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Volume 18's cover depicts only one figure, focusing on her face. She's lost in thought, so lost that there's a cloud of smoke swarming around her head, engulfing her. Her mouth is starting to open in the moment revelation strikes. Not only is *Stance* a journal that brings people together through philosophy, but also one that sparks greater analysis. We invite you to become lost in thought as you consider the new perspectives offered by the fantastic philosophers in this journal. Lose yourself in exploration. Then, when revelation strikes, continue the conversation.

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EXAMINING ARISTOTLE'S SUBSTANCE: Does AI Autonomy Warrant a Reinterpretation of Artifacts and Natural Substances?



ABSTRACT

When examining Aristotle's works, it is difficult to properly explain his account of substance, and even more so to understand what things can be considered as natural substances. Typically, artifacts have been believed not to be natural substances, since they lack a certain autonomy living organisms have. However, this argument may not be fully adequate depending on how "artifact" and "organism" are understood. I argue that due to advances in the autonomy of Artificial Intelligence, a reinterpretation of the distinction between artifacts and natural substances could be warranted.

BRADEN COOPER

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I. INTRODUCTION

In Aristotle's discussions on "being," he expounds on the concept of substance (οὐσία): the static underlier that persists through change, which to him holds ontological priority.¹ He writes about substance in several different ways. Importantly, he distinguishes characteristics of primary and secondary substances and establishes the separability of substances. He also posits claims as to what constitutes substance in living organisms and artifacts. Some interpretation is needed to determine Aristotle's exact definition of substance given his different examinations, especially in *Categories* and *Metaphysics*.² Thought is divided on whether his positions on substance evolve, or whether he is simply expanding his analysis.³ Nevertheless, a distinction is drawn between natural substances—things constituted by nature—and artifacts—things not constituted by nature—in *Physics*, in that artifacts do not have an independent and essential principle of motion within them, as natural substances do. (*Phys.* II 1, 192b10–15) It has long been held in Aristotelian scholarship that artifacts are not substances, even if they might have substances in them.⁴ However, several recent developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI), specifically advancements in the level of autonomy (LOA) of AI agents, challenge the standard interpretation given the essential features of these agents, such as self-directedness, self-replication, and, apparently, independent agency.

This article will proceed as follows: In Section II, I expound Aristotle's accounts of substance and elucidate the most important features of primary substance and natural substances in his theory. Then, in Section III, I examine Aristotle's distinction between natural substances and artifacts and explain the standard interpretation in further detail. In Section IV, I discuss recent developments in AI and robotics that challenge the traditional Aristotelian distinction, despite some objections that arise. I argue that the sharp distinction between natural substances and artifacts becomes blurred when considering said developments and that because of this, a spectrum between artifacts and natural substances appears, which offers a more compelling framework for examining their distinction. I conclude that

- 1 Jonathan Barnes, "Metaphysics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 90.
- 2 Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton University Press, 1984).
- 3 Howard Robinson and Ralph Weir, "Substance," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (2024), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/substance/>.
- 4 Errol G. Katayama, *Aristotle on Artifacts: A Metaphysical Puzzle* (State University of New York Press, 1999), 4.

as AI systems continue to evolve, they may move across this spectrum, approximating both natural substances and artifacts depending on their properties, while not fitting neatly into either domain.

II. SUBSTANCE AND NATURAL SUBSTANCES

Understanding substance as Aristotle posits can be quite difficult due to the various accounts of substance in his works, but there is a good amount we can glean for our purpose. Aristotle first defines substance in *Categories*, stating:

A substance—that which is called a substance most strictly, primarily, and most of all—is that which is neither said of a subject nor in a subject, e.g. the individual man or the individual horse. The species in which the things primarily called substances are, are called *secondary substances*, as also are the genera of those species. (*Cat.* 5, 2a10–15)

Here, he is establishing the definition of a primary substance—individual entities or things that are not attributable to any other entity. The distinction here between primary and secondary substances is particularly important as it begins to establish his thought that primary substances hold ontological priority. That is to say, primary substances are the most fundamental and real things, and everything else that exists is completely dependent on their relationship to the primary substances. He goes further into this, claiming that "all the other things are either said of the primary substances as subjects or in them as subjects. So, if the primary substances did not exist it would be impossible for any other things to exist." (*Cat.* 5, 2b4–9) Therefore, non-substances do in fact exist, as do secondary substances, but only because of the primary substance in the first place. This is what Aristotle means when he exclaims that primary substances are neither said of a subject nor in them. For a non-substance to exist, it must be some modification of a substance proper.

Now that we have some sort of working definition of substance, it is important to quickly elucidate the most distinctive feature of it: that substances can undergo change, without changing the fact that they are a substance—i.e., they remain the same substance fundamentally. This is partly how Aristotle tries to solve the famous Parmenides problem—by positing substance as an underlier throughout all change,



being can ultimately remain static.⁵ While states of being may change accidentally, nothing can completely alter the reality of being itself except for some sort of substantial change. Aristotle asserts:

It seems most distinctive of substance that what is numerically one and the same is able to receive contraries . . . For example, an individual man—one and the same—becomes pale at one time and dark at another, and hot and cold, and bad and good. Nothing like this is to be seen in any other case . . . (*Cat.* 5, 4a10–21)

The examples Aristotle gives here are accidental changes. Substances may change in appearance, place, or feeling, but these changes do not alter the substances themselves. Substances have no opposites (i.e., there is nothing contrary to a specific substance), but they can receive opposites while remaining one and the same. With accidental change, there must always be substance underlying it.⁶

Aristotle's exposition here is very general as to what exact examples may be thought of as primary substances due to his abstract definition of them. It is still somewhat difficult to distinguish substances from possible non-substances with his explanation, which is why further examination is needed to understand his aim. What is important here is that he particularly distinguishes substances as separable. We say they are separable in the same way as distinguishing primary substance: they are not in anything else, nor are said of anything else—they do not rely on other entities. Separable substances exist independently of everything else and can be given an independent definition. Aristotle speaks further on this in *Metaphysics*, saying that “substance has two senses, (a) the ultimate substratum, which is no longer predicated of anything else, and (b) that which is a ‘this’ and separable—and of this nature is the shape or form of each thing.” (*Met.* V 8, 1017b23–25) Substance is a “this” (τόδε τι), or a “something,” which must also be separable, and it must be explainable without relying on others' existence.⁷

Aristotle dives even further into substance, offering in greater precision what substances are and how they come to be. With his expanded discussion, we get a greater sense of what may not count as substances than we did previously and how the examination of substance turns to nature. He argues about certain things that come

to be by nature, stating that “the something which they come to be is a man or a plant or one of the things of this kind, which we say are substances if anything is.” (*Met.* VII 7, 1032a17–20) Aristotle is claiming here that things that come to be by nature do not arrive by chance. He continues:

Thus, then, are natural products produced; all other productions are called “makings.” And all makings proceed either from art or from a capacity or from thought. Some of them happen also spontaneously or by chance just as natural products sometimes do; for there also the same things sometimes are produced without seed as from seed. (*Met.* VII 7, 1032a25–31)

It is somewhat unclear here whether Aristotle is considering makings and things that come to be by chance as substances or not, but the distinction is important to note against the things that come to be by nature, which he clearly stated as substances. He goes further into this, saying that “while some things are not substances, as many as are substances are formed naturally and by nature, their substance would seem to be this nature, which is not an element but a principle.” (*Met.* VII 17, 1041b28) He is here identifying the essence of a thing, or the substance of substance, which he posits is a thing's nature. This is where we can begin to distinguish natural substances and understand why they are important to our analysis.

In *Physics*, Aristotle establishes the primary characteristic of natural substances. He says:

Of things that exist, some exist by nature, some from other causes. By nature the animals and their parts exist, and the plants and the simple bodies (earth, fire, air, water)—for we say that these and the like exist by nature. All the things mentioned plainly differ from things which are *not* constituted by nature. For each of them has within itself a principle of motion and of stationariness (in respect of place, or of growth and decrease, or by way of alteration). (*Phys.* II 1, 192b10–15)

This passage draws the same line between things that come to be by nature and things that come to be by chance that was explored before but offers a new point of emphasis. Here, the primary distinction between natural substances and other existing things is that they have an inner principle of motion, or change, which is essential. This principle of motion is not merely internally located. Rather, it is an essential principle, which belongs to a thing in its own

5 Leonardo Tarán, *Parmenides: A Text with Translation, Commentary, and Critical Essays* (Princeton University Press, 1965), 279.

6 Thomas Ainsworth, “Form vs. Matter,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (2024), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/form-matter/>.

7 Barnes, “*Metaphysics*,” 92.



right, not accidentally. This is believed to be what distinguishes natural substances from artifacts: An artifact may have some sort of internal source of motion, but that motion can only be coincidental (e.g., a wind-up toy may be thought of to have motion, but it is put there by another entity, it does not exist in its own right, rather it is accidental). Our discussion must now turn to artifacts in more depth.

III. ARTIFACTS AND LIVING ORGANISMS

Artifacts can be laid out much more plainly than what has been discussed of substance thus far. Artifacts are human-made objects. They do not come to be by nature or from nature—for example, a house or a bed, or tools such as an axe, or musical instruments are examples of an artifact.⁸ Even under traditional interpretation, it is somewhat unclear whether Aristotle considers these as possible substances or not, but we can at least understand how they differ from natural substances traditionally given the passages in *Physics*. The independent principle of motion is important when considering the question of whether artifacts could be considered natural substances and is, of course, one of the primary reasons why they are not typically considered as such. Using the definition of natural substances we have already established, we can accept living organisms as fitting that description since they come to be by nature and have an independent and essential inner principle of motion. It is difficult to determine exactly in what totality Aristotle might consider natural substances, and there is some scholarship that suggests Aristotle does not consider all living things to be natural substances.⁹ For our purpose, we can draw the difference between living organisms and artifacts, understand why it is metaphysically relevant, and where it might be challenged. We can go further by determining that living organisms that come to be by nature also have the characteristic that constitutes a substance most of all, in that a living organism is a “this” and does not have to be explained by any other entity. The same cannot be said of artifacts, for they rely on other entities in order to carry out their unique functions. This is the traditional distinction made between artifacts and living organisms, so one consideration is that the lack of autonomy in artifacts compared to living organisms is why they cannot be considered natural substances.¹⁰ Autonomy is defined here as the level at which

a thing might be considered an independent agent. Artifacts that rely on primary entities do not have any autonomy since they cannot act independently, which is why even in the example given before of a wind-up toy—which has a sort of principle of motion—is not a natural substance since the principle of motion within it is not independent or essential. Because artifacts do not have the same inner principle of motion that living organisms have, they cannot be considered in the same sense that living organisms are. However, what if certain types of artifacts had a level of autonomy similar to that of a living organism? It is interesting to consider how a new type of artifact may necessitate an interpretation of Aristotle's theory of substance that is forced to reckon with artifacts holding similar capacities to living organisms—and thus natural substances—due to having an inner, essential principle of motion.

IV. DEVELOPMENTS IN AI

As our world continues to evolve, the emergence and growth of AI is unavoidable. Its use continues to permeate industry and everyday life. For a long time, AI systems have been quite similar to the artifacts mentioned before, in that they were simply tools that relied primarily on external input to carry out their function. If AI use and development ceased there, its examination would be irrelevant in challenging the interpretation of Aristotle's theory. AI systems would be considered as just another example of artifacts that cannot be said to be separable or to have an independent principle of motion, and thus, they could not be interpreted in any other way. However, there is increasing development of the level of autonomy (LOA) in AI, which suggests this is not the end of the story.

Recently, several AI models and robotics systems have been created that can operate at a much higher LOA than previously possible, meaning some AI agents can now perform tasks with very minimal input from human beings.¹¹ Consider the example of Xenobots (i.e., robots created using frog cells), which have recently been developed. They are the first case of robots that can independently reproduce, realizing the sought-after task of AI self-replication.¹²

18, 10.1007/978-94-007-1044-3_1.

- 11 Allyson I. Hauptman et al., “Understanding the Influence of AI Autonomy on AI Explainability Levels in Human-AI Teams Using a Mixed Methods Approach,” *Cognition, Technology & Work* 26 (2024): 435, 10.1007/s10111-024-00765-7.
- 12 Joshua Brown, “Team Builds First Living Robots—That Can Reproduce,”

8 Katayama, *Aristotle on Artifacts*, 1.

9 Katayama, *Aristotle on Artifacts*, 23.

10 Mary Louise Gill, “Aristotle's Distinction Between Change and Activity,” in *Process Theories*, ed. Johanna Seibt (Springer Science+Business Media, 2003),



This is an important innovation in AI development that holds several implications for further development, notably that these systems could perhaps evolve completely independently in the future. We can begin to see here that the traditional Aristotelian distinction between artifacts and natural substances is blurred in a few ways. First, there are now examples of artifacts that have some sort of self-directedness in the sense that they can perform tasks without external input, unlike other artifacts, and that they can self-replicate. These are essential properties presupposed in natural substances. Possible autonomy in these systems must be considered as well. Before, we defined autonomy simply as the level at which something is considered an independent agent, and these systems certainly meet that requirement. Some AI theorists go further, however, to argue for the possibility of these systems someday achieving free will. This is a substantial problem. The issue of rational free will in philosophy is far from settled, and there is a lot of controversy over the idea of that freedom being extended to AI.¹³

One striking objection to such an application is what Wolfhart Totschnig calls the “finality argument.” This argument posits that AI can never gain full autonomy due to the fact that it will never change its final goal given to it by its creator because it would have no basis for doing so. As such, on the grounds of this argument, an AI will never deviate from its intended ultimate purpose and cannot be thought of as autonomous.¹⁴ If these objections are accepted, there perhaps would be grounds to reject a reinterpretation of artifacts and natural substances despite our previous observations of AI self-directedness and replication. The self-directedness AI exhibits could be seen as inadequate compared to the motion principle in natural substances because it is merely exhibited in an effort to achieve a task set by an external creator. AI autonomy, if there is any, might also be so far removed from human autonomy that it cannot be considered in the same sense when determining the role of autonomy in the constitution of natural substances.

These objections should not be taken lightly but are certainly inconclusive, and I argue against them in a few ways in service of our task. First, it is safe to say that AI LOA is going to continue to improve, and moreover, even if AI is incapable of a free will parallel to human agency, AI agents have already shown capability for complete independent action, which other artifacts are not capable

of. Coupled with the newfound ability of AI self-replication, there is more than enough justification to consider these developments at least in service of a novel interpretation of Aristotle's framework. There are also important objections to the finality argument. Additionally, while the discussion of free will in AI throughout its limited history has been rather inconclusive, many theorists point to compelling developments that suggest it is at least not an impossibility, so we should still consider it when regarding our main task despite some of the problems that arise.¹⁵

One thing that comes to light in these examinations is that there is a problem of defining what exactly some of these systems are, in the Aristotelian sense. AI systems do not originally arise by nature, but they still have properties typically ascribed to natural substances such as autonomy, self-replication, and independent motion. So how should they be categorized? It does not seem as if we can truly call them natural substances in an Aristotelian sense, but they clearly hold properties that constitute natural substances as well as artifacts. We begin to see here a spectrum developing between natural substances and artifacts since these AI systems do not fall neatly into either category. So perhaps it would be more fruitful to consider the spectrum between the two as opposed to the sharp distinction.

V. ARTIFACTS? NATURAL SUBSTANCES?

We have seen that when attempting to define AI according to the traditional Aristotelian distinction, several problems arise. This begs an inquiry into the newfound spectrum between artifacts and natural substances. We can see that AI at least meets definitions required for primary substance in Aristotle's theory. Certainly, an AI that can operate at a level of complete autonomy without human input could be considered separable in the sense established earlier. It could be considered a “this” since it does not rely on the existence, explanation, or operation of another entity. The sharp distinction between the artifact, autonomous AI, and living organisms that come to be by nature is done away with since the AI does in fact have the principle of motion established in Aristotle's theory. Despite this, the AI is still not considered the same as a living organism, at least in that it does not come to be by nature, so it may not be considered the same exact type of substance as those organisms, even though it still could be considered a primary substance given the definition in *Categories* and the discussion in *Metaphysics*.

15 Keith Douglas Farnsworth, “Can a Robot Have Free Will?” *Entropy* 19, no. 5 (2017): 18, 10.3390/e19050237.

Wyss Institute, November 29, 2021, <https://wyss.harvard.edu/news/team-builds-first-living-robots-that-can-reproduce/>.

13 Wolfhart Totschnig, “Fully Autonomous AI,” *Science and Engineering Ethics* 26 (2020): 2473–85, 10.1007/s11948-020-00243-z.

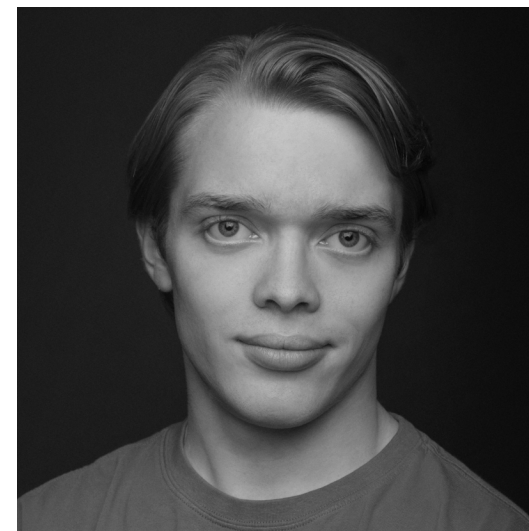
14 Totschnig, “Fully Autonomous AI,” 2475–76.



My brief exposition here has attempted to show the magnitude of possible issues when considering AI under the traditional Aristotelian distinction. If we instead consider a spectrum between artifacts and natural substances, we can reasonably conclude that some AI systems may be getting closer to natural substances even if others may still be closer to artifacts. As they develop, they will continue to move across this spectrum in either direction, approximating natural substances or artifacts while perhaps never falling into one specific domain. Instead of attempting to define these systems under the traditional interpretation, it might be more promising to think about how they can move across the spectrum and the implications that follow in that case for future interpretation of Aristotle's metaphysics.

VI. CONCLUSION

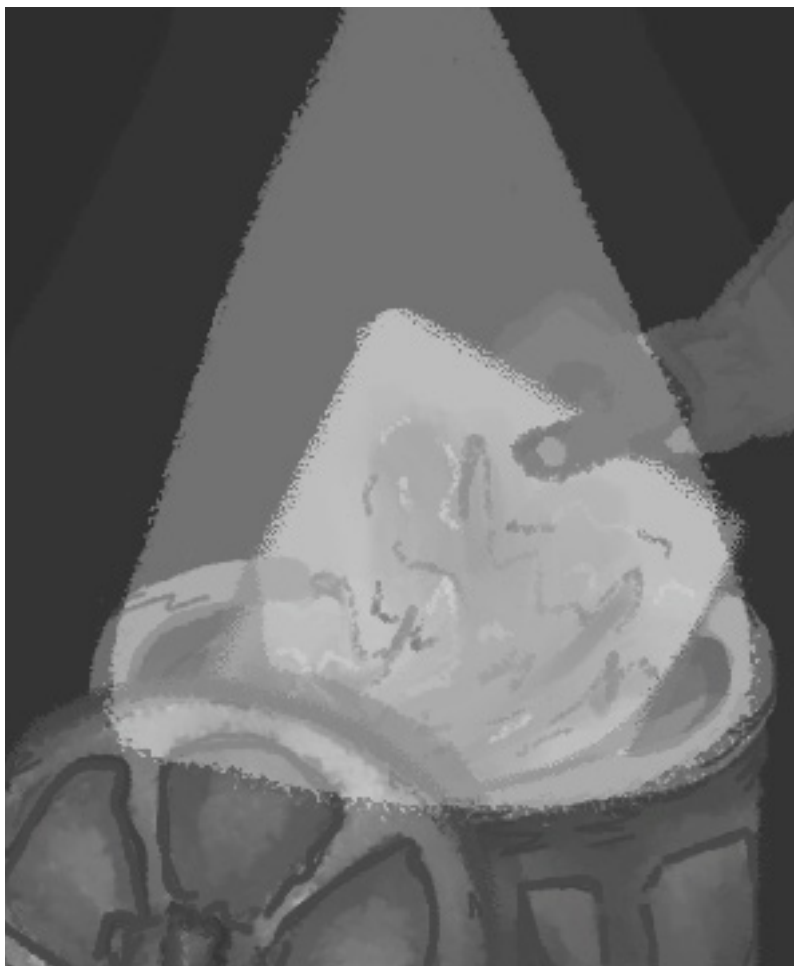
I have elucidated above several reasons why the traditional Aristotelian distinction between natural substances and artifacts could be reconsidered. However, there is surely more investigation to be had over the evolution and autonomy of AI and how to define some AI systems, which impacts the discussion. Aristotle's thought is rather complicated and broad, and it will continue to be interpreted in various ways, especially as new literature becomes available. Nevertheless, we should consider a possible reinterpretation of the traditional distinction between natural substances and artifacts in light of continued developments in technology as it will only serve to strengthen our facility for understanding Aristotle's thought as well as the future of technological development. There is still much to unfold in Aristotle's framework, and we should not consign ourselves to limited possibilities so long as we are still attempting a sincere interpretation of his theory.



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ARTISTIC CLASSISM AND “CAMP” AS CRITICAL KITSCH



CASS DUXBURY

ABSTRACT

In the philosophy of art and art criticism, there is disagreement over whether works deemed “kitsch” can be considered art. I discuss the perspectives of two thinkers, Clement Greenberg and Robert Solomon, to elucidate the kitsch debate as ultimately an issue of classism. Using AP Nguyễn’s exhibition *Lovecore* as a case study, I consider how the artist utilizes the concept of “camp” to assert the value of kitsch and comment on the classism of art criticism that denigrates kitsch art. Camp as critical kitsch celebrates artworks for the same kitschy qualities that many critics cite as negating their ability to be called art at all.

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The term “kitsch” in art criticism is often used to refer to straightforwardly expressive objects mass-produced for inexpensive consumption. In discussions of the value and validity of artworks, there is debate regarding whether kitsch devalues artworks or eliminates the possibility for an object to be called art at all. Art critic Clement Greenberg rejects the possibility of kitsch artworks, considering kitsch to be merely a capitalistic method of appropriating genuine art in order to appeal to a lower class that lacks sophistication but desires an artistic culture. Robert Solomon disagrees, arguing for the value of art that is overt in the emotions it intends to engender and that appeals to a wide audience. With respect to Vietnamese artist AP Nguyễn’s exhibition *Lovecore*, which focuses on the kitsch objects of her parents’ history, I argue that the question of significance is not whether Nguyễn’s exhibition is itself kitsch but how it utilizes the notion of kitsch and for what purposes. In other words, I propose to read *Lovecore* not merely as a work of kitsch but as an exercise in camp. “Camp” is a much-debated term in art criticism and beyond, but for the purposes of this paper, it can be understood as denoting works which arise from deliberate, critical engagement with culturally “classed” objects or ideas that endeavor to amplify and complicate easy distinctions between elegant exclusivity and garish tastelessness. Camp, therefore, interrogates underlying conceptions of class at stake in such assessments of artistic sophistication to begin with. Supported by Solomon’s point that there can be kitsch art and that appreciating it can be a self-aware act, Nguyễn’s *Lovecore* employs the idea of kitsch through the concept of camp in order to comment on the classism inherent to a total disregard of all art deemed kitsch.

I. CLASS, CULTURE, AND KITSCH: THEORISTS’ PERSPECTIVES

In “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Clement Greenberg tracks the rise of kitsch by contextualizing the inaccessibility of avant-garde art to a lower class increasingly demanding an artistic culture of their own.¹ Avant-garde art is a fundamental component of cultural progression, and true artworks are those that are “valid solely on [their] own terms.”² Greenberg explains that kitsch arises to meet the needs of a class that is too immense and small-minded to comprehend the nuance of truly innovative cultural works but is still “hungry” for

some form of culture.³ Kitsch, then, is characterized by the formulaic generation of conceptually shallow cultural works mass produced for widespread appeal. It is “popular, commercial art and literature.”⁴ Whereas genuine art is defined by the process of its creation and values originality and depth, the purpose of kitsch is to appeal to a vast, lower-class audience assumed to lack the sophistication necessary for critical analysis and enjoyment of the avant-garde. Kitsch, according to Greenberg, necessarily comes about after a “fully matured cultural tradition,” appropriating “real” art to create products marketable to a broad, working-class consumer base.⁵ Kitsch is not art because it is not meant to be art, at least not with pure intentions. By Greenberg’s account, when the masses of a capitalist society desire culture, one is provided for them—not for the sake of genuine engagement with a living artistic tradition but to generate profit and satiate the working class.

In contrast to Greenberg’s rejection of kitsch on the basis of its profit-motivated appeal to the desires of a less educated lower class in need of culture, Robert Solomon argues for the value of art that engages “softer” emotions. His argument focuses specifically on “sweet kitsch,” which he defines as “art (or . . . intended art) that appeals unobtrusively and unapologetically to the softer, ‘sweeter’ sentiments” like endearment and nostalgia.⁶ By Solomon’s account, a total disregard for kitsch is itself a shallow perspective because “the real objection to kitsch and sentimentality is the rejection (or fear) of emotions.”⁷ He too recognizes that the issue of kitsch is ultimately an issue of class, but for him, this fact does not devalue kitsch. Rather, it diminishes the taken-for-granted credibility of upper-class art criticism. He writes that “the ‘high’ class of many societies associate themselves with emotional control and reject sentimentality as an expression of inferior, ill-bred beings.”⁸ In Solomon’s view, this prideful sense of emotional regulation is not the mark of sophistication but rather is indicative of an elitist bias not grounded in the appreciation of art at all. In his view, “much of the contempt for kitsch . . . is not the product of personal or cultivated taste” but rather a classist disdain for the people to whom inexpensive cultural works are accessible.⁹ The label of kitsch therefore proves not to be an assessment of artworks but of people.

3 Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 10.

4 Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 9–10.

5 Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 11.

6 Robert Solomon, “On Kitsch and Sentimentality,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 1, 10.2307/431644.

7 Solomon, “Kitsch and Sentimentality,” 13.

8 Solomon, “Kitsch and Sentimentality,” 9.

9 Solomon, “Kitsch and Sentimentality,” 9.

1 Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Beacon Press, 1961).

2 Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 5–6.



II. LOVECORE AND “CAMPING” KITSCH

Hanoi-based artist AP Nguyễn’s exhibition *Lovecore* “playfully subverts the convention and expectation of viewers” by meaningfully engaging with the concept of kitsch.¹⁰ The project began due to the artist’s interest in her parents’ past engagement with kitsch art and media in Vietnamese popular culture. In an interview with *Vietnam Life*, Nguyễn explains that the only way for her to authentically represent experiences from her parents’ life, given that she herself was not present in them, was “to be really fake.”¹¹ Because Nguyễn’s exhibition looks at historical kitsch objects and thinks about their function in order to create something unique out of them, I argue that Greenberg would not consider *Lovecore* to itself be an example of kitsch. While he would disagree with Nguyễn’s belief that kitsch objects are art and comprise genuine culture, her manipulation of kitsch to send a message about it means that the exhibition as a whole falls outside the realm of kitsch by his definition. Although Greenberg notes that not all kitsch objects are “altogether worthless” and that some works of kitsch may be difficult to spot due to their strong resemblance to genuine art, the question of whether *Lovecore* is kitsch is unclear for a different reason.¹² The exhibition does not deceptively resemble avant-garde art despite being kitsch. Rather, it looks like kitsch—precisely because it makes use of kitsch objects and imagery—but is more likely genuine art by Greenberg’s definition because the artist is sending a thoughtful message without being motivated by profit.

Lovecore and Nguyễn’s perspective on kitsch as genuine culture aligns more closely with Solomon’s view that kitsch allows its audiences to enjoy “the seeing and not just the seen.”¹³ His argument for the legitimacy of kitsch as quality art is reflected in Nguyễn’s claim that kitsch intentionally gives the name “culture” to objects “that are in bad taste.”¹⁴ For Nguyễn, it is important to recognize kitsch as valid in art and significant as culture because failure to do so runs the risk of perpetuating the kind of artistic elitism that makes the creation and enjoyment of cultural works “inaccessible to so many people.”¹⁵ This claim resembles Solomon’s account of cheapness as an argument

10 Xuan Tung, “Kitsch or Art? Art Installation Pays Homage to Vietnamese’s Campy Way of Living,” *Vietnam Life*, November 16, 2021, <https://vietnamlife.tuotirenews.vn/news/vietnamese-culture/20211116/kitsch-or-art-art-installation-pays-homage-to-vietnamese-s-campy-way-of-living/64168.html>.

11 Tung, “Kitsch or Art.”

12 Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 11.

13 Solomon, “Kitsch and Sentimentality,” 10.

14 Tung, “Kitsch or Art.”

15 Tung, “Kitsch or Art.”

against kitsch, which he summarizes as the claim that “cheap” means “low class” and people ought to be “above such sentiment.”¹⁶ Contrary to distaste for the cheap or sentimental, Nguyễn invites her audience to relish in a celebratory archive of memory and culture “in all [its] brilliance, vulnerability, and honesty” according to the *Lovecore* exhibition’s webpage.¹⁷ Solomon’s defense of sweet kitsch lends credibility to Nguyễn’s work, demonstrating that the relatability of sentimental art through explicit, digestible, and emotional expression can be an artistic virtue.

III. A CASE FOR KITSCH

With respect to *Lovecore*, I side with Solomon’s perspective on the merit of kitsch. Solomon defends the value of the “sweet” emotions that kitsch engenders, and this sentiment is evident in Nguyễn’s goal for her exhibition. The exploration of her parents’ life is not intended to belittle or even critique their enjoyment of kitsch but rather to send a message about the beauty and power of those cultural objects that are so often invalidated as art. Revisiting the kitschy past of her parents as young adults in Vietnam is a way for Nguyễn to express appreciation and second-hand nostalgia for the vibrant life that she herself was not present for. Underlying the *Lovecore* project is her position on kitsch as significant to art culture. She utilizes the concept of camp to address the classism of wholly rejecting the artistic merit of kitsch objects. The *Lovecore* exhibition webpage quotes scholar and critic Matei Călinescu, stating that camp “cultivates bad taste . . . as a form of superior refinement.”¹⁸ Building on Solomon’s claim that regardless of its quality kitsch art is “deliberately designed” to inspire us by expressing a “moving aspect of our shared experience,”¹⁹ camp is an intentional strategy by which artists can “subvert the conventions of a ‘good taste’.”²⁰ In other words, camp is the conscious manipulation of kitsch in order to talk about kitsch and art criticism as a whole. By creating an exhibition that puts kitsch on display and calls it beautiful and valuable, Nguyễn demands that her audience see the artworks as worthy of their attention and contemplation. She shows how denying the worth of kitsch ignores a genuine, diverse, and indispensable aspect of art culture.

16 Solomon, “Kitsch and Sentimentality,” 8.

17 A.P. Nguyễn, “Lovecore,” *Manzi Art Space*, 2021, <https://www.manziart.space/exhibit/lovecore>.

18 Nguyễn, “Lovecore.”

19 Solomon, “Kitsch and Sentimentality,” 12.

20 Nguyễn, “Lovecore.”



Given the nuance of the *Lovecore* exhibition, one might argue that if a work like *Lovecore* has such obvious value, why call it kitsch at all? Put differently, if kitsch is shallow by definition, and a so-called kitsch piece has true depth, it could be argued that the piece is a genuine work of art. This assertion echoes Greenberg's perspective, which would disqualify *Lovecore* from counting as a kitsch work even though it engages with kitsch conceptually. *Lovecore* is thoughtful and one-of-a-kind. As an exercise in camp, it looks at its own themes from outside itself. If kitsch is defined by mass production and profit motivation, it could be that seemingly tacky or garish artworks that are still meaningful originals are simply not kitsch. However, I reiterate that kitsch is a class issue. Despite coming to different conclusions on the validity of kitsch art, both Greenberg and Solomon recognize that dominant perspectives on art are rooted in class biases that tend to esteem the presumed sophistication of a higher-class over lower-class simplicity. The point of defending kitsch art is not to show that a work deemed kitsch is not kitsch but to prove that kitsch itself can be valuable. The assumption that kitsch cannot be self-aware or that self-awareness negates kitsch ignores the meaningful ideas present in many kitsch artworks and denigrates the intelligence of their audiences.

While it is a fair claim that mass production for the sake of profit diminishes—or eliminates—an object's standing as art, it is worth noting that any approach to this issue is undeniably linked to the way in which what is considered high-class is distinguished from what is considered low-class, or, in this case, how so-called "art" is distinguished from "non-art." Much of what is deemed "kitsch" is simply that which is deemed low-class, be it due to an object's affordability, simplicity, or widespread popularity. I revisit Greenberg's point that some kitsch—namely high-class kitsch, such as *The New Yorker*—is harder to spot because it resembles genuine art.²¹ It seems as though it is easy to identify those objects already deemed to be "for" lower classes as kitsch, all the while failing to recognize that kitsch permeates all levels of art culture, even the supposedly untouchable upper class. Further to Solomon's claim that "the real objection to kitsch and sentimentality is the rejection . . . of emotions," I argue that a total rejection of kitsch cannot help but disregard the possibility of genuine artistic engagement from a lower class for whom kitsch is often the most accessible alternative to the high-class art culture that excludes them.²² This insistence on recognizing the merit of kitsch art because the issue is rooted in condescending conceptions of class is what Nguyễn means when she claims that "kitsch is a small kind of revolution."²³

21 Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 11.

22 Solomon, "Kitsch and Sentimentality," 13.

23 Tung, "Kitsch or Art."

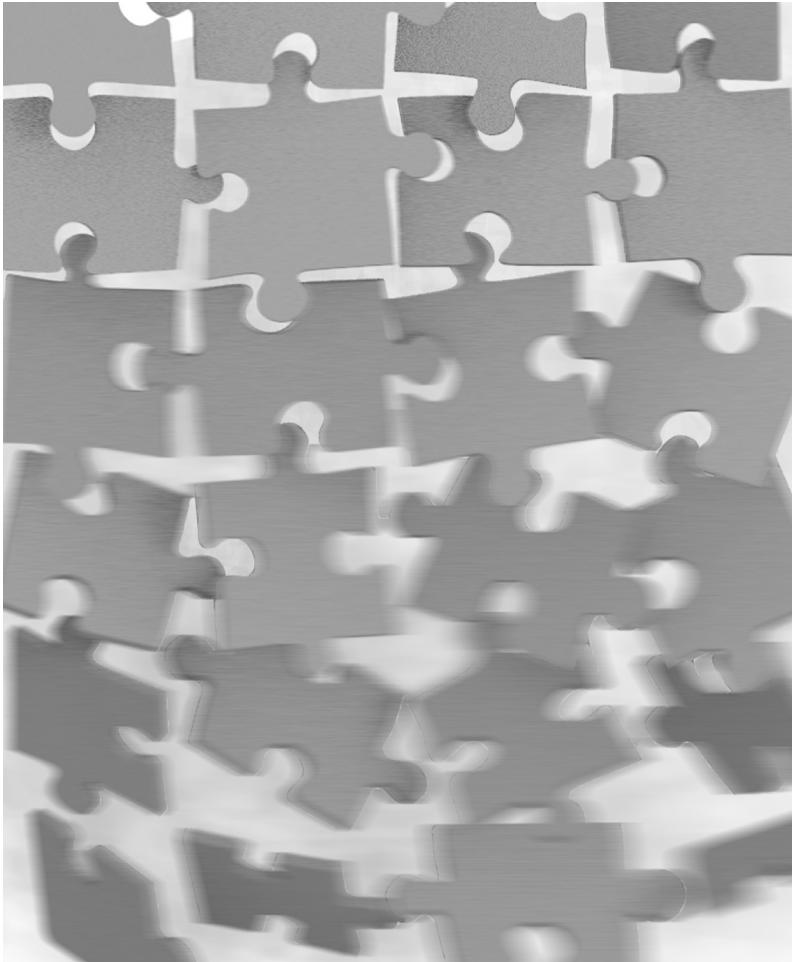
IV. CONCLUSION

Nguyễn's "yearning to learn about the world around her, and to question her own position in that world" forms the basis for the *Lovecore* exhibition.²⁴ At its core, the project insists that engaging with kitsch as both an artist and a spectator is a worthwhile practice. *Lovecore's* investigation into the young adulthood of Nguyễn's parents makes a case for the value of kitsch and in doing so exposes the classism inherent to the belief that kitsch art by-nature lacks meaning and sophistication. Nguyễn's work counters Greenberg's rejection of kitsch and transcends even Solomon's more empathetic view in its employment of camp. Through the concept of camp, which at its most basic level demands only self-awareness and a critical approach to discourses of taste, Nguyễn is able to powerfully experiment with kitsch to assert its depth. *Lovecore* therefore offers a persuasive critique of a culture which denies that widely accessible, inexpensive artworks can be worthwhile for artists and audiences. Nguyễn's own discussion of *Lovecore* ultimately asserts the unforgettability of class issues in art criticism. The exhibition invites its audience to embrace art that is unconstrained by mandatory adherence to regulatory notions of sophistication and, most importantly, to approach assessments of taste with skepticism. Refusing to relegate every object deemed kitsch to insignificance would inevitably widen the scope of what is available to audiences as art, and—as even opposing contributors to discourses around kitsch would seem to agree—we all need art.

24 Nguyễn, "Lovecore."



WHY STRUCTURALISM FAILS IN INTERPRETING VISUAL ART: A Derridean Argument



ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the application of structuralism as a method of interpreting visual art, with a focus on Jacques Derrida's critique of the concept of the frame as presented in *La vérité en peinture*. Structuralist methodology seeks to interpret artworks through segmentation and analysis of internal relations. However, Derrida's notion of the frame challenges the feasibility of defining clear boundaries between an artwork and its context, thereby undermining the foundational premises of structuralist interpretation. By constructing an argument based on these Derridean reflections on the frame, this study highlights the conceptual limitations of structuralism when extended to visual arts.

ALEXANDER BAK

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the relationship between the epistemic subject and the artwork, the process of interpretation plays a central role. Interpretation must proceed methodically to avoid arbitrariness. One of the widely discussed methods includes structuralist interpretative approaches, which emerged in the early twentieth century based on the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure.¹ Following its dominance within the field of linguistics, structuralism developed into one of the primary methods of interpretation, especially in literature. This structuralist approach did not remain confined to literature. It extended to other contexts, particularly the visual arts, though not without criticism. I engage with one of the core critiques of this structuralist approach in visual arts by constructing an argument based on Derrida's reflections on the concept of the frame, presented in his essay *La Vérité en peinture* (*The Truth in Painting*).² By constructing this argument, I demonstrate that any conceptual analysis of the frame that relies on separating the context from the artwork itself—on which structuralist interpretation methods inevitably does—is inherently begging the question. In a second step, possible remedies to this conceptual flaw are explored and discussed.

II. FROM LINGUISTICS TO ART: STRUCTURALIST METHODS OF INTERPRETATION

Structuralist assumptions, such as the preference for synchronic analysis of structure over diachronic evolution or relational meaning, can be applied beyond linguistics to sign complexes in general.

Whether this adaptation from a strictly linguistic theory to an interpretative method is as straightforward as it seems, however, is a subject of debate. I will not delve into this debate here but will proceed from the premise of a basic structuralist interpretative possibility for artworks. Edmund Leach provided one of the most recognized examples of such an interpretation, proposing three steps that a structuralist interpreter of visual art should follow. These steps, as presented by Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, are as follows:³

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- 1 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (Grande Bibliothèque Payot, 1916).
 - 2 Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (The University of Chicago Press, 1987).
 - 3 Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *The Art Bulletin*

1. Framing: The structuralist linguist delimits his subject of study by treating only the static linguistic system at a given moment, excluding its historical variation. This delimitation does not necessarily refer to time. With the visual arts, spatial delimitation is more pertinent. The structuralist art interpreter must first precisely delimit the subject of study spatially, distinguishing context from the work's inherent elements.
2. Segmentation: The structuralist linguist divides the delimited linguistic system into linguistic forms, which will later be set in relation to each other to explore the system's structures. The interpreter of a visual artwork must similarly segment the delimited subject by graphically schematizing the divided sections, which are then separated into individual components.⁴
3. Establishing Syntactic Relations: The structuralist linguist describes the linguistic system by outlining the relations among its constituent linguistic forms. Similarly, the art interpreter should describe the relations between the segments identified in step two, particularly those in which syntactic relations create a semantic tension. According to Leach, syntactic relationships, especially between semantically contradictory forms, carry significant informational value.⁵ The juxtaposition of culturally contradictory elements, for example, holds high semantic value. Thus, identifying oppositions is paramount.

At this point, important formal remarks are necessary. It becomes clear that Leach's three steps follow a certain logic: if establishing syntactic relations (3) is possible, then segmentation (2) must also be possible. This is because the feasibility of creating syntactic relations requires the existence of distinct forms that can be related to each other. Furthermore, if segmentation (2) is possible, delimitation (1) is also possible. The ability to segment implies the possibility of isolating individual forms, hence the ability to delimit the entire artwork is also possible as it is fundamentally the same operation. If (1) is impossible, then (2) would also be impossible.

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- 73, no. 2 (1991): 174–208.
 - 4 Edmund Leach, "Michelangelo's Genesis: A Structuralist Interpretation of the Central Panels of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling," *Semiotica* 56 (1985): 11.
 - 5 Leach, "Structuralist Interpretation," 19.



This is crucial for the argument proposed later as if these logical connections hold, it would suffice to present a sound argument against the feasibility of (1) to establish the impossibility of (2) and (3) as well:

$$\begin{array}{ll} P_1 & (3) \rightarrow (2) \\ P_2 & (2) \rightarrow (1) \\ P_3 & \neg(1) \\ C_1 & \neg(2) \quad (P_3, P_2) \\ C_2 & \neg(3) \quad (P_1, C_1) \end{array}$$

III. THE ARGUMENT

A. GENERAL FORM

Regardless of whether one believes Derrida was aware of the logical consequences his reflections on the concept of frame would have on structuralist methods of interpretation, the argument we can construe based on his reflections, as outlined in this section, indeed employs it. Our argument for P_3 , or the negation of the possibility of (1), can be easily constructed as a modus tollens:

For every artwork x :

- P_a If (1) is possible for x , then the frame of x is clearly definable.
- P_b It is not the case that the frame of x is clearly definable.
- K Therefore, (1) is not possible for x .

The logical form here is correct, and opponents cannot contest it based on structure alone. To determine whether the argument can be considered sound, a closer examination of its premises is required. This will be undertaken in the following sections.

B. THE FIRST PREMISE: P_a

This material conditional must be considered true: the prerequisite for framing x , or delimitation by interpreting the epistemic subject, is the ability to precisely define a frame for x . This constitutes an epistemic prerequisite—if framing is not feasible, no epistemic subject could perform the act of framing as defining a frame would be impossible. Importantly, “frame” does not necessarily refer to a physical border in

this context, like the frame of a painting, but to the abstract concept of distinguishing between the intrinsic elements of the artwork and its context.

C. THE SECOND PREMISE: P_b

The second premise appears to be the decisive and likely most contentious point. It is the actual Derridean core of our argument as it is drawn from Derrida’s statements in his section “Parergon.”⁶ The broader context of his reflections on the frame, especially his Kantian interpretations, will not be considered here. For this paper, the premise we can get from his text is the focus. The claim that the frame of an artwork is indeterminate at first glance may seem bold. Derrida does not explicitly present this as a standalone thesis, but his essay lends itself to this interpretation.

What does it mean that the frame of x is indeterminate? Derrida might refer to the frame as a “place deprived of place.”⁷ This spatial metaphor may initially seem obscure, but it sheds light on the thesis in question. A place that is not a place is a location that exists in our general understanding yet lacks the definitional criteria of a place, rendering it unworthy of such status. Derrida’s obscure formulation likely seeks to convey there is a general concept of the frame, but it does not genuinely merit the status of a concept as forming a clear notion of it is essentially impossible.

To substantiate this reformulated thesis, it is helpful to establish an intuitive idea of the frame: The frame of an artwork undoubtedly serves to delineate an inner from an outer aspect. This involves the precise delimitation of the work as the object of study, distinguishing between the intrinsic elements of the artwork and its context. A preliminary necessary condition for defining the frame of x might therefore appear as follows:

delimit an exteriority, or alternatively, an interiority of x .

Here lies the core issue: This initial condition already contains terms that could only be defined through a pre-existing concept of x ’s frame. As Derrida highlights:

This permanent requirement—to distinguish between the internal or proper sense and the circumstance of the object being talked about—organizes all philosophical discourses on art, the meaning of art and meaning as such . . . This requirement presupposes a discourse on the limit between

⁶ Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, 15–148.

⁷ Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, 38.



the inside and outside of the art object, here a *discourse on the frame*.⁸

The verb “to presuppose” is crucial here. Discourse concerning an assumed exteriority or interiority of *x* already presupposes discourse on the frame of *x*. We cannot define a supposed frame of *x* in terms of *x*’s exteriority and interiority as this would entail assuming what the very concept we are attempting to define enables.

One might object that delimiting the exteriority/interiority of *x* is merely a suggested condition for a conceptual analysis, derived from intuition. Perhaps it is possible to provide a conceptual analysis for the presumed frame of *x* without relying on the concepts of interiority and exteriority. We will return to this point later.

It thus becomes apparent that the concept of the frame is not, in fact, clearly and precisely definable. What we intuitively understand as a “frame” for Derrida is, following Kantian tradition, a so-called *parergon*:

A *parergon* comes against, beside, and in addition to the *ergon*, the work done [*fait*], the fact [*le fait*], the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply outside nor simply inside. Like an accessory that one is obliged to welcome on the border, on board [*au bord, à bord*]. It is first of all the on (the) bo(a)rd(er) [*Il est d’abord l’à-bord*].⁹

It represents an ornamental framing element that is not completely inside or outside the artwork (*ergon*) and attempts to encompass this conceptual no-man’s-land we just encountered. However, this merely shifts the issue of defining the frame concept. By accepting the existence of frames, we simply acknowledge their conceptual indeterminacy, even elevating this indeterminacy as the definition of the frame itself. Certainly, this is an unsatisfactory solution, though the concept of *parergon* will be revisited later.

For now, it is established that the argument against the possibility of conceptual analysis of *x*’s frame has shown that both P_b and P_a are true, and therefore the entire argument presented in the first section is sound. Hence, (1) is impossible, making (2) and thus (3) impossible as well. At first glance, our argument appears successful.

IV. ATTEMPTS TO DEFEND STRUCTURALISM AS A METHOD OF INTERPRETATION

Whether our Derrida-based argument is truly flawless and achieves its objective—to delegitimize structuralist interpretive methods—will be examined in this section. Here, potential counterarguments and their respective challenges, advantages, and limitations will be presented, though this discussion does not claim to be exhaustive as the constraints of this paper prevent full exploration.

A. THE LOGICAL STRUCTURE OF INTERPRETIVE STEPS: TRULY CONDITIONAL?

A potential first critique concerns the correctness of the two premises establishing the conditional structure of the three steps in the structuralist interpretive method. One might dispute that (2) is only possible if (1) is also feasible.

The previous connection relies on the assumption that delimitation and segmentation are identical types of operations: Segmentation is understood as nothing other than framing, albeit within a larger framed context. Thus, if one shows in (1) that the operation type “framing” is impossible, then it follows that (2) is also impossible.

What if segmentation does not require such precise framing? Fundamentally, the structuralist interpretive method at this point merely requires an operation that isolates individual forms within the artwork, which will later be syntactically positioned in (3). The goal is to identify elements that can be embedded semantically in a syntax in (3).

Segmentation need not necessarily involve Leach’s precise geometric division of visual elements, which would require framing, but could instead involve the iconographic identification of elements without needing a clearly bounded representation area. Of course, creating syntactic relations requires that elements hold a certain spatial position within the artwork. However, they do not need to be understood as precisely delineated sections of the artwork. Therefore, the conditional relationship between the possibility of (1) and (2) does not necessarily entail a type-identity of operations.

If we accept this view, our entire argument collapses. If (2) does not require framing, then it does not follow that (2) is only possible if (1) is possible as (2) can occur without the operation of framing.

⁸ Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, 45.

⁹ Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, 54.



Consequently, proving (1) false does not suffice to invalidate (2) and then (3) as our argument seeks to do.

However, this objection is precarious. It should not be overlooked that the connection between (1) and (2) extends beyond the type-identity of the epistemic operation performed by the subject. There is also a methodological connection: (2) can only occur after (1) is completed. These steps must be performed in succession given that we are dealing with a practical interpretive method. Segmentation could be performed without necessarily involving framing. However, for these steps to collectively constitute a method, the artwork as a whole must first be delimited, meaning (1) must take place prior to (2). Although this solution would nullify Derrida's logical progression, it does not necessarily restore structuralist interpretation as a viable method.

Furthermore, it could be argued that segmentation is understood as something other than precise framing. If so, what remains "structuralist" about this method? Structuralism aims to recognize clearly segmented forms and structures. Vaguely identifying elements without precise segmentation within the specific work is theoretically inconsistent with the structuralist label.

B. AN ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE FRAME

A more intriguing counterargument proceeds as follows: Our argument relies on the Derridean second premise:

P_b It is not the case that the frame of x is clearly definable.

If we negate P_b , the entire argument collapses. How can we justify this negation? It would require showing that the concept of the frame of x can indeed be defined without recourse to the terms interiority and exteriority of x , as discussed previously, since these terms only gain meaning through the concept of the frame. Therefore, we would need to propose a conceptual analysis of the frame that does not depend on terms which are themselves created by the very concept being defined.

At first glance, this appears difficult. We have already seen that the condition initially seems necessary—delimit an exteriority or, alternatively, an interiority of x .

But what if this condition is not necessary after all? Perhaps the concept of the frame can be understood in an entirely different way while still establishing interiority and exteriority.

Interestingly, Derrida himself ascribes purely decorative functions to his concept of *parerga*. To support this view, he relies on counterfactual conditionals, repeatedly arguing that if artworks lacked *parerga*, they would display inherent deficiencies. While the *parergon* is not part of the artwork itself, it compensates for these internal deficiencies. In Derrida's perspective, the *parergon* transcends its own exteriority by intervening in the interiority, which would otherwise reveal internal flaws:

The *parergon* inscribes something which comes as an extra, *exterior* to the proper field . . . but whose transcendent exteriority comes to play, abut onto, brush against, rub, press against the limit itself and intervene in the inside only to the extent that the inside is lacking.¹⁰

Therefore, a new conceptual analysis of the frame seems possible. The condition it would require:

serve as ornament (compensating deficiencies of x).

However, it remains debatable whether this new frame concept truly resolves the issue we raised in the context of structuralist interpretive methods. Recalling that our objective is to find a frame concept that legitimizes the first step of structuralist interpretive methods—framing—it becomes apparent that the concept of the frame theoretically presupposed here is the intuitive concept of framing embodied by the condition of delimiting the exteriority/interiority of x .

Framing, the act of delimitating the subject of analysis, becomes challenging if the frame concept used is solely based on decorative functions. In the interpretive process, the first step from the epistemic subject's perspective would then involve identifying elements fulfilling decorative functions.

Some may argue here that it is not only the frame within an artwork that serves a decorative function, making clear delimitation problematic even though it is essential. Structuralism, in its core tenets, assumes the existence of clear, objective, and recognizable structures within artworks. Hence, it is plausible that structuralist delimitation demands clarity. Critics may contend that decorative functions are insufficient conditions for defining the frame so that the condition of delimiting the exteriority/interiority of x is unavoidable and our argument remains valid. If one disagrees with this critique and believes that a precise frame can indeed be identified solely through decorative functions, it would seem that structuralist interpretive methods have been saved from Derrida's argument.

¹⁰ Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, 56.



V. CONCLUSION

It is evident that the argument constructed here exposes a fundamental conceptual flaw in the structuralist method, one that is difficult to remedy. Although the correctness of the Derrida-based argument may be partially questioned, no counterargument offers a solution that avoids such extensive modifications to structuralist interpretation to retain its structuralist character. It appears that Derrida has dealt structuralism as an interpretive method a nearly fatal blow. The limited prevalence of structuralist interpretations like Leach's confirms this victory over structuralism as a method of interpretation. An exception here is literary studies, where structuralism still serves as a theoretical basis for interpretation in many contexts. However, this is understandable as the applicability of the frame concept to literary artworks remains uncertain, and so-called structuralist interpretive methods are based on other parts of structuralism shifting focus away from the concept of frame. The argument presented here is most effective when applied to structuralist interpretations of visual art, where frames undoubtedly exist in some form. How it applies to structuralist approaches in literature remains an open question. The unique aspect of approaches like Leach's is that they apply a method rooted in literary studies to visual art. This paper has demonstrated the potential problems with such a transfer.



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TOWARDS AN ACCOUNT OF COMPLEMENTARITIES AND CONTEXT-DEPENDENCE



HONG JOO RYOO

ABSTRACT

Modern physics proposals present deep tensions between seemingly contradictory descriptions of reality. Views of wave-particle duality, black hole complementarity, and the Unruh effect demand explanations that shift depending on how a system is observed. However, traditional models of scientific explanation impose a fixed structure that fails to account for varying observational contexts. This paper introduces context-dependent mapping, a framework that reorganizes physical laws into self-consistent subsets structured around what can actually be observed in a given context. By doing so, it provides a principled way to integrate complementarity into the philosophy of explanation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the philosophy of science, explanation often involves deriving one set of propositions from another. The *deductive-nomological* (DN) account explains a desired event (*explanandum*) by deducing it from general laws through an *entailment structure*—a logical setup where certain premises necessarily lead to specific conclusions.¹ Lewis' account of causation focuses on causal histories within a system, while Phillip Kitcher's *Unificationism* seeks the most general explanations by deriving many conclusions from a small number of basic principles.² Michael Strevens' *Kairetic account* builds on these by incorporating entailment structures, causal relevance, and *Unificationism*-based principles.³

In this paper, I argue that current accounts (particularly the DN and *Kairetic accounts*) of explanation struggle to accommodate *complementarity*—cases where observed properties depend on the measurement context—because they impose fixed explanatory structures that lead to contradictions and misrepresentations. To resolve this, I develop *context-dependent mapping* (f_c), a new framework that partitions explanatory models based on the observational context.⁴ Through examples like wave-particle duality and black hole information, I demonstrate how f_c integrates complementarity into scientific explanation.

II. THE KAIRETIC ACCOUNT

Strevens characterizes the *Kairetic account* as “fully causal,” meaning that it relies entirely on causation to explain phenomena, excluding any non-causal or correlational elements.⁵ The *Kairetic account* relies on

1 Carl G. Hempel and Paul Oppenheim, “Studies in the Logic of Explanation,” *Philosophy of Science* 15, no. 2 (1948): 135–75.

2 Philip Kitcher, “Explanatory Unification,” *Philosophy of Science* 48, no. 4 (1981): 507–31.

3 Michael Strevens, “The Causal and Unification Approaches to Explanation Unified—Causally,” *Noûs* 38, no. 1 (2004): 154–76.

4 For related discussions of domain-specific modeling in science, see Nancy Cartwright, *The Dappled World: A Study of the Boundaries of Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Robert W. Batterman, *The Devil in the Details: Asymptotic Reasoning in Explanation, Reduction, and Emergence* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

5 Strevens, “Causal and Unification,” 1.

a *causal model*: an entailment structure (as in DN) with causal premises. This model enables the identification of *difference-makers*: elements that, when altered, significantly change the outcome.

To identify difference-makers, Strevens uses *abstraction*: a process that refines a detailed causal model (M) into a simplified version (M*) that preserves only the necessary factors. For instance, explaining a cup breaking could start with a complex causal model that includes all physical forces and molecular dynamics. Through abstraction, this model simplifies to key conditions—like the cup being dropped on a hard surface—that are sufficient to explain the breakage. The *Kairetic account* isolates essential causal elements in a process similar to *Unificationism* but focuses on capturing relevant causal influences. The final, most abstract model contains only the core difference-makers.⁶

Finally, a *standalone explanation* is a fully developed causal model for an event (e) composed exclusively of elements that directly influence e —the difference-makers. This explanation is constructed from *explanatory kernels*: progressively abstracted causal models that maintain the causal requirements of prior models.⁷

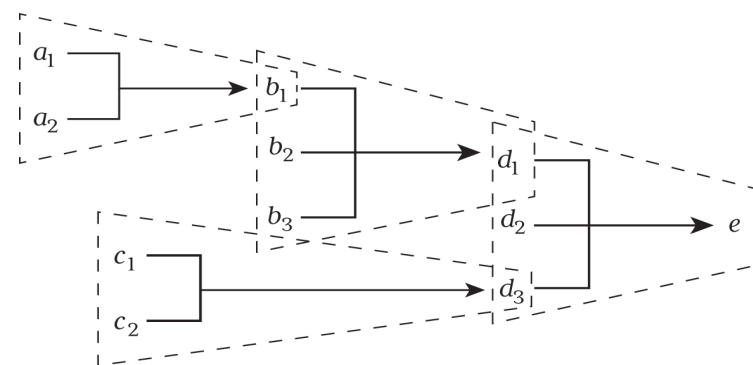


Figure 1: Sample Standalone Explanation⁸

Figure 1 showcases a typical standalone explanation constructed through four kernels (each grouped by dashed lines). The arrows represent causal entailment: for instance, in the first kernel, difference-makers a_1 and a_2 jointly entail b_1 .⁹ The final kernel in this chain isolates the essential causal factors, providing a focused explanation that captures all and only the components necessary for the event.

6 Strevens, “Causal and Unification,” 8–16.

7 Strictly speaking, a standalone explanation itself is a causal model composed of other causal models (kernels).

8 Michael Strevens, *Depth: An Account of Scientific Explanation* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 119.

9 This is the entailment structure from the DN account.



III. DISJUNCTIONS AND MULTIPLE REALIZATIONS

In this section, I review two objections to the *Kairetic account* as a foundation for introducing the notions of similarity spaces and frameworking.

The first objection concerns disjunctions: overly abstract explanations may introduce unrelated causes, making them unclear. For example, explaining a cup shattering from a fall by either a cat bumping into it or an acidic chemical reaction leads to two unrelated causes.

To avoid this, Strevens argues that causal models should only include causes that operate under similar physical principles.¹⁰ He formalizes this through the concept of similarity space, which is a collection of physical laws with a measure of how similar those laws are. By restricting an explanation to a single region of *similarity space*, we avoid combining unrelated causes and preserve explanatory clarity. In this case, we explain the cup's breakage using gravitational forces, without bringing in unrelated chemical laws.

On the other hand, the *multiple realizability objection* argues that high-level phenomena, like stress reduction, can arise from distinct mechanisms (e.g., exercise, therapy, medication), making it difficult to explain them with a single model.

Strevens resolves this concern through the practice of frameworking, which holds certain background conditions fixed to simplify explanations such as treating mental states as beliefs in psychology or assuming rational agents in economics.¹¹ Frameworking assumes one similarity space region while setting aside others, effectively taking for granted a specific explanatory perspective rather than addressing all realizations simultaneously.

IV. PROBABILISTIC EXPLANATION

Quantum mechanics introduces challenges for the *Kairetic account*. In the current model of micro-scale physics, quantum mechanics is probabilistic. As Strevens puts it, “probabilistic explanations are the

only possible explanations.”¹² This probabilistic feature is genuinely irreducible to our current knowledge, classified as *simple probabilities*. Consequently, Strevens declares the *Kairetic account* does not have “much that is novel to say” about it.¹³

Ultimately, Strevens directs the audience to Railton's *Deductive-Nomological-Probabilistic* (DNP) account, which is simply the DN account's entailment structure with probabilistic laws.¹⁴ Indeed, Strevens affirms that “[the *Kairetic account* for simple probabilities] follows the broad outlines of the DNP and similar accounts.”¹⁵ If one were to attempt to create a standalone explanation, especially involving quantum mechanics, then it is fitting to use a structure similar to that of the DNP account to construct the kernels that arise from quantum mechanics. Strevens depicts such an explanation of Rasputin's death.

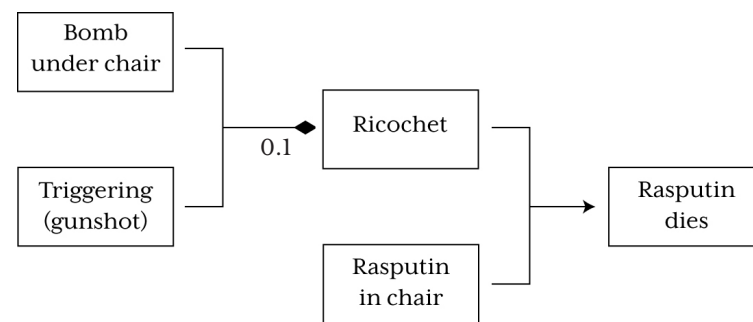


Figure 2: Sample Probabilistic Standalone Explanation¹⁶

The event involves a bomb under Rasputin's chair and a gunshot that is intended to trigger the bomb. With a small probability, represented by 0.1, the bullet does not trigger the bomb and instead causes a ricochet into Rasputin. Thus, DNP models form the basis of a standalone explanation incorporating the ricochet's probabilistic elements. Strevens claims: “a deep standalone explanation must spell out the properties of the fundamental-level laws in virtue of which the explanandum has the physical probability it does.”¹⁷

Strevens' thought regarding the DNP account is that it serves to explain a simple probability kernel which can be a part of a

¹² Strevens, *Depth*, 341–58.

¹³ Strevens, *Depth*, 341–58.

¹⁴ Peter Railton, “A Deductive-Nomological Model of Probabilistic Explanation,” *Philosophy of Science* 45, no. 2 (University of Chicago Press, 1978): 206–26, 13.

¹⁵ Strevens, *Depth*, 358.

¹⁶ Strevens, *Depth*, 442.

¹⁷ Strevens, *Depth*, 362.

¹⁰ This method is formally named “cohesion.” See Strevens, “Causal and Unification,” 17.

¹¹ Strevens, *Depth*, 154–59.



standalone explanation in the *Kairetic account*. The entailment structure of the DNP account allows one to construct a standalone explanation like the one in Figure 2. Since both the *Kairetic* and DNP accounts rely on physical laws within a given similarity space, it is crucial to examine how they handle complementarity. The following sections explore various complementarities and how these explanatory frameworks accommodate—or fail to accommodate—context-dependent observations.

V. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO COMPLEMENTARITIES

While Strevens asserts the probabilistic nature of quantum mechanics as simple probabilities, some may advocate for a view of complementarities that is not completely probabilistic but unequivocally dependent on the apparatus (reference frame, experimental instruments, and other entities in a system) used in observation.¹⁸ The *complementarity principle* posits that entities/systems can display apparently contradictory properties depending on the way they are observed or measured. These manifested properties are mutually exclusive yet equally necessary for a consistent description of the system with our physical laws. In this section, I illustrate this perspective through key examples.

The *wave-particle duality*, for instance, requires the apparatus to be the sole determinant of the manifested features. In the double-slit experiment, light manifests itself as a wave and produces interference patterns. However, in the case of the photoelectric effect—where light is shined onto a metal—light behaves as a particle, which scatters and interacts with the metal as though it in itself is an energy-carrying particle.¹⁹ Depending on the experimental context, light appears in different forms. The identity of a particle is two-fold: it is a particle and a wave in various contexts.

The nature of the observation of the wave-particle duality (whether it reveals wave or particle behavior) is not probabilistic in the sense of a quantum superposition. When used, the experimental

18 I do not aim to justify complementarity as a universal principle but to accommodate it within existing explanatory frameworks, assuming it as a feature of certain quantum interpretations. For an overview of interpretations, see Jeffrey Bub, *Interpreting the Quantum World* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

19 Louis de Broglie, “Waves and Quanta,” *Nature* 112, no. 2815 (1923): 540, 10.1038/112540a0; Thomas Young, “I. The Bakerian Lecture. Experiments and Calculations Relative to Physical Optics,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 94 (1804): 1–16, 10.1098/rstl.1804.0001.

apparatus instead unequivocally influences the nature of the observed phenomena: Depending on the experiment, there seems to be a set of relevant physical laws corresponding to waves or particles. Beyond this complementarity, there are plenty of paradoxes and complementarities that arise from our physical theories.

Furthermore, Stephen W. Hawking’s radiation affirms that when an object enters a black hole (crosses a radius called the event horizon), we expect to see the object emitted as radiation.²⁰ The *information paradox* goes as such: Quantum mechanics predicts that the radiation will contain all of the relevant information of the object that entered the black hole, but general relativity suggests that this information will be destroyed in the sense of the information not being able to escape the event horizon.²¹

Black hole complementarity is then a proposal to remove the frame-independence of this event.²² Albert Einstein’s equivalence principle states that an object that crosses the event horizon will continue to experience falling toward the center of the black hole rather than just be emitted as radiation right away. This forms the crux of the complementarity: If we are in the reference frame of the falling object, we would continue to fall, but if we were on a reference frame outside of the event horizon, then we would see an object enter and then exit as radiation. In modern physics, complementarities are often proposed as solutions to disagreements between theoretical frameworks.

Lastly, the geometry of space-time and reference frames impact the observed quantum effect: The Unruh Effect described by Luis C. B. Crispino, Atsushi Higuchi, and George E. A. Matsas, suggests that an observer in acceleration will perceive a warm bath of radiation, even if they are in what an inertial observer would describe as a perfect vacuum, void of quantum states.²³ This effect is a manifestation of the observer-dependent nature of the vacuum state in quantum field theory.

Again, a complementarity is proposed for this paradox, referred to as the complementarity principle for the Rindler horizon.²⁴

20 Stephen W. Hawking, “Particle Creation by Black Holes,” *Communications in Mathematical Physics* 43, no. 3 (1975): 199–220, 10.1007/BF02345020.

21 Samir D. Mathur, “The Information Paradox: A Pedagogical Introduction,” *Classical and Quantum Gravity* 26, no. 22 (2009): 10.1088/0264-9381/26/22/224001.

22 Leonard Susskind, Lárus Thorlacius, and John Uglum, “The Stretched Horizon and Black Hole Complementarity,” *Physical Review D* 48, no. 8 (1993): 3743, 10.1103/PhysRevD.48.3743.

23 Luis C. B. Crispino, Atsushi Higuchi, and George E. A. Matsas, “The Unruh Effect and Its Applications,” *Reviews of Modern Physics* 80, no. 3 (2008): 787–838, 10.1103/RevModPhys.80.787.

24 Takayuki Hirayama et al., “Unruh Effect and Holography,” *Nuclear Physics B* 844, no. 1 (2011): 1–25, 10.1016/j.nuclphysb.2010.10.018.



This principle suggests a relativity of observational knowledge for an accelerating observer in an analogous manner to black hole complementarity. Just as in the wave-particle duality case, there seems to be a set of relevant physical laws corresponding to each complementarity feature. The ultimate aim of this paper is to accommodate complementarities into the DNP and *Kairetic accounts*.

Thus far, I have reviewed the following points:

1. Strevens points towards the DNP account for simple probabilities within a standalone explanation of the *Kairetic account*.
2. There are paradoxes in our theories (wave-particle, information, Unruh effect, etc.).
3. Complementarities, as proposed solutions to those paradoxes, inherently depend on context.

The thoughts developed in the following sections will consist of the following:

4. If one were to use frameworking in the manner described by Strevens, then the complementarity view is misrepresented.
5. If one were to use the DNP account, then contradictions may arise.
6. Using point 3, it is possible to construct a mapping f_c that partitions a similarity space containing contradictory laws into multiple *self-consistent* similarity subspaces: regions of similarity space that do not contain contradictions.
7. If one wishes to explore an account of explanation involving complementarities, then one can utilize the mapping in point 6.

VI. IN THE FACE OF COMPLEMENTARITIES

Given that Strevens concedes the *Kairetic account* does not address simple probabilities, I revisit frameworking to show why it misrepresents complementarity in general (point 4) and set the

stage for an alternative way to partition similarity spaces. Recall that Strevens defines similarity space as encompassing all physical laws, grouping causal models by shared physical principles. It follows that dual phenomena (e.g., wave-particle duality) occupy two separate, incohesive regions of this space. As discussed earlier (point 3), wave-like and particle-like behaviors are two facets of the same underlying reality; the aim is to express the potential to manifest different properties under different conditions. Frameworking, however, imposes an artificial divide, treating one region of similarity space (e.g., particle-like behavior) as fundamental while excluding the other (e.g., wave-like behavior) within the same explanatory model. This misrepresents complementarity, which requires both descriptions to be context-dependent and simultaneous, rather than rigidly and classically distinct.

Moreover, one can argue for point 5 by demonstrating that the laws themselves are contradictory. This was briefly done in our discussion of paradoxes (point 2). Without frameworking, if one were to utilize the DNP account's entailment structure, then our physical laws regarding the wave-like and particle-like features will produce contradictions as both features cannot hold at once: only one manifests itself. Similarly, when involving relativistic laws, the entailment structure of the DNP account would lead us to the paradoxes involving the Unruh effect or the black hole information paradox, as we would have conflicting theories as the premises.

Accordingly, until a theory of unification reconciles quantum mechanics and general relativity, there are inevitable contradictions within the entailment structure of the DNP account. To resolve this, I propose a framework that dynamically assigns self-consistent sets of physical laws based on observational context. The next section introduces context-dependent mapping f_c , which provides a systematic method for this assignment.

VII. f_c : CONTEXT-DEPENDENCE AS A REPRESENTATION OF COMPLEMENTARITIES

To demonstrate point 6, I define f_c as a mapping from a set of contexts to an appropriate set of physical laws. I first categorize observations into *context space*, which is a set of phenomena that we know involve paradoxes.²⁵ Within this space, I identify *context subsets*, denoted as c_p , where each subset consists of phenomena that exhibit a single complementary feature under specific experimental conditions.

²⁵ Context space parallels similarity space: it groups physical phenomena as similarity space groups physical laws. For motivation on similarity space, see Strevens, *Depth*, 104–05.



Taking the double slit case as an example, let light manifest as a wave. This physical setup involving the slit and light will be a part of a context subset c_{Wave} alongside all other possible setups manifesting wave features of quantum entities. More examples of c_{Wave} involve multiple slits, optical setups, etc. Setups involving accelerating reference frames producing the Unruh Effect will also be a part of a context subset c_{UA} and all setups that can be treated as a black hole's matter system (the frame which enters the event horizon) will be in c_{BHM} .

The next step is to identify a mapping f_c from a context c_i onto a *similarity subspace* (S_i): a particular region of similarity space with non-contradictory laws. Namely, there will be no major overlap of general relativity and quantum mechanics, no overlap of wave and particle features of quantum entities, etc. For instance, if the context involves a double slit, then the particle is to be considered in terms of wave formalism S_{Wave} , and if there is scattering, then it is to be considered in terms of particle formalism $S_{Particle}$. Through this partition, f_c ensures that only the relevant laws for the observed complementary feature are applied.

Using empirical information from past experiments and verified theories, one can assign the relevant laws to a physical system. The thought is to have the mapping be grounded in empirical data and theoretical frameworks that are accepted independently of the specific explanations being constructed. The mapping aims to, depending on the context/setup, utilize disjoint and non-contradictory laws for the entailment structure. Figure 3 depicts a sample mapping.

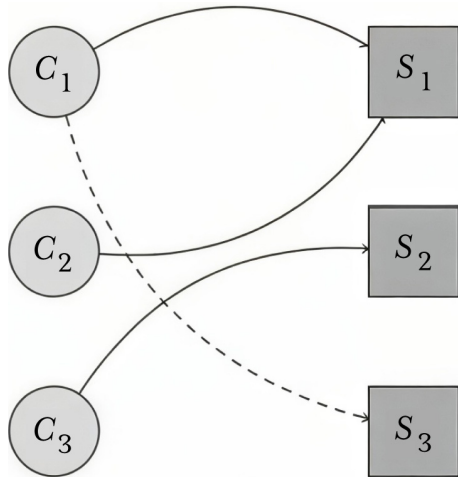


Figure 3: Visual Representation of f_c

In this figure, c_i represents the set of contexts that manifest one complementary feature: this may be the set of all accelerating frames in the Unruh effect or the set of all matter frames in the presence of a black hole. S_i represents the consistent similarity subspaces of similarity space. This may be the equations governing quantum field theory, black hole relativity, wave physics in quantum mechanics, etc.

This section demonstrates point six. The mapping f_c is intended to be an accommodation of complementarities—of a context c_i unequivocally influencing the relevant set of laws S_i . Its navigation around the contradictions of similarity space further echo complementarities as a proposed solution to physical paradoxes. If one desires to apply this mapping, in the case of dual phenomena, one can consider each mapping onto different similarity subspaces and use the corresponding physical principles to construct a DNP or similar account of scientific explanation.

VIII. EXAMPLE OF THE MULTI-SLIT MESH

In this section, I will aim to further establish that an account of complementarities can be constructed through f_c mapping (point 7). I will construct an example case to demonstrate how one could utilize context-dependent mapping. Consider an interference phenomenon arising from shining a light towards multiple slits in a mesh (with sufficient geometry such that diffraction occurs). From our physics, in this context, the laws that apply are those involving wave-like manifestations of light. Figure 4 depicts the complementarity's relevant similarity subspaces and the sets of contexts to which each one corresponds.

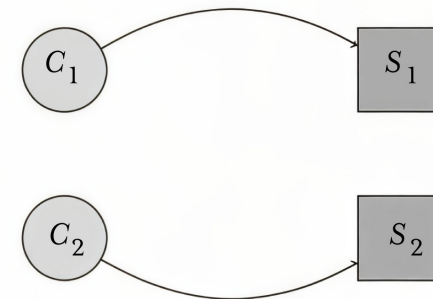


Figure 4: Complementarity of Wave-Particle Features



In this figure, the set of contexts c_i contains the contexts that involve the manifestation of light as a wave, such as cases with double (or even multiple) slits with appropriate length(s). It is a set of all such contexts (of the energy of surrounding particles, the reference frames, and other physical background conditions) for which one may identify wave-like features of particles. Accordingly, c_2 involves the contexts for which light manifests itself as a particle such as scattering, photoelectric effect, or near photodetectors. S_1 and S_2 are the similarity subspaces that involve the physics of a wave and the physics of a particle. In the case of the mesh, one with knowledge of physics would make these judgments:

- 1) The set of contexts c_i is appropriate to use.
- 2) f_c maps c_i onto S_i .
- 3) Using the laws in S_i we can construct an entailment structure.

The first judgment arises from the observation of the explanandum (of interference), and the second judgment comes from the physics background: having knowledge of the dual phenomena allows one to see that it is fitting to utilize wave-like laws of quantum mechanics. I will now continue to briefly construct a structure of the DNP account using S_i laws. The model would look like this: {the particles' wavefunction from the Schrodinger Equation, laws of constructive and destructive interference of waves, etc.} and these would entail the explanandum: the interference pattern in the mesh.

IX. EXAMPLE OF THE OPTICAL TELESCOPE

I offer an example in which the interference patterns of quantum mechanics are considered through the DNP account within a standalone explanation of the *Kairetic account*. Suppose one wants to explain the phenomena of a telescope (which uses a mesh similar to the previous example) showing a certain spectrum of light from a star.²⁶ The explanandum, in this case, is the telescope reading, which takes the form of a spectrum shown on a screen. If one wishes to use the mapping, then one can adopt the one in the previous example:

the light emitted from the star and the diffraction mesh geometry c_i determine that the similarity subspace from which the laws are drawn would be the same S_i . Using the laws in S_i , one can use the DNP account to demonstrate that, in this case of the complementarity, we have wave-like features within the telescope and a certain interference pattern.

One can go on to consider the *Kairetic account*. A causal model M can look like this: {we have the aforementioned quantum interference pattern (explained by the DNP account), the other classical optical properties of the telescope, a spectrometer that indicates calcium if the pattern corresponds to a certain family of other patterns, etc., if these previous elements are satisfied then we get the spectrum displayed in the telescope}. The model would then continuously be abstracted so that the only remaining elements are difference makers. Figure 5 depicts the standalone explanation as a parallel to the diagram of Rasputin's death—the kernel of the Interference Pattern is then explained by the first example (DNP structure) for which the mapping onto the wave (interference) laws has been performed.

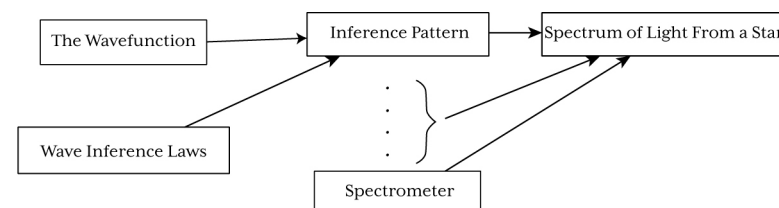


Figure 5: Optical Telescope Standalone Explanation

Using the DNP account and specifying the laws within it, it is possible to explain the quantum mechanical aspects of a telescope. The DNP account explains the probabilistic nature of photon interaction at the quantum level, while the *Kairetic account* is used to model how these interactions causally lead to reliable spectral readings under specific observational settings. This aligns with Strevens' thoughts about the DNP account being able to account for the simple probabilities. When constructing a standalone explanation, it may come to one's attention that the quantum interference pattern, which emerges within a model, would be the kernel of a DNP entailment analogous to the ricochet in Figure 2. The mapping, when used in the *Kairetic account*, may serve to give a causal model that does not sprout from a potentially contradictory set of laws but rather from a view of complementarity.

²⁶ For a specific example, see Sarah A. Jaeggli et al., "The Diffraction-Limited Near-Infrared Spectropolarimeter (DL-NIRSP) of the Daniel K. Inouye Solar Telescope (DKIST)," *Solar Physics* 297 (2022): 10.1007/s11207-022-02062-w.



X. CONCLUSION

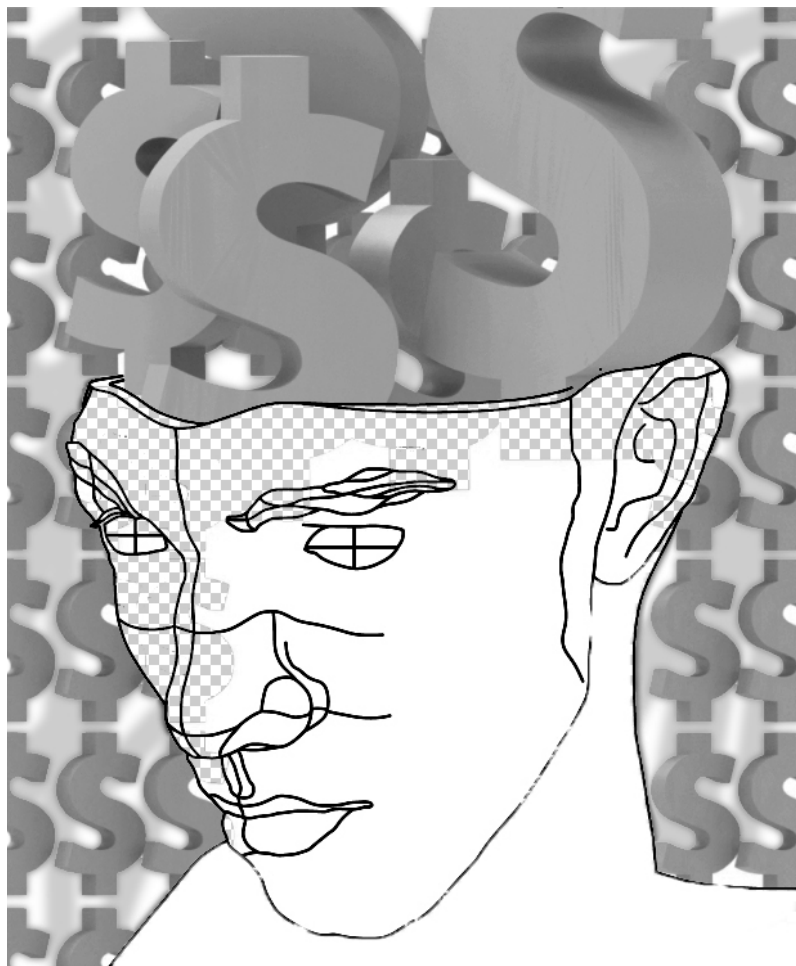
In this paper, I offer a preliminary yet practical tool to integrate complementarity within the DNP and *Kairetic accounts*. The prescription goes as so: (1) identify the context c_i , (2) use f_c to map onto a set of consistent laws S_p , (3) use those laws to construct an entailment structure, then (4) complete a standalone explanation. By mapping observational contexts to distinct similarity subspaces, context-dependent mapping f_c offers a systematic navigation around the contradictions that arise from physics, representing complementarities. Further development of this thought may be particularly useful in cases of non-negligible quantum and relativity effects before an established unification.



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GOAL ACHIEVEMENT IN CLASSICAL STOICISM AND MODERN \$TOICISM



NATHAN PHILLIPS

ABSTRACT

Many claim the philosophy of Stoicism is useful for goal achievement, suggesting it is conducive to productivity and success. However, classical Stoicism is directly opposed to goal-achievement mentalities. While Stoicism focuses primarily on developing a certain standard of moral character regardless of external circumstances, this modern goal-orientation focuses exclusively on external achievements, most often toward financial ends. Thus, I distinguish the two as Stoicism in the former and \$toicism in the latter. I discuss key differences in how the two views approach goal achievement, revealing that modern \$toicism is not a revival but a misrepresentation of classical Stoicism.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Today, we witness an intersection of self-work and goal achievement in which people attempt to transform themselves to pursue their goals. The idea is that changing oneself can make one more competitive. Many now claim to adopt Stoic philosophy as a goal-achievement tool. Proponents of this mindset display intense motivation and perseverance in adversity. They attribute these traits to Stoicism, suggesting it offers a mindset conducive to productivity and success. However, I argue that this goal-achievement ideology is antithetical to Stoicism. While it incorporates one aspect of classical Stoicism (i.e., resilience), it rejects others (i.e., temperance, indifference), consequently making the two views incompatible.

Social media influencer Andrew Tate exemplifies this misinterpretation. He espouses his so-called Stoicism as offering “unlimited energy.”¹ We can reframe negative events as opportunities for success. By becoming enraged at negative things that befall us, we can “put the energy somewhere” to be productive.² His Stoicism means channeling bad experiences into material success. By portraying this so-called Stoicism as a general remedy for one’s problems, people that are seeking success financially, socially, or romantically are drawn to it.³ Now, Tate does not completely misrepresent Stoicism. On the contrary, he ingeniously tailors it to suit a goal-oriented mindset. Stoicism is about reframing one’s perspective and coping with adversity, but it does not do so in the way he suggests. It is not about channeling rage or achieving material success. Yet these are the things being emphasized as the utility of Stoicism. While classical Stoicism develops a certain moral character regardless of external circumstances, the new success-driven mentality develops a certain character to facilitate external achievements. The former focuses inward, while the latter focuses outward. This is the fundamental opposition to be explored in this paper. These two attitudes inform irreconcilable perspectives. As such, this modern success-driven mentality represents a rejection of Stoic values, rather than a revival, and therefore fails as a form of Stoicism.

1 Patrick Bet-David, “Exclusive: Andrew Tate UNCENSORED Interview with Patrick Bet-David,” September 13, 2022, in *PBD Podcast*, produced by Valuetainment Media, podcast, Youtube, 1:53:53 to 1:53:54, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iv-C4CVGk28&t=0s>.

2 Bet-David, “Tate Interview,” 1:55:33 to 1:55:35.

3 Marcus Maloney, Callum Jones, and Steven Roberts, “‘I Can Choose to be a Good Man Even if I Got a Raw Deal’: Neoliberal Heteromascularity as Manosphere Counter Narrative in r/Stoicism,” *Social Media + Society* 10, no. 3 (2024): 5, 8, 10.1177/20563051241274677.

In §2, I name the modern mindset \$toicism to distinguish it from classical Stoicism. In §3, I explore Stoicism as presented by the ancient Stoics. This section highlights the first essential difference: the conflicting ways that Stoics and \$toics approach adversity. In §4, I discuss the second difference: how the two views approach personal satisfaction. Stoicism is not a tool to achieve goals like the \$toics believe but rather a set of intrinsically satisfying moral guidelines. §5 summarizes these differences using Seneca’s notion of a balanced life. Modern \$toicism’s obsession with goal achievement will let us conclude that it is an incompatible misrepresentation of the original Stoicism it claims to be.

II. \$TOICISM

Stoicism began reemerging in the late 20th century, prompting certain authors to coin terms like “modern Stoicism”⁴ or “popular Stoicism.”⁵ These names attempt to define relatively faithful revivals of Stoicism. As such, these names will not serve our discussion. Using variations of the term “Stoicism” to describe the obsessive goal achievement view would suggest it is a legitimate successor to classical Stoicism, but it is not. Because we are dealing with a misrepresentation, we should avoid names explicitly using the word “Stoicism.” Still, we must somehow associate these two views to prove how different they are; thus, I suggest the new ideology be called “\$toicism.” This fits the goal achievement orientation—which is often financial—while hinting at some connection to Stoicism without suggesting it is a faithful revival. We must carefully avoid comparing one to the other except to differentiate them.

III. ADVERSITY IN CLASSICAL STOICISM AND MODERN \$TOICISM

Stoics train themselves to accept whatever happens to them with equanimity by recognizing they control very few things. By concerning

4 Kátia Brunetti, “Why is Stoicism so Popular?,” *Medium* (blog), August 23, 2020, <https://katiabrunetti2.medium.com/why-is-stoicism-so-popular-f2f15f6df98a>.

5 Renata Dopierała, “Popular Stoicism in the Face of Social Uncertainty,” *Qualitative Sociology Review* 18, no. 4 (2022): 156.



ourselves only with what we can control, we can be at ease with adversity, living “free, unrestrained, and unhindered” lives.⁶ Stoics do not compete with their environment, and they do not wrestle with their circumstances to control every aspect of their lives. But that is how most people operate. We try to prevent adversity by increasing our wealth, power, or status. This, turned up to the extreme, is the modern \$toic approach. In contrast to the Stoic, the \$toic only considers a life free, unrestrained, and unhindered if adversity is utterly absent. Thus, they feel the need to control their environment to avoid adversity. The trouble with this method is that we overestimate what is controllable. This leads to frustration when we fail to obtain what we desire or fail to avoid what we are averse to.⁷ For instance, the modern salaryman chasing a promotion exhibits the \$toic goal orientation. If, despite his best efforts, he does not get promoted, this will come as a major emotional blow because of the importance he places on that goal. In contrast, the Stoics argue we only control our judgments about events. Stoics choose to value only their judgments rather than outcomes, ensuring they control what they value.

But why must Stoics fully control what they value? Is it purely from a desire to avoid adversity? To answer this, we must see how Stoics distinguish between two tiers of “good”:

1. *Primary good*: Virtuous moral character. This includes our judgments and the virtues that inform them.
2. *Preferred indifferents*: Uncontrollable goods contingent on external things. They are good only insofar as they help us pursue primary good.⁸

This distinction places primary good at the center of Stoic life. Stoics value their judgments not only to avoid adversity but also as the primary good defining virtuous moral character. Conversely, health, shelter, and food are examples of preferred indifferents as they do not contribute to the pursuit of virtue in themselves but put us in a more secure position to pursue virtue. Thus, they are instrumentally valuable, and having them can be preferred to lacking them, as long as we do not pursue them to the point of compromising our moral character. But they are ultimately indifferent because we can cultivate moral character—the only meaningful thing—without them. So, Stoics

prefer being well-fed, wealthy, and comfortable because it makes it easier to focus on developing moral character. Yet, they are perfectly content to go without these things.

Since typically desirable or aversive events (e.g., health, wealth, poverty, injury) are not in our control, they do not inform our character and therefore cannot be harmful. Consider the aspiring artist: If he fails to gain fame and wealth from his art, we do not hold that against his character. We ask questions like “Did he try his best? Did he do everything he could?” rather than judging his character based on his material success. Likewise, the Stoics judge themselves only on the content of their character: whether they did their best, acted nobly, and accepted the results with equanimity. Only what degrades our moral character should be thought harmful, and only what we control (i.e. our judgments and virtues) can degrade our character.

Now contrast the Stoic view with modern \$toicism. The \$toic is primarily concerned with the outcomes of external events. The typical \$toic is motivated by the anticipated satisfaction from achieving a goal. He is not satisfied with the mere attempt. He must succeed. In this case, our aspiring artist would not be content in the knowledge of his effort. He only finds satisfaction in material rewards that come from selling his art. Thus, if he fails to do so, he feels the emotional strain of personal insufficiency. He does not feel he is enough. Only his results make him feel he is enough. Conversely, the classical Stoic meets failure with indifference because it does not tarnish his moral character as long as he acts according to Stoic values. The Stoic does not need external success because his character makes him enough. Stoics may prefer success, but failure is not harmful. But for the \$toic, who bases his satisfaction on the goal he seeks, his happiness depends entirely on success or failure—things he cannot control.

The first difference between the two views reveals itself. Stoicism focuses on managing judgments to accept whatever happens with equanimity. On the other hand, \$toicism tries to guarantee positive outcomes because it can only accept outcomes deemed successful.

A great example of the \$toic aversion to adversity ironically comes from the most famous modern champion of Stoicism, Ryan Holiday. Holiday is a writer who has published many books on Stoicism. He is a more earnest interpreter of Stoicism than someone like Andrew Tate, but he also falls victim to the goal achievement mindset. His interpretation is perhaps more dangerous to our understanding for its greater subtlety. Holiday’s book, *The Obstacle is the Way*, showcases

6 Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, trans. Elizabeth Carter (Internet Classics Archive, 2009), <https://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/epicench.html>.

7 Epictetus, *Enchiridion*.

8 Donald Robertson, *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness: Practical Wisdom for Everyday Life: Embrace Perseverance, Strength, and Happiness with Stoic Philosophy* (John Murray Press, 2018), 42–43.



how certain hyper-successful people have applied Stoic principles to overcome adversity and get what they want.⁹ From John D. Rockefeller to Steve Jobs, the book details cases of exceptionally resilient people achieving success. Therein lies the problem. It is principally a book about material success only packaged in Stoicism. But as we know, classical Stoics accept adversity with equanimity. It is the \$toic who depends on success. It becomes clear early on that Holiday is not interested in promoting Stoicism but rather in using Stoic ideas to facilitate goal achievement. In other words, he is interested in \$toicism.

To be clear, that is his intention. Holiday does not willfully misinterpret Stoicism. Rather, he tailors it to suit his message. But that epitomizes the \$toicism problem. His work inadvertently and subtly skews our understanding of Stoicism toward \$toicism. He uses the writings of the Stoic Marcus Aurelius to teach readers how to brave adversity to “get to where you need to go.”¹⁰ The problem this presents for our understanding is that the true Stoic doesn’t “need to go” anywhere. He is content in himself as long as his character is virtuous. By applying Stoic ideas to a \$toic goal-achievement mindset, one utterly rejects the Stoic principle that material success is not inherently valuable. The \$toic attempt to change one’s environment to avoid adversity rather than change oneself to accept adversity is fundamentally incompatible with Stoicism.

So, Stoicism facilitates contentment and equanimity in adversity. The possibility of goal failure becomes insignificant when the only thing that matters (i.e., moral character) is entirely under control and can be reliably achieved. Through Stoicism, we do not avoid adversity but learn to view it such that it cannot harm us. We bring our judgments into agreement with events as they are.¹¹ However, the \$toic ethos is the opposite: one must avoid adversity by pursuing external success rather than viewing adversity as indifferent. Stoics do not argue that people with material wealth and security cannot live happy and tranquil lives, but they recognize that such circumstances are not necessary because one’s character is enough. Conversely, \$toics pursue these external circumstances because of their great need for material success on the assumption that they themselves are not enough.

But what, if anything, motivates the Stoic? We know \$toics are motivated by the anticipated benefits of achieving goals. But if Stoics are indifferent to external outcomes and instead prioritize moral character, how do they derive the satisfaction that justifies their philosophy?

⁹ Ryan Holiday, *The Obstacle is the Way: The Ancient Art of Turning Adversity to Advantage* (Profile Books, 2014).

¹⁰ Holiday, *Obstacle*, xiv.

¹¹ Epictetus, *Enchiridion*.

IV. STOIC SATISFACTION

A. STOIC ATTITUDE TOWARD GOAL ACHIEVEMENT

Stoics refuse to value the outcomes of events, rejecting the notion of satisfaction through external goals. Epictetus goes so far as to say valuing externals is to have “ruined your scheme of life.”¹² This point is best illustrated by the prime example of a Stoic goal, the “Stoic Sage.”

Stoics aspire to be like the Stoic Sage: an ideal figure who flawlessly exhibits Stoic principles. A sage is emotionally and intellectually perfect, the most equanimous, the most virtuous, the most rational, and the wisest. If satisfaction is gained by achieving goals as the \$toic believes and the Stoic aspires to sagehood, we might think the goal of Stoicism is achieving sagehood. However, this line of thinking is misguided. Stoics cannot make sagehood their ultimate goal because this is a form of external goal achievement. Attaining sagehood is not in our control. Epictetus suggests certain degrees of character are beyond our reach and that we should not assume a role we cannot fulfill.¹³ Some people may be able to reach higher degrees of moral character than others, but the Stoic Sage is not a goal meant to be reached by anyone. It is an ideal meant to inspire Stoics toward a particular lifestyle with the expectation that it will never be reached. Given that Stoics reject the notion of satisfaction through goal achievement and that the Stoic Sage is an example of such a goal, a Stoic cannot derive satisfaction from attaining sagehood without undermining their doctrine. This attitude toward sagehood extends to any external goal a Stoic pursues. One may prefer certain external circumstances insofar as they aid the pursuit of virtuous moral character, but one must ultimately recognize external things as indifferent because they are beyond control. Goals achieved do not impact one’s character but are merely preferred indifferents. Therefore, goal achievement is not an acceptable measure of satisfaction for Stoics.

B. STOICISM AS A SET OF GUIDELINES

If Stoics cannot be satisfied through external goals, why practice the philosophy? What does it offer? We should understand it as a prescriptive set of guidelines that facilitate a fulfilling lifestyle rather than a roadmap to achieving goals. The Stoic Sage is a purely theoretical yardstick that helps one measure their Stoic virtue. It is a hypothetical ideal that has never been realized in history precisely because it was

¹² Epictetus, *Enchiridion*.

¹³ Epictetus, *Enchiridion*.



not meant to be realizable.¹⁴ However, despite being fictitious, the Stoic Sage embodies a set of virtues through which to cultivate moral character. If Stoicism is taken as moral guidelines with no promise of attaining sagehood, Stoics can measure their progress by examining how well they embody these qualities moment-to-moment without having to live up to an unreasonable ideal. Thus, Stoics shift their focus from external goal achievement to something more reliable, striving to exhibit Stoic virtues day-to-day. This perspective engenders a sense of personal development through easily verifiable metrics. Stoics can know they are improving—and derive satisfaction—from how often they display Stoic virtues: coping with adversity, exercising rationality, cultivating wisdom and virtue, and so on.¹⁵ The Stoic can pursue goals just like any \$toic does, but satisfaction does not come from the goal itself, but from the manner in which the Stoic accepts the outcome. This emphasis on conduct rather than outcomes ensures Stoics always keep success in their control.

Focusing on lifestyle cultivation rather than external outcomes generates satisfaction as the Stoic perceives improvements in his character. This satisfaction comes the same way as improving a technical skill. While many athletes or musicians may never attain mastery of their craft, they derive continual satisfaction from the small improvements they make over time. Likewise, the Stoic derives satisfaction from recognizing his improvements regardless of whether he ever attains goals like sagehood. We can compare sagehood for the Stoic to reaching the NBA for a basketball player. It would be unreasonable to assume the only reason a person chooses to play basketball is to reach the NBA. Equally, the Stoic does not need to attain sagehood to be satisfied. Stoics understand gradual improvement as an end in itself and derive satisfaction through it. But note, Stoicism is not to be regarded as a method of deriving satisfaction but instead, a lifestyle that carries the byproduct of satisfaction if continually lived day-to-day, week-to-week, and ultimately throughout a lifetime. Stoic satisfaction is independent of success or failure in external pursuits.

The problem with modern \$toicism claiming to be classical Stoicism is that the former's motivation is directly opposed to the latter. \$toicism's goal is not cultivating moral virtue. Rather, it uses self-cultivation as a means to its true goal of external conquest. We have repeatedly seen how \$toicism under the guise of classical Stoicism is merely a tool to achieve external goals on which all hope is set. Failure is not an option for modern \$toics because all their satisfaction hinges on success. However, for Stoics who accept the notion of preferred

indifferents, failure is ultimately inconsequential and can be met with equanimity because success is already secured by one's effort alone. Thus, the second key difference in goal achievement between the two views is how they derive satisfaction. Stoics have complete control of their satisfaction because it comes from within, while \$toics have no control over their satisfaction because it comes from without. Consequently, the Stoic would never be motivated by the \$toic goal achievement mentality.

C. A POSSIBLE OBJECTION

At this point, one may object by saying that Stoicism still has a goal even if that goal is not sagehood. The Stoic still wants to achieve the best possible moral character, and it seems their satisfaction is bound to that end. This would put them perilously close to the \$toic mindset. Yes, Stoics still have goals. However, character cultivation is notably distinct from the \$toic type of goal. There is a sense of finality about \$toic goals absent from Stoicism. Since \$toics place their satisfaction on their goals, the implicit assumption is that “achieving X will make me happy.” They place great value on it. Thus, \$toics inadvertently deny themselves satisfaction until achieving that goal. The implicit statement underlying the above assumption is “I am not happy until I achieve X.” They expect final happiness after achievement but never before.

Stoics, on the other hand, do not view their goals in the same way. Recall the concept of preferred indifferents. Stoics can prefer certain circumstances but ultimately recognize them as indifferent. Stoics do not say, “When I achieve better moral character, I will be happy.” Instead, achieving better character is incidental. The Stoic is already satisfied by the practice of Stoicism, so his satisfaction is not contingent on achieving his goal. But \$toics are exactly the opposite. They use their dissatisfaction with their current circumstances as fuel to propel them toward their goals, and only after achieving them will they be satisfied. A \$toic expects final satisfaction after goal achievement while Stoics are continually satisfied by their daily practice with or without achieving an abstract goal.

V. A BALANCED LIFE

Both the differences discussed—handling adversity and deriving satisfaction—suggest that classical Stoics make sure not to overextend

¹⁴ Robertson, *Stoicism and Happiness*, 112.

¹⁵ Robertson, *Stoicism and Happiness*, 45.



themselves, preferring to accord with the way things are. In quite the opposite way, modern \$toics try to push the limits of what they can achieve because they lack the acceptance and equanimity that define Stoicism. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the Stoic concept of a balanced life. A Stoic manages his judgments with equanimity because he has learned to temper his expectations with the knowledge that outcomes do not affect his character. So, he balances between the excesses of extreme desire and aversion, making it possible to accept any circumstance. Conversely, the \$toic who relentlessly pursues external goals is consumed by that sense of desire and aversion. He is not balanced but overextends one way or the other in pursuit of his goals or flight from his fears. The \$toic is determined to work incessantly toward a goal, while Stoics like Seneca urge us toward a balance of work and rest. The \$toic does not seek balance but rather an all-conquering success that promises lasting satisfaction through external gain. Seneca says this is folly because external goals do not bring lasting satisfaction. They provide only brief satisfaction, and then, we quickly develop new desires.¹⁶ Thus, Stoicism is fundamentally opposed to the aim of \$toicism.

The vast differences between classical Stoicism and modern \$toicism reveal how misguided the latter is in portraying itself as a revival of the former. The ancient Stoics would reject all association with such a goal-oriented mentality, calling it, as Seneca did, “the restless energy of a hunted mind.”¹⁷

VI. CONCLUSION

Whether we should choose to live by Stoicism or \$toicism is a topic for another paper. This paper is purely descriptive as it explains why classical Stoicism is fundamentally opposed to modern \$toicism. The former stresses the indifference of things beyond our control, showing equanimity in the face of adversity, and cultivating virtuous moral character that is intrinsically satisfying. The latter promotes pursuing external goals on the assumption that those goals bring lasting satisfaction without which we cannot be content. It precludes the possibility of intrinsic satisfaction, focusing on outcomes rather than efforts. These differences highlight Stoicism’s accepting and balanced attitude toward life that counsels against overextending oneself. On

¹⁶ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic: Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, ed., trans., and comp. Robin Campbell (Penguin Classics, 2004), 62.

¹⁷ Seneca, *Letters*, 36.

the other hand, \$toicism presents a combative and ambitious ideology, glorifying overextension. This misrepresentation of Stoicism arises from one shared quality. \$toicism isolates Stoicism’s theme of resilience against adversity and manipulates it to suit goal achievement. It simultaneously omits the themes of acceptance and equanimity that make Stoicism incompatible with intense ambition. Resilience seems to offer a bridge between the two views when equivocated to suit both frameworks. But we now see how different their approaches toward such resilience are. I hope this comparison has painted a picture of two starkly opposed views to make it clear that modern \$toicism is not a revival but rather a misrepresentation of classical Stoicism.





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EXPLAINING MANSPLAINING THROUGH FRAMEWORKS OF SILENCING, EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE, AND GENDER METAPHYSICS



ABSTRACT

This paper argues that mansplaining is not just a conversational quirk but a mechanism of gender construction that reinforces systemic oppression. Drawing on the frameworks of silencing, epistemic injustice, and gender metaphysics, I come to the main thesis that mansplaining is one way gender is constructed, reinforcing hierarchical power structures and perpetuating societal inequality. As I further demonstrate, mansplaining functions as a form of epistemic violence that silences women and subordinates them within testimonial exchanges.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Mansplaining, a term coined by Rebecca Solnit in her essay “Men Explain Things to Me,” is a prevalent—albeit underestimated—gendered phenomenon with both serious implications and pernicious harms.¹ Surprisingly, despite its systematic societal impact and recognition, mansplaining’s philosophical analyses are scarce. The ones that do exist fail to address the question of gender construction in mansplaining, which, as I argue, is pivotal.

This paper’s goal is first to analyze the phenomenon of mansplaining and understand the roles of epistemic agents, the mechanisms involved, as well as the harms that follow. It will then address the question of gender, which, as I want to prove, is key to understanding mansplaining. I will examine mansplaining through three philosophical lenses: silencing (II), epistemic injustice (III), and gender metaphysics (IV) to arrive at the conclusion that mansplaining is one way gender is constructed.

To start, the framework of silencing will lay the foundation for dissecting mansplaining. This approach situates mansplaining within the realm of philosophy of language due to its fundamental nature as a testimonial exchange. The next section will unravel the magnitude of harm perpetuated by mansplaining through the framework of epistemic injustice as articulated by Miranda Fricker.² Yet, to comprehensively unpack mansplaining, an examination of power dynamics is imperative. Herein lies the role of Sally Haslanger’s account of feminist metaphysics: offering insights into the gendered construction and embeddedness of mansplaining within power structures.³ At the end of my exploration, I hope to have shed light on the gender dimension of mansplaining.

II. MANSPLAINING AS SILENCING

Mansplaining is often described as a situation that “occurs when a man talks condescendingly to someone (especially a woman) about

something he has incomplete knowledge of, with the mistaken assumption that he knows more about it than the person he’s talking to does.”⁴ This conceptualization has been extensively researched within philosophy of language and substantiated by empirical findings.⁵ Drawing from Nicole Dular’s understanding, there are two types of ‘splaining:

Mansplaining: a dysfunctional subversion of epistemic roles (of hearer/receiver of knowledge and speaker/giver of knowledge in a testimonial exchange) due to the operation of gendered prejudicial identity stereotypes.

X-splaining: a dysfunctional subversion of epistemic roles (of hearer/receiver of knowledge and speaker/giver of knowledge in a testimonial exchange) due to the operation of a prejudicial identity stereotype.⁶

What is implicit in Dular’s classification is the power dynamic. The hearer belongs to a dominant group juxtaposed against a speaker in a marginalized position.⁷ Mansplaining, as Mia Mercado puts it, “implies that the person best suited to explain the topic at hand is a man, regardless of subject matter and whether or not the man present is the one most qualified to do the explaining.”⁸

Casey Rebecca Johnson’s inquiry starts with a classification, presenting three distinct typologies of mansplaining: “‘Well, actually’ mansplaining, straw-mansplaining, and speech act-confusion mansplaining.”⁹ The forthcoming discussion will focus on mansplaining as a “speech-act confusion,” which can be characterized by its illocutionary force. Speech-acts, in general, can be analyzed on multiple levels; one can distinguish between locutionary acts (saying anything at all), illocutionary acts (saying something with a specific

4 Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. “mansplain,” accessed December 9, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mansplain>.

5 Ursula Lutzky and Robert Lawson, “Gender Politics and Discourses of #mansplaining, #manspreading, and #maninterruption on Twitter,” *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 3 (2019): <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119861807>.

6 Nicole Dular, “Mansplaining as Epistemic Injustice,” *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (University of Western Ontario, 2021): 12, 10.5206/fpq/2021.1.8482.

7 Dular, “Epistemic Injustice,” 12.

8 Mia Mercado, “Here Is What Mansplaining Actually Looks Like,” *Bustle* (2017), <https://www.bustle.com/p/here-is-what-mansplaining-actually-looks-like-because-its-way-more-common-than-you-probably-think-57097>.

9 Casey Rebecca Johnson, “Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force,” *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (University of Western Ontario, 2020), 10.5206/fpq/2020.4.8168.

1 Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me* (Haymarket Books, 2015), 1–16.

2 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

3 Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford University Press, 2013).



force), and perlocutionary acts (further effects of saying something with a specific force).¹⁰ The pivotal factor contributing to a successful performance of an illocutionary act involves the securing of uptake.¹¹ Johnson's examination operates through the lens of illocutionary force, a concept developed by Rae Langton,¹² encapsulating instances in testimonial exchanges when, due to a lack of uptake, "women are able to utter, but not able to fully successfully refuse."¹³

To get a better understanding of the concept, let us analyze the example of mansplaining as a speech-act confusion taken from Solnit's book and reformulated by Johnson:

- 1) Rebecca: I've been researching Eadweard Muybridge, and . . .
- 2) Ralph: And have you heard about the very important Muybridge book that came out this year? It considers all sorts of important . . . (*holds forth*)
- 3) Sally: That's her book
- 4) Ralph: *continues undeterred*
- 5) Sally: That's HER book!¹⁴

In (1), Rebecca intends to make an assertion, however, Ralph wrongfully interprets it as a query. Sally's utterance, in contrast to that, is clearly formulated as a reply to her interlocutor. She does not take Rebecca's utterance as a request for information or a question. In this regard, it is apparent that Rebecca's uptake fails to be successful, from Ralph's viewpoint. As Johnson emphasizes,

We can see why Ralph's behaviour is pernicious when we consider why he reacted to Rebecca's utterance (1) in the ways conventional for questions. Clearly the conversational context did not dictate that her utterance (1) must be a question. We can see from (3) that Sallie responded as if it were an assertion—she is attempting in (3) to show Ralph that he was mistaken to react as if Rebecca were trying to ask a question.¹⁵

10 John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed., eds. James Opie Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Oxford University Press, 1975), 83–164.

11 Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 138.

12 Rae Langton, "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts," *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 25–64, 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199247066.003.0002.

13 Johnson, "Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force," 8.

14 Johnson, "Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force," 15.

15 Johnson, "Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force," 16.

Ralph's response is thus informed by noxious social structures, and, as a result, Rebecca is left silenced. In Johnson's words, "This means that women who are in conversation with Ralph and people with similar habits and attitudes, are illocutionary disabled in Langton's sense."¹⁶

To try and understand Ralph's behavior, we ought to make inferences about his beliefs. In his mind, the woman's expertise is perceived as comparatively inferior. This perception positions the male individual in a self-ascribed superior stance, assuming a role of authority in proffering explanations. Consequently, this assessment likely involves ascribing woman's expertise as necessitating *his* guidance.¹⁷ Ralph's utterance in (2) suggests that he takes the gender of the speaker into account, reacting to Rebecca's utterance in the way conventional for requesting information or questioning. The fundamental issue inherent in Ralph's reaction pertains to gender dynamics' undue influence in the act of asserting statements. This reliance, consciously or not, propagates a spectrum of misogynistic beliefs.

As Johnson concludes, "Facing mansplaining as a recurrent response is frustrating, exhausting, and epistemically stunting."¹⁸ The consistent treatment of women's attempted assertions as requests for information poses an obstacle to their successful transmission of knowledge through testimony. Moreover, "Knowing that they are likely to be mansplained to may also make women reluctant to testify at all."¹⁹ Mansplaining is, thus, an *epistemically violent act* due to, in Kristie Dotson's words, "the failure, owing to pernicious ignorance, of hearers to meet the vulnerabilities of speakers in linguistic exchanges."²⁰

While mansplaining as an instance of silencing is a useful and informative theory, it has notable limitations. Primarily, the research overlooks the ethical dimensions of the harms inflicted by mansplaining. Silencing constitutes a grave ethical wrong insofar as its victims are undermined in the capacity to transmit knowledge—the capacity that makes them rational beings.²¹ Furthermore, Johnson's analysis does not encompass the entirety of mansplaining instances, warranting a more comprehensive theoretical scope. Nevertheless,

16 Johnson, "Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force," 17.

17 Johnson, "Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force," 17.

18 Johnson, "Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force," 17.

19 Johnson, "Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force," 18.

20 Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing," *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 236, 10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01177.x.

21 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 44.



philosophy of language provides a solid foundation for the continued exploration of the phenomenon.

III. MANSPLAINING AS EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

Miranda Fricker's book, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, lays the groundwork for a field that aims at exploring epistemic practices in connection with societal injustices as well as their ethical and epistemic implications.²² Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice is particularly relevant to understanding phenomena like mansplaining where women's testimony is undervalued due to identity-based prejudice.²³ In this section, I will use the concept of epistemic injustice in order to examine ethical and epistemic harms done to the rightful giver of knowledge in instances of mansplaining.

To grasp the depth of mansplaining, one must explore the concept of power—i.e., identity power—that Fricker bases her theory on.²⁴ As she elaborates, “identity power is an integral part of the mechanism of testimonial exchange, because of the need for hearers to use social stereotypes as heuristics in their spontaneous assessments of their interlocutor's credibility.”²⁵ In a situation where the stereotype embodies negative prejudice against the speaker, what follows is a deflated judgment of her credibility that culminates in both epistemic and ethical dysfunction.

Fricker's central case of testimonial injustice unfolds when:

1. A hearer must judge the credibility of a speaker,
2. the hearer assigns a speaker less credibility than they are due, and
3. this credibility deficit can be traced back to prejudice.²⁶

Testimonial injustice can be incidental, if its origin and consequences are isolated; or systematic, if it shares a common origin and consequences with other injustices across different spheres of the subject's life.²⁷ Mansplaining is thus a systematic case of a prejudicial

credibility deficit. As Fricker emphasizes, such cases, if persistent, can be seriously harmful due to a serious epistemic insult, a loss of epistemic courage, as well as other ethical and epistemic harms.²⁸

To get to the core of this exploration, one must examine the primary harms that mansplaining causes—the harms that make it noxious. Fricker focuses on an account of epistemic injustice involving “one being wronged in their capacity as a knower.”²⁹ According to her, for rational beings, being a knower is essential to our human value and intrinsic worth.³⁰ As she concludes, “when someone suffers a testimonial injustice, they are degraded *qua* knower, and they are symbolically degraded *qua* human.”³¹ However, I argue that in instances of testimonial injustice where the underlying prejudiced stereotype explicitly includes the notion that the relevant social category is inherently lesser—such as in the case of mansplaining—the dimension of degradation *qua* woman is not simply symbolic, it is a part of the core epistemic insult.

What follows are secondary harms, such as epistemic and practical harms, as well as harms to one's identity. As Fricker notes, the former can result in a loss of knowledge, which is an epistemic disadvantage for the speaker and an epistemic dysfunction for her community.³² Additionally, certain epistemic virtues, like epistemic courage, might be lost as well.³³ Practical harms can simply result in not getting a job, whereas harms to one's identity may result in one losing self-confidence in herself as an expert or even a giver of knowledge.³⁴

The concept of testimonial injustice does not encompass mansplaining fully. On the contrary, it seems to be a perfect addition to the previously explained concept of silencing. What silencing failed to address—the ethical and epistemic harms—can be found in Fricker's theory. Therefore, to continue the exploration, we need to come up with a new definition of the phenomenon. I propose the following:

Mansplaining is a systematic case of gendered prejudicial credibility deficit that leads to a subversion of the roles of a “speaker/giver of knowledge” and “hearer/receiver of knowledge.” It carries significant epistemic and ethical harms, as well as bears illocutionary force. Due to gender prejudice,

28 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 58.

29 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 44.

30 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 44.

31 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 44.

32 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 46.

33 Dular, “Mansplaining as Epistemic Injustice,” 16.

34 Especially noteworthy in academia, if we follow Dular in “Mansplaining as Epistemic Injustice,” 17.

22 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

23 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

24 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

25 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 17.

26 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

27 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 27.



the man imposes his testimony on the woman and refuses to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange, owing to ignorance. As a result, he undermines her in the capacity of a knower, degrading her *qua* human.

Overall, epistemic injustice explains the phenomenon well. However, even though it is rooted in questions of power, it addresses the question of gender as far as gender stereotype, hence. The question of gender construction remains untouched. That is where gender metaphysics come in.

IV. GENDER METAPHYSICS—THE KEY TO IT ALL

In this paper, gender has already been addressed in some manner. It was, however, mostly in relation to the creation and impact of stereotypes. As stated, it is imperative to recognize that at the very core of mansplaining lies gender and its construction. Both in the analyses of mansplaining as illocutionary force and mansplaining as epistemic injustice, it is taken for granted. To examine how power relations unfold, I need to disentangle the gender construction that takes place in the dysfunctional testimonial exchange. The culmination of this paper is a detailed analysis of the testimonial exchange that takes place in mansplaining, with an emphasis on the social construction of gender(s).

It is common for people to say that gender is the social meaning of sex. That is not wrong *per se*, but as a definition, it is ambiguous and semantically underspecified. A better distinction is offered by Sally Haslanger in her work, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*.³⁵ As she contends, our patriarchal framework is structured by the assumption that there are two (and only two) sexes; a person is either a female or a male.³⁶ By enforcing that view, not only does one deny the existence of intersex people, but they also give rise to a much stronger assumption: that there are only two genders, a man and a woman.³⁷ As Haslanger elaborates, “Gender, as opposed to sex is not about testicles and ovaries, the penis and the uterus,

but about identities or about the location of groups within a system of social relation.”³⁸ She defines gender as a social class structured hierarchically by oppressive relations where physical markers justify differential treatment.³⁹

Haslanger’s account of gender involves the background assumption that women are oppressed and that they are oppressed *qua* women. Moreover, oppression is a structural phenomenon that positions certain groups as disadvantaged and others as advantaged or privileged in relation to them. It comes in different forms, such as cultural imperialism and exploitation; or, in the case of mansplaining—marginalization, powerlessness, and systematic epistemic violence.

What Haslanger offers is an analysis that defines gender as a *social class*.⁴⁰ She grasps the concept as follows:

S functions as a woman in context C iff_{df}

- i) S is observed or imagined in C to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female’s biological role in reproduction;
- ii) that S has these features marks S within the background ideology of C as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social positions that are in fact subordinate (and so motivates and justifies S ’s occupying such a position); and
- iii) the fact that S satisfied (i) and (ii) plays a role in S ’s systematic subordination in C , that is, along some dimension, S ’s social position in C is oppressive, and S ’s satisfying (i) and (ii) plays a role in that dimension of subordination.⁴¹

As we already know, the very process of mansplaining starts with a testimonial exchange and leads to a subversion of the roles of a giver and receiver of knowledge. To look at the process through the lens of gender construction, in Haslanger’s conceptualization, we need to first assume that gender is a social class and is positioned in a hierarchy.⁴² Moreover, gender

categories are defined hierarchically within a broader complex of oppressive relations; one group (*viz.*, women) is

35 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 229–30.

36 Sally Haslanger, “The Sex/Gender Distinction and the Social Construction of Reality,” *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry, Serene J. Khader, Alison Stone (Routledge, 2017), 158, 10.4324/9781315758152-14.

37 Haslanger, “The Sex/Gender Distinction,” 158.

38 Haslanger, “The Sex/Gender Distinction,” 167.

39 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 229–30.

40 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 228.

41 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 235.

42 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 229–30.



socially positioned as subordinate to the other (viz., men), typically within the context of other forms of economic and social oppression.⁴³

The man, in the act of mansplaining, not only constructs his gender in relation to the woman but also imposes the subordinate position—womanhood—on the interlocutor. This act is not only harmful because of the actions of the individual man, but when situated in the broader context of structural oppression towards women, it reinforces gender stereotypes and binary frameworks and simply fortifies patriarchy. Mansplaining is thus one way gender is constructed.

Given that mansplaining functions within broader patriarchal structures, it does more than reinforce stereotypes—it actively constructs and maintains the category of womanhood as a site of epistemic subordination. However, one might argue that this presumes womanhood is inherently oppressive. Haslanger’s framework does not claim that being a woman is necessarily tied to oppression *in all contexts*, but rather that gender, as socially constructed, operates within a hierarchical system. The category of “woman” exists within structures that position it in opposition to male privilege, reinforcing subordination through epistemic and material conditions. Yet, this raises an important question: could womanhood exist outside of oppression? Haslanger acknowledges that if social conditions changed—if oppressive structures were dismantled—the category of woman could take on a different meaning or even cease to exist in its current form.⁴⁴ This is what makes gender a contingent rather than an essential property. In this sense, my argument aligns with Haslanger’s social constructivist approach: mansplaining reinforces a specific historical and structural version of womanhood, but the category itself is neither fixed nor necessarily oppressive outside current patriarchal conditions.

In conclusion, Haslanger’s framework provides a solid understanding of how gender operates as a social class, influencing individuals’ behaviors and reinforcing structural oppression.⁴⁵ Mansplaining, viewed through her lens, is one way gender is constructed. It becomes evident that mansplaining is not merely an isolated incident, but a manifestation of broader societal structures and power relations rooted in gender construction.

V. CONCLUSION

This essay aimed to elucidate the phenomenon of mansplaining through frameworks of silencing, epistemic injustice, and gender metaphysics. It unpacked the phenomenon, examined the roles of epistemic agents within testimonial exchanges, uncovered its underlying mechanisms, and addressed the resulting harms, emphasizing the pivotal role of gender in its interpretation.

The first section, “Mansplaining as Silencing,” provided a semantic foundation for further exploration. I started by bringing up Dular’s definition of mansplaining as “dysfunctional subversion of epistemic roles in testimonial exchange,” driven by gender-based prejudicial identity stereotypes.⁴⁶ Next, by analyzing an example taken from Solnit’s book, I examined Johnson’s thesis of mansplaining as illocutionarily disabling.⁴⁷ Understanding mansplaining as an obstacle to women’s successful transmission of knowledge through testimony, an act of silencing, and an epistemically violent one, provides the basis to underscore it as a pernicious phenomenon with serious implications.

In the next section, “Mansplaining as Epistemic Injustice,” I elaborated on harms that mansplaining causes, applying Fricker’s theory.⁴⁸ The central point frames mansplaining partially as testimonial injustice. Mansplaining was found to be a systematic case of a prejudicial credibility deficit. In this act, not only is the interlocutor “wronged in their capacity as a knower,” but also degraded *qua* woman.⁴⁹

What constituted a research gap was an exploration of mansplaining as a phenomenon that has gender construction at its very core. To start, I differentiated the terms “sex” and “gender,” then brought up Haslanger’s conceptualization of gender categories as hierarchical in terms of how one is socially positioned. In a setting where women constitute a subordinate group and men belong to the dominant one, gender is established as a social class.⁵⁰ I argued that the actions of the man do not only construct his gender in relation to the woman but also impose the subordinate position—womanhood—on his interlocutor. This leads to the conclusion that mansplaining is one way gender is constructed. What remained imperative was the

46 Dular, “Mansplaining as Epistemic Injustice,” 12.

47 Johnson, “Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force,” 17.

48 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

49 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 44.

50 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 228.

43 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 229–30.

44 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 261–69.

45 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 228.



acknowledgment of how prejudicial the phenomenon is. This is not because of the actions of the individual man, but instead is situated in the broader context of structural oppression towards women, as it reinforces gender stereotypes and binary frameworks and upholds societal structures that perpetuate power imbalances.

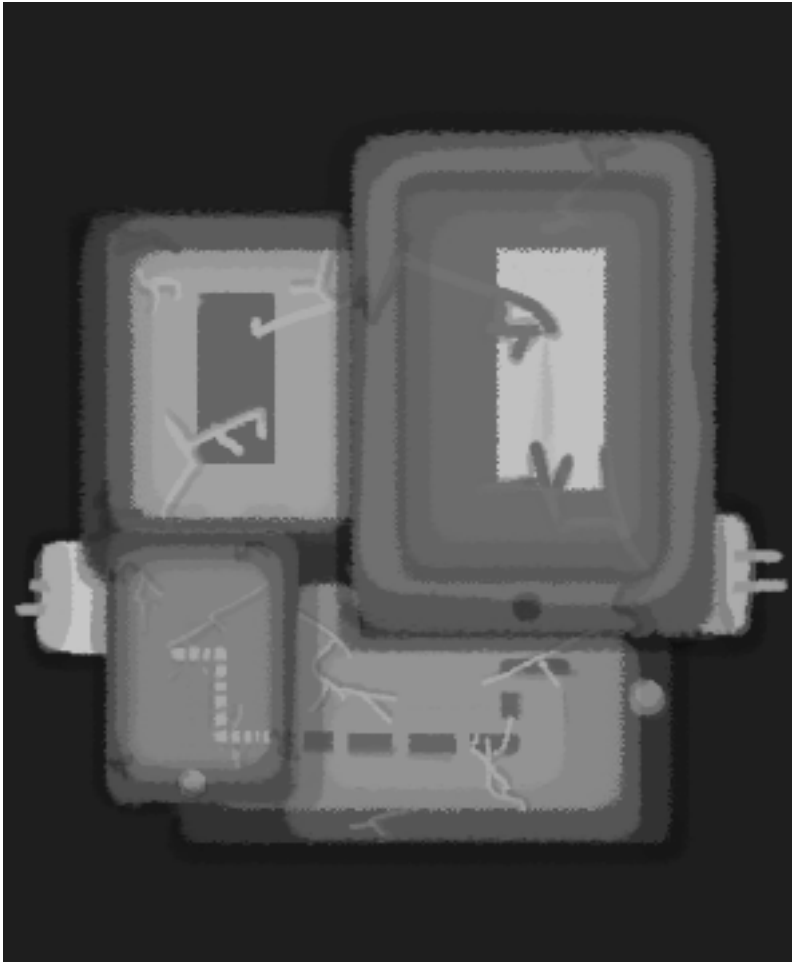
In final words, mansplaining is a distortive, epistemically violent phenomenon with a distinct illocutionary force. It is a disruptive subversion of the roles of a speaker/giver of knowledge and hearer/receiver of knowledge that brings harms into account, reinforcing oppressive, hierarchical structures. It extends beyond individual instances and reflects deeper societal frameworks and power dynamics embedded in the construction of gender. Taking it as a conversational quirk not only diminishes the epistemically destructive nature of the phenomenon but also is simply an act that distorts women's perception of reality.



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THE RENDING OF THE VEIL: Tarrying with the Technological Sublime



SAM GOURLAY

ABSTRACT

The potentially philosophically problematic aspects of modern technology have been the subject of much discourse in recent times. The new kinds of incorporeal online spaces that are available to engage with have untold consequences on the formation of subjectivity. When phenomenological arguments about the nature of being are considered, the way that we display ourselves online becomes in need of exploration. This paper hypothesizes an exploration of what new relations toward the world have arisen through our relation to the sublime in technology. To this end, we must examine how deeply the feeling of the sublime in technology has affected subjectivity and intelligence.

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I. INTRODUCTION

What, then, could a horizon for technology look like? In a recent article, Slavoj Žižek wrote that “if something resembling ‘post-humanity’ emerges as a collective fact, our worldview will lose all three of its defining, overlapping subjects: humanity, nature, and divinity.”¹ The ability to apprehend a true concept of a post-human future is, of course, completely impossible—what is however (not) encountered here is (a feeling of) the sublime (of technology).² We can characterize the sublime as an experience with misrepresentation. It is the feeling produced by encountering the limits of reason, more specifically a failure of reason. Is it not precisely this encounter with the sublime, however, that brings out in its excess a cover—which we may call fantasy—to deal with failure? Then, the entire presence of fear that could be present in this interaction becomes obscured due to our inability to perceive the existence of the sublime. Instead, we come to deal only with the possibility of its existence. Then, the character of fear—insofar as a proximity to technology does produce fear—must be located elsewhere. It is instead in the desire for, and subsequent production of a fantasy of, a pre-technological age that is the true problematic. The project, then, is to highlight that the location of the problematic of technology lies in the rejection of it rather than in its embrace. Using a Kantian mapping of transcendental imagination and the sublime, as well as Sherry Turkle’s theory of evocative objects, we shall approach an understanding of the new relations toward the world that have arisen through our relation to the sublime in technology.

II. DOWN THE RABBIT (W)HOLE: KANT WITH THE MARIONETTE

First, let us go about using a Kantian construction of cognition to establish a framework for a relationship between subject and technology. Fundamentally, the subject, as a finite being, can only apprehend its surroundings through its faculty of intuition initially. Then, the faculty of imagination acts as a sort of mediator between these sensuous intuitions and understanding—here, imagination is

that which conjoins the manifold of sense experience.³ The subject, because it appears within time, space, and causality, is incapable of completely grasping the world as a totality, so we can remark that the way in which the subject experiences the world is fragmented. In fact, the very concept of totality can only become available to the subject through the imaginary joining of components. In this way, our very basic immersion in the world is grounded in a failure to perceive things-in-themselves (*ding an sich*). The object of my experience is mine in the way that I apprehend it and fashion it into concept. The point here is that one must conceive of the subject in relation to technology as a being which already contains within itself a fundamental failure, but it is this very failing that allows the subject to become what it is. Then, the world in which the subject dwells is a phenomenal one, an immersion in the world that happens through concepts, meaning we can have no relationship toward things-in-themselves. The object is always mine: “As phenomenal entities, we are caught in the web of causal connections, whilst our intelligence (that fact that, as moral subjects, we are free, self-originating agents) indicates the noumenal dimension.”⁴ I aim to apply this understanding of intelligence throughout this project. In the context of technology, insofar as a piece of technology can be categorized as an object, it is always something which is already mine.

However, whilst this conception of the subject certainly applies to the subject of technology, an artificial intelligence, which is a technology of the subject, could not possess this type of immersion in the world—it is totally unable to participate in the phenomenal world. In fact, Kant seems to pre-empt something like an artificial intelligence. In his critique of practical reason, he gives an example of how man dwelling in the noumenal, or the world of things-in-themselves, would act: “The moral worth of actions, on which alone the worth of the person and even of the world depends in the eyes of supreme wisdom, would not exist at all. The conduct of man, so long as his nature remained as it now is, would be changed into mere mechanism, where, as in a puppet show, everything would gesticulate well but no life would be found in the figure.”⁵ From this passage, we can infer that Kant places the intelligence of man in his ability to treat objects as phenomena and to act morally, which, as I stated earlier, relies on a failure at first. Since Artificial Intelligence is programmed, it does not contain the failure within the subject that gives way to this intelligence, meaning that it

1 Slavoj Žižek, “The Post-Human Desert,” *Project Syndicate*, April 7, 2023, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/ai-post-human-future-by-slavoj-zizek-2023-04>.

2 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (A & D 2018), 97–124.

3 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 202–45.

4 Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (Verso, 2009), 24.

5 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (MacMillan, 1956), 152–53.



would be cut off from any sort of phenomenal engagement with the world. The AI model Chat GPT, when asked about its own compatibility with this definition, answered, “I lack consciousness, self-awareness, understanding, and personal experiences. I don’t possess intentions, emotions, or a moral compass. I operate based on patterns learned from diverse data during training.”⁶ This answer coincides well with Kant’s “puppet show.” Žižek draws a parallel here with something like non-alcoholic beer or decaffeinated coffee because the exact essence of the thing—intelligence in this case—is subtracted: “I know very well that I am not talking to a real person, but it feels as though I am—and without any of the accompanying risks!”⁷

Overall, the significance of these observations is to point out the deadlock present between the subject and its technological object: Artificial Intelligence acts more like a sort of mirror for us, answering only when spoken to. Following Joan Copjec in *Read My Desire*, we can conceive of the mirror as a screen, a place where I create a secondary identification with the image upon seeing an image of myself, but AI seems to create an inversion of this: a screen that functions as a mirror.⁸ As an object, AI seems to be able to appropriate the gaze in the Lacanian sense, not as the act of looking but as the object of looking. Copjec says, “The gaze of the other is not confirming; it will not validate you,” meaning that the validation I gain from the gaze of the other is an association I must myself make.⁹ AI as a responsive object contains the potential for the subject to associate the same validation that it requires from a human other, without the “humanity.” For a further investigation into the problematic nature of technology, we must keep this deadlock in mind.

III. FRANKENSTEIN’S OTHER: HEGEL AS A USER OF TINDER

Following our conception of the transcendental imagination as a mediator, a change of emphasis will be useful in highlighting the failure present within the intelligence of the subject. This can be achieved by shifting from its passive Kantian conception to the Hegelian “night of the world.” For Hegel, imagination is a violent thing which

functions by ripping things out of their context and stitching them back up: “Imagination enables us to tear the texture of reality apart, to treat as effectively existing something that is merely a component of a living whole.”¹⁰ It is this gap, opened up by violent imposition of transcendental imagination, that opens up the possibility of understanding. The point here is that there is a kind of pre-ontological, elementary violence within the subject, a wound that allows for a subsequent construction of something like an identity. Is this not the same way that we have constructed something like social media? Social media is a new kind of application of the symbolic in that there is an elementary violence in the way we mutilate ourselves and our image to create a kind of Frankenstein of an online self. The relation toward the technological object gives us a framework to access the online space, which we have fashioned in our image. If we are to take Hegel as a user of a dating app—“here a bloody head suddenly shoots up and there another white shape, only to disappear as suddenly”—the way that people appear to us online contains a radical subjectivity because we can only see what the other wants us to see—or more precisely, we only show what we think the other wants to see.¹¹ The inherent “wound” within the subject which must be covered is what Hegel calls “the night of the world.” Through this, social media then seems to come naturally to us since we are used to mutilating ourselves. This is the way in which technology has catalyzed a drive into abstraction: A deeper focus on introspection has come about through the short circuiting of desire. Turkle draws a parallel here between Freud’s conception of “time out” during reality testing and the “time out” from reality that is offered to us through the online space, “the psychosocial moratorium,” which allows us to experiment with our identities.¹²

However, this is not to say that the online space is in any way a kind of freedom or a positive place that allows us to come to a more complete understanding of ourselves. The Hegelian move here is to point out the fact that the excess drawn out by the identity building indulgence of the online space is exactly just that: pure excess, which often resembles a nightmarish realm where anything is permitted. The film *Blue Velvet* by David Lynch is a great example of this.¹³ The scene with Frank and Dorothy in her apartment depicts a kind of roleplay between the two that regresses into a primal oedipal encounter, with

¹⁰ Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 33.

¹¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, “Jenaer Realphilosophie,” in *Frühe Politische Systeme: System der Sittlichkeit* (Ullstein, 1974), 204, qtd. in Donald Phillip Verene, *Hegels Recollection* (SUNY Press, 1985), 7–8.

¹² Turkle qtd. in André Nusselder, *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology* (MIT Press, 2009), 11.

¹³ *Blue Velvet*, directed by David Lynch (1986; MGM Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

⁶ ChatGPT, response to “Do you dwell in the phenomenal or noumenal of the world?” December 7, 2023, OpenAI, <https://chat.openai.com/chat>.

⁷ Žižek, “The Post-Human Desert.”

⁸ Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Verso, 2015), 30.

⁹ Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 36.



Frank screaming “Mommy” over and over into the crotch of Dorothy. Žižek provides a useful analysis of this scene:

Dorothy’s apartment is one of those hellish places . . . a place where all moral or social inhibitions seem to be suspended, where everything is possible, the lowest masochistic sects of obscenity, the deepest level of our desires that we are not even ready to admit to ourselves, we are confronted with here.¹⁴

This scene is reminiscent of many online spaces. The gap between object and representation is widened in any digital representation, and this gap is covered by fantasy, allowing online spaces like chatrooms to embody a pure fantasy. Fantasy in the way Lacan intends is a means to sustain desire, which is exactly what structures the online space. In other words, the online space essentially exists as a window for desire, for “desire is the essence of reality.”¹⁵ The idea of the technological device as the object which frames the online space is a useful metaphor for this idea of the screen as the mirror. When functioning as this kind of mirror, we are given an insight into the nature of our desire, and we are blindly offered a short-circuiting to anything we may desire, which reveals the self-replicating hidden law of desire that we submit to when entering this space. The Kantian point here is that, in fact, this not a type of freedom but quite the opposite. It is falling into a pure excessive indulgence that is more akin to enslavement. In reality, true freedom comes about only through discipline as a means to deliver us from animalistic instinctual action.¹⁶

Now, whilst a grim picture may have been painted of the modern technological age, the point to be aware of is that the danger of technology finds its root in our already problematic immersion in reality. The objects we create are always-already projections of desire, and the technological object functions very well at giving us near unlimited access to desire. We cast our aims over the object and appropriate them as such. Through this, the problems that come about through the technological object are still mine. What opens up here is the opportunity for a different type of relation to the object. Especially against the background of an ever-advancing technological society, what better time is there to reevaluate what it is that makes an object special?

14 *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*, directed by Sophie Fiennes, written and scripted by Slavoj Žižek (P Guide Ltd., 2006), documentary, DVD.

15 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIV: The Logic of Phantasy, 1966–1967*, trans. Cormac Gallagher (Karnac 2002), 6.

16 Immanuel Kant, *On Education*, trans. Annette Churton (Dover, 2003), 3–5.

IV. TURKLE’S EVOCATIVE OBJECT

Richard Wagner, in his final work, *Parsifal*, uses the poetic phrase “*Die Wunde schließt der Speer nur der sie schlug*,” which means “the wound may only be healed by the spear that smote it.”¹⁷ Žižek’s use gives this phrase a Hegelian twist, saying that sometimes oppression is the only thing that can open up the possibility for freedom. In other words, an embrace of the very cause of the problem becomes the solution. In a broader sense, the application of this idea to Hegel’s philosophy would be that it is, in fact, the wound created by the failure of the transcendental imagination—the night of the world—that allows for our subsequent ability to create ourselves. Žižek highlights how Martin Heidegger displays that the horizon of modern technology has already embedded within itself its own rejections: “The ecological critique of the technological exploitation of nature ultimately lead to a more ‘environmentally sound’ technology.”¹⁸ Therefore, insofar as modern technology is problematic, the solution must not be thought of as a rejection. In fact, the most dangerous aspect of something which defines an epoch is always its rejection since this is the ideological move that harbors the kernel of fascism: the desire to go back to a time that does not exist. It is easy to indulge ourselves in this ideological trap because technology now allows us the chance to retroactively redeem our past selves by shifting the blame on to the modern age. Of course, the paradox here is that it is impossible to go back in time. In fact, an attempt to return to the past would inherently be creating something new. Turkle shows how this phenomenon is being incited more than ever. Her concept of the “nostalgia of the young” shows us a new happening where young people seem to harbor a nostalgia for a time which they did not experience.¹⁹ What we really seek in this feeling is, again, a chance to retroactively redeem ourselves, seek shelter in the past, and hide away from the world in front of us.

Looking forward at a world in which we can coexist with technology, I use Turkle’s concept of the evocative object as a means of addressing the problematic of technology, not by rejecting it but rather through an embrace of it. The influence of capitalism over technology is seen most clearly through importance placed on the production of capital rather than functionality and efficiency. In this way capitalism restricts creativity, with a common instance being a useless convenience—for example, voice activated lights, when a

17 Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*, 3.2.271, 1882.

18 Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 14.

19 Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (Basic Books, 2012), 265–78.



switch is already convenient. This dependence on gimmickry exposes the actual goal of capitalist technology, which is to create capital rather than to better the world. However, this is not to say that the goal of technology should be to better the world. Instead, we should remember the fundamental failures within the subject. The nature of existence in this way is always a struggle, always a reinventing. We should not be seduced by idealism. Rather, our understanding of what technology could be ought to be considered alongside the understanding that the emergence of identity is a process which is never finished. Then, the chance for a different relation toward the technological object comes in our ability to embrace an object which does not have any rational advantages. This is how Lacan conceives of love. It is a fundamentally irrational thing. It is not simply a satisfaction of needs but a dependence on a person which completely contradicts reason: “I cannot live without you.”²⁰ Turkle states that “Objects bring Philosophy down to earth.”²¹ Her work *Evocative Objects* chronicles the relation of people to objects which have had a definitive role in their life and how they can disclose history and memory. It posits that the object is always mine, and I can infer onto it a higher meaning and make it something more than it is.²² If our lover were to ask us, “why do you love me?” of course, there could be no satisfactory answer, for to reduce love to something rational would cause it to lose its essence. To this, Lacan says, “The only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one’s desire,” meaning that grounding desire would cause it to lose its essence that makes it desire.²³ What this means for the problematic of technology is that while of course many modern crises—climate change, AI, poverty—are certainly incited by and supported through modern technologies, we have also been given the unique opportunity to reclaim a relation to that object. What we realize through our reduction to consumers and data is precisely that we cannot be reduced to our data. There is a radical subjectivity that exists in the abyss of transcendental imagination: the night of the world.

V. CONCLUDING

Then, what has been established throughout is that the root of our fear of technology, insofar as it does create fear, is something which

20 Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (Routledge, 1992), 171–90.

21 Sherry Turkle, *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (MIT Press, 2011), 308.

22 Turkle, *Evocative Objects*, 8.

23 Lacan, *Psychoanalysis*, 319.

is not unique to technology. The elementary, pre-ontological wound that lies at the heart of the subject means that our immersion in the world is always grounded in a failure. However, it is because of this failure, this lacking, that we can then create ourselves. One extreme future that technology could produce is a post-human one, where the creation of an artificial intelligence far surpasses the limits of man. The conception of this is impossible to apprehend, for we cannot view history in its entirety. In this sense, the idea of intelligence that can invoke a feeling of the sublime. It is a failing in our imagination, which is something that we can only know because of intelligence’s absence. I invoke here the work of Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, and the hellscapes which exist without symbolic signification.²⁴ This is the kind of realm that a post-human future could mean. On the other extreme, a technologically-driven capitalism seeks the opposite. It desires a reduction of the subject to standing-order that can be instrumentalized in the creation of capital. Both of these images are potential representations of a technologically-driven future. However, the background of these traumatic possibilities allow the modern subject of technology to keep in mind the inner workings of intelligence and the incorruptible essence of subjectivity. Heidegger did well in his use of Hölderlin: “Full of merit, yet poetically man dwells on this earth.”²⁵

24 Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1503–15, oil on oak panels, 81 in. x 152 in., Madrid, Museo del Prado.

25 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2013), 211.





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A HISTORY OF MARXIST HEGEMONY: From Plekhanov to Gramsci



ABSTRACT

Hegemony, as popularized by Antonio Gramsci, has earned great importance in Marxist debates over the conquest of power. Unsurprisingly, this has also led to a renewed exploration of its origins in the writings of Vladimir Lenin, Georgi Plekhanov, and even Karl Kautsky as argued by the historian Lars Lih. This paper examines that history by returning to their original writings and contemporary analysis by Grigory Zinoviev. In doing so, I demonstrate a fundamental break between the original "strategy" of hegemony found in earlier theorists and Lenin's "theory" of hegemony as elaborated upon by Gramsci.

SYLUS SMITH

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I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of all revolutionary and transformative ideologies, the question of gaining power is a constant. Marxism is no stranger to this matter, and with each passing generation, the yearning for an answer has only burned hotter. For Marxists, there are few topics within this broader question which can claim greater importance and contention than that of political consciousness: what can arise “spontaneously” simply by natural struggles under capitalism, what has to be taught by an organization, what sort of organizations are best suited to this or that lesson, etc. It is in this context that the notion of hegemony enters the scene.

Hegemony is simply the concept of leadership, specifically of politico-ideological leadership. That is to say, it is the idea of one “group” being trusted by another in their perspective of how things work and what must be done about that in the field of politics. One may find that this most basic foundation stretches from Georgii Plekhanov to Antonio Gramsci.¹ In this regard, the term was first actually used by Pavel Axelrod, but he was merely giving a word to something which had already been elaborated upon by Plekhanov.² It is already easy enough to see how confused the history of the idea may become given this fact.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that there is no firm consensus on that history. If one were to ask Gramsci, hegemony truly begins with Lenin, but the historians who investigate this matter cannot seem to fully grasp how.³ Whether that is the simple confusion of some New Left era historians as noted by Alan Shandro or, more recently, the reduction of Lenin’s conception of hegemony to a strategy specifically relating to the bourgeois-democratic revolution as argued by Lars Lih, is hard to say.⁴ This does make for a curious claim on the part of Gramsci as Plekhanov obviously comes first in proposing such a strategy.

If, however, one looks back to Lenin’s contemporaries, Gramsci’s claim of an original theoretical contribution becomes far more

sensible again. When writing his history of the party, Grigorii Zinoviev featured hegemony extensively. Not only for the early question of the bourgeois revolution, but as a universal matter applying to all existing governments and aspiring revolutionary movements. When doing so, he wrote of both Plekhanov and Lenin as “founders.”⁵ One may suspect this to be a mere political trick, yet Zinoviev refers to specific examples of the incomplete nature of Plekhanov’s arguments when compared to Lenin’s.

By incomplete, I mean to say that Plekhanov’s writings on hegemony are of a purposefully narrow definition applied to very specific circumstances. As I will explain later, Plekhanov had a “strategy” of hegemony in which the workers would lead a bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia. By contrast, Gramsci presents a more universal “theory” of hegemony, one in which these ideas about leadership apply between all classes under all circumstances. The confusion which I initially referred to lies in the consensus failure to distinguish between the two and the failure to appreciate that Lenin created the distinction.

The purpose of this paper is thus to investigate whether Lenin was merely continuing with Plekhanov’s formula or if he had made some meaningfully innovative break as suggested by Gramsci. Otherwise, Lenin may be reduced, as Lih essentially argues, to little more than an Erfurtian—someone basing their political strategy around the German Social Democratic Party’s (SPD) Erfurt program as interpreted by Karl Kautsky—in Russia.⁶ Even more measured writings still place Lenin as an acolyte of Plekhanov or as an unwitting practitioner of “Gramscian hegemony.”⁷ In order to get to the truth of the matter, I first analyze the two more clearly distinct theorists in Plekhanov and Gramsci. Afterwards, I turn to Lenin, clear delineations in hand, so as to correct the current consensus denying his “original and creative contribution” to Marxism.

II. PLEKHANOV AND HEGEMONY

For the simple reason of chronology, I find it best to begin with Plekhanov’s conception of hegemony. Some revealing remarks are most clearly revealed in his polemic against Lev Tikhomirov, who,

1 Georgii Plekhanov, “Speech at the International Workers’ Socialist Congress in Paris,” in *Selected Philosophical Works*, (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1981), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1889/07/speech.html>; Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Volume 1*, trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg (Columbia University Press, 1992).

2 Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is To Be Done? In Context* (Haymarket Books, 2008), 109.

3 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Volume 2*, trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg (Columbia University Press, 1996), 187.

4 Alan Shandro, *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony: Political Practice and Theory in the Class Struggle* (Brill Academic Pub, 2014), 4; Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 98.

5 Grigorii Zinoviev, *History of the Bolshevik Party: A Popular Outline*, trans. R. Chappell (New Park Publications, 1974), 35.

6 Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 113–14.

7 Shandro, *Logic of Hegemony*, 3–5.



at the time, was a Narodnik.⁸ Narodniks followed an ideology which believed in a peasant-led revolution for socialism. This fact must be kept in mind when one considers how Plekhanov seems to skip between the overthrow of capitalism and the unification of anti-Tsarist forces. Without worrying about such matters right now, we can see that Plekhanov identifies the proletariat as the “hegemonic class.”

What does he say of the hegemonic class? It will pursue revolutionary social upheaval, and it shall do so by specific means. Those means are uniting the peasants and anti-Tsarist forces. But we must remember Plekhanov’s earliest words on this matter: The revolution against the tsar—which is to say, the bourgeois democratic revolution—can only triumph if it is a movement of the proletariat. Thus, he proclaims a movement led by the workers but dependent upon exercising an ideological influence over other classes. With that, we have the basic idea of hegemony: ideological leadership of one class with regard to another.

If it was not clear by now, Plekhanov’s concern with this leadership is its use as a weapon against Tsarism. When he spoke of the revolutionary movement in 1889, he was not referring to the ultimate goal of socialism and proletarian dictatorship. Plekhanov was speaking specifically of “storming the stronghold of autocracy,”⁹ the practical meaning of which is made all the clearer when one reviews his previously written political program.¹⁰ This part is not distinct. The “strategy of hegemony” held by all Bolsheviks and Mensheviks was proletarian leadership over the other classes to enact a truly democratic revolution.

What I would argue is distinct, and must be recalled later, is that Plekhanov’s concern with hegemony ends after this point. For Plekhanov, a strategy of alliances ceases to be relevant for the future socialist revolution. When it comes to the urban petty bourgeoisie, the reasons are obvious enough that they do not need to be elaborated. Yet one might recall the multifaceted sentence from before, where he speaks of the peasantry just after speaking of the proletariat’s destiny in overthrowing capitalism. These are very separate concepts, and the comma means everything. Not only are the peasantry grouped with other “opposition elements,” like the democratic petty bourgeoisie, in it, but a broader reading of Plekhanov also contains constant remarks

8 Zinoviev, *Bolshevik Party*, 36–37.

9 Plekhanov, “Speech.”

10 Georgii Plekhanov, “Second Draft Programme of the Russian Social-Democrats,” in *Selected Philosophical Works*, trans. Julius Katzer (Progress Publishers, 1974), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1887/xx/sdelg2.htm>.

about the inability of the peasantry to be a supportive force for the eventual socialist revolution.¹¹

What if one were to ask Plekhanov what must be done to bring about the socialist revolution? He would say that capitalism must come about and rise to maturity with all its contradictions and proletarians.¹² Considering his thoughts on the peasantry, we know this is because Plekhanov is depending on the emergence of a much larger proletarian class. It cannot simply be a matter of contending with bourgeois democracy itself. Otherwise, there would have been no need for Plekhanov’s alignment with the Mensheviks in the 1905 and 1917 revolutions. This is a matter which has been thoroughly elaborated upon by other historians, so for the purposes of this paper, it is enough to say that Plekhanov did not believe in a socialist revolution based on the strategy of hegemony.¹³

III. GRAMSCI AND HEGEMONY

Setting Plekhanov aside, we come to Gramsci. Gramsci argues that “political hegemony” can and must precede the seizure of power.¹⁴ When describing this dynamic for a would-be ruling class, he clearly describes it as a matter of “leading allied classes.”¹⁵ Thus, Gramsci outlines the most foundational concept in alignment with Plekhanov: a “scenario” or “strategy” of hegemony, in which power is seized by one class exercising ideological leadership over others. Most immediately, Gramsci gives the example of the bourgeois Jacobins with regards to the urban workers and rural peasantry.¹⁶

Yet Gramsci is not concerned exclusively with the bourgeoisie leading a bourgeois revolution. He just as easily applies these terms and considerations to the proletariat and to the scenario of a socialist revolution.¹⁷ This is not a one-off concern either—in fact, the essence of

11 Shandro, *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony*, 90. The original writing is unavailable to me, so it is necessary to depend upon Shandro.

12 Georgii Plekhanov, “Our Differences,” in *Selected Philosophical Works*, trans. Andrew Rothstein, A. Fineberg, and R. Dixon (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1885), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1885/ourdif/index.html>.

13 Samuel H. Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism* (Stanford University Press, 1963).

14 Gramsci, *Volume 1*, 137.

15 Gramsci, *Volume 1*, 136.

16 Gramsci, *Volume 1*, 148.

17 Gramsci, *Volume 2*, 41.



Gramsci's critique is of historic revolutionary strategy. Modern society is one which requires a complex battle for ideological influence found in the "trenches of civil society," which requires an "unprecedented concentration of hegemony," though further elaborations on the "war of position" are beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁸ Suffice to say, a hegemony-based analysis is indispensable to Gramsci in all revolutionary matters.

It is for such broad application that Gramsci earlier saw fit to speak in the general terms of what a ruling class requires, rather than to specifically say what the bourgeoisie required to rule, because his formula is for the state, not for a specific state, just as his formula is one for revolution, not just the bourgeois revolution or any other particular kind.¹⁹ Hegemony for Gramsci is thus a universal concept. The battle for leadership is a constant question for all classes and all periods of state and revolution.

We can now observe rather clearly where Gramsci may be said to break with Plekhanov on the question of hegemony. It is not their basic definition, which aligns perfectly well with the idea of ideological leadership of one class over another. Rather, it is the extent to which one considers the matter applicable. Plekhanov may be said to have a strategy of hegemony in the bourgeois revolution. On the other hand, Gramsci has a theory of hegemony meant to be applied to all investigations of society and class conflict, including even the proletariat and any incumbent ruling class.²⁰ Thus, the question of the paper is fully and clearly posed: Did Lenin have a universal theory of hegemony as Gramsci claimed?

IV. LENIN AND HEGEMONY

Both Lih and Shandro have thoroughly demonstrated Lenin's commitment to the strategy of hegemony as applied to the bourgeois revolution. By their arguments, Zinoviev's basic claim of Lenin's intertwinement with the concept is, as far as we need be concerned, without dispute. Furthermore, they give no reason to believe that his definition of hegemony, which aligns so well with the one observed

in this paper, was in some way dramatically different from Lenin's.²¹ This leaves us exactly where one wishes to be, in asking if that is where the matter stopped for Lenin. Did he alternatively consider the matter applicable to socialist revolution, the proletariat, and the general topic of the state? That is to say, was he a mere adopter of Plekhanov's strategy or instead the founder of the Gramscian theory I just explained?

In justifying his placement of Lenin alongside Plekhanov as founder of hegemony, Zinoviev already begins to point us in the right direction of alliance with the peasantry.²² From the practical standpoint of even the bourgeois revolution, it would seem necessary to have such an alliance—one which Lenin had advocated since 1894.²³ This confirms the beginnings of separation between Plekhanov and Lenin on the bourgeois revolution, something wholly reaffirmed by his position in the 1905 Revolution as taken directly against the Mensheviks.²⁴ Yet this does not necessarily imply anything about the prospect of socialist revolution, or the broader mechanics of class rule in society.

In that same 1894 essay, however, Lenin put this question to rest in plain text.²⁵ It is impossible here not to observe the exact same formula of dictatorship of workers and peasants that was declared in 1917—the very formula which was advanced for the socialist revolution led by the Bolsheviks. The very formula which was again reaffirmed by the party at its congresses and insisted upon by Lenin even when it seemed a secondary matter.²⁶ Even if it was ultimately only the proletariat which could meet the full demands of history, their need to lead other classes in revolution applied just as much to this final task as it did the preceding one. Lenin did not think it necessary to have capitalism mature until one would speak only of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie as Plekhanov had argued.

Just as notably, at no point did Lenin think these calculations came to a stop at all. The Lenin of 1917 viewed the matter with all the same importance even after the revolution. *The State and Revolution* bears the exact same logic.²⁷ This is exactly the idea of hegemony, the ideological leadership of one class over another. Yet again, here Lenin

21 Zinoviev, *Bolshevik Party*, 35.

22 Zinoviev, *Bolshevik Party*, 135.

23 Zinoviev, *Bolshevik Party*, 66.

24 Vladimir Lenin, *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution* (Foreign Language Press, 2021), 109–10.

25 Zinoviev, *Bolshevik Party*, 38.

26 Vladimir Lenin, "The Trade Unions, the Present Situation and Trotsky's Mistakes," in *Lenin's Collected Works* (Progress Publishers, 1965), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/dec/30.htm>.

27 Vladimir Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, trans. Robert Service (Penguin Classics, 1993), 25.

18 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Volume 3*, trans. Joseph Buttigieg (Columbia University Press, 2007), 161; Gramsci, *Volume 3*, 109; Gramsci, *Volume 1*, 218.

19 Gramsci, *Volume 3*, 75.

20 Gramsci, *Volume 3*, 20.



directly says that such leadership is for the sake of organizing a socialist economy. At all turns, he applies the ideas of hegemony to revolutions both bourgeois and socialist—to conditions of revolution as much as conditions of wielding state power.

One must recall as well that Lenin is not making this argument in the relatively narrow context of Russia either, as Plekhanov had seemed to. In the surrounding passages, he is elaborating constantly on the words of Marx with regard to the Paris Commune.²⁸ Just as importantly, Lenin goes out of his way to give a broad role to the analysis which he is conducting in these chapters.²⁹ They are for a total correction against what he views as erroneous developments on Marxist ideas about the state. Just as it would be wrong not to approach society in Russia through an expansive lens of hegemony, it would be wrong to do so in Germany, France, and any other modern country.

It is easy to continue expanding on the application of hegemony's logic. It dominates Lenin's arguments and perspectives on the proletariat as much as the peasantry. It is the totality of the masses which have an "unreasoning trust in the capitalists" because they are taught to do so by the bourgeoisie.³⁰ Lenin then argues they are consequently inclined to accept the ideas of the bourgeoisie and to give their power over to them.³¹ Thus, Lenin recognizes that there is a struggle for ideological leadership between the bourgeoisie and the socialists over the proletariat.³² As we know from our foundational definition, this means there is a struggle for hegemony. A struggle which again is not over the form of a bourgeois revolution, but over whether the revolution shall be bourgeois or socialist.

As with the peasantry, concern for the battle over leading the proletariat then persists into socialist governance. This may be immediately observed by Lenin's position amidst the trade union debate, in which he held firmly that the trade unions were a school of communism designed for education.³³ In this way, the trade unions serve as an organ of the party, one which is uniquely placed between

their dictatorship and the general masses.³⁴ Thus, we have Lenin's image of transmission belts between the vanguard, the advanced, and the general masses. Note Zinoviev's hegemony-focused alignment with Lenin here.³⁵

This, however, brings us to the reason for conceiving of these transmission belts: Lenin's belief in the need for such intermediaries. Such belts operate both ways and thus serve two functions. One direction comes from the masses to the vanguard, informing them of their needs and perspectives with regard to various social developments. This enables the leading party to be responsive to the masses and thus to earn the trust which Lenin spoke of in *The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution*. With this trust, the vanguard is able to transmit its own perspectives and views onto the masses.

In other words, the purpose of such things is to exercise ideological leadership over the proletariat or, as we now know such a phrase, to establish and exercise hegemony. This talk of transmission belts is thus precisely the same as Gramsci's remarks on the situation in Bologna. One may note Lenin's fixation on the oddities of the situation, such as when he emphasizes the trade union's separation from the state and its coercive apparatuses. Yet the role he gives to it is precisely that of Gramscian civil society, which we know from his simple formula is the domain of hegemony.

V. CONCLUSION

In order to make a decisive statement on the gap between Lenin and Plekhanov, it is necessary to conclude by addressing the supposed root of the latter's strategy. Closely attached to Lih's fundamental thesis—the Erfurtian nature of Lenin—is the claim that Plekhanov's strategy of hegemony was implicit to the principles established by Kautsky.³⁶ Whilst Plekhanov's hegemony scenario, or strategy as I have termed it, seems to be so, the decisive question becomes whether or not the same can be said of Lenin's universal theory. As I have said before, this depends on the application to the proletariat, socialist revolution, and post-revolutionary governance. Initially, it may appear so, for is it not the merger of socialism and the workers movement a matter of cultivating the transmission belts described by Lenin?³⁷

34 Lenin, "Trade Unions."

35 Lenin, "Trade Unions."

36 Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 155.

37 Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 42.

28 Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 22.

29 Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 4.

30 Vladimir Lenin, "The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution," in *Lenin's Collected Works* (Progress Publishers, 1964), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/tasks/index.htm>.

31 Lenin, "Tasks of the Proletariat."

32 Lenin, "Tasks of the Proletariat."

33 Vladimir Lenin, "Once Again On The Trade Unions, The Current Situation and the Mistakes of Trotsky and Bukharin," in *Lenin's Collected Works* (Progress Publishers, 1965), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/jan/25.htm>.



Lih's argument would oppose such an implication, but not necessarily on the account of hegemony and the proletariat, where one can say that both Lenin and Kautsky are simply refining terminology on concepts laid out by Marx. Rather, it is on the same matter which we might associate with Plekhanov's Menshevism: Arguing hegemony is just a matter of recognizing the need for proletarian leadership in the battle for democracy.³⁸ Hegemony is thus reduced to a mere solution to the problem of bourgeois inaction and deceit as Kautsky noted.³⁹

When one reviews the "implicit links" drawn on from Kautsky's *Parliamentarism and Democracy*, the reductive nature of this is cemented.⁴⁰ Political freedom is necessary to the eventual goal of socialism, the bourgeoisie seek to ignore or undermine this pursuit, thus the task falls to the revolutionary proletariat.⁴¹ I do not dispute this, so I do not object when Lih draws a link to Plekhanov's statements about the proletariat leading the battle against autocracy. However, it says nothing about the socialist revolution, where of course Plekhanov rejected connections to this strategy. It says nothing about the dynamics of the state and class rule. On such a matter, one substitutes implications for either silence or Plekhanov's concerns about skipping stages of development.

In other words, hegemony is confined purely as a means to the means to the end rather than a tool of social analysis. Pulling these details together, it becomes clear that Lenin had in fact gone far beyond Plekhanov's original formula or any implications informing it. Lenin was still concerned with the basic strategy of hegemony in the socialist revolution, while Plekhanov had abandoned it. Lenin was still concerned with it when reflecting on the tasks of governing even as Plekhanov worried over the need for Russia to undergo a bourgeois revolution in full first. And he was still concerned with its logic for all classes in relation to the party and other ideological schools, whereas Plekhanov confined himself to cross-class alliances and more traditional formulas for how to lead the proletariat.

Wherever Plekhanov saw a limited formula applying to Russia, Lenin saw a broader system of analysis inextricable from all of higher politics, the difference between a mere strategy and a theory of how societies work. When one remembers Lenin's concern with the masses' learned yet naive trust of the bourgeoisie, the universal application of this is reaffirmed. The suggestion by Lih that hegemony shifted from

an old "we can lead other classes!" to the modern "other classes can lead us!" makes no sense in such light.⁴² Nor does his surprise that Zinoviev applied it to the dictatorship of the proletariat because as Gramsci recognized by going back to the Jacobins, hegemony is a theory for all classes at all times.⁴³ Lenin's later conflicts with Plekhanov can be understood in his recognition of this fact and thus in the contribution of an original theory which breaks with Plekhanov and is independent of Kautsky's implications.

³⁸ Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 101.

³⁹ Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 100.

⁴⁰ Karl Kautsky, *Parliamentarism and Democracy in Karl Kautsky on Democracy and Republicanism* ed. and trans. Ben Lewis (Haymarket Books, 2019).

⁴¹ Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 98–99.

⁴² Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 110.

⁴³ Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 110.





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CONDEMNED TO BREAK THE LAW: The Legality and Fairness of Anti- Camping Laws in Response to the Homelessness Crisis



GENEVIEVE MOREA

ABSTRACT

Homelessness is a widespread issue that impacts the lives of thousands and motivates the actions of various governmental entities. In “Condemned to Break the Law: The Legality and Fairness of Anti-Camping Laws in Response to the Homelessness Crisis,” I argue that governments have an obligation to make laws that can be reasonably followed. The analysis of obligation incorporates concepts of penological purpose and the capacity to follow the law. These philosophical measurements are applied to the Supreme Court’s decision to permit anti-camping laws in *Grants Pass v. Johnson* 603 US ___ (2024) to situate these concepts in a real-world context.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Legal scholars and judicial decision-makers are often faced with complex issues that lack a simple solution. Homelessness, a problem the American government has been facing for generations, impacts over half a million people across the United States. This problem causes a lack of regular and adequate nighttime shelters.¹ Four in ten people experiencing homelessness are sleeping in places “not meant for human habitation,” including sidewalks, abandoned buildings, and camping grounds.² Examining legal decision-making regarding the homeless population presents questions about the responsibility of homeless individuals, what purpose the punishment of the homeless satisfies, and what solutions are responsible for reducing homelessness.

The central question of my paper will be about the legality and justice of anti-camping laws in response to the rise of the unhoused population across the United States. These types of laws have proliferated in US cities to prohibit camping and sleeping in public spaces. I focus on the laws introduced and implemented by the city of Grants Pass. Their laws became a moral and legal controversy that was eventually elevated to the US Supreme Court. Grants Pass’ anti-camping ordinances raise an important question of what ought to be the minimal expectations for a law to be morally and legally justified. One of these minimal expectations is whether governments have an obligation to make laws that can be reasonably followed.

I argue that governments do have an obligation to make laws that can be reasonably followed. This obligation arises from the idea that a deservedly punishable person is one that has control over their conduct, knowledge of their expected behavior, and the ability to act differently. I also argue that another important requirement is that the punishments instituted by the government need to have a “penological purpose” that justifies both the punishment itself and the effects of the punishment. Applying this standard to the Grants Pass anti-camping laws to situate these arguments in a real-world context, I argue that such laws are unjust. I also argue that the majority in *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson* 603 US (2024) decided wrongly by permitting the anti-camping laws to be publicly enforced and by levying punishment on the unhoused who lack the freedom to avoid camping in public spaces. In arguing for my thesis, I approach it in the following way: First, I

introduce the *Grants Pass* case. Second, I outline the philosophical measurements relevant to the case. Finally, I apply these philosophical principles to the case.

II. THE CITY OF GRANTS PASS V. JOHNSON AND THE RISE OF ANTI-CAMPING LAWS

Like many other cities in the United States, the city of Grants Pass, Oregon has been grappling with homelessness and has instituted different approaches to deal with this escalating issue. As part of its strategy to address homelessness, the city of Grants Pass, enacted three laws restricting camping in public spaces. The first law prohibits “sleeping on public sidewalks, streets or alleyways.”³ The second law prohibits “camping on public property.”⁴ In the statute, camping is defined as “set[ting] up . . . or remain[ing] in or at a campsite,” defining a campsite as “any place where bedding, sleeping bag[s], or other material used for bedding purposes, or any stove or fire is placed . . . for the purpose of maintaining a temporary place to live.”⁵ The third law prohibits “[c]amping’ and [o]vernight parking’ in the city’s parks.”⁶ An initial violation of these ordinances will result in a fine, and subsequent violations could result in being barred from city parks. Violation of orders barring individuals from city parks can result in criminal trespassing charges that can be punishable by prison time and fines.

The Grants Pass laws inspired moral outrage from the unhoused community and its advocates who challenged its legality in the courts. The main challenge was that anti-camping ordinances violated the Eighth Amendment’s prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment. According to the challenge, if a city cannot meet people’s basic needs of housing, then punishing unhoused people for carrying out life-sustaining acts in public spaces—such as eating, camping, sitting, and sleeping—is “cruel and unusual.” The unhoused are “involuntarily homeless” because the homeless population in the city outnumbered the “practically available shelter beds.”⁷ The definition of the involuntarily unhoused was established in the legal precedent *Martin v. Boise*.⁸ The lack of available beds in shelters meant that the involuntarily unhoused were deprived of the choice of avoiding

3 City of Grants Pass v. Johnson 603 US 11 (2024).

4 *Grants Pass* at 11.

5 *Grants Pass* at 11.

6 *Grants Pass* at 11.

7 *Grants Pass* at 12.

8 *Martin v. City of Boise* 920F.3d 584 (2019).

1 City of Grants Pass v. Johnson, 603 US 1 (2024), (Sotomayor, Kagan, and Jackson, dissenting).

2 *Grants Pass* (Sotomayor et al.), 3.



camping in public spaces. The majority argued that the Eighth Amendment's prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment applied only to the type of punishment inflicted, not the determination of what was a punishable offense.

However, the interpretation of the cruel and unusual punishment clause was expanded to prohibit the criminalization of the "status" of an individual. In previous cases, the Court reasoned that a person's status cannot be criminalized and only conduct should be the subject of criminalization. The Court decided that the "status of narcotic addiction" could not be a criminal offense, but using the drugs could be criminalized.⁹ The dissent argued that the Grants Pass laws are criminalizing the status of being homeless because they single out the very behavior that defines homelessness.¹⁰ In response, the majority argued that the Grants Pass laws criminalized actions like "occupying a campsite for the purpose of maintaining a temporary place to live."¹¹ The majority argued that this prohibition applies to all individuals regardless of status. Although the lower courts reliably affirmed that Grants Pass' anti-camping laws were unconstitutional, the Supreme Court reversed its decisions and ruled that its laws were not in violation of the Eighth Amendment. These determinations relied heavily on the test established by the Ninth Circuit in *Martin*, which determined that the Eighth Amendment's Cruel and Unusual Punishments Clause prevented enforcement of public-camping ordinances against homeless individuals who lack "access to alternative shelter." The court said that access to alternative shelter was lacking when "there is a greater number of homeless individuals in a jurisdiction than the number of available beds in shelters."¹² Similar to the *Grants Pass* case, the Ninth Circuit determined that about three quarters of the beds in Boise were "practically unavailable" because of "religious atmospheres."¹³

The majority opinion argues that the laws Grants Pass enacted are very similar to laws other American cities have instituted to address homelessness. The majority calls into question the "involuntarily homeless" test and argues that it does more harm than good to limit the resources of local governments. Majority opinion also calls attention to the other policies Grants Pass adopted to address homelessness to demonstrate the city's multifaceted approach. To demonstrate the city's approach, the majority opinion cites Grants Pass appointing a "homeless community liaison" officer to share information about

⁹ *Grants Pass* at 18.

¹⁰ *Grants Pass* (Sotomayor et al.), 13.

¹¹ *Grants Pass* at 20.

¹² *Grants Pass* at 7.

¹³ *Grants Pass* at 7.

assistance programs and other resources with homeless individuals. They argue that the officer is proof that the city is using various methods to address the problem. The majority opinion also attempts to deemphasize the impact of criminal charges for homelessness by claiming that the training of officers to be empathetic towards homelessness reduces the harm done by city ordinances. The opinion cites the directions of the Grants Pass Department of Public Safety Policy Manual, which states that "homelessness is not a crime" and officers should "aid and support" the homeless whenever possible.¹⁴ Majority opinion argues that these procedures demonstrate the need for cities to have a multitude of tools to respond to homelessness, and they should be able to "experiment and find effective responses."¹⁵ The majority opinion also argues that punishment is a last resort in many cases and resources for homeless individuals are made available before laws are enforced.

The majority opinion consistently defends the actions of Grants Pass by claiming that the restrictions against encampments on public property are a necessary measure that local governments should be afforded. They disregard the legal reasoning behind "involuntarily homeless" statuses, arguing that preventing the criminalization of camping when there are inadequate alternative shelters is detrimental to local governments. They reference a brief from the City of Phoenix and argue that the decision limits tools available to governments and paralyzes "even commonsense and good faith efforts at addressing homelessness."¹⁶ The concept of penological action against homelessness is often referred to as "commonsense" and "necessary." However, the punishment of individuals who violate a law has a specific purpose and assumes the punished has a responsibility for their actions. Both the purpose of the punishment and the responsibility of the punished are lacking in this situation, which I elaborate on in the next section.

III. TWO PHILOSOPHICAL MEASUREMENTS OF THE FAIRNESS OF LAWS

In this section, I will outline the philosophical reasoning that determines what makes a person blameworthy of a crime. In Amelia Wirts', "Is Crime Caused by Illness, Immortality, or Injustice?: Theories

¹⁴ *Grants Pass* at 12.

¹⁵ *Grants Pass* at 10.

¹⁶ *Grants Pass* at 9.



of Punishment in the 20th and Early 21st Centuries,” the work of H. L. A. Hart is used to explain the need for a person to be accountable for their actions if they are to be punished.¹⁷ The concept Hart presents is called “capacity responsibility,” which is defined as a person being responsible for their actions because they understand the law and morality, are able to deliberate and decide on their actions, and control their conduct. A very important aspect of this concept is, as Hart writes, “if a person could not have understood a moral rule or was unable to make themselves conform to it, then they could not have been morally responsible.”¹⁸ Based on this understanding of the responsibility of the punished, Hart argues that it is unjust for legal institutions to punish someone without considering their “capacity-responsibility.”¹⁹

The concept of capacity-responsibility can be further understood through Kant’s “ought implies can” formula.²⁰ The implementation and enforcement of laws establish the expected behavior for society which emulates the “ought” parameter of the formula. The legal standard for behavior specifically outlines what conduct is permissible and impermissible. When considering the objective of the law to uphold certain standards for behavior, the law is assumed to be followable. If the expectations of the law are inconsistent with the ability of the population to follow the law, the law is unable to fulfill its purpose. The distinction between status and conduct presented in the legal reasoning recognizes the need for actions that follow the “ought implies can” formula. Status is barred from being subject to criminal punishment due to the realistic inability to alter status, which would be necessary to follow the law. Abstractly, a law that criminalizes status is considered illegitimate because a law that expects behavior must also rationalize the expectations based on the ability to actualize the proposed conduct.

A second important measurement of the appropriateness of the law is its penological purpose. Laws are morally and legally justified to the extent that they promote a legitimate moral goal of punishment. It is standardly understood that legal punishment applies to bad actors. For the retributivist, proportional punishment is vital to balance the harms caused by wrongdoers and correct the wrongdoing. For the deterrence theorist, the reasons for punishment are to promote some broader social utility, in which punishment addresses the crimes of

wrongdoers while also deterring similar actions. For the rehabilitation model, the point of punishment is to reform the moral character of criminal offenders. Although there is a contentious debate over what properly justifies legal punishment, the point here is that legal punishment must serve some legitimate penological purpose. Since punishment involves levying harm, such responses to legal offenses must be justified.

IV. APPLYING THE PHILOSOPHICAL MEASUREMENTS TO THE GRANTS PASS CASE

In the case of *Grants Pass*, the lack of alternative forms of shelter makes it essentially impossible for the homeless population to follow laws preventing public camping. This lack of alternatives applies to the capacity-responsibility requirement for individuals to be able to control their conduct. As Justice Sotomayor states in the dissenting opinion, “Sleep is a biological necessity, not a crime.”²¹ Minding this, it is only reasonable to determine that conduct and capacity cannot be separated. The inseparable nature of conduct and capacity also means that an obligation to follow the law implies one is capable of following the law. The lack of shelter for homeless individuals demonstrates a lack of a human necessity. Based on these circumstances, criminalization of public camping when there is no alternative action to take is punishing individuals for satisfying a human need. Furthermore, punishing these individuals for satisfying a human need when the government has failed to secure basic necessities for their population is an even more egregious violation of justice.

The second consideration for the anti-camping laws is the penological purpose of these laws. The amicus brief in support of the respondents of *Grants Pass*, written by the Formerly Incarcerated, Convicted People, and Families Movement, applies the concept of penological purpose to the *Grants Pass* laws.²² In the context of this paper, penological purpose is defined as the justifications for the punishment of criminals who commit publicly known and clearly defined offenses. The justifications of punishment describe goals that can be reasonably accomplished by the punishment. The amicus brief

17 Amelia M. Wirts, “Is Crime Cause by Illness, Immorality, or Injustice? Theories of Punishment in the Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries,” *The Palgrave Handbook on the Philosophy of Punishment* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 75–97.

18 Wirts, “Theories of Punishment,” 81–82.

19 Wirts, “Theories of Punishment,” 82.

20 Frederick Wilmot-Smith, “Law, ‘Ought’, and ‘Can’,” *Ethics* 133, no. 4 (University of Chicago Press, 2023): 333–50, 10.1086/724533.

21 *Grants Pass* (Sotomayor et al.), 1.

22 Eric Sirota, David J. Chizewer, and Lawrence Wood, “Brief of Formerly Incarcerated Convicted People and Families Movement, The Shriver Center on Poverty Law, and National Consumer Law Center as *Amici Curiae* in Support of Respondents,” *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson* 603 US (2024), no. 23–175 (Counsel Press).



argues that the *Grants Pass* laws do not serve a “legitimate penological justification” or “offer a ‘good-faith effort’ to address harms associated with homelessness.”²³ Penological purpose identifies the goals of the punishment, which in the case of *Grants Pass*, the laws have repeatedly failed to achieve. This failure is not circumstantial but an intrinsic flaw within the laws’ implementation and enforcement. *Grants Pass* and cities in similar situations argue that they need to be able to enforce anti-camping laws because it will reduce homelessness.

However, as the dissenting opinion and the amicus brief argue, these laws will create new criminal records for homeless people, which will make it even more difficult for them to find housing. As the amicus brief writes, “Anti-sleeping ordinances necessarily create additional barriers to housing and trap those affected in a cycle of homelessness and punishment.”²⁴ This completely discredits the argument that the ordinances help alleviate homelessness. Based on this lack of penological purpose, the *Grants Pass* laws are operating in direct opposition to the goals the city claimed the laws could achieve. To this point, one could even argue that the laws transcend the dilemma of lacking penological purpose and prevent penological purpose from existing due to their destructive nature.

V. OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

A primary objection raised by the majority opinion is the health and safety risks homeless encampments impose on cities. Most encampments lack running water or proper sanitation facilities, which can increase the spread of diseases. The majority opinion asserts that many states have seen a reemergence of “typhus, shigella, trench fever, and other diseases” on their city streets.²⁵ The majority articulates the security risks that encampments introduce by citing various reports of increased drug circulation and violent crimes in association with encampments. One estimate reports that “more than 40 percent of the shootings in Seattle in early 2022 were linked to homeless encampments.”²⁶ These circumstances motivate many of the actions of many municipalities to address homelessness. These concerns also emphasize the need to address homelessness as neglected homeless

encampments produce health and safety concerns for communities and their homeless populations alike.

The main objection to the argument presented is that cities have limited resources and preventing them from using legal tools can worsen the effects of homelessness. This objection is repeatedly raised by the majority opinion. The majority opinion presents the opinions of states and cities arguing against restrictions on anti-camping laws. As previously stated, the local governments and the majority opinion argue that homelessness is too complex to have one solution and that governments should “have latitude” to experiment to find solutions.²⁷ The majority opinion also quotes the cities of the Ninth Circuit, who argues that “injunctions and the threat of federal litigation impede this democratic process.”²⁸ The majority opinion furthers this argument, writing that the restrictions “undermine local governments, and do not well serve the homeless or others who live in the Ninth Circuit.”²⁹ The idea that local governments should be free from critique for policies that are admittedly experimental demonstrates a lack of consideration for the homeless population.

Additionally, recalling the concepts of “capacity responsibility” and “penological purpose,” the argument that these laws are helping the homeless is untrue. The city at large is also being harmed because homelessness will continue to rise as a result of the laws and the harms they cause. In the case of *Grants Pass*, there are arguments left out of the majority opinion that provide more clarity on the harms caused by these laws.

Despite what the majority opinion argues, the motivations behind the *Grants Pass* laws can be discovered by examining the city council’s decision-making. The approach of the *Grants Pass* city council focused on removing the homeless population, not helping them like many have claimed. This desire for removal went so far that the council considered “denying basic services such as food, clothing, bedding, hygiene, and those types of things.”³⁰ A city council member remarked, “maybe they aren’t hungry enough or cold enough . . . to make a change in their behavior.”³¹ The change in behavior the council is referring to is the mere existence of the homeless in *Grants Pass*. Beyond contradicting the claims that these laws are targeted at helping the homeless, it demonstrates the inhumane treatment of the homeless and the desire to withhold basic services to those in need.

²³ Sirota, “*Amici Curiae*,” 4.

²⁴ Sirota, “*Amici Curiae*,” 4.

²⁵ *Grants Pass* at 4.

²⁶ *Grants Pass* at 3.

²⁷ *Grants Pass* at 10.

²⁸ *Grants Pass* at 10.

²⁹ *Grants Pass* at 10.

³⁰ *Grants Pass* (Sotomayor et al.), 13.

³¹ *Grants Pass* (Sotomayor et al.), 13.



VI. CONCLUSION

“Capacity responsibility” and “penological purpose” inform all of our laws and their enforcement. They are considerations that seem inherent to the legal system. However, with anti-camping laws and the criminalization of homelessness, the issue of the obligation to follow the law versus the capability to follow the law is revealed. If laws are made to require certain actions and punishments are made to enforce certain actions, punishing someone who has no ability to follow the law makes the law and punishment arbitrary. The *Grants Pass* laws fail to consider the “capacity responsibility” of the homeless by dismissing the lack of shelter and other resources that cause homelessness. The laws also fail to produce a “penological purpose” because the actions they seek to enforce are impossible to conduct based on the resources available. Additionally, the laws fail to produce a “penological purpose” because the laws worsen the situation they seek to improve. For these reasons and more, the *Grants Pass* laws and similar laws should not be upheld.



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PASTRIES TO DIE FOR: An Objection to Causal Efficacy Principles



ABSTRACT

An objection to ethical vegetarianism is that the consumption of meat does not causally influence the production of meat. The objection relies on a principle called the Causal Efficacy Principle. The principle states that if an action does not directly cause harm, then that action is morally permissible. I provide a thought experiment as a counterexample to this principle, and then, I attempt to diagnose why the principle is false in terms of moral cooperation. Moral cooperation is when many people perform an action that individually does not prevent harm, but prevents harm when the group all performs the action.

MICAH GEORGE

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I. INTRODUCTION

In discussions of animal ethics and particularly in debates about eating meat, a common objection to ethical vegetarianism—the position that eating meat in most circumstances is morally wrong—is that abstaining from eating meat will not actually influence the meat industry. Not eating a chicken sandwich will not result in saving the life of a chicken, but the arguments against eating meat often focus on the horrendous treatment of non-human animals. If there is no causal connection between not eating meat and preventing this bad outcome, how could eating meat be wrong? In the literature on animal ethics, this objection has been dubbed the Causal Impotence objection.

Despite its role in animal ethics, this objection can be easily extended to most boycotts and protests. Similar objections often arise during debates about the obligation to vote, for example. If our vote does not influence the outcome of an election, how can we have an obligation to vote? I argue that the Causal Impotence objection fails because there are many instances where we obviously should boycott/protest even when our actions, on their own, cannot causally influence the outcome. Then, I offer a potential explanation, what I call the Moral Cooperation Principle, for this obligation to boycott/protest.

II. KILLER BAKERY

To demonstrate that we can have obligations to boycott even if our actions are causally impotent, consider the following thought experiment: Imagine you enter a bakery and, after talking to the staff, you learn they are all retired assassins. You are understandably unnerved, but their baked goods look phenomenal. You are about to buy some cake when they inform you that if you shop here regularly, you have the chance of being the one-thousandth customer, and for every one thousand customers, they execute a thousand innocent people. Given the knowledge that your actions contribute to this goal without being the direct cause of the event, what do you do? Consider the following principle:

Causal Efficacy Principle: an action X is morally obligatory if and only if that action causes an overall good outcome, or refraining from performing action X would result in an overall bad outcome.

There are a variety of principles that might count as a causal efficacy principle. For example, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's harm principle, "we should not perform acts that cause direct harm to others," could be made into a causal efficacy principle if it were rendered exclusive, meaning that this is the only way an action could be wrong.¹ If this exclusive version of the principle, or another causal inefficacy principle, is true, then you should buy the cake from the assassins. You are not morally obligated to refrain from buying the cake because that action would not cause a good outcome or prevent a bad outcome. You are unlikely to be the one-thousandth customer, and you can ask them how close they are to their goal to ensure you are not. Abstaining from buying the cake only results in the loss of your pleasure. It seems, given this principle, that your overall reasons point toward buying the cake.

But surely this is the wrong answer to the thought experiment? Something is intuitively immoral about supporting the death of innocent people for the sake of cake even though your actions can neither bring about nor prevent the murders. This case is not peculiar in this regard either. Intuitively, an abolitionist from the 1700s should not buy clothes made from cotton picked by slaves. Or consider a world where the economic facts about eating meat are exactly the same, but we are eating people burgers rather than beef burgers. Surely, purchasing meat in this world would be wrong even if your actions, on their own, could not cause a person's life to be saved. Thus, the Causal Efficacy Principle is a drastic revision of our moral intuitions.

III. EXPLANATIONS AND BOYCOTT

However, the Causal Efficacy Principle also has an advantage. It provides a clear connection between the badness of production and the wrongness of consumption. According to this principle, it is wrong to purchase some product that causes a bad outcome. If we accept that actions can be wrong even if they do not, by themselves, cause a bad outcome, then a different explanation will need to be offered to bridge the gap between production and consumption. Fortunately, there are a variety of attempts at bridging the gap between production and consumption that do not appeal to the causal efficacy principle. These are solutions that have previously been offered in literature, and I

1 Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations," in *Climate Ethics: Essential Readings* Gardiner, ed. Stephen M. Gardiner et al. (Oxford Academic, 2010), 334, 10.1093/oso/9780195399622.003.0029.



primarily focus on a solution that is different from any of the following solutions. One potential solution is dubbed the extractivist approach. Christian Barry and David Wiens put this solution the following way: “Being an innocent beneficiary of others’ wrongdoing may be sufficient to ground special duties to address the hardships suffered by the victim of the wrongdoing.”² However, the authors note that being a beneficiary of wrongful action does not always generate special duties. They give the example of a terrorist bombing causing Bill and Susan to meet each other, and, because of their chance meeting, they later become successful business partners.³ Bill and Susan both benefit from the wrongful action, but it does not seem that they possess any special obligations to the victims of the bombing. They may have an obligation to help the survivors, but this obligation seems to be shared by others who can help rather than being limited to the beneficiaries of the bombing.

Another potential approach is what I will call the attitudinal solution. The claim is that consumption either displays or promotes inappropriate attitudes towards production. For example, Thomas Hill considers a variety of these attitudinal solutions in his paper, writing that “the protestor’s attempts to disassociate himself are not so much efforts to avoid responsibility as expressions of the high value he places on justice.”⁴ In the case of meat eating, a supporter of this solution might argue that eating meat would show a callous indifference to the suffering of non-human animals, or maybe it warps people’s attitudes to make them more callous. However, it is not clear that consumption always signifies or is caused by an indifference to the wrongness of production. Consider the Killer Bakery example; it seems perfectly possible for a person to hate assassins and murder in general but buy the cake anyway.

IV. MORAL COOPERATION

My own solution supposes that we can be obligated to cooperate to achieve a morally relevant outcome because the collective action will achieve that outcome, even when any individual action will not achieve the outcome. The obligation to cooperate can be made more

2 Christian Barry and David Wiens, “Benefiting from Wrongdoing and Sustaining Wrongful Harm,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 13, no. 5 (2016): 2, 10.1163/17455243-4681052.

3 Barry and Wiens, “Benefiting from Wrongdoing,” 3.

4 Thomas Hill, “Symbolic Protest and Calculated Silence,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (1979): 97.

visible by an analogy with prudential cooperation. Consider the famous prisoner’s dilemma: Two criminals find themselves faced with the choice between confessing or not confessing to a crime they committed. If the first criminal confesses and the second criminal does not, criminal one gets no jail time and criminal two gets six years of jail time. If criminal two confesses and criminal one does not, then criminal two gets no jail time and criminal one gets six years. However, if neither confesses, they only get two years of jail time, and if they both confess, each will get four years of jail time.

In this scenario, confessing is the better option regardless of what the other criminal does. For example, consider criminal one’s perspective. If criminal two chose to not confess, then if criminal one confesses, criminal one gets no jail time, but if criminal two chose to confess, then criminal one would spend six years in prison rather than four unless they too confess. The paradox is that it seems as though both criminals can be rational yet choose a sub-optimal outcome. The lesson drawn is typically that the two criminals should cooperate. The best outcome overall is where both criminals remain silent, but this cannot be achieved without cooperation. Thus, there seems to be a prudential reason in this case, even though each criminal cannot directly influence the outcome, because the jail time is determined by the decisions of both parties. My claim is that morality can have similar reasons that can even amount to obligations. Even if an agent cannot bring about a good outcome by performing some action, there are some occasions when there are moral reasons to perform an action because if multiple people perform the same action, the good outcome will occur. Consider a fundraiser for a terminally ill individual to receive life-saving treatment. Their high school, composed of five thousand individuals, is notified of the illness and the funds needed to procure life-saving treatment. If fifty thousand dollars are raised, then the person will have the funds needed to pay for the treatment and survive the illness; otherwise, they will die. Suppose that each member of the group can spare ten dollars without too much difficulty. It would seem as though each member of the group should pay ten dollars to help their schoolmate survive. We can try and generalize this intuition into the following principle:

The Moral Cooperation Principle: when a group of individuals has an obligation to prevent some outcome X that is non-trivially bad overall, the individuals that compose the group have a pro tanto obligation to cooperate in a way that best helps the group achieve outcome X .⁵

5 A pro tanto moral obligation is one that can be overridden by extenuating factors. For example, we have a pro tanto obligation not to lie, but it is okay to lie if an axe murderer asks you where the person they want to kill is.



My principle is compatible with previous explanations offered by others about the obligation to protest, but it does have some unique advantages. There is an intuitive rationale behind this principle that captures the reasons why people protest. In addition to wanting to express the right attitudes and avoid benefiting from or participating in wrongdoing, protest usually aims to end the wrongdoing. The underlying intuition is that when there is injustice, we ought to do something about it. Far from being the exception, individual causal inefficacy is the norm during protests. Every sign holder and every person who marched in the civil rights movement did not believe that their individual act would magically end racial injustice. Real change in society usually requires the action of many individuals working together. The Moral Cooperation Principle directly draws upon the intuition that it is the outcome of collective action that, at least in part, makes protest appropriate.

There is a satisfying theoretical explanation of this intuition as well. Even skeptics about protests, when such actions are not causally efficacious, often grant that groups of people might have obligations to stop injustice. For example, Sinnott-Armstrong, who is skeptical of the individual obligation to refrain from emitting needless carbon emissions, accepts that governments ought to fight climate change.⁶ However, no singular government official can end climate change. Even the president needs people to cooperate with executive orders and Congress to pass laws, so one country could not solve climate change alone.

Nevertheless, it seems obvious that we ought to stop climate change. If the individual members of government are not obligated to stop climate change, how can the government or collections of governments be obligated to stop climate change? Do abstract sets, aggregates, or people have moral obligations separate from the obligations of individuals in those sets? Aggregates themselves have neither sentience nor free will, so this suggestion is dubious at best. The rationale behind the Moral Cooperation Principle is that group obligations should be evenly and efficiently dispersed among the individuals that compose the group. If such obligations belong to the group alone, then group obligations are a mere formality. Each individual cannot do their part, on the grounds that their part alone is causally impotent, and the group obligation will not be fulfilled even though no person is to blame, only the aggregate itself. This view appears impractical. Most issues facing human societies cannot be resolved without cooperation, so it seems intuitive to suggest that morality might sometimes obligate us to cooperate. Morality is the

type of thing that should incentivize us to improve society and stop injustice, but in most instances, this requires moral cooperation. Thus, distributing group obligations in a way that can obligate individuals to do their part, even when their part alone is not causally efficacious, aligns with the actual rationale of protestors, makes better sense of group obligations, and has an intuitive plausibility.

V. POTENTIAL COUNTEREXAMPLES

I believe the moral cooperation principle can be overridden—hence my qualification that the obligation is *pro tanto*—but I argue that the factors that would override this moral principle do not pertain when most people eat meat. If a person is unable to perform the action without seriously hurting themselves, this would override the obligation. In the case of meat eating specifically, a person might have health conditions or live without access to sufficient nutrients from plants, in which case they would not have an obligation to abstain from eating meat. Instead of seeing this type of counterexample as a downside of my principle, I see it as a much-needed feature. Morality should be flexible enough to accommodate extenuating circumstances. Even if there are universal and absolute moral principles, such principles would consider factors such as extreme poverty. Examples like poverty, illness, or a lack of vegetarian options can justify some instances of eating meat despite this principle, but these extenuating factors do not hold when most people eat meat, especially in wealthy and industrialized nations. There are many people who can abstain from eating meat while remaining perfectly healthy. Thus, arguments in favor of ethical vegetarianism would apply to many people.

However, there may be other counterexamples that are more problematic because, sticking with the example of vegetarianism, there are other actions besides eating meat that would satisfy the criteria of my moral principle, yet are plausibly not obligatory. For example, substitute not having children for action X. Not only would this eventually stop all meat production, but this would also prevent other bad outcomes, such as global warming, war, racism, sexism, etc. If we all performed this action, most bad outcomes would be prevented in the future. It seems then that my moral principle would make not having children morally obligatory. One important thing to note about this action is that it would prevent most good outcomes in

⁶ Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not My Fault," 343–44.



the future as well. Protesting eating meat or other unethical practices usually lack this feature. Thus, not having children does not satisfy the requirement that the prevented outcome be bad overall because it prevents bad and good outcomes. However, since not eating meat would only prevent comparably minor instances of fleeting pleasure, it would still be covered by the Moral Cooperation Principle.

Another kind of counterexample might be brought against my principle. One objection against the claim that we should not eat meat is the case of paying rent to a non-vegetarian landlord. Even if you do not yourself eat meat, by paying the landlord, you may inadvertently give your landlord the money necessary for them to support the meat industry. This example generalizes. Since most people eat meat, when we purchase anything, we give money mostly to non-vegetarians, and they may spend that money on eating meat. However, neither observation can constitute a genuine counterexample to my principle. Not paying rent to non-vegetarian landlords is simply not an action that would prevent the production of meat. If we all stopped paying landlords that were not vegetarian, then everyone who was not a landlord would continue eating meat. We would simply not be cooperating to prevent a bad outcome in this example. However, if the alleged counterexample is instead that we should not purchase anything, then this counterexample also does not satisfy my requirement that abstaining from the action prevents an overall bad outcome. We would likely not survive without the ability to purchase anything at all, so the resulting outcome would prevent the meat industry only at the expense of killing most of us. Thus, our dependence on consumption in general counts as an extenuating factor that justifies the action of purchasing products, even from people who are not vegetarians. Cooperating to not consume anything would simply result in a bad outcome.

Furthermore, it may be noted that, under at least one reading of “would prevent” in my principle, abstaining from eating meat would actually not prevent the production of meat. If “would prevent” means “logically implies,” then this observation is certainly correct. If people stopped eating meat, this would not logically imply that meat production would cease because it is consistent with the laws of logic that people would continue to produce meat for some other reason than to eat it. However, this is an extremely unlikely scenario. If we did not eat it, meat would be an extreme waste of energy, space, water, food, and time, not to mention it would remain bad for the environment. There is simply no realistic scenario where meat production would continue once meat consumption ceased. Thus,

by clarifying that “would prevent” does not mean “logically implies” but something closer to “would prevent in nearby possible worlds,” my moral principle does indeed imply that not eating meat is morally obligatory in the majority of cases.⁷

A different objection comes from Sinnott-Armstrong. Sinnott-Armstrong considers a variety of moral principles similar to my own, such as the group principle, which states that “we have a moral obligation not to perform an action if this action makes us a member of a group whose actions together cause harm.”⁸ He gives a variety of objections to this and similar principles. For example, Sinnott-Armstrong attempts to provide a counterexample of talking loudly in the airport. He reasons that if such a principle were true, we would be obligated to not talk loudly in an airport because if everyone talked loudly, then people would not hear their flights being called.⁹

I deny that this is a genuine counterexample. It is built into my principle that such an obligation can be defeated, so if you have good reasons to shout in an airport, perhaps to warn someone who is about to be injured, then this obligation would be overridden. Thus, my principle would at most imply that you should not shout in an airport without good reason, and if this is considered a bullet, then I am willing to bite it. After all, I need not say that shouting in an airport is horrendously bad since the outcome being prevented is itself not terrible compared with the injustices prevented by other protests.

Moreover, we can imagine a similar case that is more analogous to cases like eating meat or emitting wasteful carbon emissions. Suppose that instead of refraining from speaking loudly in a mostly quiet airport, everyone in the airport was already shouting, and no one could hear their flight being called. What would be the rational thing to do? I think it is intuitive that you should stop shouting even if your action would not cause the airport to become quiet enough to hear. After all, everyone could reason that their own silence would not fix the problem. Then, the problem would simply never be fixed, and everyone would miss their flight. This seems obviously irrational. This suggests that the Moral Cooperation Principle might apply with more force when everyone is already contributing to a bad outcome, such as climate change or meat production.

7 Possible worlds is a framework philosophers sometimes use to talk about possibility. A possible world is just a maximal way reality could have been, so by a nearby possible world, I mean that the action would prevent the outcome in all ways reality could be that are similar to our own.

8 Sinnott-Armstrong, “It’s Not My Fault,” 340.

9 Sinnott-Armstrong, “It’s Not My Fault,” 340.



VI. CONCLUSION

Since the main justification for consuming wrongfully produced products is pleasure or convenience, my principle does imply that consuming wrongfully produced products is generally wrong. The burden is on consumers of wrongfully produced products to provide an alternative justification. While the list of extenuating circumstances I gave in the preceding section, lack of vegetarian options for example, may not be exhaustive, I covered the main relevant factors that could defeat the obligation to morally cooperate, so this will not be an easy burden to overcome. At the very least, I have shown that causal inefficacy principles are an ineffective objection to ethical vegetarianism, and the Moral Cooperation Principle is a plausible ethical principle that can feature in arguments for ethical vegetarianism.



Micah George (he/him/his) is currently a senior at the University of Central Oklahoma, where he is majoring in philosophy. His interests lie at the intersection of metaphysics and value theory, especially as it relates to meta-ethics and the philosophy of religion.



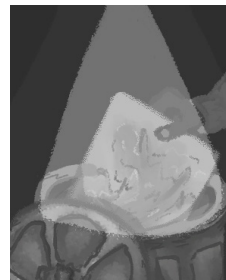


ARTWORK INDEX



EXAMINING ARISTOTLE'S SUBSTANCE

The autonomy of AI challenges Aristotle's definition of substance. A homage to Michelangelo's "God Creating Man" fits that argument as God is giving man autonomy—and therefore making man fit the standard of Aristotle's substance—while humans did the same to AI. autonomy. [ART BY BAILEY HOLLIS](#)



CRITICAL KITSCH

Kitsch art is often treated as unrefined and unworthy of admiration and study. It illustrates an individual saving a piece of art from the trash to reflect the author's refutation of this commonly held belief.

[ART BY THEO DAVIS](#)



THE FAILURE OF STRUCTURALISM

The puzzle pieces being in a state of motion are used to visually represent how works of art possess ever-changing context, context which structuralism refuses to acknowledge while interpreting visual art.

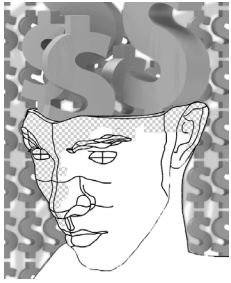
[ART BY ELI KATSIMPALIS](#)



COMPLEMENTARITIES AND CONTEXT-DEPENDENCE

As the article transitions through concepts, the author also transitions through visual examples. The art depicts three of these examples: a shattered glass, telescope, and black hole.

[ART BY BAILEY HOLLIS](#)



STOICISM AND \$TOICISM

The dollar signs flooding out of the emotionless man's head represent how Stoicism has been misconstrued to the point where the modern \$toic's primary concern is goal achievement.

ART BY ELI KATSIMPALIS



CONDEMNED TO BREAK THE LAW

The art depicts someone waking to find themselves trapped by signs telling them they weren't allowed to be there. The system punishing them for trying to survive forces them to continue breaking the laws they are punished for.

ART BY BAILEY HOLLIS



EXPLAINING MANSPLAINING

The blank text bubble covering the woman's face is a very literal representation of mansplaining through the framework of silencing.

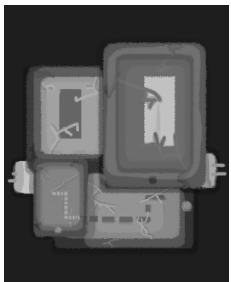
ART BY ELI KATSIMPALIS



CAUSAL EFFICACY

The figure looming behind the cookies entices the viewer to make a purchase. Buying them is tempting, but who knows what sinister plans your funds will go toward?

ART BY THEO DAVIS



TECHNOLOGICAL SUBLIME

This piece is inspired by the author's remark that internet users create a "Frankenstein" of themselves. The image depicts an amalgamation of different screens, covered in cracks that represent the fragmentation of the self.

ART BY THEO DAVIS



MARXIST HEGEMONY

This piece depicts a crowd protesting, the sound of their discontent materializing in the air. It is meant to represent the spirit of hegemony evident within bourgeois revolution.

ART BY THEO DAVIS

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