drug than to wrestle with the angel like Biblical Jacob. In the following paragraphs, I will show some of these struggles, without neutralising them through the distant, controlled – and controlling – language of psychiatry. In the rest of this article, drawing on the more extensive and refined understanding of madness that we have gained from the three figures of thought, I will focus solely on these two, on the two ‘single views’ of philosophy and madness, on their mutual relationship, their contradictions, their similarities, and the ways in which they can together give rise to meaningful and meaningless new languages and practices.

Perplexity and hyperreflection

What philosophical movements and perspectives – what single points of view – can we discern in madness? Let us explore this by assuming that the mad person may not always write fully developed philosophical research papers, but that he or she is a kind of proto-, crypto- or para-philosopher (see Feyaerts et al. 2021). What structures and themes do we find? We find access to the domain where madness is the principle of philosophy through the terms ‘perplexity’ and ‘hyperreflection’ from psychiatry. The most widely used handbook in psychiatry, the DSM, lists ‘confusion or perplexity’ as a characteristic of the

peak of a psychotic episode. Anton Boisen, a theologian who was personally acquainted with madness, noted (1942: 24):

The madman feels absorbed into an eerie and mysterious realm. The generally accepted principles of judgement and reasoning have disappeared. He no longer knows what to believe. His condition is one of utter perplexity regarding the essential foundations of his existence. Questions such as ‘Who am I?’, ‘What is my role in life?’ and ‘What is the universe in which I live?’ become matters of life and death.

Such testimonies of insane confusion and perplexity are legion. The term ‘hyperreflection’ also comes from (phenomenological) psychiatry. Instead of the insane person thinking too little or incorrectly, this refers to the overwhelming intensity and speed of self-conscious thinking in psychosis. Louis Sass states (2003: 155): ‘Hyperreflexivity refers to a kind of exaggerated self-awareness, a tendency towards objectifying attention that focuses on processes and phenomena that one normally experiences as part of oneself. Edward Podvoll (1990: 190) says: “Everything in the mind multiplies: forming clones, branching out into endless varieties of itself, without ever tiring, producing a jungle of new types of thoughts, an insatiable evolution that fills the whole world.” In psychiatry, such a combination of perplexity and hyperreflection is usually considered a ‘disturbed’ experience (note commonly used terms such as ‘exaggerated’ and ‘excessive’ in the definitions), because it often hinders functioning in everyday practice (see, for example, Fuchs, 2020). Hyperreflexivity is often considered and described as ‘delayed consciousness’, as the connection with the environment seems to be slower and more difficult. The experience itself, on the other hand, is often perceived as ‘accelerated’ – an acceleration that causes one to leave the slower rhythms of everyday life behind and lose contact.

In a philosophical mode, we can relate perplexity and hyperreflection to the basis of philosophy, namely, wonder and reflection. Madness as a combination of perplexity and hyperreflection can then be considered ‘paraphilosophy’, ‘proto-philosophy’, or perhaps ‘hyper-philosophy’, driven by the same – but more intense – impulses as ordinary philosophy (see also Derix 2024). When we analyse the expressions of madness more closely, we can distinguish three (linguistic) types of expression in which such proto-philosophy of madness is reflected.

First of all, there is the domain of natural language. This is available to everyone, and the madman uses it to articulate his experiences, to say what is going on. Personal backgrounds resonate here, but in general, the means of everyday language are used to try with all one’s might to express something unusual. Consider the enigmatic remarks of the German schizophrenic writer Harald Kaas:

When madness rises like water and passes the high-water mark, there are moments when something is revealed that you cannot speak about openly. That is why it is most clearly announced in the stammering of those who have been

burned by its light and who are condemned to remain silent about it for the rest of their lives. (Kaas 1979: 61)

In madness, ordinary language explodes and turns into an infinite game of transformations and reflections of signifiers and signifieds, in which the metaphorical character is striking. Some metaphors stand out, such as those of light and dark, fullness and emptiness, and that of fluid and fire.

A second domain of expression is the language of mysticism, religion and spirituality – already discussed above in the context of the visionary. It should come as no surprise that extraordinary experiences are described using language from a domain that deals with extraordinary phenomena, questions and problems concerning life and death, good and evil. Terms such as ‘revelation’, ‘enlightenment’, ‘rebirth’ and ‘apocalypse’ are therefore common in delusional discourse. It should be noted here that the avoidance of religious language in most psychiatric practices has not resulted in a more meaningful discourse for developing viable, meaningful narratives from the mad proto-philosophy. Outside of the practices of psychiatry, however, academic medical anthropology has managed to record meaningful narratives (see, for example, Pandolfo 2018 and Van Dongen 1994). In practice, however, the mad(wo)man with their meaningful experiences often ends up out of the frying pan into the fire of medical disease discourse, with or without a quasi-spiritual sauce. Charles Taylor (2007: 809) makes a sharp observation on this subject: “The discarding of religion was intended to liberate us, to give us our full dignity as acting persons by shaking off the tutelage of religion, and thus of the church, and thus of the clergy. But now we are forced to turn to new experts, to therapists and doctors who exercise the kind of control appropriate to blind and compulsive mechanisms and who may even administer drugs to us. Our sick selves are addressed even more condescendingly than the believers of yesteryear in the churches; they are treated merely as objects.” However, as I described earlier, this does not imply that the specialised branch of mental health care known as spiritual care could always provide an appropriate place for the insane.

A third expression of proto-philosophy is... philosophy itself. There is no language or philosophical approach capable of adequately expressing the domain of madness, since it is a domain where language, experience and reflection are (still and again) inseparable, where receptivity to the world is on the same level of experience as the interpretation and creation of the world (see also the discussion at the end of 2.2). But when madness does speak, the most obvious types of philosophy are those that revolve around such complexities and are closely related to the issues and themes of mysticism, spirituality and religion. These are philosophies that are closely linked to the moment of wonder (and perplexity) and are not yet too deeply entangled in their own discourse or tradition.

When we consider the floating cosmologies, the comprehensive systems and textual reveries that developed further from mad proto-philosophy, we see some common features. First of all, there is a tendency towards monism. The path to madness is characterised by boundary-crossing thinking; a tendency

to draw everything into a monomaniacal stream that transcends all contradictions and leaves nothing on another level of ‘shore’, ‘solid ground’ or ‘the other’. In concrete, lived madness, this can lead to fantasies about a ‘monarch’, ‘core’ or ‘Plotinian One’ in the depths of the mind, around which paranoid circles of meaning revolve (see Kusters 2020: 291ff.). Secondly, the philosophies of madness are often idealistic in nature. The breakthrough of hyperreflection into perplexity implies an overflowing of the mind into reality, a felt contact made from thinking to being. The accompanying mad experiences are feelings and thoughts of telepathy and telekinesis. Thirdly, through the appearance of ‘real contact’, the contacted imposes itself more strongly on the experience. Boundaries fall away, distance disappears, and it is as if all well-defined ‘essences’ burst open and freely swirling existences escape. This feeling of intensity, this ‘discovery of being’, leads to philosophies of affirmation and fullness. Associated psychopathological terms are mania, disinhibition and derailment.

Fourthly, after the initial phases of compact-hermetic ‘perplexity’, after the oscillating delights and fears, contractions and expansions, longer para-reflexive explanations and systems gradually emerge in which contradictions between nothingness and being, fullness and emptiness, good and evil, inside and outside, life and death, past and future are expressed in an inimitable way in crazy constructions (cf. analyses of Custance or Schreber in Kusters 2020) or in philosophically well-considered constructions – such as those of Schelling’s *Die Weltalter*. In his monograph on Schelling, Jaspers discusses how Schelling repeatedly attempts to bring wonder (or amazement or perplexity, in Schelling’s terms *das Staunen*) to a head, to capture it in words, discursive reasoning, systems, and ‘hyperphilosophy’, hovering on the edge of – at least textual – madness. Jaspers notes, among other things (Jaspers 1955: 9, 117): ‘I studied him with amazement at how such great impulses can so easily descend into madness’, and ‘Hegel wants to let perplexity disappear into knowledge, Schelling wants to let perplexity grow through knowledge into the clearest consciousness of the secret’ (see also Kusters 2020: 416ff).

The tragedy of much of this kind of searching, thinking and philosophy – whether it is of a mad nature or dressed up by more well-adjusted thinkers and philosophers – is that it attempts to find a fixed point in the mobility of one’s own thinking: a point where everything ends or begins, a boundary, horizon, or unquestionable given that can sketch frameworks and forge forms, that contains infinity and makes it livable, and that can fill nothingness with something that does not tend towards nothingness. Often, a moment appears somewhere – or call it a zone, a discursive problem, or an anomaly – in which it becomes clear that this is not possible. Alongside the fullness of the flow, there is the emptiness of impermanence. Nothing remains, no fixed words or solid ground appear in the philosophically insane thinking that disappears into nothingness. Just like average philosophical ‘reflection’, insane ‘hyperreflection’ does not lead to the discovery of a stable, safe world, but to that of an unstable, rapidly fluctuating private symbolism. It is up to the para-philosophers, insofar as they are able to take their own position above, outside, or beyond

the opposition between philosophy and madness, not to wash away, with the removal of the traditional philosophical bathwater, that child called madness, which is like a deviation in the darkness of chaos.

In conclusion

The thrust of this article is that more understanding and more philosophy are needed when thinking about madness, and I hope to have offered some ideas, perspectives and possibilities in this article. I first sought greater refinement and understanding with three figures of thought, and then took the bull of philosophy directly by the horns. In doing so, I was critical of the limiting and one-sided discourse of psychiatry, as well as that of a philosophically inspired form of psychiatry, in which philosophy is used only instrumentally: as a means to improve psychiatry and better manage the patient's health, rather than as a domain of fundamental questions and transdisciplinary reflections. This does not mean that the questions of the philosophy of psychiatry in the narrower sense are nonsensical; on the contrary, they are essential to the ins and outs of mental health care practice and must be heard and spoken aloud. However, when we talk about a philosophy of psychiatry in a broader sense, it is not self-evident who has the first word and who has the last, nor who should be heard first and who last. In this respect, there is an underground struggle or conflict between the archetypes of the sage, the doctor, and the madman. It is up to us — to para- and hyper-philosophers, but also to those who feel no need for prefixes to the title of philosopher — to transform such a struggle into a verbal and non-verbal interplay which, although 'nothing remains', ultimately gives Jacob's struggle with the angel the appearance of a dance, as a livable deviation in the darkness.

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Vauter Kusters

Devijacije u tami. O slepim mišima, veteranima, vizionarima i filozofima

Apstrakt

Ovaj članak razmatra psihozu ne prvenstveno kao medicinski poremećaj, već kao fenomen koji zahteva razumevanje pre nego objašnjenje. Dok se psihijatrija i neuronauka fokusiraju na kauzalne, biološke ili psihološke mehanizme, takvi pristupi ne uspevaju da uhvate kakav je to osećaj biti u psihozi. Kroz tri figure mišljenja, slepog miša, veterana i vizionara, nastojim da razvijem pluralno, imaginativno i filozofsko razumevanje ludila. Oslanjajući se na ideju Tomasa Nejkela o „jedinstvenoj tački gledišta“, slepi miš simbolizuje granice empatije i potrebu za narativnom multiplikacijom. Veteran otkriva moralne i društvene dimenzije traume i konflikta koji leže u osnovi psihoze. Vizionar predstavlja zamagljenu granicu između ludila, duhovnosti i uvida. U završnim odeljcima tvrdi se da psihoza uključuje „perpleksnost“ i „hiperrefleksiju“, pojmove blisko povezane s filozofskim čuđenjem i refleksijom. Ludilo se, dakle, može posmatrati kao proto- ili hiperfilozofija: radikalno preispitivanje smisla i stvarnosti. Članak zaključuje da psihijatriji nisu potrebni samo lekari i pacijenti, već i mudraci – filozofi – kako bi se ludilo razumelo kao „življiva devijacija u tami“.

Ključne reči: ludilo, filozofija, psihoza, trauma, fenomenologija, hiperrefleksija, perpleksnost, duhovnost, psihijatrija

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Mark Losoncz

IS MEDITATION THE ROYAL ROAD THAT LEADS TO PURE CONSCIOUSNESS?¹

ABSTRACT

Over the past 30 years, there has been an increasing scientific and philosophical attention to what contemplative and spiritual traditions for millennia have known as pure consciousness, free from concrete empirical content and egoic self-awareness. The article addresses whether meditation is the best candidate for the research of pure consciousness, as Thomas Metzinger claims in his book *The Elephant and the Blind*. The article calls this the Royal Road Thesis (RRT). The article first critically analyzes the concept of meditation, then uses descriptions of non-meditation to further deconstruct the concept of meditation. A section is devoted to an analysis of Metzinger's claim that minimal phenomenal experience (and pure consciousness) is not mystical in itself, and finally, this is all interpreted in the context of consciousness culture and spirituality. The article concludes that RRT is very problematic and should be replaced by a more nuanced approach.

KEYWORDS

pure consciousness,
pure awareness,
phenomenology,
Metzinger, mystical
experience, mysticism,
meditation,
consciousness,
spirituality

„Man had become distinct, unique, and separate. Now, man operates with the consciousness of separateness. So while meditating he is aware that he is meditating”. (Rav Pinson: *Meditation and Judaism*)

What is pure consciousness? The metaphor of „purity”, which has a rich history in Western philosophy, from Plato to Nietzsche, in the case of this concept, suggests that this kind of consciousness has no particular content, but

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rather bears the characteristics of awareness as such. In principle, it can be experienced within what is called ordinary wakeful consciousness, but there is also a version when it truly manifests in its phenomenal purity. In such cases, it lacks not only sensory perception, but also a spatial or temporal frame of reference, as well as bodily self-consciousness. Moreover, in such pure consciousness, the difference between the ego and the world ceases, and egoic self-awareness as such also disappears, transforming into a fully decentered, zero-person perspective, without empirical content. In short, both subjectivity and objectivity are erased, and thus the difference between them. Those who experience this state feel like they are in contact with primary reality itself, their true nature, their ever-present background which now ceases to be a mere background. Although it is suggested that this luminosity of pure consciousness underlies all of our experiences, it is rarely revealed in its full purity. However, contemplative and spiritual traditions around the world, often independently of one another, have reported on this mode of consciousness for thousands of years. What is new is that contemporary science and philosophy have also begun to systematically take an interest in pure consciousness and related modes of givenness (e.g. Woodhouse 1990, Travis and Pearson 2000, Dainton 2002, Dunne 2011, Baars 2013, Bachmann 2014, Costines, Borghardt, and Wittmann 2021, Schlosser 2021, Meling 2022, Ramm 2023, Jones 2024). Today, the dialogue between and about traditions is intensifying, the empirical material is enriching, neuroscientific insights are gaining increasing importance, and concepts are becoming more precise. An exceptionally important and invaluable moment in this trend is the publication of Thomas Metzinger's 600 pages long *The Elephant and the Blind: The Experience of Pure Consciousness: Philosophy, Science, and 500+ Experiential Reports* (2024). This research involved 3,500 respondents to a questionnaire on the experience of pure consciousness, and 1,403 of them provided usable data. However, it is worth adding that *The Elephant and the Blind* is much more than a mere elaboration of the results of empirical research: on the one hand, it takes into account many traditions, and on the other hand, while keeping neuroscientific insights in mind, it also proposes, organically fitting into Metzinger's oeuvre, a fine-grained phenomenological analysis. Although he calls the book a prolegomenon, it actually offers the most systematic philosophical and scientific approach to the problem of pure consciousness so far. The book deserves to be taken very seriously.

Meditation is often given great importance. For example, it has been suggested, departing from the traditions – both paraphrasing and changing Freud's original saying – that meditation is a „royal road to the Unconscious” (Washburn 1995: 153). Ken Wilber, the developer of integral theory, stated that meditation is the „royal road to Spirit” (2014, cf. 2015). A similar premise is the starting point of Metzinger's research. This is an extremely strong thesis: „the experience of pure awareness in meditation is the best and most natural candidate that we currently have for MPE [minimal phenomenal experience]” (Metzinger 2024:

290, cf. XIX).² This significantly influenced the research. For example, in the questionnaire, question 58 reads as follows: “were you aware of meditating?”. There is also a question that goes like this: “did your experience occur during a formal meditation session or spontaneously, outside of formal practice?”. That is, although there may be good reasons to believe that the experience of pure consciousness can be reached through multiple paths, the questionnaire assumes that respondents entered this state specifically through meditation. Although Metzinger mentions other ways of experiencing pure consciousness throughout the book (such as moments after awakening or epileptic seizures), it is nevertheless clear that for him meditation is the “royal road”. The research started from the premise that meditation is the right way, so accordingly, the overwhelming majority of reports were based on meditation (what is more, more than 77.3 percent reported regular meditation). Demographically, the research also contains a highly suspect “contextual” bias: the overwhelming majority of participants are Western, and in fact, 63.4 percent of the useful reports were filled out in German, Metzinger’s native language. Worse still, it turns out that “in phase I a personal invitation ... was emailed by T[homas] M[etzinger] to a number of regular and committed practitioners of meditation” (Gamma and Metzinger 2021: 4). The research was in a certain sense designed and realized to confirm its own unwarranted assumption – an assumption that is presupposed but never argued for.

The basic message of this article is that this starting point of Metzinger’s research is unfounded. These are not only methodological difficulties, but also serious substantive problems. The Royal Road Thesis (RRT) will be challenged and deconstructed in three steps. First, it will be pointed out that meditation is a very problematic concept, and that a multitude of contingent cultural, historical, and other circumstances shade its vague meaning as we tend to use it today. We will then further deconstruct the significance of meditation using descriptions of non-meditation. As a further step, we will question another of Metzinger’s claims, according to which „MPE itself is not a mystical experience”. Finally, the implications of these insights for the culture of consciousness (*Bewusstseinskultur*) will be discussed, which is also very important for Metzinger.

The Fragility of the Concept of Meditation

The original meaning of “meditation” is to think over, to consider, to investigate, to think carefully. The Latin *meditatio* and the Greek *meletē* both implied the meaning of “serious and sustained reflection, to ponder.” *Meditatio* (as a close relative of *ruminatio*) very often meant the interiorization and memorization of scriptural texts (one of the sisters of the muse Meletē in Greek mythology is Mnēmē, “memory”). When we describe the writings of Marcus Aurelius as

2 In his book Metzinger defines minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) as the “maximally simple form of consciousness” (Metzinger 2024a, p. XXVIII) and considers it to be synonymous with pure consciousness (e.g., Metzinger 2024a, pp. 4, 47).

Meditations, or when Descartes titled his work *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the operation of this semantic dimension is also clear. Guigo I, a Carthusian monk from the 12th century, characteristically defined the meaning of meditation as follows: “the busy application of the mind, with the help of one’s reason” (PL 153: 699–700, quoted by McGinn 1994: 358, cf. 385–7, 391). Furthermore, when Hugh of Saint Victor described meditation as a distinct phase of spiritual practice, he also stated that meditation, in addition to being reflective reading (*lectio*), was also a quiet intellectual activity, a deliberate *cogitatio* (*meditare* and *cogitare* are connected to each other, for example in Cicero too, see Ernout and Meillet 1951: 699). It was a mental process that was supposed to lead to conclusions, and, at the same time, its moral dimension was very strong. It is also symptomatic that Guigo I, in the above-mentioned same passage, on the other hand, defined contemplation as: “the mind is in some sorts lifted up to God above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness”. In fact, what this ecstatic description, and the Christian tradition in general, defines as contemplation, is much closer to the modern meaning of “meditation”, in that it also includes the meaning that it might “imply a reduction on reflective thought or even in mental activity” (Farias, Brazier, and Lalljee 2021: 31). Meditation was sometimes seen as a preparation for contemplation which meant something else (e.g. Baier 2009a), and this terminology has been valid for centuries. For example, even in Adela Curtis’ *New Mysticism*, published in 1906, meditation was still partly a phase of contemplation (see Baier 2009b: 513). An indescribably important transformation of meaning happened though: due to radical semantic changes, “meditation in our times has become almost synonymous with the idea of non-analytical or non-rational contemplation” (Farias, Brazier, and Lalljee 2021: 40). In contemporary folk – and scientific – discourse, meditation increasingly means less and less “I will meditate on that question further”, in the sense of pondering, and more and more refers to the calming of mental activity, the pacification of the mind.

This is also relevant to the concept of pure consciousness. Pure consciousness as such is by definition unstructured, that is, its experience is not defined by concepts or categories as commitments of identifying or cataloguing. Accordingly, Metzinger writes that “our target in this book is therefore the entirely nonconceptual awareness of awareness itself” (2024: XVII). The fact that Metzinger, in line with RRT, describes meditation as the eminent path to entirely nonconceptual awareness seems, from the perspective of conceptual history, to be highly contingent, the result of a complex historical process, a semantic transformation within the Western sociocultural context, the results of which could in principle be different. He uses a contemporary modern – dominantly Western – concept of meditation, in an uncritical and imprecise way, which obscures very important elements of the conceptual history. Based on a different strategy, it would also be legitimate to say that „the most rigorous concept of *meditatio* emphasizes a focus on the mind and reason (*logos*), a reflexive capacity that is typical of the Axial Age” (Silva 2021: 515).

In principle, it would be possible for Metzinger to ignore these difficulties and still propose a concept of meditation that is somehow functional. However, while Metzinger analyzes many expressions with extreme nuance and caution (such as simplicity, perspective, virtuality or “being at home”), the concept of meditation remains unreflected throughout. It appears as a natural given, as a self-evident neutral, quite homogenous and ahistorical-transcultural-universal primal datum, which is immune to criticism. It would be a mistake to accuse Metzinger of some kind of meditative essentialism, because he does not even propose an essentialist definition (see 2024: XX). He once mentions that experience, which is neither filled with agency nor completely agencyless, is “a liberating form of indeterminacy, a phenomenology of neither-nor-ness” (ibid. 83), and that suchness “resists any form of conceptual approximation” (ibid. 85). However, the uncritical use of the concept of meditation is not liberating at all, and throughout the book we do not sense any kind of approximation taking place. An attempt at conceptual accuracy would have been much needed, as there is no consensus in contemporary meditation research on the meaning of meditation. It is still true what Richard E. King wrote that “meditation remains an under-theorized concept” (2021: 51). Some authors “handle” the multiform and diverse nature of meditation in a way that maximizes the extension of the concept, sometimes to the point that all *differentia specifica* disappears. This means, for example, that they consider meditation to include the deciphering of Zen koans, the dissolving of the Sufi mystic’s heart in Allah, and Daoist qigong (an example of such loose language is Shear 2006) (an interesting example is the case of Louis Komjathy, who states that there is no direct equivalent to “meditation”, explains which words are used in the Chinese/Daoist context [“sitting”, “guarding the One”, etc.], and then still uses the “comparative” term “meditation” for Daoist contemplation techniques, Komjathy 2021: 186). Experiential plurality often dissolves into a homogeneous meaning (this sometimes corresponds to the quasi-universalist statement that meditation is “a worldwide practice found in every major religion and in most cultures”, Walsh and Shapiro 2006: 229). In fact, a kind of “customization and detraditionalization for the spiritual consumer in capitalist societies” (King 2021: 52) is taking place, in the framework of which the meaning of meditation becomes free-floating and trivialized, and can then be “discovered” again in so many cultures, sometimes dating back up even to 5000 years. However, it is typically not usually “discovered” in the West or in Abrahamic traditions, in one’s own culture (this sometimes goes hand in hand with the degradation of prayer). The original Western meaning is thus distorted, the new meaning is projected onto others, and then in a next step, an attempt is frequently made to apply it within the framework of the “Easternization of the West”, but mostly with a modernizing agenda – a very strange path. There is a “politics of translation” full of tension. Metzinger’s terminology is not culture-free, but a product of this complex process (it would also be worth critically examining the use of the words “Eastern” and “Asian” in *The Elephant and the Blind*). He notes that the participants are otherwise mostly adherents of a specific “meditation

technique” (Vipassanā, Metta, etc.), but his analysis mostly ignores the details. Metzinger openly rejects perennialism, however, the abstract construction of meditation appears as a generic activity that can be freed from the burden of tradition-specific meanings and native frameworks – the strategies of recontextualization are followed by even stronger effects of decontextualization. This is a further appropriation of traditions that have already been appropriated, filtered by Western reception, for Metzinger’s own purposes. Metzinger acknowledges that “this kind of analysis is vulnerable to many forms of bias and has serious methodological limitations” (2024: XX), but it must be shown precisely what serious difficulties are involved. Terminology does contaminate the research – but this also applies to “meditation” itself.

It is worth briefly mentioning Buddhism, as Metzinger gives it a certain privileged importance, and a very high percentage of participants claim that they practice Buddhist techniques (Vipassanā, Metta, Shamata, or Mahāmudrā, Chan or Zen). “Buddhism” itself is a construct, created through the 19th-century comparative study of “world religions” (“Buddhists” themselves speak much more of Dharma, for example, certainly not of an -ism) (Masuzawa 2005: 121–147). Western reception has projected many things onto “Buddhism,” sometimes accusing it of sheer nihilism, sometimes celebrating it as a rational, empirically based spirituality, and so on. The latter is important here, as it has also influenced the interpretation of “Buddhist meditation”. At the time when modernizing agendas were generally beginning in Asia (Meiji in Japan, the Republic of China, the Bengali Renaissance), a reformist current also began in Theravāda “Buddhism,” in Burma and other countries. One of the main goals was to show that “Buddhism” was not inferior to Christianity, or that it is even more valuable than it (which statement, in a certain sense, also appears in Metzinger 2024: 208). What might appear to be the revival of ancient traditions of introspective meditation was much more a series of inventions and fictitious constructions. One important figure was Anagārika Dharmapāla, a member of the Theosophical Society founded in New York in 1875, who, influenced by Western ideas, became a proponent of Buddhist modernism that emphasized laicity, harmony with modern science, individual creativity, anti-institutional character – and meditation as opposed to external rituals. Thus, gradually something was constructed that is also commonly called rationalized Protestant Buddhism, in which meditation acquired a status that it did not previously have: the emphasis was increasingly on the private and extraordinary experiences (and well-being) of the atomized individual at the expense of devotional-sacramental, pedagogical, propedeutical, pietistic, communal, soteriological, etc. functions.

While all Buddhist traditions are undoubtedly important, to reconstruct this aspect of the meaning of meditation, one must first understand the reception of Theravada. This is because it was often given priority in historical scholarship, with a heavy emphasis on the Pali canon, leading to the frequent suggestion that Theravada represents the most original form of Buddhism. In this context, it is particularly important to emphasize the role of Ledi Sayādaw,

Mingun Jetavana Sayādaw, and Mahāsī Sayādaw who played a central role in the construction of Buddhist modernism, which was also an essential prerequisite for the contemporary hype around “mindfulness mania” (Thompson 2020: 87–102). Meditation techniques were adapted to laypeople, increasingly freeing the basic message from “Buddhist” teachings. For example, mindfulness (originally just one of many qualities, a specific part of the Eightfold Path that included “self-restraint and concern for the welfare of others”, Thompson 2020: 87) has been decontextualized, concentration and absorption were deemed to be devaluated (and *sati* or mindfulness was presented as continuous lucidity), the importance of the renunciatory lifestyle has faded, meditation was increasingly emerging as a psychological cure, ethical codes (set of values, evaluative judgments etc.) were pushed into the background or even entirely neglected, they began to emphasize that success can be achieved in the short term, etc. Siegmund Feniger, born to a Jewish family in Germany and later a Buddhist monk under the name Nyanaponika Thera, introduced the term “bare attention” in 1954, referring to the non-judgmental attitude we adopt towards phenomena during meditation. However, this was a distorted translation. During the complex debates surrounding bare attention, it was pointed out, among other things, that originally “there is little that is ‘bare’ about the faculty of *sati*, since it entails, among other things, the proper discrimination of the moral valence of phenomena as they arise” (Sharf 2014: 943). Moreover, the Sanskrit equivalent of Pali *sati*, *smṛti*, means to remember, for example the Vedas; and it means something similar in the “Buddhist” traditions (this is also important because it resonates with what was claimed about memorization of scriptural texts in the Christian traditions – for example, in Teresa of Ávila, meditation is essentially recollection). So what John Kabat-Zinn and others describe as non-judgmental, bare attention in mindfulness today is also very much the result of a complex historical process, a construction (which is not to say that non-judgmentality is completely absent from traditions such as Mahāyāna, see for example Husgafvel 2018). The modernizing-reformist transformations essentially fulfilled exactly this function: to create an oversimplified technique and protocol that can be easily commodified and exported. These changes, such as Mahāsī’s inventions, were sharply criticized in their homeland – but from the West, this hugely problematic export package is seen first and foremost. As Robert Sharf writes:

Vipassanā was traditionally understood as a kind of analytic discernment cultivated through memorizing, internalizing, and ‘bearing in mind’ (*sati*) key abhidharmic categories. (...) Reformers like Mahāsī could jettison this by approaching *sati* as ‘mindfulness’ and treating vipassanā as the meditative experience of ‘bare awareness’. Path and goal become one, and advanced stages of insight are available to anyone willing to follow a simple technique (2014: 952–3).

To put it simply, “Theravāda was refashioned in the image of post-Enlightenment Christianity” (Sharf 1995: 252).

What we have said can be applied to other Theravāda traditions as well, and to other “Buddhist” traditions. Fortunately, Western Buddhism and Buddhist modernism have a very rich critical literature (e.g., Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, Faure 1993: 15–89, Lopez 1995, Lopez 1998, McMahan 2008, Braun 2013, Wilson 2014, Purser and Milillo 2014, Huntington 2015). These debates and controversies also touch on meditation and “McMindfulness”, from de-ethicised therapeutic techniques to the issue of militarisation – it is unnecessary to go into these details here. As we have seen, Western reception has distorted not only “Buddhism” in general, but also meditation itself, in many ways – it has begun to consider this specific practice of elite virtuosi as the core of “Buddhism” (which was much less significant than we think today), and at the same time has taken it out of its original lifeworld, increasingly considering it as a mental discipline that can and should be a stand-alone activity. This “Buddhism” and “meditation”, passed through multiple ideological filters, appear in Metzinger’s book, *The Elephant and the Mind*, without reflection. When we read that, for example, 43.9 percent of the participants are Vipassanā practitioners, we must keep in mind that this is actually a modernist construction, further distorted by Western and secular Buddhism. Metzinger considers it important to emphasize that pure consciousness played a major role in “Eastern philosophical traditions” and that “contemplative practice has mostly taken place against the background of religious belief systems like Buddhism or Hinduism” (2024: XVII). We can now ignore the extent to which this use of the term “East” is a problematic orientalism and what an extraordinary role contemplation has played in the West for centuries, but it is important to note that what appears throughout the book as “Eastern practice” is in many respects the result of modernist-reformist tendencies under Western influence, in which missionaries, scholarship etc. also played a part. It was a very ambivalent process: the West served at once – in a self-deprecating way – as an example to follow and as a partner in debate.

It is worth highlighting that Western and secular Buddhism is not only an Anglo-American product, but also a significant part of it is German. The German pre-modern history of meditation is also exciting (e.g. Luther), but also the modern German history, for example Carl Happisch, who outlined “meditative psychotherapy”, Philipp Dessauer, who introduced the concept of “natural meditation”, Karl Graf Dürkheim, the esotericist with a significant Nazi career, the “vicar of Hiroshima”, Hugo Enomiya-Lassale, who tried to associate Catholicism with Zen, etc. This process resulted in Ingrid Riedel being able to state that meditation had become the central practice of the *Neue Religiosität* (1975), or Karl Baier being able to write that meditation had become a cult word and the magic expression of the time (Baier 2009: 910–911). There are also other interesting connections in the history of ideas, for example, regarding the influence of German Romanticism on the modern Western reception and interpretation of Buddhism and meditation (Bhikkhu 2012). Metzinger’s research, in which 64.4 percent of the useful reports were filled out in German, and 55.4 percent of the participants were from Germany, is at the end

of this complex process, full of contingencies, arbitrariness and misunderstandings. It is not only that Metzinger – who, as he himself admits, has been meditating for decades – uses the concept of meditation naively, uncritically, without nuances and unreflectively, and that this raises serious substantive and methodological questions, but this is also related to the concept of pure consciousness whose semantics may also raise important questions. To give just one example: while Metzinger’s book fundamentally presents pure consciousness as the goal to be achieved by „Eastern philosophies and practices” (or at least by some secular interpretation of them), the question can be raised as to whether the transformation, reduction and then withdrawal of attention in these practices itself „does not yield ‚nonconceptual awareness’ so much as the cessation of consciousness itself” (Sharf 2014: 944). Certain traditions suggest exactly this, but are ignored.

It is one thing that the critical approach can reveal the complex conceptual history of meditation, and it is another that contemporary meditation research, which has mostly forgotten its original meaning, cannot even reach a consensus on its current semantics. This is understandable, of course, since it is the result of a complex interplay of today’s significant factors, the processes of popularization, scientification, and psychologization. The current history of the Western concept of meditation includes, for example, the pet detective Ace Ventura who, chanting „alrighty then”, teleports himself from Africa to Tibetan monks (and actor Jim Carrey, who often speaks about the power of meditation), contemporary medical-cognitive-behavioral discourses that talk about „neurodharma”, „cortical thickness” or „plastic brain changes”, or also the masses of Westerners who, for example, want to be Buddhists while at the same time „real nonattachment ... is something ... [they] either cannot or will not concede” (Cox 1977: 84), so meditation is very often just a trendy wellness activity. When we examine contemporary meditation research, we see that it is emphasized that „currently, there is no agreed upon definition of meditation in the scientific literature” (Bond et al. 2009: 135). A similar ambiguity often surrounds the term mindfulness, which is sometimes treated as synonymous with meditation (and at other times distinguished from it). For example, it is said that in the future “the various possible meanings of ‚mindfulness’ have to be clarified” (Dam et al. 2008: 16), that there are “limitations of the notion of mindfulness” (Millière et al. 2018). A recent article suggests that “a general consensus for defining and differentiating between meditation techniques currently does not exist” (Sparby and Sacchet 2022). Finally, a review about meditation research states once again that “criticism regarding the lack of clarity concerning theory, definitions, and taxonomy, as well as deficient or poorly reported methodology, has arisen”, and emphasizes that it is desirable to “provide clear and unambiguous definitions of constructs and practices” (Engström, Willander and Simon 2021: 541). It seems like the task is being postponed forever. Such examples could be cited in an infinite number.

If demarcation criteria and cross-cultural classifications are proposed despite the challenges, a thousand and a thousand difficulties arise. For example,

is it really necessary to define meditation as logical relaxation (letting go of goal-striving, suspending analytical judgment, releasing conceptual processing...)? What about those practices in which analytical-conceptual-discursive insights play a central role? And then it is not right to define it as “mental silence” in general, is it? Is meditation necessarily a defined technique? In response to those who claim meditation is a specific practice, we can raise a counter-question, drawing on Jiddu Krishnamurti’s teachings: what if that meditation is not something separate, but an unformalizable, continuous awareness that permeates all of life? And what about the paradoxical „non-practices” of non-meditation? Is meditation necessarily self-induced? Doesn’t guided meditation contain an external instance? Does a potentially selfless state really need to be described using the term “self”? Is meditation an altered state of consciousness? Don’t we risk projecting an overly problematic concept (Fortier 2017) onto meditation? Would it help to define meditation in other very general and complex terms, such as when it is said that “it is embedded in a religious/spiritual/philosophical context”? And when they define meditation as a “cognitive training technique to regulate and monitor attention, perception etc.”, aren’t they proposing a modernist de-ethicised perspective, taken out of the context of the traditional lifeworlds of meditation? And is such a description sufficient to define the *differentia specifica* of meditation? “Cognitive” itself also implies a very complex semantics, carrying with it a variety of connotations: intellectual, internal, abstract... And, for example, it can be argued that meditation is not internal at all... (e.g., Fasching 2008). And why is it that some people who consider meditation to be attention regulation also consider Sufi dancing and sweat lodge as meditation? Some people deny that meditation is an activity, describing it as a way of being; non-meditation is also described as being without an activity. And so on.

It is unnecessary to continue with further deconstruction, because the difficulties of definitional attempts are encoded in the conceptual history of meditation. No matter how much a new attempt tries to be multidimensional, to take into account the diversity of practices, to emphasize that this practice is not a discreet stage but a process, or to skillfully balance between too narrow and too broad definitions, “meditation” carries within itself the essential distortion that has occurred in the Western conceptual history, and this has been made even more serious by further serious complications over the past 150 years. No concept intended to be operational, however cautiously proposed by and no matter what „concerted efforts to define” are invested in it, for example, a family resemblance approach, can overcome this difficulty. Metzinger’s research, the premise of which is RRT, was carried out with a concept burdened with serious tensions. A *conceptus absconditus* is one of the most important pillars, which seems to withdraw itself the more we try to grasp it. To put it simply, it is not clear at all that meditation is the royal road to pure consciousness if we can’t really say what it is, without referring to the incommensurable meanings revealed by historical-critical analysis.

The Challenge of Non-Meditation

If we temporarily set aside the difficulties associated with the concept of „meditation”, we can state that non-meditation is mostly defined as an experience that fulfills the goals of meditation, but by suspending or neglecting the characteristics of formal meditation techniques. Non-meditation is, in principle, purely spontaneous and effortless, lacking the ultimately alienating and dualistic aspiration of “I am doing meditation”. It can also occur unplanned in the midst of everyday activities, for example as a kind of micromeditation. Spacious awareness could then naturally arise with the purity of full luminosity. It is suggested that while meditation is a deliberative practice that has an agent and a goal, non-meditation is said to be more about recognizing – rediscovering – the always already existing awakened nature of consciousness and the unwavering existence that does not need to be practiced. It is often described as the immediate and causeless self-arising of our primordial state. Thus, the silent and resting clarity of non-meditation is ultimately not a practice or an action, but rather a simple way of being, a letting go and letting happen, a joyful “okayness”. In a certain sense, those experiencing non-meditation are always already where they need to be, with separate egoic-self awareness dissolving in the background, or even completely free from it. It is suggested that disciplined methods, mental agitation, forced effort, etc., would only remove us from this zone. Similarly, it can be said that pure consciousness is also pure in that it cannot be constructed. In contrast, meditation as a second quality added to being – the attempt to meditate and to improve something – ultimately distances us from it and can ruin it completely. The propensity of generating meditation, the fixations of voluntary control, the endeavor of trying more or less hard, the distracting fabrications, the filters of interpretation and interferences, the heavy baggage of “I meditate”, the planned structuring of unstructuredness ... – all might make it impossible to experience pure consciousness. There is “a vortex of thinking about the practice, framing the practice, resisting the practice, and comparing and judging our practice against a perceived ideal” (Baker 2021). That is why it is suggested sometimes that consciousness should not be held hostage to labels such as “meditation”. One might say that not a single enlightened being meditates. However, there is no point in telling someone: “do nothing”, “be passive”, “keep doing nothing”, “don’t act”, “don’t meditate” (...) Non-meditation itself can only be realized through non-means. Accordingly, there is no need to cultivate, there is nothing to cultivate.

Metzinger not only knows about non-meditation, but he devotes an entire chapter to it (2024: 421–445). However, the question is whether he draws the right conclusions and whether he does not assimilate the challenge of non-meditation into his own presuppositions. Metzinger applies to non-meditation the theory he developed with Iuliia Pliushch, the dolphin model of cognition, which describes the interplay of conscious and unconscious processes. In fact, he suggests that the non-meditation is also the end result of such interactions. While some participants describe experiencing pure consciousness when they

are not meditating (and from this they come to the conclusion, for example, that “I will never have to meditate again”, 3624 quoted by Metzinger 2024: 425, cf. 430), Metzinger argues that the spontaneous occurrence of pure consciousness is ultimately mediated by two factors: “a continuous stabilization of unconscious preconditions of such experience through formal meditation practice”, and “an improved ability to *recognize* such episodes during everyday life” (ibid. 425). So when it comes to the experience of spontaneity, Metzinger emphasizes non-spontaneous presuppositions, when the occurrence of pure consciousness could take center stage, Metzinger highlights – in a typically modernist way – unconscious processes, and non-meditation as a counter-experience is revealed as the mere result of the formal practices of meditation. Accordingly, meditation is a mental discipline that can achieve phenomenologically contentless pure consciousness, but in reality the underlying mechanisms are unconscious processes in the brain and cannot be targeted (ibid. 439). Here too, Metzinger suggests that the autophenomenology of the experiencer of pure consciousness is somewhat wrong, and that 3rd person “heterophenomenology” (Daniel Dennett) will establish what is actually happening (for a critique of Metzinger’s interpretation of “phenomenology”, see Harman 2011: 15–21). Metzinger suggests that givenness, phenomenological spontaneity, is subject to the danger of the C-fallacy (i.e., some convinced feeling of consciousness is not yet a reliable indicator, but cries out for epistemic justification), and instead it is worth emphasizing “the unconscious causal precursors in the brain” (2024: 109). One might argue, of course, that all experience, even that of pure consciousness, somehow fits, for example, into the hermeneutical contexts of a person’s life. However, a much stronger claim is that, no matter how novel the experience may be and how it disrupts existing patterns, it is due solely to previously existing – unconscious – mental events. A simple question arises here: is it really true that “letting go” can only be achieved through formal-technical, systematic and goal-directed practices? Without disputing the importance of meditation understood in this way in the lives of millions of people: can there not be authentically unexpected experiences of pure consciousness, that is, that are not the result of previous non-spontaneous efforts, if, generally speaking, “there are always already micro-ecstasies going on in the subtle layers of experience” (Losoncz 2023a: 130), or if there is an external instance that brings forth it in an unpredictable way, so it is not the subject that „creates the right causal conditions”? Something that, in a deeper sense, would be an event? This might, of course, mean that the RRT is untenable. There are probably many more spontaneous events, if any, than there are experiences that can be gained through formal practices. Actually, Metzinger himself admits that there is spontaneously occurring minimal phenomenal experience, for example during transitions between sleep and wakefulness, flow states or during psychedelic experiences (2024: 431) (and maybe certain childhood experiences?, ibid.: 100). But then the general methodological and substantive question arises again: after all, why would meditation be “the best and most natural candidate” for the realization pure awareness? Especially since more

spontaneous experiences seem more „natural”. And in general: what are the criteria for “being the best candidate”? If speed and effectivity, then perhaps psychedelics, such as 5-Meo-DMT, are a better candidate (cf. Millière 2018). If the affective dimension, then, for example, ecstatic sex (cf. Losoncz 2024) also arises as a possibility. And so on. And, in general, if by non-meditation we simply mean, for example, the pure joy of letting go, maybe there is no necessary “dialectic” of meditation and non-meditation? To put it simply, is it possible for non-meditation to occur spontaneously, not as a result of formal practice?

It seems, but this should be further researched, that the most significant explicit traditions of non-meditation, the Tibetans, are generally more inclined to consider meditation as a prerequisite for non-meditation (*sgom med*), and to speak of a set of exact conditions and practices for non-meditation itself, to give protecting pointing-out instructions, etc. (see, for example, Brown 2006: 405–440). In line with this, it is customary to emphasize that non-meditation is an advanced state, and that stopping meditation too early is a thorough misunderstanding of the instructions. The general rejection of meditation is mostly considered a “don’t do nothing” type, nihilistic – that is, to be avoided – pseudo-instruction. They emphasize that within the relative conditions of consciousness, the relative effort of meditation is still important – until the gate to the ultimate state opens. However, the question arises whether there are variants in Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen, which leave open another kind of possibility which are bolder than this (like, if I’m not mistaken, when Keith Dowman talks about natural non-meditation in his book on radical Dzogchen non-meditation, 2020). It also arises that sometimes even beginners are capable of non-meditation. It is, of course, worth keeping the insights of these invaluable traditions in mind, while not forgetting their limitations.

Non-meditation is a complex conceptual figure, carrying a tension within it. On the one hand, as a term, it includes meditation, even if in the form of negation, and relies on it – and the effortlessness of non-meditation is often preceded in reality by the relative efforts of meditation. On the other hand, however, as a paradoxical counter-practice it also deconstructs it, and in principle can ultimately mean the neglect or elimination of meditation. In this respect, non-meditation might also point the way towards other processes that lead to pure consciousness, yet are not achieved through meditation. By devoting a chapter to non-meditation, Metzinger himself contributed in a specific way to the criticism of RRT: non-meditation is in a sense a “more natural candidate”, since it is effortless and spontaneous. Metzinger would probably say that meditation is the only doorway to non-meditation. However, with the variations of spontaneously occurring pure awareness, a completely different possibility opens up. The “subtle turn” or the full absorption might happen in other ways.

Is Pure Consciousness a Mystical Experience?

One state of consciousness that could imply an experience of pure consciousness would be the mystical experience. In this respect, Metzinger clearly states

that “MPE is not itself a mystical experience – though some MPE modes may actually fall under one or other technical definition of ‘mystical experience’” (2024: 325, cf. XVII, 328). Once again, just as there is no definition of meditation, so there is no definition of mysticism – it is not clear why the minimal phenomenal experience itself, and with it the pure consciousness, is *not* a mystical experience. However, Metzinger adds several things. First, in the introduction, he emphasizes that the experiences analyzed throughout the book will be those that “humankind’s meditators and mystics have known ... for millennia” (ibid. XII; he seems to call these “the most genuine forms of spiritual practice”, ibid. XV). Metzinger then adds that the book will draw on many classical texts, “such as /those/ from Buddhism or Western mysticism” (ibid. XXIX). Based on this formulation, could RRT be supplemented with the thesis of mysticism as an additional royal road? The terms “mysticism”, “mystics”, “mystical” appear in many contexts, in the company of the names of Mechthild von Magdeburg and Simone Weil, St. John of the Cross and Wittgenstein, Johannes Tauler and Robert Forman. Then, quoting and analyzing Meister Eckhart, Metzinger says that “many phenomenological details found in our own data ... had already been described by the mystics of the Middle Ages” (ibid. 323). Taken altogether, Metzinger clearly implicitly considers mysticism to be a separate category from meditation, and sometimes mentions them side by side, but surprisingly he does not consider mysticism to be the “best candidate” for paths to pure consciousness. Therefore, two serious difficulties follow. First, why does he not explain what he means by mysticism, and why does he claim that MPEs are not mystical experiences in themselves? Second, why does he not address the fact that – perhaps – mysticism involves practices other than meditation, which could lead to a significant change in RRT?

What Dean Inge wrote in 1899, that “no word in our language – not even Socialism – has been employed more loosely than ‘Mysticism’” (quoted by McGinn 1991: 266), still holds some truth today. The meaning of “mysticism” is also a huge challenge, and it involves serious difficulties. The original meaning of the Latin *mysticus* and the Greek *mustikos* refers back to *muo*, which first of all means “to close” or “to conceal”, but it also meant “silent” or “secret”. The other meanings refer to initiation, introduction, etc. So, basically, “mystical” meant that something is hidden, and in this sense, for example, Pseudo-Dionysius spoke of mystical theology around the 5th century, or in this sense, it was suggested that the mystical reading of the hidden messages of the Bible is also possible. When Origen spoke of the contemplation of divinity as a special mode of knowing *mystika*, the emphasis was on the objectively present contents of knowledge, not on any subjective state or feeling. The word “mystical” has been used in this way for many centuries. As a noun, “mysticism” is a relatively recent creation, as Michel de Certeau shows in *The Mystic Fable* (1995), a product of early 17th-century France. This resulted in an important shift in Western attitudes: mysticism began to refer to one’s own experience or language, and first-person descriptions proliferated. “Mysticism” largely started to mean a special experience, and it was in this sense that they began to

analyze it within academia, especially from the end of the 19th century. American scholars, such as William James, played a major role in this.

It is thought-provoking when a prominent researcher like Bernard McGinn, in his monumental series on Western Christian mysticism, states that “any simple definition of such a complex and controversial phenomenon seems utopian” (1991: XV), yet still continues to use the term “mysticism”, primarily meaning being in the presence of God, throughout his volumes. It is worth looking at a few more aspects of the concept’s history over the past 150 years. From our perspective, it is interesting that many people define the state of pure consciousness as a mystical experience. This trend began with William T. Stace, who viewed pure consciousness as the common core of all mystical experiences, especially those he termed introverted. For Stace, these are defined by a unitary, undifferentiated awareness without any sensory content (see, above all, Stace 1960: 85–86, 160–161, but also, for example, Brainard 1996: 360). Furthermore, in psychedelic research, it is particularly important to make the term “mysticism” as operational as possible. For example, Walter Pahnke’s 1963 ‘Good Friday Experiment’ was trying to show that “drugs” can occasion mystical-type experiences in high rates, and it is suggested that in 2006 Roland Griffiths and others again demonstrated that psilocybin can induce mystical experiences. In contemporary psychedelic research, it is claimed that there is a robust correlation between psychometric measures of mystical-type experience and lasting benefits, that is, “the degree of mystical experience is a strong predictor of clinical improvement” (Letheby 2021: 19–27, who relies heavily on Stace). Therefore, clarifying the concept is crucial. Pahnke (and his colleague William Richards) used Stace’s definition, according to which the properties of mystical experience are internal and external unity, noetic quality, transcendence of time and space, ineffability, paradoxicality, sense of sacredness, and deeply felt positive mood. Several difficulties arise from these. For example, it is doubtful whether mystical experience is truly paradoxical. For example, paradoxes are very often mere rhetorical devices that can be “explained away” (see Jones 2016: 233–261). Or the question arises whether mysticism literally suggests that this experience is ineffable. Mystical accounts are actually often linguistically extremely rich, and many mystics make very clear knowledge-claims and positive characterizations of transcendent realities (see, for example, Jones 2016: 203–233, Knepper 2017, Diperna 2018: 204). Or, for instance, Abrahamic religions approach the issue of union in a much more nuanced way. That the union would always be a total *unio mystica* is a myth (see Idel and McGinn 2016, cf. Pike 1992). As we can see, many questions arise regarding the nature of the mystical experience. In any case, several operational definitions have been used on numerous occasions in the past 75 years of research. For example, Pahnke and Richards’ Mystical Experience Questionnaire was based on the 100 items of the States of Consciousness Questionnaire, highlighting 43 of them (1966). It is also worth mentioning the Hood Mysticism Scale (e.g. Hood 1975), and Spilka and his colleagues’ analysis (2005: 350–365), which led to the development of a 32-item mysticism scale in research led by Griffiths and

others (2006). In all such definitions and questionnaires, the main reference point is Stace's theory of mysticism.

If we look through Metzinger's book, we can see that his analysis of the experience of pure consciousness repeatedly draws attention to all the things that the definitions of mysticism we have mentioned refer to in the context of Stace's theory, such as paradoxicality (2024: 55, 94, et passim.), noetic quality (ibid.: 351), the transcendence of ordinary space and time experience (ibid.: 247–271). Or, for example, Metzinger expresses his gratitude to the participants “for trying so sincerely to communicate the ineffable” (ibid.; XVII). As a proponent of secular spirituality, he avoids the meanings of “sacred”, but still quotes a practitioner of transcendental meditation who speaks of a “sacred model of reality” (ibid.; 211). Finally, although we can observe ambivalence in this regard, Metzinger clearly notes the very positive affective tone of many reports, such as: “it is a feeling of merging with all happiness and all love. It is soooooo soooooo big” (ibid.: 717., ibid.: 273). Overall, there are definitions available for mysticism that might fit well with the way Metzinger characterizes pure consciousness in general. On the one hand, the oldest meaning of the “mystical” may also be relevant, insofar as pure consciousness is a layer or possibility of consciousness that is mostly hidden from ordinary wakeful experience. On the other hand, the modern meaning of “mysticism,” which is probably best viewed as a cluster-concept, has significant overlap with what Metzinger describes as pure consciousness. In other words, while Metzinger claims, without reflection and without argument, that “MPE is not itself a mystical experience,” it is not at all easy to imagine, given what has been said, an MPE or experience of pure consciousness that is not mystical in nature.

Why is all this crucial? Of course, first of all, because of understanding the nature of pure consciousness itself. Moreover, if we could say of mysticism that it is an eminent way to achieve pure consciousness (and, as we have seen, Metzinger himself also claims that pure consciousness is something that “mystics have known ... for millennia”), then the meditative RRT needs to be revised substantially. It can hardly be argued that the mystical state of consciousness is achieved only through meditation, unless we expand the concept of meditation so broadly that it ultimately loses all of its semantic weight. But there are further consequences as well. For Metzinger, one of the key questions is what makes a state of consciousness a good state of consciousness, and whether MPE, or pure consciousness, is a good state of consciousness (ibid. 479, 481, etc.). If, as we have seen in the case of psychedelic research, there might be a robust correlation between mystical experience and benefits, and on the other hand, mystical experience and pure consciousness overlap, then we are much closer to the right answer.

The statement that meditation is “the best and most natural candidate” for MPE or pure consciousness seems increasingly weak. Rather, it seems that Metzinger formulated this not-so-obvious statement in a modern culture-specific context, as a result of a complicated 150-year semantic transformation, “mindfulness mania,” and so on. On the other hand, it is worth taking into

consideration that Metzinger quotes, for example, Meister Eckhart, who says that God must be loved in a mindless way (ibid.: 318), or the fourteenth century Christian mystic Begine of Hadewijch, who says that the knowledge of our nature is to “experience human and divine love as one being” (quoted by ibid.: 315, cf. 322). Why does not the question arise as to whether the practice of formal meditation led to these experiences? Metzinger often refers to and quotes Hadewijch, whose descriptions correspond phenomenologically very well to pure consciousness: return to the groundless depths, one single taste of one nature... However, the path leading to this state and this state itself includes, among other things, excess of love and annihilation, “living on *minne*” (love), which Hadewijch also describes as madness (*orewoet*) (see McGinn 1998: 199–222). This does not at all seem to be the mental discipline that we usually understand by meditation these days. In fact, if we approach the question in this way, the millennial traditions of mysticism and other, e.g. affective, ways of achieving pure consciousness can open up for the research of pure consciousness. Hadewijch, for example, is an integral result of the 12th-century turn in Western Christian mysticism (affective Dionysianism, etc.). In the case of the practices of so many other affective traditions, it may be suggested that they lead to the experience of pure consciousness, from the *fana* of love-intoxicated Sufism to the mystical experiences of bhakti. Metzinger knows exactly that descriptions of pure consciousness very often report a positive affective tone, and even raises the radical hypothesis that perhaps consciousness is fundamentally affective (2024: 154), but due to the one-sided meditational RRT, all this remains in the background, and the possibilities related to them are not exploited. All this could raise a number of further questions. For example, shouldn’t research on peak experience, flow, ecstasy, etc. (for example, Laski’s classical pioneering insights, 1961: 176–226) also be systematically taken into account? Taking into consideration the complexity of mysticism could also lead to a much more subtle map of the triggers, modes, states and spontaneous occurrences of pure consciousness. Of course, what is really important here is not to qualify “mysticism” interpreted in a forcedly standardized way as a royal road at all costs, but to research further, nuanced and rich paths, critical phenomenological borderlands leading to pure consciousness.

The Dangers of Consciousness Culture

Andrew Atkinson has proposed a complex taxonomy of spirituality (1997: 97–111, cf. Schlamm 2001), which may be useful here, without going into detail. Atkinson defines Hot as spirituality that is directed, at least phenomenologically, towards a transcendence – numinous, powerful, etc. – which we cannot experience without relying solely on ourselves. Cool, on the other hand, is directed towards what is our essence, that is, access to it is a naturally given right. To this is added a further conceptual pair: Structured means that discipline or effort are needed, while in Unstructured spirituality liberation is already in our own constantly given nature or the connection with the divine simply requires

unconditional submission. For example, in Cool Structured spirituality (e.g. Theravāda) gradual self-realization is quiet, still and methodologically detailed; Hot Unstructured spirituality (e.g. Sufism) might be “lost in love”. From the perspective of this taxonomy of spirituality, Metzinger’s book is one-sided in that it relegates the phenomenology of Hot to the background in comparison to the analysis of Cool (and, moreover, he in fact claims that non-meditation is not possible without prior formal practice of meditation, that is, that Cool Unstructured spirituality cannot exist without Cool Structure). The arche-decision, an *ex ante* resolution that determines the whole framework of the investigation (see Losoncz 2020: 194–5), made at the expense of Hot lies deep within the meditative RRT. Metzinger mentions at one point the tension between divine grace and self-redemption, which he strangely sees as a difference between theology and “Eastern models”, but no important methodological or substantive insights emerge from this (2024: 111–112).

For Metzinger, it is very important that his research contributes to what he calls “consciousness culture” (*Bewusstseinskultur*) (he has also published a book on the subject, 2023). For him, pure consciousness “may turn out to be the ‘convergence zone’ where a more radical and intellectually honest form of spiritual practice, cognitive neuroscience, and modern philosophy of mind will finally come together” (2024: XV). It is clear from Metzinger’s comments that intellectual honesty for him means naturalism³ without a hidden metaphysical agenda and religious (or other ideological) background assumptions. (e.g., *ibid.*: XIX, 208). Meanwhile, we learn that 45.6 percent of the participants regularly practice meditation in a secular context (2024: XVII, Gamma and Metzinger 2021: 7). Metzinger seems to arrive at this conclusion on the basis that 45.6 percent of people defined themselves as “spiritual but not religious” or as “spiritual but not affiliated”, although there is also a separate secular category, with 13.4 percent of the participants. However, even Metzinger himself admits that “nobody knows what these concepts actually mean” (2024: 27). But what is then the relevance of the remark that 45.6 percent practice meditation in a secular context? And why would it follow that just because some people describe themselves as “not religious” or “not affiliated”, they also consider themselves secular? This may mean that they are not affiliated with religious institutions, but otherwise, supernatural sacredness is very important to them. For Metzinger, it is clearly most important that spirituality becomes independent from what he considers an irrational belief system (*ibid.*: 492), but practitioners of spirituality who describe themselves as autonomous from organized religions do not in themselves necessarily meet Metzinger’s criteria. Is it not possible, for example, that in fact a very large number of them attach great importance to the sacredness manifested in their experiences, which was

3 Naturalism in Metzinger’s philosophy is primarily a science-informed framework that allows for the analysis of important questions without resorting to supernatural or non-physical entities. In *The Elephant and the Blind*, for example, he calls his own undertaking “a generally naturalistic approach” (2024: XV).

mentioned earlier? A further problem is that Metzinger also unreflectively accepts Weber's diagnosis of the disenchantment of the worlds as a "sociological context" (ibid.: 178), which, however, probably never happened (for the thesis that the thesis on disenchantment is a myth, see Josephson-Storm 2017). Overall, it seems that Metzinger wants to consider the participants in his research who define themselves as spiritual as his allies, and projects the vague category of secularity onto them, but this seems extremely arbitrary.

Another problem is Metzinger's reference to metaphysically neutral descriptions of pure consciousness (2024: 150). This basically means that an account is limited to a phenomenological description of how consciousness is given, without suggesting anything about what noumenal reality is like in itself. It is worth adding that Metzinger also says that he is not interested in metaphysics (ibid: 463). But is his philosophy of pure consciousness really metaphysically neutral? If metaphysics "is that branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of reality in its most fundamental aspects" (Koons and Pickavance 2017: 3), then Metzinger's own "radically naturalistic perspective" (2024: 61, cf. XV) actually seems very metaphysical. What is more, at one symptomatic point, even he admits that naturalism is a kind of metaphysics (ibid. 463). And, as we have seen, he identifies naturalism with intellectual honesty. To sum it up, first of all, Metzinger at the same time reappropriates many traditions *and* decontextualizes the experiences of pure consciousness and meditation. Meanwhile, he seeks to free traditional accounts from their metaphysical background assumptions, while he is promoting his own metaphysical agenda, naturalism. This is all the more problematic since he himself acknowledges that there are other relevant metaphysical options besides naturalism, such as neutral monism or non-reductive forms of materialism (2024: 463). It is worth noting that there are also those in contemporary philosophy who, taking into account the doctrine of pure consciousness as well, represent a non-naturalistic position (e.g. Fasching 2016, Albahari 2019). Metzinger claims not to be interested in metaphysics, even though he himself admits that the naturalism he applies to pure consciousness is also metaphysics. Metzinger considers naturalism to be a sign of intellectual honesty today, even though he himself admits that there are other strong metaphysical positions as well. Contradiction upon contradiction. It goes without saying that the way we view metaphysics is crucial to contemporary spirituality.

Metzinger knows about the dangers of spirituality and meditation abuse, for example, that spiritual movements often create alternative realities for themselves, that the status of authority in them is often problematic, that practitioners often develop a spiritual superego, etc. Metzinger also cites Thompson's critical analysis that spirituality tends to become "experience-based forms of privately organized religious delusion" (Metzinger 2024: 493, 153). It is worth noting that the critical analysis of experience is particularly important because it can reveal that the concept of religious (or spiritual) experience is a "relatively late and distinctively Western invention" (Sharf 2012: 98) and that a one-sided emphasis on it can seriously distort the way we think about these things. The

fact that a subjective dimension, personal experience, often treated in isolation, has become the central category of the analysis of religious (or spiritual) life, has serious negative effects on understanding, since, for example, most religious experiences are explicitly and strongly embedded in communal practices. Even more important than Metzinger's ignoring of these difficulties is that he also omits something crucial: that Thompson (2020) also subjected "neural Buddhism" to sharp criticism (incidentally, he also sharply criticized the No Self View which is so important to Metzinger), since, according to him, those who connect neuroscience and meditation usually take "meditation" out of its life-world and existential-ethical context and distort it. "Spiritual naturalism" is an increasingly important topic (see e.g., Jones 2012, Letheby 2021: 196–205), but the way the author of *The Elephant and the Blind* tends to identify with it (Metzinger 2024: 326, 459) raises many serious questions.

Metzinger is often accused of unrestrained scientism, that is, that he considers natural science "the sole arbiter of what there is" (Zahavi 2005: 16). Similarly serious problems were raised with regard to his classification of phenomenology as false and neurophenomenology as desirable, or that he reduced personal levels of description to the subpersonal etc. (Harman 2011: 15–21). In the context of pure consciousness and meditation, the question arises whether Metzinger's identification of "causally enabling conditions" (Metzinger 2024: 437) is not too narrow and one-sided? Is not he overemphasizing the neural dimension of the processes while neglecting other factors, such as sociocultural ones, which may also contribute significantly to the experience of pure consciousness? Does not he take these experiences from their lifeworld and existential-ethical contexts in a distorting decontextualizing way too? And is he justified when he claims that "real spiritual practice ... is the epistemic practice of liberating oneself from background assumptions" (ibid. 172)? This ambitious statement seems to devalue traditions that are faithful to certain teachings, aiming, in a typically *Aufklärer* way, to get rid of assumptions, instead of understanding their hermeneutical significance (Gadamer 2004: 277–285). But even more problematic is that Metzinger, instead of taking a dialogical stance, authoritatively states what "real spiritual practice" is.

As exciting as Metzinger's analyses of certain concepts are sometimes, what is truly symptomatic is when he takes something for granted. Spirituality is a further example, although, while he speaks very positively of "secular spirituality", he could have relied on a large number of contemporary, critical approaches (e.g. Losoncz 2023b). When Metzinger states that "possibly the deepest sense of the word 'spirituality'" is that it is "a form of conscious experience that is completely independent of religious belief systems" (2024: 491), he suggests something peculiar. A critical history of "spirit" reveals, for example, the role of St. Paul (with his division of man into body, soul, and spirit) in the past of this Western concept, but also that "spirituality" has operated within this religious framework for centuries. What Metzinger is doing is part of the process that the title of Jeremy Carrette and Richard King's book suggests: *Selling Spirituality. The Silent Takeover of Religion* (2005) – with the takeover being

explicit in Metzinger, without ever defining spirituality of course (and in the process, he makes proposals that depart significantly from the traditions, regarding mortality denial or the new naturalistic interpretation of *samsāra*).

Finally, a difficulty has to do with a further important sacred cow, consciousness itself, and the “radical culture of consciousness” (2024: 492) advocated by Metzinger in general. Is it self-evident that consciousness should be at the center of spirituality? P. M. S. Hacker argued in his article on the “sad and sorry history of consciousness” that the concept of consciousness, which – in its current sense – entails a number of fundamental conceptual confusions, was unknown to the ancients and is a latecomer upon the stage of Western philosophy (2012). Instead of full immersion, consciousness may suggest that there is something that “needs to step outside of the flow of reality to recognize it.” But is it possible “to be on land and sea at the same time” (Heisig 2001: 48)? It is no coincidence that Martin Heidegger avoided using the word “consciousness”, since there is something alienating about it in relation to our everyday and immersed existence in the lifeworld (on this, e.g., Holland 2018). If we are looking for the “deepest meaning” at all costs: Mahāmudrā, for example, states that, from an absolute perspective, there is no “mind” or consciousness (Brown 2006: 415, cf. about the attainment of the mindless [*acittaka*] state Griffiths 1990: 78–82). Is it possible that the “deepest meaning” of spirituality should be described, for example, more as a pathless path or a way of being, and not as consciousness? However, considering this in detail is beyond the scope of this article.

Metzinger claims that his approach is generally not only scientific but also “spiritual, insofar as it also accepts meditation as an epistemic practice in its own right” (2024: 459). However, as we have seen, in his book, that is invaluable but problematic in many ways. Metzinger nowhere argues for a meditational RRT. Accordingly, the way he presents spirituality is necessarily one-sided and poor – vast continents of spirituality are left out. The other paths that might lead to pure consciousness – or even further – are relegated to the background. Unlike this, we need a more nuanced cartography of self-transcendence that is less unidimensional. Meditation today is a *façon de parler* that scientific and philosophical research should approach it more cautiously, more rigorously. The meditation-naïve perspective, seen in a broader historical context, is an ad hoc framework that is not heuristic in itself, but rather entails a series of problems. If we don’t need a paradigm shift, we definitely need more careful approaches. Metzinger is right: “we even need a new generation of scholar–practitioners not blinded by ideology” (ibid. 327). However, to align with this understanding, there is a great need for a more precise concept of meditation, to be developed through historical-critical analysis. On the other hand, research on pure consciousness must not lose sight of the plurality of paths to this state, avoiding undue priority to any single one. Instead, it must account for as many variants as possible. This process has already begun in connection with psychedelics (Losoncz 2025), but will undoubtedly continue in other areas as well.

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Mark Lošonc

Da li je meditacija kraljevski put koji vodi do čiste svesti?

Apstrakt

Tokom proteklih 30 godina, sve veća je naučna i filozofska pažnja prema onome što su kontemplativne i duhovne tradicije milenijumima poznavale kao čistu svest, oslobođenu empirijskog sadržaja i egoičke samosvesti. U članku se govori o tome da li je meditacija najbolji kandidat za postizanje iskustva čiste svesti, kao što Tomas Mecerger tvrdi u svojoj knjizi *The Elephant and the Blind*. U članku se to naziva *Royal Road Thesis* (RRT). Članak prvo kritički analizira koncept meditacije, a zatim koristi opise ne-meditacije da bi dalje dekonstruisao koncept meditacije. Deo je posvećen analizi Mecergerove tvrdnje da minimalno fenomenalno iskustvo (i čista svest) nije samo po sebi mistično, i konačno, sve se to tumači u kontekstu kulture svesti i spiritualnosti. U članku se zaključuje da je RRT veoma problematičan i da ga treba zameniti nijansiranim pristupom.

Ključne reči: čista svest, čista svest, fenomenologija, Mecerger, mistično iskustvo, mistika, meditacija, svest, spiritualnost, duhovnost

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Bence Péter Marosán

SPIRITUALITY, CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE EMANCIPATION OF LIFE. MICHEL HENRY'S SPIRITUALIST AND CATHOLIC INTERPRETATION OF KARL MARX¹

ABSTRACT

Michel Henry is quite a unique figure in the phenomenological movement, as well as in philosophy more generally. In his work, apparently contradictory and heterogeneous motifs were integrated – in my opinion – into a harmonious, organic and synthetic unity. We can find in his philosophy firstly four leading and orientating traditions that articulated the main framework of his thought: phenomenology, Catholicism, philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*), and the philosophy of Marx, the latter of which he sharply juxtaposed to the entire tradition of Marxism. In this regard, perhaps the two most important philosophical authors for him were Edmund Husserl and Karl Marx, the latter of which was considered by Henry to be the most crucial philosopher in the entire history of Western philosophy, and the most original and authentic phenomenologist (even in comparison to the founding father of the phenomenological movement, namely Husserl). Michel Henry believed that modern global society was in such a *crisis* from which only Marx's philosophy could provide a way out, in a theoretical regard as well as in a normative, practical respect. Henry was of the opinion that without drastically overcoming capitalism, Western civilization – as well as humankind globally – would collapse in intellectual, spiritual and also *physical* regard. *Barbarism*, which was vigorously criticized by Henry as a fundamental and intrinsic feature of capitalism, reifies everything and renders things under the viewpoints of utility and profitability, including phenomena like *subjectivity* and *consciousness*. We must emancipate human and non-human, conscious and non-conscious, life by radically surpassing capitalism. With this gesture, we can reach a genuinely authentic society, which also relies on an emancipated form of consciousness and *spirituality*. In this paper, we attempt to show how Henry reformulates the Marxian idea of emancipation, based on the aforementioned four traditions.

KEYWORDS

Michel Henry, Marx, immanent life, emancipation, consciousness as auto-affection, ecological crisis, critique of capitalism, spirituality

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Introduction. Henry: A Philosophy of Immanent Life and Spirituality

Michel Henry's lifework is one of the most unique and peculiar achievements of the 20th and 21st centuries. In his thought, rather heterogeneous and distant traditions were integrated in a harmonious, organic, and coherent synthesis, such as Catholicism, phenomenology, philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*), and the philosophy of Marx. Throughout his entire life he remained strongly committed to the Catholic faith, the phenomenological method, and the ideas of Karl Marx, which he emphatically distinguished from the entire later Marxist tradition, which he believed was a distortion of Marx's original thoughts. In Henry's philosophy, perhaps the two strongest, most emphatic components were Catholicism and Marx, and both impregnated and infused the other. Henry was deeply convinced that the greatest problem of contemporary society – which stemmed from certain fundamentally flawed features of Modernity – was the capitalist mode of production, which inhibited the birth of a truly spiritual and authentic society (and with it an authentic and genuine form of Catholicism), and threatened the entire world with intellectual, spiritual, and also physical destruction. In his opinion, Marx showed the way to an emancipated and authentic form of society and *life*, and thus a way – perhaps the only way – to our future *survival* in every sense of the word.

The point of departure for Henry's entire vision of ultimate reality and emancipated society was the *phenomenon of life*. His original philosophical and methodological stance was phenomenological, and he truly wanted to follow the slogan of phenomenology announced by Husserl, in his *Logical Investigations*: “back to the things themselves!” (Husserl 2001: 168). For Henry, the “things themselves”, to which the phenomenologist must first of all return, were represented by the phenomenon of life, which was initially not apparent and manifested, and required a certain excavation, which must be found and revealed by the phenomenologist. Life, according to Henry, was not manifest and visible; fundamentally, it was invisible, and could be found deep within the sphere of *immanence* (Henry 2015).² Henry sharply juxtaposed the domains of immanence and transcendence, interiority and exteriority, and identified the truly original dimension of phenomena and phenomenality in the former, in the arch-primordial region of radical immanence.

Starting with interiority and its immanence meant for Henry that, firstly, life was auto-affection: it affected itself and it was exposed to itself before it could be affected by something different: anything which was heterogeneous to it.³

2 Such absolute precedence of invisible, auto-affective, immanent life over everything external, physical, and material—and the former's foundational role in relation to the latter—can be seen, for example, in the following passage: “The invisible comes before every conceivable visible. In its invincible certainty, in the pathos of its suffering flesh or its joy, it owes nothing to the visible. If in him it is a question of Life, God is far more certain than the world. So are we. A phenomenology of flesh is now possible” (2015: 92).

3 To this, see also Davidson 2012: vii. “Life in its genuine sense, then, is revealed through the immediate affective embrace in which one feels oneself to be alive.”

In other words, he believed that auto-affection preceded hetero-affection (or exteriority) and the former founded the latter. The difference of interiority and exteriority referred to the difference of life and world, and, in his interpretation, (the experience of) life was more original than (the experience of) the world. Life feels, enjoys, suffers itself (this is the meaning of auto-affection), before it could reveal anything other than itself, before it could feel, enjoy, suffer the world, or anything extra-mental or life-transcendent. This conception forms the main theoretical basis for his criticism of Descartes and the Husserlian idea of intentionality. The most original evidence for Descartes was “*ego cogito*” (“I think”), which – in Henry’s idea – already placed the subject in the sphere of exteriority. In Henry’s view, the “*vivo*” (“I live”) was a far more radical piece of evidence than that of the *cogito*. His criticism against the Husserlian notion of intentionality had the same theoretical core: that being that intentionality aimed some sort of transcendence, and thus cannot be the original and first form of evidence. It represents hetero-affection and exteriority. The transcendence of intentionality – Henry said – was based on the immanence of life. Contrasted to Descartes, Husserl, and also Heidegger, in Henry’s view, *Marx* articulated the most original and authentic phenomenological conception of radical and auto-affective life.⁴

In this context – regarding his relationship to Husserl and his conception of consciousness – it is important to emphasize that he emphatically criticized Husserl’s notion of intentionality as a form of externality, as a phenomenology that places exteriority, namely, the *intentional object* in the centre (Henry 2008). In contrast to this, Henry highlighted pre-intentional, affective life; a form and level of subjectivity, which – Henry believed – preceded and grounded every objectivity, even the objectivity of intentionality. In this way, pre-intentional, auto-affective, immanent life, which was a flow of hyletic (sensuous-sensational) impressions was for Henry the eminent form and deepest, most original level of *consciousness*. *Consciousness*, Henry stated, before it could relate to anything external, anything different than itself, is related to itself, in a pre-intentional, purely immanent way. In this prime-original form, it is a hyletic, sensuous flow, which lives through itself prior to anything extra-mental or extra-conscious (see also Tengelyi 2009). This view will be highly significant in Henry’s interpretation of Marx, who – Henry believed – had such a conception of subjectivity and immanent experience of creative

4 Conceiving Marx explicitly as a phenomenologist is a recurring theme in Henry’s lengthy monograph, running from its beginning to its conclusion. One example among many is the following passage: “By presenting living individuals as the presupposition of history, Marx explicitly situates the principle of all economic, social, political, and cultural phenomena that ‘occur in the world’ and that we call ‘history’ in individual phenomenological life and in the necessity proper to it—in what this life is and in its essence, in life that wants to live and that, in order to live, must satisfy its needs, and that, in order to satisfy them, must work. Individual phenomenological life, all these lives or, to speak as Marx does, ‘living individuals’” (1983: 92).

activity, whose hidden core was this notion of pre-intentional, auto-affective consciousness, and conscious life.

Henry was of the opinion that the careful and attentive reader could find in the heart of Marx's entire work of life that the "essence" of humans (and all sensitive beings) was immanent, auto-affective, and embodied life, which was through self-enjoyment, self-suffering, and self-exposure, before it could be affected by the world and any form of exteriority. In the case of humans, this immanent, self-affective life was the fundamental capability of spontaneous, creative, joyful activity which experienced first of all itself, this process of active self-realization, before it could experience the result of this creative process. One of the most destructive features of *capitalism* is to *distort* this original immanent life, and to place everything into the exteriority of commodity fetishism and the relations of the capitalist mode of production, where everything has a price, which forms the essence of things – even humans' capacity to create. According to Henry, we must *dismantle capitalism* and start to establish a *socialist* society, following the ideas of Marx, in order to save mankind and the planet, and realize such a form of cohabitation which could truly ensure ideal conditions for the optimal functioning of immanent auto-affective life (2009, 2012a, 2014, 2018).

Henry is of the opinion that capitalism corrupts the essence of life itself. It destroys everything that is truly animate and spiritual. In this context, it is important to know that in Henry's view the essence of life is not its external, physical, biological aspect, but the internal, immanent side, that of consciousness, spirituality. Henry believes that capitalism destroys all such essential features in nature, in sensitive beings, and in humans in particular. Capitalism even spoils and corrupts the essence of Christianity, and Catholicism more specifically. It is Henry's opinion that Christianity could connect us to absolute life, from which capitalism separates us in an almost irrevocable way (2003). Emancipation is also about emancipating the true essence of Catholicism, and more generally Christianity and spirituality. In Henry's interpretation, both Marx and Christianity relate to expressing the essence of spirituality, and both are about conceiving a genuinely authentic human life. Henry believes that Christianity, just like the philosophy of Marx, has an intrinsically emancipatory aspect.

These motifs form the main framework of this present study, which will be articulated in four further sections. 2. A Radical Phenomenology of Embodied and Immanent Life, 3. Main Elements of Michel Henry's interpretation of Marx, 4. Capitalism as Modern Barbarism, 5. Conclusion: Socialism as a Way Out of Capitalism. A Society of Authenticity and True Spirituality.

A Radical Phenomenology of Embodied and Immanent Life

Henry presented the core and innermost essence of his philosophy as a *radical phenomenology of life* (see Kühn 1992, 2012, 2016). He wanted to explore life in its sheer and most original self-manifestation, as this phenomenon could be unfolded as the deepest foundation for every other phenomenon, as invisible

life grounding all forms of visible life and exteriority. Philosophically and methodologically, his general point of departure is Husserlian phenomenology: he wanted to radicalize Husserl's – and also Heidegger's – philosophy. In philosophy, he wanted to reveal the ultimate origins in a theoretically and methodologically legitimate way. In this regard, his next fundamental point of orientation was Christianity, and Catholic Christianity in particular. In Henry's interpretation, Christianity is the cultural condensation of the experience of *absolute life* (2003, 2012b, 2015). Phenomenology – especially as radicalized by Henry – merely articulates and expresses in a theoretically more rigorous and exact form what is inherent in Christianity.

For Henry, there were a significant number of cultural and theoretical formations in history that helped to formulate his own conception of life, which was meant to be a radical phenomenology of life. In phenomenology, Husserl, Heidegger, Scheler and Merleau-Ponty were particularly important for him, but before and aside from phenomenology, authors like Maine de Biran, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud,⁵ and before the 19th and 20th centuries, Christianity in general, and more specifically Meister Eckhart. Henry distinguished emphatically his notion of life from prevailing and mainstream conceptions in Modernity and in his own age, instead highlighting his search for a non-deterministic, non-mechanical, anti-naturalist notion of life free of reification and reductionism. Henry joined critiques of Modernity – the ones we can find in, among others, Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer – arguing that with the victory of the Modern naturalistic scientific attitude and rise of Western capitalism, *something had gone fundamentally wrong*. He agreed with these thinkers, who were speaking of a special sort of forgetfulness (*Vergessenheit*) in the history of Western philosophy, and in Modernity in particular. In a similar manner, as Husserl was speaking about a forgetfulness regarding the life-world, Heidegger spoke about the forgetfulness of Being (*Seinsvergessenheit*) (Heidegger 1993), and in Gadamer, one can find indications as to the forgetfulness of language,⁶ Henry was speaking about a forgetfulness about the essence of life, which dominated Modernity up to his own time.

In Modernity, Henry claims, the experience “to live” and “being alive” became forgotten. A radical phenomenology of life must first reopen the way to these experiences. The original phenomenon of life must be unfurled, and after that this primordial sphere of *transcendentality* must be kept open by the phenomenologist (Henry 1973). “Transcendentality” for Henry refers to the original, ultimate invisible dimension of life as affectivity, as *self-feeling* and *self-revelation*. In Henry's opinion, life, before it could relate to everything else than itself, is related to itself. For example, *pain* – at least in Henry's interpretation

5 Here we should add that while Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Freud were deeply important thinkers for Henry, when he was elaborating his own philosophy of life, he differed strongly from the former authors that they were altogether *determinist*, and *freedom* was an essential feature of life in Henry's idea.

6 See Olay 2007.

– first of all suffers itself, it does not relate to anything else than itself. Likewise, joy is self-enjoyment, primarily it is related to the very experience of enjoyment, and not something else. In such subjective experiences, like joy, suffering, or the sheer experience of breathing or swallowing a dip of cold wine (Henry 2015) life reveals its innermost essence in its original self-relatedness. In other words, in Henry’s notion, life is auto-affection, self-pathos; something that primordially affects itself and which is a self-related pathos.

In the first section, we referred to Henry’s opposition to the Husserlian notion of intentionality, with which he contrasted his “material phenomenology” (2008), and “radical phenomenology of life”, which conceived of the innermost, ultimately genuine, most original form of consciousness and subjectivity as pre-intentional, auto-affective consciousness. This pre-intentional experience precedes, grounds and makes possible intentionality in the strict and adequate sense. It is first related to itself, it feels and experiences itself, and it could be related to a strictly intentional and exterior object, and to the world, through this way. This pre-intentional experience (which is also self-experience at the same time) prepares the way for the emergence of world-experience, and is also the most original form of life as such.

Life first feels, enjoys, and suffers itself in an auto-affective way, and, based on this self-affecting character, it can relate to the world, to the realm of externality. Life is first of all – methodologically regarded – individual, the life of a specific living being. In this respect, life reveals itself as essentially embodied,⁷ but through its embodied, incarnated aspect it also discloses its inherent connectedness to other subjects, and in a certain way to all other living creatures, and to *life itself in general*. In other words, life – even as an individual, at first sight *apparently* separated life – is essentially *intersubjective* too. It feels itself as embodied and intersubjective at the same time. Life discloses the universal togetherness of all livings. Henry, of course, is not naïve. He is fully aware of the fact that this universal community of all livings is through and through divided by unreconcilable conflicts and antagonisms. A predator must catch its prey, or it will starve to death., The prey must escape, because it dies if it is caught by the predator. There is no reconciliation in conflicts like that. Or we could think of the romantic rivalry of two men for the same woman (presupposing the aim of a monogamic relationship). The victory of one party over the other means joy for the first and pain and suffering for the other. Frequently, the joy of one subject means suffering, even death for the other. Nevertheless, Henry believed that there is *a depth dimension of life* which is common to all living creatures and shared by them, despite every mutual suffering, despite

⁷ It is important to emphasize that embodiment is not firstly physical corporeity, the biophysical body, which – according to Henry – is a founded phenomenon just like the world in its exteriority. The body is – first of all, and first and foremost – the *felt and pathic body*.

In this manner, Henry claims, for example in his book, *Incarnation*, that “*the worldly body is possible only once we have presupposed a flesh already revealed to itself as living flesh in the pathos-filled self-revelation of life*” (2015: 136).

every harm that was caused out of necessity, intentionally or unintentionally by one being to another. In Henry's view, in spite of every hostility and contention that separates and divides the realm of the living, life nevertheless has an aspect that still connects every living, even conflicting and competing parties, such as a predator and its prey. This deep dimension of life is more apparent for the theoretical glance in the case of humans, and especially regarding the conscious and *spiritualistic* aspects of human life.

Christianity is crucial for Henry to explore and unfold this above-mentioned general and universally bounding depth dimension of life. According to Henry, it was through Christianity that this depth dimension became manifest and completely *accessible*. Christianity, Henry claims, reveals the fact that every living being belongs in the same community of universal, *absolute life*. Individual life and the self cannot be conceived of as their own foundations: they are rooted in this absolute life, and founded by it (2003, see also Lavigne 2009). Henry thinks that "man is the Son of God, Son of absolute Life" (2003: 263) inasmuch that absolute life reveals itself in humans in the possibly more intensive and apparent way, and it is through man that absolute life can be manifested in an unmistakable manner. *Christ* is an archetypical living in Henry, He is the "Arch-Son", "the First Living" (2003: 66). Christ, for Henry, is a unique and exclusively exemplary manifestation of absolute life, even the life of God, as the Arch-Son of God himself, also as a living being who is the living love, who represents in person and flesh and bone the reality of the universal togetherness of the livings in one community through the feeling and acting of love. Through the self-consciousness and free will of humans, and through the Incarnation of Christ as the Arch-Son of God, of Absolute Life it became possible that humans (also as Children of God, more pregnant manifestations of absolute life) can form a truly authentic and *spiritual* community in life. Christianity for Henry represents the eminent and primordial form of spirituality, which refers to a genuine and authentic way of human life, as a life in the Absolute, as living the life of Christ and God. In Christian life, Henry thinks, one can truly live, feel, enjoy, suffer etc. absolute life itself, as an immanent, transcendental, and auto-affective life.

This brings us to our next important question: what does all of this have to do with the philosophy of Marx, who has been generally regarded as a materialist, atheistic thinker, and relentless critic of religion? Where can one find in a philologically, theoretically, philosophically legitimate way spirituality, immanence, and auto-affection in the writings of Marx? Indeed, not only did Henry believe these were shown and revealed in this work, but he also regarded Marx as the greatest theoretician in philosophy to explore, exhibit, and represent these thoughts and ideas, in a phenomenologically prime-original and penetrating manner. The main task of the next section will be to attempt to show the intelligibility of this claim in Henry's interpretative writings on Marx.

Main Elements of Michel Henry's Interpretation of Marx

The chief point of departure and perpetual point of orientation for Henry's interpretation of Marx was a strong, emphatic juxtaposition of the philosophy of Marx and the entire tradition of Marxism, beginning with the late Engels, up to Henry's time. In this regard, the main antagonist of Henry's classical, two-volume long monograph originally published in 1976 (2009) was Louis Althusser, whose conception of Marx is considered irrevocably flawed by Henry. Marx, Henry says in this context, is the most misunderstood philosopher in world history. "No philosopher has had more influence than Marx, and none has been more misunderstood" wrote Henry in his classical opus on Marx (2009: 7). In Henry's opinion the Marxist tradition after Marx reduced his genuinely philosophical attitude to something essentially non-philosophical, to a naïvely positivistic, naturalistic, scientific, deterministic worldview, with a political actionism lacking any deeper content or message – a view which, in Henry's notion, culminated in Althusser, who presented an anti-moralistic, anti-humanistic, rigidly scientific mature Marx.

One crucial element of Henry's debate with Althusser is that the former vigorously denies the so-called "rupture thesis" of the latter (see e.g., Althusser et al. 2015), according to which there is a drastic rupture in Marx's work of life that divides the period of the young idealist Marx from the era of the older, mature, scientific Marx. In contrast, according to Henry, there is a deep and essential continuity in the works of Marx which connects the author of the *Economic and Philosophic (or Paris) Manuscripts of 1844* to the author of the last manuscripts written to the unpublished versions of the *Capital*. It is Henry's opinion that in Marx's conception of *practical*, sensible, bodily, intersubjective (social) life, which he perpetually related to humans and human life, the attentive, careful reader could in fact find more or less explicitly the idea of the pathic, auto-affective, immanent life and its inherent self-revelation, self-manifestation. When we are practical, when we act and work, we – according to Henry's Marx-interpretation – experience the immanent, subjective, auto-affective and self-manifested character of life; through action and labour we gain access to the deepest, prime-original dimension of life itself, of which we were talking in the previous section.

This conception, Henry claims, necessarily implies a harsh, consequential, and profound criticism of *capitalism*, which renders everything into categories of commodity relations and forces all things into notions of externality. Capitalism, according to Marx – Henry believes – *suffocates* and *represses* real life, it distorts every form of true immanence and auto-affection, and hence leads to *barbarism* (2012a, see also O'Sullivan 2006). Although only at the level of a rudimentary, uncrystallized feeling, and in a sporadic manner, we can also find in Marx the idea that *this tendency* for reification and exteriority, which characterizes the essence of capitalism and leads to the universal reign of profitability, was rooted in Modernity – in his criticism of the naïve, mechanistic,

and deeply passivist naturalism of the materialists of the Modern Age.⁸ Henry thinks that this latter-mentioned idea must be highlighted more emphatically than it was by Marx, but we can nevertheless already find this notion from him too. Capitalism has merely brought the seeds inherent to the essence of Modernity into complete fruition. This does not mean that Marx's or Henry's conceptions were anti-modernist - neither opposed the project of Modernity entirely - they merely said that we must instantiate certain profound and crucial changes in this project, and consequently we also must alter our worldview, our general stance to life and the world in a fundamental way if we are to avoid letting the world fall into barbarism, and ultimately global catastrophe and collapse, through capitalism.

In Henry's idea the notion of an immanent, auto-affective, subjective, and essentially practical and intersubjective life could be evidently identified in Marx's anthropology and conception of human individuals.⁹ This anthropology depicts the human being as being given for herself her ultimate and utmost interiority, who - first of all - has something to do with herself in pure immanence, before everything else - everything exterior. Who feels herself acting, enjoying, and suffering things, and before experiencing the external things given in experience, she experiences the experiences of action, enjoyment, and suffering themselves; and who experiences any exteriority and non-subjective thing and entity based on this immanence, and after it, consequently, has something to do with the world and the physical entities in it *in a secondary way*. In Henry's opinion, this is the meaning of the Marxian view that human being appears first of all as a subjective, practical, sensible creature, who is given as a product of her sensible activity, and who also articulates the world around her as a product of this sensible, practical activity; and who creates the norms and measures of her own existence and enjoyment from her inner essence before she could have been rendered under any external category or measure.¹⁰ *Violence and repression* against this individuum begin precisely when a system of norms and measures are posed against her, and she is forced to adjust to such an external system; if she is forced to live and act according to norms and rules of externality, and not norms and rules that stem from her - although embodied, practical, and intersubjective - conscious immanence.

8 See e.g., the 9th and 10th thesis on Feuerbach: "The highest point reached by contemplative materialism, that is, materialism which does not comprehend sensuousness as practical activity, is the contemplation of single individuals and of civil society." "The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society, or social humanity" (Marx 2010: 5).

9 Henry 2009: 770. "In the history of Western thought Marx belongs amongst the few philosophers, (...) who conceived subjectivity not as a capacity to represent the world, so, something which is ultimately objectivity itself, but as essence, which cannot be reduced to the world, but exists in itself, which is its own life, and which is like life".

10 See e.g., the first Feuerbach thesis: "The chief defect of all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that things [*Gegenstand*], reality, sensuousness are conceived only in the form of the *object*, or of *contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively" (Marx 2010: 3).

According to Marx – at least in Henry’s interpretation – the special life-activity of the individual of an – either human or non-human – species is a subjective process, through which the individual in question affects itself first, before the world could affect it. In the case of an *animal*, this auto-affective life-process is a striving after individual and generic (sexual) reproduction, which the animal experiences as self-enjoyment or self-pathos, self-suffering, in which the creature has no distance at all to itself (Marx 1975a: 276-277). “The animal is immediately one with its life activity”, Marx says (1975a: 276).¹¹ Humans first experience life also in immanence, but humans also have a *distance* from themselves in this immanence. Humans are free, creative, spontaneous beings who have self-consciousness, who can imagine the aim and object of their action prior to this action, and who self-consciously experience this very action as action when doing it (1975a: 276-277) – or, in other words, they live it through as an imminent form of auto-affection. This conception, Henry states, remained unchanged throughout the entire career of Marx, through the pages of *Grundrisse* (1986), until the last manuscripts written to the *Capital*. Regarding this latter, we should highlight first and foremost the special importance Henry attaches to Marx’s distinction between abstract and concrete labour in the *Capital* (e.g., Marx 1996: 68-69). *Abstract labour* is the merely quantitative aspect of a particular labour process: it indicates the sheer exchangeability of different commodities of the same value and refers exactly to the formalist, purely quantitative regards that became prevalent during Modernity. In contrast, in *concrete labour* is manifested and exhibited the specific process of production, alongside its immanent, auto-affective aspect, that is to say, alongside the *subjective experience of labour- and production-process*.

Henry, following Marx, claims that capitalism is dominated by the reign of abstract labour and commodity relations (Henry 2009: 612-649). This is deeply affecting, namely by distorting and alienating auto-affective, immanent life from itself, a life which cries out for emancipation. According to Henry, we must break this reign of abstract labour and commodity relations in order to achieve true emancipation: a true and genuine society of emancipated, auto-affective life, which lives for spontaneous, joyful creation, an originally humane, free, and thus truly *spiritual* activity and way of life.¹²

11 In my opinion, one could not only find anthropology, but also an entire *zoology* in Marx.

12 In Marx: “In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilised man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving

At this point, one could rightfully raise the question of how this apparently moralistic and humanistic reading of Marx differs from other humanistic interpretations that we can find in – for example – Karl Korsch, Georg Lukács, and Antonio Gramsci? Henry's main problem with these authors is that they fundamentally read Marx through the lenses of Hegel, who is an important author and point of orientation for the above-mentioned theoreticians. Hegel, however, is a great opponent and antagonist for Henry (see e.g., Henry 1973). Hegel, in Henry's interpretation, is the philosopher of exteriority. *The superior order of the idea*, which governs Hegel's trains of thought and reigns in his system, represents for Henry an order and reign of exteriority. Marx, in contrast, at least according to Henry, explains life from within, from its most original interiority and immanence; and the earlier mentioned authors, Henry thinks, missed this crucial point.

A society emancipated from the purely formalistic and quantitative viewpoint of commodity relations could finally be an adequate place for joyful, creative human activity, one dedicated to the enjoyment of qualitative culture, and the production of qualitative cultural products (in science, arts, and philosophy), one which could finally actually exhibit and manifest the essence of immanent life. In this way, it could be *a truly spiritualistic society*, where the genuine, authentic, and intersubjective manifestation of human essence would be a manifestation of real *human spirit*, which is nothing else than the auto-affective and self-enjoying activity of qualitative cultural production and reception.

We have to touch upon one final question. What can Henry say about Marx's recurrent criticism of religion?¹³ According to Henry, it should be related to religion in an unemancipated, anti-spiritual society ruled by the forces of reification and objectification. Religion should remain in a certain form in an emancipated community, in an emancipated form, as a manifestation of the real spirituality and immanence characteristic of the very essence of life itself.

Capitalism as Modern Barbarism

Henry joins thinkers of the 20th century who claimed and believed that the project of Modernity turned out to be one that was a self-destructive project, and which released apparently unstoppable forces that now threaten the very

this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working day is its basic prerequisite." (1998: 807).

13 Marx: "For Germany, the criticism of religion is in the main complete, and criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism". "To abolish religion as the illusory happiness of the people is to demand their real happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions. The criticism of religion is therefore in embryo the criticism of the vale of tears, the halo of which is religion" (Marx 1975b: 175-176).

existence of humanity, and indeed in some interpretations even life on Earth itself. Included in these thinkers, but not restricted to, are authors like Adorno, Heidegger, Horkheimer, Husserl, Jaspers, and Marcuse. Henry himself belongs to such a philosophical trend whose representatives diagnosed a deep-lying crisis in Western humanity, and particularly in Modernity, and sought a cure to such a disease or problem. Henry – alongside other, also Marxist authors (like Rosa Luxemburg) – identified the present state of society as a form of *barbarism*, which became dangerous to life itself, human as well as non-human.

Henry's diagnosis concerning the causes of crisis and the present-day's barbarism is very similar to Husserl's (Husserl 1970). In Husserl's interpretation, through Modernity, the depth dimension of reality became forgotten, that of the life-world, and ultimately the conscious transcendental subjectivity constituting the latter, and this prime-original dimension was *exchanged* for a derivative sphere, namely, a formalized, mathematized and merely quantitative aspect of nature, which it conceived as the "thing in itself" or as true reality. For Henry, this prime-original sphere is immanent, auto-affective life; in the case of humans, conscious transcendental subjectivity, just like for Husserl. Modern, mathematizing natural science, which rose with Francis Bacon, Descartes, and Galilei, conceived a formal, idealized construction as the original form of reality and nature, and forgot about the fact that this construction is in reality a product of (transcendental, constituting, and subjective) consciousness. Representatives of this modern, naturalistic, and naturalizing attitude interpret consciousness – instead of taking it as a source of origins – as a natural phenomenon alongside other natural phenomena; thus, philosophers and theoreticians of Modernity reified consciousness, which – in Henry's interpretation – had certain disastrous consequences.

Mathematization and naturalization (thus reification) go hand in hand in the Modern reductionist attitude. Naturalization conceives everything as being part of nature or being a natural entity. Mathematization (also formalization and idealization) highlights the formal, quantitative features of things as their exclusively relevant and important attributes. This attitude ultimately serves the viewpoints and measures of utility, and likewise rising profitability. Concerns of control, domination, and utility began to dominate Modern science and society. That which cannot be controlled (and originally, also formalized, mathematized, naturalized), and was unprofitable became irrelevant and unessential. Modern rationality and sciences became insensitive to qualitative features of reality (this was an implication of the concealment of the prime-original sphere of reality), and sought to gain dominance and control over nature and humans, and the individual human soul in particular. This led to an either implicit or explicit tendency to eradicate everything genuinely qualitative, subjective, and spiritual in human nature and society.

The conception of idealized and – at the same time – materialistically reduced nature became an ideology and technology (meaning: *technē*) for Modernity and Modern society. The qualitative, subjective, immanent, and genuinely conscious became *obstacles* for this ideology and *technē*, which encumber or

even hinder the smooth control and domination of nature, and the production of profit and efficiency. What is truly relevant and interesting for this ideology is the *how*, not the *what*; the question of *how* things work, *how* they could be dominated, how we can exploit them and make them more profitable. *Ontology* became irrelevant, or even meaningless. It was only speculation. Meaningfulness was constituted through measurability and predictability. In Henry's opinion, this was the most eminent form of Modern barbarism, which essentially concerned the most effective and profitable domination of humans and nature by eliminating everything qualitative and non-reducible from its horizon, and attempting to make everything predictable and controllable.

This stance, according to Henry, necessarily results in an *impoverishment of culture*. Henry is of the opinion that culture, in a certain way, expresses the very essence of life – in the case of humans, self-conscious life. Culture is the main way to live up to one's potentials, to maximize life's potentialities, and to help auto-affective, immanent subjective human life to manifest itself in its most immense, powerful, and ever self-increasing form. Just like Marx (see e.g., Eagleton 2018: 123), Henry also believed in the emancipatory power of culture and cultural activity. By increasingly draining its emancipatory capacity and power, capitalism drastically weakens, domesticates, and disarms the arts and culture in general. It simply adjusts art and culture to the conditions of universal barbarism, ensuring that they should never mean a real threat to the current system of production, domination, and repression. Capitalism simplifies, reduces arts – like everything else – and in this way it also reduces the *life* in it to the lowest possible level. Art and culture in capitalism are *lifeless*.

Capitalism reduces and decreases the true potentials of life, conceives everything according to quantitative regards, and approaches all entities and phenomena from the perspective of utility and profitability, which ultimately defies the essence of life. Even *consciousness* – interpreted as a natural appearance – is considered from the viewpoint of manipulation and domination, inasmuch as it could be controlled and adjusted to the ideal conditions of production. In this way, capitalism and the Modern reductionist form of scientism could even be regarded as a form of *death-cult*, meaning that they deny the innermost essence of life, with its unmechanizable, non-reducible, intrinsically qualitative character that resists every attempt to be grasped by external, formalist categories, escapes every attempt to force it into rigid formulas and frameworks, and which cannot be controlled. Decreases in the level of art and culture – Henry claims – are a necessary and inevitable consequence of the capitalist mode of cultural production and consumer society. This turns art, as a manifestation of the essence of conscious human life, into its opposite, its very own enemy. *True art that stems from the essence of life is emancipatory and anti-capitalist.*

Make no mistake, Henry does not prefer the so-called “actually existing socialist” and communist regimes of Eastern Europe and Asia over capitalist societies. Quite the contrary. He rejected and criticized both (2014). Henry claimed that both of them were and are dominated by merely quantitative viewpoints, and a utilitarian and essentially pragmatist approach to rule and control over

everybody and everything. The actually existing socialist and communist regimes make no exceptions. While capitalism, in the form of consumer societies, rests upon a latent and implicit sort of violence and repression, and seeks control through manipulation, currently existing socialist regimes choose the way of explicit violence and repression. But in Henry's opinion, none of these systems are better than the other one. Both of them attempt to control humans and nature, invade, conquer, and subjugate life and consciousness. Both of them are sheer expressions of *Modern barbarism*.

It is important to emphasize, however, that Henry did not represent an anti-scientific attitude. He did not condemn science as such, and was not an anti-rationalist philosopher. He followed Husserl (1970) in this regard too. Not every form of rationalism and science is wrong. Only in and through Modernity certain fateful and disastrous tendencies commenced that *derailed* the originally positive motifs of rational and reflective philosophy and theoretical thought, and led to a one-sided, reductive attitude which is blind to the depth dimension of reality and its qualitative, irreducible moments and features.

In this regard, his attitude was similar to authors of the Frankfurt School, like Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), and Marcuse (2006) – who also criticized harshly the negative, reductionist, one-sided, simplicist tendencies in Modern rationalism, that resulted in capitalism, which exploited both human and non-human nature. Horkheimer and Adorno, however, in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and also Marcuse in *One-dimensional Man* were rather pessimistic about the future possibilities of humanity, and the chances of avoiding ultimate disaster. Horkheimer and Adorno especially emphasized that we have no guarantees at all of avoiding the final catastrophe and falling permanently into barbarism. Henry, on the other hand, was always very affirmative that if we really attempted to follow and realize the Marxian idea of socialism as a social system that ensures the best conditions for the spontaneous, unhindered, and optimal activity of creative, auto-affective human life, then we would finally find a way out of Modern barbarism.

In the next, final section we would like to examine the details of Henry's conception of socialism after Marx, and the way Henry imagined the realisation of a genuine and authentic form of socialism, one that would thus fight barbarism effectively.

Conclusion: Socialism as a Way Out of Capitalism. A Society of Authenticity and True Spirituality

As we have seen, it is Henry's belief that capitalism as the fully escalated form of Modern barbarism, enslaved and entrapped life, consciousness, and spirituality; subsumed everything to the viewpoints of utility and profitability, and attempted to eradicate, or at least disarm and domesticate, everything that might be a danger to profitability and the bottom line. We saw how Henry thought that capitalism as Modern barbarism withered all forms of life, decreased culture to the lowest possible, mechanistic level as mere consumerism

and entertainment, trapped consciousness through manipulation or open violence, and eradicated all true spirituality; and that Henry consequently believed that capitalism in the long run would destroy humanity and life in its present and essential form. The survival of humanity and earthly life – not to mention their prime-original forms, namely conscious, auto-affective immanence – depends on whether we will be able to dismantle capitalism. Henry thinks that Marx's thoughts provide us with a blueprint to transform capitalism and build a better society, following the guideline of creative, self-conscious, immanent, and auto-affective life.

Socialism would be a social system that transcends both capitalist and communist forms of barbarism. In this regard, it is important to note that Henry emphatically juxtaposes socialism to communism (2018), and believes that in Marx himself the careful reader could find a direct support for such a juxtaposition (2018: 86). Henry, as we saw, regards both capitalism and communism as repressive regimes, while socialism, in his interpretation, would be the ultimate form of emancipation and freedom. Socialism, Henry thinks, must be the end of every repression, alienation, reification, and subjugation. It should be a democratic society that rests upon the principle of representation of people. The philosophy of Marx, Henry says, is “the metaphysical foundation of the theory of democracy” (Henry 2009: 46). It does not allow anything which would restrict, delimit, or alienate the freedom – as the fundamental capacity of creative power – of the community.¹⁴

The way to socialism – and out of barbarism – would be a *gradual transformation* of current society, which relies upon a theory that constantly reflects upon the Modern barbarism as a whole, as well as the most important factors that inhibit truly free, authentic, genuine, subjective, and unreified human activity and life, and tries to fight these factors and break down the institutions from which stem reification and barbarism, through a collective, social, and intersubjective political praxis. Henry in this regard firmly believes in the political potency of Marx's ideas – he is humble enough to refer perpetually to the Marxian notion of socialism, and not place his philosophy and interpretation in the centre; but, as can be reconstructed from the context of his writings, he clearly assumes that his philosophy, interpretation, and approach could be the most effective way to realize socialism. Evidently, he presumes that people must form a clear idea regarding the importance of an immanent, subjective, auto-affective life, and the destructive effect of capitalism upon it.

14 In socialism, according to Henry, the human contribution to production is reduced to zero. Production becomes completely automatized, and human beings are able to devote their lives to meaningful, creative, and artistic activity. As Henry wrote in his major monograph on Marx: “The transition from capitalism to socialism is nothing other than that from a production process in which living labor has the greatest share to a process in which this share continually diminishes, tending ultimately toward zero. [...] In concrete terms, this involves an entirely automatic system of production, in which the products, in spite of their quantity and their quality, have no value” (Henry 1983: 287). In the last sentence, “value” clearly refers to exchange value.

People must first see clearly how destructive, devastating, and barbaric this ideology is, and what they actually lose in every moment when capitalism and Modern, one-sided rationalism rule and dominate their lives, and it is in their best interest to dismantle this society and way of production and transform it into something better.

Capitalism is a stubborn, incredibly strong and extensive form of barbarism, which is now deeply rooted in human culture and society, and which has diamond-solid foundations. One cannot get rid of this system overnight: a rapid revolution most likely would not be able to eradicate this system. Many people actually believe that they are the real beneficiaries of this system, especially members of the higher social classes. As far as it can be reconstructed from Henry's related writings (2009, 2012, 2018), Henry is well aware of the fact that people must first realize what capitalism actually does, what is true, genuine, and authentic human life, and why the latter is incompatible and irreconcilable with capitalism. Then, in a second step, people should identify the biggest structural and institutional problems of current society, and, through social collaboration and cooperation, in an essentially democratic manner, members of the community ought to change the correlated structural features and institutions of society for others, which presumably would ensure greater chances and more optimal conditions for a creative and authentic way of human life.

Henry emphasizes that despite the fact that Marx was never very systematic about the precise structure and architecture of the future, post-capitalist society, one can find indications, hints, references, even more or less explicit and elaborate trains of thought concerning the main features of such a humanistic and emancipated social formation throughout his entire theoretical career – from *Economic and Philosophic (or Paris) Manuscripts of 1844* (and in writings from even earlier years), *German Ideology*, *Communist Manifesto*, *Grundrisse*, *Capital*, or the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. Sometimes, these Marxian considerations and reflections appear to be quite utopistic (see e.g., Bence, Márkus, and Kis 2022), but in Henry's opinion, these utopistic – or apparently utopistic – motifs never really exclude the realizability of Marx's corresponding ideas on socialism. Quite on the contrary, they raise a *constant and compulsory ethical obligation* to persistently and perpetually strive after the practical and actual realization of these principles, bit by bit, and instantiate every such action and institutional change that could bring us closer to the ideal of an emancipated society. In Henry's interpretation, this is an obligation and moral responsibility rooted in the essence and structure of real, concrete, conscious, immanent life, and which calls upon us to realize a society ideal for such a life, whose conditions are rooted in the essence of human beings and their immanent and intersubjective life-processes. Our current society only enables an impoverished, alienated, reified, and thus inauthentic life. It is a barbaric social formation that confronts the individual capable of reflecting adequately on the present social and economic conditions – and on Marx's thoughts – *with the unescapable normative necessity of striving after the elimination and overcoming of the conditions of barbarism as long as they exist.*

We cannot stop until we create a society which enables a *collective, authentic, and – in Henry’s view – spiritual coexistence*.

This emancipated society, which makes authentic collective life possible, is socialism in the correct sense, which – in turn – presupposes a society of general abundance, which – of course – cannot be possible without a proper technical development. Henry knows that. That is why he is not a simplistic anti-scientist and anti-rationalistic thinker. He – just like Husserl – only criticizes and opposes bald, reductionist, one-sided technicism and rationalism. Henry, in consequence, following Marx, defines true and authentic socialism based on two preconditions: 1) general abundance, 2) labour is not directed primarily to economic production, but as a source of emancipation, it is true joy – a living praxis (*praxis vivante*) of creative activity (2009: 959; 2018: 86-87). Henry – in contrast to the late Heidegger – does not deny the positive significance of science and technology, which would be rather difficult if one truly wants to follow Marx. But Henry also thinks – and in this regard Henry sincerely believes that he follows Marx’s own philosophical intentions – that in an authentic society that successfully fought and defeated barbarism, science and technology would be emphatically subordinated to self-conscious, immanent subjectivity, and its most genuine and original form of expression, namely human culture, and, according to Henry, *artistic culture* first and foremost. If we are truly to try and emancipate our society, we must radically turn scientific ideology from an end in itself into a means to an end, subordinate it to artistic culture, and leave the conditions of universal barbarism behind.

It is an almost *gnostic* project¹⁵ of Henry’s to liberate consciousness and conscious, subjective human life from the prison created by capitalism, and thus enable it to function in an authentic, creative artistic way, which expresses its essence most pregnantly at the social level of collective, social, intersubjective praxis.¹⁶ A society based on such artistic, creative activity, which is also pro-

15 Gnosticism was an archaic view – a heretic version of Christianity – in which it was a crucial motif to liberate the soul under its enslavement and subjugation by the body.

16 By “gnostic project” I mean a sharp, almost unbridgeable division between the physical and the spiritual world, an antagonistic opposition between the two.

This stance, in my opinion, is clearly reflected, for example, in Henry’s statements concerning the irreconcilable opposition between the truth of Christianity and that of the world, as described in his work *I Am the Truth*. See: “It is then decisive to note that *the Truth of Christianity differs in essence from the truth of the world*” (2003: 23); “Here appears the radical difference separating the truth of Christianity from that of the world, as well as from all forms of truth that draw upon the world for their own possibility – the truths of science, of knowledge, of perception” (2003: 24); “*In Life, as its essence, since Life is nothing other than that which reveals itself*—not something that might have an added property of self-revealing, *but the very fact of self-revealing, self-revelation as such*. Everywhere that something like a self-revelation is produced there is Life.” (...) “Therefore we are in the presence of the first fundamental equation of Christianity: God is Life—he is the essence of Life, or if one prefers, the essence of Life is God” (2003: 27).

One could rightly raise the question here: how would a “gnostic project,” or one with “gnostic overtones,” fit into the worldly project of socialism? From Henry’s point of

foundly affected by the social, communal horizon, by the cooperation and collaboration of the emancipated subject, would be a deeply *spiritual* society, because spirituality for Henry means exactly this authentic, creative, emancipated functioning of self-conscious human life in its intersubjective embedment. *Human spirit and spirituality* in its most genuine and authentic form would be the innermost expression of creative, auto-affective, conscious, and immanent life. *Socialism, Henry claims, will be the most fitting society for a genuinely and authentically spiritual community.*

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view, the answer would be: as a project aimed at establishing a social system that provides the best conditions for the flourishing and fulfilment of spiritual, immanent, auto-affective life.

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Benče Peter Marošan

Duhovnost, svest i emancipacija života. Spiritualističko i katoličko tumačenje Karla Marksa kod Mišela Anrija

Apstrakt

Mišel Anri je prilično jedinstvena figura u fenomenološkom pokretu, kao i u filozofiji uopšte. U njegovom delu, naizgled kontradiktorni i heterogeni motivi integrišu se, po mom mišljenju, u harmoničnu, organsku i sintetičku celinu. U njegovoj filozofiji možemo pre svega pronaći četiri vodeće i orijentacione tradicije koje su oblikovale osnovni okvir njegovog mišljenja: fenomenologiju, katolicizam, filozofiju života (*Lebensphilosophie*) i filozofiju Marksa, koju je Anri oštro suprotstavio celoj tradiciji marksizma. U tom pogledu, verovatno dva najvažnija filozofska autora za njega bili su Edmund Huserl i Karl Marks; potonjeg je Anri smatrao najpresudnijim filozofom u čitavoj istoriji zapadne filozofije i najizvornijim i najautentičnijim fenomenologom (čak i u poređenju sa osnivačem fenomenološkog pokreta, naime Huserlom).

Mišel Anri je verovao da se moderna globalna društva nalaze u takvoj krizi iz koje samo Marksova filozofija može pružiti izlaz, kako u teorijskom, tako i u normativnom, praktičnom pogledu. Anri je smatrao da će bez radikalnog prevazilaženja kapitalizma zapadna civilizacija

– kao i čovečanstvo u celini – doživeti kolaps u intelektualnom, duhovnom, ali i fizičkom smislu. Varvarstvo, koje je Anri snažno kritikovao kao fundamentalnu i intrinzičnu odliku kapitalizma, reifikuje sve i podvrgava fenomene perspektivama korisnosti i profitabilnosti, uključujući i fenomene poput subjektivnosti i svesti.

Moramo emancipovati ljudski i neljudski, svesni i nesvesni život radikalnim prevazilaženjem kapitalizma. Tim gestom možemo dosegnuti istinski autentično društvo, koje se oslanja i na emancipirani oblik svesti i duhovnosti. U ovom radu nastojimo da pokažemo kako Anri preoblikuje Marksovu ideju emancipacije na osnovu pomenute četiri tradicije.

Ključne reči: Mišel Anri, Marks, imanentni život, emancipacija, svest kao auto-afekcija, ekološka kriza, kritika kapitalizma, duhovnost.

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Rick Repetti

PROLEGOMENON TO A PHILOSOPHY OF MEDITATION

ABSTRACT

This prolegomenon sketches issues central to a philosophy of meditation, develops only some of them here, and refers readers to other works where some not covered here are addressed. A complete philosophy of meditation would include accounts of: the differences between meditative practices, states, and traits; religion-based meditative traditions; novel contemporary meditative practices and research; meditative practices that are and aren't philosophical practices and vice versa; 'McMindfulness'; whether any such practices reveal metaphysical truths or lead to enlightenment; what physics/metaphysics might make the paranormal corollaries of mystical experiences possible; and the pros and cons of these issues. The author shares some personal experiences, speculative hypotheses, and arguments for the central claim that meditative practices are one of the most powerful forms of spiritual and philosophical practice.

KEYWORDS

ecology of practices, McMindfulness, meditation, mental autonomy, paranormal, philosophical counseling, philosophical practice, philosophy as a way of life, philosophy of meditation, philosophy of spirituality

Introduction

This writing lays some groundwork for a philosophy of meditation,¹ and builds upon my edited collection, the *Routledge Handbook on the Philosophy of Meditation* (2022). Some philosophers resist the claim that there is a philosophy of meditation (e.g., Davis 2022), or even reject the concept (e.g., Evan Thompson does, in Vervaeke, Repetti, and Thompson 2024). I view the Routledge collection as implicitly demonstrating a modal-logic argument to the contrary:

1. If X is actual, then X is possible.
2. X is actual.
3. Thus, X is possible.

Here, 'X' represents the claim that "there is a philosophy of meditation". Premise 2 is supported by the fact that the Routledge collection engages in

¹ I wish to thank two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, which inspired several changes and ideas.



the philosophy of meditation throughout its 27 chapters by as many authors, each addressing some relevant aspect of the philosophy of meditation, including whether there is, can be, or ought to be a philosophy of meditation (Repetti 2022a, 2022b), as well as chapters in sections on the relationships between meditation and philosophy, meditation and epistemology, meditation and metaphysics, meditation and values, meditation and phenomenology, and meditation in Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions.

Given that wealth of material, while I will outline a number of issues that I think ought to be addressed in a more complete account of the philosophy of meditation, hence, a prolegomenon, here I will selectively focus on only a handful of ideas that I think will help to forward the discipline. One central idea is that meditation and philosophy may be construed as overlapping species of some larger genus of endeavors to understand ordinary experience and existence: both may be understood as heightened attention to, and/or examination of, experience, and the concepts, language, beliefs, and views arising in or from experience. I explored this line of thought in greater depth in the Routledge collection (Repetti 2022a, 2022b). For similar reasons, the philosophy of meditation may be construed as part of a broader philosophy of spirituality, with significant overlap with the philosophies of mysticism, of psychedelics, and of related topics. What I think all these endeavors have in common is that their aspirations aim at understanding ultimate reality, rendering those who undertake them ‘ontonauts’,² as opposed to merely ‘psychonauts’, explorers of inner space, which latter term connotes that the explorations are entirely subjective. Whether they are entirely subjective, objective, intersubjective, or transjective are precisely questions explored by all of them, in some sense. Thus, while I will not say much more about it here, in the same way that the Routledge collection demonstrated the existence of a valid field of philosophical inquiry, to the extent that much of that work may be considered part of a broader philosophy of spirituality, so too it is my aspiration that the Routledge collection and this article will inspire a similar demonstration of the existence of the philosophy of spirituality as a valid field of philosophical inquiry.

One reason this work is important to me is that I am convinced that meditation practices, understood philosophically, can be among the most powerful engines of sapiential growth, transformative insights, and other forms of *metanoia*. In the same way that thought experiments in philosophy can engender figure/ground gestalt frame-shifting in understanding, functioning as what Daniel Dennett aptly termed ‘intuition pumps’ (2013), I have argued that meditation practices can function as consciousness-raising pumps that can have profound *metanoia*-generating philosophical impact (Repetti 2022b).

² See my presentation on the concept of an ontonaut as part of my argument that the naturalism/supernaturalism dichotomy is a false dichotomy (Repetti, Pascal, and Dempsey 2025).

Some of these issues that I'll partly elaborate here include accounts of some of the differences between: meditative practices, states, and traits;³ religious meditative traditions; contemporary meditative practices; meditative practices that are and aren't philosophical practices, and vice versa; secular mindfulness; 'McMindfulness'; exceptional experiences (EEs) associated with meditative practices;⁴ the possible physics or metaphysics that might explain EEs; whether meditative experiences reveal truths; and whether they lead to enlightenment.

I will devote a section to each, consider some hypotheses, share personal experiences and understandings, and conclude that a philosophy of meditation is essential in a philosophy of spirituality. Issues identified, but not elaborated on in their own sections here, include: contemplative science;⁵ an anthropological perspective;⁶ comparative religious studies and comparative philosophy;⁷ and scientific research on the paranormal (I address this in a few sections).⁸

In the classical metaphor of the elephant and the blind men, touching the tusk, one says it is a spear, another touching the tail says it is a rope, and so on for the leg, ear, torso, trunk. In Jainism, the elephant represents reality; the blind men represent how different beings perceive aspects of reality from different vantages with different senses, depicting aspects of a complex reality. The metaphor supports *anekāntavāda*, the Jain doctrine of non-one-sidedness. In Hinduism, the elephant represents Brahman (God), and the blind represent different religions. In Buddhism, it is used, among other uses, to represent Buddhism, and the blind represent its different forms.

3 See Repetti (2020).

4 See Osto (2024), chapter 5, for an account of many of my EEs.

5 See Vago 2022 for a comprehensive overview of scientific research on meditation over the past 50 years. See Goleman and Davidson 2017 for a meta-analysis of the top 50 cited research papers on it. See Mago, Miller, Repetti, and Vervaeke 2024 and Miller, Repetti, and Vervaeke 2024 for discussions of new research on it. See Letheby 2022, 2024 for the philosophy of, and scientific research on, psychedelics and meditative states. See also Vervaeke 2019/2020 and Vervaeke, Mastropietro, and Abramian 2024 for the perspective from 4e cognitive science on the topic.

6 See the journal *Anthropology of Consciousness*.

7 See the journals *Sophia*, and *Philosophy East and West* for comparative religious studies and comparative philosophy.

8 See Kripal 2024, 2019, Radin 2018, 2013, 2006, and Wargo 2018; these authors demonstrate that while the scientific consensus remains blind to the paranormal, demonstrable evidence is overwhelming. The underlying physics remains open, but one parsimonious explanation is that time, like space, admits of a nonlocal (quantum entangled) dimension (Wargo 2018). I highlight this one rather idiosyncratic explanation of precognition despite so much that has been written on alternative explanations of the broad range of psi phenomena which include precognition as but one type simply because it strikes me as most challenging insofar as its being the most parsimonious explanation poses a challenge to all its less parsimonious competing explanatory hypotheses, which latter I would prefer to be true, but as a follower of the principle of parsimony and a truth-seeker, I think it is important to draw attention to it. On the blindness of the current scientific consensus, see Frank, Gleiser, and Thompson 2024. On paranormal phenomena among practitioners of Buddhist meditation, see Osto 2024.

Anekāntavāda entails the view that the more perspectives on the elephant we grasp, the greater our understanding. In my use of the metaphor, the elephant represents spirituality; meditation represents one of its parts, say, a leg. I focus on the leg but don't think it is the entire elephant, spirituality, but one of the most powerful ways into that elephant, if not *the* most powerful, based on my leg-encounters. I address some pros and cons of the 10 issues listed, but begin by sharing some personal experiences.

My Leg(-up) on Meditation

William James (1902) identified several characteristics of mystical religious experiences, which may or may not occur in meditative contexts, including: ineffability; noetic quality (*gnosis*); transiency (brief, but lastingly impactful); passivity (absence of agency, as if from a higher power); unity (dissolution of separateness, oneness); and religious feeling (awe, reverence, sacredness, divine love).

David Yaden and Andrew Newberg (2022) update James' work, focusing more broadly on spiritual experiences, rather than religious experience, using contemporary methods, and they identify several characteristics, some of which (both James's and Yaden and Newberg's) overlap with mystical, psychedelic-induced, shamanic, and other similar types of experience: numinous (awe, reverence, sacredness, divine presence); mystical (unity); transformative; ecstatic; transcendent (beyond self); paranormal; and guidance (receiving direction as if from a superior source).

All of these phenomena constitute much of the data that a more complete theory of spirituality should explain. Their research shows that meditation practitioners report the greatest quantity and quality of such experiences: they happen most often to long-term meditators, and with the greatest intensity (2022). Thus, these phenomena constitute the main data that a more complete theory of meditation should explain. My focus here on meditation as justified at the core of spirituality, among other reasons that I hope will become clear as we proceed, is because the phenomena that these leading researchers of spiritual experiences focus on, according to their data, are produced in the greatest numbers and in the greatest intensity by long term meditation practice. Of course, correlation is not causation, but this fact alone drove my interest, and the idea that this correlation can be one of causation is dramatically confirmed in my own case.

Rather than repeat their research, I refer the reader to Yaden and Newberg for their comprehensive account, and again to Kripal (2024, 2019), Radin (2018, 2013, 2006), and Wargo (2018) for their accounts of paranormal phenomena particularly experienced by meditation virtuosos.⁹ Their combined work is essential to a philosophy of meditation and spirituality, and demonstrates that psychic phenomena are real. This should be a major news headline, but it is not.¹⁰

⁹ See Repetti 2019 on the phenomenal abilities of meditation virtuosos.

¹⁰ For the reasons why not, see Frank, Gleiser, and Thompson 2024.

At the end of my first yoga class, in deep relaxation, I had an out-of-body experience that changed my life. I soon found meditation teachers,¹¹ and began having intense EEs of all the sorts listed above. During my period of intense meditation practice I had countless EEs.¹² I will say more about these things later on, but suffice it to say here that my intensely mystical, gnostic, noetic, precognitive, and related EEs all seem to be byproducts of my highly disciplined meditative practices, all of which led me to philosophy, and to the importance of introducing and advocating for a philosophy of meditation.

Meditative practices, states, and traits

Elsewhere I have sketched the basic differences between meditative practices, meditative states, and meditative traits (2020).¹³ I have also explored such differences on the Integral Stage podcast (Alderman, Pascal, and Repetti 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). I will be somewhat more systematic here.

Meditative practices

Meditative practices are *procedures* one engages in to approximate meditative states, analogous to using training wheels to approximate bike riding. They come in many forms, for attentional focus is universal in meditative practice and anything can be its object.

Either of two basic skill types are typically employed in meditative practice: a narrow or broad focus. Of course, there is a spectrum here, with a mid-range. Narrow focus is often called *concentration*, *one-pointedness* or *focused awareness* (*FA*, in research literature): attention is restricted to a narrow range, e.g., a spot on a wall, candle flame, or breath at the nostrils. Broad focus is often called *mindfulness*, *witnessing* or *open monitoring* (*OM*, in research literature): the whole field of awareness is the focal range. In my view, both are sides of one coin: focusing attention on an intended range (narrow or broad), noticing when it slips out of the intended range, and restoring it. There are many differences in instructions around this process. E.g., some prescribe labeling any ‘distraction’ with an ‘-ing’ word: emoting, wanting, planning. Others prescribe auxiliary tools, e.g., counting breaths and starting again when the mind wanders, use of a mantra, etc.

¹¹ Hilda Charlton, Joya (aka Ma Jaya), and Ram Dass (aka Richard Alpert).

¹² For an account of some of my paranormal experiences, see Osto 2024, chapter 5, in which Osto presents me as the poster boy for his research into paranormal phenomena among practitioners of Buddhist meditation; see Alderman, Pascal, and Repetti 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, for discussions of meditative EEs, the philosophy of meditation, and meditative typologies, respectively; see Repetti 2022, forthcoming a, for my philosophy of meditation, and forthcoming b, for a full account of my paranormal experiences and philosophical analysis of them.

¹³ And also between contemplative practices, contemplative studies, and contemplative pedagogies (Repetti 2010b).

In my view, there are no ‘distractions’ in either approach: what’s being cultivated is the skill of noticing when attention wanders and restoring intended focus. These two, focusing attention and mind wandering, are features, not bugs – default mechanisms with survival value going back to pre-human ancestors who needed to zoom in (focus narrowly) on prey and zoom out to scan the environment (focus broadly) for predators.

Different traditions parse meditative practices differently, and many who are relatively new to meditation come exposed to only one or two conceptions or paradigms.¹⁴

Meditative states

Meditative states are a type of altered mental and/or psychophysiological state that may arise spontaneously, but are more likely to result from meditative practices. Just as there are many meditative practices, there are many meditative states. Some ‘flow’ states are experienced as involving a felt meditative sense, a fluid, heightened awareness coupled with the activity that triggered them, e.g., ‘runner’s high’, but which can arise from diverse activities such as dancing, singing, musical improv, hiking, mountain climbing, poetry, and other activities creatives may describe as having “found their Muse”, which conjures James’ ‘passivity’ element, when the source of inspiration seems exogenous. Many meditative states are best described as attainments of the practices employed to bring them about, e.g., one-pointedness practice, when successful, leads to a state of one-pointedness – trance-like absorption.

In the *Yoga Sutras* (Bryant 2017), the orthodox Hindu meditation manual of two millennia ago, Patanjali parses one-pointedness into categories that constitute two of the eight limbs (*ashtanga*) of Yoga (union, nonduality), namely, *dharana* and *dhyana*. *Asanas* (poses) and *pranayama* (breathing exercises) are but two preparatory limbs of Yoga, designed to stabilize mind and body for lengthy meditation. *Dharana* is the discipline of exercising otherwise intermittent attentional focus on one object, noticing when it wanders, and returning it to the target. *Dhyana* is the attainment of sustained one-pointedness without mind-wandering.¹⁵ *Samadhi*, the eighth limb,¹⁶ is the state of nonduality in which the subject/object distinction – attention-directing awareness and object of attention – dissolves, along with the broader mind/world distinction, bringing about a state of transcendence that is described as cosmic consciousness. Patanjali also distinguishes a number of different levels of *samadhi*, and Buddhism distinguishes between several stages of *jhanas* (states between Patanjali’s *dhyana* and *samadhi*).

14 For hundreds of my own free guided meditations, see Repetti 2020-2025.

15 Note that “*dhyana*”, Sanskrit, is translated as “*jhana*” in Pali, the language of the early Buddhist canon, “*chan*” as Buddhism migrated to China, and “*zen*” as it migrated to Japan.

16 Note that “*samadhi*”, one-pointedness, is also the eighth ‘fold’ in the Buddhist Eight-fold Path.

Thus, meditative states are not easily defined, as there is a great variety among them, but they may be understood readily as altered states, insofar as they are distinct from ordinary waking states. Meditative states can involve any of the following characteristics, many of which were identified by James (1903), and added to by the research of Yaden and Newburg (2022): relaxation, tranquility, concentration, focused awareness, mental quiescence: conscious mental activity ceases, from established one-pointedness,¹⁷ open-monitoring,¹⁸ groundedness, centeredness, passivity (the feeling that experiences are arising independently of volition), ecstasy, lucidity, luminosity, fluidity/flow states, energy (a felt force), *gnosis*, temporal fluctuation (time felt as slowing down), ineffableness, transcendence, revelatory or precognitive visions, out-of-body experiences, interconnectedness, sense of the sacred, awe, guidance (orientation from outside the agent), and inspiration.

Just as there are blended, mixed, or unclassifiable meditative practices, and for mystical experiences in general, so too with meditative states. For example, one might be a passive, guiding, ecstatic, inspirational, gnostic, awe-inspiring vision of a holographic universe of ineffably luminous, concept-transcending ideas – a description applicable to Proclus’ description of the *Logos* (Proclus and Taylor 1994),¹⁹ the first layer of intelligibility emanating from the One,

17 Patanjali’s treatise opens with the claim that yoga (nondual union) is attained by stopping all mental fluctuations (Bryant 2017).

18 Goleman and Davidson 2017 describe one advanced Tibetan yogi named Migyur Rimpoche whose EEG shows a high amplitude brainwave pattern of global (all-brain) ‘gamma’ synchrony during his open monitoring practice that lasts throughout his meditation but which is normally only briefly seen during moments of multi-sensory convergence, i.e., when one perceives the same object through three or more senses.

19 I had that experience, years before I read about this. Dodds’s translation of Proclus’s *Elements of Theology* (1963) is considered superior by some, but does not provide a direct experiential, visionary passage in precisely my terms. Proclus’s account of the *Logos* as the first layer of intelligibility emanating from the One is central to his metaphysical system and is analyzed throughout Dodds’s introduction and commentary. The mystical, visionary, and ecstatic experience described – ineffably luminous, concept-transcending, and awe-inspiring – corresponds most closely to Dodds’s discussion of Proclus’s theory of the intelligible cosmos (the *Logos*), which appears in the lengthy philosophical introduction (see pp. xv–xlviii), especially “Mystical Epistemology” and “The Structure of Emanation”. In the translation and commentary, propositions relating to the *Logos* and its role in cosmic emanation, unity, and intelligibility are found in Propositions 6–14 and discussed in the pages immediately following each proposition, often with Dodds’s own philosophical analyses. These can be found around pp. 6–30 of the Dodds translation. Dodds also addresses the Christian Neoplatonic reinterpretation of the *Logos* – especially in the commentary and footnotes to the relevant propositions (e.g., 20, 23, and 29), where he discusses the *Logos* as the Word made flesh in Christian metaphysics. For the most direct engagement with visionary, gnosis-like experiences and their relation to Neoplatonic metaphysics, see Dodds’s introduction (especially the section on mystical experience and illumination) and commentary on early propositions. For the specific Christian *Logos* connection, Dodds discusses these themes in his notes to higher propositions and the introduction.

which Christian Neoplatonists reinterpreted as the mind of God, according to which Jesus was the Word (the *Logos*) made flesh.

Meditative traits

Just as meditative states are not guaranteed by meditative practices, so too meditative traits are not guaranteed by meditative practices, but long-term meditative practice is likely to contribute to their cultivation, even if the practices are not engaged for such purposes. Even short-term mindfulness practices yield increases in detachment, as evidenced in a number of research protocols, one of the most researched of which involves the eight-week Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, as seen, e.g., on the Toronto Mindfulness Scale (TMS) (Lau et al. 2006).

There are many popular variations on MBSR, such as Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention, Mindfulness-Based Pain Management, and, among others, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Most of these are considered somewhat more effective than traditional forms of psychotherapy, which latter suffer from what psychologists themselves refer to as the ‘Dodo Effect’, meaning, most therapies are relatively equal – or equally ineffective – as “mechanisms of change” (Henriques and Galha 2024, Repetti 2025a).

In my own research using the TMS on my philosophy students, I created a Pre- and Post-Course Questionnaire (PPCQ) consisting of several philosophical statements to which students agreed or disagreed (on a Likert Scale), on the first and last days of class, such as:

I am confident in my understanding of the nature of reality.²⁰

I am confident in my understanding of the nature of knowledge.

I am confident in my understanding of the nature of values and value judgments.

The intervention tested the number of times we experienced basic mindfulness meditation in different sections of the same course (over a few years), between zero (control group) and 12. The more times students practiced meditation, the greater the average changes on the PPCQ, which showed up even in classes that only practiced meditation twice, and the greater changes increased in proportion to the number of exposures to meditation.²¹ My speculative conclu-

²⁰ Note that these statements are not intended to be valuable philosophical outcomes of meditation, per se. If they were, I doubt “confidence” would be such a good outcome. Rather, a better outcome would be a more self-questioning philosophical attitude. And as the results of these surveys – given at the start and at the end of a semester of philosophy classes engaged in meditative practices – show, there is a correlation between greater shifts away from confidence about such statements and greater exposure to meditation.

²¹ See Repetti 2010a on the implications of this study for a contemplative pedagogy.

sion is that meditation is a philosophical activity that engenders a philosophical state in which the possibilities for altered perspectives, frame-shifting, belief-revision and attitude-revision are phenomenologically activated: a meditating mind, at least in my experience with hundreds of my students, is intrinsically philosophically curious, open, receptive.²²

The so-called ‘Big Five’ personality traits, also known as the ‘Five Factor Model’, include Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism, are generally unalterable dispositions. Studies support the claim that meditation is one of the few things people can do to bring about changes in the Big Five. Openness to Experience, for example, refers to an individual’s willingness to engage with new ideas, experiences, and alterations in perspective. Research suggests that meditation practice can be associated with an increase in Openness. Meditation enhances self-awareness, which can lead to greater appreciation for new experiences and perspectives, potentially increasing Openness.

There are other ways in which meditation can increase putatively desirable traits, and decrease undesirable ones, although what counts as a desirable or undesirable trait is itself a matter to be explored in a philosophy of meditation, if not in virtue epistemology, among the Big Five and others. Here are some intuitive reasons meditation may help:

- reduce traits associated with Neuroticism, which can create a more open, adaptable mindset
- foster cognitive flexibility, making us more willing to try new things and adapt to changing circumstances, characteristics of Openness
- promote curiosity and exploration, which aligns with Openness, encouraging us to explore new ideas and experiences
- develop self-discipline, focus, and organization, all components of Conscientiousness
- promote attention regulation and commitment to tasks
- enhance emotional stability, reduce anxiety, stress, and mood swings, leading to a more balanced emotional state
- foster empathy and compassion, traits linked to Agreeableness
- increase self-awareness, helping us understand our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, fostering personal growth
- build resilience against stress, allowing us to cope with challenges
- enhance ability to live in the present moment
- reduce rumination
- increase life satisfaction and overall well-being

22 See, however, Struhl (2022), on the circular relationship between meditation instructions within traditions and the ways those traditions engage in ideological priming in those meditation instructions.

Many of these ideas are supported by research, e.g., long-term *metta* (loving-kindness) meditation practice increases neural activity and neural matter in the empathy center of the brain (the left prefrontal cortex), and long-term one-pointedness practice increases neural activity and neural matter in the attention centers of the brain (Begley 2007, Goleman and Davidson 2017, Vago 2022). While these are perhaps more specifically elements of a neurophilosophy of meditation, in my view, the various sciences of meditation ought to be considered aspects of the philosophy of meditation.

The monastic lore in all religions and spiritual traditions contains overwhelming testimonial evidence to a much longer list of traits altered by meditative practice (Ainslie 2001, Repetti 2010a).²³ These include, but are not limited to:

- prudence
- judiciousness
- forbearance
- benevolence
- generosity
- kindness
- compassion
- altruism
- peacefulness
- focus
- equanimity
- wisdom
- detachment
- centeredness
- fearlessness
- patience
- moral purity
- joy
- intuition
- mental/emotional freedom
- effortless self-control (*sophrosyne*)

23 There is a growing body of literature addressing some of the potentially negative consequences of meditation practices, but while this research is clearly relevant to a more complete philosophy of meditation, given my purpose of advocating and sketching a philosophy of meditation here, I will simply note this, but also share my intuition that insofar as in my view meditative exercises are simply exercises of our own awareness ideally oriented at more clearly seeing and understanding our own awareness and its relationship with reality, because such risks exist *tout court* in almost any related enterprise, they are not unique to meditation, but common to virtually all sentient existential conditions. In support of an almost universally pro-attitude toward meditation, see Repetti (2016).

Of course, the somewhat different versions of the *summum bonum* postulated by the world's contemplative wisdom traditions are all believed to be threshold-crossing attainments of human perfection made possible by various meditative and/or contemplative practices:

- *ataraxia* (tranquility, freedom from distress) – the goal in Epicureanism and Pyrrhonian Skepticism
- *apatheia* (equanimity, freedom from passions) – the goal in Stoicism
- *eudaemonia* (flourishing, well-being, fulfilment) – the goal for Plato and Aristotle, from the attainment of virtue
- *nirvana* (liberation from suffering) – the goal in Buddhism
- *satori* (sudden enlightenment, awakening) – a key concept in Zen Buddhism
- *moksha* (spiritual liberation) – the goal in several Hindu philosophies
- salvation (spiritual redemption) – the goal in the Abrahamic religions

All of these traits may be seen as elements of epistemic and/or moral virtues, that is, qualities of minds that intuitively foster sapiential growth and human excellence. Meditation virtuosos are universally revered as paragons of virtue, sages.

Contemporary research depicts substantial evidence in support of many such traits, including biomedical ones, altered by meditative practice, a number of which overlap with the monastic lore. These include, but are not limited to:

- reduced stress and anxiety
- improved emotional regulation
- enhanced focus and attention
- greater self-awareness
- increased compassion and empathy
- better memory and cognitive function
- lower blood pressure and improved heart health
- slower aging of the brain
- better sleep quality
- pain reduction and increased pain tolerance
- stronger immune system
- reduced symptoms of depression
- overall well-being and happiness
- greater neuroplasticity

(Begley 2007, Goleman and Davidson 2017)

Technically, with this list, the focus moves away again from philosophy per se, toward health and the psychology of meditation, but a complete philosophy of

meditation, in my view, ought to address all the aspects of meditation that matter to the philosophical and other dimensions of the wellbeing of human beings.

My philosophical research on how certain meditative practices count as training exercises for the cultivation of meditative traits has focused on how metacognition-involving forms of meditation contribute to the cultivation of what Thomas Metzinger calls ‘mental autonomy’ (2015) and I have termed ‘mental freedom’ (2010a, 2019). The idea, in short, is that by cultivating attentional control in connection with practicing observing, detaching from, and taking mental contents (thoughts, emotions, desires, etc.) off-line, we approximate what the Buddha – the exemplar of mental freedom – claimed, namely, that he could have or not have any thought, intention, resolve, etc., that he wanted or did not want to have, what I’ve called “the Buddha’s mental freedom claim” (2019). The ancient Greeks aspired to similar freedoms, in the form of *ataraxia*, *apatheia*, *eudaimonia*, etc., which can be understood as ‘freedoms from’ – from false beliefs, suboptimal emotions, desires, actions, and the like. I have argued extensively that the two primary practices that the Buddha advocated toward this end, *FA* and *OM*, the last two ‘folds’ in his Eightfold Path, are intuitively and empirically effective in increasing mental autonomy, freedom of the mind (2019).

Long-term meditative practice, as mentioned earlier, is also related to the cultivation of propensities to experience paranormal phenomena or the cultivation of psychic powers, which, as mentioned earlier, Patanjali detailed in an instructional manual for them thousands of years ago, although scholars are in some disagreement about the exact dating of the text (Bryant 2017). It is not necessarily the case that long-term meditation practice reliably causes these phenomena, but individuals who experience these phenomena more frequently or intensely than average are typically long-term meditators (Radin 2018, 2013). Psychic dispositions are not necessarily virtue-related traits, but they are traits related to long-term meditation practice.

Virtue epistemology emphasizes the cultivation of moral and intellectual virtues as keys to an optimal epistemology. The sapiential traits and abilities linked with long-term meditation practice render it one of the most powerful practices in any virtue epistemology toolkit. While increasing psychic powers are traits associated with meditative skill, they are universally regarded as both unnecessary collateral results of long-term practice and to be avoided for sapiential and soteriological purposes. The relationship between serious meditation discipline and virtue epistemological and related sapiential cultivation is a key subject for philosophical inquiry, but it can only be mentioned here as essential to a more complete philosophy of meditation.

Traditional-religion-based and related meditative traditions

What are the differences between paradigmatic forms of meditation from the world’s many religious traditions, where practitioners kneel in prayer in the West, or sit in Buddha-like postures in the East, between explicitly meditative

practices like one-pointedness and mindfulness, between more or less implicitly meditative practices like yoga, tai chi, Sufi whirling, tribal dance, shamanic journeys, entheogenic journeys, and between the host of diverse activities that engender altered states, e.g., sensory deprivation, runner's high, flow states (as with artists creating, mountaineers, hikers, bikers, skaters, dancers, etc.)? These taxonomic, conceptual questions need to be addressed in more comprehensive philosophies of meditation and spirituality. I sample some of them here that directly pertain to meditation, just to reveal some of the complexity of this issue.

As my analysis of differences and similarities between *FA* and *OM* above ought to make clear, these categories admit of multiple interpretations between and even within each of the two traditions that revolve around them, i.e., Buddhism and Hinduism. Buddhism is a heterodox species of the larger genus of Hinduism, itself an umbrella term that refers to six orthodox and several heterodox religious philosophical traditions of India, each of which includes many variants. Nonetheless, the primary mode of meditative practice prescribed and practiced in most forms of non-Buddhist Indian philosophy is of the *FA* type, whereas all forms of Buddhism prescribe both *FA* and *OM*, since these are the last two factors in the Eightfold Path, which itself constitutes the last of the Buddhist Four Noble Truths, which doctrines constitute the doctrinal core of all forms of Buddhism. Yet within the many forms of Buddhism, there are differences in the interpretation of *FA* and *OM* that manifest as differences in instruction and in philosophical understanding.

I do not wish to suggest which interpretation makes more sense, but simply to illustrate such differences. On one interpretation, e.g., mindfulness of bodily sensations is prescribed as the first step or foundational practice, as a prerequisite to later practices. This may be interpreted as a 'body sweep' or 'body scan' in which attention is directed sequentially throughout each bodily region, focused on proprioceptive/somatic sensations in each area. It may be interpreted as periodic exertions of *FA*, since attention is held on one part of the body and its sensations at a time, for a time. It may be interpreted as mid-range *OM* directed at a bodily region that involves more than a single focal point. Some interpret *FA* and *OM* as only conceptually – but not phenomenologically – distinguishable.

One metaphor for the subtle difference is that attention directed at a region or even a single point, such as the point where air enters the nostrils, is analogous to a spotlight shining light on that target, where the spotlight's lens control mechanism enables the practitioner to adjust the lens so it fits the contours of its object exactly, which is *FA*, and where the degree, intensity, brightness, or luminosity of the light directed at the target is the degree of mindfulness or *OM* attending to the target. Keeping the intended scope of the target is the goal of *FA*, and how mindful or aware one is of what is perceived within that scope is the degree of *OM*, and the goal of *OM* is to attain the highest degree of attentive awareness of the object or field being monitored. By analogy, while we can describe the difference between a circle of light cast exactly or inexactly

on a circle on an otherwise dark wall (the range of *FA*) and the greater or lesser intensity of the light, or lumens (the degree of *OM*), these cannot be separated physically. Some traditions instruct separate trainings for each of these two features; others insist they are both always being practiced, sometimes with emphasis on one or the other aspect.

Some Buddhist traditions outline several stages of meditative practices leading to several stages of meditative trance absorption, e.g., the *jhanas*, whereas others gloss over or simply circumvent such differences and insist on instantaneous enlightenment. Others insist we are already enlightened, and the illusion of non-enlightenment is a slight dust covering our vision, our pure consciousness, or inherent Buddha nature, whereas some claim that enlightenment takes up to seven lifetimes after attaining the first state, ‘stream entry’, characterized by one of the *jhanas*. Others assert that it takes countless lifetimes of good karma from living in accordance with Buddhist teachings.

The same sorts of differences appear in non-Buddhist forms of Indian philosophy. *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (Bryant 2018) outlines similar stages of meditative absorption on the path. *The Bhagavad Gita* (2000), one of the most beloved Hindu scriptures, lists a handful of major spiritual paths and many others leading to liberation, each involving a meditative component. Two major versions of Vedanta assert opposing claims about the enlightened state, namely, ‘Advaita’ (‘nondualist’, the identity of the soul with the supreme being or ultimate reality) and ‘Dvaita’ (‘dualist’, their non-identity), and yet a third version asserts ‘Vishisthadvaita’ (‘qualified nondualist’, a non-identity that allows for their communion). Swami Vivekananda (1895/2017), for example, argued that the difference between the dualist and non-dualist is simply a matter of spiritual evolution, asserting that only the more evolved experience nondualism. Others argue that dualism is the higher state because it enables the greater bliss of devotional ecstasy.

These are but a few of the many similar sorts of differences to be found just in Buddhism and Hinduism, the two traditions that most prioritize meditation. Daoism is among the world’s leading religions, philosophies, or religious philosophies that advocate meditation, as do the mystical and monastic elements within the three main monotheistic Abrahamic religions. Each of these divergent orientations diagnoses the human condition differently, adopts a different metaphysics about the person, the path, and the goal, prescribes a different set of practices with distinct instructions about otherwise curiously similar practices, and thus contributes to the so-called ‘jingle-jangle problem’ in the philosophies of meditation and spirituality, that is, the problem of the same word having different meanings in different traditions, on the one hand, and the same concept being identified by different words in different traditions, on the other hand.²⁴

24 The jingle-jangle problem is not limited to spirituality, but infects philosophy and the sciences (Vervaeke 2019/2020), and all communication (Repetti and Gleason 2022).

It is enough here to identify these issues and explain the need for them to be addressed in more comprehensive philosophies of meditation and spirituality. By analogy, detailing and examining a variety of claims widely considered to be forms of knowledge might be one way to go about trying to figure out what knowledge is, and such items might be relevant as data points for any theory of knowledge, but a lot more philosophical work would need to be engaged to formulate an adequate epistemology, rather than a summary of putative samples of knowledge. Thus, when it comes to the philosophy of meditation, merely enumerating the ways various traditions conceive and practice it is perhaps necessary but insufficient for a complete philosophy of meditation.

Novel forms of contemporary meditative practices

Recall the many popular meditation apps that millions of Westerners use, the many variations on MBSR, and the many different technological devices functioning as meditation enhancers, just to mention a few broad categories each of which admits of as many variations, interpretations, prescriptions, and instructions, and thus of as many jingle-jangle possibilities, as do the many forms of Buddhism and Hinduism. Likewise, it is enough for a prolegomenon to a philosophy of meditation to note their relevance to, and the need for them to be addressed in, more comprehensive philosophies of meditation and spirituality.

Meditative practices that are or aren't forms of philosophical practice²⁵

Some meditative practices are forms of philosophical practice; others are not. What makes the difference?

A ham sandwich is not normally, but can be, the object of philosophical inquiry, if, e.g., one is curious about its non-kosher nature versus that of 'turkey-ham'. Sitting upright in a chair, still, relaxing, need not be, but may be meditative, depending on whether one does so because one's blood pressure is being measured or because one is intending to meditate. Some forms of contemporary meditation are not philosophical if, e.g., they are engaged to reduce stress, lower blood pressure, relax, zone out, or take a waking nap. These are not necessarily spiritual practices either, but they can be part of a spiritual path that encourages an "ecology of practices" that includes them for overall health and wellbeing.²⁶ Similarly, one can engage in yoga for similar non-philosophical, non-spiritual reasons, e.g., body sculpting, cardiovascular health, etc., or

25 This section is admittedly of utmost importance for a philosophy of meditation. Considerations of space for this writing, however, constrain the extent to which I can go into each relevant aspect of the topic. For more on this topic, see Legum (2022), the Introduction to Repetti, ed. (2022), and the chapter by Repetti in Repetti, ed. (2022).

26 See Vervaeke 2019/2020, 2023/2024 and Vervaeke, Mastropietro, and Abramian 2024 for comprehensive arguments in support of an ecology of practices in a sapiential life path.

for explicitly philosophical and spiritual reasons. One can engage in meditative practices to explore altered states of consciousness, raise consciousness, approximate a spiritual or philosophical version of the *summum bonum*, e.g., *ataraxia*, *apatheia*, *sophrosyne*, *nirvana*, enlightenment, etc.), better understand consciousness, cultivate virtues, examine the self, the mind/body relationship, agency, the agent/arena or organism/environment relationship, the nature of time or space, and/or any other existentially relevant aspect of reality or being.

One of my meditation teachers, Dhamma Dena (aka Ruth Dennison), once remarked that “mindfulness is just extra-ordinary attention to ordinary experience” (2004). As touched upon in the opening section of this writing, in my view, philosophy and meditation are perhaps species of a shared genus: Philosophy is just extra-ordinary *examination* of ordinary experience. Thus, I see meditation and philosophy as species of a larger genus – albeit one without a name, as yet – that includes both. This greater genus includes an orientation of reciprocal, recursive interplay between discriminative attentiveness to the elements of experience and a critical examination of the concepts, beliefs, and perspectives arising in experience, toward the improvement of epistemic/metaphysical/existential convergence, the perfection of wisdom, or enlightenment. It transcends but includes observation and analysis, fostering a rich integration where introspection meets lived reality. This enables a transformative process that deepens the understanding of existence, enhances personal growth, and cultivates wisdom derived from both reflective practice and experiential learning.

We need a term that might capture the larger genus that encompasses both species. One neologism could be ‘ontosophy’, from *ontos* (being) and *sophia* (wisdom): the wisdom of being, or of how to best be, being wise, or wisening – aspiring to be wise. Seneca’s term for the sage was ‘*sapiens*’. The Greeks’ term was ‘*sophos*’, so perhaps ‘sophistry’ could work, the art of wisening, but that’s too close to ‘sophistry’, which has a negative connotation.

An alternative approach includes meditation as a form of philosophy, since in most major Asian traditions (barring Confucianism, although if ‘meditation’ is understood as a form of attentiveness, then including Confucianism) meditation is considered one of the highest forms of philosophy, and in the Western monastic traditions it is engaged towards the attainment of the *summum bonum*, which is a philosophical/spiritual aspiration, the attainment of the highest spiritual wisdom. Along this line of thought, Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault (Hadot 1995), otherwise odd bedfellows, have argued for a return to the ancient Greco-Roman emphasis on spiritual exercises as key components in *philosophy as a way of life*, which approach to academic philosophy was periodically dropped in the history of the West, but which was never dropped in the East.

Along these lines, Vervaeke has resurrected the Greek, “*philia sophia*”, ‘love of wisdom’, to differentiate it from its current denotation of *academic* philosophy, and to intend his interpretation which prescribes an ecology of such practices in a sapiential way of life (Vervaeke 2019/2020, 2023/2024, Vervaeke, Mastropietro, and Abramian 2024), or, if you will, in ontosophy. We are analyzing

meditative practices that are or aren't philosophical, but, conversely, *philia sophia* includes philosophical practices that are meditative and contemplative.

Socrates saw philosophy as “care of the soul”, *therapy*.²⁷ He and Plato also saw it as therapy of belief. Both were also martial artists – Socrates was a soldier, Plato, a wrestler – they exhibited an ecology of practices. The Stoics sought to internalize Socratic dialectic, as the therapy of assent/belief, desire, and action – ‘three disciplines’ aimed at *apatheia* – and explicitly included meditation as part of that therapy. According to Hadot (1995, Ch. IX), the Stoics saw physical exercises, e.g., fasting, willful adversity, etc., as important philosophical practices alongside dialectic and contemplation, part of the ‘third discipline’ (of action), as did Plotinus. Epicureans saw dialectic as therapy for superstition (aiming at *ataraxia*). Pyrrhonians saw dialectic as therapy for dogmatism (aiming at *aporia* or *agnosis*). Neoplatonists saw dialectic as anagogic therapy, the royal road to transcendence, including meditation.

Stoicism is *philia sophia*. There is a resurgence of interest in it in the West. This Western reclaiming of ancient Western *philia sophia* is part of a growing ‘philosophical practice’ movement that includes ‘philosophical counseling’ as an alternative to psychotherapy, or ‘therapy for the sane’, as one of its pioneers’ book titles puts it (Marinoff 2004).²⁸

Secular mindfulness

Secular mindfulness practices have become so popular in so many domains in the West in recent decades that they have been dubbed ‘McMindfulness’ (Purser and Loy 2013), to convey the idea that their spread is analogous to the spread of fast foods, like McDonalds. McMindfulness may not be philosophical, e.g., if one engages it to lower blood pressure, though it may produce collateral philosophical or spiritual benefits. I will respond to this topic in the next section.

Critiques of McMindfulness

Slavoj Žižek (2012), for example, construes McMindfulness as a new opium for the masses. Critics from the religious right accuse mindfulness of stealth Buddhism and ‘McYoga’ of stealth Hinduism. Orthodox Buddhist and Hindu critics

27 The word ‘therapy’ comes from the Greek ‘*therapeia*’, which means ‘healing’ or ‘treatment’, derived from ‘*therapeuein*’, meaning ‘to serve’ or ‘take care of’. Historically, ‘*therapeia*’ referred not only to medical treatment but to broader care and service, including of mind, body, and spirit. In modern use, ‘therapy’ covers many fields of treatment, e.g., psychology, physical rehabilitation, and holistic health, emphasizing restoration or improvement of well-being.

28 See Repetti 2025a for an argument in support of philosophical therapy; Repetti 2025b for an overview of philosophical counseling, consulting, therapy, and related ‘public philosophy’ practices; and Repetti 2023 for a sampling of such practices. For forms of the practice I developed with two groups of colleagues, see Socratic Counseling n.d. and the Philosophical Counseling Working Group n.d.

accuse them of being ethically-neutered Buddhism or Hinduism. I have argued extensively in support of McM mindfulness and against such critiques (Repetti 2016), so I will only summarize the main point of my account here: McM mindfulness is practice reducing *mindlessness*, which is implicated in most errors.

EEs associated with long-term or intense meditative practices

EEs, in paranormal research literature, include all the experiences mentioned above in connection with those studied by James and by Yaden and Newberg.²⁹ To the extent meditation is the greatest cause associated with EEs, followed by psychedelics, an account of EEs is required in robust philosophies of meditation and spirituality. While most literature on EEs has been positive, there are negative EEs, as has been brought to light in recent years by a number of researchers, significantly sparked by the work of Willoughby Britton and colleagues (Lindahl, Fisher, Cooper, Rosen, and Britton (2017)).³⁰ I briefly discuss both types.

People with undiagnosed or borderline forms of mental illness, unaddressed traumas, or diagnosed forms of mental illness such as PTSD, might be at greater risk of negative EEs by engaging in meditation practices, which can inadvertently trigger episodes of their pathologies, just as psychedelics can, outside controlled psychotherapeutic settings. So, just as those with physical health issues should consult physicians before engaging in new exercises, those with fragile psychological health should consult mental health counselors before engaging in meditative practices. It's important to recognize that basically 'healthy' persons can have negative experiences and reactions, can experience altered states that leave them disaffected; e.g., by detaching from thoughts and cultivating an impersonal stance towards them, one may experience depersonalization, a dissolution of the sense of self. Some aspire to experience this as a sign of spiritual growth, under the Buddhist belief that the self is an illusion we should transcend, but others who lack this aspiration can experience it as pathological. As with everything, it depends.

As for positive EEs, for example, I have had so many – in every category above – that if I could redistribute each one to different people who never had one, hundreds who are agnostic about them may be converted to gnostics thereby. I describe a few of them here to partly explain my vocal advocacy of their importance in any robust philosophy of meditation or spirituality. I have experienced dozens of precognitive dreams, each of which involved dozens of sequential 'hits' – improbable non-trivially-correct predictions – the

²⁹ To be clear, James is specifically characterizing mystical experience, not setting out categories of EEs. And EE is broader than the spiritual experience. Psi, for instance, isn't necessarily a spiritual experience for some who have it.

³⁰ Cf. Huebner Hayman 2022. Note, however, that the academic recognition of negative mystical experiences goes back at least as far as James, and negative NDEs have been identified by researchers for a long time.

probabilities against which are roughly equal to the odds against selecting one atom in the visible universe. Some such dreams were shared by others, which only multiplies the incredibly high improbability. Some such dreams foretold events which only came true independently of my agency, on the one hand, but because I dreamt them, somewhat paradoxically, on the other hand. Researchers call these ‘time loops’ (Wargo 2018). I will give just one example.

After having a dream about it, I was invited to attend an invitation-only secret meditation group that I never knew existed. I only learned of it after informing two members of it about my dream. In my dream I experienced the route to a house where the group met, its secret location at an exact intersection in a place I never visited, its stoop, front door, inside spiral wrought iron black staircase leading to its basement, the design of the meditation room, its altar, the platform on which the teacher sat, her identity, the people in attendance in meditation poses facing her, the meditation led by this woman, etc., all to the amazement of the members to whom I described the dream. The group was at maximum, due to the small space in the teacher’s basement, but when my dream was related to her, she invited me. One detail in my dream that I did not relate to these two members before I went there was that at the end of my dream, a blonde, green-eyed woman I recognized from a much larger meditation group I belonged to, but didn’t know personally, asked me how I liked the meditation. In real life, right after the meditation, instead, she said she dreamed that I came there. I replied, “So did I”.

I have had numerous precognitive dreams of this complex, paradoxical nature, and numerous mystical, gnostic, and related EEs that demand philosophical explanations. I am convinced that most of them were not functions of confusion, mistaken memory, or other forms of error.

Possible metaphysics that might make mystical experiences, psi, NDEs, etc., possible

As I have argued elsewhere (Repetti, Pascal, and Dempsey 2025), if the latest theoretical physics models are coherent, e.g., if spacetime is not fundamental, if nonlocality (quantum entanglement) affects not only space but time, or if time is like a fourth dimension in a timeless block universe, then these experiences are not supernatural,³¹ and the whole natural/supernatural dichotomy is a false one. It is enough to emphasize here the importance of developing credible epistemologies, physics, and metaphysics to account for these phenomena. Unfortunately, due to considerations of space, I cannot develop this line of inquiry further here in this admittedly limited prolegomenon, but only point to its importance in a more complete philosophy of meditation.

³¹ See Wargo 2022 on the paradoxical ‘time looping’ physics that would make this possible.

Can meditative experiences reveal metaphysical truths?

Contemplative traditions suggest that meditative experiences reveal metaphysical truths about the nature of consciousness, self, ultimate reality, etc. The two most obvious problems here are the blatant contradictions between them and the circularity problem within each of them: the accounts in different traditions often contradict each other, and within each tradition the alleged methods of supporting these claims are often circular insofar as their meditative instructions presuppose the metaphysics that they train practitioners to experience (Struhl 2022). As with the conclusion of the previous section, it is enough to emphasize the importance of developing credible epistemologies and metaphysics to account for these phenomena, some attempts at which appear across several chapters in my edited collection on the topic.

Can meditative experiences lead to wisdom, mental freedom, enlightenment?

According to many wisdom traditions, meditation is the royal road to the highest wisdom, sometimes referred to as enlightenment. However, this conclusion faces the same contradictions and circularity problems. What is enlightenment: the realization of the Self, no-self, the Dao, God, etc.? Is there really an enlightening threshold which, once crossed, is irreversible? If so, why the disagreement about it? Again, it is enough to emphasize the importance of developing credible epistemologies and metaphysics to address these issues in a prolegomenon to the topic.

Conclusions

How does all this inform the broader subject, the philosophy of spirituality? The better part of the answer is implicit in everything above. This is only a prolegomenon to a more complete philosophy of meditation, itself a central component in a philosophy of spirituality. I aver that we need a robust philosophy of meditation and spirituality, and that the above supports that claim. I conclude with the claim I opened with: that meditative practices are one of the most powerful forms of spiritual and philosophical practice, if not the most powerful. What exactly does ‘powerful’ mean here? Transformative? This must be left vague. Impressive experiences may certainly shake one out of conventional views, but how is the hard work of spiritual development performed? By sweeping floors, as the Zen teacher might say? In relationships, including raising children well? By engaging in social action for the benefit of other beings? In line with my use of the metaphor of the elephant and the blind, I leave these as open questions for now, and I am open to each of them and countless others being enlighteningly valid in some sense or other. Again, this is my metaphorically partial access to one leg on the metaphorical elephant of the philosophies of meditation and of spirituality, based on my personal leg-up on meditation and the many EEs that it apparently generated in my practice.

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Rik Repeti

Prolegomena za filozofiju meditacije

Apstrakt

Ova prolegomena skicira pitanja koja su centralna za filozofiju meditacije i razvija samo neka od njih, a čitaocce upućuje na druga dela u kojima su obrađena pitanja, koja nisu pokrivena ovde. Potpuna filozofija meditacije obuhvatila bi prikaze: razlika između meditativnih praksi, stanja i osobina; religijski zasnovanih meditativnih tradicija; novih savremenih meditativnih praksi i istraživanja; meditativnih praksi koje jesu i nisu filozofske prakse, i obrnuto; „Mekmajndfulnessa“ (McMindfulness); toga da li i u kojoj meri takve prakse otkrivaju metafizičke istine ili vode ka prosvetljenju; kakva fizika/metafizika bi mogla učiniti mogućim paranormalne korelate mističkih iskustava; kao i prednosti i nedostatke svih ovih pitanja. Autor deli neka lična iskustva, spekulativne hipoteze i argumente za centralnu tvrdnju da su meditativne prakse jedan od najmoćnijih oblika duhovne i filozofske prakse.

Ključne reči: ekologija praksi, Mekmajndfulness, meditacija, mentalna autonomija, paranormalno, filozofsko savetovanje, filozofska praksa, filozofija kao način života, filozofija meditacije, filozofija duhovnosti

II

STUDIES AND ARTICLES

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LIBERAL PROVOCATIONS: WHY CARLO ROSSELLI IS STILL RELEVANT TODAY

ABSTRACT

Liberal and socialist worldviews are often seen as being in a fundamental opposition. This is reinforced immensely either by Francis Fukuyama's apostrophised end of history or by the thesis put forward by authors such as Patrick Deneen that liberalism has failed. The question that arises on closer examination of this assumption is whether or not it is accurate. Based on Carlo Rosselli's work *Socialismo Liberale* (Liberal Socialism), this article attempts to systematically challenge this thesis. Against the backdrop of the rise of fascism in Italy, Rosselli comes to the realisation – contrary to many representatives of orthodox Marxism – that the liberal and socialist worldviews are not necessarily antagonistic to one another. In fact, they may even be mutually dependent – an important insight to think social change anew.

KEYWORDS

Liberalism, Socialism, Rosselli, anti-fascism, Geuss, Horkheimer, freedom, democracy, economy, Marxism

Introduction

When Max Horkheimer claimed that those who do not want to talk about capitalism should remain silent about fascism, he primarily intended to say that there is an undeniable connection between the capitalist system and fascism, in that the latter attempts to maintain the former – albeit by violent and despotic means (Horkheimer 1939: 115-116). Even if Horkheimer's formulation is inextricably linked to the rise of Nazism in terms of content, it nevertheless points to an important idea that can also be applied to other thematic contexts. Horkheimer's thesis points out that many areas that are perceived as disparate can be structurally related to one another. With reference to Carlo Rosselli's thinking, this article pursues nothing less than the goal of applying the dictum apostrophized by Horkheimer to a different context: those who do not want to speak of socialism should remain silent on liberalism.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate, in particular with reference to Carlo Rosselli's work *Socialismo Liberale*, that both liberalism and socialism



share a common goal: human freedom. Socialism, however, can be understood as an extension of the basic liberal idea in that it assumes that the liberalism advocated by the bourgeoisie was unfaithful to many of its universalist principles – and that socialism (as a continuation of the basic liberal idea) is subsequently able to realize these ideals inherent in liberalism.

Carlo Rosselli's concept of liberal socialism – which Rosselli developed at the time as a critical distinction from many representatives of Marxism – is not only able to provide guidance in readjusting the relationship between the political currents of liberalism and socialism. In addition, Rosselli also points to a crucial insight that is also of immediate relevance today: a left that views values such as freedom and democracy only as a bourgeois ideology is hopelessly lost when it comes to the question of how social change can be initiated.

The primary aim of the following discussion is to highlight the contemporary relevance of Rosselli's liberal-socialist theoretical approach and, in doing so, to move beyond a purely historical contextualization of Rosselli's thought. While Nadia Urbinati's seminal preface (1994) establishes Rosselli's historical and theoretical foundations, this article extends his framework by applying his critiques to contemporary debates about liberalism's decline – a lens unavailable to Urbinati writing in the 1990s. Furthermore—and this is a central motif underlying the following contribution—the constant rediscovery and re-interpretation of ideas in light of a new present is an essential prerequisite for clarifying the practical implications of political-theoretical approaches. This modest, though important, goal is what the argumentative elaborations presented below set out to achieve.

First, I will address the relationship between the liberal and socialist worldviews at a more general level (1). Then (2), I will examine in greater detail the historical background and the genesis of Rosselli's groundbreaking work, *Socialismo liberale*. Subsequently (3), I will explore why, according to Rosselli's liberal-socialist theoretical approach, the liberal and socialist worldviews do not represent a contradiction. Following this (4), I will analyze the extent to which Rosselli's conception of the “liberal method” must be seen as formative for the liberal-socialist approach. Section (5) will then be dedicated to the question of to what extent Rosselli's conception of the liberal-socialist theoretical approach can be fully understood against the background of his critique of Marxism.

1. Liberalism and Socialism: Friends or Foes?

In his book *Not Thinking like a Liberal*, Raymond Geuss draws attention to the idea that the frequently cited comparison between liberalism and authoritarianism is a false dichotomy (Geuss 2023: 27).

While authoritarianism negates all possible varieties of what can be subsumed under the term liberalism, liberalism itself, according to Geuss, can be seen as ‘[...] an amorphous and changing collection of things with a distinct ability to renew itself, to change shape and to revise the formulation of its basic convictions’ (ibid.).

While the anti-liberalism inherent in authoritarianism thus negates all varieties of liberalism – and consequently culminates in fascist worldviews – the liberal worldview cannot be directly reduced to a uniform definition (*ibid.*). Even if Geuss does not speak in favour of liberalism, since his thesis is that neither liberalism nor authoritarianism need to be the alternative, the question can also be raised as to whether the image that characterizes liberalism really offers a meaningful basis for discussing the potential that the political theory of liberalism possesses.

First, however, Geuss's basic consideration that the juxtaposition of liberalism or authoritarianism is a false dichotomy can be agreed with in principle. The crucial question that arises at this point, however, is whether the alternative resulting from the establishment of such a false dichotomy can take place without recourse to the basic theoretical assumptions of liberalism itself. It should be noted, however, that the dichotomous juxtaposition of liberalism or authoritarianism draws its explanatory force from significant historical developments. Not least when Francis Fukuyama proclaimed his famous dictum of an "end of history," the idea that liberal capitalism was on a clear triumphal march became popular for the first time.

Due to the prevailing global crises we face today, however, Fukuyama's view of an end to history can increasingly be called into question. Fukuyama originally developed his thesis against the backdrop of the thesis that liberal democracy and global capitalism are inseparable. Against the background of this assumption, Fukuyama developed the argument that liberal democracy should be classified as the superior system to all other alternatives, both politically and morally. The collapse of state communism in the Soviet Union and the accompanying collapse of the Berlin Wall strengthened Fukuyama's thesis of an end to history (Zissimos 2022: 372-376). Fukuyama's thesis offers an extremely insightful explanation for what Geuss calls false dichotomies.

Against the backdrop of increasing global crises – COVID-19, war, climate crisis, etc. – the question of whether the world has really reached the "end of history" is increasingly gaining attention. Much more interesting, however, is the question of how the global left is reacting to these global phenomena – which undoubtedly also have an impact on nation states. The more the crises we face increase, the more the tendencies of division within societies seem to increase as well. These divisive tendencies can also be found within the socio-political left-wing forces – as can be seen from numerous examples. Increasing authoritarianism on a global level is leading to a new competition between systems, which amounts to the false dichotomy of authoritarianism vs. liberalism apostrophized by Geuss. In 2019, for example, none other than Vladimir Putin argued that the basic idea of liberalism is now superfluous and blatantly contradicts the interests of the majority population – it goes without saying that Putin only uses this argument as an ideologically underpinned justification for his increasingly authoritarian oligarchic capitalism (Barber et al. 2019).

However, there are also less controversial voices than Vladimir Putin who state that the liberal project can be considered to have largely failed. Patrick

Deneen, for example, argues in his book *Why Liberalism Failed* that it is above all the false anthropological assumptions underlying the liberal doctrine that can be used to explain the failure of liberalism – and why liberalism subsequently cannot be regarded as the “end of history” apostrophized by Fukuyama (Wright 2023). However, Deneen’s thesis is characterized by some nuances. For example, although Deneen points out that the liberal project can be considered to have largely failed, he also mentions that it is important to recognize its achievements. Put differently, i.e. more precisely: It is important to recognize the dialectic of the liberal project itself by realizing that some of the greatest advances that liberalism has brought with it have been accompanied by regressions in other areas of society. In this context, Deneen cites the argument often made by proponents of liberalism that it was liberalism that was able to emancipate women from pre-liberal forms of domestic servitude (Deneen 2018: 187). However, Deneen raises the not entirely unjustified question of whether one can speak of real emancipation in this case, as the liberation of women essentially amounted to them having to submit to new forms of oppression by having to integrate themselves into the competitive capitalist economic system and assert themselves within this system. Thus, Deneen brings this thought to its precision with the correct consideration that true human freedom consists not only of freedom from a king (or in this case: a spouse), but also of the freedom not to have to submit to an employer to earn a living (ibid.).

One crucial question that inevitably arises in light of Deneen’s observations, however, is whether they lead him to the right conclusion. Among other things, Deneen’s argument boils down to the conclusion that, regardless of the failure of the basic liberal idea, it is still important to understand its original appeal. At this point, it seems worthwhile to cite Deneen himself:

Liberalism arose by appeal to an ennobling set of political ideals and yet realized new and comprehensive forms of degradation. Put less charitably, the architects of liberalism intentionally appropriated widely shared political ideals and subverted them to the advantage of those most capable of benefiting from new definitions of liberty, democracy, and republicanism. Building on liberalism’s successes means recognizing both the legitimacy of its initial appeal and the deeper reasons for its failure. It means offering actual human liberty in the form of both civic and individual self-rule, not the ersatz version that combines systemic powerlessness with the illusion of autonomy in the form of consumerist and sexual license. Liberalism was both a boon and a catastrophe for the ideals of the West, perhaps a necessary step whose failures, false promises, and unfulfilled longings will lead us to something better (ibid.: 187-188).

At this point, it is indeed worth taking a closer look at Deneen’s statements. If we want to present Deneen’s remarks as precisely as possible, we must first recognize that both the failure and the success of liberalism have the same origin. On the one hand, the success of the liberal idea can be explained by the fact that the ideals on which it is based – Deneen lists the principles of freedom, democracy and republicanism among these ideals – certainly represented

the ideal basis for a significant progress of the social conditions. On the other hand, one of the historical problems of liberalism from the outset is that those who benefited most from the newly acquired ideals of liberalism – *eo ipso* the bourgeoisie – proclaimed these rights for themselves alone (ibid.).

The question that inevitably arises at this point, however, is whether Deneen, against the background of these quite correct considerations, reaches the right conclusion when he states that the liberal project can be considered to have largely failed. It is worth bearing in mind – an aspect that Ed Rooksby has rightly emphasized elsewhere – that the ideals of liberty and equality (which seem to describe the ideals of liberalism in an even more accurate way), in whose name the bourgeois revolutionaries brought down the *ancien régime*, initially only benefited the bourgeois revolutionaries themselves and continued to exclude other groups – i.e. the poorer population, women, slaves, etc. – from the project. In the further course of his argument, however, Rooksby correctly points out that the actions of the bourgeois revolutionaries themselves thwarted the implicit universalism inherent in the ideals of liberalism through their privilege-securing and interest-driven actions (Rooksby 2012: 509). At the same time, this implicit universalism offered the still excluded groups a theoretical point of reference with which they could justify the struggle for their own participation in those liberal ideals. In other words, the injustice felt by the groups that continued to be excluded can be explained specifically by the fact that the ideals underlying the liberal worldview – freedom and equality – were refuted by practical conditions, in that these initially only benefited privileged groups of society (ibid.).

At the same time, the awareness of one's own exclusion has offered the opportunity to fight against these very forms of exclusion and to realize an increasingly higher degree of equality on a social level. According to Rooksby, this also highlights the subversive nature of the liberal idea itself: the tension between reality – and thus the institutions that purport to protect the fundamental liberal values – and the ideals (freedom and equality) that underpin the liberal worldview, simultaneously represents the engine of progress towards a truly freer and more equal society (ibid.).

Against the background of these considerations, it seems appropriate to criticise Deneen when he claims – as has already been shown – that the '[...] failures, false promises, and unfulfilled longings' of liberalism '[...] will lead us to something better' (Deneen 2018: 187-188). This brings us to the real core of the problem: from a left-wing perspective, it is more than easy to criticize liberalism as a bourgeois ideology. This can be explained not only by the fact that the most blatant forms of economic injustice are justified in the name of liberalism.

However, a question which does indeed require deeper discussion is whether the political currents of liberalism and socialism are really such a blatant contradiction. Probably no one has dealt with this idea more aptly than the Italian politician and historian Carlo Rosselli (1899-1937), who fell victim to the fascists in 1937. During his exile on the island of Lipari, Rosselli wrote his

only work *Socialismo Liberale (Liberal Socialism)* which is widely underestimated and neglected in today's left-wing circles.

In broad terms – as Nadia Urbinati aptly points out in her foreword to Rosselli's work – *Socialismo Liberale* is based on two main lines of argument. First, Rosselli expresses an explicit critique of both Marxism and Marxist revisionism. On the basis of this critique, Rosselli conceives his political idea of liberal socialism (Rosselli & Urbinati 1994: XXXIII).

2. *Socialismo Liberale: The World at a Crossroads*

Urbinati aptly points out that there are not only historical, but also theoretical reasons that show why Rosselli's *Socialismo Liberale* should be regarded as a thoroughly serious and fundamental work (ibid.: XXXIV) – also (or especially) in view of the multiple crises facing today's political left. One of the historical reasons for this is that Rosselli's treatise served as the theoretical basis for the anti-fascist resistance movement *Giustizia e Libertà*, which was co-founded by Rosselli – making Rosselli's work, alongside Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, one of the most important works of the anti-fascist resistance movement in Italy at the time (ibid.).

In this context, it should first be emphasized that Rosselli's development of the liberal-socialist approach itself must be regarded as the product of an intellectual evolution. Here, Rosselli's early enthusiasm for the British labour movement is particularly noteworthy. Above all, the guild socialism developed by G.D.H. Cole aroused the interest of the young Rosselli—not least because Rosselli saw in Cole's principle of industrial self-management a promising approach for future socialist movements (Calabrò 2020: 193-194). However, even independently of Rosselli's engagement with the concept of guild socialism, it can be stated that the 1920s were characterized by Rosselli's intensive pre-occupation with the British labour movement in general. Especially after the collapse of Italian socialism, Rosselli saw in the British labour movement a viable alternative (ibid.: 196). This can be explained above all by the fact that the British labour movement clearly distinguished itself from the ideological premises – keyword: centralization – of the continental European Marxists and, as a consequence, advocated for a more trade union-centred socialism (ibid.).

2.1 European Fascism

The theoretical foundation of *Giustizia e Libertà* was also based on a new interpretation regarding how to classify the phenomenon of fascism, which was emerging in Europe at the time. According to Rosselli's conception, *Giustizia e Libertà* represented the first political movement on the European level to fully recognize fascism as a central phenomenon and to consciously break away from traditional party-political strategies for combating fascism (Pugliese 2007: 31).

Rosselli's elaboration of the liberal-socialist theoretical approach is inextricably linked to his analysis of the rise of fascism at that time. In other words:

both Rosselli's conception of the liberal-socialist approach and the anti-fascist resistance movement he co-founded, which was based on this approach, can be traced back to significant intellectual influences on Rosselli's thought—above all, Gramsci and Gobetti (ibid.: 32).

2.2 Influences on Rosselli's Thought: Gramsci and Gobetti

From Gramsci, Rosselli primarily adopted the idea that the proletariat, as a political and socially transformative force, is of decisive historical significance (ibid.). Gobetti, by contrast, shaped Rosselli's view that the proletariat as a political actor represents a consistent embodiment of liberal principles – and not, as commonly assumed, the bourgeoisie. This idea is particularly developed in Gobetti's *La Rivoluzione Liberale* (ibid.).

It is also important to highlight – returning to the previously discussed influence of the British labor movement on Rosselli – that the liberal-socialist approach, as it was developed in Italy at that time, can only be fully understood through the anti-fascist stance adopted by many opposition figures, including Rosselli, Gobetti, and Calogero. In contrast to its British counterpart, which was more influenced by a social-evolutionary hypothesis of gradual progress, resistance against the fascist regime was central to the self-understanding of Italian liberal socialists (Bastow & Martin 2003: 72-72).

These historical circumstances – to take a first step towards the theoretical implications of Rosselli's work – also explain why Rosselli attributed a significant share of the blame for the rise of fascism to the orthodox Marxists. According to Rosselli, the fatalism that became apparent in the Marxist doctrine (which assumed, to put it simply, that capitalism would perish in the future due to its inherent contradictions) ensured that those parts of the workers' movement that were ideologically committed to orthodox Marxism felt themselves to be in a state of passivity, which subsequently led to their capitulation to the fascists (Rosselli & Urbinati 1994: XLI).

3. Liberalism and Socialism: A Contradiction?

At first glance, the term *liberal socialism* can easily lead to the assumption that it appears to be an oxymoron, as it brings together concepts that are fundamentally at odds with each other in terms of their basic normative essence. However, just as Geuss points out that the juxtaposition of liberalism vs. authoritarianism appears to be a false dichotomy, according to Rosselli it can also be assumed that the contradictory elements that one might be inclined to ascribe to the liberal-socialist approach also appear to be based on false assumptions. Rosselli impressively points out this aspect in the preface to his treatise:

From the historical point of view this formula might seem to contain a contradiction, inasmuch as socialism arose in reaction to the liberalism – especially the economic variety – that characterized bourgeois thought at the outset of the nineteenth century. But we have traveled a long way between then and now

and accumulated a great deal of experience. The two opposing positions have gradually been drawing closer to one another. Liberalism has gradually become cognizant of the social problem and no longer appears automatically bound to the principles of classical, Manchesterian economics. Socialism is stripping itself, though not easily, of its utopianism and acquiring a new awareness of the problems of liberty and autonomy (ibid.: 6).

According to Rosselli, the contradiction that is easily attributed to the formula of liberal socialism can simply be explained by specific historical development processes. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was an extremely one-sided interpretation of liberalism, shaped by bourgeois thinking, which applied the underlying idea of freedom more to the sphere of economic structures than to the areas of human action (ibid.). Even if Rosselli speaks of opposing positions, his considerations give reason to believe that these are by no means truly opposing positions. Rather, according to Rosselli's reasoning, the moment of self-reflexivity inherent in the basic liberal idea has ensured that the insight has increasingly come to the fore that a full realization of human freedom requires that material and social conditions are reshaped in such a way that the greatest possible number of people can develop their freedom in a meaningful way. Against the backdrop of these considerations, Rosselli then arrives at an apt definition of what constitutes the concrete essence of the fundamental liberal idea:

Liberalism in its most straightforward sense can be defined as the political theory that takes the inner freedom of the human spirit as a given and adopts liberty as the ultimate goal, but also the ultimate means, the ultimate rule, of shared human life. The goal is to arrive at a condition of social life in which each individual is certain of being able to develop his own personality fully. Liberty is also the means in the sense that the final stage cannot be bestowed or imposed; it has to be earned through hard personal struggle, as the generations succeed one another in time. Liberalism conceives of liberty not as a fact of nature, but as becoming, as development. One is not born free; one becomes free. And one stays free by retaining an active and vigilant sense of one's autonomy, by constantly exercising one's freedoms (ibid.: 85).

On closer examination of this passage, it is interesting to note that Rosselli's definition of liberalism is based on the fundamental assumption that liberalism itself is *both the means and the end*. When Rosselli speaks here of a target state, this remark indicates that the goal of liberalism is specifically to provide the social structures that enable individuals to develop their personal talents in the greatest possible way.

4. Socialism and the Liberal Method

At the same time, however, this raises the question of the way (or the means) by which such social structures can be brought about. According to Rosselli such an objective can only be achieved through the methodology of freedom

itself – which of course excludes the option of authoritarian leadership (ibid.: 85). Here, Rosselli is already taking up – at least to some extent – an important idea that Zygmunt Bauman will spell out later in his work *Socialism – The Active Utopia*. Bauman assumes that the approach to a utopian state of society (even if this may never fully succeed) that is preferable to the currently prevailing social conditions can only take place through an active and critical confrontation with the prevailing empirical/social circumstances; a form of activity that can only take place out of the impetus of freedom. According to Bauman, ‘[...] each moment of human history [...], to a greater or lesser degree, is an open-ended situation; a situation which is not entirely determined by the structure of its own past, and from which more than one string of events may follow [...]’ (Bauman 1976: 10).

According to Bauman, every historical situation is initially to be regarded as a moment with an open outcome. If one takes the effort at this point to read between the lines in Bauman’s work, it also becomes clear that from this apostrophized openness it can be concluded that any form of assumed determinism of historical developmental tendencies (‘This event had to happen, history wanted it that way’) has to be rejected – not least because such a determinism can be regarded as incompatible with the epistemic modesty that, consequently, follows from the fact of historical openness (ibid.).

It may seem unusual to introduce a thinker like Bauman here – nevertheless, such intellectual parallels demonstrate how influential the critique of determinism in the understanding of history has remained in later debates within leftist political theory.

Rosselli has already recognized the insight resulting from the bias of the respective historical or social figuration, which, according to Bauman’s reading, leads to people beginning to act as an active and voluntaristic subject, when he advocates the “liberal method.” Through the liberal (or democratic) method, Rosselli attempts to take account of the fact that both liberalism and socialism can only find to their own realization in a meaningful way if the principle of freedom – and thus also of autonomy – should be both the means (and thus also the methodology) and the end of political action (Rosselli & Urbina-ti 1994: 94). For Rosselli, this consideration also goes hand in hand with the insight that any form or imagination of a better society can only be brought about through the methodology of freedom and autonomy and never through authoritarian forms of rule – here, of course, the historical context, which in Rosselli’s environment was characterized above all by the predominance of Mussolini’s fascism, can be used as a decisive explanation:

Liberty can never be won through tyranny or dictatorship, or even through being granted from above. Liberty is a conquest, a self-conquest, which is preserved only through the continual exercise of one’s faculties and individual autonomies. For liberalism, and hence for socialism, observance of the liberal method, that is, the democratic method, of entering the political contest is fundamental. This is the method that in its essence is utterly permeated with the principle of liberty. It can be summed up in a single word: self-government. The liberal method

intends peoples and social classes, like individuals, to administer their affairs by using their own capacities, without coercion or paternalistic intervention. [...] On the political level, it can be defined as a complex of rules of the game that all the parties in contention commit themselves to respect, rules intended to ensure the peaceful coexistence of citizens, social classes, and states; to restrain competition, which is inevitable and indeed desirable, within tolerable limits; to permit the various parties to succeed to power in turn; and to guide the forces of innovation that will arise from time to time into legal channels (ibid.).

A closer look at this passage reveals two particularly interesting aspects: (I) Rosselli clearly points out that the liberal method is also the democratic method and (II) that this method must be regarded as indispensable for both liberalism and socialism. The first aspect can be better grasped if we consider the basic mechanisms that characterize the principle of freedom according to Rosselli's reading. According to Rosselli, freedom is characterized by a never-ending process, in that it can only be asserted and maintained through constant conflict with oneself and with the social environment – and thus also with one's fellow human beings (ibid.). Freedom is thus, as Rosselli puts it, a form of conquest, which at the same time can only be practiced in a meaningful way against the background of specific forms of self-overcoming. If the liberal method is subsequently also the democratic method, Rosselli draws attention to the fact that – just as the practice of true autonomy is always linked to the overcoming of one's own first nature, which is characterized by heteronomy – the practice of political freedoms also requires the overcoming of one's own particular interests in order to comply with the fundamental democratic rules of the game. For true political freedom (in the form of the realization of one's own political interests) can only take place against the background of generally accepted democratic rules of the game, so that *everyone is granted this opportunity*. When Rosselli says that the liberal method is characteristic of both liberalism and socialism, this statement draws attention to the fact that the two political worldviews are not necessarily contradictory (ibid.: 87). Rosselli goes on to explain why the liberal/democratic method defies any form of political categorization:

The liberal method of taking part in the political contest cannot be qualified; it is not and cannot be either bourgeois or socialist, conservative or revolutionary, though its very nature tends to make it favor the forces of progress. As a bond prior to any political tendency, it requires of those who enter into it faith in reason, sacred respect for mankind, the recognition that each citizen enjoys an infrangible sphere of autonomy, and the rooted conviction that nothing strong and lasting is built with brute force, even when it is employed in the service of fine ideals. Like all refined instruments, it naturally implies a high degree of civilization; rather, it is itself the product of civilization (ibid.: 94-95).

According to Rosselli, the belief in reason, autonomy and a strict rejection of any form of violence are not only to be regarded as central characteristics of the liberal method itself, but also as central characteristics of civilized

coexistence in general. From a radical-left perspective, one could of course feel compelled to accuse Rosselli of a certain form of reformist naivety. This accusation can be understood against the background of the frequently encountered assumption that the liberal method itself is based on a form of illusion, in that it assumes that the capitalist classes, i.e. the bourgeoisie, would part with their wealth without any form of resistance as soon as a certain social majority were in favour of this. Rosselli had already been able to anticipate this accusation during his lifetime – which greatly reinforces the timelessness of Rosselli's ideas (*ibid.*: 95). At the time, Rosselli was confronted with the reproach of other socialists who emphasized that '[...] the democratic method is the method proper to bourgeois society, that it answers to the conservative and governmental needs of the bourgeoisie' (*ibid.*). This argument, in turn, is based on the assumption that the liberal method and the associated recognition of the democratic rules of the game are fundamentally in favour of the bourgeoisie, whose fundamental interest remains focused on the primacy of material and financial property preservation (*ibid.*).

Against the background of these considerations, Rosselli rejects even more strictly that some of the socialists – although some socialists admit that some liberal institutions should first be utilized in the early stages – regard violence as a legitimate means:

This sort of talk, which democratic socialists have been hearing for thirty years, reveals a complete incomprehension on the part of those who utter it of the spirit and the essence of the liberal method, a physiological incapacity to cut themselves loose from notions that may have had some rationale at the origins of the socialist movement, when the proletariat was without political rights and had nothing to lose but its chains, but that have no more reason for being now that the proletariat has attained its political adulthood in every country. The working class in Europe today finds itself face-to-face with a bourgeoisie that, drawn along by the logic of its own principles and above all by the irresistible pressure of the proletariat, has been forced to give itself (what it did not have in the first place) a democratic constitution. The bourgeoisie today acknowledges explicitly that power has its only source of legitimacy in the people, in the entire people, which expresses its will in parliament, through universal suffrage (*ibid.*: 95-96).

In Rosselli's view, the liberal/democratic method is indispensable not least because the working class – in contrast to earlier times, when it was still in 'chains' and had no political and economic rights – has now achieved such a degree of political rights that it is able to confront the bourgeoisie on an equal footing, i.e. through political competition. Of particular interest here is Rosselli's argument regarding the origins that explain this newly won equality (at least at the democratic-participatory level). When Rosselli points out that the bourgeoisie was forced to recognize democratic competition primarily by the logic of its own principles, this repeats (at least in part) Rooksby's previously discussed argument: According to Rooksby, the realization of the basic liberal

idea can be considered a failure precisely for the reason that the bourgeoisie, having brought down the *ancien régime*, was unable to realize the ideals of liberty and equality – in whose name the old regime was brought down – on a practical level (Rooksby 2012: 509).

5. Rosselli's Turning Away from Marxism

One question that inevitably arises at this point, however, is what conditions led Rosselli to advocate the concept of liberal socialism. In order to fully understand the development of Rosselli's basic theoretical assumptions, it is advisable to start with Rosselli's criticism of Marxism.

Rosselli's criticism of Marxism is initially based on the assumption – in accordance with Bauman's previously discussed reading – that the future is to be regarded as an open process on an empirical level. With this assumption, Rosselli explicitly opposes the view held by many Marxists that socialism (or communism) is ultimately the most meaningful of all systems; and that this meaningfulness can be proven entirely on a scientific level. Rather, the basic attitude of the liberal socialist is characterized by the fact that he/she does not assume historically determined laws that ensure that socialism will find its realization due to supposed contradictions underlying these very laws. Rather one of the central borrowings that the liberal socialist takes from liberalism is the capability of self-reflexivity. This self-reflexivity leads the liberal socialist to the realization that he/she also does not have an epistemic standpoint that negates the will of man and according to which it can be anticipated with certainty that socialism represents the best of all systems (Rosselli & Urbinati 1994: 102). Thus, according to Rosselli, socialism describes nothing more than a different possibility of social organization – which is certainly to be welcomed on a normative level. Whether this other possibility will actually occur remains an open question according to the liberal-socialist interpretation (*ibid.*).

5.1 A Plea for Voluntarism

According to Rosselli, the question of whether this ideal (socialism) will find its own practical realization depends not least on whether people will manage to convince the social majority of the practicability and advantages of such a system. For Rosselli, this leads to the succinct statement that for the liberal socialist, the will is the primary factor (or the basic condition) for social change:

In this doubt, in this virile relativism that gives a powerful impulse to action and wishes to leave plenty of room for human will in history; in this critical demon that obliges one continually to review one's position in the light of fresh experience; in this faith in the supreme values of the spirit and the marvelous animating force of liberty, end and means, climate and lever, lies the state of mind of a socialist who has sailed away from Marxist seas and touched land on the shores of liberalism. Action is his true standard. He is a socialist because of a whole ensemble of principles and experiences and because of convictions

formed in the study of social phenomena; but he is a socialist above all out of faith, sentiment, active attachment - this is the point, the real criterion - to the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Whoever adopts this cause as his own can act only in the spirit of liberalism and in the practice of socialism (ibid.: 94).

It is particularly interesting when Rosselli points out at the end of the quoted passage that the true socialist - i.e., according to Rosselli's reading, the socialist who was able to emancipate him-/herself from Marxism - is liberal in spirit but loyal to the basic socialist idea in his/her practical actions. What may initially sound paradoxical is not as contradictory on closer inspection as one might initially assume.

The actions of the liberal socialist arise from a feeling of solidarity with the poor and oppressed. In contrast to Marxism, however, the conduct of the liberal socialist is not characterized by the conviction that the contradictions of capitalism will lead to the victory of the proletariat. Rather - and this explains the adjective *liberal* - the liberal socialist attempts to practice active solidarity with the poor and oppressed based on a mindset that starts from the basic assumption that the human will, in combination with the ability to constantly re-examine one's own point of view in the light of diverse experiences, is the basis for any sort of political action. This shows once again, how the liberal/democratic method can be characterized: that freedom is both the means and the end in the actions of the liberal socialist. The conviction of the liberal socialist - this becomes more apparent in the quoted passage, if one is prepared to read between the lines - is that he/she assumes that a full form of freedom will only be achieved when the poor and oppressed have emancipated themselves from their condition. However, this goal (or purpose) can only be achieved through a methodology that is also fully imbued with the spirit of freedom. In other words, only an active voluntaristic commitment, which makes the principle of experience the touchstone of one's own actions, is most likely to achieve this goal (ibid.). According to Rosselli, this aspect is completely neglected in Marxist thought:

The core of Marxism lies in the concept of the historical necessity of the advent of a socialist society by virtue of an objective and fatal process of transformation within the material world. Human will appears in a secondary, not to say determined, role. Problems of consciousness, of autonomy, of the formation of free personalities, do not exist for Marx. They are all postponed to the new day following the social transformation. Nothing could be more Utopian and antiliberal than this abrupt and messianic shift of position, this switch from a realm where inexorable necessity dominates to one where sovereign liberty reigns (ibid.: 106-107).

According to Rosselli, the primary problem of Marxist fatalism lies in the fact that man is no longer conceived as an active subject of action who is capable of intervening in social grievances in a formative way by means of his/her own autonomy. According to Marx - and this is Rosselli's precise criticism - the day of freedom only comes after the revolution, whereby the power of

the human will and the resulting ability to act is endlessly postponed (*ibid.*). For this reason, the Marxist idea of such an abrupt change also has something utopian about it and negates the basic liberal idea: the change from a realm of determination to a realm of freedom requires that long-term processes have already taken place, which have contributed to that realm of freedom (socialism) being able to find to its practical realization. The emergence of these long-term processes is in turn inextricably linked to a power of education and will arising from human freedom. Against the background of these considerations, Rosselli also comes to the concise conclusion that ‘[...] history for the Marxists is a gigantic and tendentious drama, with scripted roles’ (*ibid.*: 123).

5.2 Against Marxist Determinism

It is also worthwhile to consider the influences that contributed to Rosselli’s critique of Marxism. Particularly significant is Rosselli’s engagement with Hendrik de Man’s critique of Marxism, which also left a lasting mark on his own criticism: that Marxism – though it may contribute to an adequate analysis of capitalist economic dynamics – lacks a normative foundation and that the emergence of a socialist society is explained in terms of deterministic historical developments (Bastow & Martin 2003: 80).

Gramsci’s influence on Rosselli’s thinking regarding historically deterministic explanations for political development processes is unmistakably clear at this point. For example, Gramsci notes in the eighth of his Prison Notebooks that deterministic tendencies projected onto the course of history negate human agency. However, Gramsci also points out that for socially disadvantaged groups, a mechanistic-deterministic explanation of historical events can still serve as a hopeful narrative to compensate for the lack of their own agency in changing social conditions. Ultimately, according to Gramsci, it is important that people understand themselves as acting subjects capable of influencing social and historical circumstances (Gramsci 2007, PN 3: 353). Even though Gramsci is less critical of historical materialism itself, Rosselli’s critique of supposedly deterministic historical trajectories resembles that of Gramsci in many respects.

Rosselli’s criticism of Marx’s seemingly deterministic (or even fatalistic) theory of historical development processes even goes so far as to argue that historical materialism benefits the capitalists rather than the emancipation of the working class:

Let me say something that may appear paradoxical: it seems to me that at the present stage of social relations, historical materialism is a philosophy much better suited to the capitalist class than to the proletariat. The capitalist, particularly the entrepreneur, being in charge of the production process, dominating and linking its elements, sharing actively in technical progress, possesses an awareness of his active participation in the transformation of the process of production. He is able concretely to insert his will into history, and his relation to economic life is typically one of action-reaction. The proletarian (and the intellectual who joins the cause of the workers on his behalf), however, since

he only feels the effects or is forced to assist passively in the process of production, sees the forces of production merely as controlling factors against which, at present, he is powerless to react. Historical materialism, when he applies it, becomes not a liberating philosophy but a philosophy that shows him his chains, and in doing so induces him to make vain attempts to get free of them (ibid.: 61).

The paradox that Rosselli addresses here is that historical materialism places the exploited worker – as well as the left intellectual who defends his/her interests – in a state of passivity, in that the hope for his/her liberation depends entirely on historical trends that elude his/her active and voluntaristic agency. The capitalist, on the other hand – which is why Rosselli's assumption that the Marxist doctrine is a huge drama with prefabricated roles seems more than accurate – takes on an active role against this theoretical background, in that the concrete historical developmental tendencies can be traced back to his/her own actions. Technical progress (and the associated production process) thus follows a pattern of cause and effect. The shaping of economic progress is therefore in the hands of the capitalists and not in the hands of the socialists – the latter are unconditionally at the mercy of this circumstance in the Marxist framework.

Concluding remarks

The discussion of Rosselli's theory of liberal socialism should not lead to the assumption that it necessarily results in a position against Marxist thought. Anyone who has read *Capital* knows that Marx can be regarded as one of the most astute observers of the capitalist system – and its signs of decay. What Rosselli's approach to liberal socialism can offer, however, is a call for more active and voluntaristic engagement, without which social change is difficult to achieve. Against the backdrop of Mussolini's fascism, Rosselli had to realize at the time what happens when the value of freedom recedes into the background and large sections of the labour movement subordinate themselves to such a dangerous ideology. This also holds an extremely important lesson from Rosselli's work: the value of freedom is not something that only neoliberals and conservatives can claim for themselves. Rather, it is a central goal of every left-wing movement, and Rosselli's 'liberal method' provides a framework to reclaim it.

Whether the topic is the previously discussed post-liberal theoretical approach, authoritarian regimes, neoliberal logics of subjectification, or even Marxist critiques – there are many reasons to rediscover Rosselli's work. Not least because, in Rosselli's liberal-socialist theoretical approach (even if this may initially seem paradoxical), two worldviews are effectively preserved at once: the liberal and the socialist.

Rosselli's work endures not only as a historical intervention but as a method – one that insists political theory must be perpetually reimagined in light of new struggles. The central motif of this article has been to demonstrate how such reinterpretation, far from a merely academic exercise, is an essential

precondition for rendering political thought actionable. Just as Rosselli transformed liberal and socialist traditions to confront fascism, his framework today offers tools to diagnose the crises of neoliberalism, post-liberal authoritarianism, and the left's search for a unifying praxis. This, perhaps, is Rosselli's most vital lesson: that the 'liberal method' is not a fixed doctrine but a practice of critical engagement, where freedom and solidarity are continually rediscovered through their application to an ever-changing present. The modest but urgent goal of this article has been to advance that practice.

This perspective is particularly relevant for those interested in the intellectual history of political movements, the relationship between liberalism and socialism, and the legacy of thinkers like Rosselli, Gramsci, and Gobetti in shaping both antifascist resistance and the ongoing debate on political agency and social transformation.

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Florian Majvald

Liberalne provokacije: zašto je Karlo Roseli i danas relevantan?

Apstrakt

Liberalna i socijalistička shvatanja sveta često se posmatraju kao međusobno fundamentalno suprotstavljena. Ovu predstavu snažno učvršćuju i Fukujamina teza o „kraju istorije“ i tvrdnja autora poput Patrika Dinina da je liberalizam propao. Pitanje koje se javlja prilikom bližeg ispitivanja ove pretpostavke jeste da li je ona tačna. Na osnovu dela Karla Roselija *Socialismo Liberale* (Liberalni socijalizam), ovaj članak nastoji da sistematski ospori tu tezu. U kontekstu uspona fašizma u Italiji, Roseli dolazi do zaključka – suprotno mnogim predstavnicima ortodoksnog marksizma – da liberalno i socijalističko shvatanje sveta ne moraju nužno biti međusobno suprotstavljena. Štaviše, ona čak mogu biti međusobno zavisna – važan uvid za ponovno promišljanje društvenih promena.

Ključne reči: liberalizam, socijalizam, Roseli, antifašizam, Gojz, Horkhajmer, sloboda, demokratija, ekonomija, marksizam

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Rachel Armstrong

MONSTROUS MATTER: THE MICROBIAL FOUNDATIONS FOR A LIVING PLANET

ABSTRACT:

To confront the escalating climate emergency, a new twenty-first century mythos of matter is essential—one that moves beyond the extractive, industrial paradigms of modernity. This emerging worldview centres on the concept of "monstrous matter:" the unruly, dynamic materiality of life that resists categorization yet operates fully within the laws of physics and chemistry. This matter finds its ultimate expression in Gaia—not as a harmonious globe, but as a dynamic, disruptive, and planetary-scale negotiation between living and non-living forces. Rather than being chaotic or lawless, this matter is profoundly creative, having given rise to the rich biodiversity and material vitality of Earth. Embracing this perspective invites a transition in human development—away from control and exploitation, and toward regenerative practices that align with nature's own cycles of change and renewal. Architecture, as a material and cultural practice, plays a critical role in this transformation. By designing with and for the vitality of monstrous matter—refusing rigid geometries and inert materials—architects can develop environments that support life, adaptability, and ecological flourishing. This mythos offers a hopeful, imaginative framework for rethinking our relationship with the living world.

KEYWORDS

Monstrous Matter, Gaia, Entanglement, Material Agency, Microbes, Unconventional Computing, Metabolism, Holobiont, Oikonomy, Material Change

Monstrous Matter

Rather than conforming to universal abstractions, terrestrial matter operates through what we might call the logic of Gaia: a principle of "monstrous locality." This is not a bland system but a vibrant, geostorical force whose properties erupt from specific, entangled relationships of chemistry, biology, and place. These associations lie within the details of natural systems such as—unique microbial consortia that negotiate transactions within a single rhizosphere; or specific, powerful redox gradients that define the metabolic landscape of a deep-sea vent. Such examples comprise the very sites where Gaia performs her

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material negotiations. From this countless, chaotic multitude of local acts of vitality, a global system of terrifying, emergent complexity emerges—a planet that is a dynamic, unstable, and creative force, rather than a stable sphere of crusted rock. To speak of Gaia is to recognise the monster in Earth's materiality: a self-regulating yet utterly unruly pact between the living and the non-living (Latour 2017: 2).

The truth of this system is not universal but situated and partial, meaning it arises from specific perspectives and contexts rather than claiming objective totality. This situatedness resists the 'god trick', a critique of the illusion of all-seeing scientific objectivity, in favour of the rich, specific complexity of local contexts (Haraway 1988: 581). The challenge, then, is to understand the global through the local without reducing either term.

Monstrous matter's behaviour emerges from myriad local interactions with specific environmental gradients—be they redox potentials (a measure of a molecule's tendency to gain or lose electrons, driving chemical reactions) in the rhizosphere (where plant roots, microbes, and minerals interact), or quantum coherences, coordinated quantum states that may play a role in biological processes such as photosynthesis, in a leaf. These interactions scale into global phenomena forming a hyper-complex biosphere—a product of countless, irreducibly entangled local negotiations.

Despite numerous attempts to define it, terrestrial matter remains fundamentally monstrous, resisting formal rationalisation and categorical boundaries (Armstrong, Hughes, and Ferracina 2020). It privileges the complexity of the local over the simplicity of the global (Latour 1993: 117), challenging classical thermodynamic principles, which traditionally describe energy transformations and the tendency toward disorder, through its refusal to conform to conventional notions of fitness, decorum, or utilitarian purpose.

This wilfulness is most striking in matter's interaction with the fundamental forces of change: (i) entropy-driven processes, which lead toward disorder and randomness, and (ii) material synthesis, the formation of structured complexity that resists entropy. Although these forces are often conceptualised as opposites, when viewed through the lens of monstrous matter, they appear as entangled processes—interwoven and mutually influential, rather than as polarities. This entanglement is irreducibly strange, yet profoundly creative, offering a framework for reimagining human development in alignment with the regenerative capacities of the material world—its ability to self-organise, adapt, and renew.

In the context of the climate emergency, such a multi-perspectival understanding—one that values multiple viewpoints and local contexts—is urgently needed. It must embrace the monstrous character of the living world's matter, not as a problem to be solved, but as a source of creative potential.

This essay unfolds in two parts. The first develops a view of the extended evolutionary synthesis (EES)—a contemporary framework in evolutionary biology that expands on classical Darwinian theory by incorporating developmental biology, epigenetics, ecological interactions, and systems thinking—to

account for the unruly, creative behaviour of matter (Laland et al., 2015). This synthesis challenges reductionist models and embraces the monstrous entanglements of the living world. The second part explores the practical application of this theory: designing ecological technological platforms, which are foundational systems that use the regenerative capacities of living processes to achieve their outcomes. Examples like microbial platforms (using programmed microorganisms as scalable factories) and bio-digital infrastructures (hybrid systems that merge biology with digital technologies) will be considered. Through these, the alignment of human development with planetary processes will be considered by leveraging the adaptive intelligence of monstrous matter itself.

Part 1: Toward a Monstrous Synthesis: Rethinking Matter through Extended Evolutionary Frameworks

Over the course of more than 3.5 billion years, monstrous terrestrial matter has demonstrated a remarkable potential for transformation, giving rise to a vast array of forms and expressions. Far from being a singular or static entity, it possesses its own lifeworld and agency, characterised by a multiplicity of capacities that can generate unexpected outcomes. Among the most effective mediators between entropy-driven change and material synthesis is what we recognize as ‘life’. Life does not operate with ruthless efficiency, nor does it offer definitive solutions; rather, its creative potential lies in its persistence and its ability to convert material potential into physical opportunity. Crucially, life as it is lived is not an isolated or closed material system. It exists in a state of continuous flux, functioning through semi-permeable interfaces that are sensitive to the indeterminacies of the quantum realm. These interfaces—where matter encounters differences shaped by both local and planetary conditions—are sites of dynamic exchange. At these junctures, matter may be exuded, transformed, decayed, or absorbed, illustrating the ongoing, adaptive interplay between material systems and their environments.

This perspective, where matter is active and agential, aligns with the principles of the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis (EES)—a contemporary framework in evolutionary biology that expands on the Modern Synthesis (the fusion of Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection with Gregor Mendel’s theory of genetics) by integrating developmental processes, ecological interactions, and systems-level dynamics (Jablonka and Lamb, 2005). Moving beyond the neo-Darwinian focus on the “selfish gene,” the EES incorporates concepts such as niche construction (organisms modifying their environments), developmental bias (constraints and tendencies in how organisms develop), and—crucially for this argument—the symbiotic origins of complex life.

Lynn Margulis revitalised and evidenced the theory of symbiogenesis in the late twentieth century, proposing that eukaryotic cells emerged through a series of symbiotic mergers between distinct microbial species. This view, now

widely accepted as the serial endosymbiotic theory, reframes evolution as a collaborative, cross-kingdom negotiation (Shan, 2024). Within the EES, life is increasingly understood as emerging from collectives and cooperatives—dynamic assemblages of interacting organisms and environments. One example of this is the holobiont: an integrated collective of host and microbiota whose combined genetics and metabolisms shape development, health, and evolutionary trajectories (Margulis, 1991; Rohwer et al., 2002). This synthesis—integrating physics, chemistry, and biology—offers a theoretical backbone for understanding Earth’s material dynamics as a complex, context-sensitive drama in which life is not a passive outcome but a principal actor. By framing evolution as a collaborative process among collectives such as holobionts, the EES enables terrestrial matter to be considered as monstrously entangled, creatively generative, and irreducibly local. It is through this lens that we can best appreciate the unruly, emergent character of the living world.

Earth’s material restlessness can be conceptually framed through evolving conceptions of Gaia that build on James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis’s foundational concept of a symbiotic, planetary-scale system (Lovelock, 1972; Lovelock and Margulis, 1973; Margulis and Lovelock, 1974). Bruno Latour’s contemporary reinterpretation emphasizes Gaia’s disruptive and political agency, activated through primal, disruptive forces that draw on the fundamental monstrosity of Gaia in Greek mythology. Gaia was the first deity to emerge from Chaos, giving birth to powerful and unruly beings such as the Titans, the Gigantes, the Erinyes, and the Cyclopes. Embracing Gaia’s simultaneous “terrifying power” and role as an “astute advisor” who “never commits abominable crimes” due to her cunning nature (Latour 2017: 82), Latour frames Earth’s geostory as an active, ongoing negotiation shaped by the entangled agencies of planetary forces and living systems—each operating through strategically manipulative dynamics. Negotiating her existence through dynamic planetary processes—tectonic shifts, meteorite impacts, and glacial cycles—Gaia is experienced as a material potency, one that entangles human and planetary systems to produce tangible, often unpredictable, effects.

Earth’s monstrous materiality has never been “brute” or inert, as conceived by Enlightenment thinkers (Newton 2007), nor has it ever been stable. While entropy is the dominant force across much of the universe, Earth represents an exception—where entropy is counterbalanced by a finely tuned constellation of interstellar and planetary conditions. These include our position within the galactic habitable zone (the region within a galaxy that is considered most favorable for the development and long-term survival of complex life), shielded from many cosmic hazards; the presence of a stable G-type main-sequence star (an ordinary, middle-aged star that is converting hydrogen into helium in its core. Our Sun is the closest example) (Nikouravan and Nikouravan 2023); the existence of water at its triple point (the unique combination of temperature and pressure at which water can coexist simultaneously and stably in all three states of matter: solid (ice), liquid (water), and gas (vapour)); a protective magnetic field; a stabilizing moon; tectonic activity (the movement and

interaction of the large, rigid plates that make up Earth's crust and upper mantle, which causes earthquakes, volcanoes, and the creation of mountain ranges); and a life-supporting atmosphere, among other factors. These features collectively create a dynamic environment where matter is not only reactive but also generative. Characterized by fluid, metabolic processes, Gaia's monstrous materiality thrives on the contradictions that emerge as competing forces of change interact and transform to produce complex outcomes. These tensions are not merely abstract or metaphorical—they are materially inscribed in the Earth's geological and cosmological history. The planet's very structure bears the marks of such monstrous entanglements, where planetary processes collide with cosmic forces to generate profound transformations.

Earth has been continuously reshaped by a series of high-energy impact events, including collisions with asteroids (for example, during the Late Heavy Bombardment 4.1 to 3.8 billion years ago, a disproportionately large number of asteroids and comets catastrophically collided with the Earth, profoundly shaping its surface and potentially delivering the water and organic compounds necessary for life) and the oblique impact of Theia—a Mars-sized body believed to have played a foundational role in the formation of the Moon. The remnants of Theia are thought to reside deep within Earth's mantle and core, contributing to the planet's unusually high iron content. This enrichment is not inert; it continues to influence Earth's geodynamic behaviour. The dense, iron-rich core generates a powerful magnetic field that shields the planet from solar radiation and cosmic particles, enabling the long-term stability of the atmosphere and biosphere. Additionally, the thermal and compositional heterogeneity introduced by Theia's impact may act as a driver of mantle convection and tectonic activity, fuelling the dynamic processes that shape Earth's surface and sustain its geological vitality. In this way, the monstrous legacy of Theia persists—not as a singular event, but as an ongoing force in Earth's planetary evolution.

One of the most significant developments in the evolution of Earth's monstrous matter occurred during the Archean epoch, when ancient cyanobacteria-initiated photosynthesis. This biological innovation radically altered both the Earth's crust and atmosphere by introducing oxygen into previously anoxic environments. These localized chemical transformations provided new substrates for further material interactions, setting the stage for large-scale planetary change. The resulting Great Oxidation Events, beginning approximately 2.4 billion years ago, fundamentally reshaped the biosphere. They enabled the formation of new oxidized rock types and created conditions conducive to the emergence of more complex life forms. This transition ultimately supported the development of multicellularity, morphological diversity, and what Hird (2007) refers to as the “higher” expressions of life—organisms that are, in scale and complexity, “big like us” (Hird 2007: 2)

The unique material collectives that define life on Earth today can be traced back to ancient thermodynamic investments—processes that continue to shape our lifeworld by resisting the universal drift toward thermodynamic equilibrium.

These enduring dynamics enable the planet to sustain complexity in defiance of entropy. Despite extensive scientific inquiry, the precise nature of ‘life’ remains only partially understood, eluding definitive explanation due to its intricate and emergent properties. In this context, Earth exemplifies Gaia as a dynamic, disruptive force that actively negotiates its existence through ceaseless material and geological processes. This interpretation evolves from Lovelock’s original conception, laying the groundwork for the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis (EES). Latour spotlights Gaia’s monstrosity to reframe Earth as an agential force negotiating its existence through entangled material and geological processes. This framing sets the stage for a reading of matter as monstrous, that describes the unruly, symbiotic, and transformational agencies that defy categorical boundaries and classical rationalisation—such as the intimate link between life and rocks (Wei-Haas, 2016).

Physics and Life

The concept of needing to explain ‘life’ is a relatively modern development. In ancient thought, life was regarded as a fundamental principle—an animating force that explained other natural phenomena, rather than something requiring explanation itself. This view altered during the Enlightenment, when the material world came to be understood as inert and passive, activated only by external forces such as intellect, soul, or mechanical energy. Matter was consequently redefined as lacking intrinsic agency, responding only to imposed laws and interventions. These assumptions laid the foundation for mechanistic thinking, which continues to shape modern innovation. Within this paradigm, progress is driven by the application of external energy to manipulate matter, rather than by recognising or engaging the inherent vitality and agency of material systems. It was only within this mechanistic worldview that the question of what constitutes ‘life’ emerged as a distinct scientific problem.

Throughout the twentieth century, machines began to exhibit “disturbingly” lifelike qualities (Haraway 1991: 152), prompting a re-evaluation of the boundaries between the mechanical and the biological. In early classical mechanics, biological systems were modelled as intricate machines governed by deterministic laws. Initially, the highly ordered nature of living systems appeared to contradict the second law of thermodynamics, which states that entropy—or disorder—tends to increase in a closed system. However, living organisms are thermodynamically open systems, embedded within networks of energy and material exchange that allow them to locally reduce entropy and maintain order. The foundational principles for understanding such emergent behaviour—where changes in one component can influence the entire system—were articulated through General Systems Theory, an interdisciplinary framework that studies the common principles, laws, and patterns that apply to all complex systems—whether they are biological, ecological, social, or mechanical—by viewing them as integrated wholes whose properties emerge from the interactions of their parts, rather than from studying the parts in

isolation (Bertalanffy 1968). This framework was further developed by cybernetics, which introduced the concept of self-regulating systems. Within this paradigm, living organisms were understood as information-processing entities capable of achieving homeostasis (the self-regulating process by which a biological organism or system maintains a stable and constant internal environment, despite changes in external conditions) through feedback loops governed by non-linear dynamics. The notion of *autopoiesis* (Maturana and Varela 1972) expanded this understanding by describing life as a self-referential and self-producing network, continuously regenerating its material structure. By the end of the twentieth century, explanations of life increasingly converged on a dynamic interplay between information, physics, and thermodynamics—highlighting the complexity and adaptability of living systems within a materially active universe.

Chemistry of Matter

The open-ended becoming of life, as an evolutionary process, is materially governed and constrained by chemistry (Peters 2012). Traditionally, chemistry has been viewed mechanistically—as a passive backdrop to physical laws. However, recent perspectives emphasise the active role of chemical elements, particularly when considered in relation to specific spatial, temporal, and environmental contexts. Under varying conditions, excitable molecules can make “decisions” about their configuration and distribution relative to other atoms, forming the basis for metabolic change. These molecular interactions unfold across space and time, generating dynamic fields of potential that manifest as patterns. While the modern understanding of chemistry is grounded in atomic weight and chemical properties (Laing 2008), contemporary chemistry encompasses a far more complex landscape. It now includes phenomena such as hydrogen bonding, van der Waals forces, host–guest chemistry, crown ethers, molecular assemblies, supramolecular chemistry, and quantum effects. Indeed, when the chaotic forces of the classical world overwhelm the ability of cells and organisms to maintain their quantum coherence—or their “link” to the quantum realm—this breakdown may offer a compelling way to conceptualise, or even define, death (Macfadden and Al-Khalili 2018: 346). This expanded view of the fundamental units of matter has transformed chemistry into a data-intensive discipline, increasingly reliant on big data, machine learning, and artificial intelligence to bridge theory, experimentation, computation, and simulation (Cova and Pais 2019). This materially grounded, information-rich perspective helps explain some of the most creatively significant transitions in Earth’s geostory. For instance, the Cambrian explosion—around 540 million years ago—was preceded by the Great Unconformity, a geological event that eroded ancient rock layers and released oxygen into the atmosphere. This process, occurring roughly 10 million years earlier, facilitated chemical interactions with newer rocks, releasing bone-building minerals such as calcium and phosphate into the oceans. As these minerals entered solution and became

bioavailable, they provided essential building blocks that enabled early life forms to evolve complex biomineralised structures such as bones and teeth (Ou et al. 2015). Such temporally and spatially situated processes foreground chemistry as an active agent in the evolution of life.

Non-classical chemical traits are increasingly being explored as a means of narrating and attributing agency to the earliest processes of biogenesis. While many molecular systems tend toward equilibrium—thereby increasing entropy—certain forms of “lively” matter can sustain far-from-equilibrium states by capturing energy from their surroundings and dissipating it as heat. In doing so, they maintain or even increase internal order and functional complexity (Prigogine and Stengers 1984: 128). At these far-from-equilibrium conditions, persistent material assemblages can gradually reorganize themselves, maximising energy dissipation and acquiring characteristics typically associated with living systems. This phenomenon, known as *dissipative adaptation*, describes the capacity of material systems to evolve by enhancing their ability to dissipate energy while maintaining structural coherence. Under sustained exposure to energy sources—such as light—a random cluster of atoms might, over time, begin to exhibit life-like properties, potentially even developing into a primitive organism such as a plant (Wolchover 2017). This kind of “rebellious” behaviour is essential for understanding how inert matter can transition into dynamic, self-organizing systems. It also offers a compelling framework for explaining how material systems can adapt to and thrive amid change.

A growing body of research has identified long-lasting quantum behaviours that enable material phenomena beyond the scope of classical explanations. For instance, photosynthetic organisms—such as plant cells—capture approximately 98% of incident solar energy, whereas conventional silicon-based solar panels capture only around 28%. This disparity is attributed to quantum coherence, which allows energized electrons to transfer smoothly across molecular structures, avoiding the inefficient “hopping” between states typical of classical systems. This quantum efficiency facilitates a more seamless energy transfer mechanism. While traditional biological models focus on structural components like nucleotides and metabolic pathways, the dynamic nature of living systems can also be understood through the flow of electrons between active bodies. Since Luigi Galvani’s seminal frog leg experiments, electrons have been associated with the vital force of organisms, capable of animating tissues and driving physiological processes. Electron flow thus offers a unifying principle that integrates biological function with physical transformation. This is not merely a matter of transferring electricity; when substances gain or lose electrons, their molecular charge and redox potential are altered, resulting in atomic-level changes. Negatively charged electrons are held in orbit by the attraction of positively charged protons. Electrons in outer orbitals are weakly bound and can be liberated by external forces. When atoms lose electrons, they become positively charged cations (positively charged atoms or molecules); when they gain electrons, they become negatively charged anions (negatively charged atoms or molecules). Free electrons moving between

atoms generate electric currents, facilitating energy transmission and transformation across systems.

One of the most compelling characteristics of electron flow is its capacity to extend beyond the boundaries of individual organisms, enabling interactions with non-living entities such as rocks and metals. This uneven distribution of electrons underpins a lively material world shaped by redox and electrochemical gradients. A redox gradient refers to the flow of electrons between molecules based on their relative electron affinities, which helps build electrochemical gradients—zones of potential energy created by the uneven distribution of ions (especially charge and concentration) across membranes. These gradients, often powered by redox reactions, drive the movement of protons against their concentration gradient, generating the proton motive force that fuels life—namely, ATP synthesis (the production of cellular energy) during cellular respiration and photosynthesis in mitochondria and chloroplasts, respectively. In respiration, excess electrons derived from sugars are released through a series of biochemical reactions and ultimately transferred to oxygen—the final electron acceptor in the electron transport chain. Without oxygen, this electron flow ceases, halting the entire process. Yet electrons are not merely classical entities understood electrochemically within molecules or electrically as sources of power; they are also quantum particles, each subject to the probabilistic and non-local laws of quantum mechanics. This complex character allows them to participate in both measurable biochemical reactions and ephemeral quantum phenomena. Far from being immaterial, electron flow is both fleeting and empirically observable—comparable to a moving image on a digital screen or, metaphorically, a material explanation for the soul (Armstrong 2023). Despite its transience, electron flow can be quantified through parameters such as bioelectricity, redox potential, and molecular configuration, offering a tangible and often non-classical link, between energy, matter, and life.

By integrating the diverse behaviours of chemical systems into a twenty-first century mythos of matter, new alliances can be envisioned within a realm rich in reactive agents and dynamic interfaces (Armstrong 2025; Stepney 2025). This expanded material framework enables the emergence of novel bodies capable of inhabiting previously inaccessible ecological and energetic niches. Monstrously enlivened matter thus functions as both a driver and a trickster in the face of change—transcending conventional boundaries and participating actively in its surroundings. Rather than remaining passive, this matter engages in a continuous negotiation with its environment, initiating creative processes that resemble decision-making. Through its capacity for chemical invention, it generates new forms—new “monsters”—that embody the unpredictable and generative potential of material transformation. In this way, matter becomes an agent of its own becoming, shaping evolutionary trajectories through its dynamic and responsive nature.

Natural Computing

Although the potential configurations of enlivened matter are vast, they can be meaningfully explored and better understood through their material expression in experimental settings. These explorations do not aim to reveal universal truths but instead generate local, context-specific responses to ongoing challenges. Such hyper-locality is essential for engaging with change, as the material expression of a tree, for example, differs significantly between equatorial and northern climates. Observed variations are produced by the fundamental plasticity of chemical systems and their capacity to read and respond to specific physical conditions. In excited states, molecules enter a temporary configuration of ‘intra-action’—a term used to describe the entangled agency of matter and context (Barad 2007: 33)—before resolving into a formal chemical ‘decision’. Within these dynamic fields, particles, atoms, and molecules oscillate, collide, interdigitate, or persist, shaping proximate events in ways that are contingent on the specific circumstances of their interactions. During these fleeting moments, matter can ‘choose’ its next move through massively parallel computation, guided by both chemical behaviour and environmental context. Alan Turing explored how such decisions manifest as patterns in biological systems. He proposed that symmetry-breaking in otherwise homogeneous systems could produce complex patterns through reaction–diffusion processes (Turing 1952). Inspired by oscillators in electrical circuits, Turing demonstrated that even minor irregularities could trigger nonlinear chemical reactions that generate diverse spatial forms. While modern computing relies on electrons and algorithms, chemistry operates with atoms as both processors and outputs—executing decisions within molecular landscapes that reveal actualisable possibilities, though not always with repeatable outcomes.

The field of natural computing, drawing on Turing’s vision of nature as a computational system, seeks to understand the material world through the paradigm of information processing. It employs models inspired by natural phenomena to explore how matter itself can perform computation. In this context, to say that matter can compute is to recognize that physical systems—through their intrinsic properties—can process information, respond to inputs, and generate outputs, functioning as computational entities beyond the confines of traditional digital machines. This is made possible through material processes such as molecular and quantum computing, which rely on iterative and dynamic phenomena, including quantum parallelism (a quantum state where particles are correlated, allowing them to perform multiple calculations simultaneously). These oscillatory patterns—whether orbital paths, pulses, blinks, footsteps, bowel contractions, tides, rainfall, or photosynthetic cycles—operate analogously to the repetitive operations at the core of computation. Yet, unlike digital systems, these material iterations are not uniform, self-similar, or universally replicable (Armstrong 2019: 355). Their inherent variability introduces bifurcations—points of divergence—that compel molecules and systems to make context-sensitive decisions, often leading to irreversible outcomes. These

decisions are not directed by external intelligence but are resolved through the embedded computational capacities of matter itself.

Chemical computation, however, is not boundless; it is genetically constrained through biological mechanisms, particularly the operations of the aperiodic crystal structure of DNA (Schrödinger 1944). These constraints are further shaped by regulatory pathways, where deviations in material expression are interpreted as adaptations or mutations. Advances in systems and synthetic biology have deepened our understanding of the computational capacities of cellular components within complex networks. This genetic revolution has yielded extensive insights into molecular interactions, enabling the engineering of living systems by regulating cellular components, individual cells, and entire populations. However, control within these networks is not straightforward. While genes were once considered the primary agents of top-down regulation, metabolism is increasingly recognized as a bottom-up driver of change—allowing organisms to respond dynamically to local environmental fluctuations in real time (De Lorenzo 2015).

When viewed as assemblages, enlivened collectives can give rise to *unconventional forms of computation*—models that capture specific aspects of material dynamics. These include what Adamatzky (2009) describes as computing schemes whose time is either yet to come or already past, and what Stepney (2025) refers to as *persuadable matter* (Armstrong 2025). These systems operate through dynamics that include the formation of material “attractors” and hubs that catalyse flows of matter and energy across multiple spatial and temporal scales. Such agility and massively parallel processing capabilities are evident across a spectrum of monstrous liveliness—from particles and atoms to molecules, compounds, assemblages, cells, organisms, ecosystems, and the biogeosphere. These dynamic associations enable monstrous matter to maintain coherence while remaining highly responsive to environmental conditions (Tripaldi 2022: 18). This capacity for forming alliances is what grants enlivened matter its adaptability in the face of change. Dynamic material formations—such as the pulsatile, networked tubes of slime mould colonies (Adamatzky and Schubert 2014) or the vivid, fractal-like patterns of the Belousov–Zhabotinsky reaction, driven by electron transfer processes (Belousov 1959; Zhabotinsky 1964)—offer visual evidence of how metabolic networks extend through and around living systems. These phenomena illustrate how, under the right conditions, the computational capacities of lively matter can be observed at the macroscale, shaping material outcomes through distributed, emergent processes.

By interweaving the reductive abstractions of classical physics with the complex, context-sensitive dynamics of chemistry and biology, the relational nature of matter emerges as a *radically creative platform*. This synthesis links the biosphere with the human world, enabling a new understanding of material agency. The outcome of this unconventional integration—rooted in natural computation and emergent behaviour—defines the character of material change in the ecological era. It establishes the foundation for a new kind of design and engineering practice, one capable of rearticulating fundamental concepts

of life and intelligence. In doing so, it forges a coherent material continuum between nature and technology, opening pathways for more responsive and regenerative modes of engagement with the living world.

Microbial Alchemy

Theories about how an enlivened material world responds to change are diverse, yet they operate within a vast—though ultimately finite—range of possibilities. This finitude stems from the fact that matter always manifests locally, its behaviour shaped by specific environmental and contextual conditions. Even when the potential for transformation appears extensive, chemistry's capacity for parallel processing enables it to resolve multiple possibilities into distinct, observable material outcomes. While life resists entropy and enables complexity, its processes inevitably tend toward equilibrium and are not sustained indefinitely. This highlights the need for new frameworks to understand how matter can support persistent, creative change over time. Yet, under extreme conditions—such as at spacetime singularities or in environments where the known laws of physics and chemistry no longer apply—matter may behave so anomalously that it escapes recognition within the frameworks familiar to our solar system. These phenomena can only be observed indirectly, through astronomical instruments or particle accelerators like CERN, where matter behaves in ways that exceed our current conceptual and empirical grasp. Within the bounds of our material experience, we still lack a comprehensive, unified theory that integrates the diverse behaviours of matter without resorting to reductive simplifications. Presently, physics, biology, and chemistry offer distinct yet parallel lenses through which dynamic matter is understood. However, these disciplinary perspectives have yet to converge into a unified framework capable of fully accounting for matter's complexity and responsiveness. One way to navigate this conceptual fragmentation is to step outside the confines of human-centred knowledge and observe how other forms of life engage with matter directly.

Microbes, in particular, offer a compelling entry point. Free from the philosophical dilemmas and abstractions that complicate human inquiry, microbes simply *make matter work*. Their biochemical activities enact complex environmental regulation as proposed in the Gaia hypothesis (Lovelock and Margulis 1974), which is now being reinforced by modern discoveries in microbiology that reveal how microbial communities modulate atmospheric composition, nutrient cycles, and planetary homeostasis (Stolz 2017). Equipped with a versatile cytoplasmic toolkit, microbes perform extraordinary feats of molecular engineering: transforming raw substances into biologically valuable compounds, adapting to extreme environments, and driving processes at planetary scale. As Earth's most ancient life forms, microbes have shaped the biosphere since the dawn of life. For most of the planet's history, they were its only inhabitants, and today, with an estimated two to three billion species, they remain the dominant force in global biodiversity (Gwynne 2013). By studying how microbes manipulate matter—not through theory, but through action—we gain

a powerful means of checking our assumptions. Their behaviour invites us to deanthropocentrise our thinking and reconsider what it means to compute, adapt, and transform in a material world.

Microbes are the unseen engines of Earth's life-support system, performing extraordinary material transformations that keep the cycles of life turning. Without their constant activity, entropy would gain ground far more quickly—organic matter would accumulate, nutrients would stagnate, and the planet would edge toward lifelessness. Instead, microbes decompose dead organisms, upcycling their components back into the soil, where they become raw material for new life. This regenerative process ensures that even in death, bodies are reintegrated into the biosphere, fuelling future metabolic activity. Through their metabolic versatility, microbes drive the biogeochemical cycles that sustain life—recycling nutrients, producing essential gases like oxygen, carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide, and transforming inert matter into bioavailable forms. These processes are not random; they are coordinated through sophisticated chemical signalling systems, such as quorum sensing, where molecules like autoinducers regulate gene expression and synchronize collective behaviour (Miller and Bassler 2001). This enables microbial communities to perform complex tasks—swarming, cooperating, and secreting enzymes that break down organic material—ensuring that matter is continuously reactivated and repurposed. With the advent of metagenomics, it is now understood that microbes inhabit virtually all environments as interconnected ecosystems known as microbiomes. Their networked actions can decompose a whale carcass, fertilize forest soils, cause tooth decay, or illuminate ocean waves with bioluminescence. The biochemical space in which these interactions occur has been described as a “microbial commons,” foundational to life and ecological balance. Lynn Margulis' interpretation of the Gaia hypothesis emphasises microbes as the primary agents driving elemental cycles—vital processes that maintain planetary health and possess the capacity to shape entire worlds (Lovelock and Margulis 1974). Without these microbial feats, Earth would resemble the barren landscapes of its planetary neighbours.

Despite their essential role in sustaining life, microbes are not inherently benevolent. Their remarkable adaptability—the very trait that makes them such creative agents of transformation—also makes them formidable opportunists. A small subset possesses pathogenic potential, not out of malice, but as an extension of their evolutionary drive to exploit available niches. To microbes, humans are not exceptional—we are simply another nutrient-rich environment to be explored and, if possible, exploited. Their opportunism is not malicious but evolutionary: microbes are constantly seeking new sources of energy and matter, and in doing so, some become pathogenic, causing disease in humans, animals, and plants alike. This dual nature—creative and destructive—is what makes them both vital and dangerous. When microbes were first observed in the seventeenth century by Robert Hooke and Antoni van Leeuwenhoek, they were met with wonder and curiosity (Gest 2004). But by the nineteenth century, the work of scientists like Louis Pasteur and Robert

Koch had revealed a darker side: specific microbes were responsible for devastating diseases such as tuberculosis and cholera (Gossel 2000). This shift in perception—from marvel to menace—continues to shape how we engage with microbial life today. Although scientific inquiry has illuminated much about microbial behaviour, full control remains elusive. Their ability to transform matter and energy into biologically valuable substances is astonishing, but it also makes them unpredictable. Pathogenic microbes are especially dangerous because of their invisibility and ubiquity. Their stealth and global reach render them a form of “monstrous matter”—simultaneously essential to life and capable of threatening it. This paradox demands a careful, ethically grounded approach to working with microbial life. As we seek to harness their capabilities for human and planetary benefit, we must do so with humility—recognizing their complexity, respecting their autonomy, and acknowledging that we are not outside the systems they shape, but deeply embedded within them.

Part 2: Ecological Technological Platforms: Applying the Synthesis to Regenerative Design

“If we are to survive, a new balance must be found. In normal times, evil would be fought with good. But in times like these, well, it should be fought by another kind of evil.” (Twohy et al. 2004)

Mechanistic approaches to the climate emergency are fundamentally ill-suited to address the crisis—because they are, in large part, its cause. Grounded in a worldview that treats matter as inert and lifeless, these systems extract energy from living and non-living sources alike to impose control, predictability, and efficiency. This logic has driven centuries of industrial development, but it has also led to widespread ecological degradation and the devitalisation of the planet. Mainstream responses—such as “net zero” initiatives—often replicate this same extractive mindset, offering scaled-down versions of the very systems that created the problem. As Albert Einstein famously suggested, we cannot solve a problem with the same thinking that created it. To meaningfully engage with the unruly, living materiality of the climate crisis, we must adopt a radically different perspective—one that recognizes matter as active, relational, and capable of transformation beyond mechanistic control (Black et al. 2021). What is needed instead is a mode of engagement that embraces complexity, unpredictability, and the distributed agency of “hyperobjects” (entities so vast in time and space, like climate change or plastic pollution, they can never be fully grasped or directly perceived by humans; who only ever experience their local effects (Morton 2010: 1, 13)—an approach that generates qualitatively different outcomes. Microbes offer a powerful and under acknowledged technical platform for this transition. Existing largely in highly distributed collectives, (Penesyany et al. 2021), they qualify as hyperobjects, where their capacity

to perform work—transforming matter and energy across a vast range of substrates, including those toxic or inaccessible to humans—makes them uniquely suited to operate in environments where conventional technologies fail. They thrive in extremes, metabolize waste, purify water, enrich soil, and clean the air. This is not the work of machines, but the *work of life* itself: regenerative, adaptive, and deeply entangled with the biosphere (Armstrong 2024a). If we are to restore rather than devitalize the living world, we must learn to collaborate with this microbial labour. To do so requires imagination—an ability to *recognise* microbes not as tools in the industrial sense, but as living systems whose metabolic processes can be guided, cultivated, and integrated into human infrastructures. Their “technology” is not mechanical but biochemical, ecological, and relational. Through their electron transfer systems, metabolic pathways, and chemical signalling, microbes compute and act upon matter in ways that are both precise and profoundly contextual. For example, electrogenic microbes can be cultivated on electrodes, producing electrons that generate bioelectricity and serve as digitally readable signals (Potter 1911). These outputs reflect microbial vitality and offer a direct interface between living systems and technological sensing. In this context, microbial demonstrators become more than scientific curiosities—they are living proofs of concept for a new kind of technology, one that aligns with the rhythms of the biosphere rather than working against them. They invite us to rethink what it means to engineer, to calculate, and to deal with a world in flux.

My ongoing research investigates the dynamic materiality of living systems—specifically their capacity to regenerate matter, enliven it, and respond to change—while also serving as a living laboratory where real-time events can be observed, analysed, and re-theorized. Central to this inquiry is the microbial platform, whose foundational role within the biosphere positions it as a transactional system that underpins life itself. This system can be understood as a kind of “economy,” not in the modern financial sense, but in its original etymological form: *oikonomia*, from the Greek *oikos* (household) and *nemein* (management or dispensation), referring to the stewardship of shared resources (Lesham 2016). Building on this interpretation, I have situated my research within the infrastructure of household utilities—reframing the domestic sphere as a site of ecological and material transformation. Here, everyday practices become opportunities for citizens to engage directly with microbial life, enabling a transition from passive consumption to active participation in regenerative processes. This approach not only decentralises resource production but also reimagines the home as a dynamic interface between human and microbial economies.

Microbes as Technological Platforms

This approach aims to establish qualitatively different platforms for human development—distinct from industrial modernism—by harnessing the dynamic capabilities of life. In this model, citizens feed organic waste to microbes,

which in turn metabolise and transform it into biologically valuable resources such as soil enhancers or green energy. This domestic-scale exchange loosens the grip of commercial markets on everyday life, empowering citizens to become co-producers of resources in partnership with microbial life—simply through routine activities like eating, washing, grooming, and abluting. Contrary to the modern cultural paradigm that demands sterility—reinforced by the liberal use of antimicrobial agents (Domestos 2024)—a “living” household is characterized by its unique microbial colonies: a gardened, household-scale microbiome. These microbial communities naturally thrive in indoor environments, where people in Western cultures spend 90% of their lives (Mannan and Al-Ghamdi 2021). Situated microbial technologies allow citizens to shape the microbiome of the built environment (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2017), where bioreactors, walls, and surfaces host micro-worlds that actively regenerate the biochemical landscape of domestic interiors. Our understanding of this household microbial biosphere is still emerging (Leung, Tong, and Lee 2019).

The following case studies—*Living Architecture, Active Living Infrastructure: Controlled Environment* (ALICE), and *Microbial Hydroponics* (Mi-Hy)—are European Union-funded projects that explore microbial communities as active agents in electronic sensing, digital computation, material transformation, and the broader technology of life. Each initiative aims to establish household-scale ecosystems capable of transforming and valorising domestic waste streams through microbial bioremediation. These processes yield valuable outputs such as bioelectricity, organic sludge, and bespoke biomolecules, contributing to an integrated vision of the household as an ecosystem of enlivened material exchanges embedded within domestic infrastructure. At the core of these platforms are electrogenic biofilms that generate bioelectricity—serving as a usable product and also as a material and epistemic agent. This bioelectric output provides a tangible measure of the circular economy at work. It enables the evaluation of a household *oikonomy*—a regenerative system grounded in microbial activity that repurposes waste into input, mimicking ecological cycles and transforming the home from a site of obligate consumption into a biologically productive hub of useable resources. Each case study engages with “living” technical platforms composed of microbial and electronic components, seamlessly integrated through electron flows that invite new forms of cohabitation with the living realm—forms that are, in essence, world-making. By converting household waste into vital exchanges—such as energy and material resources—these microbial systems exhibit characteristics typically associated with life: sensitivity, metabolism, and even forms of distributed intelligence. Their inherent liveliness raises ethical considerations, prompting the development of protocols of care and co-inhabitation enacted through everyday household rituals. These rituals transform the impacts of human habitation into life-promoting actions. Functioning as a form of technologized soil, microbial technologies infiltrate domestic spaces through symbiotic relationships, forming an extended, gardened household microbiome (Kembel

et al. 2012). Embracing human presence while decentring it within broader ecological processes, these platforms interrogate the potential for alternative economies and household ecologies—ones better equipped to meet the environmental and social challenges of the twenty-first century.

Living Architecture

The Living Architecture project (Living Architecture 2019; Armstrong et al. 2017), funded by the European Union (2016–2019), explores the integration of microbial communities into architectural infrastructure through the development of a freestanding, next-generation, selectively programmable bioreactor. This system is composed of modular building blocks—microbial fuel cells (MFCs), algae photobioreactors, and genetically modified microbial processors—that function both as bioreactors and as standardized architectural units or “bricks” [Fig.1]. Microbial activity is “programmed” by spatially sequencing these modules, allowing the system to operate as a form of metabolic computation. Depending on the inputs, the system transforms substances through a series of biochemical reactions, effectively functioning as a metabolic app. The core hardware of the wild-type modules is based on the MFC, which includes an anode, a selective membrane, and a cathode. This configuration captures electrons generated by the bioelectrical activity of microbial biofilms, producing small but usable amounts of bioelectricity. The MFC can be conceptualised as an extended microbial “brain,” processing biochemical information from nutrient-rich waste streams that enter through the anode—its “stomach”—and pass through a semi-permeable membrane—its “gut wall”—made of carbon fibre or ceramic. During this process, the MFC not only generates electricity but also cleans water and produces other metabolites. The electrons—described as quantum excreta—are harvested via conductive wires, optimized by artificial intelligence, and visualized through electronic interfaces (*see ALICE*). The algae photobioreactor is connected to the cathode, where it supplies oxygen as a by-product of photosynthesis, enhancing the bioelectrical output of the MFC by serving as a terminal electron acceptor. The entire system is coordinated by an artificial intelligence that monitors electricity production and dynamically adjusts inputs to optimize performance. Fed by domestic waste streams such as urine and greywater, along with air and sunlight, the microbial populations metabolize these inputs into a cascade of useful outputs. Each bioprocessor passes its metabolic by-products to the next module in the sequence, enabling a chain of transformations that mitigate the environmental impacts of human habitation—removing pollutants, generating electricity, synthesizing biomolecules, and recovering water. Human interaction with the system occurs at electrical, physical, and chemical interfaces, establishing a metabolic trading system. In this way, Living Architecture enables an interdependent relationship between humans and microbes, wherein the microbiota of human inhabitants becomes part of the nutrient stream, integrating them into the full operating “living” system. As this relationship deepens through habituation,

the system begins to function as a holobiont (Gordon et al. 2013). Importantly, the microbial populations are not artificially imposed but self-organize within the bioreactor environments, forming consortia and biofilms like those found in natural plumbing systems. Inhabited through daily rituals and practices of care, Living Architecture not only computes material flows but also exemplifies an alternative paradigm for domestic economies—transforming everyday human activities into world-making actions.



Figure 1. Living Architecture “wall”, courtesy of the Living Architecture project, 2019.

As the original Living Architecture system incorporated genetically modified organisms, it could not be made directly accessible to the public. In response, an alternative wild-type prototype titled *999 Years, 13sqm (The Future Belongs to Ghosts)* was developed for the *Is This Tomorrow?* exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, in collaboration with artist Cecile B. Evans (Whitechapel Gallery 2019; Bevan 2019). This installation took the form of a speculative future apartment, a methodology that explores possible futures and challenges dominant paradigms by imagining alternative systems and realities. It housed a screen-based system powered by natural anaerobic biofilms embedded within an array of “living bricks” (Armstrong 2024b). The work provided a conceptual and material context for microbial infrastructure, envisioning a post-modern future shaped by the intersecting challenges of big data, bioengineering, and climate change. Within this imagined domestic space, a posthuman “household,” which challenged human-centered thinking and emphasised the agency of nonhuman entities and distributed intelligence, was sustained by microbial metabolisms, while the only traces of human presence were digital ghosts—representations of past, present, and future inhabitants [Fig.2]. The installation offered a speculative framework for rethinking domestic life, where microbial technologies and digital systems converge to support new forms of ecological and existential continuity.

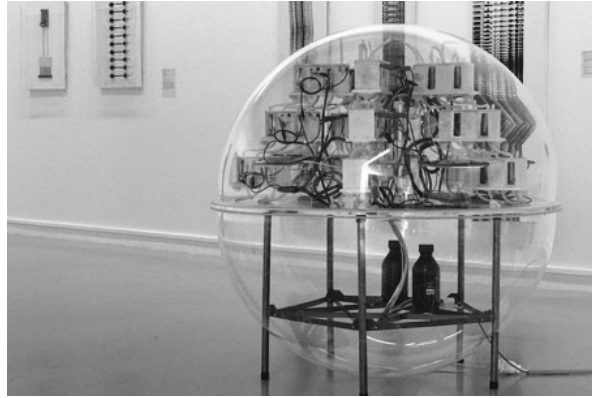


Figure 2. 999 years 13 sqm (the future belongs to ghosts). Photograph courtesy Rolf Hughes, 2019.

Active Living Infrastructure: Controlled Environment (ALICE)

While Living Architecture establishes a metabolic economy for transactions between humans and microbes, the *Active Living Infrastructure: Controlled Environment* (ALICE) prototype (2019–2021) lays the groundwork for more direct collaboration with microbial life (ALICE 2021). In this system, electrons produced by anaerobic biofilms within Microbial Fuel Cells (MFCs) are used as “data,” creating a direct interface between bacterial metabolism and electronic systems capable of interpreting and visualizing microbial activity. This bacterial data embodies a unique form of environmental intelligence, offering insights into the character of a place and enabling a technologized, communicative interface between humans and microbes. Traditionally, microbial behaviour is interpreted through biochemical assays, a process that is often slow and abstract from a human perspective. By contrast, tapping into the rapid electron flows within biofilms allows for real-time understanding of microbial dynamics. Depending on the sensitivity of the electrodes, this approach opens the possibility of developing a responsive communication platform between humans and microbes [Fig.3]. In ALICE, the electrical activity of the biofilm serves as both a power source and a data stream. This data is translated by software into animations that visually convey the biofilm’s status in accessible, human-readable terms. Rather than confronting users with the often-unappealing appearance of microbial colonies, the system presents microbial behaviour through engaging, screen-based interfaces. Participants can interact with the microbes in playful, exploratory ways—akin to caring for a houseplant or pet. This interface introduces the concept of “Mobes”—a term coined to describe the data-based, characterful representations of microbial life. Mobes offer a simple, probiotic approach to interspecies communication, making microbial behaviour relatable and potentially integrating it into everyday routines [Fig.4]. By promoting a conversational rather than exploitative

relationship with microbes, ALICE encourages a mode of learning-with microbial systems. These interactions reveal shared concerns—such as transforming waste into resources—and invite new forms of domestic labour and value creation grounded in ecological reciprocity.

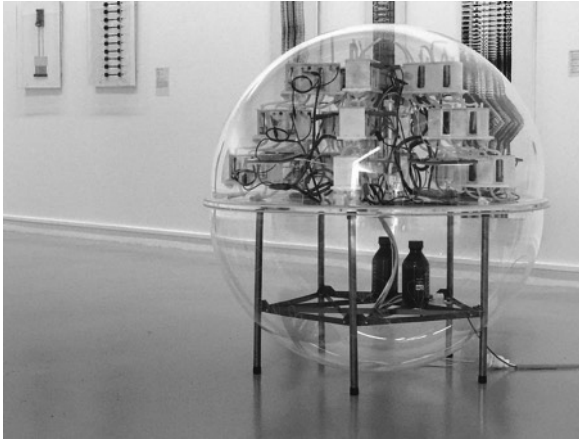


Figure 3. ALICE featured at the Dunkirk Triennale, 2023. Photograph courtesy the ALICE consortium, taken by Rachel Armstrong, 2023.



Figure 4. “Mobes”—electronic signals from microbial biofilms translated into graphical symbols. Artist Julie Freeman (see <https://mobes.alice-interface.eu>). Courtesy of the ALICE consortium, 2024.

Microbial Hydroponics

Having established the holobiontic principles of designing with microbial systems, the next step was to expand the range of participating biological and technological actors to enhance the system’s self-sufficiency. In many modern urban contexts, households lack access to land and, consequently, the ability to produce their own food—conditions that reinforce exploitative and extractive living practices. The Microbial Hydroponics (Mi-Hy) project was developed

to address this challenge by integrating hydroponic food production with microbial communities, using only carbon dioxide, light, and household grey-water as inputs [Fig.5]. Mi-Hy’s key innovation is the creation of a *prosthetic rhizosphere* for hydroponic plant roots—an engineered microbial community inspired by the natural symbioses between plants, fungi and bacteria. In soil ecosystems, such microbial partnerships enable plants to convert carbon into biomass by optimizing nitrogen uptake and supporting the synthesis (the process of building complex structures from simpler components) of chlorophyll and amino acids. Hydroponically grown plants, however, typically lack these microbial allies and are thus dependent on synthetic fertilizers, which are inefficiently absorbed and often contribute to environmental degradation. Mi-Hy addresses this limitation by embedding designed microbial communities within two types of bioelectrochemical systems: Microbial Fuel Cells (MFCs), which generate bioelectricity, and Microbial Electrolysis Cells (MECs), which use surplus electricity from the MFCs to synthesise valuable biomolecules. These include 2,3-Butanediol—a precursor for bioplastics—and acetate, a versatile feedstock used in the production of chemicals, textiles, food products, and pharmaceuticals. The prosthetic rhizosphere housed within the MFC/MEC complex supports plant growth while reducing atmospheric carbon dioxide, generating bioelectricity, and producing nutritious biomass alongside programmable biochemical outputs. This microbial “black box” is adaptable to the needs of specific plants, with functions that can be designed and imported into the rhizosphere to meet targeted goals. In essence, Mi-Hy functions as a highly specialized microbial garden [Fig.6]. Like all gardens, it must be cultivated in relationship with its surrounding community. Mi-Hy’s innovations thus extend the principles of holobiontic design, fostering a healthy, sustainable, and nature-based circular home environment where human occupants play an active role in building and maintaining diverse ecological communities.



Figure 5. Microbial Hydroponics, plant preparation, University of Southampton, UK. Photograph courtesy the Microbial Hydroponics consortium, taken by Rachel Armstrong, 2024.



Figure 6. Microbial Hydroponics, integration of hydroponics and MFCs, University of Southampton, UK. Photograph courtesy the Microbial Hydroponics consortium, taken by Dibyojoty Nath, 2024.

Towards a New Mythos of Matter

A new mythos of matter for the twenty-first century must embrace its monstrous character and requires a rethinking of rigid classifications and laws to become more like guidelines for observations than decrees, so that it is possible to understand specific aspects of matter while also embracing its inherent complexity and unpredictability. This mythos, born of Gaia and EES, proposes a theory of life founded on commonality through diversity. To engage with it, we must deanthropocentrise our perspective, defamiliarising the material realm until it becomes strange again—until we see its monstrous, irreducible vitality. Our inherited frameworks—shaped by centuries of human thought—often obscure as much as they reveal, leading us to pursue the same well-worn paths even when they no longer serve us. To truly address the complexity of the climate and ecological crises, we must cultivate systems that allow us to see, feel, and experience the world differently—without the filters of anthropocentric bias or the reductive habits of mechanistic reasoning. By engaging with the dynamic materiality of life, it is possible to develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of the interconnected processes that sustain our world. Solving the challenges we face today cannot rely on thinking alone.

Our inherited frameworks—shaped by centuries of human thought—often obscure as much as they reveal, leading us to pursue the same well-worn paths even when they no longer serve us. To truly address the complexity of the climate and ecological crises, we must cultivate systems that allow us to see, feel, and experience the world differently—without the filters of anthropocentric bias or the reductive habits of mechanistic reasoning. This means developing ways of engaging with matter that are not only analytical but also perceptual, relational, and open to its monstrous strangeness. This strangeness is not an obstacle but the key. While our human lens is adept at dissection and description, it often fails to devise platforms for engagement that don't reduce this enlivened complexity. Embracing the monster unlocks new forms of thinking, observing, and ultimately, collaborating with matter itself.

Microbes are uniquely positioned to help us reimagine our relationship with matter. Their ancient metabolic processes and ongoing contributions to Earth's biosphere are expert in managing the flow and transformation of matter—building soil, purifying water, cleaning air, and metabolising waste, often in environments inhospitable to humans. Their biochemical versatility enables them to perform complex transformations using a wide range of substrates, including those that are toxic to humans. Through their direct engagement with molecular and even quantum processes, microbes navigate and influence the intricate web of material interactions that underpin life. This makes them a powerful technical platform—if we are imaginative enough to understand how to collaborate with their capabilities.

By deploying microbial metabolic and electron transfer systems through technological platforms, we can create *living technologies* that engage in dynamic reciprocity with matter—sensing and responding to molecular-level changes in real time. Unlike conventional systems that disrupt natural cycles, microbial operations are inherently part of them, offering a transformative model for addressing environmental challenges. This paradigm shift is exemplified in experimental initiatives such as Living Architecture, ALICE, and Microbial Hydroponics, where microbes are not treated as contaminants but embraced as vital collaborators in the built environment. These projects reconceptualise habitation as a co-productive process, integrating microbial agency into the flows of energy, waste, and resources. In doing so, they valorise waste, guide resource distribution, and enable regenerative processes. Microbial systems in these contexts generate data attuned to material conditions and produce outputs aligned with biospheric rhythms. Such innovations preserve the complexity and adaptability of microbial life, paving the way for sustainable and imaginative trajectories in human development—where our activities are embedded within, rather than imposed upon, the ecosystems we inhabit. This repositions humans from passive consumers to active participants in ecologically attuned systems.

However, employing microbes as a technological substrate requires an ethics of care (De La Bellacasa 2017). Their habitats and physiological needs must be respected and maintained—not as an afterthought, but as a foundational

principle. In this way, microbial technologies can offer functional solutions as well as a philosophical reorientation: a means to restore, rather than exhaust, the living systems we depend on—molecule by molecule.

Decentring the human perspective and situating ourselves within a broader ecological framework enables a richer understanding of the microbial scale—its intricate roles, adaptive capacities, and transformative potential. This is not a departure from scientific rigour, but an expansion of our epistemological toolkit: embracing observation, experience, and empirical engagement alongside abstract theory. As material events unfold—shaped by site-specific conditions and contextual nuances—multiple perspectives on matter converge, revealing its capacity for radical transformation. Latour’s notion of Gaia as a monstrous entity offers a compelling framework for this transition through the possibility of monstrous matter: unpredictable, generative and deeply entangled with life. This metaphor transcends conventional scientific boundaries, making space for imagination, wonder, and the unexpected—while keeping matter firmly within the realm of rigorous inquiry. From this empirically grounded yet creatively open vantage point, new approaches emerge that bridge scientific investigation with imaginative exploration. Such a perspective calls for a *material ethics* of practice—one attuned to change, complexity, and the possibility of guided evolution. It urges us to design spaces for transformation through negotiation, and care, resisting the pull toward static equilibrium. By integrating storytelling, biosynthesis, bioremediation, and advanced scientific theory, we can cultivate a more enduring relationship with the dynamic materiality that surrounds us.

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Rejčel Armstrong

Monstruozna materija: mikrobne osnove za živu planetu

Apstrakt

Kako bismo se suočili sa rastućom klimatskom krizom, neophodan je novi, dvadesetoprvo-vekovni mit o materiji—onaj koji prevazilazi ekstraktivne, industrijske paradigme modernosti. Ovaj nastajući pogled na svet usredsređen je na koncept „monstruozne materije“: neukrotive, dinamične materijalnosti života koja izmiče kategorizaciji, a ipak potpuno deluje u okviru zakona fizike i hemije. Ova materija svoj krajnji izraz nalazi u Gaji—ne kao harmoničnoj celini, već kao dinamičnoj, disruptivnoj pregovaračkoj igri između živih i neživih sila na planetarnoj skali. Umesto da bude haotična ili bez zakona, ova materija je duboko kreativna, budući da je upravo ona stvorila ogromno biodiverzitetno i materijalno bogatstvo Zemlje. Prihvatanje ove perspektive poziva na prelazak u ljudskom razvoju—od kontrole i eksploatacije ka regenerativnim praksama koje se usklađuju sa prirodnim ciklusima promene i obnove. Arhitektura, kao materijalna i kulturna praksa, ima ključnu ulogu u ovoj transformaciji. Projektovanjem u skladu sa vitalnošću monstruoze materije—odbacujući krute geometrije i inertne materijale—arhitekta mogu stvarati okruženja koja podržavaju život, prilagodljivost i ekološki procvat. Ovaj mit nudi nadu i imaginativni okvir za ponovno promišljanje našeg odnosa prema živom svetu.

Ključne reči: monstruoza materija, Gaja, isprepletenost, materijalna agencija, mikrobi, nekonvencionalno računanje, metabolizam, holobiont, upravljanje prirodnim resursima, materijalna promena

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THE PHILOSOPHERS HAVE ONLY INTERPRETED THE WORLD

ABSTRACT

Many political philosophers happily repeat Marx's Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach (inscribed on his gravestone) 'The Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.' Marx had a theory of change: proletarian revolution. But what theory of change is appropriate in current circumstances? In this paper I will consider the steps that typically foreshadow and lead to policy change and the potential for philosophy and philosophers to contribute.¹

KEYWORDS

political philosophy,
theory of change,
justice, social
movements, activism

Introduction

Many political philosophers were initially drawn into the subject because of injustices or political problems they experienced, or at least perceived, in the world around them. If, for example, we think of the 1960s and early 1970s many philosophers, including some who had made their name in other areas, such as Thomas Nagel and T.M. Scanlon, turned to political philosophy because of the urgent political questions confronting the United States at the time. This included the civil rights movement in the U.S. as well as the Vietnam war, and other urgent moral questions of the day such as the legal permissibility of abortion, and global poverty. Some classic papers on topics such as freedom of speech, civil disobedience, just and unjust war, abortion, and duties to the distant were the result (for example, Thomson 1971, Nagel 1972, Scanlon 1972, Singer 1972, Walzer 1973). A high proportion of these contributions were

¹ Versions of this paper have been presented at Oxford, Frankfurt, Leuven and Belgrade. I'm very grateful to the audiences for their comments, and particularly to Katarina Pitasse Fragoso and Louis Larue. A shorter paper making some of the same arguments has been published as Wolff 2025a.



published in the newly founded journal *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, which almost immediately became the leading venue for political philosophy addressed to problems of practical urgency. However, as time has gone on and the initial period of fervid activity cooled into a more academic discourse, political philosophy has come to resemble more mainstream areas in philosophy where the immediate topic of discussion is often not a new or newly urgent problem of apparent injustice, but whether another philosopher was right or wrong in what they said, and that may well have been what they said in response to yet another philosopher. Dilligence, rigour and conceptual innovation have been valued above imaginative recommendation for policy change, which, at least until recently was either denigrated as somehow unworthy of philosophers or said to be outside the philosopher's realm of expertise.

More recently, though, there has been renewed interest in how political philosophers can make more directed contributions to policy, or at least to policy debates, rather than remaining at the more abstract level. Here we are recovering something of the earlier spirit of political philosophers, for virtually all of the great political philosophers of the past were also deeply engaged in the practical political questions of their time (Wolff 2025b). Today certain topics, such as global poverty, and climate change, are the focus of enormous international philosophical attention, with the ethics of AI also becoming highly prominent. It is clear that, in addressing these topics, philosophers want to change the world. But how can we do so, or at least contribute to change?

The connection between political philosophy and real politics needs to be handled with care. Some have warned that that philosophers should not enter the political arena unschooled, for without the right background knowledge we can look naïve at best, or do actual harm at worst (Lilla 2001). I agree. But my recommendation is not that we should keep out of politics, but rather than we should become schooled. But schooled in what exactly? I have argued elsewhere for the obvious, though often neglected, claim that to make recommendations about any particular area one needs detailed knowledge of current practice, law and regulation, the moral dilemmas that we face in the area, together with an understanding of history and international comparisons (Wolff 2018, Wolff 2019). But I want to discuss the next step here. Beyond making policy recommendations, how are philosophers to contribute to change in the world?

The Theory of Change

In many areas of social science and social policy it is common to use the idea of a theory of change, which I take to be the entirely reasonable question of how to bring about the transition from where we are to where we want to be. An educationalist, for example, might believe that the current national curriculum of their country is not in the best educational interests of school children and propose changes (cf. Freire 1970). But without a series of mechanisms by which those changes can be proposed, discussed, and, if agreed, implemented, then the proposal is not directly part of a reform movement, but rather a

contribution to debate, albeit one that might influence those with more practical levers to pull.

The idea of a theory of change may sound too grandiose: why a theory, and why should we expect one theory to cover many cases? But the impulse behind it is laudable: if you want to influence the real world, you owe an explanation of how that can be achieved. However, the topic of a theory of change is rarely, if ever, discussed in political philosophy. Yet this does not mean that there are no theories of change; rather that they appear in a less formal setting. They have occurred most often within socialist thought, notably set out by those who were later identified by Marx and Engels as Utopian Socialists. Here the main theory of change was enlightened demonstration: that by setting up ideal communities, others will see what they offer and will be persuaded to follow. Robert Owen and Charles Fourier are the main examples, and they both had some modest success in the United States, although they never caught on at scale. The Kibbutz movement in Israel is a more sustained example of something similar, although it has remained a small part of Israel's economy and was the result of a social movement rather than an attempt to realise a philosopher's vision. Another, more notorious, theory of change is Karl Marx's call for a proletariat revolution: this has certainly been the inspiration for major world change, if rarely led by the type of proletariat movement Marx expected. It is a model of change few political philosophers adopt now. In fact, I think that most political philosophers implicitly assume that we do not need a theory of change as we live in political systems that themselves incorporate a mechanism of change. Democracy, in other words, in which elected politicians, civil servants and other government officials, and voters, all have their role to play. Yet even democracy is fraught with difficulties. The burst of activity in political philosophy in the 1960s and 1970s was a response to the fact that democracies were not listening, or were far too slow. Today we have the problem that democracies around the world seem to have been captured by bad faith actors. But even without these problems, political philosophers have tended to have a rather wooden understanding of political process, forgetting that politics comes in layers: central and local, with, in many jurisdictions, other levels such as states or provinces, in between. Indeed, for those working on the topics of global policy or climate change, which would involve significant global cooperation, it is not even clear that the needed institutions currently even exist (Cripps 2013). But more broadly political philosophers have tended to write as if they are in dialogue with those who hold the highest office: presidents, prime ministers, and ministers of state. And it is true that such people make the most fateful decisions. But when citizens think about their relation to officials, they are much more like to think about local government and services rather than national policies, as they live the details of their lives at this local level, affected by the quality of local schools, health care facilities and public transport (Wolff and de-Shalit 2023, Pitasse Frago 2021). Of course they pay taxes, determined by central authorities, and are subject to the laws of the land, including laws regulating business, but much of the texture of their

day-to-day lives is the result of local decisions and policies, unglamorous as this territory may be for political philosophers.

Hence even if political philosophers gesture towards democracy as the avenue by which change is to take place, they still need to position themselves in relation to democratic agents. Who are you trying to influence: politicians, civil servants, or the electorate? And at which level? Global, national, local, or something less formal? Few philosophers seem to have given any attention to these questions, although there is now much greater sensitivity within political philosophy to how agents of the state and the people they govern interact (Zacka 2017 is a leading example). Here I will largely follow the tradition of assuming that interaction will take place with politicians at the highest level, and that any influence philosophers have on the broader public is aimed at voters in national elections, leaving aside, for current purposes, other levels and actors which, for some concerns, may be much more fruitful sites of intervention.

3. Forms of Action

It would be wrong, though, to suggest that political philosophers have ignored questions of activism for social change. Iris Marion Young has argued that real transformation comes from social movements and implies that if philosophers want to make a difference, they should partner in some way with social movements that are fighting for the same cause (Young 1990). But activism is, in some forms, a topic in political philosophy itself. Notably, John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971, 1999) has an influential discussion of civil disobedience as part of what he calls ‘non-ideal theory’. Here he is partially influenced by the powerful writings and speeches of Martin Luther King Jr (King 1963). For both Rawls and King civil disobedience is a public, non-violent, act in which protestors appeal to the sense of justice of their fellow citizens to put pressure on those in authority to negotiate change. Protestors are organised, politically committed, prepared, often trained, and prepared to accept consequences. Hence civil disobedience lies at the fringes of liberal democracy, outside of normal processes, but recognisably continuous with them, and inspired by the same ideas.

Such formal, public, protests contrast with the much more hidden and informal practices that James C. Scott describes in *Weapons of the Weak*: sabotage, foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, arson, dissimulation and slander (Scott 1985). This is the stuff of everyday resistance and protest, but much more a catalogue of forms of individual action and self-protection rather than concerted political action. It is, nevertheless, a reminder that the philosophical discussion of civil disobedience has tended to concentrate on one form, potentially very costly to the individual if caught and punished. Nevertheless, for King, Rawls, and Scott these are all ways in which people act outside the formal rules of the system. My question here is much more about how philosophers can contribute to normal political processes. When political processes are in reasonably good order, how and when can philosophers intervene? And we have already seen part of the challenge. Iris

Marion Young encourages philosophers to join with social movements (Young 1990). But this has a number of related demands which will not come easily to many philosophers. First, as academics, our natural habitat is the library (maybe now the virtual library) rather than the streets or virtual streets. Many prefer social solitude to protracted interaction. Second, most academic work in the discipline continues to be produced by lone scholars, although joint work is becoming a little more common, with two or sometimes three co-authors. But collaboration in research and writing remains the exception. And the reason for this is connected to the main difficulty: philosophers pride themselves on being creatures of the Kantian enlightenment: thinking for themselves. The partial surrender of judgement needed to work with others, at least for the sake of finding common cause, requires a type of compromise that goes against our heavily individualist training and instincts. Philosophers want to be thought leaders – even if they end up leading only themselves – rather than followers. This can make activism very difficult.

Here an observation from Terrel Carver can be very helpful. In assessing academic interpretations of Marx, Carver asked: if these interpretations were accurate accounts of Marx's thought, would they attract an audience, unite a movement and proceed to a goal (Carver, 2017)? Independent of Marx scholarship, I find this a very helpful summary of the steps needed to translate theory to practice, even if the third 'proceed to a goal' is underspecified. But just by looking at the first two, we see how challenging the task is. It is true that some political philosophers, even contemporary political philosophers, have attracted an audience. John Rawls, albeit largely an academic audience, and Peter Singer are two prominent names. And Singer's advocacy of animal liberation (Singer 1995) and effective altruism (Singer 2015) have both attracted audiences outside the narrow specialism of philosophy. Singer, arguably, has even been part of a group that has united a movement. Others, such as Amartya Sen, have gone further still and it is possible to see a direct connection between his work on the measurement of poverty and United Nations policy initiatives. Indeed, the broader Human Development and Capability Movement, also inspired by Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 2000), Sabina Alkire (Alkire 2002) and Ingrid Robeyns (Robeyns 2017), among many others now, has had broad academic and policy influence. But it is very interesting that in these cases philosophers have had to overcome their inclination to work purely independently and have joined with others, across disciplines and contexts, which has led to inevitable compromises. For example, the index of human development derived from Sen's work has been, at times, so stripped down and simplified for purposes of implementation, that there is very little chance that it would have been accepted by a peer review philosophy journal (Sen and Anand 1994).

Few of us can aspire to have the influence of Rawls, or Singer or Sen, although there must be one or two more brewing somewhere. But even those with the greatest personal influence did not do their initial philosophical work in isolation and drew on, and were sharpened by criticism from, many others. Even the most scholarly academic debate in political philosophy, then, can

have a practical edge, intentionally or inadvertently contributing to the development of a message that could ultimately attract an audience. And without that first stage, it seems hard to see how much more could develop.

4. The Role of New Ideas

The background to any attempt to change the world has to be a perception that there is something wrong with the world as it is, and that it is both important and possible to make changes. Behind such a perception, though, lies another question. Why is injustice tolerated and change not happening? The philosopher's stock in trade is ideas or conceptual innovation – or at least so many of us believe – and so the philosopher will have a natural role to play if the reason why change is not happening is connected in some way with inadequate conceptualisation, or, in other words, a shortage of new ideas. But political philosophy is hardly a novel subject, and it seems the height of arrogance to think that any of us could come up with something that has eluded the greatest thinkers for 2,500 years. Now, this may be over-stating things. For much of that 2,500 years conceptual innovation was not a priority, and the intellectual task was to elaborate and defend a tradition, and often a ruling class, rather than to issue challenges. Perhaps the relevant time-frame is not 2,500 years but 250 or even 50. During these more recent times there has been an astonishing proliferation of ideas for reform, and so the same pessimistic view about room for innovation seems reasonable. For example, in his 2020 book *How to Fight Inequality*, Ben Phillips, an activist rather than philosopher, suggests: 'We are, to be frank, not suffering from a dearth of ideas about what a government committed to tackling inequality could do' (Phillips 2020: 73). Contemporary debates recycle, and sometimes rename ideas ('The Green New Deal'), both tried and untried, that often have been floating around for decades.

Even the idea that we already have enough ideas is not new. Mikael Bakunin, is quoted as having said in 1873 'During the last nine years more than enough ideas for the salvation of the world have been developed in the International (if the world can be saved by ideas) and I defy anyone to come up with a new one. This is the time not for ideas but for action, for deeds' (quoted in Debord 1994: 92).

It is tempting to agree with Phillips and Bakunin that now is the time for action not words. But at the same time, we can find many roles for philosophical contributions, provided it is understood that such ideas are only part of the picture and need to be supplemented by many other types of action if they are to have a practical effect.

First, it is increasingly being recognised that the ideas produced in Western traditions of philosophy hardly exhaust the stock of ideas available, and many even within Western traditions are now seeking and finding inspiration in other philosophical traditions (see, for example, the papers in Robeyns 2025).

Second, I've mentioned before that some ideas have had an effect. Consider, for example, John Locke's theory of the social contract (Locke 1988), Jeremy

Bentham's defence of Utilitarianism (Bentham 1996), John Stuart Mill's defence both of Utilitarianism and Liberty (Mill 2003), and Mary Wollstonecraft's defence of the rights of women (Wollstonecraft 2004). These are among the basic building blocks of the liberal, democratic world we now occupy, and although many adopt these ideas without knowing their origin, and others reject or argue against them, it would be absurd to argue that the ideas of these philosophers have had no influence. But if ideas in the past can have influence why should we think that this process comes to an end? Theorists today can add to the stock that will influence the future, often in ways we do not notice. Earlier I mentioned Peter Singer, John Rawls and Amartya Sen and it is interesting to reflect on how their contributions have drawn on the past. Take Singer's arguments for animal liberation (Singer 1995). While it could hardly be said that Singer's goal of equality for animals has been achieved, it cannot be denied that his arguments have had force and many more people are paying attention to the needs and interests of non-human animals than even a few decades ago. Of course, Singer did not do this on his own, and it is very hard, if even possible, to untangle how exactly public debates have been formed and influenced, but Singer has been an exemplar of a public philosopher, whether or not one agrees with his views. Interestingly, though, Singer has not so much provided entirely new arguments but rather taken fragments of arguments, especially from Jeremy Bentham, refine and develop them to bring out their intellectual and rhetorical power.

John Rawls is rather different. Although explicitly drawing on the social contract tradition especially of Locke, Rousseau and Kant, and highly influenced by the Utilitarianism especially of Sidgwick, his most distinctive idea – the Difference Principle, which states that in a just society the worst off are to be made as well off as possible – seems to be his own construction (Rawls 1971, 1999). There are similar thoughts, such as the idea then current in the British Labour Party that inequalities must be made to be in the interests of everyone if they are to be justified (Hampshire 1972), and some religions encourage a particular concentration on the poor, but these all fall short of Rawls' insistence that the worst off are to be made as well off as they can be. Hence Rawls, so it seems, shows there is room for new ideas.

In relation to drawing on their philosophical predecessors, Sen, it seems to me, is halfway between Singer and Rawls in his development and advocacy of the Capability Approach, which has proven extraordinarily influential. Sen argues that instead of paying attention only to subjective well-being and material resources, such as money, we should instead measure outcomes and policies in terms of the capabilities for functioning that people have, or, in short what they can 'do or be' (Sen 1979). There are two related sources of bafflement, though, about the tremendous influence that Sen's theory has had. First, he declines to provide a list of basic capabilities, or specify them in detail, saying that this must be left to the democratic procedures of each country. Second, some might wonder how his approach differs from the very many theories that conceive well-being in terms of need-satisfaction, which are often

specified in much more detail (e.g., Doyal and Gough 1991). Why, for example, is providing the capability to be nourished any different to satisfaction of the need for food? To my mind, though, the difference between need-based views and the capability approach is that need theory implicitly paints a picture of passive recipients, lacking agency and accepting alms or charity. The capability approach shifts the language to one of agency, empowering people by removing barriers as well as providing resources. Hence there is both continuity with other approaches, as with Singer, and innovation, as with Rawls. Of course, this is a very simple picture, which could no doubt be contested, but the point is to lay out three different models of how contemporary political philosophers have been able to continue to shape and articulate the world of values that lie behind attempts to change the world: refining (Singer) innovating (Rawls) and constructive modification (Sen).

While these models are inspiring, the reality is that however talented a political philosopher, the chance that their ideas will be taken up is vanishingly small. But it is still possible to contribute in numerous ways. I've already said that normal academic practices of discussion, criticism and application all contribute to the development and refinement of ideas that may have an influence. None of the thinkers I mentioned worked in a vacuum. Furthermore, and this is the point that occurs perhaps most easily when we think of our impact as political philosophers, we teach students. The point is not that we try to recruit students to a cause through indoctrination, as many critics of the universities suppose, but rather we help them understand positions and arguments and to clarify their own thinking. It may well be that some are persuaded by their reading, or even their lectures, and perhaps the few that go into policy may make different decisions than they would have done without the study of political philosophy. But be that as it may, the general quality of political debate and understanding is improved, we can at least hope, as a result of our teaching.

Developing our students through our teaching is a contribution we all make, and it can be a comfort to reflect on this when our writings fail to reach the audience we hope for. But impactful writing is an aspiration for many, and I want now to turn to another model of successful development of ideas. Although we tend to focus on those who have made contributions to the development of positive theories, there is another way in which ideas can be developed, and, indeed, more striking and urgent impact achieved. This is not through the development of new theories or concepts of justice, but the identification of ways in which the world is manifestly unjust, against a background in which those injustices have not been noticed as injustices. I have often used two examples from Sen in this respect. One is observation that there are many millions of 'missing women' in the world, which he sees as a consequence of isolated but systematic neglect of the health and nutrition of young girls, dying at a slightly higher rate than their brothers who are shown greater concern by their parents and communities in times of hardship. Millions of individual tragedies add up to a systematic, though previously unnoticed, major injustice. The second case is that of famines. The point is well understood now, but Sen was among the

first to make widely known that famines are not caused by lack of food, for in the modern world it is not difficult to get food to starving populations if there is the will to do it. Rather, famines are caused by political failures that lead to lack of entitlement to food. Sen argued that there had never been a famine in a democracy with a free press, as the publicity would certainly endanger the ruling party's chances of re-election. Whether or not that is so, we have certainly learnt that famines in the modern world are not natural tragedies but deliberately or accidentally caused by political action and equally can be remedied by political action.

What is so interesting about these cases is that, if the facts are accepted, the injustice becomes apparent and urgent. But, it might be said, discovering such facts is not the task of the philosopher and outside our training. Sen, of course, is a celebrated economist as well as philosopher, and it is his training as an economist that allows him to see patterns in data that others have missed. Why should philosophers think they can contribute to the exposition of systematic, previously unnoticed, injustice? One reason is that identifying some issues require more detailed conceptual work. Consider, for example, the work of Iris Marion Young. Her earlier work, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Young 1990) set out a challenge to liberal political philosophy in identifying what she called 'five faces of oppression' exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, which she claimed should be the focus of our concern rather than distribution of rights, liberties and resources. Liberal theorists were, at first, somewhat complacent in the light of this challenge. Are these not injustices? Are they not connected to abuse of rights and liberties or maldistribution of resources? Surely they can be accommodated into liberal theory? But the point is that even if accommodated, they are then ignored. The issue, as I now see it, is that when political philosophers set out ideal theories of justice, the urgent injustices of everyday life simply disappear. Poverty is another example for there is no poverty in the ideal world. Like Sen, Young has paid attention to empirical injustices rather than developing a theory in isolation. Violence, such as gun and knife crime and domestic violence, blight contemporary societies, but who is the liberal theorist of violence? Indeed, it is often by looking at theorists outside the liberal mainstream that we can come to learn both about the developing and developed world. Franz Fanon is a leading example. His discussion of violence in colonial settings is not only shocking and unsettling in itself but can sensitise us to perceive similar issues in all societies (Fanon 1963). By coming down to earth, philosophers can help social movements and activists develop stronger normative grounds for their case.

In her early work Young's novelty was to bring political philosophy into connection with social movements. Her later work, and in particular her development of the concept of structural injustice, does something different (Young 2011). It provides a new way of looking at a very puzzling phenomenon; where individuals feel that they suffer an injustice but there is no other individual they can point to who is the cause of that injustice and therefore owes a remedy. Whether Young's examples actually provide the best illustration of

the point has been contested (see for example McKeown 2024, Letsas 2024, Watts-Cobbe and McMordie 2024), but the general observation is very insightful. If we always look for an ‘agent of injustice’ we are going to miss some of the things that ordinary individuals feel are the great injustices, such as not being able to afford to live in the neighbourhood or even town in which they were raised and have made a life among friends and relatives. Now, there will be work to be done in each case to show that each complaint reflects an injustice, but Young’s analysis disqualifies the easy response that it cannot be an injustice because it is not the fault of anyone in particular, unlike, say, theft. Here the development of a new concept – albeit one that bears comparison with others which were also introduced to fill this gap (Wolff 2024) – enables a new way of looking at the world, and one that once introduced can be widely shared and appreciated.

Creating a new vocabulary allows the articulation of feelings or complaints that have remained hidden far below the surface. Paulo Freire argues that addressing oppression requires ‘naming the world’ – finding a language to express oppression – as well as confronting those who refuse to accept the new vocabulary (Freire 1970), which is a phenomenon we are experiencing right now with, for example, attacks on the concept of gender and the individual choice of use of personal pronouns.²

The claim that we have all the ideas that we need assumes that we already have all the concepts we need to articulate the injustices suffered by all social groups, all over the world, including the most oppressed and silenced. On the face of it, this seems unlikely in the extreme, and there is much detailed work to do to uncover forms of what can be called ‘manifest injustices’, by which I mean the type of situation that seems obviously unjust to all reasonable people (without a vested interest) once it is revealed, but until it is named remains submerged and difficult to access.

In some cases, the practice identified is reasonably well-known yet providing a name can provide a further impetus and focus for reflection, and, ultimately, action. Leif Wenar, for example, coined the term ‘Blood Oil’ drawing on the idea of ‘Blood Diamonds’ to capture the idea of oil that has been appropriated often by the ruling family of a developing country and sold as if it is their own asset rather than the common property of their country (Wenar 2016). In my own work with Avner de-Shalit the term ‘clustering of disadvantages’ was used to describe the phenomenon of suffering from various disadvantages which often intensify each other, such as homelessness, job loss, and poor mental and physical health (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007). These associations were, of course, well-known before our work, but having the term has allowed theorists to encapsulate a communicate a complex phenomenon in a few words, and thereby heighten awareness and discussion. But probably the most impressive example in recent decades is Miranda Fricker’s concept of

² I thank Katarina Pitasse Fragoso and Natalia Brigagão for both, independently, making me aware of the relevance of Freire in this context.

epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), developed further by philosophers such as Kristie Dotson (Dotson 2011) and Jose Medina (Medina 2012). Fricker has taken a series of ordinary, related, complaints – no one listens to me, or takes me seriously, or gives me an opportunity to speak – and theorised them as an injustice with a victim who has a new language to express how they are treated. This work of making invisible or submerged injustices manifest is, in my view, a critically important task for philosophers, and in a changing world is likely to be work that never comes to an end.

5. From Ideas to Change

The picture painted in the last section was one that suggested that political philosophers continue to have very valuable work to do, even if it is not as traditionally conceived: setting out new theories or templates of a just society. Nevertheless, these contributions remain at the level of theory: they are interpretations, not change. How is the step to change to be attempted? In early sections I have mentioned the importance of joining with social movements, although I would not want to restrict possibilities to this as individual advocacy and action can also be effective, by the right person at the right time. Consider, for example, the career of James Baldwin who made an immensely powerful impression by showing the power and wit of his mind especially when being patronised by complacent white interviewers, and thereby showed what African Americans can do, though at the same time are rarely given the chance, confounding lazy, prejudicial stereotypes.³

Social movements can open up new forms of dialogue and be open to new ways of conceptualising the world, and bring novel or neglected values into the political sphere (Hill Collins 1990, Watt-Cloutier 2018, Gago 2020), although as Linda May Alcoff has argued, recent fragmentation and academic scepticism about values such as progress and truth may have weakened support for social movements (Alcoff 2011). But even if social movements are reinvigorated in ways Alcoff outlines, social movements on their own are not change; laws and policies will need to be implemented or reformed (Wolff and Mantouvalou 2024). What is the intermediate step between social movements and change in law? There are many, of course, but the key one is that someone with power and influence has to change their mind, or at least become motivated to act on considerations that had not moved them to action before. How is that to be done? There are handbooks, written in the 1970s, that try to show how, such as Alinsky (Alinsky 1971) and Walzer (Walzer 1971), but the key question is how to change minds, if you cannot change governments. And as we all know from interpersonal relations, the trick is to arrange things so that it becomes easier for the person concerned to agree with you than continue to resist. By what mechanisms can this happen?

³ I thank Vafa Ghazavi for this example. One notorious exchange, with the philosopher Paul Weiss can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hzH51DnLaBA>

Very broadly we can say that the mechanisms fall into two types: those that make it easier to live with others, and those that make it easier to live with themselves. To take the second category first, here the appeal is to the conscience of policy makers: making it clear that they are complicit in injustice, and trying to accentuate feelings of guilt, often through publicity in words and images, of the injustices they are ignoring or even encouraging. Whether this works depends on the person and the situation of course, but politicians often cultivate an insensitivity, believing that they have to steel themselves to take tough decisions.

Consequently, making it harder to live with others may be the better avenue. What can this be? Facing intense daily pressure from the public and the media is one possibility, such as the civil protest advocated by Martin Luther King (King 1963). However, politicians may take standing up to pressure simply as part of the job. But another route is to consider what motivates people. Obviously power, money and fame, but is this all? Many crave the admiration of those they admire, and this provides another possible route. Influencing a person's circle – if they can be identified and themselves convinced – can provide another way of putting pressure on someone with executive power. But again, all of this depends on dissemination of ideas, images, arguments and means of persuasion. The lesson is, I think, that ideas can, after all, help bring about social change, but they have to be the right ideas, in the right place, at the right time. Knowing how to access these places is a skill that goes beyond our expertise, though, and is another reason for teaming up with people with complementary experience and expertise.

6. What can we do? What can I do?

If the last section is correct, or close to it, then the question for each of us is what can we do to help intensify the pressure that can lead to politicians changing their minds? For most political philosophers the opportunities of venturing outside academic forms of communication are limited. Consequently, the occasional blog, read if by anyone then by other academics, or a few op-eds or radio appearances can be enough to generate a reputation as a public communicator. In terms of the difference to the world such things make in themselves, though, the impact is surely minimal. But this is only to be expected. Change typically requires many voices saying more or less the same thing, and with the exception of a few celebrities or public figures, it is impossible to attribute influence to anyone in particular. Being part of a philosophical community in which arguments are made, criticised, amended, and then, perhaps, popularised and spread is already to be part of a community which sparks social change, even if every one of those contributions one makes personally is individual and not collaborative. It is a further step to engage in collaboration with people from other disciplines and even more with social activists. And this will not suit everyone. Often in life it is better to spend your efforts doing what you can do well, rather than dissipating them on things you are not suited for,

although, with effort and determination, it is possible to extend one's range, of course. In choosing where to place one's efforts, it is helpful to think in terms of supply and demand: what can I do, and what is most needed? Theoretical contributions serve to develop new ideas, but also, and more urgently, to understand why things are not happening, or going wrong.

In sum, I do not have a new theory of how to make changes, but would emphasise that contributions can be made in many different ways. Few will develop a new theory of justice, and it is questionable whether this is our urgent priority now. But many can help to point out under-recognised injustices. The next step, for those who feel equipped to take it, is to work in partnership with others, such as activists, journalists, or social scientists to outline practical solutions, and then, if needed, the much bigger and more painful step of making life uncomfortable for those with the power but not the will to implement beneficial change.

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Džonatan Volf

Filozofi su samo tumačili svet

Apstrakt

Mnogi politički filozofi rado ponavljaju Marksovu Jedanaestu tezu o Feuerbachu" (uklesanu na njegovom nadgrobnom spomeniku): „Filozofi su samo različito tumačili svet. Suština je, međutim, promeniti ga.“ Marks je imao teoriju promene: proletersku revoluciju. Ali koja teorija promene je prikladna u današnjim okolnostima? U ovom radu razmotriću korake koji obično prethode i vode ka promeni politike, kao i potencijal filozofije i filozofa da doprinesu tom procesu.

Ključne reči: politička filozofija, teorija promene, pravda, društveni pokreti, aktivizam

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Valentina Bošković Marković

THE ATTITUDES OF TEACHING AND NON-TEACHING STAFF TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY AND GENDER QUOTAS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY FROM SERBIA

ABSTRACT

This paper represents the results of a research conducted between 2022 and 2023 within a project¹ between two private universities: Singidunum University in Serbia, and CY Cergy Paris University in France. The aim of the research is to investigate and analyze the attitudes of teaching and non-teaching staff at Singidunum University towards gender equality and gender quotas in this higher education institution, as the new Law on Gender Equality has been adopted. The research results show that the academic community at Singidunum University accepts gender equality as a concept which is necessary in contemporary society, but they do not accept gender quotas as a tool for reaching gender equality in higher education institutions. The aim of this paper is to present the results of the research which can be beneficial in the future decision-making process related to gender equality and higher education.

KEYWORDS

gender equality, gender quota, teaching staff, non-teaching staff, higher education.

Introduction

Gender equality in higher education is a critical area of focus worldwide, especially in contemporary society, when the concept of gender is in the spotlight. It encompasses various aspects, including access to education, representation, and equal opportunities for both men and women. As societies strive for progress and inclusivity, addressing gender disparities within academia becomes essential, as it ensures equal access to educational opportunities for all

¹ Project title: Promotion of New Law on Gender Equality in Higher Education Institutions in Serbia supported by French University expertise (Singidunum University, Belgrade, and CY Tech Cergy, Paris), supported and financed by Solidarity Fund for Innovative Projects, civil society, Francophonie and Human Development of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of the Republic of France.



individuals, regardless of their gender. When women and men have equitable access to education, it promotes social mobility, economic growth, and overall well-being. Moreover, gender-balanced classrooms and faculties enrich the learning environment by bringing diverse perspectives, experiences, and ideas. By addressing gender disparities, all institutions can foster a more inclusive and supportive atmosphere, encouraging female students to pursue STEM fields, leadership roles, and research careers. Ultimately, achieving gender equality in higher education contributes to a fairer and more progressive society.

The question of gender quotas is sometimes associated with gender equality in the area of higher education. In Europe, gender quotas have been implemented in various contexts to address gender disparities. For instance, some countries have introduced quotas for corporate boards, political representation, and academic positions (Revillard 2023: 316). While proponents argue that quotas are necessary to accelerate gender equality, critics raise concerns about meritocracy and potential backlash. In addition to quotas, some European countries have also adopted other strategies, such as mentorship programs, targeted recruitment efforts, and family-friendly policies, to support women's advancement in academia (Revillard 2023: 330). The question of gender quotas in academia has been a subject of debate and study. According to research by Aliza Forman-Rabinovici from Israel's University of Haifa, gender quotas not only achieve their immediate goal of increasing the number of women on academic boards and committees, but also appear to improve gender parity in senior professorship positions and academic staff. The study analyzed data from 25 countries and found that countries with quotas had an average of about 40% women on their academic boards, compared to just over 30% in nations without quotas. Similarly, senior professorship roles showed a similar trend, with 28% held by women in quota countries versus just over 25% in non-quota countries (Forman-Rabinovici 2023: 16).

Serbia was the first country outside the European Union to launch a Gender Equality Index in 2016. According to the official data, Serbia scored 52.4 points in 2016, 55.8 in 2018, and 58.0 in 2021. This indicates continuous progress in improving gender equality. The 2021 Index edition registered the biggest improvement in the domain of power. This domain has increased by 18.5 points since the first edition of the Index for Serbia in 2016. If this pace were to continue, it would take 2.5 years to achieve full equality in this domain. The progress in other domains was slower, with the domain of work increasing by 2.1 points, the domain of money by 0.6 points, and the domain of health by 0.7 points. However, the score in the domain of knowledge has decreased by 0.9 points since 2016 (Gender Equality Index 2016). When it comes to Serbian higher education, the question of gender equality has been on the rise since the adoption of the Law on Gender Equality.

With these issues in mind, the aim of this paper is to present the results of a study analyzing the attitudes and opinions of teaching and non-teaching staff at a private university in Serbia related to gender equality in higher education area in the Republic of Serbia which was conducted between 2022 and

2023 for the purpose of an international project between Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia and CY Cergy Paris University, France, in order to help the promotion of the new Law on Gender Equality in higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia and stimulate gender-aware cultural change.

The theoretical part of the paper consists of four sections: a brief overview of the project, the history of the law on gender equality in the Republic of Serbia, with special reference to the law that was adopted in 2021, an overview of the correlation between gender equality and higher education area in Serbia, and a brief overview of the concept of gender quotas. The research part of the paper presents the research methodology, research results and discussion. Finally, the author offers her conclusion based on the given research results.

About the Project

The project that this research arose from was supported and financed by Solidarity Fund for innovative projects, civil society, Francophonie and human development of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of the Republic of France. The main idea of the project was to use the expertise of French University as the guidelines for promoting and, later, implementing gender equality and all its aspects written in the Law on Gender Equality, by analyzing Singidunum University capacities and studying its potential. A specialized training program about gender equality issues and the Law on Gender Equality was organized for teaching and non-teaching staff. A study visit to France was organized for Singidunum University members to learn about the experiences of gender equality implementation in higher education institutions. Furthermore, within the project, there was a workshop for students as well, so that gender equality could be promoted both within the younger population and within academic staff.

The reasons why this specific French university was chosen are numerous. Firstly, when it comes to France, it is important to mention that France today has a strong legislative framework to promote gender equality in different contexts: family, political, professional. Since the 1960s, the enactment of dozens of different laws has enabled France to move up to 16th place in the world rankings on gender equality out of 156 countries. Secondly, when it comes to CY Cergy-Paris University, it is an institution famous for its gender equality projects and activities divided into several segments, such as: *assessment, prevention and treatment of pay gaps* (by data collection to refine the analysis of gender pay gaps and by ensuring gender parity in the distribution of managerial tasks in the departments); *ensuring equal access of women and men to civil service bodies, job frames, grades and jobs* (by launching campaigns involving women in highly male fields and men in highly female fields for administrative staff and researchers); *training (equality, discrimination, stereotypes) for recruitment officers*; *developing mentoring activities for PhD students in Science*; *disseminating publications of open positions with a link to a webpage with information on the gender situation in CY*; *maintaining the integration seminar*

for newcomers and including sessions on gender equality policy in CY. All these activities were undertaken in 2022. In 2023, the University had the following activities: promoting the balance between professional activity and personal and family life; fighting against sexual and gender-based violence, harassment and discrimination (by training and raising the awareness of department and component directors, supervisors, staff representatives, as well as all staff and students, launching communication campaigns for all staff and students on the tools available at CY, providing administrative and medical/psychological support to facilitate the gender reassignment process before the change of civil status); promote the gender dimension in research; governance, steering and monitoring of the professional equality policy (by setting up a network of equality advisors).

The aim of the project was to use the experience from French colleagues to help the promotion of the Law on Gender Equality in higher education institutions, beginning with Singidunum University, and expanding that knowledge elsewhere, if opportunities arise. Higher education institutions have a major responsibility in instructing their students. This includes raising their awareness regarding gender-relevant issues in all disciplines and subject areas, as this awareness, along with sensitivity about gender equality, contributes to changing attitudes and behaviors in other spheres of their lives. The target group refers to both students and academic staff at Singidunum University. Since the Law on Gender Equality prescribes ‘balanced composition of both sexes in boards, supervision committees and on positions’ (Articles 10 and 26), the Article 46 prescribes ‘the obligation of public authorities, including education, to take measures when there is unbalanced representation of sexes in boards, supervision committees and other bodies, and the Law also considers ‘balance representation of sexes when the representation of one sex is between 45-50% in relation to the other sex’ (Art. 6.9), Singidunum University is the right institution for its promotion, as it is one of the rare examples of gender equality at the very top level of management (the current rector is a female, as well as many deans and vice-deans). To be more precise, apart from the female rector, there are also 2 female deans, 3 female vice-deans, and 4 female heads of various departments (out of 9 faculties). Apart from Singidunum University, there were other non-academic institutions that participated in the project, such as the Study Research Group for Gender Equality and Public Policy of the Institute of Social Sciences and The Office of the Commissioner for Protection of Equality, which gave us their institutional support and promoted the project and its results among their partners.

The duration of the project was one year (from September 2022 to September 2023) and it included four phases. Phase 1: kick-off meeting between the two universities; phase 2: conducting and analyzing the research (questionnaire distributed to students, teaching and non-teaching staff at Singidunum University; comparative analysis of research results and previous studies related to the same topic); phase 3: workshop in Serbia for students, teaching and non-teaching staff, based on the research results; phase 4: training of

Singidunum University representatives in Paris which referred to explaining the gender equality activities of CY Cergy University and making them accessible to the trainees so that they could modify and implement them in their home institution. In this paper, we will present phase 2 of the project: the research about the attitudes and opinions of teaching and non-teaching staff about gender equality and gender quota in higher education area.

The Law on Gender Equality in Serbia

‘A nation is constructed through the institutionalization of a gender hierarchy that prohibits their equality, and vice versa’ (Iveković 2010: 154).

The law related to the issues of sexes and genders in Serbia was first adopted in 2009, although many residents of Serbia did not know about it then or before 2021, when the new Law on Gender Equality was adopted, as can be seen in this author’s 2015 research (Bošković 2015). Although considered desirable and necessary in modern society by a good part of the public, the Law on Gender Equality is also considered as a tool for ‘establishing gender feminism as part of the official ideology and political practice in Serbia’ by those who are against it (Antonić 2011: 7). Although there have already been some official documents and policies that contribute to gender equality in general, such as: *Constitution of Serbia* which endorses equality, mandates equal opportunities policies, and prohibits discrimination based on sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital, and family status; *Strategy for Preventing and Combating Gender-Based Violence (2021-2025)* which focuses on addressing gender-based violence and domestic violence; and *National Strategy for Gender Equality* which aims to advance gender equality across various domains, state’s commitments to the CEDAW² also include adopting the Law on Gender Equality. Namely, when a country becomes a State party to the CEDAW, it voluntarily accepts legally binding obligations to eliminate discrimination against women and promote gender equality. These obligations, outlined in Articles 2 to 5 of the Convention, cannot be altered by individual governments or organizations. The State commits to: *Eliminating Discrimination* (ensuring that women are not discriminated against in all areas of life) and *Women’s Full Development* (facilitating women’s full development and advancement, allowing them to exercise and enjoy their human rights and fundamental freedoms on par with men) (CEDAW).

The Law of Equality between the Sexes from 2009 included several segments. It defined the concepts of direct and indirect discrimination and gave the basic difference between the concepts of sex and gender. The second segment of the Law referred to equal opportunities in employment and social and health care, equal availability of jobs and positions, equal opportunity for

2 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

advancement and professional development. The third part of the Law was related to family relations: equality regardless of marital status, marriage and cohabitation, childbirth, and domestic violence. The fourth segment of the Law was dedicated to education, culture, and sports, emphasizing the obligation of equal opportunities for education, selection of a profession, scientific works, and training, obtaining a scholarship, evaluation and for active sports, while the fifth part referred to political and public life and voting rights of both sexes. The sixth part of the Law was dedicated to judicial protection, and the seventh part defined supervision over the implementation of the Law (the Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, number 104/2009). The Law on Equality between Sexes triggered the foundation of some other institutions related to gender equality that will be mentioned in this paragraph. After 2009, the Serbian government established a Gender Equality Directorate within the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia, which was closed in 2014, to establish the Coordinating Body for Gender Equality. In addition to Gender Equality Directorate, in 2010 the position of Commissioner for the Protection of Equality was created, which represents an independent, autonomous, and specialized state body formed due to the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination from 2009. In other words, the establishment of the Commissioner was prescribed by that Law. As stated in the official statement from their official website: ‘The tasks of this state body are the prevention of all types, forms and cases of discrimination, the protection of the equality of physical and legal persons in all areas of social relations, the supervision of the implementation of regulations on the prohibition of discrimination, as well as the promotion of the realization and protection of equality’ (Commissioner for the Protection of Equality).

According to the European Commission’s Serbia 2020 Report, the adoption of the new Law on Gender Equality has been seriously delayed (European Commission Staff Working Document 2020). As the Law was finally adopted in May 2021, now comes the more important part- its implementation. Having in mind that Serbia was the first non-EU country to implement the Gender Equality Index in 2016, which was developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), it should come as no surprise that this Law has finally been adopted. However, it should be noted that the process was significantly affected and pushed by women’s organizations and women’s network, the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality and the Protector of Citizens, with several drafts of the law that have been prepared, and failed to be adopted, due to the objections from specific actors.

The Law on Gender Equality from 2021 is supposed to ‘improve the institutional framework and create conditions for the implementation of policy of equal opportunities for women and men. It prescribes duties of public bodies, employers, and other physical and legal persons regarding gender equality. It also envisages measures against gender discrimination and for the realization and improvement of gender equality, which is one of the basic international standards in ensuring human rights.’ (Law on Gender Equality, the Official Gazette number 52/2021). The new Law has several new aspects, and they

have caused much opposition by the traditional part of our community, especially those related to penalties, gender budgeting, and gender-sensitive language. More precisely, the Law defines gender-sensitive language as ‘language that promotes the equality of women and men and a means of influencing the awareness of those who use that language in the direction of achieving equality, including changes in opinions, attitudes and behavior within the framework of the language used in personal and professional life’ (Law on Gender Equality, the Official Gazette 2021). It also requires the usage of gender-sensitive language in public administration and state institutions (Article 25), in education (i.e., in textbooks and teaching materials, certificates, diplomas, classifications, titles, professions and licenses and other forms of educational work) (Article 37, paragraph 3); and in the field of public information (Article 44). What is more, the new Law also implements penal policy regarding gender-sensitive language, which applies to public authorities, and a fine of RSD 5,000 to 150,000 is prescribed for non-compliance (Article 68, paragraph 9). The obligation to use gender-sensitive language should have entered into force three years after the law is passed – that is, on June 1, 2024 (Article 73). However, up to this date, there are no official guidelines, recommendations or even confirmations that these Articles of the law are to be followed. On the contrary, The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Serbia has temporarily stopped the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality, until it reaches its final decision, which will be based on the explanations given by National Assembly and Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue of the Republic of Serbia.

Even before its adoption in 2021, and especially after, the Law on Gender Equality encountered criticism and resistance from a large part of the Serbian scientific community, such as Serbian Community of Sciences and Art, Matica Srpska, the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Patriarch himself. Among other things, the law is criticized for its procedural shortcomings, the influence of the ‘West’ on domestic legislation, the way it regulates the use of gender-sensitive language, i.e., how it interferes with language policy, the determination of the concept of ‘gender’ and ‘gender identity’ in Serbian legislation.³ There have been many public debates, but conferences as well, which discussed only the negative effects of the Law, which, in the author’s opinion, seems to be a bad scientific practice. For instance, Sreto Tanasić, a Serbian linguist, claims that gender sensitive language, as a part of the new Law, is a mere product of gender ideology which diminishes and destroys the biological and inherent roles of men and women, which will lead to the destruction of family and marriage (Tanasić 2021: 14). In the same Collection of Papers, another Serbian university professor claims that gender sensitive language is a threat to word formation

3 These comments have been presented during the two social dialogues organized by the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue. The author of this paper has participated in these dialogues as a sociolinguist and an expert on gender sensitive language.

and that linguists should be the only ones who decide which words should be coined (Dragičević 2021: 33). In other words, we can conclude that the main reason for objections refers to the usage of gender sensitive language which is written in the new Law.

Gender Equality and Higher Education Area in Serbia

Only since 1974, when the Women's Educational Equity Act was passed by the United States Congress, which insists on eliminating all gender stereotypes in educational institutions, have officials around the world started paying attention to gender equality in education (Blumberg 2007). When it comes to Serbia, according to Pejić, 'during the 20th century, research related to gender relations and education focused primarily on the education of girls, or women as a socially, economically, and politically vulnerable part of the population' (Pejić 2015: 1). CEDAW Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Serbia recommended to the Republic of Serbia that it should:

- Develop gender-sensitive content on gender discrimination and gender equality and incorporate it into age-appropriate curricula, programs, and textbooks;
- Integrate sexual and reproductive health education according to the age of children;
- Reduce gender segregation at all levels of education and encourage girls and boys to pursue non-traditional 'female' and 'male' occupations;
- Strengthen mechanisms to retain Romani girls in the education system and continuously monitor the implementation of the Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma and Romani Women (2016-2025) (CEDAW/C/SRB/CO/4, 2019, para. 34)

According to the Report on Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Serbia for 2023, 57.9% of first year university students in 2022/2023 were women. In the same Report, it has been noticed that: 'there has been no progress in implementing the Law on Gender Equality regarding the obligations of educational institutions to incorporate a gender perspective and eliminate gender stereotypes from the curriculum, textbooks, and teaching materials, although these activities were planned in the 2022-2023 Action Plan for the implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy. An analysis of the level of achievement conducted by the organization FemPlatz shows that the planned educational content and textbooks have not been revised, meaning that gender stereotypes, discriminatory content, and discriminatory language have not been addressed.' What is also highlighted is that in the Regulation on Teaching, Educator, and Professional Associate Licenses from 2022, the list of knowledge and skills that teachers and educators are expected to acquire during their internship does not include competencies related to gender equality. (Report on Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Serbia for 2023 2024: 70-71).

According to List of the population, households and apartments in 2022 on school education, literacy and computer literacy of the population of the Republic of Serbia by Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, more than half of the population aged 15 and over completed secondary school (53.1%), 17.8% of the population completed primary (eight-year) school, 22.4% of people obtained a higher education diploma, while 6, 3% of the population are out of school or have completed less than eight grades of primary school (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia) (see Table I below). Observed by sex, the share of women who have obtained higher education in the total number of women aged 15 and over is higher than the share of men with higher education in the total number of men of the same age (the share of persons with completed higher education/faculty/ academy includes 24.03% women, and 20.73% men) (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia). In the period between the two censuses, the share of persons with higher education increased significantly - from 16.24% (Census 2011) to 22.44% (Census 2022), as well as the share of persons with secondary education - from 48.93% (Census 2011) to 53.08% (Census 2022), while a decrease in the share of persons without formal education and with incomplete basic education was recorded - from 13.68% (Census 2011) to only 6.28% (Census 2022). In the 2021/22 school year, 243,730 students were enrolled in all higher education institutions and at all levels of study in the Republic of Serbia. Of the total number of students enrolled, 102,527 students (42.1%) were male, and 141,203 (57.9%) were female. (List of the population, households and apartments in 2022 on school education, literacy and computer literacy of the population of the Republic of Serbia by Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia). There is still no available data for the school year 2022/2023.

Table I Population aged 15 and over according to educational level and sex (year 2022/2023)

	Overall	No schooling and incomplete primary education	Primary education	Secondary education	Higher education	Unknown
The Republic of Serbia	5.691.551	357.406	1.013.067	3.020.958	1.277.396	22.724
Men	2.739.739	110.031	450.544	1599987	567.960	11.217
Women	2.951.812	247.375	562.523	1420971	709.436	11.507
%						
The Republic of Serbia	100	6,28	17,80	53,08	22,44	0,40
Men	100	4,02	16,44	58,40	20,73	0,41
Women	100	8,38	19,06	48,14	24,03	0,39

Adapted from: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-cyrl/vesti/20230731-skolska-sprema-pismenost/>

According to the Report on Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Serbia for 2023, just like in previous years, female students are more represented at the level of higher education. To be more precise, in academic year 2023/24, 47.946 students were enrolled in the first year of undergraduate studies in all higher education institutions in Serbia, out of which 57.9% were women. The largest number of students (56.2%) enrolled in state faculties, and in terms of study financing, 49.7% of newly enrolled students were budget-funded, while 50.3% were self-financing students. In 2022, a total of 36.951 students graduated, with 60.7% being women. From 2019 to 2022, female students constituted the majority in all fields of education, except for information and communication technology (30.7% in 2022) and engineering, production, and construction fields (41.9% in 2022) (the Report on Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Serbia for 2023 2024: 73). In Table II below, the percentage of female students enrolled in various fields of education in 2022 is presented.

Table II The percentage of female students enrolled in various fields of education in 2022

Field of Education	% of students enrolled in 2022
Education	84.4
Arts and Humanities	67.3
Social Sciences, Journalism, and Information	68.4
Business, Administration, and Law	63.8
Natural Sciences, Mathematics, and Statistics	67.1
Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries, and Veterinary Medicine	51.6
Health and Social Care	74.6
Services	52.1

Adapted from: the Report on Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Serbia for 2023: 73

Even though these contemporary results depict a satisfactory level of gender equality in education in the Republic of Serbia, it has not always been like that. According to Duhaček and Popović, who based their sources on statistical data in Serbia in the period before the Second World War, the number of female students in Serbia was low. Namely, after the Second World War, women made up almost half of the total number of students, with 35% of female students studying natural and technical sciences, while as many as 60% were in teaching programs. From 1947 to 2001 of the total number of Master of Science, 27% were women, and 22% of women defended their doctorates (Duhaček, Popović 2009: 683). According to Šoljan, 'after World War I, the underprivileged classes, including women, found it much more difficult to pursue higher education' (Šiljan 1991: 132). In Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, a steady rise in the proportion of women in the student population was noticed, whereas in the nineties, 'for the first time in the history of Yugoslav higher education, women were the majority' (Šiljan 1991: 134). Since 2000, Serbia has had 57% female doctoral students (compared to 37% in 1998), which is

explained by the phenomenon of brain drain and the frequent state of war in the country, and not by the phenomenon of gender-sensitive educational policy (Duhaček, Popović 2009: 681- 693). After the democratic changes, the trend of feminization of higher education continues and, as of 2005, women make up 59% of graduate students in Serbia, 51.6% of Master of Science, and up to 55.4% of Doctor of Philosophy. In the period from 1990 to 2007, the number of women employed in scientific institutes and higher education institutions in Serbia also increased, which is explained by the fact that the academic career is no longer a prestigious profession and that men are moving to the field of business and private practice (Duhaček, Popović 2009: 681- 693). In the academic year 2023/2024, according to the data obtained from Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 249 626 students started studying in Serbia, which includes 102 050 male students (40.9%) and 147 576 female students (59.1%) (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Enrolment students 2023/2024). In Table III below, we can see the data about students enrolled by way of financing, by universities and sex.

Table III The data about students enrolled by way of financing, by universities and sex in 2023/2024

Universities	Students enrolled			Way of financing					
				Budget			Self-financing		
	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
Total	249626	102050	147576	96662	36945	59717	152964	65105	87859
State universities	175625	68553	107072	82867	30816	52051	92758	37737	55021
University of Belgrade	90152	33798	56354	37352	13151	24201	52800	20647	32153
University of Arts	2875	918	1957	1790	554	1236	1085	364	721
University of Defense	881	539	342	800	499	301	81	40	41
University of Kragujevac	15202	5658	9544	7767	2962	4805	7435	2696	4739
University of Niš	22000	8633	13367	11446	4364	7082	10554	4269	6285
University of Novi Sad	41109	17777	23332	22113	8736	13377	18996	9041	9955
University of Novi Pazar	2681	852	1829	1264	378	886	1417	474	943
University of Criminalistics and Police Studies	725	378	347	335	172	163	390	206	184
Private universities	34200	15398	18802	-	-	-	34200	15398	18802
University "Singidunum"	9330	3910	5420	-	-	-	9330	3910	5420
University "Union – Nikola Tesla"	5291	2681	2610	-	-	-	5291	2681	2610
University "Union"	3616	1617	1999	-	-	-	3616	1617	1999
"Alfa BK" University	1082	556	526	-	-	-	1082	556	526
University "Metropolitan"	2053	1000	1053	-	-	-	2053	1000	1053
University "Educons"	2024	925	1099	-	-	-	2024	925	1099
University "Business Academy"	6521	2823	3698	-	-	-	6521	2823	3698
International University in Novi Pazar	777	227	550	-	-	-	777	227	550
University "MB"	933	546	387	-	-	-	933	546	387
European University	7	6	1	-	-	-	7	6	1
Faculties not being part of universities	2566	1107	1459	-	-	-	2566	1107	1459
State academies/higher schools of applied studies	32528	14982	17546	13795	6129	7666	18733	8853	9880
Private higher schools of applied studies	7273	3117	4156	-	-	-	7273	3117	4156

Adapted from: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Students enrolled by way of financing, by universities and sex 2023/2024

When it comes to the number of women employed in tertiary education, according to Statistical Pocketbook 2024, there are 8,275 women involved, including 6,352 female researchers and 750 research assistants (Statistical Pocketbook 2024: 82). In addition, according to the data about teaching staff

in institutions of tertiary education in 2021/22 school year, there are 5,359 female members of teaching staff and 395 female assistants at universities who are Doctors of Arts (Sciences), whereas there are 1,957 female members of the teaching staff who are Masters of Arts (Sciences) and Specialists (Statistical Yearbook, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2022: 134).

When it comes to gender equality university curricula, in Serbia the first course related to gender studies entitled ‘Sex Relations and Society’ was held at the Department of Sociology at the University of Belgrade in 1993 (Bošković 2015: 59-60). Today, there are numerous gender studies programs: Women’s Studies and Research at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Novi Sad within the Center for Gender Studies; Master and doctoral programs introduced within ACIMSI at the University of Novi Sad in 2003 and MA program within the University Center for Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies and Research; gender studies at the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Belgrade; and the newest one- MA program ‘Law and Gender’ within the Faculty of Law at the University of Belgrade.

Gender Quotas at Universities

Gender quotas have proliferated worldwide as a major tool of gender equality policies, first in the electoral arena, and then expanding to other socioeconomic spheres. European countries have increasingly adopted this policy model, particularly in academia, corporate boards, and politics. Norway has been a pioneer in implementing gender quotas. In 2006, it became the first country to introduce a substantial quota requiring that at least 40% of women serve on the boards of public and state-owned companies. It has also implemented gender quotas for academic boards and committees, with the aim to increase the representation of women in decision-making positions within universities, contributing to greater equality in academic staff and senior professorship positions (Revillard 2023: 317). Finland, known for its commitment to gender equality, has fewer specific measures for promoting gender balance in academia compared to Sweden and Norway. However, despite fewer formal policies, Finland boasts an equally high share of female professors. Namely, according to a study from 2021, whose aim was ‘to investigate what is referred to as the Nordic gender equality paradox: even though Nordic countries distinguish themselves as gender equal societies, the gender balance in academia is no better than in the rest of Europe. In fact, for a long time the proportion of female professors in Norway and Sweden has been the same as the European average’ (Mustosmäki et al. 2021: 2). Also, in Finland, candidates for university studies get more points if they apply to gender non- stereotyped faculties, e.g. men applying to education and languages, women applying to technics and mathematics. On the other hand, a recent study explored the direct and indirect effects of state-mandated gender quotas in European academia, and its findings indicate that quotas achieve their intended effect of increasing women’s representation on academic boards, contributing to greater equality in academic

staff and senior professorship positions (Revillard 2023: 330). Therefore, we can conclude that, even though gender quotas aim to address inequality, their efficacy and consequences can vary, depending on multiple factors.

What is also important to mention is that gender quotas are, on the surface, an explicitly feminist policy and an example of gender feminism⁴. They seek to correct the overrepresentation of men in various areas and advance the political and symbolic representation of women. However, it is essential to recognize that quotas are a policy of assimilation. In other words, while they aim to promote gender equality, their implementation can be complex and context-dependent. Research has shown that the impact of gender quotas on public attitudes toward women varies based on factors like the type of quota and the social context (Kim, Fallon 2023: 982). Quotas can raise awareness about the underrepresentation of women in academia, but their effects can be both positive and negative (Fernandez, Valiente 2021: 368).

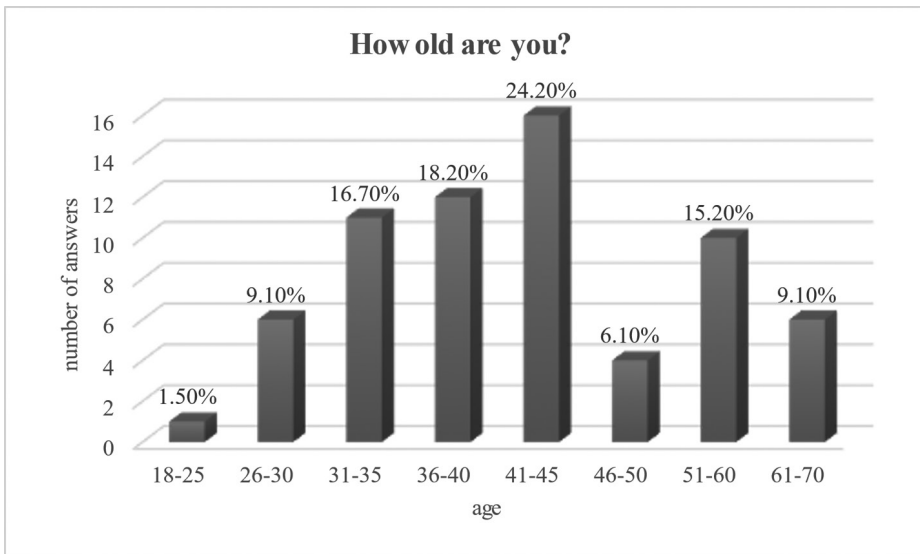
Research Methodology

The main idea of the project was to motivate Serbian higher education institutions to implement the new Law on Gender Equality properly, starting with Singidunum University, where the study was conducted. The first step to reach that goal was to investigate the attitudes of members of these institutions towards gender equality in Serbia in general, and especially towards gender equality in higher education. The main hypothesis that the research was based on is that both teaching and non-teaching staff are in favor of gender equality, but they do not know how to implement it. With that in mind, an anonymous online questionnaire was given to teaching and non-teaching staff at Singidunum University with the aim of discovering their attitudes and opinions related to gender equality in higher education in Serbia, with special reference to the Law on Gender Equality. The sample included 66 participants, 80.3% of which included teaching staff, whereas 19.7% of participants belonged to non-teaching staff. 62.1% of participants were female (41 participants), while 37.9% of them were male (25 participants). Most of the participants (24.2%) were aged between 40 and 45, whereas the rest of them were aged from 25 to 70. The age of the participants can be seen in Graph I.

The questionnaire consisted of 11 questions related to gender equality; two questions were open-ended (*'Why do/don't you believe in gender equality?'* and *'Name the reasons why there should or should not be gender equality in higher education institutions in Serbia'*), five questions were in Likert scale, and the rest of the questions were multiple choice. Due to the variety of the types of questions, both qualitative and quantitative analysis were used.

4 Gender feminism is the concept of all genders having equal rights and opportunities; respecting diverse women's experiences, identities, knowledge and strengths, and striving to empower all women to realize their full rights.

Graph I The age of participants.



Research Results

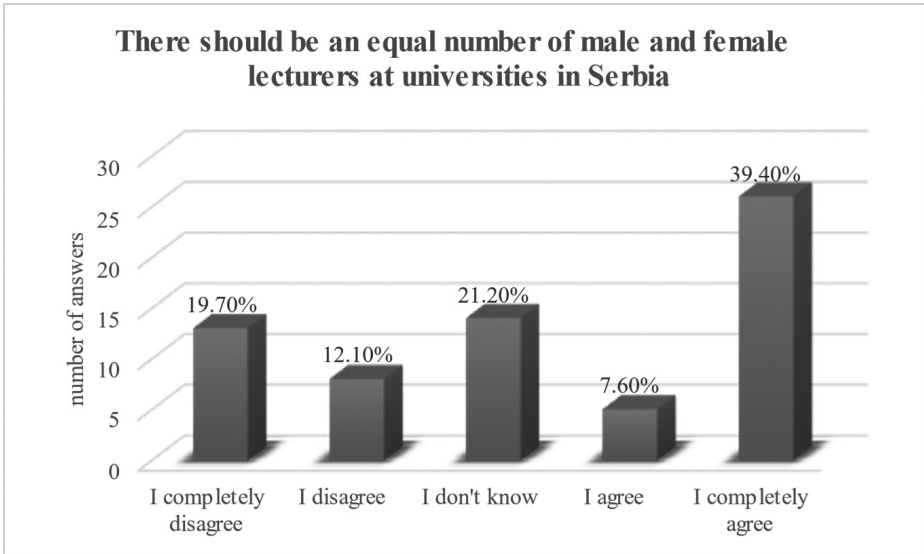
When asked whether gender equality in general can be reached in our country, 68.2% of participants gave a positive answer, whereas 31.8% of them said 'no'. This question was used as an 'icebreaker' to see the general opinion of the participants, before they continued to some more serious and more detailed questions. The next multiple-choice question was *'Is gender equality important for higher education area?'*. This time, 75.8% of participants said 'yes', 10.6% of them gave a negative answer, while 13.6% of them remained indecisive by circling the answer *'I don't know'*. If we compare these two questions, the answers imply that the participants believe gender equality to be even more important in higher education area than in some other areas.

As they moved on to Likert scale questions, we could see that the participants completely agree that gender equality exists at universities in Serbia, as there were no disagreements related to this statement. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that there was no definition of gender equality within the statement, so the participants could have defined it in their own terms, and, based on their definition and understanding of the term, they shared their opinion.

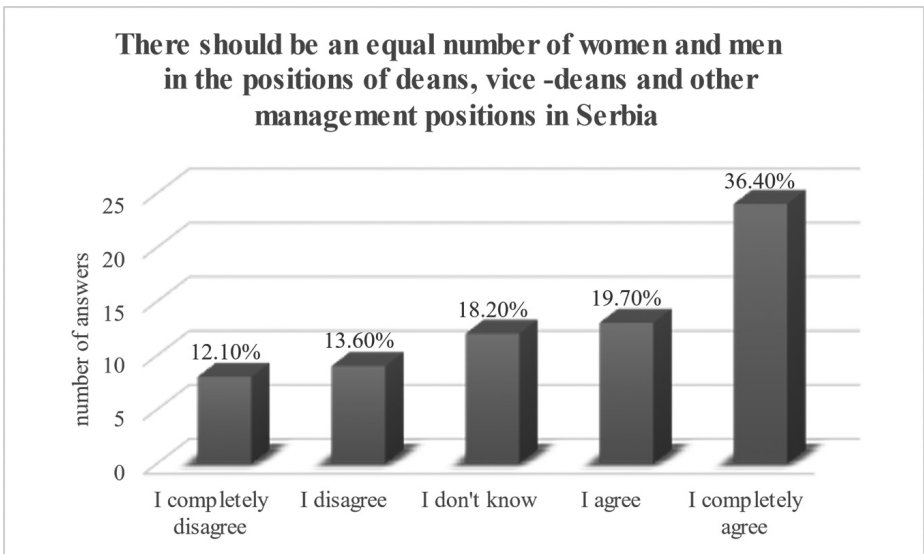
However, when it comes to the statements referring to gender quota: *'There should be an equal number of male and female lecturers at universities in Serbia'*, and *'There should be an equal number of women and men in the positions of deans, vice-deans, and other management positions at universities in Serbia'*, the opinions of the participants were different, as it can be seen in Graph II and Graph III below. Number one stands for 'I completely disagree', number two 'I disagree', number 3 'I don't know', number 4 'I agree', and number 5 'I

completely agree'. Even though gender quotas were not mentioned in the Law on Gender Equality, due to the fact that there are some European universities which implement this concept, the author decided to analyze the attitude of participants related to this issue as well.

Graph II Statement 'There should be an equal number of male and female lecturers at universities in Serbia.'

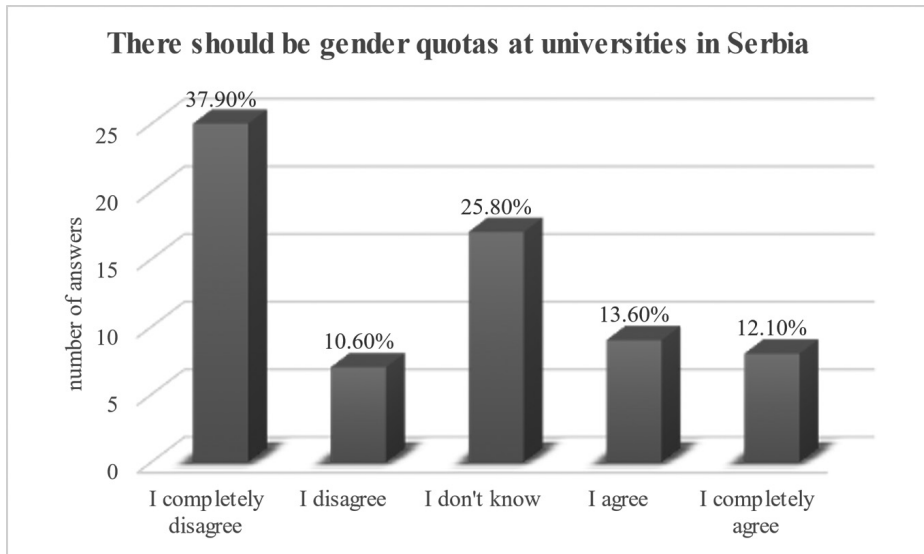


Graph III Statement 'There should be an equal number of women and men in the positions of deans, vice-deans and other management positions at universities in Serbia.'



The negative attitude of participants towards the concept of gender quota in general is confirmed in the final Likert scale statement *'There should be gender quotas at universities in Serbia'*, with 37.9% of the participants who completely disagree, and only 12.1% of the participants who completely agree with this idea (see Graph IV).

Graph IV Statement *'There should be gender quotas at universities in Serbia.'*



The most useful part of the questionnaire were open-ended questions, as this is where we could actually understand why the participants feel in favor or against gender equality in higher education. When asked why they do or do not believe in gender equality in general, some of the participants gave very thorough answers which also explain their (mostly negative) attitudes towards gender quota, which can be found in Table II. What is interesting to notice is the fact that gender of the participants is not crucial in these answers, as both male and female participants were equally in favor of gender equality, but against gender quota.

Table II Some of the answers to the question *'Why do you/ don't you believe in gender equality?'*

Participant 1	<i>Gender should not affect the choice of a profession or study or workplace, that is why I do not agree with gender quotas in workplaces, studies...</i>
Participant 14	<i>I think that it has been around for a long time, and now many are abusing it.</i>
Participant 13	<i>I believe in the ability, knowledge, skills and experience of all persons, regardless of whether they are male or female. I believe that gender should not and should not be an element of favoritism or discrimination.</i>

Participant 4	<i>I don't believe in gender equality, because both at the global and national level it boils down to the questions that you also asked in this questionnaire, which are numerical values. I believe that the numerical ratio of women and men in any system, in general, does not indicate the achieved gender equality, but only the fulfillment of the form. The numerical values do not indicate the existence of any form of inadequate treatment of women in any system. Determining the (non)existence of gender equality in a system requires much more complex questions and answers.</i>
Participant 23	<i>I believe in gender equality. I always felt equal and tried to win that equality. I think I even succeeded. However, if (as the questions in this survey show) the concept of gender equality is trivialized by reducing it to a mere equal numerical representation of both sexes, the superior concept - equality - is lost.</i>
Participant 61	<i>Gender equality is a natural state, which society deforms throughout its history on the basis of natural differences in physical strength. The return of equality is a condition for the survival of the shell of civilization. This will not be achieved in Serbia, as well as in the rest of the world, until it is understood that numbers cannot be used to characterize whether or not gender equality has been achieved.</i>
Participant 54	<i>I believe in gender equality when it comes to intellectual capacity and I believe that there is no difference between men and women in terms of achievements in any field. Women rarely have the opportunity to prove themselves.</i>
Participant 38	<i>It is an important condition of sustainable development.</i>
Participant 29	<i>I believe in gender equality in the sense that everyone is born equal, male or female, and therefore everyone has equal opportunities in life according to their abilities, hard work, commitment and resourcefulness. Gender inequality starts from the home and our entire society, the way girls and boys are educated about their roles in society, the way employers treat pregnant women. Changes should start from the beginning - from society and family and not from the end - at the university. Our problem is that women are treated unequally when they remain in a different state, that women are asked at job interviews when they are planning a family, that flexible working hours are not taken into account when children are small, that men who work as hairdressers or carers receive various epithets because men's and women's jobs are established. It must be changed from the roots. Every job should not be viewed through gender, but through the specific possibilities or impossibilities of the candidate, regardless of gender.</i>
Participant 40	<i>Gender equality is not essentially a language problem (in terms of terminology, male or female professor) as it is said and understood. Gender equality should enable and make it easier for women to perform all their roles at home and at work. This implies, for example, a greater number of vacation days, fewer working hours during the working week, protection against mobbing, etc. Gender representation in workplaces, faculties, should depend exclusively and only on the competence, knowledge, skills that someone possesses... And of course, there are jobs that women (most of them) are unable to perform, solely for biological reasons. (weaker and smaller constitution). For example, should it be prescribed that an equal number of women and men enroll in a secondary vocational school that educates personnel dealing with electricity?</i>
Participant 19	<i>I have a mother and a father, I think that is enough reason to believe in gender equality.</i>
Participant 34	<i>Because it leads to an increase in productivity, efficiency and success of an organization as a whole.</i>

Participant 11	<i>I believe in gender equality, as both sexes should have the same chances and opportunities. However, it should not be misused in the sense that a person is selected for a position solely on the basis of gender quotas, but the most qualified person (whether male or female) should always be selected.</i>
Participant 65	<i>Gender equality is important in the sense that no persons are discriminated against at work. However, since housework is not valued in any way, there is no way to achieve true equality.</i>
Participant 29	<i>Gender equality is something that has only just begun to be openly discussed in our country. It is important because it gives hope that in the future women will be equally recognized for their qualities as men, which will further lead to an increased desire and effort of young women to develop and improve and thus improve the general condition of society and our community.</i>
Participant 55	<i>Equality of any kind, including gender equality, is always a benefit for the social community.</i>
Participant 6	<i>I believe that the human rights of both women and men should be respected equally. Until now, I have never been exposed to gender discrimination. I am not in favor of introducing gender quotas in universities because I believe that everyone should be employed/promoted according to their abilities and education, not their gender. In my opinion, it does not matter whether there are more women or men working within the scope of the institution, as long as they are competent for the work they perform.</i>
Participant 27	<i>The competence of the teacher or the ability to teach the students does not depend on the gender of the person, that person and the other gender should be represented in the same percentage in the mentioned positions. However, I do not think that there should be quotas, because this can lead to the fact that quality teachers are not hired or students are not enrolled, but that a certain percentage is met.</i>
Participant 62	<i>I absolutely believe in gender equality, but not in “quotas” – every job should be performed exclusively by the most capable, and positions should not be filled against quotas in order to force gender equality. This destroys any business in the medium and long term. The second is the fact that there really are typically “male” and typically “female” professions, i.e. professions in which, due to the nature of the work, one or the other gender dominates (eg craft/technical professions vs HR/PR). Attempting to equalize this relationship with artificial quotas has unfathomably bad consequences. So, yes, gender equality in education and employment must be forced (otherwise it’s idiocy), but the only criterion for employment must be the candidate’s professional suitability and not belonging to one or the other gender!!!</i>
Participant 2	<i>I believe in gender equality, but I don’t think that belonging to a certain gender is a prerequisite for performing a certain function in terms of fulfilling previously defined percentages.</i>

Furthermore, in Table III, we can see their answers to the question ‘*State the reasons why gender equality should or should not be respected in higher education institutions in Serbia.*’

Table III Some of the answers to the question 'State the reasons why gender equality should or should not be respected in higher education institutions in Serbia.'

Participant 5	<i>When it comes to people enrolling in higher education institutions in Serbia, they make their choice based on their interests and the goals they want to achieve in their career or life. Depending on the area of the higher education institution, a different percentage of male and female students are enrolled.</i>
Participant 8	<i>When we talk about teaching and non-teaching staff, I believe that it is necessary to respect gender equality in order to remove the trend and all prejudices about the abilities of one or the other sex.</i>
Participant 12	<i>In higher education institutions, apart from competences and references, there should not be any other criterion during employment.</i>
Participant 17	<i>Gender equality should certainly be respected in all institutions in Serbia, because the participation of both sexes in the implementation of activities contributes to the quality of the functioning of the institution itself and the final results. However, the situation is not the same in all areas of higher education, as well as in all scientific fields and disciplines, so it does not necessarily mean that there is no gender equality if the numerical ratio of women and men is not uniform.</i>
Participant 22	<i>The parameters that are imposed as indicators of equality are incorrect. Insisting on gender equality using numerical parameters is incorrect and backward and makes the whole concept wrong. The abilities and values of an individual, and thus his contribution to this or that uncle, do not depend on his/her gender. Higher education institutions are obliged to provide the best to their students, and this cannot be achieved by equalizing the number of members of this or that gender, on the contrary, it can destroy the chance of "most" to contribute.</i>
Participant 26	<i>Equal opportunities should be ensured and guaranteed, but not at the cost of forced "equalization" in order to satisfy some "statistics" and equality in terms of the "number of people"; but to ensure that everyone has equal opportunities, and only equal treatment of everyone must be guaranteed. People's interest in study programs and job positions at higher education institutions will determine whether there will be an equal number of male and female students in a course or an equal number of cleaners. Competitions should not be "adjusted" or students prevented from enrolling in order to artificially maintain some statistically driven numerical equality. The market, affection and interests of people should regulate the filling of positions/places, and the institutions should only guarantee an equal relationship, criteria and opportunities for all interested parties.</i>
Participant 31	<i>Gender equality should be respected in higher education institutions for the sake of raising the awareness of future generations.</i>
Participant 43	<i>It is important to put the quality of teaching staff first (knowledge, expertise, communication skills, experience, teaching skills, etc.) when talking about teaching staff working in higher education institutions and hire them on that basis, regardless of their gender. On the other hand, I think that the existence of an equal number of male and female students in all study programs and universities in Serbia does not make sense. The best students should be enrolled regardless of their gender, and the chance should be given to everyone regardless of how many male or female applicants there are. If there had to be an equal number of male and female students, does that mean that due to the enrollment of only 20 girls at e.g. Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, the same faculty can enroll a maximum of 20 men and vice versa? This would lead to a situation where potentially worse students are enrolled in higher education institutions and in such a way better students would be discriminated against regardless of gender.</i>

Participant 44	<i>It should be respected, just as it should be understood that some programs enroll more men and some women. Insisting too much on something sometimes creates more repulsion than acceptance.</i>
Participant 50	<i>Today, women have the right to education, but later with the same diplomas, they do not have the same treatment at work or in life.</i>
Participant 52	<i>Increasing awareness and knowledge about Chapter 23 (Judiciary and fundamental rights) with a special emphasis on women's rights and their discrimination, when it comes to work and employment, as well as the process of further harmonization with the EU regulations.</i>
Participant 56	<i>Gender equality should be respected in all areas, so higher education should not be an exception. There is no reason for anyone to advocate for gender equality to be respected in higher education institutions, but it should be part of the general narrative that gender equality is one of the crucial issues in modern society.</i>
Participant 58	<i>Gender equality should be established at higher education institutions, but with respect for the specificity of study programs (some are almost entirely female and some are male). The right to higher education must not depend on gender. The problem arises when graduated students gossip, because there women are often paid less or find it harder to get a job because of the possibility of motherhood.</i>
Participant 61	<i>Gender equality is a basic human right, academic institutions, as the highest educational institutions, must set an example in gender equality.</i>
Participant 66	<i>Equality yes, but not at any cost. (equal number of male and female students...I think quality is more important than quantity...etc).</i>

Conclusion

Even though gender equality is a topic that has been discussed many times, there is always a need to analyze it more thoroughly and in different communities. Therefore, the analysis of the attitudes of teaching and non-teaching staff toward gender equality in higher education areas could be crucial for curricula, student population and education specialists in the future. As members of the academic community, representatives of both teaching and non-teaching staff in a higher education institution form an essential component in creating and achieving gender equality within any society. Not only do the answers presented in this research clearly depict the attitudes of specific academic community towards the new regulations related to gender equality, but they also offer an argumentative approach towards the steps we need to take to reach gender equality in contemporary society.

Based on all given answers, it can be concluded that members of teaching and non-teaching staff at Singidunum University do believe that we, as a society, should nurture gender equality. On the other hand, when it comes to finding the appropriate tools for reaching gender equality in higher education, gender quotas are not desirable, as most of the participants believe they are unnecessary and that they can even lead to more discrimination. Moreover, the attitudes toward gender quotas in higher education area are extremely negative, so it is highly unlikely that teaching and non-teaching staff will adopt or

implement them in the future. We could also conclude that the main hypothesis has been confirmed, as both teaching and non-teaching staff are in favor of gender equality, but they do not agree with the steps needed to implement it, as it is written in the new Law on Gender Equality.

The sex of participants did not play a crucial role in this research, as both male and female participants were strictly against gender quotas, but mostly in favor of gender equality in general. What remains to be seen is whether the research results would be different if the sample was larger. Also, due to the fact that the research was conducted for the purpose of the project, we have not analyzed the answers based on the title, background, or place of birth of the participants, so there should be another research which would analyze the answers of the teaching assistants, full professors, non-teaching staff, etc. in order to see whether their answers would vary depending on their level of education, their vocation, or their place of birth. Also, it would be significant to conduct the same research within other higher education institutions in Serbia and compare the results, as this sample is quite small. Therefore, the author is planning to organize another research, paying attention to all correlations and a bigger sample.

Despite considerable progress in the last decade, gender equality remains a critical goal within academia. Gender quotas, when thoughtfully implemented, can serve as a powerful catalyst for change, but should not be considered crucial. By mandating a minimum representation of women in decision-making bodies, universities can foster an inclusive environment that benefits all. However, it is essential to recognize that complementary efforts, such as mentorship programs, training, targeted recruitment, and family-friendly policies, are equally relevant. Only when we understand that we are all in charge of gender equality will we be able to contribute to equal opportunities for everyone, in all spheres of society.

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Valentina Bošković Marković

Stavovi nastavnog i nenastavnog osoblja prema rodnoj ravnopravnosti i rodnim kvotama u visokom obrazovanju: studija slučaja iz Srbije

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad predstavlja rezultate istraživanja sprovedenog od 2022. do 2023. godine u okviru projekta između dva privatna univerziteta: Univerziteta Singidunum u Srbiji i Cl Cergi Paris univerziteta u Francuskoj. Cilj istraživanja je da se ispituju i analiziraju stavovi nastavnog i nenastavnog osoblja Univerziteta Singidunum prema rodnoj ravnopravnosti i rodnim kvotama u ovoj visokoškolskoj ustanovi, pošto je usvojen novi Zakon o ravnopravnosti polova. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da akademska zajednica Univerziteta Singidunum prihvata rodnu ravnopravnost kao koncept koji je neophodan u savremenom društvu, ali da ne prihvata rodne kvote kao sredstvo za postizanje rodne ravnopravnosti u visokoškolskim ustanovama. Cilj ovog rada je da predstavi rezultate istraživanja koji mogu biti od koristi u budućem procesu donošenja odluka koji se tiču rodne ravnopravnosti i visokog obrazovanja.

Cljučne reči: rodna ravnopravnost, rodna kvota, nastavno osoblje, nenastavno osoblje, visoko obrazovanje.

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HARDT AND NEGRI'S POLITICAL ONTOLOGY: THE SCOPE OF THE *MULTITUDE* AND THE REALITY OF THE *REVOLUTIONARY*

ABSTRACT

Hardt and Negri's philosophical approach is deeply shaped by their interpretation of biopolitics, particularly through their exploration of the multitude's power and their analysis of emerging forms of sovereignty. The revolutionary potential within the diversity of the multitude cannot be fully grasped without considering the broader context of their critique of neoliberal political practices and their view of the Empire as a system that creates mechanisms for new political thought and action. A central question posed is whether, in reinterpreting Marxism through a postmodern lens, these authors manage to provide a framework for new, small-scale revolutions, or whether their intense focus on sovereignty has left them disconnected from the very multiplicity that defines the multitude's potential.

KEYWORDS

neoliberalism,
ontology, subjectivity,
Empire, biopolitics,
multitude

Introduction

The argument that Hardt and Negri provide in their most famous book *Empire* begins with the assertion that the Empire is visible to each and every one of us, right in front of our very eyes. Their methodical and descriptive nature is reflected in a multitude of examples and insights on the manner in which the practices of power have evolved over the course of history, transitioning from imperialism to empire. The authors' observations regarding the transformation that takes place inside the power of sovereignty do not pertain to the weakening of the power of sovereignty itself. The diagnostic approach taken by Hardt and Negri demonstrates the gradual erosion of the sovereignty of nation-states, which, as the authors put it, ultimately results in the material establishment of power in the form of global sovereignty, which is brought about by the processes of globalization.



Hardt and Negri outline a shift from the legal system of nation-states to a type of imperial law, which they define as a component of a historical development of legal systems that reached its peak with the establishment of the United Nations. According to their argument, the United Nations, as a supranational entity with many agencies and organs, has a vital role since it serves as a new hub of normative production capable of carrying out a legally sovereign function. (Hardt and Negri 2000 : 4-9) While the United Nations recognizes the legitimacy of individual states, it functions within the wider context of international law. The authors contend that the implementation of this sovereignty is only successful when it transfers sovereign rights to a genuine supranational body. Their emphasis, however, lies not around criticizing the constraints of this procedure but rather on the importance of institutions such as the UN in the shift from an international order to a global system.

Imperial sovereignty signifies a paradigm change and a novel understanding of law according to Hardt and Negri. This transformation necessitates a reinscription of authority, a reconfiguration of the development of norms and legal weapons of coercion, and is essential for the enforcement of contracts and the resolution of disputes. (Hardt and Negri 2000: 212) Foucault and Marx have made a significant impact on Hardt and Negri by highlighting the need for reforms in production and political systems. By implying that the Empire stands for a homogeneous, limitless space, the writers stress the malleability of imperial sovereignty. The Empire is a non-place or *ou-topia* in this worldview because power is pervasive. Power is distributed throughout a seamless and united environment in global capitalism, as borders become increasingly porous. To grasp the structure of the Empire, it's essential to understand Hardt and Negri's view of sovereignty and how it intersects with concepts like biopolitics and biopower. Hardt and Negri repeatedly emphasize that imperial sovereignty signals a change in paradigm, making it distinct from traditional imperialism. Unlike Foucault, who sees the sovereignty paradigm replaced by biopolitics within neoliberal practices, Hardt and Negri argue that sovereignty hasn't been displaced by biopolitical power. Instead, they suggest it has undergone a transformation within the concept of sovereignty itself. The power dynamics of biopolitics are most evident when merely the human body and life, together with the life of the population, are subjected to power, thereby expanding upon the authors of some of Foucault's most significant insights. The authors observe that the achievement of contemporary sovereignty reflects biopower, which extends beyond the control of interpersonal relationships to encompass society as a whole and all its facets. This notion positions Empire, according to Hardt and Negri, as the quintessential manifestation of biopower. From this vantage point, the authors stress that the idea of Empire is intrinsically linked to and devoted to peace, as an everlasting, comprehensive peace. Consistent with its guiding principles of peace and the unflinching promise of justice for all, the Empire exudes an air of calm serenity. (Ibid.: XVI) The concept of the Empire is intricately connected to universal principles and legal classifications, such that its function arises as a political entity that

values, promotes, and strives to preserve peace. In this regard, the singular authority is endowed with the requisite capacity to carry out, when required, fair conflicts at the frontiers against the barbarians and within the country against the insurgents. The authors propose that analyzing the meaning of war and peace in current political practice is crucial for comprehending the manifestation of various types of power in the present day. The Imperial emphasis on safeguarding peace necessitates the defense of peace, which in turn results in righteous conflicts and establishes a perpetual state of war. Hardt's and Negri's perspective on the universality of war reveals a profound knowledge of the reversal of the concepts of war and peace. In reality, the concept of war starts to denote a condition of war that adopts the status of the norm. Hardt and Negri perceive war as *ontological*, manifesting as a paradigm of political action in an unprecedented manner, both in its scope and its structure. Ontological warfare entails escalating forms of domination that permeate various dimensions and domains of social existence. The function of warfare in the Empire's organization is pivotal, as the fundamental political mechanisms have shifted from defensive to security-oriented. A conflict that has transitioned from a state of emergency to an ingrained and accepted aspect of daily life leads to the conflation of military and police operations. Although it is taking place on a worldwide scale rather than within nation-states, the authors contend that the present global battle should be viewed as a type of civil war. So, much like in *Empire*, their investigation in *Multitude* begins with a survey of Hobbes' war of every man against every man. However, *Multitude's* analysis is more narrowly focused on the paradigm of war and peace as the arena in which biopower is most starkly and dramatically displayed. The fact that localized wars are happening all over the world doesn't mean they're unrelated; rather, it shows that the global dimension of the struggle makes any hope of peace seem like a pipe dream. Could it be contended that, following Clausewitz's and Foucault's approaches, Hardt and Negri suggest that politics is really the continuation of war *just* through techniques of war, thereby reversing Clausewitz's and Foucault's original formulations? War and politics are seen as separate but interrelated concepts, and the authors make note of Clausewitz's famous formula, which assumes this to be the case. Also, the authors claim that Clausewitz only considers wars between nations, ignoring the myriad of internal conflicts that occur in society. Hardt and Negri juxtapose Clausewitz's interpretation with Carl Schmitt's broader assertion that actually all political motivations and conflicts are influenced by the differentiation between allies and adversaries. Nevertheless, we are no longer confronted with a public adversary, previously symbolized mostly in another nation, nor is politics itself devoid of a potential condition of conflict. Preserving political activities under normal circumstances, free from military conflicts, was the intention of modernity's sovereignty notion, which aimed to settle civil issues and maintain peace in international relations. There has been a dramatic shift since the new Empire government came into power: from conventional warfare to the „war on terror“ and asymmetrical wars. War was once an isolated incident, but now

it has spread and will likely continue indefinitely. The integration of violence into contemporary political practices has become an omnipresent potentiality, therefore erasing the fundamental differentiation between war and peace. In contemporary society, the era of war has transcended its transient nature and has become an integral aspect of social existence. Our current era is characterized by the pervasive presence of war, particularly in light of the officially proclaimed war on terror following September 11, 2001. The inversion of the concepts of war and peace holds great significance in Hardt's and Negri's comprehension of biopolitics. War, no longer an anomaly, now permeates the social realm as a norm that, by its universal applicability, inevitably impacts life itself and extends across all domains of social existence.

Hardt and Negri argue that the distinctiveness of our time is in the transformation of warfare via the different components of power dynamics, ultimately reaching a stage where dominance alone is unattainable without resorting to violence. War must transform into a regulating and organizing activity that creates and sustains social hierarchies in order to serve its fundamental political and social purpose. It needs to be a form of biopower that is purposefully used to govern and enhance social life. The authors argue that by linking war to the concepts of biopower and security, biopower profoundly alters the whole legal framework of warfare. Biopower, as a form of sovereign power, governs the realms of life and death, enabling the Empire as a mode of government to exert effective authority not only over the lives of individuals but also over the mortality of the entire human race (for instance, by the advancement of nuclear weapons technology). Conversely, security systems are implemented simultaneously at many levels of society, allowing sovereign power as a biopower to exert its influence throughout the stages of conflict at all levels. According to Hardt and Negri, biopower is most evidently demonstrated through warfare, which, when transformed into a kind of governance, becomes enduring and consistent. Contemporary conflicts are defined by the ubiquitous and interconnected use of military force, in conjunction with unrestrained dominance and control across several levels that intersect the whole social sphere. Sovereignty is primarily shown as biopower through the paradigm of war. Continuing from Foucault's point that the regime of government has taken control of people's lives when it becomes an essential part of their daily lives and something that people voluntarily engage in again and again, the authors argue that the government has successfully exerted control over the whole social body. (Hardt and Negri 2004: 18) The authors' points on biopower, being mainly understood in relation to the development and reproduction of life that is challenged, are well-taken – in the sense that it directly affects the organization of individuals in all their activities. When it came to institutional disciplinary administration, biopower in disciplinary states couldn't quite reach all individuals. Discipline failed to penetrate people's minds and bodies to the point where they could be treated and organized in all aspects of their lives; it was only within transition to control society that biopolitical technology was able to seize life to the point where individuals

were completely absorbed in the rhythm of productive practices and productive socialization. (Hardt and Negri 2000: 24) Hardt and Negri conceptualize the event inside the framework of the Empire as an inherent potential, serving as a prerequisite for the creation of a *common* and a *multitude*. In contrast to Foucault, who examines the many and novel manifestations of power, Hardt and Negri emphasize the generic and multifaceted nature of the new subject arising inside the Empire. The concepts of multiplicity in these authors are intricately linked not to diversity and distinction, but rather to the unity and democracy of the multitude, through which they engage in the analysis of affirmative biopolitics in their discourse.

The ontology of the biopolitical of Hardt and Negri diverges in two main directions: one, which considers biopower as intrinsically and structurally linked to the paradigm of war and the exploitation of peace, and the other, as an analysis of the biopolitical generation of the multitude, whose actions effectively include and restore the potential of the whole cultural, political, and social existence. The presence of a political ontology in the works of the authors is most evident in the characterization of the ontological drama surrounding the processes of production and reproduction: “This is when the ontological drama begins, when the curtain goes up on a scene in which the development of Empire becomes its own critique and its process of construction becomes the process of its overturning. This drama is ontological in the sense that here, in these processes, being is produced and reproduced.” (Ibid.: 47; cited in: Dragišić 2022: 123)

The generation of novel living forms is predominantly facilitated by immaterial labor, hence giving rise to intangible commodities. The term *immaterial goods* refers to many forms of information, ideas, intersubjective relationships, and modes of communication. Economic processes are intricately connected to the creation of social interactions and lifestyles, as the cultural, political, and social domains are directly engaged in the global economy, in a completely novel manner. The authors refer to this type of production as *biopolitical* since it involves integration of economics and politics, therefore encompassing the entirety of social existence. This shift from biopower to biopolitical production signifies a transformation in which common social forms of life are established by the utilization of forms of labor. In the realm of biopower, the ability to control and govern both human life and nature leads to the creation of many elements of social existence. Within biopolitical production, there is a shift where production has evolved into an economic-socio-cultural-political process. In this context, the authors observe resistance and possibility of the emergence of a new political subjectivity as means to challenge the Empire. They refer to the interrelation between such production and action, which represents the comprehensive involvement in life.

What is Democracy within biopolitical production?

“The political is not what we are taught it is today by cynical Machiavellianism of politicians; it is rather, as the democratic Machiavelli tells us, the power of generation, desire, and love. Political theory has to reorient itself along these lines and assume the language of generations”. (Hardt and Negri 2000: 388)

Hardt's and Negri's proposed theory of subjectivity should include both the revolutionary and exploitative aspects. It should emphasize that the intangible and communicative labor force serves as the foundation for addressing the issue of value accumulation “at the core of the exploitation mechanism (and hence, potentially, at the core of potential revolt)”. As to Hardt and Negri, knowledge, communication, and language should serve as the foundation for activating factors that will significantly enhance the capacity for resistance. Although Foucault acknowledged the validity of the biopolitical viewpoint, his rigid adherence to structuralist epistemology prevented him from fully implementing his theories. According to Hardt's and Negri's research, Foucault failed to take into account the efficient functioning of social reproduction and the actual processes by which production takes place inside a biopolitical organization. Hardt and Negri, in contrast to Foucault, but also diverging from Deleuze and Guattari, aim to demonstrate how the radical ontology of social production displays its significance and influence specifically within the context of biopolitical society. What are the creative aspects overlooked by previous generations, which indicate the significance of the ontological essence of social production, and whose potential has not been fully explored through analysis? The authors delineate three fundamental elements of immaterial labor in the contemporary economy, which, when examined, would provide insight into the dynamics of “the new theoretical framework of biopower”. (Ibid.: 30) The initial aspect pertains to an industrial production that has been digitized and has integrated communication technologies, hence altering the manufacturing process itself. Second is the immaterial labor of analytical and symbolic work, while a third kind of immaterial labor encompasses the generation and modulation of affect, necessitating virtual or physical human interaction and corporeal engagement.

What is the precise meaning of the authors' statement that while evaluating the requirements imposed by the biopolitical body on the multitude, we must uncover the process by which our history, reality, and existence have been formed? What is the rationale for conducting the study not through ideal forms, but rather within the intricate network of experience? How can affirmative biopolitical production be comprehended when multinational corporations exert biopolitical influence on territories worldwide and directly impact populations and territories, so shaping the evolution of the global market and the biopolitical structure of the world?

Democracy arises as a potentiality when a collective of many individuals comes together, and who can only express their vitality in connection to the *multitude* and the *common*. The plurality and multiplicity are defined by the

infinite number of distinct living forms generated by biopolitical production. This entity possesses a physical form, a bodily tissue, which is evident through various expressions in diverse subjectivities – including political, economic, cultural, and social domains. How do the authors perceive the various options available inside the Empire, and how can the general population actualize its revolutionary capacity?¹

Modern legal theory, grounded in individualism, encompasses all facets of the subject, but in a manner that assigns economic importance to all attributes and characteristics. The problem with this approach is that it seems to be getting more and more difficult to distinguish between individual rights and the right to private property, as the term *private* can mean both. Hardt and Negri attribute the confusion to *the ideology of possessive individualism*, which posits that the differentiation between private freedoms and the right to private property is being blurred. This phenomenon is driven by the framework of contemporary law, which perceives every element or characteristic of the individual, ranging from their interests and desires to their essence, as *properties* owned by the individual. Consequently, all aspects of subjectivity are reduced to the economic domain. According to Hardt and Negri, the legal terminology employed by contemporary legal theory is inadequate and ambiguous in elucidating the true nature of generally applicable and shared principles. The concept of community has traditionally been linked to governmental authority, and it is imperative to adopt post-systemic thinking to identify suitable frameworks for understanding the connection between collective and biopolitical production. The common is unaffected by the conventional concepts of *public* and *community* as it largely pertains to the experience of communicativeness that arises from the interaction of singularities, which, via social collaboration, enable the creation of the *general*. Hardt and Negri define the common as the natural environment, its resources, and the products derived from it, but also as the results of social interaction, including languages, information, emotions and other types of knowledge. The diversity of the multitude exposes its various subjectivities, which arise specifically from common practices, languages, habits, and behaviors—essentially, common and general forms of life.

1 The authors provide an illustration of several feminist and queer theories of performativity that successfully grow and evolve within the framework of postmodernism, therefore executing a type of anthropological metamorphosis. The shift in habits to performance has enabled the emergence of a resolution to the conundrum that feminist theories have encountered, by embracing the uniqueness of the female body as the foundation of its operational framework. Nevertheless, the achievement of performative theories lies in their ability to oppose the physical body and advocate for the collective performance of queer social existence. Through her rejection of the inherent notion of a sexual distinction, Judith Butler creates an opportunity to challenge the rationale behind identification and generate what is universally applicable. The possibilities of *the multitude* can arise, among other things, by comprehending the political importance of the continuous creation and replication of social entities, basically because by means of our daily performances, we can perform in a different manner, undermine those social entities, and create novel social structures. Hardt and Negri (2004 : 199)

The connection between the general and the norms should be comprehended in this perspective, as the generation of norms, for Hardt and Negri, should be predicated on a continuous, unrestricted, and transparent interaction among singularities, which, by means of their communication, gives rise to common norms. (Ibid.: 204) The insistence of Hardt and Negri on substituting the identity-difference pair with the concepts of generality-singularity is evident, as it is the process of interchange and communication that serves as the foundation for the phenomenon of multitudes. *Multitude* refers to the human creators of empire who forge a common identity through the exploitation. For Hardt and Negri, the multitude is the sole type of political subjectivity capable of realizing democracy. The diversity of the multitude exposes the many experiences and perspectives inside the group, which arise specifically from shared customs, languages, habits, and behaviors, namely universal and widespread modes of life. The authors interpret the term singularity as a manifestation of the ethical concept of performativity, highlighting that singularities actively and unrestrictedly engage in social interactions and shared experiences.

In the foreword to the *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri assert that the Internet has the capacity to function as a paradigm of the multitude, as the multitude indeed encompasses several entities of production: "... a distributed network like the Internet serves as a robust starting point or prototype for the multitude due to two main reasons. Firstly, the different nodes within the network remain distinct but are all interconnected through the Web. Secondly, the network's external boundaries are flexible, allowing for the constant addition of new nodes and relationships." (Ibid. : XV) Furthermore, the authors place particular emphasis on the concept of carnival and the possibilities it has for developing a global carnival vision. Hardt and Negri argue that literature, by including the concept of carnival, has the potential to disrupt the traditional societal structure. Their vision, while perceived as neither sovereign nor anarchist by some critics, aims to transcend and impose a paradigm shift – to eliminate the concepts of anarchy and sovereignty. This is because without such a shift, the concept of multitude remains ambiguous and fails to achieve its complete potential. Upon reading Bakhtin's work, the writers observe a prominent dialogical narrative in Dostoevsky's dialogues. These dialogues involve a significant number of people who actively contribute to shaping both the subjects of the dialogue and their communication. The theory of carnival culture centers on the distinctive features of Middle Age carnivals, including elements such as carnival laughter, marketplace discourse, dialogism, and grotesque behavior. This highlights a novel viewpoint encountered by human awareness throughout the festivities, whereby the characters exhibit greater freedom, unrestricted, and the ambiance of disorder and humor fosters a sense of camaraderie among the characters, resulting in both their eccentricity and interpersonal closeness. For Bakhtin, the carnival serves as a venue where what is typically unaltered and revered is satirized, but within the context of this festive event, what typically divides individuals is brought together in the familial ambiance of the carnival.

Dialogic connection becomes a form of experimentation, always providing a fertile ground for imagination, emotion, and utopia, so establishing the foundation for a novel universe. The authors stress the significance of the polyphonic understanding of narrative, as it is precisely due to the environment that promotes free expression that singularities relinquish their self-imposed limitations and engage in dialogues without restriction once “the common narrative structures” (ibid. : 211) are established. To what extent is the carnivalesque theory necessary for Hardt and Negri to provide a more comprehensive explanation of how political organization might arise in the contemporary order? The authors have identified theatrical conduct, laughter, singing, and the excitement of the carnival as attributes that can be ascribed to certain modern protests. Within political organizations, active and meaningful interaction and conversation among various sides, rather than pervasive conflict, is expected and indeed occurs.

The (im)possibilities of the multitude

“Any worker with any sense, of course, wants to refuse the authority of the boss, but Bartleby takes it to the extreme. He does not object to this or that task, nor does he offer any reason for his refusal – he just passively and absolutely declines. Bartleby’s behaviour is indeed disarming, in part because he is so calm and serene, but moreover because his refusal is so indefinite that it becomes absolute. He simply prefers not to.” (Hardt and Negri 2000: 203, Italic on original)

An authentic democracy would be characterized by the manifestation and inclusion of diverse groups of people through the process of alterglobalization of the multitude, supporting global cooperation and interaction, still opposing the negative effects of economic globalization. A pertinent inquiry is whether Hardt and Negri provided sufficient specific instances of how affirmative biopolitics might be converted into a genuine manifestation of democracy, and how in contemporary political dynamics, the concept can be relinquished. What is the relationship between elimination of the sovereignty and revolutions of the people from below? To what degree is the writers’ conception of sovereignty sufficient for the practical advancement of democracy, and to what extent does their perspective on the concept of people influence that definition? Throughout history, many systems of governance, including monarchy, oligarchy, autocracy, and even democracy, have consistently entailed the dominion of one or a few individuals over a large number of people, with no apparent alternative. From this vantage point, authors contend that it is hardly surprising that Hobbes’ model of monarchist absolutism resembled Rousseau’s democratic republicanism. Authors such as Hobbes and Rousseau successfully recreated the contradiction that Jean Bodin had first articulated. Hardt and Negri argue that subjecting oneself to the authority of a powerful person or group is fundamental to the concept of sovereignty. Sovereignty encompasses the concepts of submission and obedience. One could argue that sovereignty does not exist

outside of monarchies, given that only one person can hold that title. Sovereignty cannot exist in a multi-person or multi-group governing structure because no sovereign can submit to the authority of another. Despite claims to the contrary, there is only one political figure in contemporary sovereignty—a single transcendent power—regardless of whether the political system is democratic, plural, or popular. (See: Hardt and Negri 2000: 102, 103)

In fact, a new form of democracy cannot be based on the idea of people since it represents something very different from the idea of a multitude. According to Hardt and Negri, the idea of the people is a product of the nation-state, and when seen in this light, the people are intrinsically one and the same. The people inherently possess a will that always emerges within the context of an ideological framework and embodies a well-prepared synthesis for the purpose of sovereignty. Contrary to the concept of plurality, the idea of people operates not as number but as a whole entity; the multitude does not aim for uniformity but for diversity; it is unrestricted and limitless.

This interpretation of sovereignty and the concept of people closely aligns with Agamben's perspective on the force of biopolitics as a means of exercising sovereignty. Therefore, according to Hardt and Negri, sovereignty, whether it be the authority of an individual or maybe the authority of the people, is always confined in suppression: sovereignty must necessarily involve control and subordination, since it would not be considered true sovereignty otherwise. The democratic revolution intended to mobilize the masses is very ambiguous, just as the multitude itself lacks a clear definition and gives rise to extensive uncertainties and objections. Can it be argued that the definition of the multitude, as perceived by Hardt and Negri, represents a hypothetical subjectivity that is more a result of imagination than the vision of reality as it could be? Within the early stages of modern history, society was characterized by profound division and fragmentation. It was impossible for a singular institution to arise that could bring together the shared interests of the people and provide an alternative stable structure. As Laclau articulates:

“That the transfer of control of numerous social spheres to new classes is at the root of new forms of biopower is indisputable, but the alternative to this process would not have been the autonomous power of a hypothetical multitude, but the continuation of feudal fragmentation. Furthermore, only when the process of centralization has advanced beyond a certain extent has something like a unitary multitude been able to emerge through the passage of sovereignty from the king to the people.” (Ibid.: 151, translation S.D.)

By means of their modified physical looks, what particular message should the new subject of rebellion communicate? May the authors' focus on the rights of the multitude, specifically the right to disobedience and the right to diversity, genuinely provide us a fresh perspective on how the developing political subjectivity may fully support these rights? Which courses of action are available to the majority and how may this manifestation of the struggle and pursuit of novel aspects of existence offer valuable understanding of the

function of politics in Hardt and Negri's frameworks? The authors propose a systematic approach to improving the conditions of modern society by suggesting the new barbarians and methods of exodus should utilize techniques and tools that will function as *poietic prostheses*. The new barbarians could be understood as individuals who have transcended local limitations but must also reconstruct their life from scratch. As subjects for whom nothing is permanent, they should use prostheses that must be productive and formative, not machinic. That's the reason the term *poietic*, since these prostheses serve to mediate towards collective experience while opening possibilities for transformation within the human body. Within the context of pioneering collective experiences, the group, driven by its will to resist and its desire for liberation, must triumph against the Empire in order to emerge on the other side. What particular action does it require and to whom should it be directed? This is significantly problematic aspect in Hardt's and Negri's analysis, showing their theory of political subjectivity as contradictory and emphasizing its lack of any psychoanalytic component. What does it mean that being human means *being-against* and does it expressly refer to a particular opponent, or does it indicate the general state of the multitude – marked by its resolve to resist and oppose? The authors repeatedly establish that the adversary is a clearly defined system of worldwide relations referred to as an Empire. Moreover, they argue that in modern times, the adversary, like the conflict itself, is both diminished to a simple object of routine police violence and raised to the position of an unequivocal threat to the ethical structure. Does the term *being-against* really support Hardt's and Negri's conclusion that it is impractical to determine the opponent, because the internal disputes inside the Empire stem from multiple sources? The authors themselves emphasize the significance of determining the actual identity of the opponent, as a pivotal matter in political philosophy.

Hardt and Negri argue that the people's opposing of imperial sovereignty based on desire entails directing attention towards imperial sovereignty and seeking suitable methods to challenge the authority of sovereignty. However, the authors could provide more specific frameworks to address this challenge, as their explanation of the emergence of the multitude appears to be overly simplistic. Does their analysis adequately consider the intricate framework of contemporary social conflicts and is any change feasible without the political expression of precise objectives and strategies? Does it not appear that the several forms of resistance that emerge among the diverse populations can be hindered, or, at least in this disorganized and dispersed fashion, diminish in power and prove ineffective in generating a unified platform for fighting imperial authority? For instance, Laclau argues that a comprehensive historical change cannot occur without replacing the specific battles of individuals with a larger determination of the collective. However, this necessitates the understanding of what we have referred to as the logic of equivalence in our work, which entails exercises of political expression – precisely the horizontal link that Hardt and Negri have disregarded. Opposing is, once again, a distinct indication of the inherently anti-political inclination of *Empire*. Laclau, for

instance, regards the notion of *anthropological evacuation* as an abusive metaphor, since he perceives it as a *martial conception* rather than a genuine expression of a solution to the complexity of our current world. Contemporary physical transformations for Hardt and Negri signify this exodus and embody a significant, yet still unclear, aspect of the republican configuration in opposition to imperial culture. Indeed, Hardt's and Negri's demand for us to challenge conventional lifestyles and reject the transformation of our bodies into instruments of power for the Empire lacks any justification for why this kind of resistance and motivation should be a fundamental aspect of our future struggle. The multiplicity of social groups, together with the several factors contributing to migration, give rise to an ambiguous depiction of the migratory process and its role in the uprising of the masses against the imperial system. Laclau contends that this approach results in the loss of the essence and precision of the concept of migration, as each historical transformation, whether positive or negative, can be perceived as migration. A well-crafted metaphor unveils, by virtue of analogy, a heretofore concealed facet of reality – but, this is seldom the case in this particular instance.

Hardt and Negri, referring to Melville's interpretation, ought to contemplate whether *Bartleby* can genuinely symbolize complete rejection as the authors intend. If that is the case, what implications does it have for their theory of multitude and the formation of the common and the general? What about giving up on the revolutionary potential of the masses and submitting to capitalism's control through embracing and working within the parameters of present *democratic* processes? Is rejection power a way to describe *Bartleby's* power? In such case, what kind of authority does it possess? Consider Žižek for an instance. Not content to merely lay the groundwork for the second, more constructive stage of the new alternative system's construction, he insists that *Bartleby's* attitude is its fundamental cause. Again, parallax is the defining feature that differentiates *Bartleby's* withdrawal gesture from the launch of a new system. A persistent "I would prefer not to" pushes away the extremely hectic and demanding procedure of creating a new order. It is just as difficult to picture *Bartleby* in a position of authority as it is to picture the *New*. (Žižek 2006: 382)

The question is whether the choice to "prefer not to" rather than *participate* in the operations of imperial institutions and systems founded on imperial law matters, or if rejection is merely a symbolic act of resistance. If you want to build a new community, Žižek says rejection isn't the way to go. On the other hand, he maintains that doing nothing is preferable to performing localised acts whose end goal is to facilitate the system's operation (such as making room for the myriad new subjectivities, etc.). Nowadays, the real danger is not indolence but the impulse to "be active", "participate", or otherwise hide the nothingness of the situation. (Ibid.: 334)

Where is Hardt's and Negri's political expression situated, if plurality is an inherent consequence of the numerous engagements of the singularity? How can the multitude unite to create a unified entity? Should Hardt and Negri fail

to address current political issues through their theoretical analysis, they may be inclined to reassess certain political tendencies until they align with their political ontology. Some writers argue that Hardt and Negri's cognitive framework represents inherent and unsolved tensions within poststructuralism: how can we reconcile the skepticism of the poststructuralist legacy towards any common political identity with the implicit demands for contemporary activism that we often mention? The significance of collective conflicts in real political affairs, such as those expressing issues of race, class, or ethics, can be understood through this important part of Hardt and Negri's research, sometimes called Deleuzian individualism: Hardt and Negri see any political system that isn't characterized by a *multitude*, or a collection of persons, as a representation of a muddled Hegelian multitude that leans too much toward nationalism or statism. (Koljevic 2015: 125) Such a type of blurred multitude would refer to a subjectivity that relies on the entire moral world of mankind, the moral world of law, the family, the economic world, and the commonwealth. To what extent does Hardt and Negri's theory effectively address the practical challenges arising from the intricate interplay of influential state actors? Current technological progress has exacerbated the gravity of this predicament. Is *Empire* well prepared to address the present trends that demonstrate politics as a cooperative endeavor rather than an individual one? As per Hardt and Negri, the present global order is characterized by a reduced influence of the United States. Consequently, the United States urges its allies to initiate a strategy of armed containment and/or repression against the present adversary of the Empire. This idea has superseded the old global order as the governing framework for military actions. The positions of center and margin appear to be constantly changing, avoiding any fixed locations, the authors contend, which complicates the determination of the precise state of imperial power inside the Empire. (Hardt and Negri 2000: 37-39) The assertion is made that this process is virtual and that its efficacy resides in the virtual realm. The proliferation of multinational corporations and their extensive worldwide networks has made contemporary nation-states irrelevant, leaving the Empire in their stead.

Did Hardt and Negri underestimate the importance of nation-states by claiming that their positions were embraced by the supranational institutions of the Empire? Furthermore, did they overlook the fact that although the United States independently imposed many 'police actions' as invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, international organizations and institutions were really a continued manifestation of American imperialism? To what degree may the response of the United States to the 9/11 attacks be interpreted as an expression of its imperialistic objectives, and also to what degree are the various international monetary, financial, and other institutions ultimately auxiliary to American global hegemony? According to Michael Rustin, Hardt and Negri's argument is largely influenced by their theory of the state. Rustin believes that although they identify as libertarian communists rather than anarchists, their position on the state aligns more closely with anarchism. Within this particular framework, the author contends that the understanding of the United States

beyond the imperialist paradigm following the Vietnam War lacks precise clarity. (Rustin 2003: 3, 12-13) Moreover, he proposes that the Tet attack should not be regarded as a conclusive military setback to U.S. imperialist pursuits. The US administration has viewed September 11 as a chance to demonstrate that its loss in Vietnam was an outlier, primarily attributed to its own self-control and erroneous assessments. In the future, the military capabilities of the said entity may and will be effectively deployed wherever necessary, regardless of the preferences of other sovereign governments.

For example, there is major relocation of different activities, especially manufacturing and world market shares from Western Europe and SAD to East Asia have moved from South Asia and Western Europe to East Asia. (See: Arrighi 2003). This is especially true of manufacturing and worldwide market shares. Bull contends that the possibility of merging with Asian lineages is ignored by Hardt and Negri, who solely focus on the Euro-American lineages of Empire. (Bull 2003: 93) In Malcolm Bull's analysis, Hardt and Negri neglect to recognize the true influence of the United States. Based on the present situation, it seems that nearly all of the authors of the book *Debating Empire*, which examines Hardt and Negri's concept of the Empire, hold the belief that the American reaction to the 9/11 attacks validates the notion that acquiring power is synonymous with acquiring America. In this exposition, Bull posits that the most effective approach to effect political transformation may include governments wholeheartedly adopting both the legal and practical concept of American sovereignty. It is a political transformation through the acceptance of epitomized Orwellian control, which was established by the Bush administration's "Total Information Awareness" (TIA) program. The *war against terrorism* demonstrates that, as long as the US administration is able to read the mood at home, it can afford to be indifferent to its most powerful friends. According to Bull's research, even though you can call yourself American, not everyone living in the USA is a citizen, and not having a US passport makes you a voter without a voice anywhere in the world. Alex Callinicos claims that Hardt and Negri make a valid point about the shift in ideological language. A new hybridized form of sovereignty has emerged with the emergence of global governance organizations, which permits the violation of other states' rights not out of national interest but to protect the human rights and humanitarian needs of their citizens. (See: Callinicos 2001) However, he strongly insists on separating this change in ideology from the allocation of geopolitical power in modern society.

On one hand, Hardt and Negri espouse Deleuzean individualism, emphasizing the need of many struggles and resistances that need to be addressed on an individual level while simultaneously dismissing local struggles that are associated with sovereignty. On the other hand, their systemic argument for the downfall of the Empire through the ascent of the masses is rooted in a strong conviction in the creation of the general and the common. This philosophy is linked to the belief in the existence of numerous new democratic organizations that are built upon the ruins of sovereign exceptionalism and capitalist economic management practices.

It is clear that the political ontology that Hardt and Negri have presented does not adequately reflect the actual conflicts that are experienced by certain groups of people in contemporary political society. More specifically, the following conflicts are not adequately expressed: “We may wonder where the place is (sic) of Maori tribal activists striving for self-determination or members of Aloha Ain’s party from Hawaii, in their struggle for sovereign rights. And why would ‘non-sovereign’ violence [being] legitimate and justified, and sovereign peace of ‘people’ [being] illegitimate both be the result and the manifestation of the Empire? (...) Sovereignty is the “poisonous gift” of colonial Europe that indigenous peoples must exchange for the ontological emancipation promised to them by migration and exile.” (Koljevic 2015: 125)

Hardt and Negri, who undoubtedly support a stance similar to Marx’s, analyze the alternative course of Indian society, which is situated between the savage British colonization and the conventional Indian culture characterized by diverse social institutions and devotion to Indian rulers. In reference to the articles written by Marx and published in the “New York Daily Tribune” in the year 1853, the authors underline that Marx’s acknowledgment of the brutality and savagery of the British should not be a prerequisite for embracing the condition of Indian civilization that has already been formed. From that standpoint, Hardt and Negri argue that Marx perceives the only *alternative* path as the precise one that European civilization has already pursued. Marx, conclude the authors, may not have a comprehensive grasp of the disparities within Indian society and the diverse capacities it harbors. (Hardt and Negri 2000: 120) One of the fundamental problems is that Marx is only able to view history outside of Europe as progressing in a predetermined and unchangeable manner following the same route that Europe has historically followed. Do Hardt and Negri fail in a manner similar to Marx, as they adopt a similar methodology and don’t take into account the one-of-a-kind experiences and challenges that non-Western cultures face in their pursuit of freedom and a democratic structure? These cultures may give emphasis to artistic, ethical, or cultural aspects in their pursuit of freedom. Do they not, as a result, restrict their own understanding of the multitude, by denying the existence of any manifestation of communal identity? Without a doubt, the authors fail to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of collective disagreements and the degree to which they can be effectively molded by controlling the ethical or cultural dynamics that exist inside the group environment.

Our world differs significantly from the ones portrayed in *Empire* and *Multitude*, and though the ontological map put forth by Hardt and Negri doesn’t seem to be able to handle the problems given by empirical evidence. Okur argues that the main actors in the modern world order’s ontological framework are best described as nation-states. The United States, China, and Russia are the new geopolitical superpowers. (See: Okur 2007: 70) At the same time, multinational regionalization tendencies are becoming more apparent in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Europe. In addition to the socioeconomic sphere, the idea of regionalization should include the participation and demands of

regional power centers in the functioning of international organizations in the ideological, cultural, political, and military spheres. The dominant powers' imperialist aspirations have changed in some areas, but the results of the *new* imperialisms are being felt today. One of these is the rise of new identity policies that aim to foster subjectivity within national or civilizational frameworks; another is the diversification of economic nationalism; still another is the expansion of efforts to improve nuclear capabilities; and yet another is the decline of the impact of international organizations.

A number of academics have argued that Hardt and Negri's analysis of migrants and nomads is too Eurocentric and fails to take into account the unique reasons people migrate nowadays. Traveling and not settling down represent an effective and unplanned backlash against imperial postmodernism, according to Hardt and Negri. The nomads bear the weight of both the positive and negative aspects of globalization. On one hand, the negative aspect is manifested in abandonment and exodus. On the other, the positive aspect includes an abundance of desire and the accumulation of expressive and productive abilities. The upshot of this movement is an optimistic outlook. However, according to Malcolm Bull, modern migrations are typically prompted by the desire for a better quality of life. (Bull 2004: 224) Specifically, migrants aim to escape from a substantial economic disadvantage and achieve more than just financial wealth. Also, instead of seeking revolutionary freedom, the massive migration from Africa could be seen as a way to survive. This fact exemplifies how the authors of the *Empire* were so Eurocentric that they ignored the distinctive features of non-Western cultures and their movement. (Dunn 2004: 156) Hardt and Negri ask: who should head the migratory wave, what should they represent, and how can various spontaneous movements around the world bring out their revolutionary potential?

The leap, actuality and fall of the revolutionary

The editors of *Empire's New Clothes* stipulate: upon reading Hardt and Negri, it becomes evident that their ideal migrants are individuals belonging to the world-traveling global elite, who are becoming more numerous but still limited in number on a worldwide level. These individuals are characterized as individualistic and "rootless cosmopolitans." (Deacon 2005: 109) Deacon questions the role of politics in the writings of Hardt and Negri and how we may interpret their connection to political activity, as their political ontology appears to conceal the proper definition of genuine political action. The question that must be posed is where the politics in *Empire* is located. What strategies can be employed to mobilize the masses into action? *Empire's* ontological landscape through self-affirming and foundational labor, state Hardt and Negri, its planted with a virtuality (of activity and the alteration of material conditions) that hopes to become real. Several detractors portray the immanence of empire (as the empire that has no limits) and the virtuality of the multitude as, at best, politically complacent, relinquishing the authority of

the state to others, and at worst, fatalistic and quietistic. (Ibid.: 108, 109; Pas-savant and Dean 2005: 109)

An approach to address these inquiries could be to focus the analysis on three distinct forms of multitude in Hardt and Negri. Firstly, there is the ontological multitude, which signifies the fundamental nature of reality as a collection of many elements and their arrangement. Secondly, there is the multitude *per se*, which represents its original condition and is therefore essential for political and social existence. Contrary to *local* multitudes, the first multitude is distinguished by its lack of time and is described in a manner that highlights the ontological multiplicity of the multitude. This multiplicity symbolizes the revolutionary capacity of sociality, which is considered a crucial and determining characteristic of the human being. Consequently, another multitude is derived and expressed from this multiplicity. Hardt and Negri do not dismiss the local nature of individual conflicts, as the second multitude emerges as a political multitude, a logical extension of the ontological multitude. This places the multitude in a dual temporal realm, that oscillates between a constant state (ontological multitude) and a state of non-existence (political multitude). (Koljevic 2015: 115-116; translation S.D.)

But when trying to understand Hardt and Negri's political ontology, the question that arises is whether the many pairs that they use—for example, identity/difference, first multitude/second multitude, being/phenomena, local/systemic, unity/multitude—are the product of binary rationality. To what extent does the biopolitical aspect of their paradigm address the concepts of otherness and relationships? The biopolitical aspect of the multitude's production is not an ancillary element in the analysis of economic, legal, political, justice, and freedom categories; rather, the biopolitical category should not be perceived "... as a supplement that gathers up all that has been left out – considering it the merely social or the merely cultural – but rather as the fundamental category that demonstrates how all of the others are mutually implicated." (Hardt and Negri 2004 : 282) Biopolitical conflicts emerge in fields like ecology and knowledge management due to the interconnected nature of fundamental life questions with more generalized issues of law, culture, and economy. Problems in the ecological realm, argue Hardt and Negri, are the major vehicle for bringing attention to the need to restate the common goal on a worldwide scale. The reason behind this is the strong connection between national climate change programs and global events. Different indigenous peoples' efforts and the work of many anti-racist and feminist groups and movements, Hardt and Negri see as biopolitical, encompassing all facets of existence, including legal, political, economic, and cultural dimensions.

Understanding Hardt and Negri's stances on biopolitical conflict—which include knowledge control—is crucial to understanding how they perceive the evolution of general knowledge. For them, the incorporation of scientific knowledge into economic production has shifted the paradigm in economics from the manufacture of things to the product of life itself. They claim that it's hardly surprising that economic powers would put their stamp on knowledges

and subject knowledge production to profit-driven standards when knowledge becomes so closely tied to production. They continue by saying that even seeds, traditional knowledge, genetic material, and even living organisms are becoming private property due to patents. (Hardt and Negri 2004: 282-285) Hardt and Negri believe biopower drives the generation of life and, by extension, strengthens control over human nature. Does this necessitate a new theory of knowledge growth and a different way of looking at human relationships? There are many unanswered concerns regarding the communication that enabled the multitude to spread, the potential response of Hardt and Negri's political ontology to the intricacies of human connections, and their omission of this particular subject. They criticize Habermas' position without investigating the structure of the Empire in regard to communication and ethics, even though they do say that control over language sense and meaning and communication networks becomes an increasingly central issue for political struggle as communication and linguistic cooperation become the fabric of production and the structure of productive corporeality, respectively. (Hardt and Negri 2004: 404)

Since Hardt and Negri argue that the people's actions only become political when they directly oppose the oppression of the Empire, their identification of three demands serves as the apex of *Empire*. The three requirements should establish a foundation for a significant battle that, while ideologically distinct, remains predominantly abstract and subject to interpretation in light of emerging understandings of global political processes. The initial stipulation pertains to the autonomy over one's own mobility, as interpreted within the framework of global citizenship law: hence, undocumented populations should also get full citizenship, and the movement of labor under prevailing capitalist conditions should be acknowledged. The second criterion pertains to the entitlement to social wages, indicating that all individuals are eligible for some form of recompense. The third requirement concerns the right to reappropriation, signifying that the means of production are not privately owned but rather constitute public, communal property.

Having said that, they fail to offer a precise description of how to go about doing so. The authors contend that these three factors should lay the groundwork for a global struggle that is ideologically obvious but largely theoretical and open to interpretation based on new knowledge of the features of international political processes: in the context of global citizenship legislation, the right to self-regulation of movement is the first requirement; this will allow undocumented populations to become full citizens and guarantee that capitalist economies can accommodate workers' freedom to move around. The second requirement is that everyone should be able to get social wages, which means that everybody should be able to earn money in some way. Thirdly, the means of production must not be privately owned but rather collectively held by the public, which is connected to the right to reappropriation.

It is intriguing that even this practical, affirmative aspect of Hardt and Negri's theory has been heavily criticized. Even authors who agree with these

requirements have their doubts. For instance, Laclau argues that all their requirements are based on law and demands, stressing that rights and demands “... must both be recognized and the instance implementing the recognition cannot be in a relationship of total exteriority vis-a-vis the social claims.” (Laclau 2020: 157: translation S.D., italic in original) Hardt and Negri’s explanation of spontaneous vertical fights is based on the notion of plurality, which is incompatible with all demands, and therefore cannot be directed against the virtual center of the Empire. Laclau asserts that the multitude, although it influences the many multiplicities of individual conflicts, cannot inherently transform into a plural entity; the shift from unity to multiplicity, from singularity to plurality, necessitates deliberate political effort. Hardt and Negri’s explanation of spontaneous vertical fights is based on the notion of plurality and therefore cannot be directed against the virtual center of the Empire. Also, since Hardt and Negri don’t appear to have any specific plan for how genuine democracy might be established, one could wonder if it’s good to make demands that are so far-fetched. They are adamant about the possibilities of real democracy, but it is unclear how it will rise from the multitude. Asserting the substance of the three demands, Žižek argues that it is paradoxical that Hardt and Negri, the poets of mobility, variety and hybridization, call for three demands stated in the vocabulary of universal human rights. An inherent problem with these requests is their oscillation between being entirely formal and entirely radicalized, which is clearly inconceivable. (Žižek 2001: 192)

Conclusion

Hardt and Negri not only fail to recognize a pivotal moment for new revolutionary or progressive initiatives in the autonomy of the political sphere, but they also regard such autonomy as a hindrance. The novel technologies of resistance and life change in authors cannot be associated with a power that is non-sovereign, which appears to be the source of numerous limits in their theory. It appears that many of the theoretical constraints stem from the fact that the authors’ new resistance technologies and life-altering innovations cannot be associated with any power that is not non-sovereign. In offering a theory and requiring such action to represent a political ontology, they essentially detach the constitutional power from its legal foundation and meaning. This detachment removes many ideas from both their literal and historical value and meaning. The writers’ foundational principles for bringing together the vast multiplicity of groups and movements into shared political and social projects are communication, sharing, connections, and common languages. By examining specific social movements like the Black Lives Matter movement and others, Hardt and Negri proved in their *Assembly* that the claim that their discourse shows a noticeable lack of empirical research on specific phenomena of modern politics is not entirely true. But they don’t seem to go too far in their research, leaving us wondering what non-sovereign power looks like. Whether this causes them to have a vague understanding of social movements,

which they then brush off as unimportant when discussing issues of national or religious identity or aspirations for sovereignty, is unknown. In their examination of right-wing ideology and actions, the authors assert that liberationist goals are obscured by a skewed reflection of right-wing ideology, which they say turns identity into a paramount value while democracy is delayed or even rejected. (Hardt and Negri 2017 : 45-47) Their arguments seem to contradict Foucault's evaluation of biopolitics, even though their biopolitics might not be considered as anti-political; it is unequivocally post-politics, and it seems to reject politics and political expression fundamentally.

In this article I tried to demonstrate that Hardt and Negri base their stance on the particular connection between politics and ontology. According to them, multitude can be understood as an ontological, first-multitude, and second-multitude concept, alluding to the created political set, and it also exists as a possible new subjectivity. So, the second set is the second because it is based on and derived from the first set, which is the ontological multitude. Hardt and Negri both reject the ideas of sovereignty and people as concepts that need to be transcended, while simultaneously expressing a certain ambivalence in their insistence on the multitude's multiplicity and distinctiveness. Despite Foucault's indisputable influence on their theory, the authors offered a considerably different view on political subjectivity and biopolitical formation. The authors argue that the opposition to state biopower is primarily motivated by the rise of post-politics and the concept of the universal human condition. To be sure, Agamben's biopolitical theories share many commonalities with those of Hardt and Negri. Postmodernism and globalization had a significant impact on these initiatives, which sparked concepts like the singularity-community relationship and the community of whatever singularities. Their theoretical perspective revolve around the idea that sovereignty and international law can't create modern conditions for revolutionary subjectivity to emerge. Hardt and Negri failed to address the theoretical necessity of articulating the modern biopolitical realities of the 21st century, as evidenced by their focus on theories of individuality, singularity, and multiplicity.

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Sara Dragišić

Politička ontologija Harta i Negrija: domet množta i stvarnost revolucionarnog

Apstrakt

Filozofski pristup Harta i Negrija u velikoj meri oblikuje njihova interpretacija biopolitike, posebno kroz istraživanje moći množta i analizu novih oblika suvereniteta koji se pojavljuju. Revolucionarni potencijal unutar raznolikosti množta ne može se u potpunosti razumeti bez uzimanja u obzir šireg konteksta njihove kritike neoliberalnih političkih praksi i njihovog viđenja Imperije kao sistema koji stvara mehanizme za nove političke ideje i akcije. Ključno pitanje koje se postavlja jeste da li su, reinterpetirajući marksizam kroz postmodernu prizmu, ovi autori uspjeli da obezbede okvir za nove, male revolucije, ili ih je intenzivna usredsređenost na suverenitet udaljila od multipliciteta koja definiše potencijal množta.

Ključne reči: neoliberalizam, ontologija, subjektivitet, Imperija, biopolitika, množstvo

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THEORETICAL-POLITICAL RENEWAL IN EDUCATION AND ITS CONTRADICTIONS UNDER NEOLIBERALISM: AN INQUIRY INTO THE DEBATES AND CHALLENGES OF THE CHILEAN CASE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY¹

ABSTRACT

The article presented here focuses on the New Public Education (NPE), established by Law 21.040, which represents a substantial change in the understanding of the right to education in Chile. The fieldwork is organized around three key areas: 1) the administrative structure supporting public schools, the SLEP (Servicio Local de Educación Pública / Local Public Education Service); 2) the effects and aftermath of inequality exacerbated in school communities during the pandemic; and 3) the strategies implemented by schools with the SLEP to ensure equity and equal opportunities in dynamics of participation, communication, and democratic dialogue within the framework of education for citizenship and democracy as outlined in the law's principles. The methodology of this research is based on a qualitative and hermeneutic epistemological paradigm, aligned with the goal of deeply understanding the reality of local public education services through a multiple and retrospective case study design. The emerging results from the analytical processes of discourse and documentary material collected in five case studies across the country are built around three categories: 1) teachers as the foundation and pillar of public education; 2) neoliberal managerialism; and 3) the deep gap or fracture between what Law 21.040 declares and the daily reality of schools. These categories were constructed to contrast theory with practice in the Chilean educational context, demonstrating that these three axes allow for a rethinking of the current situation, an understanding of dominant conflicts and debates or tensions, and the charting of new perspectives to address current challenges.

KEYWORDS

new public education, school, State of Chile, citizenship, democracy, neoliberalism, twenty-first century, school

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Introduction

When considering the existential conditions, subjective configurations, and human dilemmas inherent to the logics of our time, we enter a broad conceptual debate (Barria-Asenjo 2024). However, these obstacles only highlight the relevance and urgency of reflecting on the individual and society (Barria-Asenjo et al. 2023). In this context, this article will connect the notions of citizenship (Redon 2010, 2011), democracy, education (Angulo Rasco and Redon 2020), and neoliberalism to open a new dialogue about the socio-historical and political-human phenomena that must be rethought in the Chilean State today (Redon et al. 2015; Vallejos et al. 2022).

Previous research has allowed us to understand that education for citizenship and democracy is not merely normative declarations or procedural structures but constitutes the foundation of daily democratic exercise in the life of each educational institution (Biesta 2021 2017; Sünker 2007; Morrison 2008; Sant 2019; Gibson 2020; Nishiyama 2021): “That is, the theoretical, legal, constitutional structure may be perfect, and citizens may know it well, but if there are no subjects who live it, it is useless” (Redon 2016:10).

Public education and the logics of the educational system have been extensively researched from various angles. The relevance of this study lies in its focus on the school, remembering that the school is the public space that promotes social bonds, as an experience of collective bodies that, together with other actors and/or organizations, expand the social and cultural repercussions of school communities (Bull 2012). Public commitment is not simply a public relations exercise but involves the development of dialogue, or what Young (2000) has called the establishment of deliberative democracy (Elster 2001; Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Smith 2004; Dryzek 2009) between schools and communities.

To delve into the issue, it is essential to begin by noting that this project pays particular attention to the New Public Education (NPE), established by Law 21.040²—led by the Directorate of Public Education (DEP)—and administered by the Local Public Education Services (SLEP), which represents a substantial change in the understanding of the Right to Education in Chile. This is because it embodies and symbolizes the significant demand of the citizenry expressed in the social uprising of October 2019 (Barria-Asenjo et al. 2020;

2 The Law, through its principles, poses significant challenges for educational communities—challenges that go beyond learning outcomes and SIMCE test scores (Flórez, 2013). However, the emphasis of governmental education policy has remained under the shadow of an *Evaluative State* (Neave 1990, 1994; Bellei 2015; Parcerisa & Falabella, 2017), operating through the *Quality Assurance System*. This system, composed of the Ministry of Education, the National Education Council, the Superintendency of Education, and the Agency for Education Quality (Gazmuri and Toledo 2020; Falabella and Opazo, 2014; Falabella 2015; Osandón et al. 2018; Angulo 2022), sets the targets and indicators that schools, teachers, and students must meet, measuring results via a framework of control, incentives, and sanctions (Meckes 2007; Gazmuri and Toledo 2020).

Angulo and Redon, 2023) and the preceding student movements (Inzunza, et al. 2019; Mayol 2019; Garcés 2020). The interpretation of the law and its implementation have been the subject of multiple studies (Bellei et al. 2018; Uribe et al. 2019; DEP 2019, 2020; González, et al. 2020; Barrera et al. 2021), which, among other aspects, suggest recognizing and integrating local trajectories, respecting the particularities and characteristics of the socio-cultural territorial contexts in which schools are embedded. The law establishes the importance of guaranteeing coverage and access with equity and equal opportunities, with local relevance, fostering collaborative work in networks integrated with the environment and the community. It also highlights the key importance of developing inclusive, secular, and democratic educational projects (Article No. 5, Law 21.040).

This research focuses on the axis of participation, democratic dialogue, equal opportunities within the framework of social justice, and public commitment to build knowledge in education for citizenship and democracy from the policies implemented by the SLEP and the experiences of schools since the pandemic.

The changes and transformations driven by historical movements and oscillations have promoted and constructed new challenges, such as those faced by the Local Services in managing public education with multiple complexities (Bellei et al. 2018), exacerbated by the health crisis context, which has made it difficult to visualize a clear policy in the framework of citizenship and democracy (Barrera et al. 2021).

It is important to recall and reiterate that the new Public Education System Law is articulated around nine principles that underpin it and could be organized into three major cores: quality, social justice, and public commitment. Quality refers to an integral sense of it and its constant improvement; social justice encompasses equitable development, equal opportunities, the implementation of inclusive, secular educational projects, citizenship education, and republican values; public commitment is established in the diversity of educational projects, citizen participation, local relevance, and integration with the environment.

This research centers on the cores of social justice and public commitment that the establishment of local education services under Law 21.040 entails. Its relevance stems from theoretical sources that consider social justice (Fraser 1997, 2000, 2008a, 2008b; Fraser and Honnott 2006) to involve, at least, combining redistribution, recognition, and representation, as shown by Lynch and Lodge (2002), and addressing precisely equal opportunities and inclusion, among others. On the other hand, the concept of public engagement (Wooden 2006) means that schools affirm themselves in the public sphere (and commit to it) through their active connection with local communities in networks. It is not just about the commitment of school communities to the instruction they provide or concern for learning but about the duty and responsibility to educate for citizenship and democratic life, which represent the deepest meaning of education and its ultimate purpose (Redon 2018).

The transformations in evaluations and the logics of competition deployed and installed in schools—promoted by the Law—have deeply strained the realization of the principles of the New Public Education Law with the maintenance of structures and educational policies that favor segmentation and privatization of education (Ruiz Schneider 2019; Angulo 2020b). The content of public education established in Law 21.040 takes on fundamental significance for society, citizenship, and the nation’s well-being, as it clearly assumes, with all its consequences, that education is a public right (Atria, 2014), a right that has been diminished over the last 40 years with enrollment not exceeding 35% (MINEDUC 2019). According to the OECD, Chile is one of the countries with the lowest public education enrollment in the world (OECD 2014).

Pandemic, School, and Inequality

The COVID-19 pandemic context brought significant changes (Barria-Asenjo 2021; Barria-Asenjo et al. 2023, 2024b), exposing society and revealing all pending and invisible dilemmas. One of the challenges it highlighted was the complex educational reality and the difficulty of rapid and effective restructuring in the management of Local Education Services and their articulation with school communities, specifically in the areas of inequity and democracy.

The pandemic had a vital, social, and political impact that cannot be separated from civic education. It has affected the space of the common, forms of relationship, fears of proximity to others, the ephemeral nature of life and its meaning, sustenance and food, health in all its variants determined by inequality (Andrada 2020).

This pandemic caused an unimaginable and unprecedented crisis in all areas³, and it has wreaked havoc in the educational field (ECLAC 2020; UNESCO 2020; Cachón-Zagalaz et al. 2020; Mejías-Flórez et al. 2020; Pokhrel and Chhetri 2020; Barrett and Chen 2021), as, among other consequences, it has widened the gap of inequalities based on condition and/or origin among students.

In Chile, due to the pandemic, on March 16, 2020, the suspension of in-person classes was decreed for the entire school system at all levels, affecting: 616,615 pre-primary students, 1,514,761 in primary; 1,520,724 in secondary; and 1,238,992 in tertiary education (UNESCO 2021). For 2020, it was estimated that in the school system, “the number of dropouts could increase by 43% compared to the magnitude presented the previous year” (MINEDUC 2020a: 4). In this sense, remote education placed students at risk due to gaps

3 The situation experienced during the pandemic posed significant challenges for the New Public Education (NEP) in a country with high levels of inequality, where, even before the health crisis, it took six generations to escape the cycle of poverty (OECD 2018). From this perspective, the core principles of the law—organized around the concepts of social justice and commitment to the public good—allow this research to highlight how the NEP’s institutional framework (through the Local Public Education Services, SLEP) and educational communities have responded to the health crisis and advanced in line with the law’s principles.

that hinder the maintenance of school trajectories, derived from inequalities of origin or condition, such as migrant students, those with unstable trajectories, students with disabilities, as well as factors like special educational needs (SEN), rurality, family socioeconomic needs (SES), and/or gender (MINEDUC 2020b; MINEDUC 2020c; MINEDUC 2020d). On the other hand, as several studies have indicated, the lack of in-person attendance and the interruption of school meal services due to school closures (ECLAC 2020; Vlachos, et al. 2021; Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021) equally affected child malnutrition rates, which in Chile increased particularly in preschool and secondary education (JUNAEB 2020).

One of the barriers of the lack of in-person attendance was the need to resort to virtual channels and redesign communication strategies with the school community (Pokhrel and Chhetri 2020; Scharagrodsky 2021). However, precarious connectivity conditions reveal that in Chile, virtual education is not accessible to all students, whether due to lack of internet access, electronic devices, or knowledge of platforms and technologies (Koçoğlu and Tekdal 2020; Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021; Scharagrodsky 2021). According to MINEDUC, in the poorest quintile, the coverage of distance education reaches 27% of students, while in schools serving the richest quintile, this coverage reaches 89% (MINEDUC 2020e). Thus, the difficulty in accessing the internet in a large part of low-income households has raised alarms about the possibility of de-schooling, interruptions in educational trajectories, or increased school dropout rates in these segments (MINEDUC 2020c).

On the other hand, the work overload of teachers in a virtual learning context, concerns about personal and family life and health, and the role of emotional support for students (Red ESTRADO and OPECH 2020; Palma et al. 2021) have meant impacts on mental health and greater pressure on teaching performance.

Citizenship and Democracy in School Communities

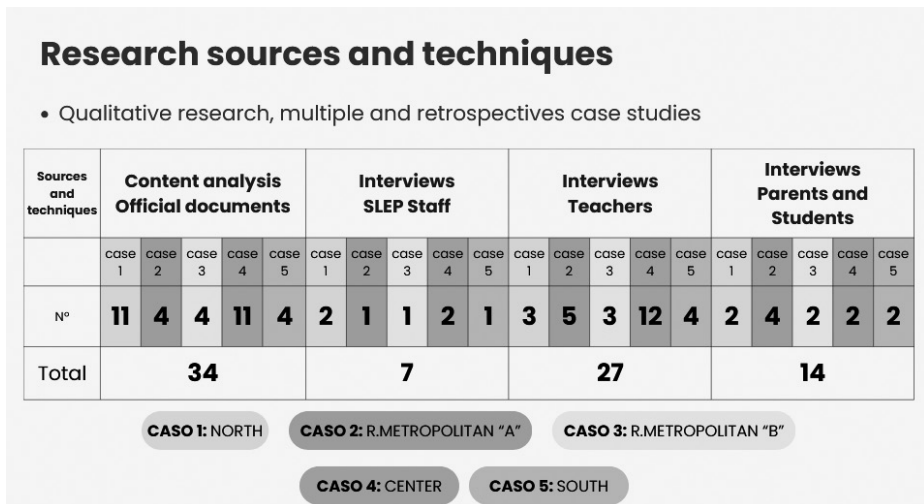
The relevance of this project lies in investigating the policies issued by the Local Public Education Services (SLEP) and schools in education for citizenship, participation, democratic dialogue, and equal opportunities as the cornerstone that guarantees the right to public education. In schools, democracy is often reduced to the numerical procedure by which we elect a ruler (Redon 2020), which often becomes a strategy that disguises real participation arising from dialogue in difference to build spaces for political decision-making, whether at the institutional-local and/or national level. The experience of citizenship and democracy in schools should surpass and expand this procedural aspect because it is anchored in practices and democratic experiences that emerge from a way of living together based on ethical and epistemic principles, collectively constructed through a culture of dialogue in diversity. Education for citizenship and democratic coexistence, rather than being realized through manuals or plans attached to decrees, laws, or indicators, is consolidated in

policies of meaning that permeate life in the educational community. Education for citizenship is expressed and realized in practices of solidarity, cooperation, and the construction of a collective body that exercises “a way of life in school culture, which involves dialogues, bonds, shared values, an experience of the common in a collective that concretizes its civic action in praxis” (Redon 2020:74). Hence the importance of building knowledge in education for citizenship and democracy from the policies implemented by the SLEP and the experiences of schools since the pandemic and its effects.

Methodology

The methodology used to gather information from the five SLEP responds to a qualitative and hermeneutic paradigm aimed at understanding the object of study, in this case, the actions deployed by the SLEP and the lived experience of school’s post-pandemic, through five case studies, ethnographic, multiple, and retrospective, which integrated various qualitative techniques and sources. Therefore, the first year involved collecting information from official documents of each SLEP, and the following years included interviews with SLEP staff, teachers, school leadership teams, students, and guardians of educational institutions based on inclusion and exclusion indicators through a reasoned sample by criteria. The synthesis of the collected information is shown in the table (Diagram No. 1). The analysis was assisted by the NVIVO 12 software, which gave rise to more than 120 free nodes (open categorization) and matrix categories (selective) expressed in two categorical trees, one resulting from official documents and some discourses of SLEP personnel, and the other from interviews with schools, especially teachers, students, and guardians.

Diagram No. 1.



Results

The results are grouped into discursive lines that emerge from both documents and interviews. In this article, we only present the discourses of teachers, given that the analysis of the documents is disseminated in the article “The New Public Education in Chile and its Implementation in Neoliberal Contexts” (Redon Pantoja, et al. 2024). The interpretive explanatory framework of the content analysis of the reviewed documents aligns with the characteristics of the Chilean neoliberal context, generating deep contradictions between the content of the law and its implementation.

The specific categories that emerge from these documents are organized around five thematic categories in the content analysis: a) neoliberalism as normative reason and valuation scale; b) management as the sole objective in the logic of new public management; c) homogenizing bureaucracy of accountability; d) quantification as the only reading of reality, using it as a legitimizing discourse; and e) participation as a discursive mantra. This article presents the discourses of teachers, students, parents, and SLEP personnel, which show a close thematic coherence with the analysis of the reviewed official documents, linked to the Annual Plans of the SLEP (PAL) and the Strategic Plans (PEL) valid for the seven years of the SLEP’s management.

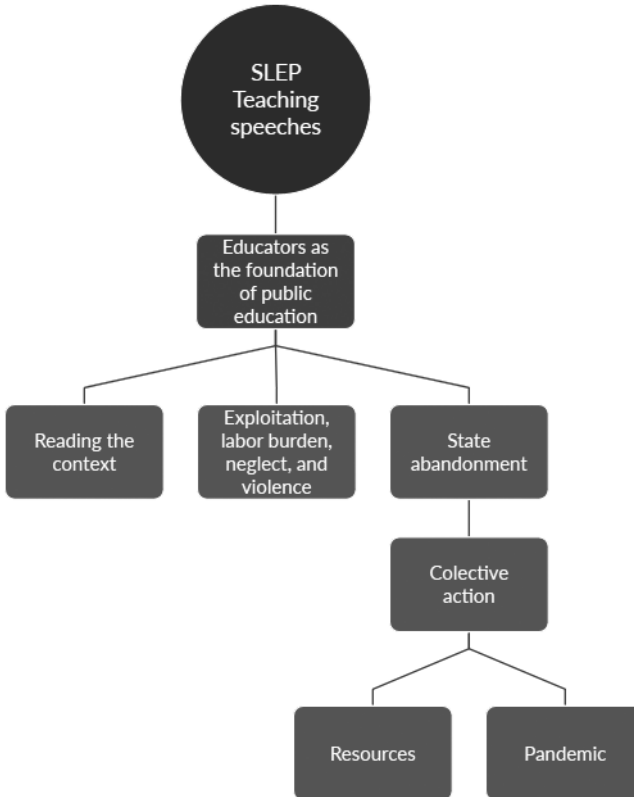
The categories that emerge from the discourses of the speakers, mostly teachers from schools affiliated with the SLEP, are grouped into three major thematic axes of basic discursive lines: 1) Teachers as the foundation and pillar of Public Education; 2) Neoliberal Managerialism; and finally, 3) the deep gap or fracture between what Law 21.040 declares and the daily reality of schools.

Category I. Teachers as the Foundation and Pillar of Public Education

The figure of the human, the importance of the body or emotions, the forgotten relevance of humanity in construction with other humanities, and the importance of these mixtures that arise in the processes of subjective edification that intersect in school spaces and labyrinths of encounter with another, with the common and difference, become particularly denied and invisible places in the educational contexts of the era. Education and the education system underwent profound reforms in the 1990s; thinking about education today is also thinking about the discursive logics that the dominant ideology in the twenty-first century tolerates and fosters. In this regard (Peña et al. 2022) point out that since 1927, when the work of “teachers” was consolidated, various emancipatory tools and capacities for individuals in construction have crystallized in this place. It is important to affirm and understand that the educational institution constitutes the pivot and fundamental foundation to transmit, safeguard, and consolidate the three pillars that sustain every culture, ‘the episteme’ as what the culture that is established as true, the ethical as what is considered valuable, and the beautiful, art, and aesthetic sensitivity in a given culture (Redon, 2018); however, this relevance is often invisible and

undervalued in society. As one interviewed teacher expresses: “head teachers are key to all that and in the school system, they are little visible” (D1, SLEP 1). In this context, the individuality and ruthless competition that neoliberalism promotes must begin to be deconstructed; the recognition of a leader in the educational context must be linked to the value of the community and the construction of communities.

Diagram N°2: Category I. Teachers as the Foundation and Pillar of Public Education.



According to various authors (Palma and Álvarez 2011; Toro 2015; Pérez et al. 2007), we find various exchanges between family, social, and educational systems tied to the figure of the teacher, through whom information passes, implying a possibility of echo and resonance in the student body. Various educational themes have their epicenter in the role of the teacher, such as trust (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2000), recognition of agency and decision-making capacity (Phillippo 2012a, 2012b), infantilization or student autonomy (Fuller 2014; Ramson 2019), and communication and/or validation (Binning et al. 2019).

On the other hand, in retrospect, the perception of remote work as the only possibility during the COVID-19 pandemic has various facets. In the study titled “Perception of Chilean Workers on the Impact of Teleworking in the COVID-19 Environment” (Céspedes, et al. 2021), it is noted that the psychological repercussions caused by isolation brought harmful effects that professionals had to face, along with the work overload that extended their working hours.

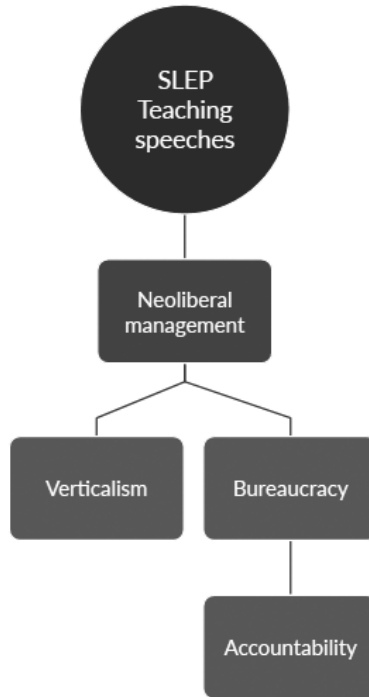
The repercussions on mental health and its importance must be a place of reflection in light of the accounts, among which we find: “we took a break to have tea and then continued working until three, four in the morning preparing the material for the next day, so it was very exhausting, many teachers got sick (...) we were almost all medicated, really, because there was a lot of back pain (...) a lot of headaches, stress, tension, forget it, we were all very, very bad” (D1, SLEP 2) “There was no support for us. So, there was no psychological support, no kind of support, other than our colleagues and seeing that we were all going through the same thing. So, what’s happening now? We have to... I don’t know if it’s 12 or 14 colleagues on leave now, and several holding on not to go on leave. We have a teacher, one day she had a panic attack” (D2, SLEP 5).

Demonstrating with this some of the effects and psychic conflicts that arose in this period and that are relevant to think about the implications these dilemmas have in the educational process and the transmission of knowledge. It becomes essential to rethink humanity and sensitivity, avoiding falling into the identification of the teacher as a mere number and responsible for a process; we affirm that they are a pillar and, therefore, the conditions of the pillar become an important place to care for, support, and value for what it means to be a pillar in the educational context of the twenty-first century.

This described context of teachers as the pillar and foundation of education enters into total contradiction with the logics of exclusion, invisibility, and silenced voices of the teaching collective by the SLEP. The managerial and bureaucratic administrative structure with which the SLEP operates follows a management dynamic that centers its action on its internal structure, which connects with the administration of official representation of school communities, which, as we know, are usually not the voice of the bases they represent, occasionally linking with the leadership and representatives of educational institutions, which, as we know, are usually not the voice of the bases they represent. It is the antinomy of democracy widely discussed by Rancière (2007), Balibar (2013), and Brown (2016).

Category II. Neoliberal Managerialism

Diagram N°3: Category II: Neoliberal Managerialism.



The arrival of the neoliberal model configured and disfigured various aspects of the social, the human, the institutional, the historical, the economic, and the political (Sferco and Blengino 2023; Jameson 2005); this domination crystallizes as a *political theology* (Villacañas 2019) that exterminates creative potential (Villacañas 2023) and from its moment of birth began to create determined subjective forms adapted to the limits of the model. Developing new forms of governance, it managed to “usurp a vocabulary and social consciousness belonging to democracy for economic terms” (Brown 2015 p. 12). This form of colonization typical of neoliberal logic is introduced with voracity and violence into education, eliminating and introjecting into the subject instrumentalization and rationality, invisibilizing in practice the human and living aspect itself. The discourses expose it as follows: “The law sometimes says some things, and has some very nice, very ideal principles, but in reality, what we have experienced is an employer manager who does not know the educational needs of his schools, nor educational, nor social, nor structural, nor anything” (D3, SLEP 4) “They send guidelines and send documents, but

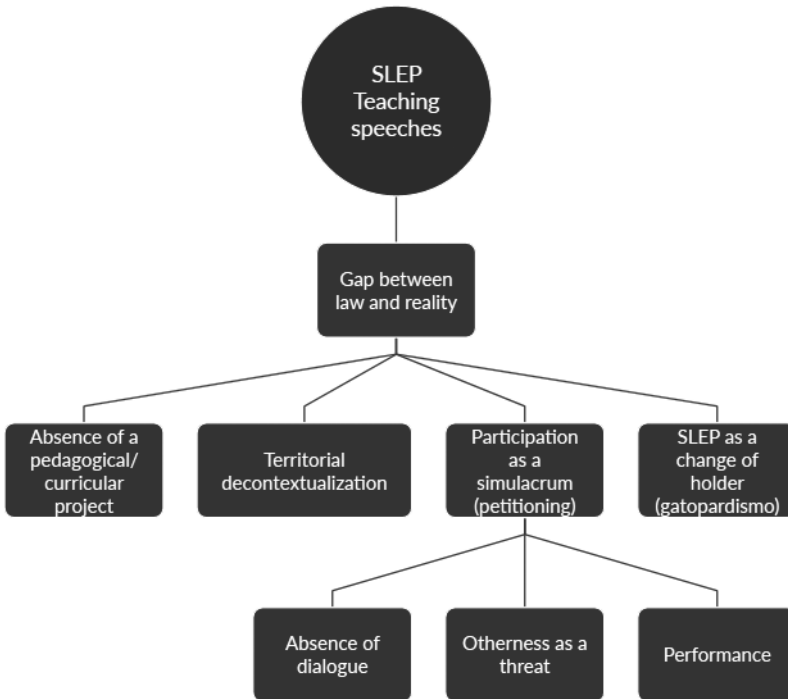
mostly to the principals, not to us, not with teachers, yes, there is information that the SLEP sends for teachers, but we don't see the document, the leadership sees it, and the leadership passes some guidelines to us" (D1, SLEP 2). The logic that drives the entry of the market and therefore competition modifies the educational structure, promoting the figure of an *employer manager*, with characteristics typical of *corporates* (D1), that is, "they are managers, very good managers" (D1 and D2, SLEP 2), drawing a verticalism that suppresses the sense of community, collective creativity, and forms of emancipation typical of social criticism.

The above is related to the processes of educational standardization in Chile (Saldaña 2024); economic transformations also implied new modalities of measurement and performance, which are transversal in the educational model and also have resonances. From the inside, it is identifiable as "a level of bureaucracy that is brutal" (D4, SLEP 4), in which "there is no flexibility" (D4, SLEP 4), a bureaucratic and economic model "that does not respond to the dynamic times of working with human beings" (D3, SLEP 4).

Category III. The Deep Gap or Fracture Between What Law 21.040 Declares and the Daily Reality of Schools

A recurring critique of all kinds of transformations is the gap between what we can identify as theory and practice. Klein (1992) points out that both are polysemic concepts: "neither term denotes a clear meaning in any careful and consistent way. This condition further confuses communication between theorists and professionals" (Klein 1992: 193, cited in Álvarez-Álvarez, 2013). From an early date, theory and philosophical processes had as their horizon to serve society and not remain encapsulated in the plane of ideas. According to Álvarez (2013), "in the field of education, theory and practice suffer mismatches; in this regard, the importance of the distance that exists between the production of knowledge and its implementation in schools stands out" (p. 173). This antagonism concerns educational laws and their possibilities of implementation and/or application; it is a relevant place to consider and rethink in light of the accounts and discourses of active agents who must try to translate these guidelines in the educational context. We find in this regard: "Regardless, I think that education laws are very idealistic, they idealize an education, but reality is very far from that, from what the paper says. The paper allows for a lot. But what happens in reality is not like that, it cannot work exactly as it comes out on paper, and the same if we take it to everything that involves education" (D2, SLEP 4).

Diagram N°4: Category III: The Deep Gap or Fracture Between What Law 21.040 Declares and the Daily Reality of Schools



The duality or impossibility that arises from the theory-practice gap is directly related to territoriality and the particularity of each case: “At least it declares within the principles, like building a territorial issue that responds to the internal logics of each community” (D3, SLEP 3). It is the construction that occurs, the process of constructing the laws and structuring that must be revalued to avoid a misreading and therefore a miswriting of the documents that sustain the practice: “There is no such reading, so they misread the territory, they have a bad diagnosis” (D1, SLEP 1)] “The real physical contact, in the territory, is done by the territorial coordinators, who, as I was saying, go to specific situations, and generate dialogue with the leadership team, but not with the base of the teachers” (D3, SLEP 4).

Christian Laval and Pierre Dardot (2013, 2015, 2016) in their work, highlight that “the modern market does not act alone, but has always relied on the state. Moreover, this allows us to understand that it is the same normative logic that governs power relations and forms of governing at very different levels and domains of economic, political, and social life” (17). This is what, when extrapolated to the field of education, becomes confusing and complex. We are facing a fundamental blockage, that is, in the depths of public education, sleeps an economic model that eliminates from the root the possibility of emancipatory

paths in education. The subterranean gears that move behind reforms, modifications, and action plans within institutions that are bathed in the inhumanity of neoliberal ideology, which, like a virus, floods and contaminates the entire structure. The human and humanity are erased to understand and translate them into a number, a void, and a place that can be replaced or eliminated.

Provisional Conclusions

The anchors of the conceptual, practical, and theoretical renewals of the New Public Education are sustained and solidified around the possible figures of a transformation with an emancipatory horizon; the proposals and epistemological turns seek to contribute to the foundations of tomorrow as a near reality that the next generation will navigate. However, the impossibilities of social justice in the field of education find their blockages and barriers precisely because of the limits that logics impose at the level of transformation; the dominant discourse, the possible constructions from the common, the human, and solidarity are part of the incessant search for new signifiers that open new discourses.

In our contemporaneity, we find an increasing frequency of reports, results, and interventions that are presented from a position of alleged objectivity, alluding to the importance of numbers, tables, indicators; the expected results are constructed from results. A dominant logic that has caused undeniable saturation in those who fight in daily life with new modalities of doing their work. What affects institutions is also what impacts those who are inserted in these spaces.

One of the pending challenges is to achieve a translation that is kind to discourses and lived experiences. The challenge of the time is to accept humanity and subjectivity not as a barrier to progress but as the fundamental condition that must be made visible and valued. In this article, from the discourses and narratives of various individuals, an attempt was made to foster a translation to the complexity of their labors, affections, and feelings that awaken in the field of education and in educational contexts that seem obsolete and stagnant, precisely because they hide and deny these elements.

To think about education today, to enter the labyrinth of the educational context today, is to approach the abyss of our historical, social, and economic context that increasingly produces isolation, self-absorption, and a way of being and being in the world as a foreigner.

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Silvija Redon Pantoja, Nikol A. Barija-Asenjo

Teoretsko-politička obnova obrazovanja i njene kontradikcije pod neoliberalizmom: Debata i izazovi čileanskog slučaja u XXI veku

Apstrakt

Ovaj članak se fokusira na Novu javnu edukaciju (New Public Education/NPE), uspostavljenu Zakonom 21.040, koja predstavlja značajnu promenu u razumevanju prava na obrazovanje u Čileu. Terensko istraživanje organizovano je oko tri ključna područja: 1) administrativna struktura koja podržava javne škole, SLEP (Servicio Local de Educación Pública/Lokalna služba za javno obrazovanje); 2) efekti i posledice nejednakosti koje su se dodatno pogoršale u školskim zajednicama tokom pandemije; i 3) strategije koje su škole, u saradnji sa SLEP-om, primenile kako bi osigurale jednakost i jednake šanse u dinamici učešća, komunikacije i demokratskog dijaloga u okviru obrazovanja za građanstvo i demokratiju, kako je definisano principima zakona. Metodologija ovog istraživanja zasnovana je na kvalitativnoj i hermeneutičkoj epistemološkoj paradigmi, usklađenoj sa ciljem dubokog razumevanja stvarnosti lokalnih javnih obrazovnih službi kroz višestruki i retrospektivni dizajn studija slučaja. Rezultati koji proizlaze iz analize diskursa i dokumentarne građe prikupljene u pet studija slučaja širom zemlje organizovani su oko tri kategorije: 1) nastavnici kao temelj i stub javnog obrazovanja; 2) neoliberalni menadžerizam; i 3) duboki jaz ili raskorak između onoga što Zakon 21.040 propisuje i svakodnevne stvarnosti škola. Ove kategorije konstruisane su da bi se kontrastirala teorija i praksa u čileanskom obrazovnom kontekstu, pokazujući da ove tri ose omogućavaju preispitivanje trenutne situacije, razumevanje dominantnih konflikata i debata ili tenzija, kao i mapiranje novih perspektiva za rešavanje aktuelnih izazova.

Ključne reči: nova javna edukacija, škola, Čile, građanstvo, demokratija, neoliberalizam, dva-deset prvi vek, školske zajednice, pandemija, socijalna pravda

III

SEMINARS

SEMINARI

TIZIANA ANDINA
University of Turin

SEMINAR ON TIZIANA ANDINA'S BOOK A PHILOSOPHY FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade
11. November 2022.

In this short lecture I will try to say something about the book you have read and something new, because I am still developing some thoughts on the subject. We can start by explaining the concept of transgenerationality. I have proposed to social ontology and social philosophy to include the concept of transgenerationality in their tools of analysis. This will make it possible to look at the question of transgenerationality from a fundamental and not just a moral perspective, as is often the case.

If you look at the specialised literature on transgenerationality, you will find that most of the interesting studies come from moral theorists and moral philosophers. So the question of transgenerationality is now a question of justice. I am trying to establish some kind of ontological and metaphysical foundation to give philosophy a more solid basis. I propose to look at transgenerationality as a constraint that manifests itself in various forms in both natural and social spheres. Both are important, but today I will try to say something, especially about the social sphere, which manifests itself in a certain kind of action that I call “transgenerational social action”.

So I want to introduce three metaphysical principles. It is important to explain this idea, because I think that philosophers usually presuppose a metaphysical and ontological background as a prerequisite.

First principle: Being exists and is preferable to non-being in most circumstances.

The principle is of course not neutral and concerns metaphysics. Indeed, there is an extensive literature, even recent literature, arguing that non-being is preferable to being. However, it starts from a realistic observation: Life exists, and the idea is that it is necessary to create the conditions that serve to sustain it. Otherwise, people would live in increasingly poorer conditions and the degree of suffering to which they are exposed would increase.

Second principle: The human species recognises the existence of a transgenerational bond.



This bond is biological in nature and takes on a social structure, is recognised and supports the progress of the species. The second principle concerned ontology and recognised the existence of a bond of a biological nature between individuals of the same species, which occurs, for example, in the traditional family context. Whereby the traditional context within the union of a man and a woman - which is what we are concerned with in our case - leads to procreation. In non-traditional family contexts, in homogeneous extended families or adoptive families, on the other hand, it can be either biological or social, as in the case of families that express parenthood through adoption. The transgenerational bond can be observed above all when it breaks down, leading to the phenomenon of the replacement child: the child who replaces a sibling who died at an early age and whose present absence and experience is depicted by many artists such as Van Gogh, Dali or, for example, philosophers such as Jacques Derrida. The transgenerational bond is structured as a caring relationship. It should be noted that the human species has been able to recreate and make more complex the dynamics that arise in the familial sphere, taking it beyond the limited nucleus of the family to become the central hub of social life.

Third principle: it concerns time and can be summarised as “the rule of time”.

According to this rule, time is at least as important as space. From a phenomenological point of view, perceived time can be divided into two types. Short-term on the one hand, medium or long-term on the other. Human emotions are primarily oriented towards ensuring survival. They are therefore oriented towards short-term temporality. This is recognised by psychologists and cognitivists, for example. However, some emotions are oriented towards the survival of the species and the satisfaction of needs in the social sphere. In these cases, they relate to medium and long-term temporality. Therefore, of the three temporal dimensions, past, present and future, the future must also be understood as the final cause. The future is a necessary condition for transgenerational action. Transgenerational action cannot take place outside a long-term horizon.

Ultimately, I believe that the decision to favour transgenerational acts as behaviours is a competitive advantage for the human species, which uses transgenerationality much more consciously and systematically than other animal species in general. Examples of widespread transgenerational practises within our species include education, the development of humanistic and scientific knowledge, social and political institutions. It naturally follows that the more we succeed in strengthening transgenerational social structures and the more we succeed in promoting behaviour that is oriented towards transgenerational logic, the more we will follow the evolution of the human species in its quest for greater intergenerational justice.

As I said earlier, social transgenerationality is a connection that emerges in a set of social and institutional practises. More precisely, in a particular type of social action, namely transgenerational social action. Transgenerational social action is characterised by the fact that it requires the cooperation of at least

two generations. One of the two decides to carry out the action, which has a transgenerational character, while the second has the task of continuing and possibly completing this action. The central theoretical point of transgenerational social actions lies in the fact that the subsequent generation that completes the transgenerational action generally does not have the opportunity to consent to the action beforehand. The critical point of this structure is that the generation that decides on a transgenerational action cannot require other, usually future, generations to consent to the action.

Material impossibility, however, does not exclude that from an ethical point of view, this type of action, if undertaken, should not include the adoption of spatial precaution towards future generation. I define as transgenerational those actions that require necessarily the cooperation between two or more different generations, one which is usually a future generation. Transgenerational action can be directed to our future, to the future and toward the past. When directed to the past, they refer to entities such as ancestors, some who existed and no longer exist. When directed to the future, they refer to future generation, the young or the unborn. All these cases must be treated in different ways from the ontological point of view. Theoretically speaking, the much more interesting group for a lot of reasons is the group of the unborn.

Since the concept of social action between generations refers in many cases to the concept of generation, it is necessary to make an ontological determination in order to define the kind of entity we are talking about when we speak of generation – past and future. Past and future generations are, in my opinion, abstract artefacts. They are partially or fully constructed objects. In particular, the concept of ancestors (past generations) is weakly dependent on the subject that constructs it and strongly dependent on history, while the concept of future generation is weakly dependent on history and strongly dependent on the subject that constructs the concept. We therefore analyse the concept of future generation in the sense that it includes the unborn and not the young.

I propose to consider the future generation as a particular abstract artefact. At a certain stage of their existence, they have the same characteristics as Donald Duck, for example. And more generally as fictional entities. But unlike Donald Duck, the future generation is a being that will exist sooner or later. This means that they have the property of acting or being influenced by power, or that they add the property of existence to their description. My thesis is that we have introduced these kinds of beings into the realm of social reality because they have a special function in directing actions towards the future. The future generation will enter into the dynamics of transgenerational action by continuing and completing the action. In other words, without reference to future generations, the intergenerational social action that is necessary for the continued existence of our societies would not be possible. So, we need the future generation. We need this fictitious concept. In other words, trust sets psychological mechanisms in motion at a societal level. And we know that trust is not only a normative concept, but also a useful concept for the organisation of society.

In general, there are at least two types of attitudes towards the future generation. Under certain circumstances, we shift the burden of decisions or measures that should be taken in the present onto the future generation. This is the case, for example, with measures to mitigate the climate crisis. In other cases, we oblige future generations to take measures that bind them to the decisions of previous generations. This is the case, for example, with the reduction of national debt.

Incidentally, I mentioned the climate crisis and national debt because we naturally find this type of action, intergenerational action, in certain areas of our social activities. Typically, these are activities where generations or different people in different places and at different times have to work together, such as the climate crisis or constructive sovereign debt. In both cases, we are prioritising the needs of the present rather than addressing the situation, which is more multi-layered and complex. This is particularly the case when we oblige future generations to take measures resulting from the decisions of those who preceded them.

From a moral perspective, however, the shared commitment to intergenerational action through callbacks to the future generation binds the actor of intergenerational action to the shared goal of passing on the action and promoting conditions that ensure the possibility of the existence of future generations. This is my central theoretical point, which derives from the first principle, the metaphysical principle, which I mentioned at the very beginning of the presentation.

We can refer to historical examples to understand my model. The example I mentioned on this slide is a very famous exchange between two of the fathers of the American Constitution. It's Jefferson and Madison, who did a lot of thinking during the drafting of the American Constitution. And the interesting thing is that Jefferson raised this very point with Madison, the point of the problem of the permanence of society over time from a similar perspective to the idea that I'm trying to convey to you today. Jefferson, who was overwhelmed with the debt his family had left behind, emphasises to Madison the importance of preventing the same thing from happening to the states. Remember the problem of national debt that I mentioned.

"The land", is his motto, "must remain with the living". To achieve this, he proposes that every new generation should have its debts cancelled and the constitution rewritten. That's a bit radical, if you like. In order to free himself from the ties to his father and to have the opportunity to directly choose the text that forms the basis of the political community. He therefore proposed the model of a society that would last a generation. Madison's response was sharp and very clear. He explained that such a society would be both materially impossible and unjust, and he was right. Jefferson proposed a solution that is unworkable, but the point he was proposing, which is based on what we call "false attribution of consent," remains open. That's the idea that future generations agree to pay the debt or other things. What you want is for the previous

generation to express consent to end the intergenerational social action of incurring a particular debt. This is the open question.

This kind of assumption is, philosophically speaking, something we can define as a principle of uniformity, and you can think about Jefferson's assumption in the terms I want to suggest here. This practise exposes itself to Hume's argument known as the principle of uniformity, which the philosopher formulates in the context of his critique of induction. To summarise, we can describe the uniformity argument applied to transgenerational action as follows: we have established that the complex actions of medium duration that we have labelled transgenerational social actions have a typical structure. They are decided and carried out by an alpha generation and continued and completed by the beta, gamma and delta generations, depending on the temporal extension of the action in question. Transgenerational actions initiated by an alpha generation are continued and completed by other generations - the beta, gamma and delta generations, and indeed by all generations that are functional in relation to the temporal extension of the action performed by alpha. For example, if we turn to the question of the national debt accumulated by a state, which is a classic example of transgenerational action, we will have the following type of argument.

We have established that the national debt of a certain alpha generation living in a state S is partly repaid by alpha and partly by the beta, gamma and delta generations living in certain states. The national debt of a particular generation living in a particular state is partly repaid by that generation and the following generation. This is how generations work in terms of the time it takes to repay the debt of a particular state. You can imagine a similar example, which I will not describe here, for the case of the climate crisis. Now, not only does this influence generalise the experience of debt repayment through a series of steps that imply the necessary link between debtors and descendants, but it also leads to the conclusion that intergenerational relationships enforce the assumption of debt across generations. Future generations have no choice but to assume the obligation to pay the debts of those who lived before them. So there is no other reason than the empirical one. That is the point of why future generations should take on the intergenerational obligation. It is to be expected that any other decision would lead to war, misery or environmental catastrophe. But it is not an authority of reason to follow what would otherwise be a necessity, namely to do what the previous generation chose to do.

What we have said gives rise to the principle of *transgenerational responsibility*. Intergenerational justice can be achieved by applying the principle of transgenerational responsibility, which is a necessary condition for its pursuit. This principle can be formulated as follows.

Metaphysical premise: Life exists, and in general it is worth protecting its possibility.

Ontological premise: There is a boundary between generations, the transgenerational bond that unites them by establishing rights and duties within transgenerational relations.

Observation: Transgenerational action has a special structure that ensures the necessary co-operation between the generations so that a certain action can be carried out. This cooperation is characterised by the constitutive lack of reciprocity. Especially between the supposed initial generation and the unborn.

Conclusion. Given the metaphysical and ontological premises, we must conclude that social action that has a transgenerational character must preserve the right of the future generation to exist.

Just a few words to recapitulate what I have introduced here. We have seen that the transgenerational society is based on certain principles, namely the existence of life and its preservation, the recognition of the transgenerational relationship on a biological and sociological level, the rule of time and the principle of transgenerational responsibility. We have thus seen that transgenerationality comes into its own above all in transgenerational action. This action can be orientated towards both the past and the future. Future-orientated transgenerational action implies reference to a specific type of being: future generations. Future generations can be regarded as abstract artefacts that have the property of attaining existence. They will actually exist at a certain point in time. Transgenerational acts directed towards the past refer to beings that have already existed, namely the ancestors. Recourse to past and future generations implies a certain degree of reconstructive and interpretative activity: rather limited in relation to the past, much more radical in relation to future generations. And I would like to emphasise the connection with the last part of Maurizio [Ferraris]'s talk yesterday. One of the exemplary qualities that characterise human beings is that they are oriented towards shaping the future. Furthermore, intergenerational social action can concretise the question of how, for example through which legal instruments, future generations and their interests can be represented. This is a particularly exciting problem on the political side, and I think it is possible to develop some considerations to suggest to politicians, for example, how they can move on this side. Since political representation implies an activity of "construction" of the represented subjects, it is plausible to assume the possibility of representing the interests of future generations.

PETAR BOJANIĆ

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade

First, I'd like to thank Tiziana. I have worked for many years with her. She's an institutionalist, as I think I am. We work at and work on different institutions, but I can say that because she's been the head of a very important center and editor-in-chief of a well-known journal, etc., – Tiziana has worked for a long time with others, all the while thematizing joint work (since she teaches social ontology, as do I), that is, in one way or another, with other people, Tiziana produces collective acts.

How come the topic of this book and why is it important from an ontological perspective? To what extent is my or our activity determined by the future or those who are not yet present (groups of people yet to come), those

who will only at some future date be present together and act together? I have written about the importance of those not (yet) present or the importance for the group or the institution of those not present (but who exist). Tiziana goes further, speaking as she does about those who are yet to come or will need to be here, which is different.

But I think an important word here is corruption. We have the great French revolutionary and institutionalist Saint-Just speaking of corruption. And the institution protects from corruption in two ways. One is the preservation of the institutions of the revolution. The other is that we are human, bodily, corruptive in the Aristotelian sense, while the institutions have to outlast us. But that means that transgenerational social acts that lie in all institutions have to take corruption into account. For they have to outlast us who generate them, us who are corruptive, because bodily.

The generational in transgenerational is how we collectively produce social acts, but in addition to us needing to protect them from outside corruption, they have to be protected from our own corruption, that is, they have to be produced such that they outlast those who made them and protect them from the outside.

And then we have the word ‘trans’. ‘Trans’ is something beyond, but already in generation. We have a ‘trans’, something that emerges. And that means that there may be something opposite to generation. There is always something additional: hence, the future, and the future such that it protects from inevitable human corruption (again, I mean this in the Aristotelian sense).

How does this relate to gender? I am not entirely sure. Because this is not something that is produced through collective action. Are generation and gender different in that one implies something, it goes beyond, while the other not? I do not know.

Perhaps we turn to the idea of projects to projection. For me, there is no future without a project, without projective acts. To project means to cast something. This too is a generational act, to cast something forward. And without this act, there can be no future. There is no future without projecting, without collective social acts. I thought that generation is when acts are produced among us; in the course of producing acts (together), we are generating something. And that means already something beyond is introduced, we are already on this path upon which something more exists.

ALEKSANDRA KNEŽEVIĆ

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In her book, *A Philosophy for Future Generations* (2022), Andina aims to resolve a puzzling issue about the persistence of social institutions. Her strategy consists of illuminating how social institutions are formed synchronically and diachronically, that is, how they are distributed in space and through time. In order to particularly understand “the propensity of societies to extend in time”, Andina introduces the concept of a *transgenerational bond* or *transgenerationality*. As she postulates, a transgenerational bond is formed of a biological bond

that unites a generation of people and of a bond that unites, as she writes, “the passage of generations from a historical point of view” (p. 3). More specifically, Andina introduces the concepts of *primary* and *secondary transgenerationality*. The primary transgenerationality (or the biological bond) is the bond that extends in space and connects people through their blood relations and “in the shadows of trauma”. The secondary transgenerationality, the one that unites passages of generations, is a more crucial and more perplexing bond. It emerges due to the transgenerational social action, which connects people diachronically, through time, and which, according to Andina, requires “co-operation between different generations to be effectively accomplished” (p. 3).

Interestingly, from the very beginning of her book, Andina explains the ethical and social relevance of the philosophical endeavor in which she partakes. Namely, as she writes, the issue of transgenerationality is not merely the problem of how the transgenerational bond is formed. In other words, it is not only an issue in social ontology. This question, initially ontological, transitions into an ethical one that asks whether the duties of current societies and their members ought to be shaped by the rights of future generations. To put it differently, the question is simple, and do not mind me posing it in a suggestive manner: shouldn't we – the current, present generation united by biological bonds and social action – protect natural resources, which are already scarce enough and unequally distributed, so that in the future clean air, drinking water, and fertile soil could be accessible to all living creatures? The issue of the climate crisis is one of the examples Andina devotes the ending parts of her book to illustrate the real-life social implications of failing to discuss and provide an understanding proper to the ontological nature of a transgenerational bond.

In this short commentary, I will address an issue I find personally interesting regarding Andina's understanding of the primary transgenerationality.

According to Andina, the most straightforward form of primary transgenerationality includes a biological bond between parents and their offspring. This bond gives a stable foundation for building societies, considering that family forms the most fundamental social structure. It is thus usually taken for granted in the sense that it does not require further explanation. However, Andina goes a step further to ask how a transgenerational bond expands outside the family and blood relations. In answering this question, she argues that the primary transgenerationality is formed not only by a biological but also by a psychological bond, which emerges due to the generational transmission of trauma, suffering, loss, and painful emotions. Interestingly, Andina argues that this psychological transfer of meaning behind the traumatic events is due to the specific aspects of our environments which are intentionally or not constructed to embody and materialize this meaning. Therefore, unlike other theories in social ontology which require, as Andina nicely frames it, “surplus ontological commitments” (p.10), her perspective offers a simpler and a more sophisticated account of a bond that unites a generation of people.

I would like to raise some issues regarding the very basic aspect of primary transgenerationality. Namely, without disagreeing that family is the most

fundamental social structure across cultures and societies, I wonder whether families are tied only via blood relations. A cultural anthropologist, Marshall Sahlins, famously argued against understanding non-Western cultures through Westernized scientific lenses. In other words, he argued against what he saw as an ethnocentric projection of Western cultural assumptions to other cultures in the name of describing and understanding them. In his book, *The Use and Abuse of Biology* (1976), Sahlins discusses the ways in which kin relations are formed in non-Western cultures. At the time of his writing, a widely held assumption among Western anthropologists was that kin relations *should* be founded on blood relations and that if there are cultures in which this is not the case, this only serves to show that these cultures are less developed than Western cultures (in which this pattern is allegedly present). In order to argue against this view, Sahlins offered a rich plethora of cases to demonstrate diverse ways in which kin relations are made outside of Western cultures, which do not follow the “blood is thicker than water” logic.

To uncover the nature of kinship, in his later work, Sahlins (2011) introduces the term “mutuality of being”. *Mutuality of being* exists among kins “who are intrinsic to one another’s existence” (Sahlins 2011: 2). In other words, “kinsmen are people who live each other’s lives and die each other’s death. To the extent they lead common lives, they partake of each other’s sufferings and joys, sharing one another’s experience even as they take responsibility for and feel the effects of each other’s acts” (Sahlins 2011: 14). Therefore, the notion of *mutuality of being* assumes that shared life conditions, shared memories, and time spent together are some among many factors that constitute kinship since unlike *biological kinship*, which is constituted by procreation, *performative kinship* is the consequence of the cumulative processes of mutual care among kins.

Granted, Andina’s argument about the nature of social institutions does not need to claim universality. After all, most social institutions are local in their character, specific to particular cultures and societies. Therefore, it seems that pointing out diverse cross-cultural ways of how kinship is made (and thus how families are formed) is irrelevant to the claims Andina makes. At this point, I ask two things. First, is it truly the case that in Western cultures families are founded on blood relations? Second, regardless of what we think the answer to the first question is, I wonder: could Sahlins’ insights about the nature of kinship as *mutuality of being* illuminate some important aspects of both the primary and secondary transgenerationality?

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MAURIZIO FERARRIS

University of Turin

My question is simpler. During your presentation, you told about a relation between 2 entities, a present generation and a future generation, and the future generation is a generation that does not exist yet. So, is it possible? A relation between something which is existing and something which is not existing? Maybe it would be better to speak about the intention or the purpose of creating a relation. But, *per se*, there is not a relation between this and this, because this does not exist.

REPLY TO PETAR BOJANIĆ

I am very grateful for your comment on the question of corruption, because I must confess that I have not dealt with it. If I understand you correctly, you are addressing two different types of possible corruption that need to be considered in the philosophy of transgenerationality, the project I am trying to develop. The corruption of life and political corruption.

I have to say that the question of political corruption probably is at the background of my research, because if I have to answer to the question: “why did you talk about the transgenerationality?” I would say because in Italy we had a lot of public debt which came from political corruption. And that was my starting point about all of this.

As you probably know, in Italy, young women who had been working in the public sector for several years were able to retire just after the age of forty, thanks to the so-called “Rumor law”. This law was very damaging to the state’s finances, because it did not take into account the problems of pension sustainability and the fact that it created the conditions for many young women to leave the world of work, to their detriment and to the country’s development. In other words, this measure was clearly against sustainability and intergenerational equity. It should be noted that the entire parliament, including the opposition, voted in favour of this measure because it was obviously a short-term electoral consensus.

REPLY TO ALEKSANDRA KNEŽEVIĆ

Thank you for your questions and comments, both of which are very interesting.

I will try to answer them in the following way. Traditional family, i.e., the stable union between a man and a woman that can lead to the birth of children, was the nucleus of Western societies, because European marriage guaranteed the continuity of lineage and, by patrilineal means, of inheritance. In this sense, the traditional family was both a political and an affective nucleus. This does not mean that there cannot be stable relationships that deviate from this model and are based, for example, on the practice of care, i.e., the obligation of mutual care between members of the relationship. Of course, the commitment to

care - if it is generally recognised and normalised - can also enable intergenerational practices, which can be informal or formal in nature. In other words, I have nothing against the idea that family is an institution that can be organised either on a natural basis (if the term is understood in its broadest and most inclusive sense) or on a social basis, as in the case of a stable relationship between two friends who decide to live together in a mutual caring relationship.

REPLY TO MAURIZIO FERRARIS

You are right, strictly speaking it seems to be a strange relationship. So the question seems to be: Is it possible to have a relationship with something that does not exist or no longer exists? Do we have a relationship with our ancestors or with future generations? I think so, although these are special forms of relationships: they are not relationships of synchronous exchange, but relationships in which one part is absent. Ancestors have left traces in documents, books and research, and we relate to these traces. The identity of the unborn will emerge both from the world we leave them and from how we think about them. Today's generations, especially those with political power, relate to each other and to the spirits, the generations that have been and those that are yet to come. Ghosts - as Shakespeare wisely teaches us - somehow exist, at least in the sense that they have the power to determine our actions.

Maurizio Ferraris: I would not speak of a relationship, but of a cultural obligation that our species has towards future generations. Animals are not concerned with the future generation, they make the future generation, but they do not care. They can also eat future generations if they need something, including humans. Therefore, the idea of a relationship is a little misleading and becomes clearer in the cover note if you are a human whose definition includes caring about future generation. If you do not care, then you are not human. Hitler, for example, decided at the last moment of the Second World War that he did not care about the Germans because they were losing, and in that sense he was not a human being.

Tiziana Andina. Thank you for your observation: from my point of view, the relationship grounds the obligation. It is because there is a relationship that the obligation becomes legitimate. Otherwise it would be a cultural option that, in principle, depends on people's good hearts and intelligence.

TAMARA PLEČAŠ

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade

Firstly, I would like to express my great pleasure in participating in this seminar. I truly enjoyed your book and gained valuable insights from it. As my primary focus in philosophy revolves around Stoicism and Hellenistic philosophy, I couldn't help but notice some connections between Stoic philosophy and the ideas you presented mostly in the first part of your book entitled 'Anthropology: Transgenerationality and Recognition'.

Notably, Spinoza was influenced by Stoicism. Stoic ethics, with its universalistic approach and advocacy for cosmopolitanism, recognizes the equality of all human beings. Stoics dedicated considerable attention to the emotions or so-called 'passions of the soul', a specific aspect of their moral philosophy. Additionally, parallels can be drawn between Spinoza's concept of *conatus* and the Stoic concept of *oikeiosis*, among other similarities. However, what was particularly important to me, and I hope it may be of interest to you as well, is that Seneca mentions *future generations* in his writings. For this occasion, perhaps I could paraphrase something he wrote to his friend Lucilius in his *Epistles*. When Lucilius asked Seneca whether he should retreat from society and focus on his thoughts, despite the Stoic philosophy's call for action, Seneca replied that he was doing so for the sake of future generations. Namely, he is spending his days and nights *because* of posterity, as they can benefit from his writings. Seneca is crafting 'some healthful admonitions,' akin to recipes for useful salves. He has found these effective on his own sores, which, while not completely healed, have ceased to spread. Seneca also expresses that he conducts his research for both himself, and future generations, because he believes he is offering greater benefit to them than when he engaged in activities such as advocating for legal matters or supporting political candidates (in times when he was lending his 'voice and aid to some senatorial candidate'). We should have in mind that despite the Stoic belief in the world's eventual destruction by fire (*ekpyrosis*), Seneca *still* writes to future generations. That is, although his works have an 'apocalyptic nature' and sometimes depict world-catastrophe scenarios, the vision of the end influences how we should live our lives and preserve ourselves, and our loved ones, in this world. That vision also includes posteriority and the feelings towards them, and it is aligned with the Stoic humanism.

It seems that Seneca was right, because many of us returned to reading his works during the period of the coronavirus crisis we all experienced. This means that we can still find certain consolation in his words. So, it seems that despite all the technological development so far, human psychology has not changed so drastically in the previous two thousand years. I wonder, and I would like to hear your opinion on this – do you think that *our generations* could even leave a meaningful answer (or guidance) to future generations when it comes to our 'inner world'? Not guidance for the next two thousand years, but rather some guidance that would be relevant in not-so-distant future, considering the complexity of today's world and the influence of modern technologies on human psychology, emotions, and life in general. Thank you in advance!

GEORGE HRISTOV

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade

Tiziana Andina's book, "A Philosophy for Future Generations", brings to light a previously implicit problem – the question of transgenerational action. Initially, I perceived this concept as a mere aspect of the broader notion of action. My

anticipation was that the book would delve into a specific problem or concept within the broader framework of action. However, Andina's work surpassed my expectations by not only exploring this particular issue but also offering a fresh perspective on philosophical positions and theories. The book effectively engages with and reflects upon the foundational principles of philosophers like Hegel and Hobbes, builds upon their arguments or argues against them. Through this interchange, it becomes evident that the problem of transgenerational action is not an isolated concern but rather a pivotal element in our understanding of action itself. In essence, Andina's arguments demonstrate that this particular issue is indispensable to our understanding of the concept of action as a whole.

One of the book's most compelling arguments revolves around Hegel's logic of recognition, despite his famous claim that philosophy has no bearing on the future. Andina builds upon the recognition model, using it as a basis to contemplate our connection with future generations. By contrasting political theories rooted in individualist anthropology, where the Other is seen as an external opposition, with those that view the "I" as inherently shaped by its relationship with the Other, Andina highlights the profound implications these philosophical notions have on both our present and our future. She demonstrates that the recognition model of human relations, with its roots tracing back to ancient thinkers like Aristotle, carries significant consequences for our political and social interactions with children and future generations. This is why recognition-based approaches emphasize the role of education in shaping identity, a principle evident in the works of philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, and Rousseau. Unlike theories that begin with abstract models of individuality in a hypothetical state of nature, these approaches acknowledge that political subjects were once children and that future generations will come into being. This is why when examining political accounts that derive the "I", from its inherent relationship to the Other, it becomes evident that they often expand their political thought to encompass family relations and interactions with children. This aspect, as Andina has rightfully pointed out, is essential to understanding action. The reason for this lies in the fact that when we start with the relationship to the Other, we cannot reduce the human being to a mere abstract presupposition. As Rousseau recognized, this abstract presupposition represents a particular human social character, which is then generalized and considered universal. Instead, we are compelled to acknowledge the human being as a biological entity, born into this world and destined to be born. This crucial perspective tends to be missing in accounts that begin with an abstracted and atomized individuality, like those presented for example by Hobbes and Locke. By embracing the intrinsic relationship with the Other as the foundation of our political thought, we open ourselves to a deeper understanding of human nature that accounts for both our social character and our biological existence. Such a view leads us to appreciate the interconnectedness of family relations, the significance of children in society, and the profound impact our actions and decisions have on future generations.

The idea that consistently occupied my mind while reading Andina's book was Hannah Arendt's concept of natality – a notion that links action to the inherent human capacity of beginning, present in each birth. As Andina points out, the shift in focus from death to birth, so central to Arendt's project, directs thought towards assuming responsibility to the fullest extent possible. By contemplating natality, Arendt encourages us to recognize the significance of each new beginning and the potential it holds. It prompts us to consider how our actions, decisions, and policies will impact future generations. Embracing this perspective allows us to appreciate the value of continuity and the legacy we leave behind.

In essence, Andina's book compellingly demonstrates that political approaches centered around fear of the Other, and the fear of death, as seen in the case of Hobbes, are confined within a temporal closure. Such approaches limit action to the immediacy of our existence, neglecting the long-term implications of our decisions. This distinction for Andina is not merely theoretical; it becomes evident in real-life examples that she provides, as shown in the case of Italy's pension reform. The pursuit of extractive measures for short-term gains can have detrimental consequences for the entire political system in the long run. An anthropology founded on the concept of fear fails to account for the long-term sustainability of a political union. Fear-driven and atomistic approaches are inherently shortsighted and neglect the broader context and interconnectedness of political actions. Thus, my initial perception of the book as being concerned with a particular problem evolved significantly through Andina's methodical approach, particularly in the way she skillfully intertwines philosophical arguments with policy analysis. It became evident that this problem of transgenerational action is, in fact, a fundamental element at the core of a profound philosophical divide, one that has significantly influenced modern political thought. As vividly demonstrated in the book, the consequences of this divide hold immense relevance for the future of our society.

ANDREA PERUNOVIĆ

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade

One possible way of commenting Tiziana Andina's book *A Philosophy for Future Generations* is to engage with the primary notions that it puts to work in its theoretical dwellings. Here, I shall try to address three of those notions, thus the following text will contain three segments: the first one will concern the notion of generation, the second one the notion of transgenerationality, and the third one the notion of future generations.

Generation. A quick look into the dictionary can provide us with two basic definitions of the word generation. The Oxford Languages Dictionary formulates them in the following manner: the noun 'generation' denotes in the first place « all of the people born and living at about the same time, regarded collectively ». This definition corresponds, in a very basic sense I shall claim, to the starting point from which the analysis in the book departs. Anyhow,

the same dictionary gives us a second definition. According to it, generation is « *the production or creation of something* », so evidently, generation is also a poietic, or more precisely auto-poietic process in time, a process of formation or transformation, of becoming, that ends up in the coming into being of something new. Bearing in mind these two definitions, we can ask ourselves about the primacy and even about a possibility of a concrete distinction between the two definitions of generation. In the beginning of the book, it is stated that one of its goals, if not its overall aim, is to answer the question of identity of future generations. Yet, can we speak of generation solely in terms of identity and being, or should we also consider, maybe as decisive, in an act of deconstruction if you wish, the second definition, that seems to put forth becoming and difference? What happens if we consider not only the transgenerationality as a dynamic process, but also the very generation itself as a certain form of dynamics?

In order to conclude this first remark, I shall expose how do I see, provoked by Andina's theory, these dynamics: an individual pertains to a certain generation, as well as all other people born in the same moment. We belong to this certain generation from birth. Yet, this common belonging wasn't a pre-given condition to us as individuals. Or rather: factually, it was. Biologically and timewise, maybe also in the sense of what is called in the book the *primary transgenerationality*, it was. But symbolically and socially not quite. A new generation is in a sense a *tabula rasa* - a bunch of newborns - that *will become* a generation properly speaking once it has generated itself in the process of connecting to the knowledge and institutions of the past. A future generation is thus a leap forward that carries an inherent return. It is through the process of socialization that a 'generation' becomes what it is. A generation is thus first a space where difference appear, and only in the second place an identity. In this sense, every generation is a short-circuit. In a paradoxical reconnection to itself, a generation is always already what it is, yet it needs also to become what it is. It strives to become what it is, by referring to the past that precedes not only its existence. The final aim of this becoming is the (however partial) disconnection from the past generations. In short, boomers needed to become what they are so the gen X could see their becoming start to develop; gen X represented a similar point of reference for the Millennials; Millennials for the gen Z etc. They were all heading back in order to progress, in order to actualize their potentiality. Therefore, isn't the generation, as a process of becoming, already a trans- or a transitory phenomenon? And if it is, how this affects the transgenerationality as a meta-process?

Transgenerationality. This leads us to the second segment that considers the conceptualization of transgenerationality. When writing about transgenerationality of social systems and other transgenerational phenomena like institutions, terms like endurance, preservation and conservation are often used in the book, yet the word reproduction appears only once, in a quote. Do that implicitly mean that the author do not see transgenerationality of social systems and institutions as a matter of reproduction, a matter of repetition (or of

difference and repetition, so to echo Gilles Deleuze)? These questions raise yet another questions on transgenerationality, which, I will claim is the crucial one, and that concerns Andina's distinction between primary and secondary transgenerationality. She distinguishes very clearly and decisively (and that is obviously one of the main arguments of the book) the primary and the secondary transgenerationality. To put it roughly, the first one is natural and/or biological (it includes family ties, parents and their biological children, etc), while the second one is social (and concerns our relation with otherness properly speaking). The question one could ask is the following: what happens then with Althusser's assumption that interpellation begins already in the mother's womb, or to put it in other words, that we are *always already* (*toujours déjà*) subject to the secondary transgenerationality, that even before they come into being, individuals that will form future generations are a part of the social fabric, even before they had undergone the process of primary transgenerationality?

Future generations. In the very first sentence of the chapter 3, Metaphysics, Andina writes: "Transgenerationality is a bond that obliges us to plan the future, which means taking the future into consideration when shaping the present." This chapter is particularly important in my view, because of the way in which Andina relates in it the categories of agents, actions, emotions and faculties is simply fascinating. Still, there is something she dismisses explicitly from the beginning which could be possibly valuable for the reader's general insight. Namely, this is the manipulative, political potential of 'taking future into consideration when shaping the present'; or to be more precise, the potential to manipulate the obligation to take future generations in consideration, when shaping the political present. In order to begin the metaphysical investigation on the transgenerationality, Andina expresses the need to "put aside the cheap rhetoric that leads politicians and institutions to say that society needs to protect future generations and then take little to no action about it in terms of substantial decision-making." But how could look the metaphysics of this fiduciary political manipulation? How agents, actions, emotions and faculties appear in this particular discourse and what are the implications they induce in the social reality? This question appears to me as a reaction to the 2020 presidential campaign in Serbia, where we have witnessed that the current president's campaign slogan was literally: "For our children". From where stems that need and the idea to legitimize one's political program by dedicating it to the future generations? Are present generations in need of the 'future generations' hypothesis in order to gain legitimacy and credit for their current political actions? Our example seems to show exactly that.

REPLY TO TAMARA PLEČAŠ

Your comments on Stoicism and Seneca are very interesting, and I thank you for bringing them to my attention. I think, as you rightly point out, that Seneca captured a fundamental characteristic of our species that many moral philosophers have recently been reflecting on. That trait is the need to act in

a dimension that includes the future. In other words, if we knew that there was no near future, or even no tomorrow, the meaning of our actions would change radically. They would probably even lose their meaning. Think of films that tell us about the possible destruction of the Earth by alien attack or natural disaster: because of these dangers, the actions of the protagonists take on a completely different meaning. The fact that the future is open allows us to have hope: this was true for Seneca as it is for us. I completely agree with you that the perceptual, psychological and probably also emotional structure of our species is rather stable, i.e., it changes very slowly. That is why observations that were true for Seneca are also completely true today.

REPLY TO GEORGE HRISTOV

Thank you for your detailed reflections on Hegel. Indeed, the Hobbesian and Hegelian models correspond to two very different ways of conceptualising social reality: Hobbes starts with the individual, who he sees as alone and in competition with everyone else. An evolved animal who must defend his life and his territory. Hegel, on the other hand, starts from the relation, from an individuality that is always already in relation with the other. Personally, I find the Hegelian model more convincing.

Thank you also for the suggestion about Arendt and her concept of natality; it is indeed the possibility of natality that makes the future possible. I think Arendt was right on this point: the possibility of birth takes away our species' fear of the absence of a future and, if you like, of extinction at the level of sentience. Even if death is clearly perceptible on the individual horizon, its presence is more nuanced when we refer to our species as a temporal totality. The temporal extension of our species, which, as Arendt would say, has formed a "world", provides a horizon of meaning for our actions.

REPLY TO ANDREA PERUNOVIĆ

If I have understood correctly, you were probably more concerned with the distinction between primary and secondary transgenerationality. On my view, there is an anthropological component that we have to describe and that we have to maintain even if we develop social ontologies. Even when we try to describe the sociability or the pillars of our society. So, when you try to do a descriptive work, as in my case - because I try in this book to be descriptive, not just normative or not primarily normative, I think that a good and very structured categorisation can be very useful to better describe the conditions. So that's the reason why I try to keep the distinction. As I said, we are animals. And our sociability is something that we add. And we also construct with the help of our animal disposition.

Andrea Perunović: So it's some kind of, let's say, ontological distinction, because the primacy of the animal is more ontological than chronological. This point is not so clear. That's what I wanted to talk about... That we cannot

be sure about us first in this game. This is one point and then the primacy of the social or the natural. And if this is the case for you, then this makes things clearer. I'm asking myself what is this primacy? What is this quality of primacy?

Tiziana Andina: I'm not saying it's a primacy. But it is something we need to consider. In my view, humans are transgenerational animals, which means that we are animals that are raised. This means that our species is characterised by certain natural predispositions: emotions, natural inclinations, the way we perceive the outside world and so on, which form a common basis on which we build culture and its differences.

MARJAN IVKOVIĆ

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Let me try to formulate a very brief reflection and question regarding Tiziana Andina's intriguing book by means of some elements of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. As we know, in Honneth's perspective, recognition is an evaluative response to some key aspects of human personality, either generalizable or idiosyncratic, such as one's individual worthiness of affective care, moral respect and esteem of one's ability to contribute to the common good (Honneth, 1996). Recognition takes place in interpersonal relations, but it is always framed by particular institutional (societal) orders, which consist of *institutionalized patterns of recognition* – formalized patterns of ascribing qualities and statuses to people, upon which we draw in our everyday interactions. In a feudal society, for example, people's interactions are regulated by highly asymmetrical patterns of interpersonal recognition – people are recognized as lords or serfs, and the two identities are mutually constitutive. In modern, normatively universalist social orders, institutionalized patterns of recognition are supposed to be egalitarian, symmetrical – in our everyday interactions, we recognize each other as citizens. But what exactly this means – what will be the exact content of such generally egalitarian patterns of recognition – leaves a lot of room for maneuvering. Much of our current politics revolves around the question of what egalitarian patterns of recognition should mean – especially the question of the ratio of “formal” and “substantive” components of such patterns.

With respect to Andina's conception of transgenerational political action, I was wondering about the contents of the patterns of interpersonal recognition that we need in the present in order to be motivated to take transgenerational actions and recognize future generations. As I see it, a lot depends on what kinds of institutionalized relations of recognition we have when it comes to our ability to think and act transgenerationally about crucial matters such as climate change. There have been arguments recently about the apparent “nihilism” of large numbers of people in the West (and beyond) who support reactionary political actors that are prone to deny climate change and overturn progressive policies aimed at preventing it, such as Bolsonaro, Trump or Sweden Democrats (see Brown, 2018). The premise of authors such as Wendy

Brown is that many of the people who vote for these political actors are not really climate change “deniers”, they actually understand and accept that human-induced climate change is happening, but they either don’t care, or worse, they enjoy contributing to the destruction of the world. And the implicit premise here is that these people have become nihilists because they have interiorized a worldview that is based on resentment toward what they see as “liberal elites” (segments of the political-economic elite in financialized capitalism that endorse progressive cultural politics) rather than any kind of positive vision of society. A further implication is that even the apparent adherence to right-wing values among these people is instrumental rather than substantive. It is for these reasons that they become completely unable and unwilling to think and act transgenerationally.

This argument sounds somewhat plausible, and it is deeply worrying¹. On the other hand, I was always puzzled by one (rather banal) thing – how can you be a nihilist when it comes to climate change if you have children, as most of those people in all likelihood do? Do they really want their children and grandchildren to live in hell? Obviously, there must be a degree of cognitive dissonance in these people, and this is reason for hope. Let’s say they understand (intuitively) that most of the liberal-democratic establishment in the West is engaged in “greenwashing” rather than honestly committed to fighting climate change. How do we motivate them to resolve their internal contradiction in a politically progressive way and support those actors (on the left) who are trying to fight climate change for real through a substantive socio-economic restructuring of our societies, which is definitely in their “objective interest” as Marxists would say?

I would argue that the contents of institutionalized patterns of recognition are of key importance here, by which I mean the conceptions of egalitarian citizenship that the main political options today formulate within their visions of the good society. To keep it simple, let’s say that the establishment liberal options articulate a conception of egalitarian recognition that is premised on abstract legal universalism. For them, egalitarian recognition means the recognition of persons as *morally autonomous decision makers* – most of the time, this form of institutionalized recognition will in practice become what Axel Honneth calls “ideological recognition”, which means that the formal act of recognizing someone as a morally autonomous actor is unsubstantiated by real (above all economic) resources for practicing moral autonomy (Honneth, 2007). This, I would argue, is the reason why many people are nowadays rejecting such

¹ The following example seems to corroborate such views – polling agencies in the United States *again* severely underestimated Donald Trump’s electoral prospects in the 2020 presidential elections, just as they did in 2016, and in spite of their improved methodologies. This time, the error can only be explained by the fact that a considerable number of respondents did not tell the truth about who they were going to vote for – but why? In my view, the only plausible explanation is that these people had a guilty conscience – at some level, they understood that they were doing something morally wrong, but they went on and did it anyway.

conceptions of egalitarian recognition, and, in rejecting it, they become tempted to endorse a “nihilist” approach which operates through a demonstrative (performative) rejection of moral autonomy and responsibility for future generations. Such rejection is a key trait of right-wing populism. What about the left? It has mostly been trying to articulate a model of recognition that follows the Hegelian logic of “social freedom” based on substantive (material) equality and cooperative self-realization. But could we suggest that what is missing in this model is precisely the *temporal dimension* of what John Dewey would call collective intelligent problem-solving – once again, space is privileged over time (Dewey, 1946)? In other words, the left does not stress enough the recognition of persons as “intelligent problem solvers” who can contribute, over time, to issues such as climate change in participatory-democratic contexts. Could we say that this is the missing element that could help people resolve their above-mentioned cognitive dissonance in a progressive way, that could turn them away from “nihilism” and motivate them to act transgenerationally?

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SRĐAN PRODANOVIĆ

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I find transgenerationality, as one of the key issues that you raise in your book, to be of immense theoretical and practical importance – especially if we bear in mind that this topic is unfortunately often overlooked in current social theory. In that regard, your interpretation of Mead in the context of articulating a philosophical justification for the primacy of (future) *We* over *I* is particularly thought-provoking and my intervention will focus on some of the implications of this pragmatist understanding of selfhood for those problems that are relevant for future generations.

Mead’s notion of generalized other is, as you rightly point out, a good way to consider those types of intuitive insights that go beyond the rigid dichotomy between the individual and collective – which is undoubtedly required if we are to grasp the needs of generations to come. However, in Mead’s philosophy generalized other is “boundless” mainly because it is an emergent product of interaction: actors in early childhood through role-playing games develop a sense of abstract unity (generalized other) against which idiosyncratic (and

future oriented) I is constituted and in turn (the present situated) and habitual Me aspect of the self is formed. In other words, generalized other, once established, is intrinsically dynamic because it emerges from two kinds of interactions: those that occur among different aspects of selfhood and those which arise between concrete social groups. It should come as no surprise that the end state of this “double emergent process” is notoriously difficult to predict. It also seems that Mead was quite aware of this fact. For example, in his *Philosophy of The Present*, Mead explicitly states:

The past is there conditioning the present and its passage into the future, but in the organization of tendencies embodied in one individual there may be an emergent which gives to these tendencies a structure which belongs only to the situation of that individual. The tendencies coming from past passage, and from the conditioning that is inherent in passage, become different influences when they have taken on this organized structure of tendencies. (Mead 1932: 17-18)

In that sense, radical novelty is the only certainty for Mead. So, we come to the crux of the problem. If there is this nonlinear determinism at the heart of Mead’s notion of the generalized other, then it seems that secondary transgenerationality must have a limited horizon. Essentially, it cannot be premised on the long-term perspective, because the needs of future generations cannot be adequately comprehended from our point in time (even if we adopt a We perspective). Therefore, do you think that intersubjectivity of transgenerationality must, at least partly, remain in the present if we are to hope that collective action would bring about a desired change in the future.

Moreover, even if we, as social theorists, abandon the futile dream of predicting the needs of future generations and opt to remain closer to potentialities that exist in the present moment, there will still remain some practical problems regarding secondary transgenerationality, Namely, much of the public discourse about pressing issues that are relevant to our posterity is still centered around prediction. The climate change debate is a good example. Insistence on the facts about man-made global warming is not proving particularly effective against the persistent group of sceptics who maintain that previous predictions and projections about climate have not come to fruition. In other words, if transgenerationality is a regulatory ideal (Andina, 2022:78) that we grasp intuitively, then how do we change the current state of discourse on pressing issues such as climate change which is still dominated by mechanistic linear determinism and overreliance on facts as primary motivators of action that is directed toward future generations?

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IGOR CVEJIĆ

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade

For me, the most interesting and the main question of the book is how to have the kind of social actions or collective intentionality with those who are not present and cannot be present. My first association to this problem is the problem of empty-set experiential group. Or the problem: can a person have collective emotions in a situation when there is no other person present, no other members of the group, so there are no sharing of phenomenal content or body exchange with others? Edith Stein has interesting example which refer to future generations:

The experience is essentially coloured by the fact that others are partaking in it, or better, by the fact that I am partaking in it only as a member of a community. We are affected by the loss, and we grieve over it. And this “we” encompasses not only those who feel the grief as I do, but all those who are included in the group; even those who perhaps do not know of the event, and even the members of the group who lived earlier or will live later. (Stein 1922: 122)

She explicitly said that that grief, our grief about the member of the group who passed, encompasses even the members of the group who lived earlier or will live later. And she has an explanation to it. The explanation is that there is a difference between shared emotions and collective emotions. Collective emotions presuppose robust socio-cultural patterns of evaluation (Szanto 2015). And I think this is an important notion here, because we usually speak about the new generation in terms of cultural tradition. For example, radical right wing usually speaks in the name of new generation but presupposing that the robust evolutive patterns are here to stay. Another example, at the Institute for Philosophy and Social theory, of course, we presuppose some changes in the future, but we presuppose that there is some pattern of core values and that this pattern will not change even for future generations (e.g. emphasis on the importance of international cooperation, critical thinking and social engagement). To deal with this question, we have to understand the problem of relation to those who are not members, and I think it is the question of engaged acts, because engaged acts typically are related to non-member of the group or to those who don't know about an event, who are not aware or committed. With non-members we don't have joint commitment, but we can invite them. It could be used to better understand our relation towards future generations, as well. Our acts will put some pledge to the future generations, but we cannot make a proper normative obligation in terms of joint commitment.

Transgenerational acts, thus, might be understood as engagements towards the new generation. The concept of engagement helps us to understand the logic in which we are putting the pledge, the invitation to those who are recipient of this act to respond, but they can respond in different manners and probably even reject this invitation. This could be an ethical background of what we do when we are doing transgenerational acts.

I have one connected question, which could be used as some kind of example of how this can function in emotional terms. It is related to the question of forward-looking or future-oriented emotions (such as hope, fear, trust etc.). It is obvious that we have such emotions for future generations. But to be very concrete, I will refer to trust as a forward-looking emotion, as treated by Bennet Helm in his book *Communities of Respect* (2017). By treating trust as forward-looking emotion, we can avoid some epistemic problems, because trust, of course could be related to cognition and confidence to the members of society, but we don't have such a cognition about future generations.

One way of understanding this relation is that it is like therapeutic trust. For example, when mother provides trust to a daughter that she will come home until midnight, even though she will most probably come later, and mother has no evidence in the past to trust her. It is about the normative background: responsibilities and entitlements. By providing trust to a daughter, mother also provides her with responsibility and entitlement, that she could behave in the expected manner. So, even if those who are recipients of trust are not members of the group or are not even alive yet, they are immediately entitled by our trust to be responsible for what they are trusted for. We press the import of something we find valuable to them.

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REPLY TO MARIJAN IVKOVIĆ

I would say two things. Your first general question was about the political dimension that we have to use in order to push people to adopt a sort of trans-generational approach to the daily lives. I would say that the instrument that is probably much useful to do this job is that of institution. Using the institution as an instrument to organize the urgencies of people probably is one of the most important things we have to do.

I found your analysis of a possible tension between people's interest, at least those with children and grandchildren, in mitigating the climate crisis and their choice of what could be called denialist policies interesting. How can you have children and not want a healthy environment and at least acceptable climate conditions for them? I don't know if the cause of this tension is what you describe as a kind of nihilism born of resentment towards political systems that have failed to distribute wealth more fairly. It may be: if, in order to protest against an injustice, I end up giving my children worse living conditions, I am

certainly not achieving much. Economic conditions are certainly important, but they are not the only thing that matters, and resentment in particular has more to do with power than with wealth. If, even if I am not rich, the society in which I live enables me to act appropriately or according to my will, where this is compatible with common norms, I believe that resentment will find less fertile ground to take root.

What about the temporal dimension? The German court is the legal institution that spoke about the rule of time, which I mentioned in my presentation. So the idea that we have to look at our society as a permanent entity. That time is probably at least as important as space, or probably much more important than space.

REPLY TO SRĐAN PRODANOVIĆ

I think you have hit the nail on the head. We cannot describe future generations, nor can we precisely determine their wishes and needs. That's because we know nothing about their identity. However, we can work to create a world in which future people will be able to exercise their basic rights, for example human rights, which are not yet effectively guaranteed. That is what we can do, and that is what a philosophy and practice that does not forget transgenerationality can do.

Srđan Prodanović: Yeah, it also seems to me a useful term here to use is legacy. So what's to be responsible towards our legacy? It doesn't have this long-term perspective in it. Still, it encompasses all that you are trying to say.

Tiziana Andina: Inheritance is a perfect word to express the idea of heredity. But while it is true that we inherit the future - just think of the climate crisis - we also build it in order to pass it on. That's why I prefer to speak of transgenerationality.

REPLY TO IGOR CVEJIĆ

Thank you for your question and your suggestions. It is not easy to describe the kind of feelings we have about future generations. There are probably different types: fear, hope, confidence, just to name the most important ones. Emotions can be positive or negative, depending on the situation and the person. Sometimes we hope that future generations will do what we want, sometimes we fear that they will do what we do not want. All in all, I think the most common emotion is the hope that some kind of future is possible, because for some of us - probably the luckiest ones - this allows for some kind of permanence even after we die. In a way, this feeling is therapeutic, because it can create a kind of calm and a horizon for an important part of our work. Future generations have rights simply because they will be and because we invoke them to justify intergenerational action.

IV

REVIEWS

PRIKAZI

KEES DE GROOT (ED.), *COMICS, CULTURE AND RELIGION: FAITH IMAGINED*, LONDON: BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC, 2023.

Sabina Bodin Hadžibulić
Dalarna University, Sweden

Kees De Groot is a Dutch sociologist and Professor at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Religion and Practice, best known for his work on the liquidation of religion in the public domain. Together with two colleagues, he co-founded the Centre for Religion in the Public Sphere, where research is guided by a cultural sociological approach and the liquidation theory. Among his diverse research interests is a sustained focus on the interplay between religion and popular culture, particularly in the realm of comics. This interest has been expressed in his study of *Tintin* comics and, most recently, in his role as editor of an anthology titled *Comics, Culture, and Religion: Faith Imagined*, which focuses on the intersection of religion and comics. The book offers a cultural sociological overview of the relations between comics and religion. It explores two crucial questions: how comics function within religious contexts, and how religion is represented in comics. In addition, it examines how graphic narratives reflect contemporary society and illuminate the evolving role of religion. The book brings together contributions from some of the most prominent researchers

in the field of religion and popular culture, with half of the chapters authored by Nordic researchers of religion, including Andreas Häger, Ralf Kauranen, Sofia Sjö, Evelina Lundmark, Sissel Undheim, Line Reichelt Føreland, and Irene Trysnes. Organised in four thematic parts, it includes both an introduction and a concluding part written by the editor. The volume is available as an open-access publication on the Bloomsbury Academic website, and the print edition is also available.

The volume has a conceptual openness. The authors do not adopt a fixed definition of religion. They avoid defining religion in essentialist terms and instead focus on how people live and label religion. Hence, concepts such as lived religion, liquid religion, implicit religion, and invented religion are used when tracing the sacred in the context of the secular. Similarly, meaning-making, sacralization, and ritualisation are used to explore aspects commonly associated with religion that also manifest beyond explicitly religious spheres. The term “comics” is used broadly, encompassing not only humorous content. Moreover, they are seen as visual narratives, a sequential form of visual storytelling

that typically combines images and text. Therefore, the volume focuses on a cluster of cultural formats, including comics, bandes dessinées, graphic novels, manga, webcomics, and hybrid editions, all of which appear in both print and digital media.

Another strength of the volume lies in its thematic and regional diversity. It encompasses a wide range of research across various religious traditions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Japanese religions, and Zoroastrianism) and geographic contexts (Europe, India, Japan, and the United States), despite many of its authors being based in Western institutions. It reflects an apparent effort to promote diversity; hence, themes such as nationalism, trauma, memorialization, and othering are addressed in several chapters. The volume also offers valuable overviews that contextualise a field before addressing specific case studies. Likewise, the editor's introduction and the final chapter provide essential background for understanding the study of comics and religion.

An example worth mentioning is a study by Andreas Häger and Ralf Kau-ranen from Finland, which examines how religion is woven into self-representation in the comics by Kaisa and Christoffer Leka, drawing on the Gaudiya Vashnavism tradition within Hinduism. At the heart of the analysis is the role of the autobiographical approach in portraying and promoting this minority religion within a secularised Nordic context. Another representative example has to do with the social consequences of reading comics presented in a study by Evelina Lundmark, a sociologist of religion from Sweden, which focuses on a comic about Jesus' second coming and the moral outrage as a manifestation of Christian nationalism in the USA.

As someone who has researched music audiences, fan cultures, and cultural consumption, I find it particularly

relevant to highlight Sofia Sjö's study, which examines the meaning of reading, collecting, and discussing comic books to people. Her research builds on the concept of lived religion and meaning-making in contemporary life, contributing to our understanding of how individuals engage with popular culture. Drawing on earlier studies by Botzakis, Axelson, and Blom, Sjö explores what adults derive from reading comic books, and the forms of meaning-making associated with this engagement. By interviewing avid comic book and graphic novel readers, Sjö identifies multiple motivations for reading these genres. While narrative content is central, reading also serves as a break from everyday life and a ritual that highlights the material and bodily aspects of the experience. It further connects to identity work and self-perception. The meaning processes involved in reading comics and graphic novels are thus closely tied to the study of lived religion, as readers' reflections on why and how they read emphasize the role of everyday practices in meaning-making; "what we do and what gives us pleasure, peace, and energy to live our lives to the best of our abilities are important aspects of contemporary meaning making and lived religion" (182).

Despite its many good sides, the volume contains several limitations worth noting. Although many textual analyses are meticulous, they often fall short in contextualising their material within broader social, institutional, or historical frameworks, limiting their explanatory power. Additionally, some chapters are rich in description and easy to read, but at times they lack critical distance and sociological framing. Finally, the collection tends to focus on minority religious traditions and niche genres, leaving mainstream religiosity under-represented.

As a sociologist of culture, I am impressed by the breadth and diversity of this book. I would warmly recommend

it to scholars and students in sociology and religious studies, as well as to those exploring minority religious traditions, fandom, and visual media. In

fact, this is a highly relevant and engaging resource for anyone with a critical interest in questions related to religion and popular culture.

V

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