

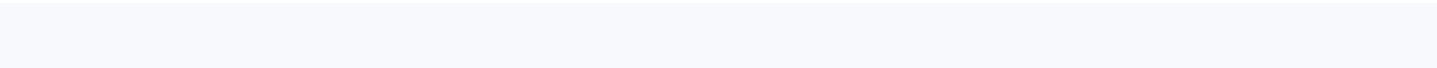
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articles

The Yoruba Concept of Alajobi as a Panacea for Africa's Environmental Crises

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Abstract

This research centers on environmental issues in Africa. By environmental issues, we mean human actions that threaten the collective existence of all living beings on the Earth's surface. Present reality and research indicate that the ongoing abuse of the environment is not only harmful to nature but also impacts human health and prosperity. According to the World Health Organization, a quarter of all deaths worldwide are now linked to environmental misuse and carelessness towards nature. Incidents such as Ebola and Coronavirus outbreaks should remind humans of the severe and destructive effects that can occur when the environment is exploited without regard and caution. Many lives and properties have been lost globally due to nature's retaliation in events like earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and other natural and human-made disasters. In addressing these issues, this paper discusses how the Yoruba concept of 'alajobi,' meaning 'kinship,' can be vital in reorienting Africans to see themselves and other beings in nature not just as co-tenants (ajogbe) but as relatives originating from the same ontological source – 'the earth.' The paper examines two core values essential for the sustainability of alajobi: moderation (iwontunwonsi) and contentment (itelorun). These values can serve as a paradigm to tackle environmental crises. Ultimately, this paper aims to reinforce the importance of interconnected, interdependent, and harmonious relationships between humans and nature as a sustainable solution to prevent further and impending environmental crises in Africa.

Keywords: *Alajobi; environmental crises; Ajogbe; Yoruba; earth; health; moderation (iwontunwonsi); contentment (itelorun)*

I. Introduction

This paper focuses on the trajectories of environmental crises within the African continent. By environmental crises, we mean human activity that threatens the collective and harmonious existence of all entities on the Earth's surface. Present reality and scholarly research are pointers to the fact that the continuous abuse and degenerating use of nature are not just injurious to nature but also affect the health and wealth of humans. According to the World Health Organization, one-quarter of all deaths worldwide are now attributed to environmental abuse and recklessness towards nature.¹ The outbreak of diseases such as Ebola and Coronavirus ought to serve as a constraint on humans due the terrible and devastating effects that may occur when the environment is not properly taken care of. While a lot of lives and properties have been lost across the globe as a result of the revolt of nature in the form of earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and other human-induced disasters. The International Panel on Climate Change predicts that

greenhouse gases will increase global temperatures by 3.6 degrees F by 2100 – a rise unprecedented over the past 10,000 years. What might the world look like as we approach that point? Wetlands will disappear. Floods, hurricanes, and droughts will become progressively more severe. Infectious diseases will increase in virulence and range. Montana's famed glaciers may all but disappear within 30 years. A quarter of species may vanish by 2050 (sic).²

Even more disturbing is the possibility that human activities in the environment could weaken human genetic defenses and increase vulnerability. In an article published by Scott Solomon, he asserts that:

As climate change brings rising temperatures, droughts, shifting patterns of precipitation, and longer growing seasons, plants and animals are evolving to keep pace. Biologists have observed squirrels and salmon developing at an accelerated pace, causing them to reproduce at a younger

¹ Scott Solomon, "Climate Change could Affect Human Evolution," *NBC News*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/mach/science/climate-change-could-affect-human-evolution-here-s-how-ncna907276>.

² "Do Genes Respond to Global Warming?" *PLoS Biology* 2, no. 10 (2004): e338.

age. Earlier summers have caused some flowers to bloom earlier in the year. And corals are forging new relationships with microscopic algae to survive in warmer, more acidic seas. As the planet continues to warm, evolutionary changes are expected in other species as well – including *Homo sapiens*. Climate change will alter the internal workings of our bodies in subtle but significant ways and will likely cause a noticeable shift in our appearance. A warmer climate means malaria, West Nile virus, and other diseases long confined primarily to the tropics will spread into temperate zones. As a result, people living in the U.S. and other developed nations will be exposed to these illnesses, and our immune systems will be forced to evolve new defences. That, in turn, could cause other, noninfectious diseases.³

The need for humans to be environmentally responsive and responsible has given rise to several studies in the field of environmental ethics and philosophy. Ethical reflection on human relations with the non-human world is not new. Concern about the environmental impact of human practices and humane treatment of animals was found in ancient Greece. Jeremy Bentham and John Muir are both still influential in environmental ethics. Also, Aldo Leopold and *Country Almanac*'s seminal work in the field, with its essay on land ethics, which was published in 1949, is a good reference point. However, the modern field of environmental ethics emerged in the 1970s. From the 1980s, much research, publications, and teachings in environmental ethics rapidly expanded. As environmental ethics continued to grow in the twenty-first century, it diversified.⁴ Environmental ethics encompasses a range of divergent perspectives regarding the core issues within the field, such as, how to approach these problems, and how environmental ethical theory relates to pressing practical environmental issues. Addressing these issues has given birth to several theories that are non-African, such as anthropocentrism, ecologism, biocentrism, and deep ecology (land, air, and water). However, the concern of this paper is not to regurgitate and reiterate the findings of scholars using different environmental approaches and theories to resolve and restrain the excessive use of non-human and natural resources in the environment. The concern of this paper is an attempt to domesticate and locate the solutions

³ Solomon.

⁴ Palmer Clare, Katie McShane, and Ronald Sandler, "Environmental Ethics," *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 39 (2014): 421.

to Africa's environmental crises within the African value system and principles, which will help to resolve environmental crises in Africa and beyond, thereby making the attainment of environmental sustainability achievable. As such, this paper adopts the Yoruba concept of *alajobi* as an ethical framework and foundation for broadly applicable environmental principles to preserve and conserve the environment against abuse and overexploitation. Indigenous epistemologies, when substantiated through pragmatic interaction with health and environment, demonstrate that local ethical lexicons can be employed to tackle urgent crises.⁵ They do not just represent things; they shape how people act every day to prevent problems, care for the environment, and be responsible.⁶ However, it is essential to note that the adoption of *alajobi* as a culturally significant value is not meant to serve as a universal projection, suggesting that the use of *alajobi* will inherently lead to environmental sustainability throughout Africa. Instead, the use of *alajobi* is construed in the following senses: First, it mainly talks about local communities, where traditional values and kinship norms still have a lot of moral weight. Second, it applies to policy framing and moral education, indicating that policymakers and educators can utilize culturally significant concepts such as *alajobi* to enhance environmental sustainability. Third, it adds to philosophical discourse by providing an indigenous framework for environmental ethics that goes against models that are only based on people or that come from other cultures.

II. The trajectories of African environmental crises: Philosophers' perspectives

In an attempt by African scholars to look beyond the inadequacies of the Western environmental ethics in addressing Africa's environmental problems, the works of existing African environmental scholars can be broadly categorized into two. The first strand of African literature on environmental issues consists of works that describe the interconnectedness between humans and non-humans as grounded in either culture or religious beliefs and values. Under these categories are the works of scholars like Workineh Kelbessa, Godfrey Tangwa, Ademola Fayemi, and Ogunade Raymond, to mention a few. The second category consists of scholarly work that has either used virtues inherent in people's way of life, devoid of any metaphysical connection, or adopted con-

⁵ Cyril Emeka Ejike, "COVID-19 and Other Prevalent Diseases in Africa: A Pragmatic Approach," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2021): 33.

⁶ *Ibid.*

cepts that address human relationships in combating environmental challenges. Scholars in this category include Segun Ogungbemi, Thaddeus Metz, and Lawrence Ogbo Ugwanyi. While the latter have been studied by a limited number of scholars, whereas the majority of the existing literature in African environmental ethics has focused on the former. Most notable among the African scholars who have contributed immensely to the discourse on African Environmental crises is Workineh Kelbessa. In his earliest work titled “Environmental Philosophy in African Traditions of Thought,” he describes the interconnectedness and bonds shared between the Oromo people of Ethiopia and nature. According to him, in the Oromo worldview, the concepts “*Waaqa*” (God), “*Ayyaana*” (spirit), “*uuma*” (the physical world), and “*safuu*” (an ethical principle) provide the metaphysical underpinning of an environmental ethic. They underlie environmental attitudes to nature and society.”⁷ He points out that “*Ayyaana* is a refraction of *Waaqa*. *Uuma* is the physical thing. *Saffuu* mediates between the *Ayyaana*, which is the ideal, and *uuma*, which is the physical that needs to be regulated. The three, according to him, are interconnected and interrelated, and as such, each concept cannot be understood independently of the other.”⁸ He better describes the Oromo worldview thus:

The Oromo people value different natural entities, as they are created by *Waaqa*. Hence, the valuing of *Waaqa* underpins belief in the values of living beings. Different natural entities have different roles and statuses. God allowed human beings to use other natural entities, but they cannot overexploit them as they wish. They are given a special role with responsibility. The point to be stressed here is that the Oromo people do not consider nature as a storehouse from which to rob resources. *Safuu* governs the relationship between different entities and the use of resources. It would be wrong to overexploit fellow human beings and natural resources. This shows that in the Oromo worldview, human beings are not placed at the top of the ladder to dominate everything below without any restriction. Human beings are an equal part of a vibrant, interconnected whole. The Oromo see themselves as within nature, not as subjects

⁷ Workineh Kelbessa, *Indigenous and Modern Environmental Ethics: A Study of the Indigenous Oromo Environmental Ethic and Modern Issues of Environment and Development in Ethiopian Philosophical Studies I* (Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2011), 213.

⁸ *Ibid.*

detached from it. For the Oromo, nature is essential for survival, production, and protection. Thus, the Oromo worldview promotes responsible resource management.⁹

However, this position of Kelebssa might not be able to go past the Oromo tribe in Ethiopia because it is strictly rooted in the metaphysical and religious beliefs of the Oromo people and since various communities within the African world view have different divinities or mythological beliefs, it will require anyone who wants to subscribe to the Oromo ethics to first understand the divinity structure of the Oromo people. Hence, Lawrence Ogbo Ugwanyi advocates for an African environmental philosophy that divorces environmental morality from purely religious foundations.¹⁰ Perhaps Kelbessa sees the limitation in his environmental philosophy; hence, in his recent works, he questions why human relational concepts such as *ubuntu* were neglected in addressing environmental issues in Africa.

Godfrey B. Tangwa, a Cameroonian philosopher, describes the traditional African environmental ethics as eco-biocommunitarian, which is the metaphysical recognition and acceptance of interdependence and peaceful co-existence between earth, plants, animals, and humans. According to him,

This metaphysical worldview involves the “recognition and acceptance of inter-dependence and peaceful coexistence between earth, plants, animals, and humans.” This metaphysical outlook underpinned the ways, manners, and cosmic relations between humans and their fellow humans. It is also responsible for why traditional Africans were more cautious in their attitude to plants, animals, and inanimate things, and the various invisible forces of the world. Tangwa noted that traditional Africans were more disposed towards the attitude of ‘live and let live.’¹¹

Joseph Nkang Ogar and Samuel Akpan Basset affirm that the foundation of Tangwa’s eco-bio-communitarianism is “the slim and flexible

⁹ Workineh Kelbessa, “Environmental Philosophy in African Traditions of Thought,” *Environmental Ethics* 40, no. 4 (2018): 316.

¹⁰ Philomena A. Ojomo, “Environmental Ethics: An African Understanding,” *African Journal of Environmental Science and Technology* 5, no. 8 (2011): 572.

¹¹ Godfrey B. Tangwa, “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics,” in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu, 387-395 (Blackwell, 2004), 389.

line that exists between plants, animals, and inanimate things, between the sacred and the profane, matter and the spirit, the communal and the individual. It is in line with this metaphysical framework that one can consistently and coherently situate the people's belief in transmigration of the soul into animals, plants, or into forces such as the wind."¹² Based on this metaphysical understanding of nature and the nature of man, Tangwa says such a mindset has very significant implications for the way nature is approached and treated by traditional Africans. However, according to Ojomo, the problem with Tangwa's exploration of an African environmental ethics is "that it is an ethno-philosophical defense of indigenous African treatment and management of the environment. He never recognized the ways and manners by which traditional Africans contributed to the segregation of the environment."¹³ The point of Ojomo is valid because several African environmental ethicists do not offer a thorough critique of events in indigenous African societies despite the interconnectedness with nature.

Ademola Kazeem Fayemi, in his study on environmental sustainability within the Yoruba purview, affirms the interconnectedness of Africans with nature. According to him:

Ritual is the principal tool used to approach that world of felt but unseen forces in a way that will rearrange the structure of the physical world and bring about ecological equilibrium. The rationale here is that there is a metaphysics of force permeating everything in the environment, and this explains the connectivity and interdependence of all things, humans, plants, and animals, along with inanimate entities.¹⁴

However, the problem with Fayemi's position is that the ritual practices are becoming far too insular, and some of them even constitute environmental degradation or abuse. For instance, putting up sacrifices at T-junctions has been perceived not to be hygienic for society because so many items used for these rituals are being left to rot and decay in public because of people's fear of touching or going near them. Moreover, some of these rituals have lost their epistemic relevance in the

¹² Joseph Nkang Ogar and Samuel Akpan Bassey, "African Environmental Ethics," *RAIS Journal for Social Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2019): 80.

¹³ Ojomo, 577.

¹⁴ Ademola Kazeem Fayemi, "African Environmental Ethics and the Poverty of Eco-Activism in Nigeria: A Hermeneutico-Reconstructionist Appraisal," *Matatu* 48, no. 2 (2016): 377.

sense that many young generations are not aware of some of these practices, as a result of westernization and globalization.

Ogunade Raymond also alludes to the interrelatedness of the Yoruba people with nature. He posits that the “Yoruba concept of environment is all-embracing – humans, animals, plants, and the non-living beings form the entire human society or community.”¹⁵ He expresses the fact that within the indigenous Yoruba traditions, there are values rooted in oral traditions that speak of the need to care for and preserve nature. Supporting his view are several taboos cited in the works of Bolanle Wahab that express the need for proper hygiene and a good environment among Africans. These proverbs include:

A cup placed on a water pot must not be used for drinking;
 one should bring one’s personal cup or bowl for drinking.
 A menstrual woman must not prepare meals.
 Housewives must not cook with their heads uncovered.
 Cooking with the head uncovered will cause a headache.¹⁶

However, the problem with some of these proverbs is the fact that epistemic enlightenment has made so many of them meaningless and obsolete. People no longer see the need to obey them because enlightenment has allowed people to see that the dangers attached to some of these taboos are not actually real. For instance, the above taboo that a housewife must not cook while the head is uncovered so as to prevent a headache has been found to be untrue; rather, the reason why a housewife needs to cook with her head covered is to prevent the hair strands from dropping into the pot unknowingly while cooking. In a nutshell, scholars have tried to underscore an African environmental philosophy from the spiritual and religious perspective, which has not been able to address the problem holistically. Nevertheless, we also have scholars who are trying to engage the issue from a humanist perspective.

For Segun Ogungbemi, the notion of traditional philosophy is what he calls the “ethics of care.” He believes this is derived from the relationship that exists between Africans with natural constituents like water, land and air. He affirms the need to keep sanity while interacting with nature. However, Ogungbemi soon diverged from this philosophy to what he tagged as the ethics of nature-relatedness. In his words:

¹⁵ Raymond Ogunade, “Environmental Issues in Yoruba Religion: Implication for Leadership and Society in Nigeria,” *Science and Religious Global Perspectives* 3 (2005): 4.

¹⁶ Bolanle Wahab, “African Traditional Religions, Environmental Health and Sanitation in Rural Communities,” *The Environscope: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 1, no. 1 (2004): 6.

Ethics of nature-relatedness asserts that our natural resources do not need man for their existence and functions [...] The ethics of nature-relatedness can be succinctly stated as an ethics that leads human beings to seek to co-exist peacefully with nature and treat it with some reasonable concern for its worth, survival, and sustainability. The ethics of naturerelatedness has three basic elements: reason, experience, and the will. It does not attribute natural resources to a spiritual nature, nor does the creation of natural resources have any religious affinity. With this new ethical thinking, our present reckless use of nature can be curtailed.¹⁷

Here, Ogungbemi notes that “natural resources do not need man for their existence and functions. Rather, humans need to seek to co-exist with nature peacefully for its own survival, sustenance, and worth.”¹⁸ As much as this may sound true, it is not, because both biology and African ontology agree on the interdependence of humans and nature. According to Ojomo, “Ogungbemi’s alarming recommendation that nature should invariably apply its brake through volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and other events is reflex of the disconnection of his ethics of nature relatedness and African ontology.”¹⁹

Thaddeus Metz tries to establish a sort of African environmental philosophy based on the Afro-communal virtue ethics. It must be noted that the Afro-Communal ethics of Metz are rooted in the concept of *ubuntu*. For Metz, two principles were integral to his Afro-Communal Ethics: shared identity and togetherness (solidarity). The first emphasizes that an individual is strictly a member of a community and does not exist in isolation. Hence, he has a responsibility towards others. The second principle enacts the coming together of people to achieve similar goals for the betterment of humanity. Metz’s work can be summed up in three theses as explained by Samuel and Fayemi:

Thesis 1: An action is right just insofar as it promotes shared identity among people grounded on goodwill; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to do so and tends

¹⁷ Segun Ogungbemi, “An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis,” in *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*, ed. Louis J. Pojman, 330-337 (Wadsworth Publishing, 1997), 333.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 332.

¹⁹ Cf. Ojomo, 577.

to encourage the opposites of division and ill-will.

Thesis 2: An act is right just insofar as it is a way of living harmoniously or prizing communal relationship, ones in which people identify with each other and exhibit solidarity with one another; otherwise, an act is wrong.

Thesis 3: An act is wrong insofar as it degrades a person's special ability to enter into a mutual relationship of identity and solidarity... With those who must be treated with respect in virtue of their capacity for them.²⁰

Metz's theory of Afro-Communal Ethics is relational because they are interconnected. That is, when the flourishing of one has far-reaching implications for the others and vice versa. Metz's Afro-Communal Ethics is in tune with environmental issues because, within the African settings, Metz granted moral status to nonhuman entities; hence, rationality is nonhuman inclusive.²¹ Hence, the above theses are non-human inclusive. Metz's view could be seen as non-anthropocentric in nature and could be a viable tool for looking into trans-generational environmental concerns since Africans, by and large, believe in the ontology that metaphysically links the living, the unborn, and the dead.²²

However, the issue with Metz's relational ethics is the fact that Metz, for one, did not take the conflict of interest into consideration, which we have identified as one of the major causes of environmental crises in Africa. Even within African societies, there are issues of conflict of interest where a community will wage war against another community at one point or another. The fundamental question that needs to be raised is to what extent solidarity can be maintained when it comes to issues that pertain to the sustenance of human life. The Yoruba proverbs will say: *omo eni o le sedi berere kafi 'leke s' idi omo elomiran* – meaning one's child may not be qualified (to receive a benefit), and one would give his/her entitlement to an outsider. This proverb explains a lot about issues in relational ethics. To what extent can one

²⁰ Cf. Olusegun S. Samuel and Ademola Kazeem Fayemi, "Afro-Communal Virtue Ethic as a Foundation for Environmental Sustainability in Africa and beyond," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 38, no. 1 (2019): 85. For original texts, see Thaddeus Metz, "Toward an African Moral Theory," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (2007): 321-341; Thaddeus Metz, "Human Dignity, Capital Punishment, and an African Moral Theory: Toward a New Philosophy of Human Rights," *Journal of Human Rights* 9, no. 1 (2010): 81-99; Thaddeus Metz, "African Values and Human Rights as Two Sides of the Same Coin: A Reply to Oyowe," *African Human Rights Law Journal* 14 (2014): 306-321.

²¹ Cf. Samuel and Fayemi, 79-95.

²² *Ibid.*

remain faithful to a good course when it contradicts one's personal goals? How do I think not to harm the environment in the face of serious hunger and starvation?

Damford Chibvongodze, in alluding to Metz's position, also emphasizes the fact that *ubuntu* is not only about humans but the entire socio-sphere. According to him, there are linguistic imprint that shows Africans' connection with non-human entities. For instance, he claims that the announcement of the death of late Nigerian Literary Giant, Chinua Achebe, was like the fall of an *Iroko* tree.²³ He asserts that clan names in Africa are pointers to Africans' interconnectedness with nature. He further posits that the use of proverbs and taboos is a viable means through which environmental virtues and ethics are imparted to Africans.²⁴

Lastly, Kelbessa sums up the majority of existing African environmental ethics literature to express a harmonious relationship with the natural world. He said, "African environmental ethics and philosophy emphasize that life is relational. Different cultural concepts, including *Ubuntu*, *Saffuu*, *Ukama*, and others, have been used to promote African relational ethics and our ethical obligations towards future humans and nonhuman generations."²⁵ The ontological interconnectedness of humans with nonhuman entities stands at the baseline of most environmental ethics theories originating in Africa. However, despite this interconnectedness, reckless abuse and exploitative use of nature persist, which makes the continent the leading continent in terms of environmental degradation and abuse. And at this point, one needs to ask "why?" Joseph Nkang and Samuel Akpan, confirming this contradiction, note that:

The relationship between the African people and their environment is much like the two sides of a coin – inextricably connected yet in constant opposition. The people, one aide of the coin, live in close dependence on the service value of natural resources. On the other side of the coin is the environment: the land, climate, and water resources, which are so intimately connected in a physical and metaphysical sense to the African people. This interdependence

²³ Danford Tafadzwa Chibvongodze, "Ubuntu is not only about Humans! An Analysis of the Role of African Philosophy and Ethics in Environment Management," *Journal of Human Ecology* 53, no. 2 (2016): 157.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 160-161.

²⁵ Kelbessa, "Environmental Philosophy in African Traditions of Thought," 316.

manifests itself in a love-hate relationship; love- because the land and the people are connected in a historical song-dance, meshed in the traditions that make the people “African” and identify the land as African soil; hate – because the intimacy of the relationship and connectedness of the African people, their economies, their politics, their religion, to their natural environment brings to the fore the inadequacies of the dominant partner, embroiling the couple in moral wars labeled “slash-and-burn” soil erosion, farming and deforestation.²⁶

In addressing the reason behind this African predicament, Ogungbemi contends that,

there is a shift in African’s perception of the natural world. He maintains that the modern usage of our land by society does not reflect a similar degree of awareness of the importance of forests and trees for maintaining environmental values. The drive to develop has led to wholesale abandonment of traditional practices [...] As if development and modernization were incompatible with the conservation of forests and the protection of trees. The consequences of this have been a breakdown in environmental stability [...].²⁷

Plumwood, complementing Ogungbemi’s view, argues that “the subjugation of Africans and their nature by European power, dependent on the anthropocentric rationality which viewed humans as beings separate from nature, has further contributed to the pitfall of existing literature in addressing the issue.”²⁸

Existing literature is insufficient to address the rising environmental challenges in Africa, due to conflicts of interest. Most African countries are developing and, as a result, finding it challenging to balance their traditional connection to nature with the pursuit of advancement. Also, there is a need to continually develop concepts that resonate with people’s environmentally inclusive beliefs, to address human and non-human relationships. It is upon this theoretical gap that this research seeks to address the African environmental problem by adopting a concept that is not just integral to the belief system of the Yoruba

²⁶ Cf. Ogar and Basse, 80.

²⁷ Cf. Ogungbemi, “An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis,” 332.

²⁸ Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (Routledge, 2002), 21.

people, but also a useful tool in combating continual social change, which has created the tension of conflict of interest between humans and non-human entities. The next section of this paper will elaborate on the concept of *alajobi* in Yoruba traditional thought as a pragmatic and viable theory to resolve the problem of environmental crises in Africa, particularly in Nigeria.

III. Conceptual clarification: *Alajobi*, *Ajogbe*, and related African traditional concepts

To avoid conceptual confusion, it is crucial to distinguish *alajobi* from similar or intersecting categories within African thought. In Yoruba ontology, *alajobi* signifies kinship or familial bonds rooted in a shared ontological origin – the earth. It involves not just cohabitation, but profound family responsibilities supported by ethical duties, communal sanctions, and metaphysical accountability. Conversely, *ajogbe* means “co-tenancy” or “mere cohabitation,” representing a less strict social bond that does not carry the permanent obligations of kinship. Akinwowo argued that modernization and social conflict have weakened *alajobi*, leading to relationships resembling *ajogbe*.²⁹ This paper disputes the claim of its disappearance: kinship bonds may be fragile, yet they remain central to Yoruba identity and continue to underpin moral frameworks for human and nonhuman interactions.

In a comparative sense, *alajobi* shares similarities with other African relational concepts, such as *ubuntu* (which emphasizes communal solidarity in Southern Africa) and *Safuu* (the Oromo moral principle of balance). However, *alajobi* is distinct in its familial framework: it positions humans, nonhumans, and the earth itself as siblings sharing a common mother (*ile*). *Ubuntu* emphasizes unity, *Safuu* focuses on balance, and *alajobi* centers on family responsibilities, justice, and the inescapable ties to the earth.

Regarding wider applicability, the claim is not that *alajobi*, as a culturally specific concept, can be wholly transferred into non-Yoruba contexts. The underlying logic of kinship obligation and moderation embodied in *alajobi* offers a transferable ethical perspective: sustainability requires viewing the environment not merely as an external resource but as a relative to whom responsibilities are owed. Policymakers and educators can adapt the principle of *alajobi* – by framing environmental responsibility within kinship or familial metaphors – without

²⁹ Akinsola A. Akiwowo, *Ajobi and Ajogbe, Variations on the Theme of Sociation* (University of Ife Press, 1983), 19.

needing to adopt Yoruba rituals or metaphysical beliefs. In this way, *alajobi* functions both as a culturally rooted ethical framework and as a foundation for broadly applicable environmental principles. The Yoruba concept of *alajobi* resonates with other cultural terms, such as *mmadu* which in Igbo means relational ontology, *safuu* means balance among the Oromo people and *ubuntu* means solidarity and interconnectedness in Southern Africa.³⁰

IV. The Yoruba concept of *Alajobi* and the imperative of environmental sustainability in Africa

Amidst all continuous social change, there is something that remains central and pivotal to an African person – ‘familyhood.’ Culture may be eroded or diluted, people may reject being a part of a community, people can stop believing in myth, taboos, and the worship of deities, but no one exists without a family, either biological or adopted. It is on this ground that one can adopt the values that exist among the family or kinship bond as a way of re-orientating humans’ ideas towards nature. According to the Yoruba historical sociology and ontology, both humans and other entities in nature are family and children of the same mother (earth). Hence, Akinwowo’s concept of *ajobi* becomes instrumental in addressing African environmental problems for two basic reasons.

First, *alajobi* expresses the ontological connection that exists between humans and non-human entities in the world as being from the same source. The ontological relations are further emphasized by Stavros Karageorgakis and Konstantina Lyrou that nature should be understood beyond constructivist or instrumentalist paradigms. Like *alajobi*, they contend that dialectical naturalism perceives the human-nonhuman relationship as internally mediated, resulting in ecological ethics that arise from relational processes rather than external imposition.³¹ This framework has consequences for how African communities can establish environmental governance based on ontological perspectives of the earth as kin. Second, *alajobi* possess rich sociological values within the Yoruba tradition that can be adopted in addressing issues of conflict of interest between humans and nature. Although, Akinwowo claims that there is no longer *alajobi*, due to various conflicts that

³⁰ Anayochukwu Kingsley Ugwu, “An Igbo Understanding of the Human Being: A Philosophical Approach,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2024): 135-181.

³¹ Stavros Karageorgakis and Konstantina Lyrou, “The Essence of Nature and Dialectical Naturalism,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2023): 185-200.

break up family members today,³² but rather what exists is *alajogbe* (co-tenant) but we disagree with him on this very point because even when one fights and rejects his family, one cannot deny the fact that he has or belongs to a family, not taking cognizance of them does not deny their existence. The existence of a family is axiomatic. Friendship or a co-tenant bond cannot substantiate a family bond. The Yorubas have a way of placing kinship bonds alongside deities and divinities. These can be seen in the traditional hunters' song of the Yoruba-*Ijala*.

B'gun ba gbeni, akobi f'egun
b'orisa bagbeni, akobi f orisa
b'alajobi ba gbeni, akobi f'ara eni

This is translated to mean:

If masquerades favor one, one gives masquerades, kolas,
If a deity favors one, one gives a deity kolas.
If kin favor one, one gives kin kolas.³³

The Yoruba place significant emphasis on kinship bonds. It is believed that these bonds are both sociological and ontological. It is also believed that even when one tries to break away from this bond by doing what is wrong or evil to one's kin, there is always a metaphysical justice force that oversees the justice system. This justice force is Mother Earth, from whom one cannot run away. One cannot deny the existence of a mother, regardless of feelings of animosity towards her. Just as the Yorubas place motherhood as per with deities by saying *Orisha bi iya o si*, meaning that a deity like a mother does not exist. Likewise, such reference is being accorded to 'Mother Earth,' who happens to be a mother to all entities. It is believed that the Earth serves as a regulator and a force of justice for all activities in the universe. The Yoruba say that, *kaka ki ile ku, ile a sa*, which means that the earth does not die; it will rather lose value than die. The same way a mother can lose value in the eyes of her children. A proverb expresses this aptly:

*Ore kitikiti, iyekan katakata,
ojo ore kitikiti ba ku, iyekan
katakata ni o gbesin*

³² Akiwowo, 23.

³³ Omowoyela Oyekan, *Yoruba Proverbs* (University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 421.

This is translated to mean:

Intimate friends, intimate maternal siblings;
The day an intimate friend dies,
It is the intimate siblings who will bury him³⁴

The above shows that a kinship bond cannot substitute friendship or a co-tenant bond. Also, just as the existence of kinship and familyhood is a priori, as is the existence of both human and nonhuman entities. One can fight with a co-tenant and pack one's load and relocate to a different settlement, never to meet that tenant again, but one cannot get offended by nature, or one cannot recklessly abuse nature and relocate to another place, never to meet nature again. The way the universe was structured is that, just as family members are interdependent, in the same way, humans and non-humans are. The Yorubas believe that even when you do wrong to your siblings and run away, never to meet again, there is a metaphysical force that enacts justice. Hence, the Yoruba say that *alajobi a da*, meaning the kinship bond will judge. They believe that this bond serves as a cosmic law of justice. Similarly, the role of the earth pertains to all forces present in the universe. The earth serves as a cosmic law of justice. Hence the Yoruba's say *eni ba da ile, a ba lle lo*. Meaning he who betrays Mother Earth will die by Mother Earth. Mother Earth here has a sort of denotative meaning. The earth is seen as a metaphysical force that oversees all entities of her children. Hence, if two persons make vows towards another and one betrays the other, it is believed that the other will face the consequences of the betrayer, which will be inflicted by Mother Earth, who regulates the actions of all her children. Nonetheless, it is important to see how some of the features of *alajobi* resonate with the human-nonhuman relationship.

It must be noted that since Akinwowo's usage of the concept *alajobi*, several scholars have reacted for and against his usage based on human relationships, peaceful co-existence, and conflict resolution. Yunusa Salami adopted the concept of *asuwada* in addressing inter-tribal conflict in Nigeria.³⁵ Likewise, Ayokunle Olumuyiwa and Olayinka Akanle have used the concept of *asuwada* epistemology in addressing human relationships as well.³⁶ However, no one have used these

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Yunusa Kehinde Salami, "Asuwada Principle and Inter-Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria," *Yoruba Studies Review* 3, no. 1 (2018): 139-152.

³⁶ Ayokunle Olumuyiwa Omobowale and Olayinka Akanle, "Asuwada Epistemology and Globalised Sociology: Challenges of the South," *Sociology* 51, no. 1 (2017): 43-59.

concepts in addressing human-non-human relationships, surprisingly, considering the fact that the origin of the concept itself in the Yoruba oral tradition encompasses not just human-human relationships, but the entire entity of the cosmos. With the interconnectedness of the Yoruba with nature and the metaphysical component of the universe, it seems to us that adopting a concept like this in addressing and reorienting Africa's attitude towards nature, is not out of place. Needless to say, it does not seem out of place while we consider how a concept like *ubuntu* was used to address human-non-human attitude by Danford Chibvongodze, which is also echoed by Wolkinah Kelbessa in his later work on climate change. Hence, it seems beneficial to examine some of the features that exist among *alajobi* (kinship among the Yorubas) in reorienting people's attitude towards nature.

Alajobi is significant on the premise that, within the relationship that exists among the Yorubas, the concept of *alajobi* already includes some virtues that are environmentally friendly and principles that support environmental responsiveness. For instance, the Yorubas believe that one should not consciously step on the little ants to kill them, first because one cannot create them, and second because they are believed to bring good luck.

*Yi ese re si apakan,
Ma se te kokoro ni
Kokoro ti iwo ko naani ni
Olorun lo le da a*

This is translated to mean:

Side step your feet
Do not kill that insect
That insect you do not regard
God also created.³⁷

The above explains the ontology of *ihuwasi* (behavioral patterns), which have been identified as qualities needed in successful *alajobi* (consanguinity). This shows the values the Yoruba hold towards nature, as they consider the little ant valuable.

In addition, one could also affirm that one of the basic constituents that enhances *alajobi* among the Yoruba is *iwa* (good character). Good character is said to be summed up in the Yoruba concept of *omoluabi*.

³⁷ Cf. Raymond, "Environmental Issues in Yoruba Religion," 5.

Among the Yorubas, it is the joy of each family to have all members as *omoluabi*. According to J. F. Odunjo, one of the qualities of *Omoluabi* is *Imototo* (Cleanliness). Odunjo, in fact, categorically emphasizes making sure one has good, proper waterways that allow used water waste to be taken care of without both damaging the environment and affecting the public.³⁸ This implies that an *Omoluabi* is only complete when one also gives due diligence to taking care of the environment, because the environment is seen as not completely different from who one is. This point is emphasized with the Yoruba proverb that says:

Afínjúú Ààrè; ó fi àkísà dí orùbà; ó ñwá
èniire-é bá sù epo.

Translation and meaning:

Fashionable woman of Ààrè, she cocks her
oil jar with a rag, and she expects good
people to buy oil from her. (Never compromise
on cleanliness and good character.)³⁹

The above proverb explains that among the Yorubas, great credence is given to cleanliness, and it is set at par with good character. The Yoruba will say, *obun obirin ni ohun's o ni ori oko* – meaning, a dirty woman claims she does not have good fortune to attract a husband. Esan and Awe (2023), in another article, identified some values that exist among the Yoruba people that could be used as a paradigm to address the problem of environmental crises in Africa. These values include – corporate responsibility towards others (*ajumose*), principle of non-maleficence (*ire gbogbo*), respect (*ibowofun*), and love and care (*ife ati itoju*).⁴⁰ This paper identified two other virtues that are integral to the Yoruba concept of *alajobi*, thereby promoting environmental responsiveness – moderation (*iwontunwonsi*), and contentment (*itelo-run*).

Moderation (*iwontunwonsi*) – The Yoruba people hold moderation, which is translated in Yoruba as *iwontunwonsi*, as an esteemed

³⁸ Joseph Folahan Odunjo, *Alawiye: Iwe keta* (Learn Africa Plc, 1975), 50.

³⁹ Oyekan, 157.

⁴⁰ For more discussion on Yoruba values that are essential and viable to resolve environmental crisis in Africa, see Oluwatobi D. Essan and Solomon K. Awe, "The Yoruba Concept of the "Okun Omo Iya" as a Critique of Martin Buber's "I-Thou" and the Quest for Environmental Sustainability," *Dialogue and Universalism* 33, no. 2 (2023): 233-253.

virtue worthy of praise. The Yorubas believe that a person who lives a moderate life does not put himself/herself into trouble. The reason for this is predicated by the notion that a moderate person is not covetous and greedy and does not engage in any unlawful and selfish actions in order to acquire material wealth. This presupposes that a moderate person lives according to his ability and within his limits. On the contrary, Akinwowo, in his inaugural lecture, accentuates the traits and personality of those who aspire to live beyond their limits and, as a result, cause irreparable damage to family bonds (*alajobi*). Akinwowo remarks that the result of lack of moderation led to “slavery, or the seizure and forcible sale of a relative, fellow villager, or townsman... unbridled lust for money led to indiscriminate kidnapping of children who were sold into slavery.”⁴¹ This shows that covetousness is characterized by different inimical and criminal attitudes that are detrimental to the development of society as well as the well-being of humans and the rest of the environment. Moderation, therefore, is an integral value and virtue that holds and sustains love, unity, solidarity, cooperativeness, cohesion, and harmony among family members. The virtue of moderation is highly echoed in the ethics and philosophy of Aristotle. A virtuous act, according to Aristotle, is that which strikes a balance between two extremes (vices) – excess and defect.⁴² This is what Aristotle calls the “doctrine of the mean.” A human performs well when he/she avoids extremes and chooses the mean in actions and feelings. Now, how do we use the virtue of moderation to solve environmental crises in Africa?

The virtue of moderation advises humans against the overexploitation, misuse, and excessive abuse of the resources in the environment. Just as a Yoruba proverb warns that *bí ilùú bá dún àdúnjù, yó fàya* (if a drum makes too much noise, it breaks),⁴³ the same applies to the use of the environment, such that if resources in the environment are excessively and covetously used, the environment suffers irreparable damage. For instance, the felling of trees to use in the production of wood, paper, furniture, and so on improves the quality of human existence. However, the felling of trees without planting others is detrimental to the environment and threatens human existence. Also, moderation emphasizes control and restraint in human actions towards non-human entities. In other words, humans should not treat the rest of the environment as mere objects of exploitation for the satisfaction of their

⁴¹ Akiwowo, 18-19.

⁴² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106a-b.

⁴³ Oyekan, 158.

needs.⁴⁴ Simply put, one should not act like a Yoruba proverb that says *agúnbàje ni tolódó* (Pounding-until-it-is-ruined is the habit of the owner of the mortar). Just as family members learn to live moderately so as not to damage or break family bonds, humans should also learn to exploit and use the environment moderately and responsibly in order not to break the harmonious relationships that exist between humans and non-human entities.

Contentment (*Itelorun*) – This is a derivative of the virtue of moderation discussed above. The Yorubas place a premium on the virtue of contentment, such that a contented person is highly respected and accorded high status in society. A person who lives within his limit is content with what he has, regardless of how much or little it is. The Yorubas believe that contentment is the basis and foundation of all human character. A Yoruba proverb that says *itelorun baba iwa* (contentment is the father of all) corroborates this assertion and clearly points to the fact that *itelorun* is the basis of all characters (*iwa*). It suffices to say that anyone who imbibes the virtue of contentment is the master of all good characters. However, Yoruba detests and condemns lack of contentment or covetousness. A covetous person is likened to a thief and a greedy person who stares at another person's possessions. This is shown in the Yoruba proverb that says “*Òkánjúwà baba olè; àwòrònsòsò wo ohun olóhun má séjú*” (The covetous person is the most senior thief; a bug-eyed greedy person stares at another person's possession without blinking).⁴⁵ Another proverb also expresses the same information: “*Òkánjúwà pèlú olè, déédé ni won jé*” (greed/covetousness and stealing are the same).⁴⁶ The point to note here is that greed, covetousness, immodesty, and avarice are vehemently condemned among the Yoruba people. The relevance of this discourse to environmental issues is that in relating and interacting with the environment, a contented person does not exploit the environment beyond what he needs to satisfy his desires. In addition, following Kant's submission that rejects using humans as means to an end, a contented person should not objectify the environment so that the environment is used as a means to an end. The way a contented person will treat his family members as an end in themselves should also be extended to the

⁴⁴ Kelvin G. Behrens, “Toward an African Relational Environmentalism,” in *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in African Meta-Ethics*, eds. Elvis Imafidon and John Ayotunde Isola Bewaji (Lexington Books, 2013), 61.

⁴⁵ Mohammed Ayodeji Ademilokun, “Yoruba Proverbs and the Anti-Corruption Crusade in Nigeria,” *Inkanyiso: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (2014): 45.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

rest of the environment. As contentment prevents conflict, unhealthy competition, rivalry, and clashes in the family, it also prevents clashes between humans and the rest of the environment. When humans are content in the use of the environment, they act in such a way that the environment is preserved, conserved, and protected against damage, degradation, and destruction. What is gleaned from the two virtues discussed above is that they are intricately linked together, and as such, they are essential to solving the quagmire of environmental crises in Africa.

Now, what are the mechanisms by which cultural values influence behavior? *Alajobi* values affect behavior through enforcing social norms, reinforcing rituals, and punishing people in the community. In Yoruba and broader African contexts, kinship principles influence not only interpersonal relationships but also resource allocation, conflict resolution, and collective accountability (*ajumose*). In ecological contexts, these principles act as moral and practical checks on overexploitation. For instance, proverbs that discourage greed or encourage moderation (*iwontunwonsi*) turn into everyday habits of self-control, and the praise of cleanliness (*imototo*) affects how people think about trash and sanitation. Anthropological evidence substantiates these connections: Kelbessa (2011, 2018) illustrates the role of Oromo relational ethics in resource management via *safuu*, whereas Chibvongodze (2016) demonstrates the impact of *Ubuntu*-inspired taboos and rituals on land utilization and forest conservation.⁴⁷ In the same way, Ogunade (2005) talks about Yoruba proverbs and taboos that protected the environment in communities before colonization.⁴⁸ This paper does not claim that cultural virtues alone guarantee broad policy success. Instead, it argues that virtues like moderation and contentment, when embedded in education, community activities, and governance, can boost ecological responsibility and gradually advance environmental sustainability.

V. Conflicts of interest, pressures for modernization, and the limits of cultural norms

This paper advocates *alajobi* as a way to recalibrate human-nature relations; however, it is crucial to recognize that cultural ethics alone are not enough to counteract the structural drivers of environmental crises in Africa. Modern African societies are deeply involved in glob-

⁴⁷ Kelbessa, "Environmental Philosophy in African Traditions of Thought;" Kelbessa, *Indigenous and Modern Environmental Ethics*; Chibvongodze, "Ubuntu is not only about Humans."

⁴⁸ Ogunade, "Environmental Issues in Yoruba Religion," 1-9.

al markets, extractive state policies, and modernization pressures that often result in the overexploitation of natural resources. For instance, land acquisitions by multinational corporations, government support for cash-crop monocultures, or the demand for minerals and timber in international markets often replace local ecological norms. In these situations, the *alajobi*-based values of moderation (*iwontunwonsi*) and contentment (*itelorun*) may not weigh as heavily as the need to survive, the pressures of poverty, or the lure of financial gain.

Conflict of interest is especially evident when communities face the dilemma of conserving their environment versus ensuring immediate economic survival. Ogungbemi⁴⁹ and Ogar Joseph Nkang, and Bassey Samuel Akpan⁵⁰ have observed that the pursuit of development and modernization frequently leads to abandoning traditional limits on environmental exploitation. Similarly, globalization has diminished the significance of taboos and oral traditions, reducing their effectiveness in regulating behavior. This paper proposes a dual approach that combines cultural ethics with legal and institutional reforms to enhance the relevance of *alajobi* amidst these pressures. Land tenure reforms and community-based forestry schemes could embed *alajobi*-like communal responsibility into law by granting local groups enforceable rights over their natural resources. Secondly, economic incentives such as payments for ecosystem services or subsidies for sustainable farming can align market practices with the values of moderation and contentment. Thirdly, integrating *alajobi* principles into school curricula and civic education can preserve their importance among younger generations, helping to counteract the decline of traditional authority. By situating *alajobi* within a comprehensive framework of cultural, legal, and economic measures, the ethic of kinship is not isolated in competition against the formidable structural forces of environmental degradation. Instead, it can serve as an additional moral underpinning that reinforces initiatives for environmental sustainability that are both culturally relevant and backed by institutions.

In conclusion, taking an extract from the *Ifa* literary corpus that charges man with the higher responsibility of preserving the environment, one *Odu Ifa* says:

*Otoro! Aiye ja
Ogbara! aiye la kanle!
Bi aiye ba ti owo eni baja
Aimo 'wahu wa ni*

⁴⁹ Ogungbemi, "An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis," 330-337.

⁵⁰ Ogar and Bassey, "African Environmental Ethics."

This is translated to mean:

Otoro! The world has flown off its hook into space
 Ogbara! The Earth is rent asunder to its core
 If the world becomes unlivable in our time
 It is because we no longer know how to behave.⁵¹

The above extraction does not serve as an anthropocentric ground, but rather, humans are seen as the eldest of the siblings of *Olodumare*; hence, they are charged with such responsibilities, just as the Yoruba task the eldest to look after the well-being of the younger ones. This suggests that the elders should treat the younger ones with respect, love, and care. The care for the younger ones includes, among others, protecting them against any harm, showing them love and care, and doing things that will make them flourish and prosper. These attitudes should also be extended to non-human entities and nature, such that every human's actions should promote the flourishing of the environment and protect it from harm, misuse, abuse, degradation, and depletion. The result of this approach is evident in the Yoruba proverb that says *Irorun igi ni irorun eye* (the peace of the tree is the peace of the bird).

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Author contribution statement

Both authors have contributed equally to the conception and design of the work, the drafting and revising of the manuscript, and the final approval of the version to be published.

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⁵¹ Cf. Akiwowo, 30.

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In Defence of Nudging from a Virtue Ethics Perspective

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Abstract

Nudging is typically understood as a design intended to influence the behaviour or choices of decision-makers to promote their own or other stakeholders' welfare by steering choices in beneficial directions without restricting their freedom of choice. This paper explores the ethical dimensions of nudging and provides an account that defends the framework of nudging from a virtue ethics perspective. We will do so by examining the design and purposes of nudging and its relationship with welfare, virtue and eudaimonia. We argue that the notion of nudging in nudging is closely associated with the notion of external goods in the Nicomachean Ethics and that certain nudges can be helpful in cultivating virtues. We refer to nudges such as virtue-conducive nudges that aim to enhance welfare and also support the cultivation of virtues over time. We identify two key pathways to explore the interplay between nudging, virtue, welfare and eudaimonia. In the first pathway, we discuss those nudges which aim at promoting welfare and also contribute to the development of virtues over time. The second pathway explores those nudges that enhance welfare as a consequence of virtue development. In the Nicomachean Ethics, both welfare and virtues are essential for attaining eudaimonia. By exploring the relationships between nudging, welfare and virtue, this paper provides an account that defends the design and practice of nudging from a virtue ethics perspective.

Keywords: nudging; welfare; virtue ethics; habit formation; virtue cultivation; eudaimonia

I. Introduction

In everyday life, individuals often rely on their intuitions and emotions to quickly resolve various decision-making situations. While making the choices can have a tremendous impact on people's welfare, behavioural economics reveals valuable insights about human decision-making, which suggests that individuals often deviate from rational models of decision-making for various reasons. People are prone to various cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias,¹ status quo bias,² and anchoring effect,³ etc., while making choices. These biases often influence decision makers to make irrational choices, which may ultimately affect their overall welfare.

In different decision-making situations, people are often bombarded with a myriad of options, where some options are much better than others, and the choice of the best option is very likely to contribute to their overall welfare. For example, we all know that eating fruits is good for our health, and we also teach the same thing to our children. However, due to various cognitive biases, when we have fruits, cakes, and other delicious items in front of us, picking the best available option by invoking rationality alone becomes a highly challenging task for us in real-world situations. In other words, although a better option, which contributes to the welfare of decision-makers in terms of being healthy, is available, they might not choose it over the other available options due to various contingent and psychological reasons. Hence, there is a need for a gentle push that may influence people to opt for the best available choice. In this context, Thaler and Sunstein propose a method to help decision-makers choose the option that may make choosers or other stakeholders better off because of the choices they make.⁴ This method is termed 'nudge.' The primary goal of nudge is to influence people's behaviour or choices in a predictable manner by designing a choice architecture in a decision-making context by carefully considering human behavioural insights, including various biases.

¹ Margit E. Oswald and Stefan Grosjean, "Confirmation Bias," in *Cognitive Illusions: A Handbook of Fallacies and Biases in Thinking, Judgement and Memory* (Psychology Press, 2004), 79-83.

² William Samuelson and Richard Zeckhauser, "Status Quo Bias in Decision Making," *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty* 1 (1988): 7-59.

³ Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases: Biases in Judgments Reveal Some Heuristics of Thinking under Uncertainty," *Science* 185, no 4157 (1974): 1124-1131.

⁴ Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge, The Final Edition* (Penguin Books, 2021).

In the background given above, Thaler and Sunstein suggest libertarian paternalism as the foundational principle for nudging.⁵ According to them, it is a “*movement*” for the welfare of the people.⁶ Libertarian paternalism emerges from paternalism, in which the welfare of the stockholders is the primary objective. Thaler states:

Readers who manage to reach the fifth page of *Nudge* find that we define our objective as trying to “influence choices in a way that will make choosers better off, as judged by themselves.”⁷

This statement suggests that nudges are designed to facilitate choices that individuals would wish to make but often fail to make in reality because of certain biases or behavioural tendencies. Based on the fundamental principle of libertarian paternalism, nudging advocates the promotion of the welfare of the stakeholders, where choice architects should design nudges in such a way that preserves the individuals’ freedom of choice.

While nudging, if a libertarian paternalistic choice architect acts out of their practical reasoning with the intention to promote the welfare of stakeholders, it can be seen as a virtuous act out of benevolence, compassion, and justice. While practising their virtues, choice architects should also ensure that nudging practices promote the cultivation of virtues among decision-makers as well. It is also important to note that the motivation for nudging interventions is not limited to the welfare of the individuals who take part in a nudged design. Nudging interventions also encompass concerns about the actions of individuals that may affect third parties and broader societal interests. Thus, stakeholders in nudging include both nudgees, who directly engage with the choice architecture, and third parties who may enjoy welfare from the nudging outcomes. This broader perspective supports the nudging interventions that promote prosocial behaviour, the provision of public goods and similar goals for collective welfare. Accordingly, when we refer to ‘welfare’ or ‘welfare of stakeholders’ in this paper, these terms encompass both individual and broader societal welfare.

In contemporary times, nudging has emerged as a popular behavioural public policy tool to steer individuals’ choices. At the same

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁷ Richard H. Thaler, *Misbehaving: The Making of Behavioural Economics* (Penguin Books, 2015), 325.

time, it has also been criticized for potential ethical concerns. A literature review on ethical issues of nudging by Kuyer and Gordijn⁸ groups these issues into four major areas: (1) autonomy, (2) welfare, (3) long-term adverse effects, and (4) democracy and deliberation. Michaelsen et al.⁹ emphasize two main lines of ethical concerns regarding nudging: (1) the first group considers nudging as manipulative because it undermines rational decision-making and freedom of choice, and (2) the second group considers nudging as paternalistic because choice architects may impose their preferences on individuals and override individuals' real preferences. The core claim of both critiques is that nudging fails to respect and preserve individuals' autonomy. Bovens¹⁰ and Grüne-Yanoff¹¹ contend that '*nudges violate autonomy*' because of the reason that nudges are opaque rather than transparent and therefore '*work best in the dark*.' Similarly, Hacker argues that there is a possibility that decision-makers' autonomy may be undermined while nudges are implemented by leveraging biases even if nudging is for the decision-maker's own welfare, because nudges may change individuals' '*first- and/or second-order preferences*.'¹² Hausman and Welch argue,

No matter how well intentioned government efforts to shape choices may be, one should be concerned about the risk that exploiting decision-making foibles will ultimately diminish people's autonomous decision-making capacities.¹³

That is to say, critics contend that nudging diminishes agency because choice architects try to impose their view of best interests on decision-makers. Thus, the problem of autonomy refers to concerns relat-

⁸ Paul Kuyer and Bert Gordijn, "Nudge in Perspective: A Systematic Literature Review on the Ethical Issues with Nudging," *Rationality and Society* 35, no. 2 (2023): 191-230.

⁹ Patrik Michaelsen, Lars-Olof Johansson, and Martin Hedesström, "Experiencing Default Nudges: Autonomy, Manipulation, and Choice-satisfaction as Judged by People Themselves," *Behavioural Public Policy* 8, no. 1, (2024): 85-106.

¹⁰ Luc Bovens, "The Ethics of Nudge," in *Preference Change: Approaches from Philosophy, Economics and Psychology*, eds. Till Grüne-Yanoff and Sven Ove Hansson, 207-219 (Springer, 2009).

¹¹ Till Grüne-Yanoff, "Old Wine in New Casks: Libertarian Paternalism still Violates Liberal Principles," *Social Choice and Welfare* 38 (2012): 635-645.

¹² Philipp Hacker, "Nudging and Autonomy: A Philosophical and Legal Appraisal," in *Research Methods in Consumer Law*, eds. Hans-W. Micklitz, Anne-Lise Sibony, and Fabrizio Esposito, 77-118 (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018).

¹³ Daniel M. Hausman and Brynn Welch, "Debate: To Nudge or Not to Nudge," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2010): 135.

ed to nudging interventions that may undermine individuals' ability to make informed, rational, and autonomous decisions according to their own preferences, goals, and values. In response to these critics, Engelen and Nys emphasize that "*we should not put the bar too high*" while analyzing normative standards of autonomy, otherwise our decisions, such as choosing a life partner, a job, or a hobby, might no longer qualify as autonomous choices worthy of respect.¹⁴ We contend that when nudges are transparent and allow individuals to recognize and endorse the values guiding their choices, they reinforce, rather than alienate, agents from their authentic identity.

Based on these critiques, a fundamental ethical question is 'In what ways can nudging be justified by choice architects when they influence individuals' behaviour or choices?' In the literature, there are ethical discussions which focus on the problem of autonomy and manipulation, but a less explored but equally important perspective is the potential of nudging to impact the moral development of nudgees or the stakeholders of nudges.

The questions we aim to explore in this paper are: do nudging interventions – such as default settings used to encourage retirement savings or strategic placement of donation boxes at checkout counters to promote charitable donations – merely aim at promoting welfare? Or do they also assist individuals to cultivate virtues such as prudence and generosity? And finally, how can nudges contribute to the flourishing of human life?

These questions lead us to explore nudging through the lens of virtue ethics. The emphasis in virtue ethics is on the development of moral character and on the long-term flourishing of individuals, which helps us to understand the effects of nudging on character development when individuals are being nudged by choice architects. The central claim of this paper is that nudging not only influences the behaviour or choices of the nudgees and promotes the welfare of stakeholders but also contributes to the cultivation of moral character and the flourishing of the lives of those stakeholders.

To assess the effects of nudging on character development, we will explore whether nudging interventions facilitate virtuous habits or remove barriers to virtuous actions. We will also explore the relationship between nudging, welfare, and virtues to evaluate the potential for long-term flourishing of the stakeholders through virtue-conducive

¹⁴ Bart Engelen and Thomas R. V. Nys, "Nudging and Autonomy: Analyzing and Alleviating the Worries," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 11 (2020): 152.

nudges.¹⁵ From the standpoint of virtue ethics, which emphasizes the cultivation of stable character traits through habituated action, this paper argues that nudging can be ethically justified not only because it aims at promoting welfare but also because it supports and reinforces the cultivation of virtuous dispositions among individuals who partake in a choice architecture. We argue that virtue-conducive nudges can incorporate reflective checkpoints – such as prompts for justification or feedback loops – that engage agents’ deliberative capacities. In Aristotle’s ethics, autonomy is not mere non-interference, but the capacity for reason-guided self-determination. Virtue-conducive nudges, by supporting rational reflection and habituation, educate rather than erode agency. Our strategy is to analyse the examples of nudges and the effects of these nudges on individuals’ character building. The following section will analyse virtue ethics and its central tenets. Section III will discuss the relationship between virtues, welfare and nudging. Section IV will conclude the paper.

II. Virtue ethics as an ethical framework

To analyse whether nudging is morally justified, it is important to place the discussion within a normative ethical framework. Traditionally, ethical evaluations of actions revolve mainly around two major ethical frameworks: consequentialism and deontology. In consequentialism, the actions are mainly evaluated based on their outcomes. If an action increases overall utility or welfare, it is considered a morally right act in consequentialism. However, this outcome-oriented view overlooks crucial ethical concerns related to the autonomy and intentions of individuals while performing the action. On the other hand, deontology, which is grounded in the work of Immanuel Kant, evaluates actions by their adherence to moral duties, regardless of their consequences. Deontology emphasizes the ‘good will’ behind any act to evaluate if the act is morally worthy.¹⁶

While both consequentialist and deontological approaches offer important insights into the ethics of nudging, those debates focus only on welfare and autonomy, outcomes and intentions, or utility and duty. Since consequentialism emphasizes utility and deontology focuses on motive, these frameworks do not fully capture the signif-

¹⁵ By *virtue-conducive nudges*, we mean nudging interventions that aim to promote welfare and contribute to the cultivation of virtues over time. In this paper, when we state that nudges are capable of promoting virtues, we mean only *virtue-conducive nudges*.

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4:394.

icance of the moral development of individuals or the cultivation of good character over time. This limitation leads us to adopt the virtue ethics framework, where the moral focus is ‘who we ought to be’ rather than ‘what we ought to do.’ Virtue ethics emphasizes the cultivation of moral character traits or virtues that lead individuals towards a flourishing life. The development of good character traits is considered the foundation of ethical behaviour in virtue ethics. This emphasis on virtue as central to moral life distinguishes it from consequentialism and deontology. In general, the traits of character that make certain people admirable are known as ‘virtues.’ Hursthouse and Pettigrove state, “*a virtue is an excellent trait of character.*”¹⁷ A virtuous individual is a morally admirable person who behaves and feels in the right way. Annas states, “*To qualify as a virtue, a character trait must embody a commitment to some ethical value.*”¹⁸ Some of the traditional virtues are courage, kindness, honesty, generosity, loyalty, prudence, diligence, temperance, fairness, justice, benevolence, modesty, and hospitality.¹⁹ These virtues are moral qualities that shape people’s choices and contribute to the welfare of individuals and society as a whole. The concept of virtue is closely linked to moral philosophy. In the framework of virtue ethics, virtues serve as guiding principles for ethical behaviour. Moreover, when an ethical agent focuses on attaining virtues, the agent also wants to eliminate bad character traits, which are the opposite of virtues, such as cowardice, dishonesty, stinginess, disloyalty, laziness, etc. These bad character traits are known as vices that one ought to get rid of.²⁰

In general, virtue ethics emphasizes the cultivation of virtues and the development of moral character *for a good life*.²¹ The first theoretical structure of virtue ethics can be found in the work of Aristotle.²² Aristotle emphasizes that the ultimate aim of cultivating virtue is to guide individuals towards *eudaimonia* or human flourishing. Virtues are

¹⁷ Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove, “Virtue Ethics,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/ethics-virtue/>.

¹⁸ Julia Annas, “Virtue Ethics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp, 515-536 (Oxford Academic, 2007), 519.

¹⁹ Barbara MacKinnon and Andrew Fiala, *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues* (Cengage Learning, 2009), 149.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Henrik Syse and Martin L. Cook, “Robotic Virtue, Military Ethics Education, and the Need for Proper Storytellers,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2023): 667-680.

²² Annas, 515-536.

essential because they guide individuals towards meaningful actions and help them to live a flourishing life. Thus, virtues are constituents of living a good life as a whole. They reflect an individual's character and way of life, which are shaped by the choices she makes. For this reason, this paper primarily draws on the work of Aristotle, particularly the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

According to Annas, virtue is a character trait that helps individuals to act rightly, with the right motives and in the right way.²³ The key feature of the classical version of virtue ethics is the importance it places on the *agent's practical reasoning*. An individual is considered virtuous only if she acts rationally after clearly understanding the reasons for acting in a certain way. However, there are other perspectives that challenge the role of an agent's practical reasoning. For example, in Humean virtue ethics, a virtuous person is seen as someone with stable dispositions that generally lead to good actions and cooperation in social situations. It is not necessary that a virtuous person should acquire these dispositions only based on her own reflective endorsement. She may also adopt these dispositions because of the influence of others' reflective reasoning.²⁴ The more radical version suggests that individuals do not even need to engage in reflective reasoning at all. A person can still be virtuous even if they possess the disposition and are ignorant of it.²⁵ In other words, having a virtue does not always depend on an agent's practical reasoning. This understanding is different from Aristotle's view, where a virtuous person is someone who learns the right way to act based on their personal reasoning and reflection.

According to Hursthouse & Pettigrove, there are different forms of virtue ethics, but all of them, in some way, accept that virtue ethics is rooted in ancient Greek philosophy and employ the following three concepts (1) *arête* (excellence or virtue), (2) *phronesis* (practical or moral wisdom) and (3) *eudaimonia* (flourishing or happiness).²⁶ One of the reasons that people may fall short of virtue is the lack of *phronesis*, i.e., practical or moral wisdom. Practical or moral wisdom is the *knowledge or understanding* that enables an agent to consistently do the right things in different situations.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Maria Merrit, "Virtue Ethics and Situationist Personality Psychology," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 3, no. 4 (2000): 365-383.

²⁵ Julia Driver, *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9.

²⁶ Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove, "Virtue Ethics," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/ethics-virtue/>.

At this point, it is important to recognize that there are varieties of approaches within virtue ethics. While all approaches emphasize virtues and consider practical wisdom essential for acquiring virtues, there are differences in how they combine these concepts and how they propose individuals should live their lives as a whole. Hursthouse and Pettigrove identify four forms of virtue ethics: a) eudaimonist virtue ethics, b) agent-based and exemplarist virtue ethics, c) target-centered virtue ethics, and d) Platonistic virtue ethics.²⁷

In eudaimonist virtue ethics, as proposed by Aristotle, the focus is on moral character and the cultivation of virtues that one ought to possess to achieve the ultimate goal of human beings, that is, eudaimonia. We will elaborate on eudaimonia in section 2.1. In agent-based virtue ethics, morally right actions are considered as the result of good motivations, and similarly, morally wrong actions stem from bad motivations.²⁸ In the exemplarist account, Zagzebski emphasizes learning virtues by imitating *exemplars of moral goodness*.²⁹ Zagzebski states, “Exemplars are those persons who are most imitable, and they are most imitable because they are most admirable.”³⁰ Thus, in exemplarist virtue ethics, an agent’s understanding of virtuous motivations is shaped by the lives and behaviours of exemplars. Target-centered virtue ethics, introduced by Christine Swanton, begins with the traits we already think are good, like being generous or courageous.³¹ It explains how these traits should guide our actions. The target-centered framework guides towards the target of virtue. For example, the target of courage is to tackle fear, and similarly, the target of generosity is to share time or things with others that may be beneficial for them. Platonistic virtue ethics has two main approaches. In the first variant, Chappell argues that true virtuous action requires moving away from selfish ambitions by regularly contemplating goodness in the world.³² Similarly, Murdoch emphasizes the traits such as objectivity and unselfishness, which help individuals connect with the reality of the world.³³ In the second variant, provided by Adams, virtue is grounded in a meta-

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Michael Slote, *Morals from Motives* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁹ Linda Zagzebski, “Exemplarist Virtue Theory,” *Metaphilosophy* 41, nos. 1-2 (2010): 41-57.

³⁰ Ibid., 52.

³¹ Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

³² Timothy Chappell, *Knowing what to Do: Imagination, Virtue, and Platonism in Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 300.

³³ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge, 1971), 82.

physical framework.³⁴ Adams suggests that virtues resemble the qualities of a supremely perfect being – God – and that goodness is defined by the extent to which actions and traits reflect this divine goodness.

To analyse nudging and its relationship with virtue, we consider Aristotle’s eudaimonist framework as well-suited. Aristotle’s account provides a proper framework where virtues are cultivated through practical wisdom and help individuals to guide them towards eudaimonia. Our central argument is that nudging can help to promote welfare and cultivate virtues in real-world situations. It is also important to note that some scholars argue against the notion of stable virtues. For example, Doris contends that people’s actions are not always the result of stable virtues, but rather they are often shaped by situational factors.³⁵ He emphasizes that individuals may not possess enduring virtues because external circumstances often influence their behaviour and actions. We do acknowledge these situationist worries, which raise significant doubts about the stability of moral dispositions. Nevertheless, empirical studies in psychology and the behavioural sciences demonstrate that stable habits can and do develop. Carden and Wood highlight that performing repeated actions can contribute to stable habit formation. They further emphasize the role of choice architecture in this process. As they state:

Although habits can be disrupted by changes in macro environments or during life transitions, habit performance can also be altered through choice architecture or environmental reengineering interventions that change the structure of everyday decisions. Given that habit formation requires repeated responses in a stable context, altering the decision structure may sometimes promote habit formation by making it easier to perform a desired action.³⁶

In other words, while situational factors may affect our behaviour, we should not neglect the role of choice architecture. By restructuring the choice architecture to make certain behaviour easier, nudges can support the development of stable habits. For example, Carden and Wood discuss how dedicating a specific place in the kitchen for fruits and vegetables can increase consumption and contribute to weight loss.

³⁴ Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

³⁵ John Doris, *Lack of Character* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³⁶ Lucas Carden and Wendy Wood, “Habit Formation and Change,” *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 20 (2018): 119-120.

Similarly, mechanisms of conditioning and reinforcement suggest that external factors can meaningfully contribute to changes in behaviour that can be stabilized over time. In short, although contextual factors may affect people's actions, nudging can significantly contribute to cultivating general – and, by extension, virtuous – habits. However, for such habits to qualify as virtues in the Aristotelian sense, they must not only be context-dependent but also stable across varying circumstances and endorsed through reflection. Thus, virtue-conducive nudges which incorporate reflective components can transform situational habits into consciously sustained dispositions. This ensures that the behaviours formed through nudging meet Aristotle's criteria for virtuous action.

Therefore, we contend that virtues should be taken seriously in ethical discussions of nudging. Virtues are not merely admirable traits that influence actions but constituents of a flourishing life. From a philosophical standpoint, virtues offer a way to connect practical reasoning with flourishing life and meaningful goals. In addition to that, nudging operates within specific contexts and aims to steer individuals' behaviour by gentle interventions in a choice architecture within the libertarian paternalism framework. We will elaborate that even if behaviour varies across situations, nudges can still provide opportunities for individuals to reflect and cultivate virtues. In the context of nudging, although behaviour may be influenced by external factors, virtues equip individuals to act in ways that align with their broader values of life as a whole. The following section explores the notion of '*eudaimonia*' in Aristotle's ethics and examines how nudging can contribute to achieve *eudaimonia*.

i. *Eudaimonia*

According to Aristotle, just as the good of a flute player, sculptor or any artisan lies in the proper exercise of their distinctive function, the human good appears to depend on the fulfilment of their own distinctive human role or function. This idea is also referred to as the teleological argument, where the Greek word *telos* refers to 'purpose' or 'end.' Teleology is the idea that everything in nature has a function, and the good for any being lies in fulfilling that function well. For human beings, this function involves the use of reason and the cultivation of virtues necessary to reason and act well. Human life has an active element of life, which is distinct from plants and animals. This element has two parts: one is "in the sense of being obedient to reason, the oth-

er in the sense of possessing reason and exercising thought.”³⁷ In this way, the *telos* of human life is the highest human good or eudaimonia, which is defined as the “activity of soul exhibiting virtue, ... in a complete life.”³⁸

The *Nicomachean Ethics* is an inquiry about human goods. Aristotle considers the highest of all goods achievable by action to be ‘eudaimonia,’ which is often translated as ‘happiness’ or ‘flourishing.’³⁹ For Aristotle, moral character is about cultivating qualities or virtues that enable individuals to live a flourishing human life or achieve ‘eudaimonia.’ Aristotle’s description of eudaimonia reveals two essential characteristics. Firstly, it is an activity, not a passive state, and secondly, it requires a life shaped by virtues, not merely episodic good deeds. That is to say, eudaimonia is something that must be actively sought over time through rational choices, habits and reflective living. Eudaimonia has both moral and practical dimensions because flourishing requires not only a virtuous character that aims at the right ends, but also practical wisdom to choose the right means in action. The following sections explore two different dimensions of eudaimonia and investigate whether nudging contributes to the cultivation of moral character and eventually leads to eudaimonia.

a. Moral dimension of eudaimonia

The moral dimension in the context of eudaimonia refers to the development of virtuous character dispositions to think and act rightly for the right reasons in different contexts. These dispositions include both the classical cardinal virtues – prudence, justice, temperance, and courage – and social virtues such as generosity, honesty, and compassion. ‘To exhibit virtue’ means synchronizing one’s rational and emotional faculties rather than suppressing them and acting rationally. A person who acts rightly out of fear or without awareness may achieve good results but may not flourish. A flourishing person takes joy in doing what is right because his character has been formed to value the good. Snow argues:

If we have a proper upbringing, we will become habituated to perform virtuous actions and to take pleasure in doing virtuous things. Eventually, we will act virtuously not for

³⁷ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford University Press, 2009), 1098a3-4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1098a16-18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, x.

the sake of the pleasure involved but for the sake of doing the right thing; that is, we will act virtuously because we see the value of virtuous action in its own right.⁴⁰

Consider a nudge in the form of a default setting that promotes organ donation. If people are well aware of such default settings and voluntarily endorse them upon reflection, then the action may be considered morally right, and it may also create an altruistic norm in society. This nudge may result in a higher participation rate and may align with the virtue of generosity and altruistic behaviour among individuals. However, if agents are not properly aware or act without volition, such actions may lack moral worth in the Aristotelian virtue ethics framework. The reason, according to Aristotle, is:

The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does them (acts); in the first place he must have the knowledge; secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character.⁴¹

That is to say, in the Aristotelian framework, virtuous actions must be performed through deliberate choice for the right reasons and from a stable moral character. However, scholars such as Driver challenge the role of rationality in virtue. Driver states, “Why can’t virtue depend as much on what the agent fails to see as on what the agent sees?”⁴² She discusses the virtues of ignorance, such as modesty and blind charity, where agents may lack sensitivity to rational considerations while still possessing these virtues. Similarly, in the context of nudging, individuals’ behaviour or choices may be steered towards better outcomes. Depending on specific nudging techniques, such nudges can also contribute to the cultivation of virtues. Initially, individuals may not be fully aware of their choices, but after experiencing positive outcomes, they may endorse and repeat the same choices voluntarily. If they are not satisfied with the nudged options, they remain free to opt out, since nudges are grounded on the principle of libertarian paternalism, where individuals’ freedom of choice is preserved.

⁴⁰ Nancy E. Snow, “Should Virtue Be Promoted by Nudging?” in *Studia Humaniora LXXVIII: Per un nudging etico: Autonomia, virtù e persuasione sociale*, ed. Antonio Scoppettuolo (Orthotes, 2024).

⁴¹ Aristotle, 1105a30-32.

⁴² Driver, 39.

b. Practical dimension of eudaimonia

The practical dimension of eudaimonia refers to the use of the capacity of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, to make rational and morally sound decisions. For individuals to exhibit virtues, their choices and decisions must be guided by *phronesis*. Therefore, it is crucial to develop *phronesis*, virtuous motivations, and regulated emotional responses to cultivate and sustain a virtuous character.⁴³ These elements work together to guide individuals in making moral decisions and acting in accordance with virtue. This practical dimension recognizes that flourishing is not only about possessing virtues but also about applying them appropriately in real life. This application of practical wisdom may involve balancing competing virtues, regulating one's impulses, and prioritizing long-term goals over short-term temptations. All of these elements are very relevant in the context of nudging. If nudges can scaffold the development of practical wisdom, they can aid not only immediate welfare but also the formation of good judgement.

Aristotle further maintains that to achieve human flourishing or eudaimonia, external goods are also important in addition to virtues.⁴⁴ As he states, "Yet evidently, [...] it needs the external goods as well; for it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment."⁴⁵ He argues that we use external goods such as good friends, family, noble birth, wealth, political power and physical attractiveness as instruments which contribute to our ability to live well and take pleasure in virtuous actions.⁴⁶ Thus, a component that plays a significant role in the process of attaining the telos of human life, eudaimonia, is an external good. This recognition of the importance of external goods also has significant relevance in the context of nudging because several nudging interventions are designed precisely to help individuals secure or better manage the external goods, which are essential to living a flourishing life. For example, nudges that promote healthy eating, retirement savings or collective social welfare directly support securing the external goods such as health, financial security and social support, as referred to by Aristotle. Moreover, nudging interventions can also support the cultivation of virtues by creating conducive scenarios under which reflective moral choices and virtu-

⁴³ Snow, 5-42.

⁴⁴ Pia Valenzuela, "Fredrickson on Flourishing through Positive Emotions and Aristotle's Eudaimonia," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no 2 (2022): 37-61.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, 1099a30.

⁴⁶ Nancy E. Snow, "Virtue and Flourishing," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 39, no. 2 (2008): 225-245.

ous actions become easier, and this point will be discussed in detail in Section III. Ultimately, there is a conceptual link between Aristotle's notion of external goods, which are needed for eudaimonia and the promotion of welfare through nudging using the framework of libertarian paternalism and nudging may be viewed as a design which helps the stakeholders move closer while pursuing eudaimonia. In the next section, we will discuss virtue in the Aristotelian framework and then analyse the definition of nudging.

ii. Aristotelian virtues and nudging

According to Aristotle, there are two kinds of virtues: intellectual and moral virtues.

Intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit.⁴⁷

As Aristotle mentions, intellectual virtues can be taught, and they are qualities of the mind that help people to understand the world and make their judgments. Some examples of intellectual virtues include *scientific knowledge, practical wisdom, philosophic wisdom, and intuitive reason*.⁴⁸

On the other hand, moral virtues are learned by habit.⁴⁹ We cannot acquire moral virtues by nature. Aristotle further explains:

From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. For instance, the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times. [...] Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Aristotle, 1103a15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1139b15.

⁴⁹ Bart Engelen and Thomas R. V. Nys, "Pushed for Being Better: On the Possibility and Desirability of Moral Nudging," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* (2024): 1-27.

⁵⁰ Aristotle, 1103a20-25.

From childhood, individuals learn various social and practical skills by repeating actions over time. When people perform an action regularly, it gradually becomes a habit for them. Aristotle defines moral virtues as “a state of character, not a passion nor a capacity.”⁵¹ Some of the examples of moral virtues include courage, temperance, generosity, and honesty. It is important to note that in the context of nudging, this paper focuses on moral virtues because they can be cultivated through habituation, which nudging has the potential to foster. Carden and Wood explain:

Habits form as people pursue goals in daily life. When repeatedly performing a behavior in a particular context, people develop implicit associations in memory between contexts and responses.⁵²

Wood & Runger state, “Once habits form, perception of the context automatically brings the response to mind, and people often carry out that response.”⁵³ It means that habits develop through repeated goal-oriented behaviour in specified contexts. Once formed, they trigger automatic responses whenever those contexts are encountered. Similarly, moral virtues can be cultivated by repeatedly doing certain things, such as courageous acts. An individual who repeatedly acts courageously will become courageous, and that person may find it easy to act courageously when required.

Aristotle defines a virtue as the mean between two extremes: a deficiency and an excess. This mean, which is also known as the ‘Golden Mean,’ represents the ideal state between two undesirable extremes. Aristotle explains:

Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason, and by that reason by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid., 1105b19.

⁵² Lucas Carden and Wendy Wood, “Habit Formation and Change,” *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 20 (2018): 117.

⁵³ Wendy Wood and Dennis Runger, “Psychology of Habit,” *The Annual Review of Psychology* 67 (2016): 289-314.

⁵⁴ Aristotle, 1107a1-2.

For instance, courage is the mean between cowardice (deficiency) and recklessness (excess). Similarly, generosity is the mean between stinginess and extravagance. Individuals develop these virtues through experience and practice. These virtues enhance an agent's ethical decision-making ability, which, in turn, will lead to a flourishing life (eudaimonia). However, Aristotle acknowledges that attaining virtue is not an easy task. As he states,

But this is no doubt difficult, and especially in individual cases; for it is not easy to determine both how and with whom and on what provocation and how long one should be angry; for we too sometimes praise those who fall short and call them good-tempered, but sometimes we praise those who get angry and call them manly.⁵⁵

Thus, it requires discernment and wisdom to determine the mean in every situation. To find the right balance is very significant and difficult at the same time. The difficulty lies in complex situations where moral reasoning is essential to determine the right course of action. A virtuous person must cultivate not only the right habits but also the wisdom to apply them appropriately in different contexts.

We have already seen that virtues are cultivated through repeated actions. Let us now analyse how certain external interventions, such as nudges, can play a significant role in shaping behavioural patterns that can contribute to the cultivation of virtues in individuals. To assess the possibility, it is important to first analyse the definition and necessary characterizations of nudge. According to Thaler and Sunstein, nudge is defined as follows:

A nudge, [...] is any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives. To count as a mere nudge, the intervention must be easy and cheap to avoid. Nudges are not taxes, fines, subsidies, bans or mandates. Putting the fruit at eye level counts as a nudge. Banning junk food does not.⁵⁶

By referring to the aforementioned definition, one precondition and

⁵⁵ Ibid., 1109b15-17.

⁵⁶ Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge, The Final Edition* (Penguin Books, 2021), 8.

four necessary conditions can be derived for a design to qualify as a nudge.

- a. Precondition: The presence of appropriate choices, with at least two options. A nudge can be designed only if there is more than one option available. That is to say, a choice architect cannot design a nudge if there is only one option.⁵⁷
- b. Necessary conditions: A nudge should:
 1. Have the ability to influence the behaviour or choices of decision-makers through choice architecture.
 2. Not forbid any options,
 - i. Retain all available choices, and
 - ii. Not use any coercion.
 3. Not use any significant economic incentives to sway decision-making.
 4. Be easy to intervene and inexpensive to avoid.

Interventions such as graphic warnings on cigarette packs or health alerts on alcohol bottles are simple examples of nudging. These interventions meet both the precondition and the necessary conditions of nudging mentioned above. By presenting the negative consequences associated with smoking or drinking, such nudges may activate reflective self-regulation and influence individuals' behaviour without any coercion. By discouraging smoking or alcohol consumption, such nudges also foster the virtue of temperance, a capacity to regulate desires and maintain self-control while facing temptations.⁵⁸ Similarly, consumers are nudged and prompted to round up their purchases to the nearest dollar and donate the remaining cents to charitable causes.⁵⁹ Over time, these kinds of nudges instill individuals to practice generosity by donating for the benefit of others. Although these nudges operate subtly, repeated engagement with such behaviours can contribute to the cultivation of virtues aligned with flourishing or eudaimonia.

At this point, it is also significant to understand Aristotle's doctrine of mean that highlights the calibration problem: what counts as

⁵⁷ Karen Renaud and Verena Zimmermann, "Ethical Guidelines for Nudging in Information Security and Privacy," *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies* 120 (2018): 22-35.

⁵⁸ Aristotle, 1118a-1119b. Andy Mullins, "What Does Self-control Look Like? Considerations about the Neurobiology of Temperance and Fortitude," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (2025): 165-191.

⁵⁹ Katie Kelting, Robinson Stefanie, and Richard J. Lutz, "Would you Like to Round up and Donate the Difference? Roundup Requests Reduce the Perceived Pain of Donating," *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 29, no. 1 (2019): 70-78.

the appropriate mean can vary across persons and contexts, so interventions must avoid pushing agents towards either excess or deficiency. That is to say, a virtue-conducive nudge that is designed to promote one virtue should not produce deficiencies in other virtues. Kuyer and Gordijn point out the issue of infantilization and state that prolonged exposure to multiple nudges may affect agents' capabilities for autonomous decision-making.⁶⁰ Over influence of nudges might lead individuals towards dependency and make them passive rather than encouraging moral agency. Similarly, if virtue-conducive nudges such as charity promotion nudges become ubiquitous, they may reduce individuals' reflective giving and undermine prudence. These concerns reveal the potential trade-off between virtues and underscore the practical role of *phronesis*. Therefore, virtue-conducive nudges must be designed carefully to ensure that, while promoting virtue, they do not exceed the mean or displace reflective judgement. In this regard, *phronesis* serves as the guiding principle for policy designers to balance competing virtues by exercising contextual discernment rather than applying uniform behavioural rules. Policymakers must continually evaluate the proportionality and context-sensitivity of nudges through empirical feedback and ethical reflection to ensure they remain aligned with the mean. The following section analyses the contributing factors to eudaimonia and examines their relationship with nudging.

III. Factors contributing to eudaimonia: Virtues and welfare

The cultivation of virtues and developing a virtuous character are traditionally considered essential elements for achieving eudaimonia. For example, the virtue of temperance may guide individuals towards healthy eating habits, and such good habits may lead to good health. Similarly, prudence can lead to personal welfare. Since virtue lies between two extremes – excess and deficiency, it is challenging to navigate this golden mean and become a virtuous person. It is difficult and complex to choose the right course of action in each circumstance because it requires discernment and moral sensitivity. When individuals make irrational decisions under the influence of cognitive biases or a lack of *phronesis*, there is a disruption in this delicate equilibrium, and the agents may drift towards vice. Consider the case of present bias. Present bias refers to individuals' tendency to focus on the present results of their actions while ignoring future consequences. As a result,

⁶⁰ Paul Kuyer and Bert Gordijn, "Nudge in Perspective: A Systematic Literature Review on the Ethical Issues with Nudging," *Rationality and Society* 35, no. 2 (2023): 191-230.

people may prioritize immediate rewards over long-term benefits, even if the long-term choice aligns better with their overall goals.⁶¹ Some examples of such cases are accumulating credit card debt, consuming unhealthy foods, and engaging in environmentally harmful behaviours.⁶² Over time, such habitual patterns can result in a lack of temperance, which may further lead to self-indulgence. Similarly, status quo bias causes people to stick with the existing state of affairs.⁶³ An employee who witnesses unethical behaviour in the workplace, such as discrimination, data manipulation or abusive behaviour, may still choose not to report and remain with the status quo to avoid conflicts. Such decisions, which are guided by fear of consequences or inertia, may result in a harmful work culture in the long run. In such cases, a nudge in the form of an anonymous reporting mechanism can gently prompt individuals to overcome status quo bias and act with moral courage and integrity. By lowering the psychological and practical barriers to action, such nudging mechanisms may foster the cultivation of virtues such as courage, honesty and justice.

The importance of external goods, such as health, friendship, and material resources, in achieving eudaimonia, in addition to cultivating virtues, has already been discussed in the previous section. These external goods can be conceptually subsumed under the broader category of welfare because all these elements provide the necessary means that contribute to the welfare of individuals. In this context, welfare is not limited to material wealth or state assistance; rather, it refers to the comprehensive background conditions – social, economic and psychological – that support individuals in living flourishing lives. As Snow states, these external goods serve as instrumental enablers that guide individuals towards virtuous activity and allow them to take genuine pleasure in virtuous actions.⁶⁴ Thus, welfare, understood in terms of external goods, plays a foundational role in the practice of virtue and, ultimately, attaining *eudaimonia*.

To examine the relationship between virtue, welfare and nudging, it is essential to understand the welfare in the context of nudging. Sunstein provides an account of welfare in nudging by describing what

⁶¹ Serdar Sayman and Ayse Öncüler, “An Investigation of Time Inconsistency,” *Management Science* 55, no. 3 (2008): 470-482.

⁶² David J. Hardisty, Kirstin C. Appelt, and Elke U. Weber, “Good or Bad, We Want it Now: Fixed-cost Present Bias for Gains and Losses Explains Magnitude Asymmetries in Intertemporal Choice,” *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 26, no. 4 (2013): 348-361.

⁶³ Samuelson and Zeckhauser.

⁶⁴ Snow, “Virtue and Flourishing.”

it means for people to be ‘better off.’⁶⁵ He states, “If people can live longer lives, have less illness and pain, and be free from serious mental health problems, they are better off.”⁶⁶ He further elaborates, “Early death, illness, sickness, accidents, and poverty are bad, and richer is better than poorer.”⁶⁷ This means that Sunstein’s concept of welfare in nudging is primarily understood through a set of objective indicators such as health, longevity, safety from accidents, wealth and economic stability. These indicators also provide a suitable environment and create necessary conditions for individuals to pursue their goals, form good habits and exercise their virtues. Thus, these indicators not only enable individuals to make good choices but also help them to flourish. In other words, the concept of welfare is not only instrumental but also constitutive of a flourishing life. All these components provide the foundation for a fulfilling life and contribute to individuals’ quality of life. Therefore, these are inherently beneficial and recognized for a safe, stable and thriving life. The concept of welfare in nudging aligns closely with the Aristotelian notion of external goods required for eudaimonia. Eudaimonia is not reducible to momentary pleasure; rather, it includes sustained welfare and moral development of character in the long run. Similarly, welfare-oriented nudges, which aim at improving decisions about health, wealth and happiness, as highlighted in the subtitle of the book *Nudge*, contribute to this broader view of human flourishing.⁶⁸ In what follows, we shall illustrate two pathways which will be used for analyzing the relationship between nudging, welfare and virtue.

i. The interplay of nudging, welfare and virtue: First pathway

The first pathway examines how certain nudging interventions that primarily aim at enhancing welfare related to health, safety and economic stability indirectly contribute to the cultivation of virtues. To explore and analyse the relationship between welfare-enhancing nudges and virtue development, insights from behaviour psychology, particularly the notion of conditioning and reinforcement, are very significant. Mechanisms such as conditioning and reinforcement explain how external factors or stimuli can shape and stabilize behaviour over time.

⁶⁵ Cass R. Sunstein, “Welfare Now,” *Duke Law Journal* 72, no. 8 (2023): 1643-1672.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1658.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1659.

⁶⁸ Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (Yale University Press, 2008).

In the classic example of Pavlov, a bell that is consistently followed by the delivery of food eventually triggers salivation in dogs.⁶⁹ On this foundation, Skinner suggests operant conditioning, according to which the behaviour is shaped by the consequences that follow it.⁷⁰ When a particular behaviour is followed by a positive reinforcement or a favourable outcome, that behaviour is more likely to be repeated in the future. Skinner states:

If eating a particular kind of food has had survival value (such as that which explains the behavior of eating the food), an increased tendency to eat because the taste of the food has become a reinforcer should have had survival value.⁷¹

The good taste acts as a positive reinforcement, which makes people repeat the behaviour of eating it again. Skinner's study shows that over time, the ability to learn from consequences helps individuals to develop stable behavioural patterns. Similarly, individuals often resist engaging in apparently simple actions, such as eating healthy food, exercising, or saving money, because of inertia, uncertainty, or a lack of motivation. However, once they start performing these actions and experience the positive outcomes, they are more likely to repeat them by reflective practical reasoning. Through repeated experiences, people learn which actions lead to positive outcomes and which lead to negative outcomes. Gradually, these learning conditions help individuals to behave in the same manner even when there are not enough stimuli available to guide them.

These insights from behavioural conditioning are very relevant to understanding how nudging can influence behaviour in real-world contexts. Consider the classic example of placing healthier food at the eye level to promote healthy eating. This intervention in choice architecture leverages inertia – people's tendency to pick up easily accessible options – making it easier to choose healthy foods. As individuals begin to choose these options more often, such repeated behaviour is gradu-

⁶⁹ Ivan Pavlov's classic experiment demonstrated classical conditioning by training dogs to salivate at the sound of a bell. Initially, the bell was a neutral stimulus and did not cause any reaction. However, when the sound of the bell was repeatedly paired with food, the dogs began to salivate at the sound of the bell alone. This experiment shows that behaviour can be shaped through a conditioned stimulus, which can trigger a conditioned response.

⁷⁰ B. F. Skinner, "The Evolution of Behavior," *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior* 41, no. 2 (1984): 217-221.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 219.

ally reinforced through positive outcomes. After eating healthier food, individuals may experience the benefits, such as feeling physically better and more energetic. These benefits serve as natural reinforcements that strengthen the behavioural pattern. Over time, this repeated association between healthy foods and these positive outcome conditions individuals to favour such choices habitually. In other words, leveraging inertia can condition individuals towards stable, good eating habits and help to cultivate the virtue of temperance or self-control.

It is important to note that virtues should not be confused with habits that are merely productive or beneficial. Virtue should be understood as constitutive of the way an agent lives her life as a result of her own decisions.⁷² Just as memory is constitutive of identity, virtues are constitutive of an agent's way of life. We do not view memory simply as an instrument only for performing certain actions; rather, it is an integral part of who we are. Similarly, virtues are not merely means to achieve good outcomes. Virtue production is about the cultivation of habitually based dispositions to action – rational, affective, and evaluative. These dispositions help individuals to develop a stable, good character over a period of life. Nudges, which are primarily aimed at steering individuals towards choices that are broadly beneficial for them, may not directly target the development of stable virtues. However, they can still serve as a supportive design by encouraging behaviours that align with long-term welfare. Nudges, based on the principle of libertarian paternalism, offer opportunities for individuals to engage in reflection, evaluate their actions, and progressively cultivate virtues that guide them towards eudaimonia. Similarly, Knies states:

Default rules can also shape preferences by enabling experiences; in other words, a decision maker might 'try it and like it.' The 'mere-exposure effect,' which is well documented in the social psychological literature, can lead people to develop preferences and positive affective reactions through repeated exposure to a given stimulus.⁷³

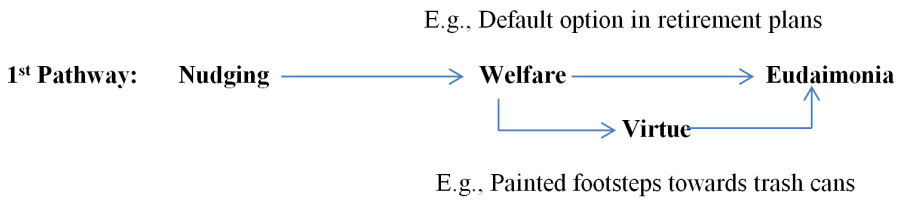
In other words, when people try the nudged option and experience the positive effects, they may choose to continue the same actions even in the absence of a nudged choice architecture. That is to say, nudges – such as the strategic arrangement of food items or the default setting

⁷² Annas.

⁷³ Johannes Knies, "Libertarian Paternalism and the Problem of Preference Architecture," *British Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 2 (2022): 925.

in a retirement savings plan – primarily enhance the welfare in terms of individuals’ health or wealth, while secondarily, the resulting habitual practices further contribute to the cultivation of the virtue of temperance.

Thus, nudges of a similar sort of act as non-coercive reinforcements that influence individuals’ choices for their welfare. Such nudges serve as a form of moral conditioning that helps individuals develop virtuous habits through practice and enables them to act virtuously. Welfare and virtues are necessary conditions for attaining eudaimonia. Welfare ensures the presence of external goods and helps create favourable conditions for living a flourishing life, and virtues shape moral character and guide individuals towards right actions. When individuals possess virtues and have access to external goods, both of these factors together will lead them closer to attaining eudaimonia. This relation between nudging, welfare and virtues can be illustrated in the form of the first pathway as follows:



As illustrated in the first pathway, a nudging intervention can be used primarily to promote welfare, and at the same time, the intervention can also support the cultivation of virtues. Consider an example where painted footsteps subtly guide individuals towards trash cans in public parks. These visual nudges steer individuals to dispose of litter properly without coercion. While the primary aim of this nudge is to promote societal welfare by encouraging public cleanliness, repeated exposure to such nudges may gradually shape individuals’ character and reinforce virtues like responsibility, discipline, and respect for public places. Similarly, an empirical study conducted by Bhattacharya et al. concludes that nudging serves as a promising approach “to induce exercise habit formation, which is an important public health goal.”⁷⁴ The authors point out that the effectiveness of nudges may vary based on the differences in individual personality traits.

⁷⁴ Jay Bhattacharya, Alan M. Garber, and Jeremy D. Goldhaber-Fiebert, “Nudges in Exercise Commitment Contracts: A Randomized Trial,” *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper*, July 2015.

Consider the case of automatic enrollment in a retirement savings plan. In this case, employees are nudged to participate in the retirement savings plan by making a change in the default settings. This nudge influences employees to save more by encouraging them to remain enrolled. According to Sunstein and Reisch, default rules may work for three contributing factors: (a) Suggestion and endorsement, (b) Inertia, and (c) Reference point and loss aversion.⁷⁵ People may often perceive default options as recommendations or socially approved practices. Sunstein and Reisch argue that “many people appear to think that the default was chosen by someone sensible and for a good reason.”⁷⁶ Employees may perceive this default setting as a suggestion from the employer and, therefore, endorse this suggestion and choose not to opt out. In addition to that, due to inertia, employees might fail to enroll in the retirement plan even if they intend to. By changing the default setting, the nudge helps individuals to overcome inertia and enhances the enrollment rate. It might seem that a default opt-out setting in a retirement plan merely ensures future financial welfare after retirement by helping individuals to save money in the present time. However, this act of regularly saving money for the future also prompts individuals to cultivate certain virtues, such as temperance and prudence, well before the future welfare is realized. As individuals recognize the rational justification behind the endorsed option and internalize it, they develop prudence in decision-making even though they go with the default option. Furthermore, when employees are directed to save some money every month from their salary, it becomes a habitual practice for them. This practice also helps them to reflect on their long-term financial goals over time and cultivate more prudent approaches to other areas of life, too. Eventually, this practice can also prevent certain vices as well. For instance, when people save some portion of their monthly earnings for a retirement plan, it also helps them reduce their unnecessary consumption and impulsive spending.

At this point, someone might raise a question: “Do people want their social system – whether shaped by government or educational institutions – to be designed in ways that encourage the development of good character by structuring their choices in ways that are likely to achieve individual or societal welfare?” In other words, do people really want choice architects to design choices in ways that may encourage them towards good habits?

⁷⁵ Cass R. Sunstein and Lucia A. Reisch, “Automatically Green: Behavioral Economics and Environmental Protection,” *Harvard Environment Law Review* 38, no. 1 (2014): 127-158.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

These questions lead us to ask another question: Is it possible to have a neutral choice architecture which does not influence individuals' choices? Thaler and Sunstein state that it is a misconception to believe that a neutral choice architecture is possible.⁷⁷ The authors point out that often there are inevitable situations where governments or people in authority design systems or choice architecture for other people, and they argue that such design can never be neutral. They argue that the design of choices, whether intentional or unintentional, will inevitably affect the behaviour or choices of individuals who engage with it. They state, "choice architecture is inevitable."⁷⁸ Sunstein argues that government influences individuals' choices in one way or another, and it ends up "nudging even if it does not want to do so."⁷⁹ Moreover, it is significant to recognize that nudging is grounded in the principle of libertarian paternalism,⁸⁰ where individuals are not coerced to make a particular choice. People are free to make their own decisions and have the option to opt out if they do not want to go with the nudged option. Consider another example of using 'smaller plate sizes in cafeterias' to steer individuals to consume less food without restricting their freedom.⁸¹ When plate sizes are reduced, even a modest portion appears more filling. In this way, this nudge guides individuals to regulate their food intake without any coercion. This results in reduced calorie intake, which directly promotes individuals' welfare in terms of physical health. If someone wants to take more food a second time, they are free to do so. Although this nudging strategy does not eliminate impulsive eating habits, it may help individuals to develop self-restraint over time and develop the virtues of self-control and temperance.

A similar effect can be observed in opt-out organ donation policy, where individuals are automatically enrolled as organ donors. If they wish to opt out, they are free to do so. A study by Johnson and Goldstein demonstrates that such a default-based policy has increased the organ donation rate by reducing the need to actively register,⁸² which

⁷⁷ Thaler, *Nudge*, 14.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷⁹ Cass R. Sunstein, "Nudging and Choice Architecture: Ethical Considerations," *SSRN*, January 6, 2015.

⁸⁰ Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, "Libertarian Paternalism," *American Economic Review* 93, no. 2 (2003): 175-179.

⁸¹ Brian Wansink and Koert Van Ittersum, "Portion Size Me: Plate-Size Induced Consumption Norms and Win-Win Solutions for Reducing Food Intake and Waste," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied* 19, no. 4 (2013): 320-332.

⁸² Eric J. Johnson and Daniel G. Goldstein, "Defaults and Donation Decisions," *Transplantation* 78, no. 12 (2004): 1713-1716.

would involve some psychological barriers, such as hesitation tied to thoughts of mortality. Notably, the primary beneficiary of this nudge is the organ recipient rather than the donor who is nudged. As a result, this nudge primarily promotes prosocial behaviour and enhances societal welfare, which leads to more lives saved and improved health outcomes. Since individuals retain the freedom to opt out, they can deliberately choose whether to remain registered or not. This reflective engagement can also contribute to normalizing altruistic behaviour over time and help individuals develop moral courage, charity, and compassion, as well as a sense of responsibility and solidarity.

In such examples, nudging primarily seems to enhance external goods required for achieving eudaimonia by guiding people toward healthier, safer, or more productive choices which are prosocial. Thus, one interpretation of welfare in the context of nudging is about influencing people to possess or secure such necessary external goods that support a good and flourishing life. At the same time, nudges encourage the repetition of morally desirable behaviour and help to develop virtuous habits. Through this habitual reinforcement, nudging further contributes to cultivating virtues like temperance, responsibility, and discipline, and these virtues take individuals closer to attaining eudaimonia.

ii. Nudge, virtue and welfare: Second pathway

In this second pathway, we will analyze how nudging interventions can act as a catalyst for the cultivation of virtues and subsequently lead to the promotion of welfare. We will discuss examples of nudges that support virtue cultivation and how these virtues lead towards welfare. Snow argues that there are individuals who are already inclined towards virtue but fail to act according to their values despite possessing virtuous inclinations due to various reasons.⁸³ This gap between the inclination and action is not always a matter of willful moral failure, but it arises because of limited cognitive capacity, distractions, decision fatigue, limited information and emotional impulses. Mazar and Hawkins explore behavioural tendencies and point out that people are more likely to engage in dishonest behaviour through omission rather than commission due to the reduced cognitive and physical effort required when one refrains from an action.⁸⁴ The study further suggests

⁸³ Snow, "Should Virtue...", 5-42.

⁸⁴ Nina Mazar and Scott A. Hawkins, "Choice Architecture in Conflicts of Interest: Defaults as Physical and Psychological Barriers to (Dis)honesty," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 59 (2015): 113-117.

that default settings can be designed to promote honest behaviour among individuals “by creating a psychological barrier to dishonesty.”⁸⁵ For example, tax software can be designed to automatically populate available financial data rather than requiring individuals to fill in the information manually into empty fields. This kind of system design requires individuals to deliberately alter the pre-filled information to override it if they want to misrepresent their finances. Such choice architectures create a psychological barrier and internal resistance to dishonesty and introduce a moment of reflection. They make individuals aware of the ethical implications of their choices. Thus, nudges can leverage people’s existing moral inclinations and support them in overcoming biases and temptations in order to act according to their virtuous inclinations. Thus, such nudging interventions can bridge the gap between individuals’ virtuous inclinations and actions by enabling them to reaffirm their commitment to various virtues.

Nudging, therefore, serves as a justified means of cultivating virtues, although virtue promotion is not the primary aim of any nudging. These nudges in the form of virtue-cultivating means help to achieve the welfare-oriented objectives. Snow illustrates this with the example of charitable donation prompts placed near checkout counters.⁸⁶ These cues may encourage individuals to donate while checking out and lead them towards the virtue of generosity. Since such nudges guide people toward choices, they would likely endorse upon reflection, they help bridge the gap between moral intention and action. Snow further states that “For this type of [virtuous] person, who is indeed imperfect, nudging functions as a supplement to, and not as a substitute for, her conscious reasoning capacities.”⁸⁷ These types of nudges empower individuals to align their decisions with their moral commitments. Such nudges are not manipulative interventions that steer people away from their values; rather, they buttress people to live up to their own standards and virtuous conduct. When individuals are repeatedly engaged in acting up on their virtuous inclinations, such as giving, helping or other prosocial behaviour, it is highly likely that eventually, they become habituated to such actions. In line with Skinner’s theory of operant conditioning,⁸⁸ such nudges serve as positive reinforcements by helping individuals cultivate virtuous habits and nurture the virtues they value.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁸⁶ Snow, “Should Virtue...,” 5-42.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸⁸ B. F. Skinner, “The Evolution of Behavior,” *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior* 41, no. 2 (1984): 217-221.

Consider an example of double-sided printing as the default setting. Individuals may perceive it as an environmentally friendly or economic recommendation. They may not choose to opt out of this default unless they specifically want one-sided printing for some special purpose. Moreover, changing the default setting requires some effort from individuals. Therefore, it is more tempting to avoid any change in default and remain with the status quo. Similarly, the default setting frames it as a standard practice. Switching to single-sided printing may also be perceived as a loss of efficiency. Since changing the default setting can be perceived as some kind of loss, individuals tend to avoid changing the default option. So, in this case, loss aversion, rooted in reference points, also reinforces default behaviour. Moreover, this nudge not only encourages sustainable consumption but also helps individuals cultivate the virtue of temperance. In the long run, it contributes to saving the environment and enhancing overall societal welfare, leading individuals closer to attaining eudaimonia.

Here is another example of a workplace nudge that promotes ethical behaviour, such as establishing honesty as the social norm. A study by Shu et al. demonstrates that asking employees to sign a declaration “at the beginning rather than at the end of a self-report [...] significantly reduces dishonesty.”⁸⁹ This kind of intervention places the signature line at the beginning and promotes honesty by reminding individuals of their accountability for the accuracy of the reporting data. This mechanism leverages internal moral cues and makes it harder to justify dishonest behaviour. Any attempt at dishonest behaviour would directly conflict with the moral commitment that individuals have just affirmed. Thus, this nudge promotes self-accountability and guides employees towards honest behaviour. These kinds of nudges can activate self-awareness and remind employees that honesty is a shared moral value in the workplace. Over time, repeated exposure to such nudges may foster the virtue of integrity among employees. When individuals have confidence that others around them are honest, they also develop trust in one another. Honest colleagues serve as admirable exemplars whose character traits are worthy of imitation. Such a culture can shape individuals’ character and promote virtuous motivations.⁹⁰ Subsequently, this practice can strengthen other workplace virtues, such as trust and cooperation. Moreover, the effect of these virtues may lead

⁸⁹ Lisa L. Shu, Nina Mazar, Francesca Gino, Dan Ariely, and Max H. Bazerman, “Retracted: Signing at the Beginning Makes Ethics Salient and Decreases Dishonest Self-reports in Comparison to Signing at the End,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109, no. 38 (2012): 15197.

⁹⁰ Linda Zagzebski, “Exemplarist Virtue Theory,” *Metaphilosophy* 41, no. 1-2 (2010): 41-57.

In other words, in these four steps, Iyer emphasizes how nudges can support the development of virtue. Nudges can encourage people to practice virtuous habits and shape positive feelings towards virtuous actions. Consequently, they can guide attention to important moral aspects of decisions. They can also provide the right conditions for people to live according to their virtues.

Having said this, it is important to recognize that while many nudges do support virtue cultivation, not all nudges promote virtues. Based on the fundamental principle of libertarian paternalism and the definition provided by Thaler and Sunstein, nudges should preserve their freedom of choice. However, even after the principle and all the conditions of nudging are satisfied, there can be some nudges that may promote welfare but may have little or no connection with the cultivation of virtues. Consider, for instance, a reminder about an optional office meeting related to employees' personality development or recreational activities. Since the meeting is optional, employees may choose to attend the meeting or ignore the reminder. This nudge in the form of a reminder may increase attendance by helping employees to overcome forgetfulness or inertia. However, it does not necessarily contribute to virtue development. Similarly, another example can be a default setting on a computer for automatic software updates. This setting helps users to receive the latest updates without manual intervention, but it does not contribute to virtue cultivation. Thus, we can distinguish nudges into two categories: virtue-conducive nudges and virtue-neutral nudges.

A virtue-conducive nudge is one that not only enhances welfare but also supports individuals in cultivating virtues and developing moral character. Such nudges help individuals develop virtuous habits that persist in the long run, even after the nudge is removed. They also exhibit measurable features such as transparency and opportunities for reflection. In other words, individuals should be aware that they are being nudged, enabling them to recognize and endorse the underlying value. These criteria allow choice architects and researchers to assess whether a nudge merely changes behaviour or genuinely promotes enduring, virtue-based dispositions consistent with *phronesis* and *eudaimonia*. In contrast, virtue-neutral nudges typically focus on improving individuals' behaviour or choices to enhance welfare outcomes without contributing to their moral development. In such cases, welfare outcomes are detached from the individuals' moral development. These nudges tend to remain context-dependent – for instance, printing a fly image in urinals to reduce spillage. Such interventions change behaviour mechanically, without providing opportunities for reflection. Here, the choice architect need not inform individuals that they are being nudged, since the intervention

does not operate through reflective engagement. In case of virtue-conducive nudges, depending on their nature, either pathway is possible in the interplay between nudging, welfare and virtue. Some nudges primarily improve welfare, which subsequently foster virtuous habits. Whereas other nudges first cultivate virtues, which, in turn, enhance welfare. Thus, virtue-conducive nudges are able to promote welfare and cultivate virtues, ultimately leading to a flourishing life – eudaimonia.

IV. Conclusion

This paper has explored the nudging practices through the lens of the virtue ethics framework. We have analyzed how nudging interventions, which primarily aim at promoting the welfare of the stakeholders, can also contribute to the cultivation of virtues. Nudging interventions are based on the principle of libertarian paternalism and are not only limited to the welfare of the stakeholders but also have an extended moral significance beyond mere utility. In the Aristotelian framework, both welfare and virtues are essential for achieving eudaimonia or human flourishing. We identify virtue-conducive nudges that play a significant role in supporting individuals to live a flourishing life and achieve eudaimonia. We have distinguished two possible pathways that illustrate the relationship between nudging, welfare, and virtue. In the first pathway, certain nudges steer individuals towards choices that directly promote welfare – such as better health. Over time, these nudges also support the cultivation of virtues like temperance or prudence. In the second pathway, certain nudges initially shape moral character and encourage virtuous habits such as honesty and integrity and subsequently, these nudges lead to better welfare outcomes for both individuals and society. We acknowledge that some nudges may have little or no role towards the cultivation of virtues. To account for this, we distinguish between virtue-conducive and virtue-neutral nudges. Ultimately, when choice architects carefully design nudges, these interventions can serve as a design that promotes welfare and supports individuals to cultivate virtues, which in turn help them to live a flourishing life. In this way, nudging can be ethically justified within a virtue ethics framework since at least virtue-conducive nudges can meaningfully contribute to the moral life of nudgees.

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Author contribution statement

Both authors have contributed equally to the conception and design of the work, the drafting and revising of the manuscript, and the final approval of the version to be published.

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Harmony as an Ideal: A Proposal for the Further Development of Heraclitus' Approach

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Abstract

In the study that follows, one might find several elements that, building on the concept of Heraclitean Harmony, move it a step further. This is especially notable considering that Heraclitus himself did not seem inclined to assign a more specialized meaning to the notion of Harmony. In particular, as Karl Jaspers observes, Heraclitus does not explicitly explain – at least in the surviving fragments – either the precise way in which opposites are connected (or united) with each other, or in what exact sense one might speak of a unity of opposites. Nor does he attempt to construct a “logic of oppositions” (a dialectic); rather, he simply starts from the grand vision of that which exists everywhere as the One and the Same. Besides, Heraclitus never even raised the question of how a synthesis – as opposed to a mere unity – of opposing forces might be achieved, for example, by envisioning “noble competition/fair play” as a harmonization of war and peace. Instead, these reflections possess in this study a primarily autonomous philosophical character, which – taking Heraclitean thought as their starting point – explore Harmony as an ideal for contemporary humanity. This ideal, according to the author, is based on the idea that each opposite contains elements useful to the mind (advantages) as well as harmful to it (disadvantages). The advantages of the one opposite are the disadvantages of the other. Hence, if one desires to attain the maximum advantages of a situation and/or the possible minimum disadvantages, one has to combine the opposites, to balance them properly and thus achieve harmony. Externally, this balance finds its expression in the form of ideals, such as justice, which is the balance between tolerance and severity.

Keywords: *Heraclitus; harmony; unity of the opposites; classical thought; pre-Socratics; normative ideal*

I. Prelude

The study that follows was first published in 1971 in Greek under the title “Opposites and Harmony” in a special issue of the Hellenic Humanistic Society, whose president at the time was the inspired philologist Constantine Vourveris (1899-1978), Professor of Ancient Greek Philology at the University of Athens and a foundational figure in the development of humanistic studies in Greece. Naturally, the style of the text – despite the careful scholarly documentation – also revealed a youthful enthusiasm and a passionate drive to open new philosophical horizons (the author was only 24 years old at the time).

However, upon rereading this text today – now refreshed with an updated articulation of its key positions – one might find in it several elements that, building on the concept of Heraclitean Harmony, move it a step further. This is especially notable considering that Heraclitus himself did not seem inclined to assign a more specialized meaning to the notion of Harmony.

In particular, as Karl Jaspers astutely observes in his work *The Great Philosophers*,¹ Heraclitus does not explicitly explain – at least in the surviving fragments – either the precise way in which opposites are connected (or united) with each other, or in what exact sense one might speak of a unity of opposites. Nor does he attempt to construct a “logic of oppositions” (a dialectic); rather, he simply starts from the grand vision of that which exists everywhere as the One and the Same.

Therefore, the developments that follow do not seek to offer an interpretative supplement to Heraclitus’ notion of Harmony. Moreover, Heraclitus never even raised the question of how a synthesis – as opposed to a mere unity – of opposing forces might be achieved, for example, by envisioning “noble competition/fair play” as a harmonization of war and peace – see below. Instead, these reflections possess a primarily autonomous philosophical character, which – taking Heraclitean thought as their starting point – explore Harmony as an ideal for contemporary humanity.

II. From opposites to harmony

The starting point of this study is, of course, Heraclitus’s fundamental observation that, at its core, *all phenomena are subject to constant*

¹ I used the French translation: Karl Jaspers, *Les grands philosophes*, Vol. 4 (Plon, 1972), 32.

change.² As Pindar equally notes: “But within a short time, things change, and now other winds blow.”³ Indeed, whether a flower becomes fruit within a few days or a planet slightly alters its orbit over thousands of years, essentially, we are dealing with a continual transformation of phenomena and of the sensible world.

These changing conditions appear in two forms: either as the *evolutionary development* of an initial state,⁴ or as a *transition from one state to its complete opposite*.⁵ Usually, the evolutionary course comes first; when it reaches a peak (e.g., absolute freedom within a lawless society), it is followed by its exact opposite (e.g., absolute discipline through authoritarian governance), and so on.

This idea was first articulated by Plato: “Excessive freedom seems to change into nothing but excessive slavery, both for the individual and for the city.”⁶ The shift from one state to another is more abrupt when the initial condition is maintained by force. As Guicciardini writes in his *History of Italy*,

It is in human nature that, when people escape from an extreme condition which they have been forced to endure, they readily rush to the opposite extreme, without pausing at any middle point.⁷

But precisely this easy passage from one extreme to another also reveals the striking similarity between the two extremes,⁸ and, in this specific case, between anarchy and tyranny or authoritarianism.

Consequently, the form of the evolutionary course followed by various conditions is, ultimately, a manifestation of a *broader process in which opposites succeed one another*. This does not, of course, exclude minor shifts or adjustments in one direction or the other, but

² Hermann Diels und Walther Kranz, *Die Fragmente den Vorsokratiker* (Weidmannsche Hildesheim, 2004), fragment B 91 – [henceforth: author, number of fragment].

³ Pindar, *Olympian Odes*, VIII, 94-95. In Diane Arson Svarlien (ed.), *The Odes of Pindar*, Perseus Project 1.0 (Yale University Press, 1991).

⁴ Heraclitus, B 31.

⁵ Heraclitus, B 126.

⁶ Plato, *Republic*, 564a 3-4. In *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 5, trans. Paul Shorey (Harvard University Press, 1969).

⁷ Craufurd Tait Ramage, *Familiar Quotations from French and Italian Authors* (Routledge, 1886), 463.

⁸ Cf. corresponding approaches in Heraclitus, B 126, and Plato’s *Symposium*, trans. R. G. Bury (Heffer and Sons, 1909), 207d ff. Cf. Heraclitus, B 103, and Democritus, 233.

such changes carry little specific weight in the overall progression of events.

It should also be noted that these *opposites* are *interdependent* – for example, life cannot be conceived without death – and *mutually influential*, in the sense that internal oppositions, being in a constant state of flux and conflict with one another, coexist and shape each other over time.

A similar approach is found in Aristotle's *theory of the mean*, according to which two opposing conditions differ in the degree of intensity of a fundamental quality they share as a common basis. Typically, one possesses it in excess and the other in deficiency – for instance, the reckless person exhibits in excess the very trait that the coward lacks, and which lies at the midpoint: in this case, the virtue of courage.⁹

a. Specific aspects of opposites that are beneficial for human beings

Every opposition contains elements that are spiritually beneficial, as they compel the human being to live in accordance with what is highest within them, thereby elevating and uplifting them into the realm of values, such as freedom and truth. However, each such opposition simultaneously contains harmful aspects that hinder or obstruct this spiritual ascent.

For *example*, *war*, motivated by the innate drive for self defense and maintenance of self in existence,¹⁰ invigorates the spirit of struggle and compels the human being to surpass themselves in order to achieve victory and excellence. At the same time, however, war entails bloodshed, destruction, and a degradation of human dignity, thereby disrupting the normal order of human life and producing widespread suffering. Conversely, the opposing force to *war*, *peace*, while it ensures the conditions for human beings to cultivate their personality and to produce cultural achievements in science, literature, and the arts – within a framework of respect for human rights – can also lead to a life of softness and indulgence, and thus to the stagnation of spiritual virtues.

⁹ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 19, trans. H. Rackham (Harvard University Press, 1934), 1106b 36ff., and especially 1107a 2ff., as well as 1107b 1ff.; also, Plato, *Statesman*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 12, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Harvard University Press, 1921), 308c.

¹⁰ See in particular, Purissima Emelda Egbekpalu et al., “Dialectics of War as a Natural Phenomenon: Existential Perspective,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2023): 129-145. Cf. also Paul Ertl, “Progressus as an Explanatory Model: An Anthropological Principle Illustrated by the Russia-Ukraine War,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2023): 188.

Similarly, in the aforementioned contrast between *freedom and order*, order – existing for the sake of the collective – prevents the disintegration caused by internal conflict, but at the same time limits the individual. Freedom, on the other hand – existing for the sake of the individual – does indeed offer the necessary space for personal development, but when it becomes excessive, it threatens the cohesion of the group. As Adamantios Korais states in his *Political Counsels to the Greeks*:

When citizens do not know the precise limits of their freedom, they either become slaves, ready to bow their necks to the yoke of the first tyrant who comes along, or they rebel against the lawful government, turning it into outright anarchy.¹¹

For this reason, according to the apt definition given by Marcus Aurelius, freedom must consist in this: “To be neither a tyrant over anyone, nor a slave to anyone.”¹²

b. The problem with one-sided approaches

A single opposing force cannot offer all the potential advantages one might expect from it (except, of course, for the opposition crystallized in the fundamental pair spirit-matter, which, however, has a transcendent value and does not appear in a pure form within the sensible world). The reason a single opposition cannot provide completeness of benefits is that it represents only one side of life’s continuous movement between opposites. Thus, it inevitably displays corresponding deficiencies. Hence, a one-sided choice of just one opposition as a means of solving a given problem, under normal circumstances, tends as a rule to lead to misjudgments or failures.

It is useful to observe, on a broader level, that one-sidedness stands in contradiction to the very worldview of *ancient Greek civilization*, which cultivated – or rather embraced – all possible philosophical and social tendencies, without preemptively excluding any of them. Thus, we see the development of theories by both the rationalist Plato and the empiricist Democritus, while in Aristotle these two currents are synthesized. Later on, Plato’s trajectory was revived by the Stoics, and that of Democritus by Epicurus. As Maria P. Pattichi aptly ob-

¹¹ Adamantios Korais, “Prolegomena,” in *Aristotle’s Politics* (Elliniki Vivliothiki, 1821) [in Greek].

¹² Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Gregory Heys (Modern Library, 2013), IV.31.

serves – making the aforementioned remarks: “This salvific dualism was Greece’s legacy to the modern world, and ever since, one-sidedness, which dulls the intellect, has become more difficult to maintain.”¹³

We might even add here that it is perhaps no coincidence that the two most luminous resurgences of the human spirit – *ancient Greek civilization and the Renaissance* – were primarily grounded in *Harmony and the idea of Measure*.¹⁴

On the other hand, it is well known that *one-sided choices* are often reinforced by extreme psychological states, such as *prejudice, fanaticism, and ideological fixations*, which are typically attached to corresponding ideopolitical “-isms.” In such states, one-sidedness can be said to lead even to a distortion of human nature itself – the only entity within the realm of living beings that possesses the ability, through repeated experiences, to grasp the universal, that is, to form general concepts of broad applicability. Through this process, human nature acquires a comprehensive overview of reality, allowing it to reach knowledge, science, and the causal structure of things.¹⁵

Thus arises the *necessity of thoroughly examining both opposing aspects of any given situation*, in order to fully investigate the components of the problem and to properly utilize the advantages on each side. It is self-evident that the need to hear differing viewpoints in the pursuit of truth becomes even more urgent whenever vital human interests depend on the discovery of that truth. Consequently, dialogue is established, among other things, as a mandatory requirement in politics (provided the regime is democratic), as well as in the conduct of legal proceedings.

Regarding *political dialogue*, the Greek statesman Charilaos Trikoupis stated characteristically in a speech delivered in Parliament on December 14, 1883 – while also explaining his preference for a two-party system modeled after that of Great Britain:

We desire an opposition program and a strong opposition, because having our own program, we recognize that every issue has two sides, and that both sides require expression and can be used for the country’s benefit when examined with good faith.¹⁶

¹³ Maria Pattichi, *Measure of Balance: The Legacy of Greek Civilization to the Western World* (Nicosia, 1972), 51 [in Greek].

¹⁴ Cecil Maurice Bowra, *The Greek Experience* (Mentor Books, 1957), 100ff. and 209ff.; Humphrey D. F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (Penguin Books, 1951), 186ff.

¹⁵ See Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, trans. E. S. Bouchier (B. H. Blackwell, 1901), I, 31, 87b 30.

¹⁶ Charilaos Trikoupis, *Analekta*, Vol. III (Sakellariou, 1912), 241 [in Greek].

As for the conduct of *trials*, *dialogue* is safeguarded by the principles of equality of arms and mutual hearing. In this context, the Latin procedural maxim *audiatur et altera pars* (“let the other side be heard as well”) applies, as does the ancient Greek injunction from Phocylides: Μηδενί δίχην δικάσης πρίν ἀμφοῖν μῦθον ἀκούσης (do not judge anyone before you have heard the speech of both sides). These principles provide fertile ground for speech and counter-speech, thereby creating the dialectical phases of legal proceedings, which in turn lead to the possibility of true knowledge.¹⁷

According to a theory that is increasingly gaining ground and bears the telling name *Theory of Balancing of Interests* (Interessenabwägung),¹⁸ even the interpretation of legal norms, in order to reach correct decisions, must be conducted through a comparative balancing of the conflicting interests involved – both individual and societal – while giving precedence to the interest that carries the greatest importance for society. See, for instance, Supreme Civil Court of Greece decision no. 841/2017 (of civil character, digitally accessible via Qualex), which relates to the unforeseen change of circumstances:

Within the framework of such balancing, it is of course important to establish limits – limits shaped by the constitutional principle of proportionality as well as by the *ideals of Measure and Harmony* – when exercising conflicting interests, in order to ensure their harmonious coexistence and to prevent any overstepping of these boundaries.¹⁹

This observation also recalls the significant remark of Heraclitus, who stated that even the sun, should it deviate from its prescribed path and proper measure, will be pursued by Dike (Justice) and the Erinyes (Furies).²⁰

Indeed, *Harmony, as the meeting point of opposing forces*, simultaneously *defines the boundaries* within which each opposing force may legitimately operate without harming the other or the collective whole of society.

A characteristic example is the concept of freedom, which – as I have had the opportunity to argue in a previous study,

¹⁷ See Jürgen Meyer, *Dialektik im Strafprozeß* (C. B. Mohr, 1965).

¹⁸ See also the seminal work by the originator of this theory: Philipp Heck, *Begriffsbildung und Interessenjurisprudenz* (C. B. Mohr, 1932).

¹⁹ Article 388 of the *Greek Civil Code*.

²⁰ Heraclitus, B 94.

[...] has a clearly delineated content, with its outer limits defined by the rights of others, the interests of the community as a whole, and the requirements for the maintenance and advancement of a democratic society; any transgression of these boundaries, and the transformation of freedom into indulgence, ultimately undermines the very notion of freedom itself.²¹

In this light, numerous institutions of modern legal and social life – such as the principle of *abuse of rights*,²² namely, the excessive or improper exercise of a right – can find their legal foundation and operational framework within the broader conceptual context of Harmony.

c. The role of harmony in the synthesis of opposites

Every opposition, taken in isolation – as previously noted – cannot provide the *maximum* potential spiritual benefit, i.e., the kind of benefit which, according to Plato's eloquent expression in the *Timaeus* (90d), is linked with the understanding of the universe as a whole and the full comprehension of the harmonies and revolutions in the Cosmos, beyond the material world.

The *maximization of this benefit for each of the two opposing elements*, and the corresponding containment of their non-spiritual (or detrimental) effects, can only be realized *through the proper connection, synthesis, and equilibrium* of both opposing forces – that is, through Harmony.

It is thus up to the decision-maker tasked with resolving a given issue to selectively adopt and utilize the positive aspects of both opposing forces while neutralizing their respective shortcomings.

But *how can this connection and synthesis of opposites be achieved?* This study argues that the decisive role lies in the capacity of the individual *to first identify and select* the positive (and only the positive) spiritual benefits of each opposing element, and then to interconnect and synthesize those benefits into a new integrated whole. To grasp this process intuitively, *poetic or allegorical approaches* can initially be of help. For example, the poet Yiannis Gryparis, in his poem *Satire*, illustrates a proper selection process of the best elements through the metaphor of bees, writing characteristically:

²¹ Nestor Courakis, "Security and Freedom: Their Static and Dynamic Boundaries," *Nomiko Vima* 54 (2006): 1221 [in Greek].

²² Article 281 of the Greek Civil Code, and Article 25, §3 of the Greek Constitution.

*From the blossoms of things
they draw threefold
the purest essence.*²³

Similarly, Saint Basil the Great, in his excellent exhortation *To the Young on How They Might Profit from Pagan Literature*, uses the same image of bees who “take from flowers only what they need for their work and leave the rest behind and fly away.”²⁴ In doing so, he encourages the young to adopt a similar selective attitude, echoing the advice of the Apostle Paul: “Test all things; hold fast to what is good.”²⁵

However, the requirement of *selectivity* in the search for or formation of an optimal condition also implies something further regarding the balancing of opposites: Namely, that *harmony is not necessarily found at the midpoint between two extremes* – not at the geometric or quantitative center equidistant from both ends of a spectrum. Such a mechanistic fusion of opposites would never succeed in producing qualitative harmonization or in maximizing the advantages of each.

On the contrary, such a “compromising” or “middling” practice – which bears no resemblance to the higher, qualitative notion of *Aristotelian moderation* – ends up neutralizing the strengths of one side with those of the other, resulting in no final benefit. The outcome is merely a suspended state, neither resolved nor improved.

d. Examples of harmonious synthesis of opposites

The distinction between “compromised” or intermediate states and *true states of Harmony* becomes much clearer when concrete examples are provided – illustrating precisely *how* such connection and harmonization of opposites may be achieved in specific contexts.

In the example of the *opposing forces of war and peace*, the “intermediate” condition is represented by the ambiguous state known as “neither war nor peace,” in which, although formal military operations are not entirely excluded, skirmishes and border incidents primarily occur. A characteristic example is the latent conflict between Arabs and Israelis following the establishment of the Israeli State in 1948, culminating in the three wars of 1947-1949, 1967, and 1973.

²³ Yiannis Gryparis, *Scarab Beetles and Terracottas* (I. N. Sideris, 1943) [in Greek].

²⁴ Saint Basil the Great, *To the Young on How They Might Profit from Pagan Literature*, ed. V. Bilalis (Grigoris, 1989), IV: 18-30 [in Greek].

²⁵ Paul, 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

By contrast, the *ideal state*, that is, the state of *Harmony*, is realized in the *balancing condition of noble competition* (ἄμιλλα). Whether in the form of a sports match, a literary contest, or the scientific pursuit of a prize, competition offers a framework for the harmonious fusion of war and peace – that is, a contest that incorporates elements of conflict, derived from war, and elements of conflict resolution, derived from peace, all within the bounds of Ethics (fair play, *noble competition*, εὖ ἀγωνίζεσθαι). Therefore, competition is distinguished from other forms of confrontation, first by its motivating aims and second by its methods employed.

Schematically, this *harmonious condition* of noble competition, like other forms of synthesis of opposites through *Harmony*, may be represented at the apex of a triangle, with the two extremes – war and peace – occupying the base corners, and the intermediate state of ambiguous “neither war nor peace” placed midway along the base.

A similar structure of *Harmony* appears in other contexts as well: For instance, in the realm of a nation’s foreign policy, the opposing tendencies are represented, on the one hand, by alignment with one of the so-called Great Powers, and, on the other, by a “middle-ground” policy that avoids forming alliances or taking stances on critical international issues, aiming instead to maintain equal distance and neutrality.

The *harmonious approach*, as proposed by the Greek statesman Eleftherios Venizelos, consists in shaping a foreign policy that seeks, as far as possible, to serve the country’s specific interests, by finding allies and partners within the sphere where those interests are most likely to be realized.²⁶

Nonetheless, even *neutrality* itself can evolve into an *optimal tool of foreign policy*, especially when practiced by a state with strong geopolitical standing, seizing the moment’s opportunities. This was, for instance, the case with Turkey’s foreign policy during World War II, which led to its characterization by Weber as “the evasive neutral.”²⁷

Moreover, in the previously mentioned opposition between *freedom* and *order*, the intermediate or rather “middle-ground” condition consists, at least from an Aristotelian perspective, in the equal strengthening of those social strata that represent the forces of *freedom* (e.g., radical poor), of *order* (conservative affluent classes), and of the inter-

²⁶ For an equally pragmatic approach, albeit in a totally different cultural setting, see Panagiotis Kallinikos, “Political Realism in the Chinese Warring States Period and the European Renaissance: Han Fei and Machiavelli,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2023): 127-166.

²⁷ Frank G. Weber, *The Evasive Neutral: Germany, Britain, and the Quest for a Turkish Alliance in the Second World War* (University of Missouri Press, 1983).

mediate condition (e.g., progressive bourgeoisie). However, such an approach may intensify competing demands and lead to uprisings and revolts – thus, ultimately, to conditions of *unfreedom*, i.e., a state of *masters and slaves*.²⁸

By contrast, according to Aristotle, *Harmony* is achieved through the well-ordered condition, wherein such strengthening of individual citizens takes place *justly* and *primarily through the empowerment of the middle class*. This class, according to Aristotle, “ποιεῖ ροπήν καὶ κωλύει γίνεσθαι τὰς ἐναντίας ὑπερβολάς,”²⁹ in other words, it contributes to *balance* and impedes the *excesses* of other opposing social strata. Yet, this *empowerment of the middle class* in relation to other social groups must not occur through the *equalization of wealth*, but through the *equalization of desires*. According to Aristotle, this can be achieved only if *the laws enforce the necessary education*.³⁰

In the *modern era*, however, *social contradictions* have clearly become *less sharp* than in Aristotle’s time, such that *social stratification* is no longer as distinct as it once was. On the contrary, antagonistic social roles now frequently *overlap*, in the sense that a citizen may hold a high status in the social hierarchy but still be subject, in employment terms, to orders from superiors. This softening of *social antagonisms* is also connected with the fact that, in contemporary *pluralistic* societies, there exists – at any rate – a certain *consensus* on fundamental values (especially those protected by the *Constitution*), as a necessary outcome of *mutual concessions and balances between various social groups, in pursuit of social peace*. Consequently, the *class-based* and *toxic* spirit of confrontation and hostility that prevailed until the formation – around the dawn of the 20th century – of the modern *Rule of Law* and *Welfare State* in various developed countries seems to have significantly diminished.³¹

In light of these new developments, the pursuit of a *harmonious relationship* between *freedom* and *order* could thus be located in the *concept of Social Justice*. Through this, the State seeks to distribute or redistribute the fruits of economic development in a manner that is both *fair* and *compassionate*.³²

²⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1295b 1ff.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1295b 41-42.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1266b 29ff.

³¹ R. Dahrendorf, *Classes et conflits de classes dans la société industrielle* (Mouton, 1972).

³² See this definition of Social Justice in the United Nations Security Council, *Expert Report* (United Nations, 2006), http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/ifsd/Social_Justice.pdf; see also Nestor Courakis, “In Search for a New Eutopia in Criminal Policy: The Role of Social

Accordingly, the term *Social Justice* assumes a broader meaning than in Aristotelian thought, where the focus was on the *middle class*, as it now ultimately encompasses *all* social groups, and not merely select segments.

As mentioned above, the two main components of social justice are: *fairness*, which promotes *meritocracy*, and *compassion*, which promotes *social solidarity*. As a result, *fairness* – that is, the value-based (re)distribution of goods – emerges as equally necessary and imperative as the humanitarian ideal of *social solidarity*. In other words, a society must not only care for the protection of its *vulnerable groups* and the support of members in need, through measures such as improved public health, public education, social security, and social welfare. Rather, its core mission must also be to ensure *meritocratic equality of opportunity* in education and employment and to actively support those members who are capable in a given domain and aspire to build a successful professional career. Such measures may include the establishment of more *schools of excellence*, the broader *granting of scholarships* to talented young people, and the *provision of start-up capital* for their first professional steps.

Furthermore, *measures aimed at enhancing meritocracy* also include initiatives for the improved functioning of the public administration – especially efforts to reduce *non-merit-based hiring and promoting* in the civil service and to combat *corruption and evaluated appointments* in the field of higher education.

Already in antiquity, leading philosophers such as Plato in his *Republic*³³ and Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*³⁴ analyzed with great clarity how *justice, moderation, and harmony* (“δίκαιον ἀνάλογόν τι,” i.e. *a proportional form of justice*) may be established on the basis of *rectifying injustice* and *recognizing everyone’s merit*. In the 20th century, this debate reached a new peak in the realm of political philosophy, as the long-standing *dilemma* resurfaced: whether *meritocratic fairness* or *social solidarity* should take precedence – sparked by opposing arguments among thinkers such as John Rawls, Robert Nozick, Thomas Piketty, Michael Sandel, among others.

However, it becomes clear from the above, I believe, that *social justice* must, without resorting to *false dilemmas*, rest equally on both of its foundational pillars: *meritocratic fairness* and *social solidarity*,

Justice,” in *Ceremonial Presentation of the Festschrift in Honour of Prof. Dr. Nestor Courakis*, 40-57 (Max-Planck Gesellschaft, 2017).

³³ Plato, *Republic*, 433c ff.

³⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1131b 38ff., and 1131a 33ff.

aiming to achieve their *harmonious coexistence*. In contrast, a “middle-ground” condition would consist of the *equal distribution or redistribution* of goods to all, regardless of *individual merit or need* – as was the case in certain totalitarian regimes of the so-called “actually existing or real socialism.”

In this *harmonious* form, *social justice* constitutes not merely a fundamental ideal, but perhaps the *supreme value* of a well-governed society, as it responds to the aspirations of *all* social groups. What is required, however, is *constant vigilance* on the part of political leadership, so that the *balance* between the two key components of *social justice* – *meritocratic fairness* and *social solidarity* – may be *continuously adjusted, without dogmatism*, to suit the particular needs and historical circumstances of each society.

Furthermore, at the individual level – specifically concerning one’s *conduct toward others* – if we take *strictness* and *tolerance* as opposing extremes, then a “middle-of-the-road” (or *ambiguous*) stance would consist of an arbitrary behavioral pattern: one that is at times strict, at other times lenient – motivated solely by the momentary *moods or perceptions* of the person involved, without due regard for the *particular circumstances* of each case.

By contrast, a *harmonious* mode of conduct arises when behavior is grounded in *justice* – that is, when each individual is given what is appropriate to them, based both on their *needs* and their *merit*. This mirrors what has been said earlier in relation to *social justice* on a societal level.

More broadly, *justice* – which also forms the basis of *Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean* – safeguards for each person what they deserve. In this respect, it serves, as in *Plato’s* philosophical vision, as a *reliable criterion* for the establishment of *harmonious* relationships and structures within society.

Moreover, another fundamental *duality* requiring harmonious reconciliation can be discerned in the *relationship between human nature and education*. By *human nature* we mean those inherent capacities and inclinations rooted in one’s biological constitution or acquired during the earliest stages of infancy and childhood. By *education* – or more broadly, *upbringing* – we refer to the influences received by the individual from their social environment, whether through structured processes or random life experiences.

Human nature and *education* alike exert a neutral or even *ineffectual*, if not *harmful*, influence on moral development – unless they are pertinently integrated. Moreover, *each* of these forces, acting alone

and without being synthesized with the other, proves insufficient. As Confucius insightfully noted:

When natural endowment acts unilaterally, the result is a crude person; when cultivation alone prevails, the result is a pedant. Only when natural endowment and cultivation are harmoniously combined do we attain the superior individual – the virtuous person.³⁵

However, even within *education itself*, a new *tension* emerges – namely, the need to *reconcile tradition with creativity*. Tradition alone renders individuals rigid and prevents them from adapting to life's evolving demands. On the other hand, creativity in isolation, detached from tradition, often expends itself fruitlessly, disregarding the *wisdom of the past*.

The “middle-of-the-road” approach here would consist of an indiscriminate attempt to connect past elements – *whether obsolete or enduring* – with present-day life. In contrast, true *harmony* lies in selecting *those values of the past* that are *timeless* and *relevant* to present needs and tendencies and using them as the basis for *new creative expressions*.

This process of transition – from inherited tradition to present-day innovation – is eloquently described by *Nietzsche* in his seminal work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, particularly in the first of Zarathustra's discourses, titled *The Three Metamorphoses*. There, the German philosopher presents the human *Spirit* as first *kneeling like a camel*, bearing the weight of tradition and the imperative “you must,” submitting dutifully to the values of its age.

Then, upon retreating into the desert, the spirit *rejects* this wisdom and throws off the burden of inherited norms *like a lion*, saying “No” and “I will.” Finally, freed from the shackles of the past – but having retained all that is valuable from it – the spirit becomes *like a child*, who, as Nietzsche beautifully puts it, “is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a sacred Yes.”³⁶

e. Harmony as an Idea and as an Ideal

As illustrated by the above examples, the synthesis of opposites brings together subjective elements (such as natural talents or creative inspi-

³⁵ Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. William Edward Soothill (Fukuin Printing Co, 1910), VI, XVIII. On Confucius' ethical ontology, especially with reference to Dao and Li, see Georgios Steiris, “Confucius' Ontological Ethics,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2023): 303-321.

³⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Penguin Classics, 1961).

ration) with objective ones (like education or tradition), thereby enabling a fruitful and continuous dialogue between the individual and their environment in the service of Harmony. Naturally, there can also be a *gradation of harmonious unities*, from the less significant to the more essential, especially when viewed through the lens of Aristotelian moderation. Thus, for instance, courage – as the balance between cowardice and recklessness – and temperance – as the balance between licentiousness and insensibility – form, when regulated by prudence (*phronesis*), a new and higher-order harmony: the broader value of justice.³⁷

More broadly, from all the aforementioned examples, *the notion of Harmony itself* can now be defined with greater precision. Heraclitus famously characterizes it as the union of opposites,³⁸ while the Pythagorean Philolaus³⁹ describes it as the fusion of the multiform and the concord of the dissenting: “ἔστι γὰρ ἄρμονία πολυμιγέων ἔνωσις καὶ δίχρα φρονεόντων συμφρόνησις.”⁴⁰

In Heraclitean thought, the terms “opposites” and “contraries” refer to phenomena that are often diametrically dissimilar, yet which – through the ceaseless motion and conflict of *becoming* – are ultimately led into a state of equilibrium, unity, and completeness. Crucial to this dynamic are the elements of divinity and *Logos*. It is evident, however, that *in Heraclitus’ worldview the union of opposites does not signify their abolishment*; rather, it entails their coexistence and their potential for renewed conflict. Even when a temporary balance is achieved, the condition remains fluid, continuously ἐν τῷ γίγνεσθαι (in the state of becoming).

Yet, this conceptualization of Harmony leads onto slippery terrain, with no stable outlook. Admittedly, according to Heraclitus,⁴¹ *Harmony* may indeed assume a more permanent form when it *coexists with the divine Logos*, the divine Law, and other transcendent entities that constitute the ἐπέκειντα (beyond) of Heraclitean thought. Still, even in this

³⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104a 20ff; cf. Plato, *Laws*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vols. 10 & 11, trans. R. G. Bury (Harvard University Press, 1967-8), 631c ff.

³⁸ See especially Heraclitus, B 10 and B 8.

³⁹ Heraclitus, B 10.

⁴⁰ Regarding the correlation between harmony, numbers, and music according to Pythagoreans, cf. Nikolas K. Angelis, “Harmonie cosmique et Harmonie humaine,” *Diotima: Revue de Recherche Philosophique* 29 (2001): 28-32, passim; and Virginia J. Grigoriadou et al., “History of the Concept of Similarity in Natural Sciences,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2021): 107.

⁴¹ Heraclitus, B 1, B 50, passim.

elevated metaphysical dimension, *Harmony cannot function as a stable and autonomous value*. For even there, it merely ensures the cohesion of the other cosmic entities without itself becoming an independent *synthesis* that reconciles every type of opposition – as, for example, in the earlier case of peace and war, whose synthesis lies in noble competition and εὖ ἀγωνίζεσθαι (fair play). And even if Heraclitus, as Long has rightly observed,⁴² discovered “how to articulate rationality in terms of measured or proportional processes,” he nevertheless did not go so far as to elevate *measure* into a principle of the synthesis of opposites.

This is why, in his *Symposium*, Plato – referring to Heraclitus' fragment B 51 on the bow and the lyre – has the physician Eryximachus voice objections to the Heraclitean doctrine. With a rationalist spirit, he argues that:

Harmony is concord, and concord is a form of agreement. But agreement between things that are in opposition, insofar as they remain opposed, is impossible. Nor is it possible, conversely, to harmonize that which is in conflict and fails to agree.⁴³

In the *Republic*, Plato offers a more detailed elaboration of his own position on the matter and specifies the potential of *Harmony to constitute a transcendence of opposites and a stable, balanced condition within the realm of the Ideal*. He begins by presenting, through the lens of the Idea of Justice, a state of harmonious coexistence among citizens – one that can and ought to be realized in well-governed cities.⁴⁴ This harmony is first based on the distinct roles that citizens are to fulfill; Plato distinguishes here three classes: (a) warriors, (b) rulers or magistrates, and (c) other professionals or farmers), and secondly, on the soul-faculty that typically or normatively governs each citizen's conduct in their role (for instance, magistrates are to be governed by reason).

In a second stage, Plato transfers this notion of harmony among the components of the well-ordered state to the personal life of the

⁴² As mentioned in Despina Vertzagia, “Anthony A. Long. *Selfhood and Rationality in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Heraclitus to Plotinus*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2023): 345. Also, in Anthony Arthur Long and Despina Vertzagia, “Antiquity Revisited: A Discussion with Anthony Arthur Long,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (2020): 111-122.

⁴³ Plato, *Symposium*, 187a.

⁴⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 410e ff.

individual citizen.⁴⁵ In so doing, he posits that individuals too may enjoy the benefits of such harmony within their own souls, provided that the three parts of the soul – the appetitive (ἐπιθυμητικόν), the spirited (θυμοειδές) and the rational (λογιστικόν) – operate in a state of mutual balance and proportionality.⁴⁶

From the above, it becomes evident that Plato conceptually associates Justice with Harmony and thereby implicitly *attributes to Harmony a distinctive ideal content*: one that provides human beings with a teleological orientation, allowing them to set aims and strive for their fulfillment across all spheres of activity. This applies particularly, as noted above, (a) to the functioning of a well-ordered *polis*, and (b) to the acquisition of internal harmony among the soul's faculties.

The elevation of Harmony to the status of an *Ideal* – one worthy of serving as a guiding principle and inner compass for human life – is powerfully expressed in a poem by Angelos Sikelianos, titled *The Consciousness of Personal Creation*:

O Harmony, above all deaths!
 Shall not my hand extend
 over all contradictions
 calmly, like the branch of a plane tree,
 like the hand of Apollo, straight and serene,
 above the furious struggle
 of Lapiths and Centaurs?⁴⁷

A parallel poetic vision is found in Friedrich Schiller's *The Song of the Bell*, where in the opening of the eighth stanza he writes:

⁴⁵ Ibid., 441a ff.

⁴⁶ It is interesting to note that this Platonic approach to the tripartite classification of the human soul may find confirmation in the so-called “triune brain model,” proposed in the 1960s by the American neuroscientist Paul D. MacLean. According to this model, the human brain is composed of three parts which, though independent, are interconnected and represent a gradual evolutionary development from the animal world to the human. Beginning with the so-called (a) *reptilian brain (reptilian complex)*, which regulates basic sensorimotor functions – e.g., breathing – as well as *non-rational psychic energies*, such as drives and impulses, the model progresses to the (b) *paleomammalian complex*, which primarily governs emotions, and culminates more recently in the (c) *neomammalian complex or neocortex*, which regulates *abstract thought, logic, planning, high intelligence, problem-solving*, and the *simultaneous regulation of impulses, drives, and emotions* – see indicatively: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triune_brain. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1138b 7ff.

⁴⁷ Angelos Sikelianos, *Lyrical Life*, Vol. III (Ikaros, 1975) [in Greek].

Where sternness joins with tenderness,
and power is reconciled with gentleness,
there resounds the true purpose of harmony.⁴⁸

Yet even in prose, the necessity of Harmony as an ideal and a high calling for the intellectual and spiritual life is vividly articulated in the following passage by Giorgos Theotokas:

Beyond the problems of the moment, and beyond national or ideological borders, such appears to us the highest role of the spirit at the threshold of the New Times: to accomplish the enlargement of the soul so that it may contain and reconcile within itself Tradition and Revolution, Necessity and Freedom, the Collective and the Individual, Science and Poetry, Technique and Imagination, and the new religiosity that modern humanity so thirsts for – to make the soul capable of taming and humanizing the swollen and ailing body of our society – to recompose human reality and to create a new harmony in the Human Being and in the World [...].⁴⁹

II. Forms of harmony

a. The concepts of external and internal harmony

Harmony, as the culmination of the greatest possible spiritual excellences of any given condition, and as a justification of human existence itself, constitutes an appealing *ideal*, undoubtedly connected to the notions of *the good* and *virtue*. As Socrates beautifully puts it in *Philebus*: “*Measure and proportion result everywhere in beauty and virtue.*”⁵⁰

At the same time, however, *Harmony* – emerging, as already noted, from the ongoing conflict of opposing forces – constitutes an *exceptionally precarious balance*, one that is difficult to attain and even more difficult to maintain.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Friedrich Schiller, *The Song of the Bell*, trans. W. H. Furness (Estes and Lauriat, 1887).

⁴⁹ Giorgos Theotokas, *At the Threshold of the New Times* (Ikaros, 1945), 24 [in Greek].

⁵⁰ Plato, *Philebus*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Harvard University Press, 1925), 64e. Furthermore, in Plato’s *Republic*, 505a, special emphasis is placed on the *primacy of virtue and the Good* within a *harmonious whole* in human life, with the statement that “the idea of the Good is the highest object of knowledge [...]. Without it, neither just things nor anything else beneficial or worthwhile becomes truly useful.”

⁵¹ Plato, *Phaedo*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 1, trans. Harold North Fowler (Harvard Uni-

The same conflict, which is constantly played out in the *external* world between opposing powers (e.g., war and peace), and which may at times culminate in the ideal state of *external harmony* – in our example, through noble competition or ἀμιλλὰ (fair play) – also takes place *within the inner world of the human being* (as an individual or as a member of society). It unfolds primarily between forces that urge the soul toward a *spiritual elevation* and alignment with higher values capable of imparting meaning to one’s life, and those that pull it in the opposite direction.

This internal struggle between conflicting forces within the human being has been poetically illustrated by great thinkers such as Goethe. In a well-known passage from *Faust*, he writes:

Two souls, alas, reside within my breast,
And each from the other would be parted:
One clings with stubborn passion to the world,
With clumsy lust, seeking love’s sweetest zest;
The other soars from dust to high ancestral spheres.

Oh, if there be a spirit-breathing air,
That rules between the earth and heaven fair,
Descend with golden clouds from high,
And bear me to a brighter life on high!⁵²

In a similar vein, another German poet – somewhat younger than Goethe – Friedrich Hölderlin, in his poem *Hymn to the Goddess of Harmony*, exclaims:

Pure love, boundless, gently guides us
Toward the sublime harmony.⁵³

Victor Hugo too, in his *Contemplations*, expresses this inner ethical striving in equally powerful terms:

Ever am I the one
Who walks straight toward duty,

versity Press, 1966), 92c; cf. Galen, *Mixtures*, ed. and trans. P. N. Singer and Philip J. van der Eijk (Oxford University Press, 2018), I, IX, 566.

⁵² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, trans. Bayard Taylor (London Ward, 1890), lines 1112–1121.

⁵³ Friedrich Hölderlin, “Hymne an die Göttin der Harmonie,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 1, 131–136 (Cottasche, 1946).

once honor has summoned me.
 And like Job, I tremble in the wind, a fragile branch –
 Yet I long for the good, the true,
 the beautiful, the great, the just.⁵⁴

Naturally, in every thought and action of the human being, elements of both his inner forces – those that stand in mutual conflict – are present. It is incumbent upon the human being – and indeed, this is the direction toward which he tends, provided, of course, that he is not ‘asleep,’ as Heraclitus observes⁵⁵ – to break the vicious cycle of fate and *to bring his inner powers into harmony*. This may occur if, in his responses and pursuits, the spiritual forces prevail – those oriented toward higher values that justify him as truly human – rather than the forces that Heraclitus describes as mere [animalistic] desires.⁵⁶ However, this effort is not without *serious difficulties*. As Ioannis Sykoutris notes:

[...] The world that man carries within his breast is as vast as the external world – an *endless ocean*, with storms and fury, with the *countless laughter of waves* and its *unfathomable depths*, with *myriad forces* intertwining and contending among themselves. Each of these has its own worth and justification for existing. Thus, for those who keep their eyes open, the *problem of life* appears as a matter of *balance* among these forces – *a balance that constantly requires support and demands unceasing attention and effort*. Those who see life *one-sidedly*, who let themselves be swept along in a single direction, who shut their eyes to the *contradictions and varieties* of life, may perhaps be spared toil and worry; they may find rest or even sleep, because they have ‘resolved’ the problems of life. But *they are not living their own life – life is living them*. And the *more beautiful and richer*, the *deeper* a thing is, the *more difficulties and labors* it presupposes.⁵⁷

Furthermore, certain other *timeless texts* vividly underscore not only the *difficulties involved* in the ascent toward the *realm of spiritual val-*

⁵⁴ Victor Hugo, *Les contemplations*, vol. 3, ed. Joseph Vianey (Hachette, 1922), 33.

⁵⁵ Heraclitus, B 89.

⁵⁶ Heraclitus, B 85.

⁵⁷ Ioannis Sykoutris, “The Spiritual Orientations of Youth,” in *Essays and Articles*, 257-260 (Aigaiο, 1956), 259.

ue, but also the *importance of properly balancing emotion and reason* in the success of such an effort. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet tells Horatio:

Blessed are those whose blood and judgment
are so well commingled.
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please.⁵⁸

More pessimistically, Montaigne in his *Essays* observes: "It seems that the very name of virtue presupposes straggles, conflicts, and adversities."⁵⁹

In contrast, the *Psalms* of David strike a somewhat more *optimistic* tone: "Those who *sow in tears / shall reap with rejoicing*"⁶⁰ – hence with no suggestion of problems arising during the harvest (either literally or metaphorically), due to the potential adversities that may have intervened.

A different perspective on the ascent into the spiritual world of Ideas – enriched with subtle strokes of irony – is offered by Emmanouil Rhoides. He writes:

After one has arduously climbed a ladder of abstractions to the summit where Hegel's Idea stands – the One, the Whole, the Absolute, or some other such Principle – one feels a kind of distress, like that experienced by those who reach an untrodden mountain peak, where the air no longer has the density required to sustain life, and where no earthly sound is heard – not of running water, nor rustling leaves, nor the buzzing of an insect. But man was not made to dwell at such heights [...].⁶¹

This metaphorical image, however vivid, refers evidently to the biological constitution of the human being, which can indeed falter in the face

⁵⁸ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Rex Gibson (Cambridge University Press, 2005), Act III, Scene II, lines 68-71). On the need for a well-balanced mixture of emotions and reason, see also Plato, *Republic*, 442a ff.

⁵⁹ Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. Charles Cotton, rev. William Carew Hazlett (Edwin C. Hill, 1910), Book II, Chapter 11.

⁶⁰ *The Psalms of David*, trans. and ed. Donald Sheehan and Xenia Sheehan (Wipf and Stock, 2013), Psalm 126 [LXX: 125], 5-6.

⁶¹ Emmanouil Rhoides, "Unpublished Thoughts," *Erevna* 7 (1932): 3-15 [in Greek].

of difficulty. It does not, however, apply to his *psychic faculties*, which, on the contrary, I believe *are fashioned to lead him toward perfection*, provided he truly wills it – as Paulo Coelho puts it in *The Alchemist*, “with all his heart.” In such a case, “the universe will conspire to help him succeed.”⁶²

If, however, a person succeeds in harmonizing their inner forces – and thereby attains the *inner Harmony of the soul*⁶³ – then they naturally acquire a significant axiological supremacy of spiritual powers and can draw from them substantial benefit.

Even the *less spiritual goods* – such as *wealth, health, or physical beauty* – when governed by the *Nous* (Reason/Mind), can also be put to meaningful use: both as *means* for achieving inner harmony (as the well-known maxim has it: “a sound mind in a sound body”), and as a *bridge* by which Reason may realistically connect itself with the world of lived reality – without indulging in escapist abstractions.

More broadly, the *Nous* plays a central role in revealing to the human being both external and internal Harmony, aided, of course, by the other psychic forces identified in Heraclitean thought: namely *faith, will, intuition, and enthusiasm*. In any case, the revelation of Harmony must be the fruit of personal effort by the individual who seeks to know it – and not the result of simply copying or mimicking a form of “Harmony” found elsewhere, which more often than not fails to correspond to the cultural and social needs or conditions of a given society.

Between *external Harmony*, as an ideal in the external world, and *internal Harmony*, as a state of balance in the human soul, there exists a *close and reciprocal relationship*: The person who apprehends the *external Harmony* of the world sets for their soul a spiritual direction, in pursuit of which they will employ their corresponding spiritual resources. Yet in using these resources, those spiritual capacities are themselves cultivated and come to prevail over the non-spiritual ones, thereby bringing about *internal Harmony*.

Conversely, the person who achieves *internal Harmony* thereby creates the necessary conditions for their spirit to apprehend and realize *external Harmony*.

Thus, when the two forms of Harmony come into contact – when, that is, the spiritual merits of a given state (as ideals) come into con-

⁶² Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist* (HarperOne, 2014).

⁶³ It should be noted, however, that neither Plato (e.g., *Phaedo*, 92a ff.) nor Aristotle (*De anima*, 407b 27ff.) accepted that the *soul as such is harmony*. A thorough and penetrating analysis of the topic from the perspective of Platonic philosophy may be found in Evangelos Moutsopoulos, *La Musique dans l'œuvre de Platon* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1959), 321ff.

tact with a person who has already successfully resolved their inner conflict – then the *identification* of the two Harmonies occurs. In other words, *external Harmony*, in its absolute and static form, comes and settles within the soul of the person who is inwardly harmonized.

b. The Hegelian triadic structure and its relation to harmony

Relevant in this context is also Hegel's view, as formulated especially in his *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, particularly in the introduction of that work. There, Hegel distinguishes between *subjective will* and *objective will*.

Subjective will expresses individual freedom – that is, the human capacity to set personal goals and to act according to one's inner convictions and personal ethics. In contrast, *objective will* expresses what is universally valid – the established moral order, which is embodied in institutions such as law and the state, and is actualized through the historical development of society.

When *subjective will* coincides with *objective will* – that is, when the individual recognizes and embraces the general will as expressed in the institutions of law and the state – *then true freedom is achieved*: not arbitrary choice, but the conscious integration into universal ethical life.

This reconciliation does not signify a retreat into a transcendent “world of ideas,” but rather the *spiritual fulfillment of the human being within real life and history*, as affirmed by the Hegelian principle that “the rational is real” (*Vernunft ist Wirklichkeit*).

Hegel developed *similar theories in other works* as well, such as the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807) and the *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* (1817), where he outlines the *triadic progression of Spirit toward its fulfillment* through institutions and the highest manifestations of the mind. Specifically, *subjective spirit* is expressed in individual consciousness, thought, will, and personal ethics; *objective spirit* is embodied in the institutions of law, morality, and social life; and *absolute spirit*, as the unity and transcendence of the former two, is revealed in the highest forms of the human spirit: *art, religion, and philosophy*. At this highest level, Spirit achieves *self-knowledge*, recognizing itself as the rational principle that permeates and unifies reality.

Hegel has at times been associated with the *triadic schema thesis* – *antithesis* – *synthesis*, which appears to bear similarities to what has been discussed here concerning Harmony. However, it is important to note that *Hegel himself does not explicitly adopt this schema*, nor does he employ the terms *These* – *Antithese* – *Synthese*.

In fact, these terms were later introduced by Hegelian students as a schematic rendering of the *dialectical method* employed by Hegel. According to this method, thought develops through contradictions and their transcendence, with each contradiction necessarily leading to the next, into a higher unity. Yet this unity is never final, for the process continues in a *spiral-like movement*, through continuous transcensions.

An example of this dialectical method is developed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where – for the sake of clarity – terms from the triadic model are added in its present exposition. In a first stage (“thesis”), the individual perceives the world through the senses (immediate certainty). Then, they become aware of the relativity of their experiences and the presence of subjectivity (“antithesis”). Finally, they are led to *self-consciousness* and the recognition of themselves within objective reality (*Aufhebung* / sublation), where *subjective and objective perspectives are integrated* (“synthesis”).

This progression is not merely internal or psychological, but *logical-ontological*: it concerns the *self-development of Spirit*, as it is expressed in *art, religion, and philosophy*.

With regard to the concept of *Harmony*, it does not occupy a central place in Hegel’s dialectic, nor does it function as a logical foundation. Although in aesthetic or moral contexts one may encounter notions akin to *Harmony* (such as the reconciliation of contradictions within the moral community or within a work of art), the essence of Hegelian philosophy does not seek *balance*, as is the focus of the present study on *Harmony*, but rather *unity through the dynamic transcendence of contradictions*. Therefore, these Hegelian views are less closely related to the views developed here and more aligned with Heraclitean ideas, which Hegel, as he himself admits, fully endorses – stating in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* that “there is no saying of Heraclitus that I have not incorporated into my Logic.”⁶⁴

More specifically, Hegel – regarding the triadic schema attributed to him (thesis – antithesis – synthesis) – focuses his attention on the *evolutionary development of the human being toward spiritual fulfillment* through the overcoming of contradictions. However, unlike the present study, he does not attempt to clarify what exactly constitutes the “synthesis” in each pair of opposites – for example, between *freedom* and *order*. Moreover, he does not explain how such contradictions may be overcome within the *inner world of the human being*, so as to bring about their resolution and hence a *harmonious synthesis*.

⁶⁴ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, trans. E. S. Haldane (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1802), 279.

Finally, with regard to the *coincidence of subjective and objective will*, Hegel – though he sets as both goal and content the spiritual fulfillment of the individual – does not associate this fulfillment with *Harmony*, but rather with the alignment of *subjective morality* (Moralität) and *objective ethics* (Sittlichkeit), in such a way that *individual freedom* is combined with the *objective order* of law and institutions. Although this state presupposes some form of *internal unity*, *Hegel does not describe it in terms of Harmony, but as a self-conscious unity of freedom with necessity.*

c. The need for a dynamic harmony leading toward static, external harmony

As noted above, the convergence – or even identification – of *external* and *internal Harmony* presents, as an ideal, particular difficulties in its realization, and thus cannot be regarded as an easily attainable goal for the *many*. In particular, *most people*, due to their *inherent limitations* and the *ever-changing nature of their personality over time*, rarely achieve *internal Harmony*, and even when they do, they retain it only briefly before relapsing into new internal conflict. From this perspective, Heraclitus was not mistaken in considering *Harmony* to be something *ephemeral*, and in doubting whether the majority of his fellow citizens were capable of achieving it.⁶⁵

What is therefore required, in view of the ever-changing circumstances and the intrinsic weaknesses of human nature, is a different form of *Harmony* – a *dynamic Harmony*. This ever-shifting form of *Harmony* would serve to link the individual's *potentialities*, which may lack *inner Harmony*, whether as a person or as a member of a collective, to the (absolute) *external Harmony*.

Accordingly, in this case, *equilibrium* would serve to connect *external, static Harmony* as an ideal (e.g., *noble competition*) with the individual's current *psychological state*. In a sense, *dynamic Harmony* fuses *the real with the ideal*, with a tendency for the human being to move from problematic reality toward *static Harmony* – that is, toward the realm of the ideal, which, according to Plato, emerges as a *combination and blending of the infinite with the finite*.⁶⁶

Naturally, the greater the individual's level of spirituality, the more *spiritually valuable elements* they will be able to receive from *external Harmony* and make use of. Respectively, with each new personal vic-

⁶⁵ Heraclitus, B 1, B 2, B 72, B 17, B 34, among others.

⁶⁶ *Philebus*, 25 a ff.

tory in the fight against non-spiritual forces, one draws closer to the realization of *external, static Harmony*. And indeed, it seems that the soul strives for the gradual acquisition of virtues and harmony, as a directed activity that unifies multiplicity.⁶⁷

But what are the elements upon which *dynamic Harmony* is built? Three may be considered the most important. Specifically, the ideal of *static, external Harmony* is dynamically adapted to the circumstances of each case, based on:

- (a) existing needs and conditions,
- (b) the individual's unique personality, and
- (c) the limits they are capable of reaching, including their *capacity for adaptation to new situations*.

In particular, the third element carries special weight, as it is linked to the factor of *self-knowledge*. Cicero, in his *De officiis*, aptly writes:

We must act in such a way that we do not come into conflict with the universal laws of human nature, but rather preserve them, while at the same time following – as far as possible – our own individual nature.⁶⁸

Similarly, Kostis Palamas, in his *The Twelve Lays of the Gypsy*, extols the importance of adaptability: “I know all the songs / but to sing them well / I tune each one / to my own melody.”⁶⁹

Therefore, the *adaptation of the ideal to the circumstances and contingencies of each case*, as the basis of *dynamic Harmony*, implies that the pursuit of *static Harmony in its totality* is not always appropriate. On the contrary, *the effort must proceed step by step, according to each person's capabilities and the prevailing circumstances*.

Furthermore, it is important to stress that in the shaping of *dynamic Harmony* – through which the *normative ideal* (Sollen) is translated into the reality of *being* (Sein) – excess is also among the tools employed. That is, even though we are speaking here of *Harmony*, it may take the form of *exaggeration* in order to “straighten the tree” and ultimately bring about its *static realization*.

⁶⁷ See John R. Bagby, “Aristotle and Aristoxenus on Effort,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 51-74.

⁶⁸ M. Tullius Cicero, *De officiis*, trans. Walter Miller (Harvard University Press, 1913), I, XXXI.

⁶⁹ Kostis Palamas, *The Twelve Lays of the Gypsy*, trans. George Thomson (Lawrence & Wishart, 1969), Fifth Lay, stanza 24.

As noted at the beginning of this study, evolving situations tend to follow a developmental arc; when they reach a point of extremity (e.g., *absolute freedom within a society drifting toward anarchy*), they are typically succeeded by their direct opposite (in this case: *absolute discipline through authoritarian governance*), or the reverse may occur (from *harsh authoritarian rule to excessive freedom*). Naturally, both of these extremes are to be avoided. Thus, in such circumstances, *dynamic Harmony* operates using *excess* as a tool (in this case, either *absolute discipline* or *excessive freedom*, depending on the situation), for the purpose of achieving the ideal of *Eunomia* (Lawfulness) – that is, the *static, external form of Harmony* between *freedom* and *order*.

It is worth noting here that a form of *dynamic Harmony* aimed at *restoring justice* is also explicitly recognized in the Greek Constitution itself.⁷⁰ This provision goes beyond the general proclamation of equality for all Greeks (Art. 4 of the Constitution) and provides for what is often termed *affirmative action* – that is, measures in support of vulnerable groups. It states that:

Positive measures taken to promote equality between men and women shall not be considered discrimination on grounds of sex. The State shall take measures to eliminate inequalities that exist in practice, especially to the detriment of women.⁷¹

Thus, the constitutional legislator permits the adoption of measures that diverge from the *principle of equality* and benefit specific social groups (typically vulnerable ones), when such measures address the *existing imbalances between legal (constitutional) and insufficient actual equality*, in this case, between men and women.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, we note that the *external Harmonies* that one constructs by balancing opposites are traversed by a common unifying thread. Precisely because *Harmonies* are all achieved through the maximization of what is (absolutely or relatively) spiritually beneficial, they are all imbued with *spirituality*, which connects them as an indissoluble cohesive force.

⁷⁰ Hellenic Parliament, *The Constitution of Greece*, trans. Xenophon Paparrigopoulos and Stavroula Vassilouni (Hellenic Parliament, 2022), Art. 116 §2.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

By virtue of this role, *Harmony* becomes the *life-giving force in the souls of human beings*, as it endows them, according to Ioannis Theodorakopoulos “with *moral value*.”⁷² In a way, the individual *Harmonies* constitute *mosaic fragments*, which together compose the *entire substance of spirituality*.

In the case of *static Harmony*, this will occur in an *absolute* manner, such that *noble competition* (ἀμιλλὰ), for example, appears *intrinsically linked* with *eunomia* (lawfulness or good order). In *dynamic Harmony*, however, *spirituality* likewise extends through all individual *Harmonies* – but now in proportion to *the capacities of each particular person*.

For instance, to the extent that a given person is inclined toward achieving *noble competition*, so too will they be inclined toward *eunomia*, as a *consequence of the inner Harmony they have cultivated within themselves*. And this inclination will gain more and more ground, provided that one earnestly strives toward it, “ἕως οὗ δικαιοσύνη ἐπιστρέφῃ εἰς κρίσιν καὶ ἐχόμενοι αὐτῆς πάντες οἱ εὐθεῖς τῇ καρδίᾳ”⁷³ or, alternatively, as Heraclitus would put it, “ἕως οὗ πάντα γὰρ τό πῦρ ἐπελθόν κρινεῖ καὶ καταλήφεται.”⁷⁴ In other words, with a combined rendering of these two sayings: [...] Until the divinity, in the form of Justice, comes forth and judges all things according to the Logos and takes possession of them, at which point all those who are pure in heart will cleave to it [...].

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⁷² Ioannis Theodorakopoulos, *Introduction to Plato* (Rodi, 1970), 225 [in Greek].

⁷³ “[...] until justice returns to judgment, and all the upright in heart follow after it.” *The Psalms in Greek according to the Septuagint*, ed. Henry Barkley Swete (Cambridge University Press, 1896), 93:15.

⁷⁴ “[until] fire, when it comes, will judge all things and take hold of them.” Heraclitus, B 66.

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Ubuntu as Social Ethics

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Abstract

This paper explores the indigenous African philosophy of Ubuntu and its implications as both a worldview and social ethics. It argues that Ubuntu not only describes the African understanding of personhood, emphasizing connectedness, interdependency, and relatedness, but also prescribes a moral framework grounded in principles such as identity, solidarity, tolerance, justice, respect, compassion, and human dignity. By clarifying Ubuntu's principles and differentiating it from related concepts such as community, communalism, communism, and communitarianism, the paper addresses the following key questions: What is Ubuntu? How does it differ from similar concepts? What values define Ubuntu? Can Ubuntu contribute meaningfully to global ethical discourses? This paper significantly dwells on the individual-community debate within the context of Ubuntu philosophy, arguing that Ubuntu philosophy offers a compelling ethical alternative in the face of the prevailing dominant social paradigm of exploitation, oppression, hatred, division, religious conflicts, terrorism, and intolerance at the local and international levels.

Keywords: *Ubuntu; human values; communitarianism; individualism; interconnectedness; African ethics; Western ethics*

I. Introduction

The question of how human beings ought to live in society has preoccupied philosophers across cultures and historical periods. This age-old question has elicited diverse answers from many scholars and remains relevant in contemporary ethical debates. This paper attempts to provide an answer to the same question through the lens of Ubuntu, a distinctly African philosophy that emphasizes the relational nature of human existence and the primacy of communal values in shaping moral life.

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The systematic and defined attempt to present *Ubuntu* as a description of the African personality, as a social ethic, and its place at the global stage defines the uniqueness of this work. As a moral framework, *Ubuntu* prioritises values such as solidarity, justice, compassion, respect, and human dignity, not only within African societies but as guiding principles for global coexistence. The unique contribution of this study lies in its attempt to systematize *Ubuntu* as both an expression of African identity and a viable ethical model capable of addressing contemporary social challenges. In the next section, a brief attempt will be made to differentiate *Ubuntu* from related concepts such as community, communalism, and communitarianism.

II. Understanding *Ubuntu* through its affinities: Community, communalism, and communitarianism

A clear understanding of *Ubuntu* requires distinguishing it from several concepts with which it is often conflated, including community, communalism, and communitarianism. While these terms share certain philosophical and social connotations, each has a distinct meaning that enriches the broader discourse on *Ubuntu*.

i. Community

The first concept to examine is community. The concept of community has been looked at from different angles: as a geographical area, a group of individuals living within a defined place, and community as an area of common life. At its core, a community involves two related suggestions: that the members of a group have something in common with each other, and that the thing held in common distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other possible groups.¹ Thus, the idea of community implies both similarity and difference.²

Community refers to a human organization that is bound together by a common belief, a common purpose, a sense of solidarity and identity, and a set of shared values that all members of the community agree to. This human organization is different from a state, nation, society, or family. What is central to a community is that it is a motley group of people or a gathering of human beings, which may be large or small, that are bound together by primitive shared communicable ideas

¹ Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (Tavistock, 1985), 12.

² On the conceptual nuances of community and the dangers of treating it as a homogenous moral category see Babalola Joseph Balogun, "How not to Understand Community: A Critical Engagement with R. Bellah," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2023): 55-76.

and values bordering on a common focus in religion, a profession, or a general calling.³ Examples of communities in this light are the Church of God Mission Church (CGM), the Catholic community, the Nigerian intelligence community, and the university community. There are also e-communities, such as the community of users of or members of Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter (now X), etc. In sum, a community can have a physical location or a virtual presence. Regardless of form, its essential attributes are the set of values shared by the members of the community, a feeling of identity or solidarity, and a common purpose. Communication is another important element in a community, for without it, there can hardly be a community.

ii. Communalism

Essentially, communalism is the idea that the human person in Africa is a social being that cannot be isolated from the society to which he belongs. It is rooted in the belief that an individual's existence and identity are inseparable from the community to which they belong. It means that the human person in Africa is not and cannot be complete as a social being unless the rest of the community participates in his life. To live an isolated life is to be an incomplete being, because man is a social being by nature. Simply put, the life of an individual is only meaningful within the context of the community.

Communalism is a social ethic that is most often associated with African society. At the heart of the idea of communalism are the displays of solidarity and the feeling of belongingness among people, as well as the quest for identity. As noted by Mbiti, African communities are defined by the fact that they are knit together by a web of kinship relations and other social structures.⁴ In traditional African societies, communalism is expressed in the customs and practices of the people, such as feelings of togetherness and intimacy, as well as communal ownership of land.

iii. Communism

While communalism and communism are sometimes confused due to their shared emphasis on collective life, they are conceptually distinct. Communism is primarily a political and economic ideology. For some political scholars and theorists, such as the Marxists, communism is the

³ Philip Ogochukwu Ujomudike, "Ubuntu Ethics," in *Encyclopedia of Global Bioethics*, ed. Henk Ten Have, 1-14 (Springer, 2015), 4.

⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1969), 208.

end of human political history. According to this philosophy, human society arrives at a final point or stage after going through several stages, starting from primitive, feudal, capitalist, and socialist. Essentially, the final stage of the communist vision is a communist state, or, better put, socialism, which is basically a classless, egalitarian social system. The communist engages and crushes the preexisting oppressive, profiteering, domineering, and unequal system of capitalism to arrive at the communist vision.

While communism critiques capitalism for fostering discrimination, dehumanization, exploitation, and the commodification of the human person, its concerns are largely material and structural rather ethical or relational. *Ubuntu*, in contrast, is not an economic ideology but a moral and cultural philosophy that prioritizes human dignity and relational harmony over material structures.

iv. Communitarianism

Communitarianism is a social and political philosophy that arose in the 1980s as a critique of contemporary liberalism, which seeks to protect and promote individual rights and autonomy and, above all, emphasizes the unique place of the individual in society. As Kymlicka observes, communitarianism challenges liberalism because the liberal ideology is too individualistic and often ignores the fact that human beings desire and rely on communal relationships.⁵ An essential feature of communitarianism is its opposition to individualism. That is, communitarianism holds that:

[...] though the individual is the basic material of the universe, just as individualism or liberalism professes, and that everything needs to work to the individual's benefit, yet in a very important sense, the individual has an obligation to society. This obligation, in a deep sense, creates a situation where the individual can no longer say categorically that he is more important than the society. This is because without the society, he will have no meaning as a social, political, economic, and even ontological being.⁶

At the heart of the communitarian argument is the view that the individual cannot achieve its full individuality without community. Hence,

⁵ Will Kymlicka, "Communitarianism," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Donald M. Borcherdt (Thomson Gale, 2006), 368-369.

⁶ Ujomudike, 4.

community is a very important tool in the life and survival of the individual. As Okolo notes,

My identity is partly constituted by the community. What I am is partly what the community has made of me. I do not have the definition of my *self* priori, or outside of community ties, obligations, care, love, rules, and customs and tradition (Omenala).⁷

This simply means that “the value of the self is, thus, dependent on its interrelation with other selves, where a communal relationship is formed, hence, from *onwe m* to *onwe anyyi* ‘myself’ to ‘ourselves.’”⁸ *Ubuntu* echoes this view, but it extends beyond philosophical argumentation to embody a lived cultural ethic grounded in African traditions of interdependence and collective care. We now turn our attention to a discussion on the origin and meaning of *Ubuntu*.

III. Western ethical theories as a philosophical background for understanding *Ubuntu*

To appreciate the ethical significance of *Ubuntu*, it is useful to examine certain Western ethical theories that provide a philosophical background for its justification and contrast. While many ethical frameworks exist, this paper focuses on three major traditions – Aristotelian virtue ethics, utilitarianism, and Kantian deontology because of their historical influence and their distinct contrast with *Ubuntu*’s communitarian ethos.

There is no better place to begin this intellectual engagement than ancient Greece and the work of one of the masters of philosophy, Aristotle. Aristotle’s ethics is virtue-oriented and teleological, as can be found in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Basically, Aristotle views the individual as both a rational and social being, whose goal is to be virtuous and happy through reason. He sees virtue as a rational activity. Hence, virtue comprises essentially the use of one’s ability to act purposefully in conformity with one’s intellectual insight. It means the application of intelligence to practical situations and concrete actions.⁹ The virtuous act is the mean between two extremes. Aristotle proposes moderation

⁷ Chukwudum Barnabas Okolo, *What Is to Be African? Essay on African Identity* (Cepta, 1993), 355.

⁸ Anayochukwu Kingsley Ugwu, “An Igbo Understanding of the Human Being: A Philosophical Approach,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2022): 143.

⁹ William S. Sahakian, *History of Philosophy* (Barnes & Noble, 1968), 73.

as a critical principle of ethical evaluation. His cardinal virtues include courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom. Aristotle views each virtue as a mean between two vices, an excess of something and a deficiency of something.¹⁰ Reason helps man to be virtuous and to achieve happiness, which is the purpose of man.

While Aristotle's framework remains influential, its limitations become evident when contrasted with *Ubuntu*. First, Aristotle's ethics, precisely his overemphasis on individual rationality, raises questions about his exclusion of other forms of moral knowledge. According to him, virtue is an activity in line with reason. This is purely a rationalist position, which downplays other moral frameworks like compassion, empathy, intuition, and relational wisdom, which are the foundations of many non-Western traditions like *Ubuntu*. Second, although Aristotle recognizes justice as a virtue benefiting others, his ethical system largely centers on the moral development of the individual rather than the collective well-being of the community.¹¹ This highly individualistic orientation on moral development and justice makes it problematic and unsuitable as an ethical framework that unifies people together as human beings, and this explains why *Ubuntu* social ethics is pushed forward as a better alternative.

Another ethical theory is utilitarianism, which can be traced to Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. It is a consequentialist ethical framework that evaluates actions based on their outcomes. According to the consequentialist, no action is inherently right or wrong. It is an outcome-driven, individual-summation system of ethics. This theory generally holds that an action is morally valid if it brings about the greatest good/happiness for the greatest number of people. The proper standard of right and wrong, good or bad, is the principle of utility. A major problem that this moral stand triggers is that of measurement: how do we measure and compare increases and decreases in people's happiness? Also, while this theory appears to be communitarian, as it talks about the greatest good of the greatest number of people, it does not fully cover the notions of community, relationality, and interconnectedness that are at the heart of *Ubuntu* ethics.

While utilitarianism lacks some relational criteria, we will now take a look at Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics to see if it offers anything different. Kant sees the individual as a rational, autonomous moral agent whose worth lies in his capacity for rational self-development. Kant's brand of ethics is rooted in universalism and reason. That

¹⁰ Emmett Barcalow, *Moral Philosophy: Theory and Issues* (Wadsworth, 1994), 97.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

is, an action is morally acceptable if and only if the maxim the individual is following is morally acceptable. If we are following a maxim that's not morally acceptable, the action is wrong, but how can we determine whether a maxim is morally acceptable? Kant argues that a maxim is morally acceptable if and only if one could consistently will that it becomes a universal law.¹² Clearly, Kantian ethics gives no room for outcome, solidarity, or communal relations. This again contrasts with *Ubuntu ethics*; as a communitarian ethic, *Ubuntu* is context and culturally sensitive, grounded in dialogue, empathy, group solidarity, and harmony, while Kantian ethics focus on the universal nature of morality. This rigid focus on universality and duty makes it highly individualistic and inflexible as a theory. *Ubuntu*, on the other hand, is relational and communal and promotes contextual narratives. Though when examined critically, we could find some meeting points between the two ethical theories, especially in their respect for human dignity. Both theories promote respect for human dignity, but they ground it differently. Kant in rational autonomy, and *Ubuntu* in relational interdependence.

In sum, one thing that is common between the Western ethical frameworks discussed above and *Ubuntu ethics* is that they all deal with human beings and human nature. However, Aristotle's virtue ethics, utilitarianism, and Kantian ethics differ from the brand of ethics we are proposing in this work. One obvious feature of these three Western ethical frameworks is their promotion of individualism, which has necessitated the push for an alternative ethics that unites and promotes togetherness, compassion, solidarity, and love, and transcends individual achievement and rational calculation. This communal orientation makes *Ubuntu* particularly relevant for addressing the moral and social challenges of contemporary societies, which are often shaped by individualism and competition. This communal orientation is not unique to *Ubuntu* but is also found in other African moral systems, such as Igbo ethics. The following section comparatively examines both traditions to show the moral insights each system offers.

IV. *Ubuntu* and other African moral systems: The case of Igbo ethics

Before we delve into a detailed discussion on *Ubuntu*, it is important to situate this work within the ongoing conversation on African ethics. Thus, we must briefly examine *Ubuntu* alongside other indigenous African moral systems, like Igbo ethics. Suffice it to state that while

¹² Ibid., 137

Ubuntu is well known among Southern African people, the Igbo moral framework, with its different brands, shares some similarities and differences. In addition, while African moral thought shares a communal-relational orientation, it is not monolithic.

The Igbo ethical system is basically communal, just like *Ubuntu*. The communal nature of Igbo ethics is tied to the customs (*omenala*) of the people. One point of convergence between both *Ubuntu* and Igbo moral frameworks is in their conception of the person (*mma-ndu* or *mmadu*) and the community. *Mma-ndu* in Igbo means *the beauty of life*.¹³ The notion of personhood is central in both frameworks. In Igbo thought, personhood is not achieved at birth but is achieved in the community. This simply means that an individual cannot attain personhood outside the community. This is clearly reflected in the Igbo saying *onye bu mmadu bu mmadu n'ih i ndi ozo*, meaning *one is a person because of others*. This mirrors the popular *Ubuntu* principle *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, meaning *a person is a person through other persons*. So, both ethical frameworks affirm that personhood is possible only within the context of the community. This means that to relate is to be human. The human person cannot be human outside the parameters of relationality.¹⁴

While self-realisation is possible only through active participation in communal life, there are values that must be exhibited in such participation. Igbo ethics lays emphasis on good character (*idi mma* or *omume oma*) as the basis of moral life. A good person, according to the Igbo, is one who carries out morally admirable actions. Such a person would be decent, honourable and just. However, it is not enough to refrain from moral vices; in addition, an *ezigbo mmadu* (a good person) should abhor or detest socially reprehensible actions. Among the Igbo, a good person is generally known in the community as *onye na edozi obodo* (literally, one who sets things right in the community).¹⁵ In a similar vein, *Ubuntu* emphasizes values such as compassion, solidarity, dialogue, respect, justice, etc. However, there is a spiritual dimension in Igbo ethics, particularly as it has to do with the notion of *chi* (personal destiny). According to this view, while communal values

¹³ Anthony Udoka Ezebuio, Emeka Simon Ejim, and Innocent Anthony Uke, "Just War Determination through Human Acts Valuation: An Igbo-African Experience," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2024): 204.

¹⁴ Ikehukwu Anthony Kanu, "Igwebuike as an Igbo-African Relational Ethical Theory," *SIST Journal of Religion and Humanities* 2, no. 1 (2022): 89

¹⁵ Christopher Agulanna, "Ezigbo Mmadu: An Exploration of the Igbo Concept of a Good Person," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 5 (2011): 149.

are important, individual actions must be in line with one's divine destiny. It is through such harmony that self-realization is possible.

Furthermore, while the Igbo moral framework is communal in nature, it gives room for the celebration of individual exploits but only within the collective. Specifically, the Igbo philosophy of *Ikenga* (personal achievement and strength of character) points to the fact that individuality can be celebrated, but it must be done within the collective. According to Asouzu's complementary ontology, the individual and the community are inseparably linked, with neither attaining full realization outside the other. Similarly, Kanu, in his *Igwebuiké* ethical theory, emphasized complementarity, relationship and communion as the basic features of his brand of Igbo ethics. According to him, human fellowship and cooperation are a reality that is rooted in human nature, and to keep away from relating is to place a limitation on our being.¹⁶

Despite the similarities between *Ubuntu* and Igbo ethics, they differ in their philosophical emphasis. *Ubuntu* is more relational and communal in approach as it lays emphasis on the interdependence of human beings and the place of the community in achieving personhood. Igbo ethics, with its various variants, balances the communal aspect with an appreciation of the place of personal achievement (*ikenga*) and industriousness. So, in a way, while the Igbos are known to have strong communal dispositions or attachment, they are also known to possess a high level of individualism.¹⁷ *Ubuntu* also differs from Igbo ethics because, whereas the former is presented as a normative principle of humanness, the latter incorporates spirituality, thereby linking morality to traditions and customs. The incorporation of spirituality in Igbo ethics is clearly seen in Igbo conception of man as a composition of *Mmuo* (spirit), *Onwe* (Self), *Obi* (heart), *Chi* and then *Ahu* (Body). Through this, it becomes clear that the human person is more of a spiritual constitution, and the combination of these different elements makes him superior to the mere physical constitution.¹⁸ So, while *Ubuntu* shares some features with other African ethical frameworks, it differs from them fundamentally and therefore cannot be completely identified with them. In addition, *Ubuntu* is distinct by not being a proposal or an invention of any thinker, nor is it the ideology of any country. It is this strong distinct philosophical appeal that *Ubuntu* expresses that this work intends to explore and discuss.

¹⁶ Kanu, 94.

¹⁷ Christopher Agulanna, "Community and Human Well-being in an African Culture," *Trames* 14, no. 3 (2010): 293.

¹⁸ Ugwu, 141.

V. Origin and meaning of *Ubuntu*

Ubuntu is a term that originates from the Bantu language. It is a term that is widely used in the southern parts of Africa. Linguistically, many scholars have posited that *Ubuntu* is an Nguni concept that means ‘personhood.’¹⁹ However, the term is not limited or exclusive to the Nguni people; instead, it is found among some other African ethnic groups under different names. In Shona, for example, it is called *unhu*, and in Sotho, it is *botho*. *Ubuntu* is made up of two words: *ubu* and *ntu*. In analyzing these two words, Ramose opines that *Ubu* evokes the idea of being in general. It is enfolded before it manifests itself in the concrete form or mode of ex-istence of a particular entity. *Ubu* as enfolded being is always oriented towards unfoldment, that is, incessant, continual concrete manifestation through particular forms and modes. In this sense, *ubu* is always oriented towards *-ntu*.²⁰ Consequently, ontologically, there is no division between *ubu* and *ntu*. *Ntu* is the concrete manifestation of *ubu*. The idea of *Ubuntu* is best captured in the popular maxim *umuntu ngumuntu nga bantu*, meaning that to be a human being is to affirm one’s humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them. According to Ramose, *Ubuntu* is understood as be-ing human (human-ness); a humane, respectful, and polite attitude towards others constitutes the core of this aphorism.²¹ Hence, *Ubuntu* becomes a foundation and standard for ethical and social judgment because of its normativity.

According to Mbigi, *Ubuntu* is the essence of being human, and it embodies a positive perception of African personhood.²² Central to the philosophy of *Ubuntu* is a unique positive humanism and portrays the essence of humanness that is founded on interdependence and solidarity. Writing in this light, Richardson affirms that *Ubuntu* refers to the collective interdependence and solidarity of communities of affection. *Ubuntu* is concerned with the welfare of everyone in the community.²³ Hence, in a way, *Ubuntu* is an African worldview of life. It is an expression of how Africans perceive and relate to the world. The point to take is that *Ubuntu* is predominantly African humanism.

¹⁹ Lovemore Mbigi, *The Spirit of African Leadership* (Knowres Publishing Pty Ltd, 2005), 69.

²⁰ Mogobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu* (Mond Books Publishers, 2005), 36.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

²² Mbigi, 69.

²³ Robert N. Richardson, “Reflections on Reconciliation and Ubuntu,” In *Persons in Community: African Ethics in Global Culture*, ed. Ronald Nicolson, 19-25 (University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2008), 19.

Furthermore, it is important to note that *Ubuntu* is a philosophical ethic. It is an African philosophy of life that pushes for some ethical values and principles. *Ubuntu* philosophy finds its key embodiment in the Zulu expression *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which means a person can only be a person through others – often reduced to ‘I am because we are’ in English.²⁴ Further, it also finds its root in the Northern Sotho aphorism such as *motho ke motho ke batho*, which is a simplification of *Ubuntu*. What it means to be human is to affirm one’s humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on this basis, establishing respectful human relations with them. *Ubuntu* is relational ethics. As a relational ethics, it shows us how we ought to relate to others and how we ought to live in society. It is a belief in the interdependence and interconnectivity of human beings. Therefore, it means that my humanity is caught up with the humanity of the next person.

Suffice it to state that the above discussed features of *Ubuntu* do not imply that its philosophy is anti-individualistic. Instead, *Ubuntu*’s respect for the particularity of others links closely to its respect for individuality. This is because *Ubuntu* defines the individual in terms of his or her relationship with others.²⁵ Hence, *Ubuntu* must not be confused with privileging or prioritizing of the community over the individuals in society. The community is relevant because it is the medium through which an individual fulfills their potential. A crucial attribute of *Ubuntu* is interdependence. *Ubuntu*, in this light, is a social ethics.

VI. Building an ethics of *Ubuntu*

Ubuntu, aside from being a factual description of the African worldview, is also a social ethic, which is a rule of conduct or behaviour. First, what is ethics, and why is ethics needed by human beings? Ethics is important and needed in society because it is one of the social instruments or structures for moderating human actions and behaviours in order to have a peaceful and meaningful society. Other social structures for moderating human actions are laws and conventions. Basically, ethics is concerned with the rules for deciding the wrongness or rightness of an action. There are several theories that have been propounded by scholars in this light. For some Africans, the human experience can be promoted positively

²⁴ Mbigi, 1-7.

²⁵ Dirk J. Louw, “The African Concept of Ubuntu and Restorative Justice,” In *Handbook of Restorative Justice: A Global Perspective*, edited by Dennis Sullivan and Larry Tiftt, 161-171 (Routledge, 2006): 168.

through the philosophy and ethics of Ubuntu.²⁶ What, then, is *Ubuntu* ethics?

Ubuntu is ethical because it emphasizes the inherently social nature of human beings. Fundamentally, human beings are social animals because they were created to live together. Also, human beings are social because they need to cooperate with one another in order to attain the common good. Pursuing the common good is a central element of the social, ethical, or moral life.²⁷ Hence, *Ubuntu* is an African world view that has normative implications. The pursuit of the common good is aimed at the welfare of everyone in the community, and this is essentially the spirit of *Ubuntu*, which is rooted in solidarity, care, compassion, and interdependence.

As a rule of conduct, *Ubuntu* not only describes human beings as relational beings, but also prescribes what this entails. A good example of the normative nature of *Ubuntu* is when we consider the Nguni and Sotho-Tswana aphorisms *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* and *motho ke motho ke batho babang*, which in plain English would simply mean our well-being or survival is dependent on others. However, when the native Nguni and Sotho speakers make such statements, they are, in the first instance, tersely capturing a normative account of what we ought to most value in life. One's ultimate goal in life should be to become a complete person, a true self, or a genuine human being.²⁸ What this clearly shows is that the assertion that 'a person is a person' is a call to develop one's (moral) personhood, a prescription to acquire *ubuntu* or *botho*, to exhibit humanness.²⁹ To develop and exhibit one's humanness entails displaying certain values in our everyday lives. *Ubuntu* ethics emphasizes some ethical values. According to Mokgoro,

Group solidarity, compassion, respect, human dignity, humanistic orientation, and collective unity have, among others, been defined as key social values of *Ubuntu*. Because of the expansive nature of the concept, its social value will always depend on the approach and the purpose for which it is depended on. Thus its value has also been viewed as a basis for a morality of cooperation, compassion, communalism and concern for the interest of the collective respect

²⁶ Ujomudike, 5.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Thaddeus Metz, "Ubuntu as a Moral Theory and Human Rights in South African," *Human Rights Law Journal* 11 (2011): 537.

²⁹ Metz, 537.

for the dignity of personhood, all the time emphasizing the virtues of that dignity in social relationship and practices.³⁰

From the above, it can be deduced that *Ubuntu* defends a unique conception of the human person that is based on the intrinsic worth of the human person and not an instrumental one. The worth of a human being is expressed in his dignity. This self-dignity is intrinsic and comes as a result of one being a human being, and dignity requires that humans be addressed and treated in ways that demonstrate their intrinsic worth, free will, freedom, and responsibility to themselves and others.³¹ Our deepest moral obligation, according to *Ubuntu* ethics, is to become more fully human. And the only way to achieve this is by entering community with others, which is by living out the values embedded in *Ubuntu*.

VII. Values and principles of *Ubuntu*

i. *Ubuntu* and self-worth: The value of human life and human dignity

One important aspect of *Ubuntu* ethics is its unique conception of the human person, vis-a-vis human dignity. A high premium is placed on human life and human dignity. This respect for human life rests on the belief that a human being has an intrinsic worth that cannot be quantified in instrumental terms. The value of a human being is seen and accepted in his self-worth and dignity. The dignity of man is intrinsic to man and acts as the basis of all other claims about him.³² This dignity comes naturally to a human being by virtue of being human. Consequently, this last assertion demands a special kind of respect and treatment for all human beings as a way of recognizing their intrinsic worth. Writing on this, Wood, Bertsch and Clark opine that human dignity presupposes that each human being is considered an end in himself and is not a mere instrument to enhance the values of some higher entity, for example, a state or dictator.³³

³⁰ Yvonne Mokgoro, "Ubuntu and the Law in South African," *Buffalo Human Rights Law Review* 4 (1998): 15-23.

³¹ Ujomudike, 5.

³² For a concise analytical treatment of dignity as an intrinsic moral predicate see Filimon Peonidis, "Making Sense of Dignity: A Starting Point," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (2020): 85-100.

³³ David M. Wood, Gary K. Bertsch, and Robert P. Clark, *Comparing Political Systems: Power and Policy in Three Worlds* (Macmillan, 1991), 18.

According to Bujo, life is the highest principle of ethical conduct.³⁴ It takes precedence over all ethical considerations and beliefs. Human life is sacred and, as such, demands a certain kind of recognition and respect regardless of colour, race, tribe, religion, and nationality. The self-evident truth that no human being can give life also entails that no human being should take the life of another. Hence, the morality of an act is determined by its life-giving potential.³⁵ Implied in this respect for human life and dignity are the ethical principles of compassion, dialogue, patience, tolerance, and respect for diversity.

The value of human life that *Ubuntu* preaches does not mean an accommodation of life-threatening actions from individual members of a community. Simply put, because the common good must have priority over the individual good, an individual who truly poses a danger to the community or endangers the clan by taking assets or lives must be removed.³⁶ Nevertheless, the main goal of African ethics is, fundamentally, life itself. The community is at the service of Earth's life.³⁷

ii. The self and the community

a. Interconnectedness and interrelatedness

The notions and values of interconnectedness and interrelatedness are prevalent in African society. Fundamentally, *Ubuntu* is about the intrinsic connectedness of humanity and human beings in general. All human beings partake in a single humanity and, as such, are intrinsically connected. This interconnectedness should therefore propel all human beings to relate together as one family. In *Ubuntu* ethics, life is participatory, and the life of the individual is incomplete outside the community. The individual participates in the community as a social being, and the community shares in the life of the individual in return. There is a constant flow of relatedness. Any break in this flow signals danger in the social and ethical makeup of the community. Accordingly, being with others is not added on to a pre-existing and self-sufficient being; instead, both the individual (the self) and the collective find themselves interconnected within a complete entity where their relationships already exist. By nature, a person is interdependent with other people.³⁸ The interdependency aspect of *Ubuntu* connotes that no man is an is-

³⁴ Benezet Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1992), 235.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ John Macquarrie, *Existentialism* (Penguin, 1973), 383.

land. We all depend on one another for survival and progress.

The realization and acknowledgement of the interdependency of human beings is encapsulated in what Teffo calls respecting the *historicality* of others. Respecting the *historicality* of the other means respecting his or her dynamic nature.³⁹ This simply means that a person who is grounded in the ethics of *Ubuntu* is open (not rigid) and available to others; he or she does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper sense of self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.⁴⁰

b. Community with others

The starting point of African ethics, and in this case, *Ubuntu* ethics, as has been opined by some African scholars, is community. Hence, one cardinal aspect of *Ubuntu* is community with others. This principle, as sufficiently discussed by Thaddeus Metz in his article *Ubuntu as a Theory and Human Rights in South Africa*, sits at the foundation of the idea of *Ubuntu*. This is because it portrays the social and ethical characteristics of *Ubuntu*. What then does it mean to seek out community with others within the context of the *Ubuntu* philosophy? Does it mean to yield to the yearnings and desires of the majority in society? Is it the same as conforming to the norms of one's group or association?

To seek out community with others within the notion of *Ubuntu* can be understood using two recurrent and dominant themes in African discourse, as enunciated by Thaddeus Metz. These two themes are "identity" and "solidarity."⁴¹ Community with others encapsulates the ideas of identity and solidarity. But what does it mean to identify with others? Simply put, it means for people to think of themselves as members of the same group, that is, to conceive of themselves as a 'We' for them to take pride or feel shame in the group's activities, as well as for them to engage in joint projects, co-coordinating their behavior to realize shared ends.⁴² To identify entails a feeling of brotherhood and total involvement in a group and its activities. It means for people to think of themselves as part and parcel of the same group, there-

³⁹ Joe Teffo, *The Concept of Ubuntu as a Cohesive Moral Value* (Ubuntu School of Philosophy, 1994), 38.

⁴⁰ Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (Doubleday, 1999).

⁴¹ Metz, 538.

⁴² *Ibid.*

by transcending the 'I' thinking to the 'We' mentality. Conversely, for people to fail to show solidarity does not end with them thinking of themselves as an 'I' but also aiming to undermine one another's ends.⁴³ Solidarity involves the exhibition of mutual support. To show solidarity, people must act in ways that are reasonably expected to benefit one another. Solidarity is also a matter of people's attitude, such as emotions and motives, being positively oriented towards others.⁴⁴ Sympathy, help, and compassion are at the heart of solidarity. On the contrary, for people to fail to show solidarity would mean for them to show a lack of interest in one another's well-being and progress.

At the conceptual level, identity and solidarity are two separate items. That is to say that one can do without the other. An individual could show identity without necessarily exhibiting solidarity. Also, one could exhibit solidarity without identity. For example, when you render help to someone anonymously. However, identity and solidarity are not logically distinct in African thought or philosophy. A communal relationship with others, of the sort that confers *Ubuntu* on one, is well construed as the combination of identity and solidarity.⁴⁵ Morally, they ought to be actualized together and not separately. Writing on this, Munyaka and Motlhabi affirm that seeking out community with others means that individuals consider themselves integral parts of the whole community. A person is socialised to think of himself or herself as inextricably bound to others. *Ubuntu* ethics can be termed anti-egoistic as it discourages people from seeking their own good without regard for, or to the detriment of, others and the community.⁴⁶ *Ubuntu* promotes the spirit of helping and living for others but discourages egoism.

c. Community as an extension of the individual

The idea of *Ubuntu* ethics also embraces the notion of community as an extension of the individual. At the heart of this social engineering is the pursuit of social cohesion, which is based on caring for oneself and others. It means the active participation of the individual in the community for self-awareness and other people's realization. It is a two-pronged approach: the self and the community, and never just the

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Mluleki Munyaka and Mokgethi Motlhabi, "Ubuntu and its Socio-Moral Significance," in *African Ethics: An Anthropology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*, ed. Munyaaradzi Felix Murove, 63-84 (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 71-72.

self. The community is seen and understood as an extension of the individual. This could easily be understood within the context of cause and effects; that is, whatever is done by an individual in the community affects everybody in the community.

This way of thinking is communitarian in nature. It is not an individual against community but an individual *a la* (with) community. It is pro-community rather than against community.⁴⁷ This mindset breeds a feeling and sense of brotherhood hinged on care and solidarity. This is clearly expressed during times of grief, pain, or, for example, death. During such periods, neighbours usually gather and spend hours, sometimes days, consoling the bereaved family. Explaining this phenomenon vividly, Murove observes that in traditional African ethics, a patient would not see the doctor alone. He would usually be accompanied by his or her relatives and neighbours.⁴⁸ The company of relatives and neighbours helps to provide the support needed, counselling, interpretation, and understanding of both the diagnosis and prognosis.⁴⁹ The individual is never seen as an isolated being but as a social being. Highlighting this value of *Ubuntu* as expressed by the Shona people of Zimbabwe in their greeting, Nussbaum writes, “Good morning; did you sleep well?” The answer is always: *Ndarara, kan a mara rawo*, meaning I slept well if you slept well.⁵⁰ Further, where a European man only inquires after the health of someone he meets, the African wishes to know, even from a total stranger, whether his family members are well. It is not just a question of “how are you?” but “how are your people?” that matters when it comes to health.⁵¹ In sum, the community is an extension of the individual because he or she exists corporately.

iii. Instruments for living together (social cohesion)

a. Dialogue

Dialogue is an African value and one of the key principles of *Ubuntu*. Man is a relational being, and to realize his humanity is to recognize and affirm the humanity of others. This means to respect and recog-

⁴⁷ Leonard T. Chuwa, “Interpreting the Culture of Ubuntu: The Contribution of a Representative Indigenous African Ethics to Global Bioethics” (PhD diss., Duquesne University, 2012), 96.

⁴⁸ Munyaradzi Felix Murove, “An African Commitment to Ecological Conservation: The Shona Concepts of Ukama and Ubuntu,” *Mankind Quarterly* 45, no 2 (2004): 198-209.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Barbara Nussbaum, “Ubuntu: Reflections of a South African on Our Common Humanity,” *Reflections of the SoL Journal* 4, no. 4 (2003): 24.

⁵¹ Chuwa, 50.

nize the particularity, individuality, and historicity of others within a relational context. In this sense, true *Ubuntu* incorporates dialogue, i.e., it incorporates both relation and distance.⁵² Ontologically, man is by nature a relational being and, consequently, a dialogical being. Dialogue refers to a focused conversation engaged in intentionally with the goal of increasing understanding, addressing problems, and questioning thoughts and actions. It engages the heart as well as the mind. It is different from ordinary everyday conversation in that dialogue has a focus and a purpose. Unlike debate or even discussion, dialogue is intertwined with the relationships between the people involved.⁵³

As a relational philosophy, *Ubuntu* pushes for dialogue as a tool for settling disputes and issues. This is in recognition of the ontological truth that the non-identical other is important in society and in the realization of my humanity. An *Ubuntu* perception of the other is dialogical and, at the same time, open-ended. To put it more succinctly, dialogue allows human beings to appreciate and acknowledge the interests and perspectives of others in an atmosphere of mutual understanding aimed at peaceful co-existence. Understanding, reconciliation, and cooperation are the fundamental principles that lie at the core of dialogue, making it an essential value of *Ubuntu*.

b. Justice

Justice within the purview of *Ubuntu* ethics is essentially restorative. Primarily, the aim of justice here is the restoration of peace and order in the community and the stamping of human dignity. This type of justice is based on the idea that the human community is organic in nature. It is likened to an organism. In an organism, all parts are connected, and what affects one part affects the other parts. Analogically, if one person is hurt in the community, the rest of the members are hurt too. An evil done to one is an evil to all, not just the victim of that evil or violence, as the case may be. In a dispute, there is no clear distinction between conflict resolution and the execution of justice. The resolution process aims at mutual education, community education, character formation, and consensus-seeking.⁵⁴ Justice in this light aims at developing the individual and building the community cord so as to ensure peace and progress. The objective of seeking justice is the resto-

⁵² Dirk J. Louw, "Ubuntu and the Challenges of Multiculturalism in Post Apartheid South Africa," *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy* 15, no. 1-2 (2001): 26.

⁵³ Patricia Romney, "The Art of Dialogue," *Animating Democracy* 71, no. 1 (2005): 2.

⁵⁴ Chuwa, 52.

ration of peace and order. Hence, when an issue is brought to the fore, dialogue is triggered until a compromise is found and all in the discussion agree with the outcome. Dialogue and consensus are two values that are needed to arrive at an outcome. *Ubuntu* justice is restorative because it is summed up in Tutu's maxim: I am human because I belong. My humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours.⁵⁵ The primary aim of criminal justice in *Ubuntu* is reconciliation for all involved, not retribution.

Another important aspect of *Ubuntu* justice is that it is communalistic in nature. Accordingly, an action is right insofar as it positively relates to others and thereby realizes oneself; an act is wrong to the extent that it does not perfect one's valuable nature as a social being.⁵⁶ This clearly depicts the communal nature of *Ubuntu* justice. *Ubuntu* justice is "other-prioritized" and not individualistic. A just action is one that brings about personal realization. But this realization must happen within the ambit of the community, and it is done for two reasons: for the self and for others. Benhabib states that individuation does not precede association; rather, it is the kind of association that we inhabit that defines the kinds of individuals we become.⁵⁷ It therefore means that community precedes the individual, and the individual needs the community for self-realization. Without the community, individual self-realization is not complete and cannot be complete. Summing this up, Metz opines that an action is wrong insofar as it fails to honor relationships in which people share a way of life and care for one another's quality of life, and especially to the extent that it esteems division and ill-will.⁵⁸ This notion of *Ubuntu* is different from the Western conception, which focuses on individual rights and freedoms.

VIII. Tension among diversity, communitarianism and human freedom

As a philosophy, *Ubuntu* is fundamentally a pursuit of unity, and at the same time, diversity is an important aspect of it. It is the recognition of human diversity that necessitates the quest for unity. Recall that one of the essential attributes of *Ubuntu* is interconnectedness, meaning that no individual can survive or live a meaningful life without the sup-

⁵⁵ Birute Regine, "Ubuntu: A Path to Cooperation," *Interbeing* 3, no. 2 (2009): 17.

⁵⁶ Thaddeus Metz, "Toward an African Moral Theory," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (2007): 331.

⁵⁷ Benhabib Seyla, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Routledge, 1997), 73.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

port and help of others in the community. At the level of community relations, no community can survive in the cosmos in isolation. Human societies and humanity in general exist based on human relationships and solidarity. That is to say that *Ubuntu* communitarian ethics is based on the indebtedness of any particular individual, both to the current community and to his ancestors, who are responsible for who any particular individual becomes.⁵⁹ The above description of *Ubuntu* reveals tension between individual freedom and autonomy and its communitarian nature, which is necessary for individual existence. The *Ubuntu* worldview defines the individual within the context of the community. It is the community that defines the individual, and as such, the community takes primacy over individual freedom.

The tension generated between individual autonomy and *Ubuntu* communitarianism throws up a problem of identity. Hence, Taylor is of the view that an individual's identity is not defined in solitude but rather is partly overt, partly internalized, with others. Self-identity, therefore, cannot be independent of others or society.⁶⁰ In the making of an individual, physical birth is not enough. The individual must be integrated into society through rites of incorporation, which are occasioned through his vital involvement in the community and with others. One thing that is clear from the above is that *Ubuntu* encourages diversity, provided that such diversity doesn't threaten communal existence. When the tolerated diversity becomes a threat to the cooperative existence of the community, the community, through its instrumentalities and established mechanisms, steps in to restore order. Communal existence becomes the standard of morality.

On the aspect of human freedom, one cannot extricate the individual from his or her social environment without harming the very foundations of his or her freedom or undermining the very social surroundings where he or she belongs.⁶¹ This simply means that morality entails human freedom, while human freedom is restricted by the community to which an individual belongs. Therefore, the concept of freedom in *Ubuntu* is relative and determined by the community. It is a "situated" type of freedom as opposed to autonomy, choice, or self-determination.

Freedom in *Ubuntu* is different from the western conception of freedom. In *Ubuntu*, there is no human freedom outside of the commu-

⁵⁹ Chuwa, 242.

⁶⁰ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 243.

⁶¹ Isaias Ezekiel Chachin, *Community, Justice, and Freedom: Liberalism, Communitarianism, and African Contributions to Political Ethics* (Uppsala Universitet, 2008), 258.

nity. The logic of freedom in *Ubuntu* is: if “to be” means to “belong,” then to be “free” is to “relate” with other members of the community. Freedom outside of human relationships is absurd and not welcomed. Writing on freedom, Tempels affirms that freedom can be justified only when it expresses itself through fellowship, and free society must be so organized as to make this effectual’ in other words, it must be rich in sectional groupings or fellowships within the harmony of the whole.⁶²

IX. *Ubuntu* and its global prospects

A crucial question arises: can *Ubuntu* address global issues such as threats to peace, security and justice? *Ubuntu’s* humanistic principles – interconnectedness, compassion, tolerance, and the pursuit of the common good hold significant potential for addressing the moral challenge of globalization.

Globalization, broadly defined, is a process by which the different parts, peoples, and countries of the world are interconnected and interdependent on each other. Globalization is a practical and philosophical concept of economic integration, information and communication highways, justice and fairness for mankind under the auspices of the United Nations, and the concept of man as an end in himself.⁶³ It has to do with the free flow of people, goods, finance, and information among the countries of the world. This concept is significant for the knowledge of *Ubuntu* because of the prevailing reality of injustice, inequality, exploitation, violence, extremism, and intolerance in the world. These issues clearly negate the positive manifestation of globalization. Hence, in concrete terms, globalization can be unfair due to power tussles and hegemony, class distinctions, trade and financial imbalances, and social justice deficits across the world.⁶⁴ The push for globalization, laced with capitalism and individualism, has greatly affected cultures, thereby creating conflicting ideologies and identities.

The application of globalization has become problematic, given the negative features associated with it. In other words, there is a scarcity of the required mindset for its implementation globally, thus leading to difficulties in effectively applying it. Instead of acting as a unifying factor and as the basis of our common humanity, globalization seems to be dividing the world and raising issues of justice, fairness,

⁶² Chuwa, 260.

⁶³ Maduabuchi Dukor, “Globalization and Social Change,” *ESSENCE: Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 5 (2008): 16.

⁶⁴ Ujomudike, 10.

and insecurity. *Ubuntu* offers an alternative moral vision. In this light, the philosophy of *Ubuntu* comes into play to identify and establish the values necessary for human relations and interaction in the world. Put simply, by emphasizing the intrinsic dignity of every human being and the necessity of harmonious relationships, *Ubuntu* could provide the ethical framework needed to guide global interactions. One way *Ubuntu* can lend itself to reforming the global order or human behavior at the international level is to transpose the localized values of tolerance, human dignity, consensus, respect for others, compassion, and the pursuit of the common good to the activities of nations within the international system.⁶⁵ This involves the application of the humanistic and normative values inherent in *Ubuntu* to the global community of human relations. *Ubuntu* defines and focuses on human beings as social beings capable of peaceful co-existence and interactions based on common humanity. If nations approached global relations through the lens of *Ubuntu*, international policies would prioritize cooperation over competition, peace building over aggression, and human flourishing over profit. In this sense, *Ubuntu* is not merely a local African ethic but a global moral resource. It can serve as a corrective to the alienation and moral deficits of contemporary globalization, inspiring a vision of humanity rooted in solidarity and shared pursuit of the common good.

X. Conclusion

In sum, *Ubuntu* synthesizes freedom, diversity, and communalism into a unified moral narrative that emphasizes both individual and collective well-being. Tangwa perfectly captures this integration when he opined that African cultures are characterized by diversity and, left to themselves, united in their tolerance and liberation, live and let live attitude, non-aggressivity, non-proselytizing character, and their accommodation of the most varied diversities and peaceful cohabitation of the most apparently contradictory elements. This unity in diversity reflects the core spirit of *Ubuntu*.

Conclusively, Africa has something very important to contribute to the world in the face of the prevailing dominant social paradigm of exploitation, oppression, hatred, division, religious conflicts, terrorism, and intolerance at the local and international levels. *Ubuntu's* emphasis on justice, dialogue, and communal interdependence provides a moral compass not only for Africa but for the global community. Future scholarship should explore *Ubuntu's* potential in emerging fields such as digital

⁶⁵ Ibid., 11.

ethics, environmental justice, and global governance where its relational values could offer innovative solutions to contemporary challenges.

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An Aporetic Reading of the Apology

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Abstract

The thesis of this paper is that Plato's Apology has an internally structured dialogue which may be read aporetically and may be used to read its monologic external structure as a dialogue proper. The aporia of the Apology has to do with the notion of 'justice' (dikē). Drawing from Hesiod's observations as to the ambiguity of the term 'justice,' I argue that the same type of ambiguity is implicitly exploited by Socrates in the Apology. It is traditionally the case in Plato's aporetic dialogues that Socrates' interlocutor(s) are the ones reduced to a state of aporia. I argue that under this reading, the jury plays a dual function, acting both as Socrates' audience and interlocutor, and that they find themselves at an impasse (aporia) as to what justice is and whether they have acted justly.

Keywords: *Plato; Apology; aporia; dialogue; monologue*

I. Introduction

Despite the small number of *aporetic* dialogues within the entirety of the Platonic Corpus, the majority of the *early* Platonic dialogues lead to an *aporia*. Yet, the *Apology* stands as an oddity for, although considered one of the *early* dialogues, it is seen neither

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as *being* a dialogue nor as being *aporetic*.¹ That is because a dialogue is traditionally seen as needing to be in dialogue form, which the *Apology* admittedly lacks, and because Platonic *aporia* is thought of as requiring dialogue. That is to say, it requires Socrates' interlocutor to be verbally responsive – not only does the interlocutor need to agree [as his own person and in his own voice] to the premises set out by Socrates, but we also need to know that he agrees – and to be give *verbal* signs indicating his cognitive and ethical impasse.

According to the ancient accounts of Albino and Diogenes Laertius,² the definition of dialogue is: λόγος ἐξ ἐρωτήσεως καὶ ἀποκρίσεως συγχείμενος περί τινος τῶν φιλοσοφουμένων καὶ πολιτικῶν μετὰ τῆς πρεπούσης ἡθοποιίας τῶν παραλαμβανομένων προσώπων καὶ τῆς κατὰ τὴν λέξιν κατασκευῆς.³ I propose an expanded notion of dialogue, specifically with regard to the ancient notion of “λόγος ἐξ ἐρωτήσεως καὶ ἀποκρίσεως” of the above definition, such that a ‘dialogue’ may be called a dialogue due to its external structural form, or by way of its goals and effects and the mechanisms employed to promote these; by way, that is, of its internal structure. The ‘or’ may, but need not be, inclusive. In this way, one may read an externally structured monologue as a dialogue. By doing so, I do not mean to deny the need for [the interlocutor’s] signs of response but, rather, that the signs, as long as they may, in some way, be extrapolated from the text, need not be directly articulated by the interlocutor, nor directly indicated by the author, nor, for that matter, obviously attributed to a specific person. The *Apology*, I argue, *is* a dialogue – in the sense that its soliloquial external structure may be read as dialogue due to its philosophically dialogic internal structure – in that it shares this internal structure with other Platonic dialogues, for which both of the aspects of ‘dialogue’ may hold true.

Arguing from the position that Platonic *aporia* demands a dialogic exchange due to its ethical dimensions, I further propose that the internal form of dialogue of the *Apology* may also be read as *aporetic*.

¹ For example, Catherine H. Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues* (Chicago University Press, 2012).

² For modern sources on the ancient definitions of dialogue, see Rudolf Hirzel, *Der Dialog Vol. II* (S. Hirzel, 1895); Olaf Nüsser, *Albins Prolog und die Dialogtheorie des Platonismus* (De Gruyter, 1991), 87-100; Nikos Charalabopoulos, *Platonic Drama and Its Ancient Reception* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 24-103.

³ Alb. Intr. 147.18–21. D. L. 3.48: “speech composed of question and answer on some political or philosophical topic, having the proper delineation of characters employed and the artistic treatment in terms of diction.” I am using Charalabopoulos’s translation of Albinos’s *Prologos*, in Charalabopoulos, 25.

The *aporia* arises from the proposed Socratic thesis that insofar as both public sentiment or opinion and moral justice may be expressed *qua* law, law cannot be the highest means by which people are made to be virtuous. The ethical impasse experienced by Socrates' interlocutors in the *Apology* can be seen in the structure of its parts, which number five rather than the usual three, in its linguistic mannerisms and literary devices, implying natural conversational speech, and in the use of a Hesiodic style of ambiguity pertaining to 'justice.'

In this paper, I am focusing on an author-specific, informal definition of dialogue as opposed to a generic one. This, admittedly, narrows the scope of the application of the definition. However, this consequence is not necessarily problematic. A definition need not be applicable to both Xenophon and Plato, nor be generally informative about Socratic dialogue as a literary practice. Considering that this paper specifically examines structurally internal dialogue, which may not – and I take it does not – form an integral part of Xenophon's dialogues, and argues for the *aporia* – also a predominantly Platonic feature among the Socratic writers – of this internal dialogue, a generic definition of dialogue would not be appropriate for approaching the task at hand.

II. Dialogue

At a first glance, there seem to be two questions that first ought to be answered: firstly, what a Socratic dialogue [Σωκρατικοί λόγοι] *in genere* is, and, secondly, what the *sui generis* characteristics of the Platonic dialogues are. The reason for investigating these questions, even if briefly, is to understand the Socratic and Platonic aspects of the *Apology* – as opposed to how the proposed dialogic internal structure of the *Apology* may inform generic definitions.

i. Socratic dialogue

'Socratic dialogue'⁴ is ambiguous in that it could mean either a dialogue carried out by Socrates, a dialogue having the figure of Socrates as one of its protagonists, or a dialogue that has a certain stylistic form associated with the Socratic dialogic style. In the first case, there is a subject carrying out an action, with Socrates as the subject and dialogue as the action. In the second case, dialogue is a framework

⁴ There is scholarly disagreement as to whether works that aim at being Socratic yet exceed the periodic framework of the Classical period can legitimately be called Socratic. Whether King James I's *Daemonologie* can be considered a Socratic dialogue exceeds the scope of this paper and will not be addressed here.

in which Socrates is one of its major elements, and in the third case, the dialogue is not characterised by its existing subject but by a wholly specific argumentative style, a *modus operandi* associated with a specific person, in this case, Socrates. In other words, in the first case Socrates is doing something and in the second case, he is defined by being part of a certain kind of (literary) arrangement; that is, things are being done to *him*. In the third case, however, Socrates is associated with a certain kind of argumentative methodology that may, but need not, be performed by him, and is doing something to the literary framework so that the structure of the entire dialogue is arranged according to the structure of the method.

In fact, there is room for even more distinctions. Insofar as Socrates is seen as doing something to others, the ‘doing’ can either be understood as implying a philosophical tactic (goal), or as significantly contributing to a recurring state of affairs (effect), regardless of whether the state of affairs is the result of a tactic. The state of *aporia*, as seen in Plato’s dialogues, is the paragon. Similarly, Socrates’ participation in a dialogue can be understood in two ways. Either he is part of the framework-dialogue, he is, that is, the object of a writer, and so the writer is doing something to him, or Socrates is open to the dialogue *at hand* by means of maintaining an internal dialogue with himself, that is, he is doing something to himself. The latter may also be applied to the third case, albeit it may not be Socrates but some other figure performing this function.⁵ A further distinction applicable to the third case has to do with the argumentative style that Socrates is said to have created for himself and the various argumentative methodologies and styles associated with Socrates but not *created* by him, such as the art of rhetoric.

ii. Platonic dialogue

a. Inter-personal conversations

Plato’s overtly conversational dialogues are casual in nature and are either narrated – the *dramatis personae* talk to each other within a narrated frame – or are dramatic, involving only direct dialogue without narration. In the *Apology*, apart from the brief direct dialogue

⁵ Dialogues that include a Socratic-like figure but not Socrates as such include, for example, the Athenian Stranger in Plato’s *Laws* and Simonides in Xenophon’s *Hiero*. One could even include Timaeus, in *Timaeus*, as a figure that replaces Socrates, who, albeit actually present in the dialogue, does not act as an active interlocutor. Timaeus’s rhetorical style is close to, if not the same as, Socrates’ in *Phaedrus* and his thesis resembles Socrates’s in *Phaedo* and *Republic* (*sans* the ‘demiurge’).

between Socrates and Meletus,⁶ there does not seem to be any substantial conversational dialogue involved. In fact, it very much resembles a (dramatic) monologue. And for good reason, since, for the most part, there is only one speaking protagonist, Socrates. That is, the structural form of the *Apology* seems to prevent an actual dialogic exchange.⁷

By analogy, for example, one may imagine a girl standing on her father's feet, while he moves her with his own feet to teach her how to waltz. In this example, the question as to whether the girl is actually dancing, or even learning to dance, is a legitimate one, since she can be said to dance only insofar as her body is being moved by someone else's. Similarly, the question as to whether Socrates' audience is actually involved in a dialogue is also legitimate, since it can be said that Socrates is the one *moving* their thoughts. Although that is true for Socrates in the *Apology*, to the extent that he is primarily the only one delivering a speech, he does not simply monopolise the conversation in a way that reduces his interlocutor's responses to mere reflections of his own cognitive dance. In fact, there are many levels of conversation going on which are expressed through his defense speech.

On the one hand, Socrates gives his audience (and Plato's wider audience, namely *us*) an account of the practice of conducting conversations⁸ that have already taken place, as well as, along with the subsequent consequences of these conversations, whether social, ethical and so on. He tells us of the conversations that his 'first' accusers have had with the men of Athens when the men were but only children.⁹ He tells us that he has talked with young and, for the most part, wealthy men,¹⁰ that he has talked with politicians,¹¹ poets,¹² and craftsmen.¹³ He has indirectly talked to the Orphic oracle,¹⁴ he has previously spo-

⁶ *Apol.* 24b-28a.

⁷ Mary Margaret McCabe, *Platonic Conversations* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 8.

⁸ Although unwritten in the present context, the rest of the Platonic dialogues still serve as written examples.

⁹ *Apol.* 18b-c.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23c; cf. 33c.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21c4-5; cf. 22a7; cf. 22c8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 22a7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 22d1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20e5-23b10. What I mean by saying that Socrates has talked to the Oracle indirectly is both that Chaerephon is the mediator between the Oracle and Socrates, as well as, and perhaps more importantly, that Socrates goes into modes of proving and disproving the Oracle not only by conversing with others, but also by construing an imagined conversation with the Oracle. See also McCabe, 16.

ken with (and must now again speak to) his current accusers,¹⁵ and he has been talking to the *daimonion* all his life (which I take to be his own internal dialogue).¹⁶ In other words, he exposes his current audience and interlocutors to the various kinds of conversations he has, and has had, throughout his life. In doing this, he brings both his own life and the lives of the men of Athens in all their individual complexities to the *podium*.¹⁷

What that means is that Socrates shifts these conversations from being simply narrated to being, in an important sense, active.¹⁸ That is not to say that the lives of the men of Athens are being judged from a legal perspective; rather, they are examined in the present of the *Apology* just as they were in the past. I argue that much like any other dialogue¹⁹ where this kind of personal examination is taking place, the interlocutor of the *Apology* is being examined in light of a question crucial to his life and, often, livelihood. It is exactly at the crucial moment that the jurors are called to be just that their capacity for thinking about justice is called into question.

On the other hand, apart from the seemingly simply narrated accounts of past conversations, more straightforwardly active conversations take place. In a sense, the absence of a vocal conversation at the time of Socrates' courtroom speech between Socrates and the *daimonion* is an open-ended conversation – a kind of ongoing negotiation – that is at all times given priority over his other conversations; Socrates has been waiting with his ears wide open, for if the *daimonion* were to warn him, or object to his at-the-time-of-the-court position, then Socrates would have to pause and reflect.²⁰ His professed conversation with the *daimonion* is both 'historical'²¹ and active during his giving a

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24d3-27c3.

¹⁶ Thought (*διάνοια*), as defined in *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* (264a), is the soul conversing with itself, with thought doing the asking and answering of questions.

¹⁷ This is a Socratic technique where a certain concept is examined through the life of someone who thinks to have a legitimate claim over it.

¹⁸ On Plato's dialogues using predominantly 'mixed' narrative, see David Halperin, "Plato and the Erotics of Narrativity," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, eds. Julia Annas, James C. Klagge, and Nicholas D. Smith (Oxford Academic, 1992), 93-129.

¹⁹ For example, Socrates asks Ion whether Homer is knowledgeable about the things he talks about, since Ion is a rhapsode.

²⁰ A case in which the *daimonion* is seen to actively warn Socrates while he is speaking is found in *Phaedrus*, where Socrates after entering his first speech on love with such 'dithyrambic frenzy' stops suddenly and professes that 'the spirit [the *daimonion*] that always holds him back from something he is about to do has come' (*Phdrs* 242).

²¹ *Apol.* 31d2-3; 40a4-5.

defense speech.²² Socrates' private dialogue with the *daimonion* is – in its demystified form – an aspect of his own active internal dialogue; it is the kind that reviews and weakens certainty at crucial points.

The kind of Socratic self-questioning is an internal dialogue which organises thought itself.²³ When Socrates says, “When I heard of this reply I asked myself: ‘Whatever does the god mean?’” he is asking ‘how should I go about thinking about some x thing.’ The other internal dialogues occur within the *Apology* among the rest of the characters, the jury, his accusers, neutral parties or supporters. That is because, as Socrates informs us, his accusers had to “first persuade themselves before they go on to persuade others.”²⁴ And he continues,

Very well then, men of Athens. I must surely defend myself and attempt to uproot from your minds in so short a time the slander that has resided there so long.²⁵

That is, there should be an internal state of uncertainty for the men of Athens to be reflective and open to what Socrates has to say. Socrates is consistently put in the position where he should first open shut doors before his voice is heard loudly within his interlocutor's ‘estate.’ It is because of the nature of the setting and, as I shall argue, the nature of Socrates' speech, that the internal dialogue of those present in the courtroom also constitutes an active, albeit implicit, dialogue between Socrates and the people present in the courtroom. And, additionally, there is of course the aforementioned brief and abrupt exposition of Socratic refutation in the direct conversation with Meletus, which stands as a tangible instance of what is *currently* happening on a grander scale.

Imaginary speech – questions and objections raised by hypothetical speakers – is one of Plato's recursive literary motifs. In the *Apology*, Socrates inserts hypothetical questions assuming the voice of the silent interlocutor, the men of Athens, and thus rendering them from passive to active: e.g., the imaginary conversation between an unskilled questioner²⁶ and Socrates in the *Hippias Major* introduced by

²² *Ibid.*, 40a5-b1.

²³ *Ibid.*, 21b.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 18d.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 18e-19a.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 288d.

Socrates as a means of self-questioning.²⁷ The fact that the speaker poses questions in the voice of his audience, in keeping with common oratory practice, does not take away from the function this style of questioning plays in Plato's dialogues *in genere*. We encounter this type of questioning in the *Apology*:²⁸ 1. "One of you might perhaps interrupt me and say: 'But Socrates, what is your occupation? From where have these slanders come?'"²⁹ 2. "Someone might say: 'Are you not ashamed, Socrates, to have followed the kind of occupation that has led to your being now in danger of death?'"³⁰ 3. "What do I deserve for being such a man?"³¹ 4. "Thinking of this, he might feel resentful toward me and, angry about this, cast his vote in anger. If there is such a one among you – I do not deem there is, but if there is – I think it would be right to say in reply."³²

The last example is particularly interesting for the implied question mark is expressed through an assumed physical action, that is, the casting of the vote.

The backbone of Plato's dialogues is, as Thesleff calls it, "cultivated everyday conversation."³³ Socratic dialectic mandates that there is only one immediate interlocutor whose views are being examined at each one time. That is even the case when there are multiple active characters present, as in *Phaedo* or the *Republic*. In the *Apology* the opinions and attitudes of the men of Athens may vary, but the end result of their actions, be that their interference with Socrates' speech or the outcome of their votes, comes out as a single voice. Moreover, Socrates himself treats them as though they are a unified entity. The awareness of the existence and power of the collective public perception, as seen both in *Protagoras* and the *Apology*, sets the scene and shapes the inter-personal dialogic exchange between the 'many' and Socrates.³⁴

²⁷ Kathryn Morgan, "Plato," in *Speech in Ancient Greek Literature. Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative, Volume 5*, eds. Mathieu de Bakker and Irene J. F. de Jong, 539-564 (Brill, 2022), 543.

²⁸ All the translations are taken from Cooper and Hutchinson's edited edition unless otherwise indicated. J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, eds, *Plato: Complete Works* (Hackett, 1997), 17-36.

²⁹ *Apol.* 20c.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 28b.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 36d.

³² *Ibid.*, 34d. See also 19a-b, 20d, 28d, 32e-33a, 33c, 34d, 36b, 36d, 37b-c, 40b, 40e-41a.

³³ Morgan, 540; Holger Thesleff, *Platonic Patterns. A Collection of Studies* (Parmenides Publishing, 2009), 51-52.

³⁴ Morgan, 544.

b. Inter-textual conversations

Another type of ‘dialogue’ in Plato occurs between the texts representative of traditional discursive genres of his time, those with a certain claim to wisdom, namely poetry and rhetoric, which Plato time and again incorporates into and interrogates within his dialogues and his own texts.³⁵ Much like what happens to the figure of Socrates in the Socratic Dialogue section, “when one genre enters into the text of another genre, it both acts and is acted upon.”³⁶ In the words of Bakhtin, “in one discourse, two semantic intentions appear, two voices.”³⁷ The audience “is meant to hear both a version of the original utterance as the embodiment of its speaker’s point of view (or ‘semantic position’) and the second speaker’s evaluation of that utterance from a different point of view.”³⁸

In his interaction with other genres, Plato never alludes to simply one specific author or text. Instead, Plato’s method often involves incorporating different genres which he has composed himself, such as the funeral oration in *Menexenus* or the encomiastic speeches in the *Symposium*.³⁹ Similarly, Socrates’ speech follows many of the stylistic aspects of an *apologia*⁴⁰ – a court-room defense speech.⁴¹ As Fowler

³⁵ Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁷ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press, 1982), 305.

³⁸ Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford University Press, 1990), 65; Nightingale, 6.

³⁹ Nightingale, 8.

⁴⁰ For an analysis of ancient Greek apologetic speeches, see Angela Darkow, *The Spurious Speeches of the Lysianic Corpus* (Kessinger Publishing, 2010); Kenneth Seeskin, “Is the Apology of Socrates a Parody?” *Philosophy and Literature* 6, no. 1-2 (1982): 94-105; E. de Strycker, *Plato’s Apology of Socrates. A Literary and Philosophical Study with a Running Commentary. Edited and Completed from the Papers of the Late E. de Strycker S.J.*, ed. S. R. Slings (Brill, 1994); Michael Gagarin, ed., *Antiphon: The Speeches* (Cambridge University Press, 1997); John R. Porter, “Adultery by the Book: Lysias 1 (On the Murder of Eratosthenes) and Comic Diegesis,” in *The Attic Orators*, ed. Edwin Carawan, 60-88 (Oxford University Press, 2007); Michael C. Stokes, *Plato, Apology of Socrates* (Liverpool University Press, 1997).

⁴¹ Demosthenes *Speeches* 18.306. See also Thomas Schirren, *Philosophos Bios: Die Antike Philosophenbiographie als Symbolische Form* (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2005), 81-3; M. F. Burnyeat, “The Impiety of Socrates,” *Ancient Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (1997): 5; Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue. The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 88; Donald Morrison, “On the Alleged Historical Reliability of Plato’s Apology,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 82, no. 3 (2000): 240. I do not take the intention of a certain text to be performed or delivered within a certain context as a prerequisite for that text to belong to a genre. In other words, Plato’s *Apology* does not need to actually have been deliv-

points out, the basic structure of the speech, apart from the two responses following the conviction and condemnation, aligns with oratorical tradition; there is a brief introduction, followed by the narrative and the argument, and it ends with an appeal to the court and the god.⁴² The speech, Tennant tells us, does not withhold the expected use of common rhetorical tropes of an *apologia*.⁴³ For example, we find a formal address to the jury (“men of the jury”), an appeal to their shared experience and emotion,⁴⁴ Socrates’ (the litigant) promise to speak the truth⁴⁵ and expression disbelief as to the accuser’s claim,⁴⁶ a showcasing of evidence of the litigant’s good and trustworthy character,⁴⁷ and the invocation of an authority with regard to the litigant’s decision to act a certain way.⁴⁸

The *apologia*, however, fails to completely conform to the standards of its kind partly because of its inter-textual dialogic character. For the sake of brevity, I shall focus on only one example, the formal address of the jurors by Socrates. As Tennant succinctly observes, Socrates addresses the assembly men who acquit him as “men of the jury”⁴⁹ only once in the end of the *Apology*. For the rest of the *Apology*, as well as when he refers to the whole of the assembly, he refers to them with the less formal and respectful “men of Athens.” Socrates’ change of address, Tennant notes, is to be understood in relation to the passage⁵⁰ in which Socrates establishes the sole criterion by which a man of the assembly is to be judged in his capacity as a juror; his capacity to recognise what is just, despite of social appearances. The subtle difference in the customary address by the litigant, then, becomes a vehicle for Socrates’ poignant commentary on whether a body of people is capable of pursuing justice in what Socrates views as its purest form. The practice of legal justice fails to be moral for, since it is being carried out by people, it is often conflated with a social code

ered by Socrates in the court of justice to be considered as an example of the *apologetic* genre.

⁴² Robert Fowler, ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Homer* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 65.

⁴³ John Roger Tennant, “Plato’s *Apology* as Forensic Oratory,” *Revista Archaia* 14, no. 14 (2015): 39-50.

⁴⁴ *Apol.* 17a1-3, 21a1-4.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 17a4-b8, 17c1-4, 22a2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 17a3, 18a6-b1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 17d2-3, 20d5, 28e1-29a1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 23b4-7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 40a3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 18a1-5.

of conduct. Insofar as practising the laws involves deviation from the truth, legality and ethics are divorced.

The change in address, however, does not necessarily reflect Socrates' or Plato's belief that solely those who voted to acquit him may truly be called 'jurors.' The punishment that Socrates chose for himself is put forward as a just punishment, but only ironically. Both options for punishment, the one proposed by the accusers (death) and the one by Socrates (championic treatment)⁵¹ are not only unexpected by Athenian standards, but also ridiculous. Placing the jury in such a position as for them to make an impossible choice is deliberate; faced with the choice between Scylla and Charybdis one cannot escape death and one is not expected to. The choice, whichever it may be, shall be met with great regret. The brilliance of enforcing the impossible choice upon the assembly is exactly that it highlights the issue at hand: one should not and cannot help but be simultaneously 'a man of Athens' and 'a man of the jury.' Allen's observation as to the lack of a legal classification of the fact of the crime within the Athenian juridical system – especially with regard to the accusation of the corruption of the young – and its replacement with a dependence on a shared morality, namely that there is a judgement of the individual's character as opposed to a judgement of a certain action carried out by the individual reinforces this point.⁵² That is not to suggest that the accusation of the corruption of youth does not have a legal basis as a crime under the Athenian legal system, but rather that the system leaves the definition of what constitutes 'corruption' to a group of people who more often than not are driven by a personal agenda. Plato's allusion to Anaxagoras' case also works as a reminder that the legal system allows for politically and socially driven juridical decisions and punishments. The impossible choice is foregrounded precisely to bring attention both to their impossible condition and the possibility of structurally unethical legality.

The changes in the traditional genre of oratory do not merely constitute Platonic perversions for the exaltation of philosophy. In Nightingale's words,

⁵¹ I take the proposal to pay a fine of 30 mina (38b9) not to be a serious counterpenalty offer. One reason has to do with the brevity of the particular suggestion in comparison to the overly extended championic treatment. The other is that if one is to read the *Apology* theatrically, it becomes obvious that the 30 mina has a rather comical effect which renders the proposal championic treatment even more painful as a counterpenalty offer.

⁵² R. E. Allen, *Socrates and Legal Obligation* (University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 17, 27.

if genres are not merely artistic forms but *forms of thought*,⁵³ each of which is adapted to representing and conceptualizing some aspects of experience better than others, then an encounter between two genres within a single text is itself a kind of dialogue.⁵⁴

The tense relationship between oratory and philosophy may be paralleled to the cognitive dance between Socrates and his interlocutors; in light of a certain concept no one gets it completely right and everybody brings something to the table.

iii. Natural speech

Natural speech, as opposed to a set speech, is a prerequisite of dialogue. That is because spontaneous discourse is reactive; it requires the current speaker has listened to the previous speaker and that his own speech is a reaction and an answer to the opinions, objections, and questions of the first. Socrates' speech, he informs us, is a spontaneous speech delivered in a casual manner that stands as a response to the speeches of the accusers which preceded his own. Then, Socrates conveys a warning issued by his accusers, that "the men of Athens should be careful not to be deceived by an accomplished speaker like Socrates."⁵⁵ Socrates' refutation of this warning is to say that he shall speak in a casual manner. From then on, we are given a brief exposition of what his accusers said and the manner in which they said it.⁵⁶ The response that follows is not only casual in style, but – as argued in the previous sub-section – also embedded with other natural conversations.

There are several trademarks of natural speech which Plato emulates in the dialogues. For one, it conveys more than simple formally presented arguments and often exceeds the confines of the philosophical subject at hand. For example, in *Protagoras*, the short conversation between Socrates and his friend touches on matters of gossip,⁵⁷ while the discussion about the virtues between Socrates and Protagoras⁵⁸ appeals to general principles and seeks an abstract conclusion. In the

⁵³ Gian Biagio Conte, *The Hidden Author: An Interpretation of Petronius's Satyricon* (University of California Press, 1996), 132.

⁵⁴ Nightingale, 3.

⁵⁵ *Apol.* 17a-b.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 17a-c.

⁵⁷ *Prot.*, 309c-310a.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 332a-333b.

Apology we see this phenomenon in the form of Socrates' detailing of his own, and other people's, personal circumstances; it is evident in the gossipy manner in which he talks about those people he has deemed to have a false claim to wisdom, as well as in the emotional state of the interlocutors, conveyed through Socrates' speech.⁵⁹

III. Other conversational mechanisms in the *Apology*

By 'conversational mechanism' or 'device' I refer to the means by which a reflective conversation is promoted and sustained within the scope of the Platonic Dialogues. There are at least four such conversational devices employed in the *Apology*, difference of opinion, silence, ambiguity, and paradox.⁶⁰ In this section I show how these conversational devices are being used in the *Apology* and engage in comparative work. The aim is to argue that the effect Socrates' speech has on his audience (-interlocutors) and Plato's wider audience does not substantially differ from that of Plato's other dialogues, both those traditionally seen as *aporetic* and those which are non-*aporetic* but structurally exist in dialogue form.

i. Difference of opinion

A dialectical exchange can only be sustained only if a certain subject remains unsettled and the interlocutors are not silenced⁶¹ by each other nor reduced to echoing each other's ideas. Moreover, there must be evidence with regard to this activity in the dialogues, namely, the interlocutor, either by way of speaking or acting, will eventually answer.⁶² The refinement of a state of disagreement in the *Apology* lies precisely in the fact that a proposition *x* is believed by Socrates, but not, or not yet, by the men of Athens.

The effect that difference of opinion has on the audience involved differs from that of a simple need for further development or clarification of a certain thesis. In his invocation to the gods, for example, Ti-

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 21b-c and 21e. Verano lists a number of informality-related phenomena characteristic of natural language in defense of Socrates' claim to spontaneity which are present in the *Apology*. In Rodrigo Verano, "The Truth Alone Will Suffice: Traces of Spoken Language in Plato's *Apology* of Socrates," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 37 (2018): 25-43.

⁶⁰ While the list is not exhaustive, I have chosen four of the most important devices. As McCabe mentions, for example, fallacy as another such discursive device, in McCabe 136.

⁶¹ Unlike the silence encountered in the next section of this paper, silence here is not fruitful; it rather indicates a lack of cognitive fruits and self-reflectiveness.

⁶² McCabe, 135; Jochen Mecke, "Dialogue in Narration (the Narrative Principle)," in *The Interpretation of Dialogue*, ed. Tulio Maranhao, 195-218 (Chicago University Press, 1990), 202.

maeus sets out the theme of the speech that is about to follow, namely the study of the universe.⁶³ Socrates' response is simply an expression of enthusiasm for further details; he asks no questions that would influence the course of Timaeus' examination.⁶⁴ Timaeus' speech has to do with cosmology, and as such Timaeus is attentive to the assumptions and questions of his inquiry, aiming at providing a fully satisfactory answer to all of them. He is not, however, concerned with his audience and the questions they may have, nor are we informed by Plato as to how they react. Timaeus guides his audience (including *us*) step by step; we can examine his thinking process in terms of consistency, validity and intuitiveness, but there are no personal stakes. And whatever wonder we may feel at the world he is constructing, we can set it aside and move on with ease once his speech is over.

That there is an active, but not direct, dialogue based on a difference of opinion, unlike the monologue of the *Timaeus*, is immediately indicated by the setting of the *Apology*. The accusers have brought Socrates to court because there is something about his life that is at odds with how they and the *polis* as a whole operate. The people of Athens are called (by the very laws of the *polis*) to reflect on Socrates' speech concerning his way of life and decide on his fate. That is, the setting prompts a dialogue in which the interlocutor (the men of Athens) reflects and responds through their actions, most notably by voting. The fact that it is a court issue means that Socrates' life may be at odds with the city not only at a social and informal level, but also with its very legal foundations. The proposition that is not yet believed by the jury is that Socrates is a just agent. That Socrates does not try to convince his interlocutors-audience that he is a legally just agent can be seen by the fact that he accepts the charges.⁶⁵ Rather, he argues that he is a morally just agent. The underlying question (and perhaps criticism) on his part is precisely that the law may simultaneously satisfy conditions both truthful and ethical, or deceitful and unethical, or at least that the connection between the two is something ought to be defended.

⁶³ *Tim.* 27c1-29d2.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 29d3-5.

⁶⁵ This is not straightforward to discern from the text, but a careful, though admittedly controversial, reading shows that Socrates invents *daimonia* and does not believe in the gods of the city (in his 1983 lectures on the *Apology*, Allan Bloom talks about how the arguments that purport to show Socrates' *polis*-approved piety prove exactly the opposite), as well as that he does corrupt the youth (insofar as he teaches them values that the *polis* opposes, i.e. the renouncing of wealth). In Allan Bloom, "Allan Bloom's Lectures on Socrates (Boston College, 1983)," *Open Culture*, <https://www.openculture.com/allan-blooms-lectures-on-socrates-boston-college-1983>.

Unlike *Timaeus*, there is plenty of evidence that Socrates is concerned about the reaction of his audience; he time and again checks that the men of Athens are thinking about the things they hear.⁶⁶ Socrates directly requests that they neither be surprised (θαυμάζειν), nor disturb him by making noise (θορυβεῖν).⁶⁷ He, then, requests that they listen to his speech, focusing on whether what he says is true and just.⁶⁸ The two requests function as a way for Plato to inform us how the men of Athens are, and will be, responding to Socrates' speech. Given that later in the *Apology* the men of Athens do disturb the proceedings by making noise, we can infer that they are surprised by what they hear and that they fail to make justice and truth, as understood in their Socratic conception, the criteria by which to judge Socrates' case.

ii. Silence

Silence within the context of dialectics operates as a “self-corrective mechanism.”⁶⁹ In Mittelstrass's words,

When we say that something – an action, a context of actions, a state brought about through action – reveals the presence of reason, we mean that whatever we are referring to – an action, a situation, a state – is the effect of a reasoned judgment. The demand for clearness, proof, and justification with respect to actions and their effects requires in this sense that we stop and think.⁷⁰

That is to say that silence carries, within the context of the internal state of the individual that participates in a dialogic exchange, a reflective function.

There are three significant occurrences of silence in the *Apology*; the silence of the *daimonion*, the silence of the men of Athens (the interlocutor), and the silent two parts to an otherwise tripartite structure. The silence, as it occurs in these cases, is significant because it is the internal dialogue, or the thought of the silent agent(s) that oc-

⁶⁶ *Apol.* 17d1; 19c7; 21a5-6; 31e1; 32a5; 32d1; 34c1; 34d1-2.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 17c-d.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 18a.

⁶⁹ Edward G. Ballard, *Socratic Ignorance: An Essay on Platonic Self-Knowledge* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), 50.

⁷⁰ Jürgen Mittelstrass, “On Socratic Dialogue,” in *Platonic Writings/Platonic Readings*, ed. Charles L. Griswold Jr., 126-142 (Routledge, 1988), 130.

curs within the context of an externally structured monologue. The action that follows is found outside the *Apology*; namely, Socrates dies and the men of Athens later come to doubt the decision that led to his death. Plato writes the *Apology* after these two events have taken place and incorporates them into the structure of the *Apology*. If Diogenes Laertius is to be believed,⁷¹ the dialogue was directed to an audience which had the time to reflect upon what happened and were aware of the ramifications of their choice. “By the time the *Apology* was written,” Hunter tells us, “The guilt of the men of Athens was not only known and admitted, but also a source of great regret.”⁷²

The sense of process, of movement through time, which is given by the *Apology*'s overt tripartite structure brings home with great force the unspoken fourth moment, Socrates' death, and indeed the fifth, Athenian regret and anger at what had happened on one side, and the continuing power of Socrates' example on the other. This manipulation of time and a sense of the past pave the way to the reasonable suspicion that Plato's *Apology* was *sui generis* in this, as in so much else.⁷³

This structural silence indicates that whereas the *aporetic* effect of conversing with Socrates may not be directly visible, it, nonetheless, is there.

However, Socrates' interlocutors are traditionally not fully internally open to dialogue at the *present* time of the Platonic dialogues, especially when the subjects concern something to which they that are said to have dedicated their lives and livelihoods. In a similar manner, the men of Athens enter the courtroom with their own individual pre-conceptions of Socrates and of what constitutes justice. Most of them are not there to grant Socrates' request to be considered as a moral agent, nor to engage in an internal dialogue, a processing of what they hear. If Socrates has come in to voice the question, ‘do you know the meaning of justice, men of Athens?’, the jury, at the time of his speech, is not prepared to say ‘no.’ The resistance to an internal openness may be seen in their lack of silence. An observation to this effect is present in *Alcibiades*, where Socrates voices his remark to Alcibiades with re-

⁷¹ D. L. 2.43.

⁷² Richard Hunter, *Plato and the Traditions of Ancient Literature: The Silent Stream* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 116.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 116.

gard to the relationship between loudness and a strong sense of one's own knowledge of justice.

Socrates: When you were a boy [...] and sometimes when you were playing knucklebones [...] you'd say to one or another of your playmates, very loudly and confidently – not at all like somebody who was at a loss about justice and injustice – that he was a lousy cheater and wasn't playing fairly.⁷⁴

In the *Apology*, Socrates repeatedly and throughout the text asks his interlocutors not to be loud and cause disturbance as they hear him talk about the way his life is aligned with that of a just one.⁷⁵ When Socrates asks for silence he requests that his audience reflects not only on what he is saying, but also on their own role in the situation. In both texts, Plato draws attention to the lack of silence and the lack of rational speech in response to a force aiming at destabilising our sense of an answer to a fundamental question. “So, it seems,” says Socrates in *Alcibiades*, “that even as a child you thought you understood justice and injustice.”

Alcibiades: Yes, I did understand.

Socrates: At what point did you find out? Surely it wasn't when you thought you knew.

Alcibiades: Of course not.

Socrates: Then when did you think you did not know? Think about it – you won't find any such time.⁷⁶

There is no point in a person's life, Socrates tells us, when being just is not pertinent to our lives, for one cannot operate outside a system of justice, either external or internal. In *Republic I* we encounter a similar attitude when Socrates says:

I mean that no man wants to be deceived in the most important part of him and about the most important things, that is when he is most terrified of falsehood.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ *Alc.* 110b-c.

⁷⁵ *Apol.* 17d1, 20c4, 21a5-6, 27b3, 27d5-6, 30c3. 18A3 may also be interpreted in this way though it is less straightforward that this may be the case.

⁷⁶ *Alc.* 110b1-c10.

⁷⁷ *Rep. II* 382a7-9. I am using Desmond Lee's translation of the passage (2003).

The position in which Socrates has been placed – and in which he has placed himself – is a terrifying one, not only for himself, but also for the men of Athens. The idea that a system of justice – for which Athens felt particular pride – is not infallible, not contained, that is, within its own domain, but heavily rests on the domain of ethics, is particularly frightening. Not only can it lead to a wrong decision and outcome, but – as in Socrates' case – it may not allow for the possibility of a *right* decision.

Aporia is intimately connected to silence. In Szaif's words, "the characteristic sign of this condition is that the person (the interlocutor) has been rendered *speechless*."⁷⁸ The speechlessness of the men of Athens comes forward not during Socrates' speech, but rather it is expressed through the structural silence of the last two parts. This follows the psychological progression of the interlocutors in other aporetic dialogues; from roisterous, confident and impatient to silent, insecure and shocked, and from an internalised pretence of knowledge to a suspicion of ignorance.

In the case of the *daimonion*, the action – that is, what Socrates says during his speech – is under constant *surveillance* with the possibility always being left open that the action is interrupted and made an object of reflection (which would then be Socrates' silence). The *daimonion's* silence does not signal a lack of conversation but rather suggests that Socrates' speech is the effect of an internally produced reasoned judgment. In the *Apology*, Socrates has already thought about what he is saying and for this reason he does not need to stop and reflect, he does not need to be silent. As such, the *daimonion* acts as Cupid in Marsilio Ficino's letter to Domenico Gallettil; "*cupido magis persuadet uel tacendo, quam et orando Mercurius et Phebus ipse canendo*."⁷⁹ The *daimonion's* silence is the most powerful means of persuasion, for it grants Socrates a kind of moral knowledge regarding his actions.

In *Timaeus*, the audience's silence does not indicate the same depth of thought as the audience's silence in the *Apology*. *Timaeus'* method more closely resembles, though is not the same as, that used by Socrates when conversing with the boy-slave in the *Meno*.⁸⁰ The slave's

⁷⁸ Jan Szaif, "Socrates and the Benefits of Puzzlement," in *The Aporetic Tradition in Ancient Philosophy*, eds. George Karamanolis and Vasilis Politis, 29-47 (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 31.

⁷⁹ "Cupid persuades more powerfully by being silent than both Mercury by speaking and Phoebus himself by singing," in Marcilio Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino Volume 2 (Book III)* (Shepherd-Walwyn Publishers, 1978), Letter 66.

⁸⁰ *Men.* 82b-85b.

short affirmative answers do not reveal a process of internal dialogue, but rather a quick assessment. To him, Socrates' propositions sound about right without the boy necessarily being able to give a detailed account of why they may be right. Similarly, Timaeus' audience listens to Timaeus' speech without immediately giving a detailed account as to whether Timaeus is wrong. Their silence is the lack of protestation, which implies that either they agree with Timaeus' proposed position, or have not detected anything evidently false in it.

iii. Systematic ambiguity

The *Apology* begins with ambiguity. As previous commentators have observed, the Greek title of the dialogue, *Ἀπολογία Σωκράτους*, is ambiguous; it can mean either "defense speech by Socrates," or "defense speech for Socrates."⁸¹ The question commentators raise based on this ambiguity has to do with the degree to which the dialogue accurately represents the historical trial. However, I suggest that the question raised by ambiguity is of a different nature and pertains more closely to the issue at hand; namely, Socrates' defense speech. Is Socrates speaking in defense of himself (*for Socrates*), or in defense of something else, namely philosophy, the (moral) good (*by Socrates*), or justice?⁸² Even though I take both to be the case, insofar as they may be isomorphic, the point of this remark is rather to emphasise that a certain atmosphere is established; ambiguity shall be of systematic use and the key to understand the *Apology*.

The most important ambiguity in the *Apology* is of Hesiodic character and has to do with the interpretation of 'justice,' the definition of which is never explicitly specified. However, what we can draw from the *Apology* concerning justice is that there are two opposing forces, each with their own conception of what justice is. These opposing forces put forth both, yet in different ways, defend their case. According to Yamagata's table of Homeric and Hesiodic references in Plato,⁸³ the

⁸¹ The "defense speech for Socrates" is commonly extended with the clarification "but written by Plato," which plays an important role in the way this ambiguity is usually understood. Cf. Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 1985); Thomas West, *Plato's Apology of Socrates: An Interpretation, with a New Translation* (Cornell University Press, 1979), 219-220; David M. Leibowitz, *The Ironic Defense of Socrates* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 5.

⁸² A defense speech by Socrates does not have to be for the benefit of Socrates.

⁸³ Naoko Yamagata, "Hesiod in Plato: Second Fiddler to Homer?" in *Plato and Hesiod*, eds. G. R. Boys-Stones and J. Haubold, 68-88 (Oxford University Press, 2010), 70.

Apology contains eight references to Homer⁸⁴ and one to Hesiod.⁸⁵ As Yamagata suggests, the single reference to Hesiod occurs as an honorary mention among the praiseworthy poets, alongside Homer, Orpheus, and Musaeus. In comparison with the Homeric references,⁸⁶ the Hesiodic reference is *prima facie* not structurally significant. It primarily alludes to the fact that Plato is aware of the authority of Hesiod.⁸⁷ I propose that there are in fact two references to Hesiod in the *Apology*, one being the direct reference as it is found in Yamagata's table of references and another which is indirect, spread out throughout the text, and is of structural significance. This reference rests on the ambiguity of the term *δίκη* in Hesiod. In a recent conference on *Reflections on Language in Early Greece* Tor and Clay pointed out that with regard to the term *δίκη*, there are at least four different interpretations in Hesiod; the goddess *Dikē*, a principle of justice, a judgement or court verdict, and punishment or restitution (Σ Op. 279).⁸⁸ Vergados argues,

At one juncture, Hesiod pointedly confronts us with the linguistic aspect of this sometimes confused multiplicity: "it is a bad thing for a man to be just, if the more unjust is going to have greater justice."⁸⁹

The obvious way out of the paradox is the disentanglement of the notion of justice as an ethical principle from that of restitution, so that

⁸⁴ *Apol.* 28b-d; 41a; 41a6-7; 41b-c.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 41a6-7. Another Hesiodic reference, according to Yamagata, has to do with the two accounts of death, namely that of falling asleep and that of having a chance to converse with the demi-gods. Yamagata argues that the accounts were fashioned after the death (WD116) and afterlife (WD170-2) of Hesiod's Golden Race.

⁸⁶ Just after this passage, Socrates goes on to mention Homeric heroes, such as Ajax, Agamemnon, and Odysseus, among the people whom he would look forward to questioning after death. Earlier on, Socrates has famously compared his situation to that of the Homeric Achilles, when he said that he is not afraid of death, just as Achilles did not fear death. Plato clearly casts Socrates in the image of Achilles, the quintessential Homeric hero. In *Apol.* 41bc, 28b-d, 41a.

⁸⁷ Cf. *Lg.* 658a4-659a1. For an analysis of the passage as a contest between Hesiod and Homer, see G. R. Boys-Stones and J. Haubold, eds., *Plato and Hesiod* (Oxford University Press, 2010). For the contest as such: Barbara Graziosi, *Inventing Homer: The Early Reception of Epic* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁸⁸ E.g., (i) Op. 256, (ii) Op. 213, (iii) Op. 225-226 ('straight judgement'), 249-251 ('crooked'), (iv) Op. 239, 712. For analysis and further examples, see Athanassios Vergados, *Hesiod's Verbal Craft: Studies in Hesiod's Conception of Language and Its Ancient Reception* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 172-175. Vergados isolates further a use of *δίκη* for 'legal procedure' (e.g., Op. 254) and for a general normative state of affairs (Op. 248-249).

⁸⁹ Op. 271-272.

“the man whose conduct does not conform to the demands of the ethical principle of justice is the one to whom the legal system will grant restitution or satisfaction.”⁹⁰

Similarly, in the *Apology*, the *polis*, on the one hand, allows public opinion to be expressed through legal channels and defends its case through force. On the other hand, Socrates argues his case on the grounds of being right⁹¹ and (morally) just in acting as he has. He pleads with the jury that there is “no reason to help [him] except the right and proper one, that they know that Meletus [one of the accusers] is lying and that [he is] telling the truth.”⁹²

There is, however, an ambiguity, which again Socrates exploits, this time concerning ‘truth,’ for truth reflects the complexities of justice. That is, just as the jurors’ conception of justice becomes critical when they are called to be just, so Socrates’ conception of truth becomes decisive when he is confronted with the critical moment of being called to speak the truth. It is at this moment that Socrates exploits the ambiguity between legal – which he views as circumstantial – and philosophical, absolute truth, asking the question, through this ambiguity, of the priority of ‘truths.’ If legal propositions are true only in virtue of something else, whether a moral truth, a convention, or a social circumstance,⁹³ then legal truths, unlike philosophical and moral truths, cannot be universal truths, since they do not rest solely on a purely rational structure.

Socrates’ case is also evident from the fact that he questions the divine origin of the city’s laws.⁹⁴ When Socrates asks Meletus who it is that morally improves the young men, Socrates does not accept the (city’s) laws, nor those who supposedly know the (city’s) laws as correct answers.⁹⁵ When Socrates asks if it is possible for a man to “believe children of the gods [heroes, demi-gods] to exist, but not gods,”⁹⁶ he draws a parallel with whether it is possible to believe “mules, to exist, but not to believe in the existence of horses and asses.”⁹⁷ Bloom’s as-

⁹⁰ Vergados.

⁹¹ *Apol.* 28b5; 28c1; 31d5; 32a6.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 34b4-5.

⁹³ David Bakhurst, “Truth, Philosophy, and Legal Discourse,” *The University of Toronto Law Journal* 47, no. 3 (1997): 395.

⁹⁴ *Apol.* 24e1. The scope of the laws is also ambiguous.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24e2-6.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 27d8.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27e1-3.

tute argument is that the mule, a product of two different species, as were the demi-gods, is infertile. If the offspring of different species cannot themselves reproduce, then the connection between Theseus – the hero from whom Athens’ divine laws originated – and Athens is lost, as is the connection between divine law and the city’s laws. If the city’s laws are not divine, then the connection between legality and universality is ruptured. That is to say, the laws are not moral laws. In other words, the *polis* only has access to circumstantial, and not universal, truth. If the connection between law and morality is broken, then the question of whether Socrates is a just agent cannot be settled purely in terms of Athenian legality.

The aim of arguments that exploit vagueness and ambiguity, as Szaif succinctly points out, is to show that the interlocutor suffers from a muddled grasp of the relevant concepts.⁹⁸ There are plenty of cases of ambiguity being used by Socrates in this way. In the *Euthydemus*, for example, there is an ambiguity as to whether Socrates is wondering how we can bring it about that we do well. Or, if he is in fact asking a deeper question; what does it mean to do well?⁹⁹ Ambiguity in this way has a discursive function; it promotes and sustains discourse rather than ends it.

iv. Paradoxes

Paradox has a bifurcate effect on the reader; it both excites his curiosity and undermines his claim to knowledge. It has the paradoxical effect of being both, as Scruton puts it, a “destabilising force, and also a strange invitation to commitment.”¹⁰⁰ It is a destabilising force in that it presents us with an impossible situation in which, at least *prima facie*, the affirmation and the negation of a proposition *x* seem intuitive, or not evidently false, and to have equal, or some, claim to truth. In order to solve the paradox and get out of the uncomfortable situation, one has to reason towards one of the two sides or rethink the proposition itself. That is, paradox works as a psychological itch that demands of us to commit to thinking in order for the pain of the paradoxical itch to be alleviated.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Szaif, 36.

⁹⁹ *Euthyd.* 279c-282d.

¹⁰⁰ Roger Scruton, *Modern Philosophy: An Introduction and Survey* (Penguin Books, 1996), 398.

¹⁰¹ As the Athenian explains in the *Lg.* 799c4-d7: “No young man, much less an old one, on seeing or hearing anything paradoxical or unfamiliar, is ever going to brush aside his doubts all in a hurry and reach a snap decision about it. More probably, like a traveller who has come at a crossroads, alone or with others, and is rather uncertain about the right road, he’ll pause,

In the *Apology*, justice is a major philosophical paradox in that, as seen in the previous sub-section, it equivocates; justice seems to do two things at once, two things which contradict or cancel each other. If one maintains that all things politico-legal are just, but also that all things moral are just, then one has to face the problem that all things legal and all things moral are not two identical categories. Furthermore, one has to face the even more difficult problem that these two categories are at times in direct opposition to one another. Justice, under its Socratic construction, is a paradox also because it “defies a familiar orthodoxy,”¹⁰² namely, the legitimacy of public opinion as an absolute moral standard expressed through the legal system. If thinking and paradox are so closely related, then the existence of the paradoxical concept as the very theme of the *Apology* indicates that there is also a form of active thinking in progress for the purpose of, at the very least, the alleviation of pain caused by the existence of the paradox.¹⁰³

IV. Ἀπορία: Ex contradictione sequitur ignorantia¹⁰⁴

In this section I focus on answering certain questions. Firstly, what *aporia* is, aiming at showing that *aporia* and dialogue are intimately connected. Secondly, whether *aporia* follows from an eristic, refutational dialogue, and, thirdly, how the *Apology* forms an *aporetic* dialogue.

i. What is *aporia*

For the purposes of this paper, I take *aporia* to be the point in a conversation when the agent (typically one of Socrates’ interlocutors), whose moral beliefs, both explicit and implicit (that is, by way of life), are being tested, reaches an internal impasse. A state of *aporia*, then, is being at a complete loss as to one’s moral standing, such that one can only to admit one’s ignorance, if anything at all, and that one’s very life is ruled by paradoxes. Yet, *aporia* transcends the device of paradox (and ambiguity); a human being whose life is constituted by a bundle of

and put the problem to himself or his companions; and he won’t continue his journey until he’s pretty sure of his direction and bearings.”

¹⁰² Scruton, 397.

¹⁰³ Similarly, though in an explicit manner, Euthyphro’s Dilemma is the exposure of the underlying paradox concerning holiness, which keeps the conversation going. And, in the *Hipparchus*, the paradox of the conclusion that everyone is greedy is the impetus to maintain the process of questioning.

¹⁰⁴ “From a contradiction [or paradox] follows ignorance.”

paradoxes recognizes there is something that works. There is a sense of a moral being where one least expects to find it. That is, even a person in all his moral failures, misunderstandings, and hopelessness, is still a moral agent, still of moral worth, and, surprisingly, still of moral capacity.

I take it that, even though the idea of a moral being persisting *in [a] hell*¹⁰⁵ of its own making sounds hopeful and possibly elicits hope from the one who undergoes *aporia*; that in itself does not guarantee that the reaction of whoever undergoes *aporia* is going to be that of hope. It is a rather frightening realisation. In fact, we are shown that the reactions of the interlocutors who have been reduced to an *aporetic* state are usually negative. It makes sense, I take it, that faced with our own multiplicity of beliefs, we may react with a multiplicity of emotions, both hope and fear. An *aporetic* state is hopeful because, in seeing the truth of the *aporia*, one sees something of the truth of the inquiry. At the same time, it is scary, as if someone has suddenly pulled the carpet (often the one you thought was your flying carpet) out from under your feet, you have fallen, and you do not know whether you can get up again, nor, even if you do manage to get up again, whether you have landed on another carpet.

Now, *aporia* can result from an inability to define a certain concept¹⁰⁶ or from an inability to differentiate between concepts.¹⁰⁷ And it is exactly the latter case, I argue, that we find in the *Apology* in the form of a conceptual confusion of morality and legality in justice. The reason the claim that the *Apology* is an *aporetic* dialogue must be proven is that Platonic *aporia* and its state can only be produced in, and as the result of, dialogue.¹⁰⁸ Why then is dialogue the necessary breeding ground for Platonic *ethos*-pertaining-*aporia*?¹⁰⁹

ii. Platonic *aporia* and dialogue

In Plato, as we have seen in the Platonic dialogue section, there can be different levels of dialogue. For example, there is the dialogue as

¹⁰⁵ St Silouan the Athonite's phrase 'Keep your mind in hell and despair not.'

¹⁰⁶ As in the cases of *Theaetetus*, *Charmides* and *Protagoras*.

¹⁰⁷ Such is the case in *Euthyphro*.

¹⁰⁸ For the relation between *aporia* and dialogue, see George Karamanolis and Vasilis Politis, eds., *The Aporitic Tradition in Ancient Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹⁰⁹ McCabe treats the same question as producing different answers in the same person when asking it repetitively, see: McCabe, 2. Though this may be true, the success of the claim depends on the agent's ability to recognise that each successive answer is unsatisfactory, and on a personal persistence to find an answer.

a conversation happening between the interlocutors, the internal dialogue of the active speakers, the dialogue of the audience witnessing the conversation, and the assumed internal dialogue of the audience reading the written dialogue. In a dialogue there is a multitude of interrogative questions that aim to aid the answering of the main question of the dialogue and to appeal to all the levels of 'dialogue.' The reader of the dialogue may or may not identify with the answers of the in-dialogue interlocutor(s). If she does, then she will be in a similar internal state as that of the interlocutor's as the dialogue progresses (and as such will also be at a loss).¹¹⁰

If she does not, she will start criticising the interlocutor's answers and trying to produce her own. In some real sense, the reader is also compelled to answer. The production of answers on the part of the reader occurs because the text deals with fundamental ethical concepts, the definitions of which people tend to inadvertently overly elasticise or restrict. The mistakes are similar to those of the interlocutors, and even if the reader does not identify her views with those of Socrates' interlocutor, the problems that the questions are meant to pose for the interlocutor's belief system, shall have an effect on the reader as well.

On the level of the in-dialogue interlocutors, if someone asks you to explain your reasons for your attitudes and actions, you have to create and convey a clear image of your belief system in such a way that, if you were to answer these questions to yourself, you would probably not have been as clear and would not have spotted potential inconsistencies. The other person then, provided that she has an eye for detecting and attacking vagueness and inconsistency, not unlike Socrates, is the one who both excites and maintains the interlocutor's 'internal dialogue.'¹¹¹

Furthermore, it is in the nature of dialogue within the context of Ethics to produce both intellectual and psychological engagement. Ethics is the branch of philosophy that is most entangled with human life, aiming, after examining concepts that govern our lives, at answering the question of how we should live. For this reason, it is also the one that is most approachable and has the most psychological relevance. At the same time, it is also the most psychologically taxing if we fail to answer the major ethical questions well. For if we are convinced of a certain definition of a concept, or of the soundness of an argument, despite there being good reasons not to be, the consequences of such false beliefs will echo in how we live our lives.

¹¹⁰ A. K. Cotton, *Platonic Dialogue and Education of the Reader* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 44.

¹¹¹ McCabe 15.

Ethical *aporia* – which is most often seen in the Platonic corpus – depends on dialogue, since the agent, whether the interlocutor or the reader to varying extents, experiences a revelation by way of being persistently questioned; either there is a belief system to speak of, but the definitions of the concepts on which it is based fail to adequately describe these concepts, or, the belief system itself is inconsistent and the relations between the concepts are erroneous or misunderstood. When this is revealed to the agent, he realises that a quick and seemingly temporary repair will not satisfy his interlocutor (Socrates), and the agent can no longer provide any answers.

iii. Aporia in the apology

The next crucial question is: in what way is the *Apology* an *aporia*-inducing discourse? To answer this question first we need to look at patterns within the set of *aporetic* dialogues. The main difference, I shall argue, between the *Apology* and the rest of the *aporetic* dialogues is that what happens in most of them is explicit, whereas in the *Apology* it happens implicitly. In all their differences, the *aporetic* dialogues share a more or less similar pattern; Socrates, together with an interlocutor – whose way of life or alleged belief system is in some way relevant to the philosophical theme of the dialogue – begin with a question and then work together step by step toward an answer, only to have their answer repeatedly undermined and rejected. The question remains open throughout the dialogue, and the answer-production continues until the interlocutor can no longer come up with a new answer.

Aporia demands that someone is being reduced to its state. Who is it that undergoes the *aporetic* treatment by Socrates in the *Apology*? I have argued in earlier sections that the men of Athens, as represented by the jury and the court-audience, are, along with Socrates, the protagonist, being Socrates' interlocutor. The response of the *polis*, as the interlocutor, is to act as an authority on the pertinent subject (in this case, justice). This is unsettled by the difference in opinion and – instead of the traditional verbal force, which we also see in Socrates' request for silence – acts of force. Force works as the equivalent of the pride and confidence typically seen in the interlocutors and evident in the *polis* attempts to impose its conception of justice on Socrates. The men of Athens have entered the scene with a certain conception of right and wrong, and, by the *visible* end of the *Apology* they have not entirely changed their minds; instead, they exhibit signs of doubt via their reluctant fist voting.

Here are the examples of the question-starting-point pattern: the question of the *Laches* is “What is courage?”¹¹² The *Meno* investigates the question “What is virtue?”¹¹³ In the *Lysis* the question takes the form of “What is a friend?”¹¹⁴ The *Euthyphro* strives to find an answer to “What is piety?”¹¹⁵ In the *Charmides*, the question is “What is temperance?”¹¹⁶ In the *Hippias Major* the question is “What is the fine?”¹¹⁷ In the *Hippias Minor* the question is “Who are better, those who do wrong intentionally or those who do wrong unintentionally?”¹¹⁸ Finally, in the *Protagoras*, the question is “Is virtue’s unity more like the unity of a face or of a piece of gold?”¹¹⁹ The *Apology* fits this pattern in that it begins (and ends) with whether justice is a politico-legal or a moral matter. However, since, as I claim, this question is not explicit in the *Apology* as it is in the other *aporetic* dialogues, its place in the text needs to be defended. To begin with, to ask this question is to suggest there is a conceptual confusion between morality and legality.

The signs of such a confusion are clear in the face of Meletus. He asserts that it is the laws that make the young men morally better along with anyone considered knowledgeable about the laws, from the jury to any citizen (apart from Socrates and presumably others who have been ostracised). The confusion is also evident in the case of the so-called experts.¹²⁰ If what it is to be wise is to know moral truths,¹²¹ and the politicians who are law experts are deemed unwise, then it cannot possibly be the case that knowing the laws of the *polis* is equivalent to knowing the moral laws. The politicians, however, along with many other people who have heard them speak, think of themselves as being wise. This means, though, that there must be a naivety as to the relation between morality and legality. Furthermore, the question of whether justice is legal or moral can be detected in the way Socrates constantly asks his audience to consider whether he is being just,¹²²

¹¹² *Lach.* 190d-e.

¹¹³ *Meno* 87d-e.

¹¹⁴ *Lysis* 212a; 223a.

¹¹⁵ *Euthyp.* 5d.

¹¹⁶ *Charm.* 159a.

¹¹⁷ *Hip. Maj.* 286c-d.

¹¹⁸ *Hip. Mi.* 371e-372a.

¹¹⁹ *Prot.* 329d.

¹²⁰ *Apol.* 22b6-c8.

¹²¹ Socrates calls himself wise and defends the moral understanding of justice.

¹²² *Apol.* 18a2; 18a4-5; 32e3-5; 33b3-5.

while trying to prove, and as he himself believes, that he has been and is being just.¹²³ At the same time, he attacks the city's (mis)understanding of justice by undermining the reasons for maintaining the identity relation between the two concepts.¹²⁴

The abandoned answers of some of the aforementioned questions of the *aporetic* dialogues are the following: The *Laches*, provides a potential definition of courage, namely "courage is knowledge of the hopeful and fearful,"¹²⁵ but then the explanation is found to be problematic and the definition is abandoned.¹²⁶ In the *Meno*, we are told that "virtue is knowledge,"¹²⁷ but then this definition appears also not free of problems and as such the answer is also abandoned.¹²⁸ In the *Lysis*, the definition drawn forth is "that which is neither good nor evil is friendly with the good because of the presence of evil,"¹²⁹ which is yet again rejected.¹³⁰ In the *Euthyphro*, both "the service of the gods" and "the science of giving and taking from the gods"¹³¹ are rendered as inviable answers.¹³² In the *Charmides*, one of the various definitions of temperance,¹³³ "temperance is the knowledge of good and evil," is also abandoned.¹³⁴

Is there any sign of a first negotiated and then abandoned answer in the *Apology*? The answer is no. Neither Socrates, nor the jury try to come up with slightly different yet related answers in a straightforward manner in defense of their conception of justice. Something different happens instead. Socrates implicitly questions the relation between morality and legality in justice and showcases where the relation fails. It is hard to imagine that, at the level of internal dialogue, all 500 jurors remained either unaware of or apathetic to, Socrates' arguments and their meaning; yet, as evidenced in the text, 220 of them chose to acquit him.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 17c4-5; 18a2; 29a1-3; 30d6; 32a2; 32c1-2; 32d5; 33a3; 36e2; 42a2.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 24e1-27e3 (against divine origin argument); 31e1-32a1; 34b4-5 (universal truth argument); 35c3-5; 35d1-2; 41b2.

¹²⁵ *Lach.* 195a; 195d-197b.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 198a; 199b.

¹²⁷ *Meno* 87d-e.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 89c-e.

¹²⁹ *Lysis* 218b-c.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 221d.

¹³¹ *Euthyp.* 12d, 13c, 14d.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 14b; 15a.

¹³³ *Charm.* 161b; 163e; 165b.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 174d-175a.

Given Socrates' professed surprise¹³⁵ – which within an endorsed context of natural and reactive speech should be taken as an honest response – it is clear that at least some of the jurors voted to acquit him because of a change of mind, or due to doubt about whether their conception of, and commitment to a fully legal concept of justice is correct.

Furthermore, do the men of Athens come to the realisation that their conception of justice cannot be defended? That is, do they experience *aporia*? The jury is generally thought of as possessing expert knowledge of how to rule and impose a just verdict, keeping the citizens' best interests at heart. Not only is it assumed that such knowledge is possible, but also that politics should be led by it. Among the jurors who acquit him, Socrates points out at the end of the *Apology* that there are people who may feel that, even after the end of his speech, they still do not know what happened.¹³⁶ That is, there are people at a loss as to what has taken place, who may suffer from intellectual and psychological confusion. They are the people that Socrates invites to speak to him¹³⁷ after they leave the courtroom. They are the people that may be open to, and as such can benefit from, further Socratic examination. This follows a similar pattern, also seen at the end of the *Euthyphro*.¹³⁸

The experience of *aporia*, however, is more prominent in the fifth and silent moment of the *Apology*; the moment of the realisation of the effects of the action against Socrates and the experience of regret. Regret, however, does not necessarily imply that having chosen between two possible options one wishes to have chosen otherwise. One may have experienced regret either way. The *aporetic* state is the state in which all moral choices appear as impossible. The fact that the men of Athens proceeded to make a choice does not eliminate the *aporetic* state. Rather, the knowledge of the psychological effect of the choice indicates that the choice has amplified the *aporia*.

V. Conclusion

The *Apology*, I have argued, is, to paraphrase Thesleff, an *aporetic* “monologue approximating to dialogue,”¹³⁹ because it retains the goals and effects of a Platonic dialogue; the manner of speech which

¹³⁵ *Apol.* 36a2-3.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 39e1.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 39e1-40a1.

¹³⁸ In *Euthyp.* 15d, we read: “So we must investigate again what piety is, as I shall not willingly give up before I learn this.”

¹³⁹ Thesleff, 41-50.

reflects natural language, the inter-personal conversations and certain devices that promote these conversations, and the inter-textual conversations which negotiate the limits of rhetorical and philosophical language, the practice and thought.

For these reasons, the *Apology* shares a lot more overlapping aspects in terms of inter-personal dialogue with a conventional dialogue, such as the *Euthyphro*, than it does with a monologue such as the *Timaeus*.¹⁴⁰ As Cooper says, the *Timaeus* is a “rhetorical display, not a philosophical dialogue,”¹⁴¹ not in the sense that it lacks philosophical content, but in that it lacks dialectical investigation. It is not my argument that the *Timaeus* and the *Apology* have no overlapping aspects; both of them are in monologue form, each hosting a *mock* dialogue, and in both there is an audience that exceeds the two main interlocutors, both in terms of characters – Socrates and Meletus in the *Apology*, Timaeus and Socrates in the *Timaeus* – and in terms of the audience of the dialogue. However, whereas the *Timaeus* is a rhetorically embellished treatise in *Metaphysics*, the *Apology* is a dialectical investigation in *Ethics*, and as such places different demands on its audiences. For this reason, the *Apology* can be shown to be an *aporetic* dialogue and the *Timaeus* cannot.

The *aporetic* mode of the apologetic dialogue is subtle, but nonetheless there. There is a clear subject under consideration, that of justice, and a clear oppositional disposition between two forces. Plato plays on the alleged expertise of a verbally silent yet intellectually active and forceful interlocutor and on Socrates’ talent at diminishing the sense of confidence of the interlocutor on the subject. What is more, the main subject of justice is undermined by the implicit exploration of the concept of truth. In this way the goals and effects of a typically Platonic *aporetic* dialogue are maintained in an otherwise overtly soliloquial piece of writing.

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¹⁴⁰ That is not to say that the *Apology* does not have overlapping features with non-*aporetic* dialogues. The point is rather that the *Apology*’s monologue form does not get in the way of it being read as an *aporetic* dialogue.

¹⁴¹ Cooper, 1224.

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Becoming Differently, Open Identities, and Going into the Wild

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Abstract

*Becoming is the concept of unexpected links that are opened up by agency. Understanding that concept is, at the same time, understanding the changing possibilities expressed by those who play with reality and action based on the assumption that reality is uncontrollable. In such a way, existential experiments and reality possibilities are deeply connected scenarios. In this context, we will engage with recent debates about the concept of becoming, drawing on current interpretations of Deleuze and Guattari's work and Thomas Nail's contributions. In pursuing that aim, we will illustrate the idea of becoming through two concrete narrative devices: *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras and *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer. We follow a hermeneutical approach to identity formation processes, informed by the interdisciplinary methodological connection between text and action – i.e., the interplay between subjectivity and reflectivity in qualitative research. The central thesis is that narrated living trajectories refer to experiential scenarios associated with life experiences, disclosing reality in its diverse dimensions and possibilities. Following that consideration, we argue that becoming enables hermeneutical possibilities to comprehend open and creative enterprises.*

Keywords: creative writing; becoming; fluid boundaries; Gilles Deleuze; Felix Guattari; Marguerite Duras; Jon Krakauer

I. Introduction

It is commonly said that adopting other perspectives represents an open space for self-criticism and possibilities for improvement.¹ If there are individuals so profoundly and egocentrically dedicated to their view of reality, the opposite, contrasting measure must be to adopt radically differentiated perspectives incarnated into other living beings' existences and realities.²

What does that mean? Identity can be a place of possibilities. We can be artists of ourselves. However, identity can also represent a trap full of fallacies: the neoliberal definition of the person, personal interest maximalism, narcissistic attitudes, anti-institutional sentiments, cherry-picking arguments, and disproportionality. Indeed, identity can embody places to reduce complexity to one-sided perspectives and reproduce common sense and habits. In other words, identity can be a jail that encloses us within the bars of our own beliefs, experiences, geographies, values, feelings, and concepts.³

Instead of protecting ourselves within the confines of individuality, can we seriously consider the importance of existential thresholds and communal possibilities? Places of enunciation and material determinations should not block the ability to go outside oneself by opening the door to differentiated living processes and experiences. Being oneself can be a state of being challenged by transformation and recomposition. Identity is not an obligatory tag. It is not a brand. It is a construct. A fragile one. Because identity is an open scenario full of opportunities, contingencies, and

¹ Patty Sotirin, "Becoming-Woman," in *Gilles Deleuze. Key Concepts*, ed. Ch. Stivale (Routledge, 2012), 116-130; Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Polity, 2006); Rosi Braidotti, "Affirmative Ethics and Generative Life," *Deleuze and Guattari Studies* 13, no. 4 (2022): 463-481; Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations," in *Feminist Contentions*, eds. S. Benhabib, J. Butler, D. Cornell, and N. Fraser (Routledge, 1995), 35-57; Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Routledge, 2004); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 2002); Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2024).

² Michael Pitts, *Alternative Masculinities in Feminist Speculative Fiction* (Lexington Books, 2021); Matthew C. Gutmann, *Changing Men and Masculinities in Latin America* (Duke University Press, 2003); Alex Manley, *The New Masculinity: A Road Map for the 21st Century Definition of Manhood* (E. C. W. Press, 2023); Junot Diaz, *This is How You Lose Her* (Riverhead Books, 2013); François Jullien, *Vital Nourishment. Departing from Happiness* (Zone Books, 2007); François Jullien, *There Is No Such Thing as Cultural Identity* (Polity, 2021).

³ Sebastian A. González and Juliane Bertrand, "Langage et Société: Pragmatique de la Communication. Hommage à Oswald Ducrot," *Eidos* no. 35 (2021): 92-121; Lucas Uribe-Lopera and Sebastian A. González, "Complexity, Reality and Ontological Insecurity: On Mistakes and Navigational Skills," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (2024): 173-199; Judith Kegan Gardiner, "On Female Identity and Writing by Women," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (1981): 347-361; Maurice Mitchel, "Building Resilient Organizations," *The Forge*, November 29, 2022, <https://forgeorganizing.org/article/building-resilient-organizations>.

complications, requiring a radically honest questioning of any metaphysical comfort based on the ideas of unity, fixity, constancy, and absolutism.⁴ *Fluid boundaries*: “It is fatal to be a man or woman, pure and simple. One must be woman-manly or man-womanly.”⁵ Ambiguousness. Limitlessness. Constant learning. Can we cease to believe in sides and explore open possibilities of being? That is a powerful question. Avoiding the use of identity as referring to closed entities and embracing the discovery of thresholds represent two premises for thinking (and writing) creatively.⁶

Let us explain. Becoming is a concept expressing living processes of discovering life’s possibilities beyond previously given ethical coordinates, institutional rules, political ideas, and social patterns taking place as socio-historical entities, i.e. male/female, heterosexuality/homosexuality, masculinity/femininity, Left/Right, oppressor/oppressed, etc.⁷ Put differently, becoming is the concept of a spectrum of differential living scenarios that compose non-linear temporalities, action possibilities, and discovering experiences.

In line with the critique of the notions of being and unity, becoming represents a challenging concept involving considerations about changing and movement – that is, the continuous processes by which new things emerge.⁸

Mystification, falsification, and universalism can be avoided by rejecting any attempt to instantiate normative imperatives as ontologically unavoidable limits.⁹ That is an opportunity because it prevents the same questions from being asked.

How must people love? How must people feel? How must people think? How must people act? How must people work, struggle, use money, dress, eat, walk, sleep, make love, read, write, defend ideas, choose sides, etc.?

⁴ David Menčík, “Identity Theft: A Thought Experiment on the Fragility of Identity,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (2020): 71-83; Anthony C. Ojimba, “Nietzsche’s Intellectual Integrity and Metaphysical Comfort,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (2024): 109-130.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (Penguin Random House Canada, 2017), 71.

⁶ Louise Burchill, “Becoming-Woman. A Metamorphosis in the Present, Relegating Repetition of Gendered Time to the Past,” *Time and Society* 19, no. 1 (2010): 81-97; Renate Gunter, “Fluid Boundaries: The Violence of Non-Identity in Marguerite Duras’ Representations of Female Relationships,” *South Central Review* 19, no. 4 (2002): 85-102; Patty Sotirin, “Becoming-Woman,” in Gilles Deleuze. *Key Concepts*, ed. Ch. Stivale (Routledge, 2012), 120-122.

⁷ Arvonne Fraser, “Becoming Human: The Origins and Development of Women’s Human Rights,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1999): 853-906; Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, “Migration and Trans-Racial/National Identity Re-Formation: Becoming African Diaspora Women,” *Black Women, Gender + Families* 5, no. 2 (2011): 4-24; Patricia McFadden, “Becoming Postcolonial: African Women Changing the Meaning of Citizenship,” *Meridians* 6, no. 1 (2005): 1-22.

⁸ François Jullien, *Vital Nourishment. Departing from Happiness* (Zone Books, 2007); Thomas Nail, *Being and Motion* (Oxford University Press, 2018); Ojimba.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 119-120; Uribe-Lopera and González.

Alternatively, we can ask: what is living? How is it possible to live? How can we learn from singular existences without pretending to be examples to others interested in models and standards? Beyond trying to animate normative and ideological debates about how we ought to be, we can dedicate our time to thinking about open activities within the infinite mode of becoming, characterized by boundarylessness, activity, and creativity.

A methodological measure is necessary to consider that idea seriously. We should surpass the generic consideration about the meaning of norms based on references to transcendent rules in the name of concrete thought about experiences of being and becoming.¹⁰

How to do that? We follow a hermeneutical approach to subjectivity, designed in the context of the interdisciplinary methodological connection between text and action – i.e., subjectivity and reflectivity in qualitative research.¹¹ Identity and similar concepts related to standardized social categorization of human lives are inadequate tools for interpreting experiences of subjective transformation. Instead, the notion of becoming enables interpretative possibilities to comprehend open and creative existences.

Carefully curated identities often relate to individuals who are anxious and seek attention and approval. On that ground, it can be found generic representations of life: The Woman, The Man, The Father, The Mother, The Child, The Adult, The Worker, The Sexy, The Professor, The Businessperson, The Young, The Writer, The Singer, The Influencer, The Actress, The Politician, The Beautiful, The Handsome, etc. We all live in the middle of those standardized images that do not necessarily depict real life.¹²

Fortunately, creative living modes exist. These are concrete lives constituted by immanent movements and singular events that question linearity, control, power, identity, habits, and common sense. Those modes of existence refer to processes of becoming differently, constantly experimented with (and narrated) by people interested in exploring the world.¹³

How can we grasp those processes? Here is the methodological alternative to do that. Concepts and the living are tightened by thought-images: narrative crystallizations of *a life*. In that way, becoming entails more

¹⁰ Louise Burchill, “Becoming-Woman. A Metamorphosis in the Present, Relegating Repetition of Gendered Time to the Past,” *Time and Society* 19, no. 1 (2010): 81-97.

¹¹ Paul Ricœur, *From Text to Action. Essays in Hermeneutics, II* (Northwestern University Press, 1991); Gilles Deleuze, “Literature and Life,” *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 2 (1997): 225-230; Henning S. Olesen, “The Societal Nature of Subjectivity: An Interdisciplinary Methodological Challenge,” *Historical Social Research* 38, no. 2: (2013): 7-25; Thomas Nail, *The Philosophy of Movement. An Introduction* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024).

¹² Audrey C. Farley, *The Girls and Their Monsters. The Genain Quadruplets and the Making of Madness in America* (Grand Central, 2023), 18-29.

¹³ Ridvan Askin, *Narrative and Becoming* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

than mere abstraction and first-person accounts of events and experiences. Becoming is a compelling concept because it refers to the step between abstract thinking about generic beings and considering transformation experiences, revealing singular existential processes beyond identity coordinates, material conditioning, corporal determination, and formalized ethical frameworks. In one sentence: Narrated living trajectories neither refer to abstract vocabularies nor institutional languages, but rather experiential procedures associated with life experiences that disclose reality in its diverse dimensions and possibilities.¹⁴

A final comment about the narrative resources at play in our attempt. Becoming can be depicted by the image of flow.¹⁵ To document that image, we delve into narratives that confront the problem of becoming through writing.¹⁶

One day, we will learn to stop talking about ourselves constantly, following the desire to impose ourselves on everyone around us. How can we cultivate attention to the outside? How can we pay attention to uncommon things and people? If becoming is about singular transformation processes, writing and thinking creatively are the more qualified abilities to create scenarios for grasping differentiated experiences, due to their boundaryless nature.¹⁷ Grounded on that idea, we chose two books: *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras¹⁸ and *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer.¹⁹ The reasons for selecting those materials will be carefully detailed below. It can be said, in advance, that *The Lover* and *Into the Wild* are fascinating narrative encapsulations of how we can undergo transformation processes that extend beyond our identity.

II. Becoming differently

Becoming refers to transformation processes involving diverse materials - i.e., animals, chemical substances, biological entities such as viruses, cells,

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Freedom. A Disease Without Cure* (Bloomsbury, 2023), 2-5.

¹⁵ Pelagia Goulimari, "A Minoritarian Feminism? Things to Do with Deleuze & Guattari," *Hypatia* 14, no. 2 (1999): 97-99; Audrey C. Farley, *The Girls and Their Monsters. The Genain Quadruplets and the Making of Madness in America* (Grand Central, 2023), 36-45; François Jullien, *There Is No Such Thing as Cultural Identity* (Polity, 2021): 8-22; Thomas Nail, *The Philosophy of Movement. An Introduction* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024): 36-52.

¹⁶ Alice Jardine, "Woman in Limbo: Deleuze and His Br(others)," *Substance* 13, no. 4 (1984): 47.

¹⁷ David Morley, *The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 88-124.

¹⁸ Marguerite Duras, *The Lover* (Harper Perennial, 2006).

¹⁹ Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (Anchor Editions, 2015).

algorithms, people, institutions, States, and communities.²⁰ There are no immutable substances. Entities can perform differentiated activities and produce connections at different levels. They are not static nor defined by substantial attributes.²¹

All living beings exhibit a propensity to seek otherness, diversity, and freedom, based on the assumption that reality is uncontrollable.²² That is the desire to become different, involving internal changes and external transformations despite uncertainty and uncontrollability. In this sense, living beings are active in their endeavours to take risks without guarantees and discover the open reality by forming connections. Being alive means becoming differently through encounters and experiences that force us to gather, evaluate, and face events full of information and possibilities. Efforts to answer contingencies by creative risk-taking alternatives that make each morning worthy are what we can call ‘Living.’²³

§1

Becoming is the expression of transformation processes. Always in plural. Because becoming is immanently multiple. That means existential possibilities are infinite and open to connections. For that reason, it cannot be prefigured in advance. Becoming a woman. Becoming an alien. Becoming a machine. Becoming an animal. Becoming weird. Becoming an immigrant.²⁴ Who knows what is possible at the level of experimentation and possibilities? How can we estimate what is possible from our constantly limited and biased perspective? Reality is more complex and diverse than our representations.²⁵ It is the same about human becoming. How can we prefigure what is possible to humans? How can we guess what forms human beings can undergo -what possibilities can we experience?

That assumption concerns a methodological decision regarding the

²⁰ Louise Burchill, “Becoming-Woman. A Metamorphosis in the Present, Relegating Repetition of Gendered Time to the Past,” *Time and Society* 19, no. 1 (2010): 81-97; Alice Jardine, “Woman in Limbo: Deleuze and His Br(others),” *Substance* 13, no. 4 (1984): 46-47.

²¹ Dave Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 13-38; Rosi Braidotti, “Affirmative Ethics and Generative Life,” *Deleuze and Guattari Studies* 13, no. 4 (2022): 463-481; Uribe-Lopera and González.

²² Hartmut Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World* (Polity Press, 2020); Saras Sarasvathy, *Effectuation: Rethinking Fundamental Concepts in Social Sciences* (Cambridge University Press, 2024); Thomas Nail, *Being and Motion* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

²³ Sebastian A. González Montero, *Living in Transit: Youth, Nomads, and Reality. A Narrative Essay on Becoming and Education* (Ediciones Unisalle, 2023), 30-33.

²⁴ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 25-98; Carl Safina, *Becoming Wild: How Animal Cultures Raise Families, Create Beauty and Achieve Peace* (Henry Holt & Co., 2020).

²⁵ Yuk Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 30-45.

notion of becoming. Eruptions, perturbances, revolts, and protests are not necessarily informative about changes. Outbursts, perturbations, rebellions, and demonstrations are not the only sources of understanding transformation capabilities. Militancy, grassroots political activism, and organizations are not culturally privileged spaces for expressing views about differences.²⁶

§2

Alternatively, becoming differently can start with simple and quotidian gestures. Consider a few options. Becoming can be about ambiguities. It can be about playing. It can be about anonymity. It can be about quiet struggles – as professors usually engage in having an open youth able to navigate realities without desiring control, institutional imperatives, or authoritarian creeds built for uncritical believers.²⁷ Becoming differently can be discovered by being humorous and playful about habits, expectations, manners, projects, needs, obligations... Children are remarkable in that regard.²⁸

About language, it is said there are rules to be followed. Syntaxes. Grammar. Idiosyncratic ways of speaking. Communicative manners. Institutional vocabularies. But language embodies a plastic material. Becoming expressive or having something to say is about freely going into everything that can be written, uttered, sung, etc.²⁹ Everything is possible, nevertheless. Expression, meaning, and sense are open fields. Mixing words, grammar, and signification is a creative scenario. “Every morning the same routine: Hypatía Belicia Cabral, ven acá! You ven acá, Beli muttered under her breath. You.”³⁰

*Free Spirits.*³¹ There are examples able to illustrate that transformative processes of becoming are inherent to living independently of material constitutions, symbolic coordinates, formal restrictions, social imperatives, institutionalized norms (and other similar constraints). The general idea is that becoming is associated with a compulsion for freedom and a state of liberation. It is an urge to get rid of forms. It is about not being able to stand life as it is.

²⁶ Sebastian A. González Montero, *Living in Transit: Youth, Nomads, and Reality. A Narrative Essay on Becoming and Education* (Ediciones Unisalle, 2023), 30-33; Sebastian A. González Montero, A. M. Sarria-Palacio, C. López Gómez, and J. M. Sierra Montero, “Exploring Collective Agency: A Methodological Approach to Becoming Differently,” *Journal for Cultural Research* 28, no. 4 (2024): 393-414.

²⁷ Markus Orths, *The Staff Room* (Dedalus, 2015).

²⁸ David Small, *Stitches: A Memoir* (Norton & Company, 2010); Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* (Pantheon Graphic Novels, 2002).

²⁹ Andrew Hui, *A Theory of the Aphorism. From Confucius to Twitter* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

³⁰ Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (Riverhead Books, 2007), 45.

³¹ Ojimba, 114.

Let us explore that more concretely through two creative endeavours: *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras and *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer.

III. *The Lover*

The Lover by Marguerite Duras: that strange book that does not have the expected form of the recent books –directly related topics, temporarily ordered thoughts, the rule-of-five paragraphs, clear aims and limits, a perfectly stated plot, heroes and villains, a described path of a difficulty discovered inherited fate, strong and inspired emotions, figures of speech, adjectively elevated word arrangement, etc.³²

The Lover is a strange novel in ways we should discover. How many things can we think of being a girl and a woman without knowing what that entails? We know nothing about singular experiences until we go into the experiences of those who narrate their own lives without pretending to give an example for others. The question is: How can we avoid general appreciation, common sense, and normative estimation? We can read poorly by doing that, for sure. Instead, it is possible to suspend judgment by following a becoming by its internal logic.³³ So, let us *read her*.

§1

She is fifteen and a half. People would say that she is a little girl. Appearances are usually mischievous. She is also a grown-up. Not physically. She is fifteen. Nevertheless, she is a grown-up because of her early anticipation of what it means to think, write, and desire. “Now I see that when I was very young, eighteen, fifteen, I already had a face that foretold the one I acquired through drink in middle age.”³⁴

She seems to be a little girl under standard views. But she is also a grown-up under her account. She knows about desire even if she has not had a physical experience of sex. She thinks a lot about it. She says she needed the experience. She could not have known in advance the importance of desiring. She did not know what it was about. She was not detached from the knowledge, nevertheless. The ferry episode is illustrative. While it was happening, she knew the encounter was about *her* desire. “You didn’t have to attract desire. Either it was in

³² Lauri Ramey, “Creative Writing and Critical Theory,” in *The Handbook of Creative Writing*, ed. St. Earnshaw (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 43-53; David Rain, “Literary Genres,” in *The Handbook of Creative Writing*, ed. St. Earnshaw (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 54-64.

³³ Marianne Bertrand and Adair Morse, “Information Disclosure, Cognitive Biases, and Payday Borrowing,” *The Journal of Finance* 66, no. 6 (2011): 1865-1893; Jonathan Baron, “Cognitive Biases, Cognitive Limits, and Risk Communication,” *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 23, no. 1 (2004): 7-13.

³⁴ Duras, 8.

the woman who aroused it, or it didn't exist. Either it was there at first glance, or else it had never been. It was instant knowledge of sexual relationships, or it was nothing. That, too, I knew before I experienced it."³⁵

She is irreverent and ambiguous because she is unconcerned about socially shared customs. Her way of dressing speaks about that. "It's not the shoes, though, that make the girl look so strangely, so weirdly dressed. No, it's the fact that she's wearing a man's flat-brimmed hat, a brownish-pink fedora with a broad black ribbon."³⁶

She is rebellious. However, her rebelliousness is more pronounced than that of nonconformists, who usually express it through alternative dressing or personalizing their belongings – their phones, computers, hair, makeup, names, etc. Transforming oneself entails more than the anxiety of having an 'irreproducible' personality. There is something crazy, something mad, in becoming differently. "It's not that you have to achieve anything. It's that you have to get away from where you are."³⁷ That is her case. The aesthetic value of dressing a man's hat (or whatever) is not enough to make people different from others. Everybody can do that these days, indeed. She is irreverent because she rejects straight lines, standard tags, and *cul-de-sacs*. "The story of my life doesn't exist. Does not exist. There's never any centre to it. No path, no line. There are great spaces where you pretend there used to be someone. But it's not true. There was no one."³⁸

§2

We can indeed fall into the despair of giving ourselves up to appearances, the need to belong, to be appreciated, and validated. These days, those are highly shared daily needs. We are swallowed into a global universe of personal branding and subjective identification.³⁹ She rejects that. She names that necessity to belong "a mistake, an error."⁴⁰ She vehemently refuses common sense and habits by her courageous insistence on writing. She has discussed that with her mother – who intuits something is not correct:

'I want to write.' I've already told my mother: 'That's what I want to do –write.' No answer the first time. Then she asks:

³⁵ Ibid., 18.

³⁶ Ibid., 11.

³⁷ Ibid., 23.

³⁸ Ibid., 7.

³⁹ Alain Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self. Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).

⁴⁰ Duras, 19.

‘Write what?’ I say: ‘Books, novels.’ She says grimly: ‘When you’ve got your maths degree, you can write if you like, it won’t be anything to do with me then.’ She’s against it, it’s not worthy, it’s not real work, it’s nonsense. Later, she said: ‘A childish idea.’⁴¹

§3

She has found him. He introduced himself and elegantly talked. He has travelled. He has money. And properties. He has a black car that symbolizes his wealth and progeny. She has followed him. She has entered his bachelor’s place. He has brought other women there.⁴² *He is at her mercy, nevertheless.*⁴³

A regular reader should refrain from making up his mind about what happened there. We can risk doing a manly reading. What is supposed to happen when a woman and a man meet in a secret room? Sex? Coupling? Intercourse? They made love. They had sex –if you do not want to romanticize the issue. However, that is not a significant event. Sex is the generic experience of humans related to the reproductive copula and culturally framed coordinates. We used to say, ‘We make love’, following highly structured norms and habits.⁴⁴ They had sex. They made love. Whatever. That is not the point there, in any case. She did something less categorized. She experienced a more nuanced thing. It is the experience of desiring. “She doesn’t feel anything in particular, no hate, no repugnance either, so probably it’s already desire. But she doesn’t know it.”⁴⁵

She did not know how it was supposed to be desired. She had no name for that. She did not care. She cared about the experience itself. She is learning. She was not versed in sexual matters. She did not care about loving him. On her account, the sensible, formless situation happens at the level of desire, not the activities (or romantic promises) at play when people have common sex. “The sea, the immensity, gathering, receding, returning.”⁴⁶ She was simultaneously navigating her experience and creating an account of her affections. She knew it. Desire surpasses the instant of making love, kissing, talking, etc. On the contrary, desire is related to the sensible event

⁴¹ Ibid., 20.

⁴² Ibid., 31-34.

⁴³ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁴ Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul. Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (The University of California Press, 2008); Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts. A Sociological Explanation* (Polity, 2012).

⁴⁵ Duras, 35.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 42.

of corporally being side by side within a place full of perceptible happenings unfolding as percepts.

He's trembling. At first, he looks at her as though he expects her to speak. But she doesn't. So, he doesn't do anything either, doesn't undress her, says he loves her madly, says it very softly. Then, it is silent. She doesn't answer. She could tell she didn't love him. She says nothing. Suddenly, all at once, she knows that he doesn't understand her, that he never will, that he lacks the power to understand such perverseness. And that he can never move fast enough to catch her. It's up to her to know. And she does. Because of his ignorance, she suddenly knows that she is attracted to him already on the ferry. She was attracted to him. It depended on her alone.⁴⁷

They rested and moved. They moved and rested. In the meantime, she was discovering herself beyond the limits represented by her mother's role, her eldest brother's issues, and her family's poverty. The bachelor's place did not account for the typical scenario of those wanting sex. She was becoming differently there, as someone experiencing colourful affections inside a place that should be better described as a theatre for smelling, touching, smoking, thinking, talking, and writing than simply making love or copulating. It was not him that she mattered. Neither sex nor family experiential issues. Not his money, for sure. Multiple sensory experiences (multi-sensoriality) are the primary issues at stake.⁴⁸

§4

He did not understand. He wanted to own her. She was young. And he was afraid. The usual gesture. She laughed in response to that feeling.⁴⁹ She had become cocky and indifferent because she knew what was happening to her. She was not the same. She was becoming. It was not because of him. She was different from the beginning. Her becoming did not have to do with the fact that they had had sex or the reality of his money and reputation.

People can have sex. Nothing significant necessarily happens for that reason. People can have money and be famous, yet still fear the prospect of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 36-37.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 38, and 53-54; Michelle Royer, *The Cinema of Marguerite Duras: Multisensoriality and Female Subjectivity* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 107-112.

⁴⁹ Duras, 44 and 62.

living. That is his case. He feared his father's commandments and hated his duties.⁵⁰ He was an afraid person.

She was different, in contrast. She was different because she found something. The child became a woman, opening up to living in the bachelor's place *by writing*. It is the event of becoming differently by experimenting with percepts –i.e., nociception, thermoception, tactility, and olfaction.⁵¹ She indeed commented on her mother's dilemmas and her brothers' existence. Perhaps she loved that man. Maybe she did not. That is not important. Duras's concerns are not about The Father, The Mother, or The Man. She is concerned with other things.

§5

“In the dormitory, the light is blue. There's a smell of incense. They always burn incense at dusk. The heat's oppressive, all the windows are wide open, and there's not a breath of air.”⁵² In the room, his body and his sex are present. They were lovers in the end. But who cares? It is more important to comment on the affective theatre of the experience. The smell, the humidity, his skin, her pleasure, etc. There is no need to narrow that experience just because it involved sex. Her desire was not reduced to that. At this point, it seems obvious to say it. What did happen? She was writing sensations, rhythms, and movements. To notice this, it is necessary to pay attention to her ways of describing Cholon, the bank of the river, and her house while she cleans the floors and sees her mother smile and sing.⁵³ There are other topics. The boarding school affair against her, the marriage issue, the elder brother's stupidity, passive condition, and violence.⁵⁴

The Lover is about writing. She wanted to write, indeed. And writing is about desire. It is about the creative endeavour of embracing her identity formation process as a writer able to express her composition through sensory experiences. She was connecting heterogeneous things and irreverently enjoying writing because it represented an enabling networking activity. She is multiple. She is complex. She combines everything. China and France. A white child flirting with a Chinese guy. An impending family tradition and the opportunity to boundlessly fall in love. Her family and her brother's madness. The joyfulness of the water surrounding her house

⁵⁰ Ibid., 46-47.

⁵¹ Ibid., 45-50; Michelle Royer, *The Cinema of Marguerite Duras: Multisensoriality and Female Subjectivity* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 107.

⁵² Duras, 101.

⁵³ Ibid., 60-62 and 74-76.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 80-93.

and the sadness of being poor. His father and future wife. His promises. Her indifference. All the details concern radically different things taking place in her word arrangement.

Insight and wisdom are there. Risks, of course. “The sea, formless, simply beyond compare.”⁵⁵ She is becoming something she did not know how to define. She was shapeless. She was not like other girls. She was a girl beyond comparison. “What becomes of her?”⁵⁶ She was not writing because of her desire to recount her memories and her family’s disgrace and ignominy. Again, she was learning. She was open to her desire as a living being. She senses her surroundings and assesses her emotions without relying on more rules than those offered by the experience itself. She was inventing the person she was becoming. In her case, doing that has nothing to do with building an identity or a personal brand. Her narrative effort involves inventing words for complex experiences and a combination of things whose reality exceeds common sense. In that way, it would be better to ask: what is happening to her? How is the experience at play outlined and liberated by words? She says: “From now on, I think words and my life are inseparable [...]. I’m going to write. That’s what I see beyond the present moment, in the great desert whose form my life stretches out before me.”⁵⁷

§6

“He lived a very lonely life. And more so as he grew older. He was only a layabout; he operated on a very small scale. He inspired fear in his immediate circle, but no further. When he lost us, he lost his real empire. [...] He didn’t take any risks [...]. He was afraid.”⁵⁸ The shame of being a man is the shame of insisting on imposing forms, removing enabling conditions, narrowing possibilities, fearing escapades, establishing restrictions, controlling gestures and thoughts, blackmailing others’ independence, and using violence.⁵⁹ We should repulse all those actions. Instead, we should embrace becoming differently.⁶⁰ Is there any better reason to do things such as writing, painting, singing, thinking, etc.?

⁵⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁹ Audrey C. Farley, *The Girls and Their Monsters. The Genain Quadruplets and the Making of Madness in America* (Grand Central, 2023), 60-88.

⁶⁰ Leo Tolstoy, *Family Happiness and Other Stories* (L.B.A., 2018)

§7

Extracted from sedimented forms, becoming is inseparable from ill-formed or incomplete beings. Becoming is inseparable from processes, passages, journeys, expeditions, voyages, etc.⁶¹ It is the ethical consequence of engaging in becoming – i.e., movement and change.⁶² We can become different in terms of our categorised bodies and socially shared identity.⁶³ If we can travel through the livable and the lived by following doorways and encountering threshold experiences, we can forget to think about gender, nationality, political preferences, economic determinants, ideologies, and so on.

There are ways of making fun of reality and the conditionals at play in it, indeed. That means alternative opportunities regarding identification, imitation, mimesis, group thinking, and patterned behaviours are readily available. Those opportunities lie in the processes of undifferentiation and indiscernibility. We can all reproduce standards. In contrast, unforeseen and non-existent modes of existence can be singularized from the populations of living creatures, which constantly change in their ways of dealing with reality.⁶⁴

That formula serves as a helpful research criterion for selecting differentiated experiences. How can we pay attention and describe living beings experimenting with escapes, playing with rules, flying from determination, taking risks, etc.? A post-signification age may have an opportunity to get real due to attention-privileging action possibilities and transformations in the name of a highly shared oblivion of the well-known topics of meaning, ideology, leadership, and material determination.⁶⁵

“Well, it’s an awkward situation trying to fight the jungle alone. But I gotta make my way through if I wanna travel light. Lately, I’ve been walking away, floating like a song in the air. Lately, I’ve been trailing away. I’ve walking my way [...]”⁶⁶ Becoming represents a concept that signals another time may come.

If you are concerned about changing and discovering processes, you can eliminate everything previously considered secure. Let us insist on that idea. Gender, ideology, conceptual preferences, sexual appetites, values,

⁶¹ Gilles Deleuze, “Literature and Life,” *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 2 (1997): 225.

⁶² Thomas Nail, *The Philosophy of Movement. An Introduction* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024), 207-228.

⁶³ Menčík, 81.

⁶⁴ Deleuze, “Literature and Life,” 226; Ojimba.

⁶⁵ Alice Jardine, “Woman in Limbo: Deleuze and His Br(others),” *Substance* 13, no. 4 (1984): 48-50.

⁶⁶ “Travel Light,” by The Dø on A Mouthful, 13, Universal Music Publishing Group, 2008.

shared costumes, leadership, etc., are irrelevant at that level. *Travelling light*: within creative processes, what is relevant are the limits at play and the questioning processes that put pressure on crystalized categories, identity boundaries, and externally formed social references that confine the living.

That can be achieved through various means. To write. To paint. To sing. To talk. To act. To think. To do all of those things with a combination of creative means. One can establish a zone of proximity with anything, provided that one creates the means to do so.⁶⁷ It does not matter what outcomes can be at the end of that. What matters is the creative process.

IV. *Into the Wild*

Living freely does not necessarily involve individualistic views.⁶⁸ Instead, it can be about a compulsion to navigate open lands, strange territories, and different people, meeting other beings, and walking ceaselessly. Let us illustrate that idea.

Chris was free. But in an alternative sense. Chris did something radically unconventional, refusing to build himself up at the expense of others. He did not care about self-promotion. He was a charming, creative, and stubborn individual – not a confrontational businessperson seeking to make money and achieve success.⁶⁹

He became a vagabond, allowing himself to be shaped by changing circumstances and discoveries rather than sanctioned rules. “As for me, I’ve decided that I’m going to live this life for some time to come. The freedom and simple beauty of it are just too good to pass up.”⁷⁰

His decisions demonstrated that conviction.

He resolved that his life was none of the world’s business. Money was not enough. A career was a superfluous enterprise. He did not care about hard work, competitiveness, or sacrifice. He remained isolated from people, technology, buying things, and normalcy. He had money. He had a cheerful family: a prosperous mother and father. He went to Emory University in Atlanta. He had remarkable grades. He graduated. He studied history and anthropology. He was proposed to find a future as a lawyer. His father would pay for everything he needed. He had distinguished himself in all that environment.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Deleuze, “Literature and Life,” 227.

⁶⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (Profile Books, 2022), 38-52.

⁶⁹ Krakauer, 16-18.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 16-18.

One day, after donating his money and rejecting his father's professional victories and financial offers, he abandoned his comfortable family's house and the upper-middle-class lifestyle it afforded. "I think I'm going to disappear for a while."⁷²

No identification. No identity. No past. No future. No goals. He was not seeking approval, validation, or comfort. He changed his name. Alex? Chris? Who cares? His name is Chris. But he is Alexander, instead. And "Alexander is jubilant!"⁷³ Who cares about a name? Names are for sameness and identity. His gesture of becoming an outsider is exceptionally joyful. On February 24, he wrote in his diary: "It is the experiences, the memories, the great triumphant joy of living to the fullest extent in which real meaning is found. God, it's great to be alive! Thank you. Thank you."⁷⁴

There was no help, no security. No one knew who he was, where he was from, or what he was doing. More than becoming an outsider, he became imperceptible. And to become imperceptible, he decided the world was unimportant. "I don't want to know what time it is. I don't want to know what day it is or where I am. None of that matters."⁷⁵

§1

He was walking through the margins of the Alaska Range, attempting to navigate the wilderness and adopt a nomadic existence.⁷⁶ That attempt has its price. Romantic narratives of people venturing into the unknown often overlook the power of nature. Nature is not specially made for comfort – not at the margins of human alienation of nature, at least.⁷⁷ Chris learned that lesson.

Becoming differently is, in fact, risky. It is not about tattoos, fancy clothes, weird hairstyles, driving fast, opening the doors of perception by drugs, etc. Those are familiar places these days. Chris-Alex underwent the process of becoming differently throughout his journey by rejecting shared habits and motives. That is not comfortable. That is not a tourist endeavour. It is not about vacationist commodities. On the contrary, it has a price. Disorientation. Distress. Agitation. Insecurity. Doubts. We wrote: "S.O.S. I need help. I am injured, near death, and too weak to hike out of here. I am

⁷² Ibid., 20.

⁷³ Ibid., 33.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 18-22.

⁷⁷ Alejandro González Iñárritu, dir, *The Revenant* (20th Century Studios, 2015); Glenn Randall, *Breaking Point: Challenge on Alaska's Mt. Hunter* (Chockstone Press, 1984).

all alone. This is *no joke*. In the name of God, please remain to save me. I am out collecting berries close by and shall return this evening. Thank you, Chris McCandless. *August?*⁷⁸

He highlighted the following lines from one of the books found with his remains: “It should not be denied... that being footloose has always exhilarated us. It is associated in our minds with escape from history, oppression, law, and irksome obligations, with absolute freedom, and the road has always led west.”⁷⁹ He travelled light. A Remington rifle. A plastic box of shells. Paperback books. Jeans. Cooking utensils. A backpack. A diary. A camera. He has been dead for two and a half weeks. “Starvation was posited as the most probable cause of death.”⁸⁰

§2

If he had been interrogated, he would not have had answers to the usual questions. “Why had he ignored posted regulations and driven down the wash in the first place? Was he aware that the vehicle’s registration had expired two years before and had not been renewed? Did he know that his driver’s license had also expired, and the vehicle was uninsured as well?”⁸¹

Why did you ignore regulations? Why did you not renovate your papers? Why did you go out there? Responses to those questions belong to those who pay bills, work all day in the same place, go shopping, and buy things using credit cards (which can be a hell because salaries are not necessarily high enough to cover them). Outsiderness. Alexander’s responsibilities were other than those of regular people. He had abandoned contemporary life, in which we get anxious and depressed because of the pressures of being recognized, successful, and happy.

Instead, “McCandless was exhilarated.” He seized the opportunity to get rid of unnecessary baggage and weight. No need to have possessions. No need to be attached. “In a gesture that would have done both Thoreau and Tolstoy proud, he arranged all his paper currency in a pile on the sand -a pathetic little stack of ones and fives and twenties- and put a match to it. One hundred twenty-three dollars in legal tender was promptly reduced to ash and smoke.”⁸²

He stayed here and there for a while and resumed his life of constant motion.

⁷⁸ Krakauer, 11.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 29.

“From Orick, McCandless continued north up the coast. He passed through Pistol River, Coos Bay, Seal Rock, Manzanita, Astoria; Hoquiam, Humptulips, Queets; Forks, Port Angeles, Port Townsend, Seattle.”⁸³ After that, Needles, California. After that, Topock, Arizona, the Colorado River Indian Reservation, the Cibola National Wildlife Refuge, and the Imperial National Wildlife Refuge.⁸⁴

Maps beautifully describe his wandering, making it clear that he is passing through places, not seeking a destiny to rest nor returning to his original location to feel at home. That is tourism, not wandering. According to his journal, on February 3, McCandless went to Los Angeles “to get an ID and a job but feels extremely uncomfortable in society now and must return to the road immediately.”⁸⁵

§3

Chris-Alex was exiled. He was perpetually unemployed. He found jobs. But he worked uncompromisingly. He quit jobs as early as he saw them. He stayed in trailers. He was on the streets. He found vacant mobile homes. He was on the streets again. He did not like to be surrounded by people, “plastic people,” he would say. He did not enjoy human intimacy. He avoided all messy emotional baggage. Perhaps he just pretended to be kind. That is all.⁸⁶

He volunteered. He read. He wrote. He read again. *Call of the Wild* by Jack London was one of his favourite books. He was friendly. Sometimes, he was not. Chris was soundless. In times when people talk incessantly about themselves, he, conversely, revealed virtually nothing about himself. He enjoyed time with friends, nevertheless.⁸⁷ He was not destitute, indeed. He had a college education. He had a family. He had options. He was walking into the wild by choice.⁸⁸ That makes a difference. People who have not had opportunities to develop wander here and there. Just think about migrants to have a picture of it.⁸⁹ Chris-Alex decided to go to the wild because he embraced adventures in the name of his convictions. He wanted to

⁸³ Ibid., 30.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 31-32.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 50-54 and 61-64.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 37-45.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 50.

⁸⁹ Noelle K. Bridgen, *The Migrant Passage: Clandestine Journeys from Central America* (Cornell University Press, 2018); Héctor Tobar, *Our Migrant Souls: A Meditation on Race and the Meanings and Myths of ‘Latino’* (MCD, 2023)

eliminate the shortcomings of a sedentary life and live on the road. That is different from not having options. It was an ethical imperative, akin to an aesthetic commitment to oneself. That was depicted in a letter in which he explained himself. It is worth writing it down in its entirety.

So many people live within unhappy circumstances and yet will not take the initiative to change their situation because they are conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservatism, all of which may appear to give one peace of mind. Still, in reality, nothing is more damaging to the adventurous spirit within a man than a secure future. The very basic core of a man's living spirit is his passion for adventure. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence, there is no greater joy than having an endlessly changing horizon and each day having a new and different sun. [...]. You are wrong if you think Joy emanates only or principally from human relationships. God has placed it all around us. It is in everything and anything we might experience. We just have to have the courage to turn against our habitual lifestyle and engage in unconventional living.⁹⁰

§4

In the end, Chris-Alex died in Alaska. “When McCandless turned up dead in Alaska, and the perplexing circumstances of his demise were reported in the news media, many people concluded that the boy must have been mentally disturbed.”⁹¹

Should we necessarily conclude that people like Chris-Alex do what they do because they are mentally disturbed?

It is well-known that the notion of mental illness represents a category for power exercises based on normative comprehensions and behavioural standards related to the history of what it means to be human.⁹² We can avoid that way of understanding people like Chris-Alex.

We all will die. Some of us can do it by waiting for the next office meeting call or seeking approval from others, utterly blind to our own existence. We can be those who fall into the same need to be seen and liked without necessarily thinking about the effect of living in the midst of the un-

⁹⁰ Krakauer, 56-57.

⁹¹ Ibid., 70.

⁹² Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, eds. F. Gros, F. Ewald, and Alessandro Fontana (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Michel Foucault, *Mental Illness and Psychology* (University of California Press, 1976).

differentiated existence of millions. Some of us can die while going through experiences as diverse as visiting Alaska or reading a book that changes everything, creating alternative forms, writing even if no one is interested, caring for others even if no one would give us awards for doing so, and so on. Making sense of reality is about singular existential endeavours, not about the reproducible forms of the identity market.

§5

On the other hand, paying exaggerated attention to Chris's final living stage represents an oversimplification. He died. But that is not the point. Instead, it is better to ask: What did he do? What was he able to do? What powers did he find? What did he discover about living radically differently?

He found friends. Ronald Franz was one of their loveliest.⁹³ Chris found terrific places. He walked many places. The Grand Canyon was one of his favourites. He wrote this to a friend: "You think that I am stubborn, but you are even more stubborn than me. You had a wonderful chance on your drive back to see one of the greatest sights on earth, the Grand Canyon, something every American should see at least once in his life."⁹⁴

He was highly irreverent. He was able to make fun of the things we usually take seriously. He was penniless. He had no properties. He had no investments. He had no family. He was not a father. He was a lame worker. He was homeless. He would show up at work smelling bad. He was ineffective: sluggish. Especially in his work. He was incorrigibly lazy. He did not like socks, for instance. That is a beautiful detail. It tells a lot about him. Let us explain. He was working at McDonald's and did not want to use the proper gear – mainly footwear.

'One thing I do remember is that he had a thing about socks,' says the assistant manager" [...]. "He always wore shoes without socks—just plain couldn't stand to wear socks. But McDonald's has a rule that employees have to wear appropriate footwear at all times. That means shoes and socks. Chris would comply with the rule, but as soon as his shift was over, bang! –the first thing he'd do is peel those socks off. I mean the very first thing. Kind of like a statement, to let us know we didn't own him, I guess."⁹⁵

⁹³ Krakauer, 58.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

What does that gesture entail? Generally, we accept rules. Most of the time, at work. You must use adequate expressions, dress appropriately, and wear masks: the mask of flourishing, the mask of confidence, the mask of politeness, the mask of political correctness, the mask of gender, the mask of competence, the mask of subordination, and the mask of obedience and productivity. Chris-Alex did not do that in any way. He did not want to play social roles at any level, from the highly socially shared requirements (such as having a career, working, and being successful) to the more intimate demands, including being clean at work, being socially presentable to authorities, etc.

He was not passive nor incapable, in any case. He walked and walked and walked. He figured out how to paddle to Mexico. He was able to freight trains. He physically trained his body to reach Alaska. “He did calisthenics each morning to get in shape for the rigors of the bush and discussed back-country survival strategies at length with Bob, a self-styled survivalist.”⁹⁶ No boyfriends. No girlfriends. He did not have romantic entanglements. He avoided sex. But he was a capable being. One of his friends made the following insightful comment about him:

“Something was fascinating about him,” explains Mrs. Westberg, seated at the polished walnut table where McCandless dined that night. “Alex struck me as much older than twenty-four. Everything I said, he’d demand to know more about what I meant, about why I thought this way or that. He was hungry to learn about things. Unlike most of us, he was the sort of person who insisted on living out his beliefs.”⁹⁷

He read. All the time. Tolstoy, Thoreau, London, Twain. He wanted to write.⁹⁸ He had a fantastic voice. He could dance. He was musical. He played piano. Witnesses said he was not merely a drunken actor of his delusions of talent. “He was *good*,” they said.⁹⁹

He was a craftsman. He crafted a beautiful leather belt with marks that told the story of his journey. “Each picture he’d carved into the leather had a long story behind it.”¹⁰⁰

His ambitions had nothing to do with taking advantage of people. He rejected favors. He broke up with his parents and the hypocrisy of their

⁹⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 67.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 66.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 67.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

lives. He did not stand for authority. He followed his independent nature and intensely reached the extreme consequences of freely living.¹⁰¹ He was courageous.

He had nothing. He had no car. He had no money. He had no credit card. He had no fancy clothes. He had no house. He had no cell phone. He did not use social media. He was not seeking validation. He had no food. He had no savings. He had no bank account. He has no common sense. “He was disturbed.” “He was ill-prepared.” “He was a kook.” Ordinary people using thoughtless concepts did not understand him correctly. That was testified by all the scolded correspondents commenting on his wandering and reacting to his actions.¹⁰² *But who cares if people do not understand?*

Chris-Alex was not wandering his life trying to make a point to others. He was not trying to gather supporters, captivate believers, and convince followers. Those interests are for people with different motifs.¹⁰³ The fact is that Chris was capable of navigating reality without seeking control or security. He was a skillful surfer of happenings and a compassionate person highly committed to the open. At the time he reached Alaska, he wrote:

This is the last you shall hear from me, Wayne. Arrived here two days ago. It was very difficult to catch rides in the Yukon Territory. But I finally got here. Please return all mail I receive to the sender. It might be a very long time before I return to the South. If this adventure proves fatal and you don't ever hear from me again, I want you to know you're a great man. *I now walk into the wild.*

He signed that letter: “Alexander.”¹⁰⁴

§6

There are no substances. There are no essential things. There are living beings defining themselves by their capabilities and ongoing experiences of change and connection. What can bodies do and not do? Within which conditions does agency happen? In what sense is it possible to understand bodies' actions?¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 47-64.

¹⁰² Ibid., 70-75.

¹⁰³ Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul. Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (The University of California Press, 2008).

¹⁰⁴ Krakauer, 68.

¹⁰⁵ Michael Hardt, *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press,

That conceptual frame enables a particular consideration of Chris's life.

Chris was a kind person. He was profoundly affected by interactive scenarios that featured diverse encounters. As we have said, he met strangers. He found friends. He came across mountains, rivers, and roads. He found weird places to live. "Oh-My-God Hot Springs!"¹⁰⁶ He took pictures of his adventures. He wrote. He starved. He ate. We walked. Overall, we walked. Generally speaking, he could do many things that conformist people do not even consider. He was an interesting person because he possessed great power. Chris became Alexander. He was another person. An unidentifiable one. He stubbornly decided to change. The congress of nature and the universe within himself made him a different guy.¹⁰⁷ He wanted the excitement of becoming something else. Everything else was superfluous, unnecessary, dispensable.

V. Conclusions

Becoming is the philosophical expression of the evasion of forms and boundary crossings-beings.¹⁰⁸ *Evasion* is an important concept because it refers to the possibility of intentionally avoiding the conceptual persona of an identity, the psychological type it can represent, and the material determinations of sociohistorical attributes of the body.¹⁰⁹ More than that, becoming is about inventing possibilities beyond *moral formulas and ethical models*. Furthermore, it can be said that living is exciting and exceeds the idea of providing examples to people eager to engage in mimesis. In this sense, becoming is associated with the experienced realities of beings undergoing intensive affective transformation and irreproducible experiences that transcend their singularity.

Something important to understand is that becoming is a notion firmly attached to the idea that there are no universals and that describing and comprehending reality concerns interrogating entities and

1993), 72-75; Michael Hardt, "The Power to be Affected," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28, no. 3 (2015): 217-220; Alice Jardine, "Woman in Limbo: Deleuze and His Br(others)," *Substance* 13, no. 4 (1984): 52-55; David Morley, *The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 64-87; Maurits van Bever Donker, Ross Truscott, Gary Minkley, and Premesh Lalu, *Remains of the Social. Desiring the Post-Apartheid* (Wits University Press, 2017), 225-248.

¹⁰⁶ Krakauer, 47.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁰⁸ Courtnie N. Wolfgang, "Productive Uncertainties: Deleuze and Guattari, Feminism Theory, and Disciplinary Boundary Crossings," *Arts Research* 39, no. 1 (2013): 52-69.

¹⁰⁹ François Jullien, *Vital Nourishment. Departing from Happiness* (Zone Books, 2007); François Jullien, *There Is No Such Thing as Cultural Identity* (Polity, 2021).

their living conditions to discover action possibilities. Becoming is based on the same ontological assumption that reality is neither about unities nor totalities but multiplicities, movement and change. Reality is itself multiple and designates agency and existential dimensions that are irreducible to one another.¹¹⁰

In this context, our argumentative premise is that expressive practices represent the multiplicity of reality.

Occasionally, writers think about precisely that: the excitement of walking through unknown territories; the experience of alternatives and the adventure of being someone else. *In the Margins* by Elena Ferrante.¹¹¹ *The Art of the Novel* by Milan Kundera.¹¹² *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*.¹¹³ Writers of different kinds employ similar vocabulary to describe entrances, exits, language play, experiences, working habits, composition, incubation, forms, qualities, notebooks, deadlines, imprecisions... It is never about the writers' stamina pushing their urgent desires for success by following commonly accepted genres, profitable topics, and conventional matters. Of course, some will intentionally write to obtain lucrative contracts. That is fine. In any case, standards are often seen as enemies of creativity, despite their potential for high content consumption rates. Allies of imagination are elsewhere and cannot be formulated as instructions.¹¹⁴

The Lover and *Going Into the Wild* unfold the existential problem of becoming different. That means they are not about The Family, The Father, the Mother, The Past and Future, The Hero, The Good and The Bad, The monster and The Victim, etc. Those are names for common sense. On the contrary, *The Lover* and *Going Into the Wild* dramatize the performance of transformation, which refers to the play of forms and contents that transcends individualization by identity.

¹¹⁰ Graeme Harper, "Making Connections: Creative Writing in the 21st Century," *New Writing. The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* 8, no. 3 (2011): 203-205; Gilles Deleuze, "Literature and Life," *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 2 (1997): 225-230; Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II* (Columbia University Press, 2007); Thomas Nail, *Matter and Motion. A Brief History of Kinetic Materialism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Thomas Nail, *Being and Motion* (Oxford University Press, 2018); Peter Sloterdijk, *The Aesthetic Imperative: Writings on Art* (Polity, 2017).

¹¹¹ Elena Ferrante, *In the Margins* (Europa Editions, 2022).

¹¹² Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (Faber & Faber, 2020).

¹¹³ Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (Scribner, 2000).

¹¹⁴ Rosi Braidotti, "Affirmative Ethics and Generative Life," *Deleuze and Guattari Studies* 13, no. 4 (2022): 463-481; Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Polity, 2006).

§1

So, what is it to live? It is ruminating on expressive materials and living circumstances. It is the task of purposely abandoning formats, existing rules, habits, manners of speaking, idiosyncratic formulas, nationalistic utterances, standardized sentences, publishing requirements, audience demands, scholarly fashions... Accepting that implies questions are open. When and how does one become differently? By rejecting cultural figures? By fighting social determinations? By discovering a proper identity? By protesting? We can do that. However, is there an alternative?

§2

There is no necessity to draw strict starting and ending points at the level of compositional processes. As we have said, considerations about identity can be avoided. In contrast, it is perfectly possible to think about complex experiences that involve situations, feelings, thoughts, objects, personages, possibilities, conversations, and so on. Why should we limit our existential seeking to mothers, Fathers, Women, and Men, Repressors and the repressed, Authoritarians and followers, when there are so many exciting events, people trying to find other worlds, and capable living beings experimenting with forms and scenarios?

The notion of becoming provides a perspective on researching the geography of changing events. The conceptual value of the concept of becoming lies in its orientation of research toward the open scenarios of lives undergoing experiments with reality and capabilities. It says nothing about the essence of reality. It says nothing about how it must be. Instead, the concept of becoming grounds an authentic curiosity about processes that are immanent, pulsing within the time and space of what is happening in reality. Even more than that. Becoming supports a conceptually grounded perspective because it signals pulsing identity formation processes irreducible to past events, future goals, and sanctioned rules. It is better to say that becoming expresses itself as involuting. Neither regressing nor progressing: becoming is about considering unlimited transformation processes that should be interrogated within their own procedures and dynamics.

§3

To become is not a metaphor. It is not a conceptual device for describing identities, but rather a methodological perspective that enables consideration of metamorphosis. Ultimately, it is about considering creative opportunities that arise from individuals becoming different through existential exploration.

Transformations require materials and enabling scenarios. Transformation also implies activities: thinking differently, sensing differently, walking differently, believing and feeling differently... Becoming involves action. For that reason, it demands actual realization. It cannot be separated from form and content. It is critical to describe what is changing following its movement of change, as well as the materials at play in the transformation processes themselves.

One of us. We can always want to belong. Identities are the expression of that will. On the other hand, by extraction, we can become de-identified beings. *Outsiders.* No identities. No images. No models. No standards. No meanings. Indeed, becoming is a demanding concept. Is it better to escape than to struggle? Becoming does not refer to ethical or political imperatives. It does not say you must change the system and fight oppressive majorities. It can be acknowledged that these issues are necessary in the political realm. However, it is also true that other conceptual tools will help find reasons to fight in that territory.¹¹⁵ Becoming embodies a different conceptual calling because it summons the power of living in transit and our navigational skills to discover changing possibilities.

How to change? How to become? The answer to these questions should be discovered. It does not matter if you are a woman or a man, a person ambiguously experimenting with those marks, or an individual rejecting them in the name of radical ambiguity. Again, becoming is not about identity. It is not about values, beliefs, preferences, etc. It is about the uncontrollable desire to escape and fly, creating a habitable scenario where unobstructed movement is possible and fresh living options are available.

§4

Too man-like. Not too man-like. Too womanly-sweet. Not too sweet. Too smart. Too stupid. Too honest. Too snobbish. Sexy and beautiful. Strong and indifferent. Handsome. Hot and rich. Profound. Superficial. Extremely worried about body, fashion, expected manners, and social obligations. Successful. A failure. No. It is better to be an intellectual. No. You must be a warrior – an activist, if that is a preferable expression. Punk instead of being a doll. Workers, social democrats, Right-wing, unprogressive, angry people, Leftists who do not want only to produce money and things, etc. Do not be concerned about power and control. No. Fight for them. It is your life at stake. No. Instead, be kind and be aware of the importance of institutions. Be comprehensive. Follow the rules. Be assertive while demon-

¹¹⁵ Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (Verso, 2010); Christopher Dunn-Chase and Paul Almeida, *Global Struggles and Social Change: From Prehistory to World Revolution in the Twenty-First Century* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022).

strating your ability to inspire and support others. Put food on the table. Pay taxes. It is what we should do. Or is that a historically invented task and a culturally invented tag? Society is oppressive. Who cares about socially determined roles? Resistance must lead everyone. Change the system. You have to go on the streets and struggle. You cannot be passively regarded as waiting for change. You must act. However, social transitions take time. And this life is short. Should I spend my life without recognition and social relevance? Should I sacrifice myself in the name of social justice, progress, equality, etc., knowing those things seem unreachable? Again, this life is too short. How can I change? Do I have to change the world or myself? Is it the other way around, indeed?

Should we live as a woman or as a man? Should we live inside box identities? Is everything dictated from the outside? Should we talk, feel, write, work, believe, think, express, etc., as others usually do? Should all belong to others? Living in a community is necessary. Mountains, rivers, cities, cars, roads, cellphones, computers, buildings, planets, stars, oxygen, water, the Sun, etc. We live among things, sharing the existence of time. Does that mean we must obey what is told from the beginning to the end? At the edge of the social: can we be seriously rebellious? How can we do that?

The central assertion here is that there are no pre-formed answers to those questions. They have to be invented. It is necessary to make fun of normative imperatives to embody fluid boundaries. *The Lover* and *Into the Wild* are not examples. They are singular experiments materializing creative possibilities. In any case, they highlight a problem that we should take seriously in a broader context. *How is it possible to play with reality in the middle of the living and the multiple?* “Women have traditionally known nothing will grow within a closed ‘I.’ [...] One began to be tired of ‘I.’”¹¹⁶ Hannah Arendt: “Why? How? What? I know the answer has to be somewhere out there in the wonderful wide world. I know it.”¹¹⁷ Ultimately, becoming is about nourishing curiosity, self-dispossession, and having the guts to embark on long journeys into the real and the wild as attempts to escape the normal, the expected, the polarized, and the circumscribed by the desire to navigate the unknown.

§5

These considerations are open to diverse research developments: from the notion that there is no such thing as identity and the study of the concept of the common as the boundaryless scenario of living among others (including

¹¹⁶ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Penguin Random House Canada, 2017), 70.

¹¹⁷ Ken Krimstein, *The Three Escapes of Hannah Arendt. A Tyranny of Truth* (Bloomsbury, 2023), 5.

non-human beings) to the idea of the monster – the ever-changing emergence of human forms, involving monstrification and outsidership.

What is the meaning of being different? What is the price of challenging social limits and blurring historical customs by exploring existential possibilities?

In the context of cultural history and the archaeology of human forms, two recent references similarly illustrate the question raised by the argument developed here: Surekha Davies's *Renaissance Ethnography and the Invention of the Human*¹¹⁸ and *Humans: A Monstrous History*.¹¹⁹

Complementarily, in the context of ontology and ethics, it would be interesting to explore *After Ethnos*¹²⁰ and *The Philosophy of Movement. An Introduction* by Thomas Nail¹²¹ and Andrew Hui's *A Theory of Aphorism: From Confucius to Twitter*.¹²²

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¹¹⁸ Surekha Davies, *Renaissance Ethnography and the Invention of the Human* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹¹⁹ Surekha Davies, *Humans: A Monstrous History* (University of California Press, 2025).

¹²⁰ Tobias Rees, *After Ethnos* (Duke University Press, 2018).

¹²¹ Thomas Nail, *The Philosophy of Movement. An Introduction* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024).

¹²² Andrew Hui, *A Theory of the Aphorism. From Confucius to Twitter* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

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The Fragility of Truth: Skimming through Noise and Bias in the Post-Truth Era

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Abstract

In today's society, where false information is widely spread and noise makes accurate information elusive, the concept of truth faces constant assault. This situation emphasizes the harm caused by disinformation and underscores the necessity for individuals to develop critical thinking skills to navigate through the sea of misleading noise. The present paper also explores the phenomenon of "post-truth," where subjective opinions and feelings often override objective facts, significantly influencing people's reactions. Furthermore, this investigation sheds light on the intricate relationship between information credibility and public perception by examining the decline of trust in scientific discoveries and the subsequent emergence of fact-checkers as a response to the erosion of factual information's trustworthiness.

Keywords: *post-truth; bullshit; disinformation; truth; noise*

I. Introduction

The concept of truth is the subject of extensive philosophical debate, which has led to the formation of various theories. Among the most prominent are correspondence theory, coherence theory, deflationary theory, and pragmatic theory. It is worth noting that this topic remains an area of intense research in the current context, where the value of truth is under fierce attack. This paper aims

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to bring multiple perspectives to the fore, particularly through the lens of disinformation, stressing the importance of developing the necessary skills to better defend against all aspects of noise. The relationship between factual incorrectness and conspiratorial thinking requires careful epistemological consideration. Noise refers to anything that is factually incorrect, malicious, or conspiratorial. However, the term ‘conspiratorial’ here warrants a nuanced understanding. As Dentith demonstrates, treating conspiracy theories as a monolithic category oversimplifies their epistemic status, arguing instead that evaluative criteria should serve as useful guidelines or considerations for the appraising of particular conspiracy theories.¹ In contrast, Boudry and Napolitano specifically reject the particularism distinction that Dentith employs and adopt the term ‘conspiracy theory’ as having a pejorative sense, whereas Dentith opts for a minimal definition. Despite these differences in approach, both perspectives highlight the importance of examining the evidential foundations of conspiracy claims. In this context, ‘conspiratorial’ specifically refers to claims that lack sufficient evidential support or methodological rigor, rather than any claim involving conspiracy, as some conspiracy claims are well-documented and evidentially supported.²

This present paper argues that effectively combating disinformation requires a multidimensional approach that integrates both epistemological and psychological insights. By examining the interplay between bullshit receptivity, noise in judgment, and the emotional appeal of conspiracy theories, the paper argues that current fact-checking approaches alone are insufficient, but nevertheless, one can have the liberty to assess claims based on factual information without being called a modern inquisitor. Instead, countering disinformation requires addressing three distinct but interconnected dimensions: cognitive biases in information processing, the role of emotional resonance in belief formation, and the social-linguistic mechanisms that enable misinformation to spread. Recent discourse positioning fact-checking as a form of censorship fundamentally misapprehends the epistemological function of verification in public discourse. This paper does not advocate for an unequivocal defense of fact-checkers, but rather seeks to situate fact-checking within its proper epistemic context. It is particularly noteworthy that free speech absolutists who defend the propa-

¹ Matthew R. X. Dentith, “Some Conspiracy Theories,” *Social Epistemology* 37, no. 4 (2023): 526-530.

² Matthew R. X. Dentith and Melina Tsapos, “Why We Should Talk about Generalism and Particularism: A Reply to Boudry and Napolitano,” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 13, no. 10 (2024): 57.

gation of climate change denial as an exercise of free expression often object to independent fact-checking organizations providing contextual labels and empirical data.³ This represents a striking logical inconsistency: if the free marketplace of ideas is to function effectively, then the provision of additional context and verifiable data should be welcomed as an enhancement of discourse rather than condemned as suppression. The crux of the matter lies not in whether fact-checking should exist, but in understanding its role as an epistemic tool that enriches rather than constrains public debate.

The crisis of contemporary public discourse around disinformation must be understood through Habermas's foundational analysis of the public sphere's structural transformation. Habermas argues that the bourgeois public sphere emerged as "the sphere of private people come together as a public,"⁴ characterized by rational-critical debate rather than the representation of power. This ideal of reasoned discourse provides a crucial framework for understanding current epistemic challenges. The deterioration of public discourse that Habermas identifies begins with what he terms the "re-feudalization" of the public sphere.⁵ In this process, private interests increasingly colonize public debate, transforming citizens from active participants into passive consumers. Particularly relevant to current disinformation challenges is his observation that "critical publicity is supplanted by manipulative publicity."⁶ where the goal becomes manufacturing consent rather than facilitating genuine debate. Habermas's analysis of how public discussion has become a consumer good⁷ precisely anticipates our current crisis, where algorithmically-driven social media platforms optimize for engagement rather than truth. His critique of how "rational-critical debate has a tendency to be replaced by consumption"⁸ speaks directly to how disinformation spreads in today's digital ecosystem. Most crucially for the present paper's analysis, Habermas describes how the commercial-

³ Wudan Yan, "Încălzirea Globală, Pusă Pe Seama Unor Evenimente Climatice Din Trecut – Dezinformările Din Social Media," *Factual*, July 21, 2022, <https://factual.ro/dezinformare/dezinformare-incalzirea-globala-pusa-pe-seama-unor-evenimente-climatice-din-trecut/>. This case study from Romania illustrates how a TV presenter repeatedly challenged fact-checkers by making science denial claims regarding climate change.

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (MIT Press, 1994).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

ization of the press led to a situation where “the public sphere becomes the court before whose public prestige can be displayed – rather than in which public critical debate is carried on.”⁹ This transformation maps directly onto current tensions around fact-checking, where the performance of truth-telling often supersedes genuine epistemic inquiry.

However, Habermas’s account also suggests potential remedies. His description of the original coffee houses and salons as spaces where “private people come together as a public”¹⁰ through the “parity of ‘common humanity’”¹¹ offers a model for how fact-checking might be reconceptualized: not as authoritative pronouncement, but as part of a broader project of collaborative truth-seeking. This connects to his emphasis on how the early bourgeois public sphere was characterized by “people’s public use of their reason.”¹² In our contemporary context, fact-checking could be understood not as censorship but as facilitating exactly this kind of reasoned public discourse, providing the shared epistemic foundation necessary for meaningful debate. The challenge, as Habermas notes, is that “the public sphere with which the eighteenth century had begun started to come apart at the seams”¹³ as it expanded. This tension between inclusivity and the maintenance of critical standards remains central to current debates about disinformation and fact-checking.

II. Knowledge, manipulation, and the battle for truth

Knowledge is powerful. In 1504, Christopher Columbus was stranded in Jamaica on his fourth trans-Atlantic voyage. Stranded by running out of supplies along with his crew and two ships. Knowing that some of his men were coming to help him, but lacking resources, he had to find a way to stall for time. Columbus, being scientifically literate, carried with him astronomical tables indicating that a lunar eclipse was coming. Taking advantage of the knowledge he possessed and aware that the natives did not have access to his knowledge, Columbus resorted to manipulation. He told the natives that his God would darken the moon. The natives laughed at first, but when the eclipse began, they reconsidered their decision. Columbus retreated to his cabin to nego-

⁹ Ibid., 201.

¹⁰ Ibid., 27.

¹¹ Ibid., 36.

¹² Ibid., 27.

¹³ Ibid., 141.

tiate with his God, and after the eclipse was over, the natives were convinced of his powers and offered him everything they needed until their rescue.¹⁴

The natives were victims of a hoax. Although this example seems far-fetched, it is relevant to the times we live in. Various protagonists choose to misinform the public, not out of a lack of knowledge but rather out of a lack of conscience, pursuing their own self-interest at the expense of the common good. This illustrates a broader phenomenon that Stamatiadis-Bréhier terms “second-order conspiracies” (SOCs), where certain actors deliberately conspire to create and disseminate conspiracy theories for specific ends. As he defines it, “a conspiracy C is a second-order conspiracy of conspiracy theory T if C is, in some important way, the reason why T exists.”¹⁵ This framework helps us understand how deliberate misinformation campaigns operate systematically rather than emerging spontaneously. Particularly relevant are what Stamatiadis-Bréhier calls “denial industries,” which create and spread conspiracy theories for monetary gain, such as the anti-vaccine industry’s multimillion-dollar ecosystem of companies that profit both from spreading vaccine hesitancy and selling “solutions” to manufactured problems. The genealogical approach proposed by Stamatiadis-Bréhier for evaluating conspiracy theories suggests examining their origins rather than just their content, as this reveals the deliberate nature of their creation and the self-interested motivations behind them. This framework demonstrates how hoaxes and misinformation campaigns are often not simply matters of misunderstanding or genuine belief, but rather calculated efforts by actors who, “not out of lack of knowledge but rather out of lack of conscience,” pursue their interests at the expense of truth and public good. The sophistication of these operations is evident in their comprehensive approach, spanning multiple media channels, creating seemingly independent but connected organizations, and strategically undermining legitimate expertise – all while maintaining plausible deniability about their coordinated nature.¹⁶ A second-order conspiracy refers to a deliberate effort to create and disseminate conspiracy theories, with two key aspects: (1) it can generate either single or multiple conspiracy theories, and (2) it involves a designed, methodical process of creation and distribution. The text uses two examples: anti-vaccine groups creating vaccine-re-

¹⁴ William F. Rigge, “The Columbus Eclipse,” *Popular Astronomy* 31, no. 506 (1923): 506.

¹⁵ Alexios Stamatiadis-Bréhier, “Genealogical Undermining for Conspiracy Theories,” *Inquiry* (2023): 1-27, 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3-5.

lated conspiracies and fossil fuel industries fabricating climate change denial theories. Both employ sophisticated techniques like “repackaging,” where the same conspiracy is tailored for different audiences – such as presenting mRNA vaccine conspiracies differently to Black communities versus prospective mothers, or how climate change denial narratives have evolved from complete denial to questioning human responsibility.¹⁷

The Columbus example parallels what Keeley identifies as “conspiracy politics” rather than genuine conspiracy theory. Like Alex Jones, Columbus knowingly manipulated beliefs not to explain reality, but to achieve specific goals (in his case, survival). This aligns with Keeley’s distinction between conspiracy theorists, who genuinely seek explanations, and those who engage in deceptive manipulation for personal gain. Keeley’s framework helps distinguish between:

1. Genuine conspiracy theorists investigating real concerns (like Watergate).
2. “Conspiracy liars” who knowingly spread false information for profit/influence.
3. “Bullshitters” who are indifferent to truth and focused on manipulation.

This maps onto Stamatiadis-Bréhier’s concept of “second-order conspiracies” – both identify systematic manipulation by actors who understand the truth but choose deception for personal gain. The “denial industries” that Stamatiadis-Bréhier describes match Keeley’s analysis of conspiracy politics aimed at undermining trust and creating chaos for profit.

The key insight combining both perspectives is that the most dangerous actors aren’t misguided conspiracy theorists, but rather knowledgeable manipulators who, like Columbus, exploit information asymmetries for personal advantage while undermining public trust. This helps explain why examining the origins and motivations behind conspiracy claims, rather than just their content, is crucial for understanding their true nature and impact.¹⁸

Today, we live in a system where relativity often trumps reality. While it is true that data can be selectively presented to support various narratives, this does not mean that truth itself is unattainable or

¹⁷ Alexios Stamatiadis-Bréhier, “The Power of Second-Order Conspiracies,” *Inquiry* 68, no. 8 (2024): 2633-2634.

¹⁸ Brian L. Keeley, “Conspiracy Theorists Are Not the Problem; Conspiracy Liars Are,” *Inquiry* 68, no. 8 (2024): 2753-2762.

irrelevant. Rather, it underscores the importance of methodological rigor, transparency, and verification in data interpretation. Being 'pro-truth' entails recognizing these challenges and striving to mitigate them through critical inquiry and evidence-based reasoning, rather than succumbing to radical skepticism. As D' Ancona argues, in the post-truth era, the credibility of a statement hinges more on its emotional appeal than on factual accuracy.¹⁹ Let us start with the surrealist painter René Magritte's "The Treachery of Images." In the painting, we obviously see a representation of a pipe accompanied by the text "*Ceci n' est pas une pipe.*" Thus, we have a representation of a familiar and easily identifiable object and a text that contradicts our actual knowledge of what we instantly identify as a pipe. According to one perspective, Magritte's work resembles the saussurean linguistic, where words are not in direct reference to things.²⁰ As put in the book *This is not a Pipe*, "the painter's images do not really 'resemble' anything whose sovereign presence would lend it the aspect of a model or origin."²¹ This perspective criticizes the concept of resemblance by considering that when a thing resembles another thing, the latter "is somehow ontologically superior [...], more 'real' than the former."²² Thus, the conventional idea of representation and the notion of a singular objective reality are undermined. Reality is not entirely fixed, as social conventions play a significant role in shaping aspects of our world. For instance, concepts like money, legal systems, and language exist primarily due to social agreement. However, this does not imply that all aspects of reality are purely conventional. Certain fundamental truths – such as gravity, mathematical principles, and biological processes – exist independently of human perception. Even in cases where social and objective factors interact, such as time measurement or economic markets, there remain underlying physical or structural constraints that conventions cannot override. Thus, while social conventions shape much of our lived experience, not everything is reducible to them. Michel Foucault expresses the following about the writing that accompanies the painting, which clearly represents a pipe: "Take me for what I manifestly am – letters placed beside one another, arranged and shaped so as to facilitate reading, assure recognition, and open themselves even to the most

¹⁹ Matthew D' Ancona, *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (Ebury Press, 2017), 53.

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. and ed. James Harkness (University of California Press, 1983), 7-8.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

stammering schoolboy. I do not claim to swell, then stretch, becoming first the bowl, then the stem of the pipe. I am no more than the words you are now reading.”²³ Thus, one can understand from this statement that on some level the text of the painting is right; what we see is not a pipe but only the visual representation of it, which is an insistence on symbolism in the context of the physical world.

The tension between representation and reality that Magritte and Foucault explore takes on new urgency in our contemporary media landscape. The painting’s declaration that ‘this is not a pipe’ beneath an unmistakable image of one reveals a fundamental truth about representation that becomes crucial for understanding modern disinformation: the gap between sign and referent can be exploited while maintaining technical truth. Just as Foucault notes that the text speaks truth on one level (these are indeed just marks on canvas), sophisticated disinformation often operates in this liminal space between representation and reality. When the text asserts ‘I am no more than the words you are now reading,’ it highlights how representations can simultaneously tell truth and mislead – a dynamic that characterizes much of modern media manipulation. This self-referential commentary on representation anticipates how contemporary disinformation requires us to question not just individual claims, but the very nature of how meaning and truth are constructed through media. Thus, the painting’s paradox illuminates not just philosophical questions about representation, but practical challenges in navigating an information environment where the relationship between signs and reality is increasingly complex and deliberately manipulated.

III. Considerations on bullshit – or everything against truth

Harry Frankfurt describes our culture as one rife with what we colloquially call bullshit, to which the author argues we all contribute.²⁴ Frankfurt’s work draws attention to the insincere discourse in our contemporary society. Take political communication, for instance, which is often laden with what can be lumped under the umbrella of bullshit. A politician running for office may come up with a revolutionary promise like health care reform. It is, of course, a worthy goal to pursue, but without a strategy, these words turn into deception, part of disingenuous communication. Another example of where we run into such hollow rhetoric comes from the advertising field, from anti-aging skin care creams to deals that trig-

²³ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁴ Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 1.

ger in us FOMO (fear of missing out) by using the terms of a limited offer or exclusive deal, all warrant bullshit. This phenomenon parallels what we observe in the realm of conspiracy theory entrepreneurship, where certain individuals have transformed the dissemination of alternative narratives into profitable business ventures. As Harambam demonstrates, prominent figures like Alex Jones and David Icke have successfully monetized conspiracy theories through multiple channels, including books, documentaries, websites, and even merchandise.²⁵ Their business model extends beyond mere content creation to include “shops that sell, besides their own videos and books, many different products, mostly in the realm of alternative healing and food supplements.”²⁶ This commercialization of conspiracy theories reveals how entrepreneurial figures can capitalize on people’s search for hidden truths, much like how advertisers exploit consumers’ insecurities and fears.

As Frankfurt argues, bullshit is differentiated from lying, which involves intentionally stating something false, by the fact that it creates a facade that can be devoid of any meaningful content.²⁷ Bullshit does not necessarily focus on the accuracy or truthfulness of the information, but on the appearance of authenticity or importance of the subject. Thus, for Frankfurt, the lack of authenticity is worse than falsehood. Through bullshit, you can mislead by pretending to cover important but unfounded information. The emphasis is mostly on persuasion. Frankfurt’s seminal distinction between bullshit and lying turns on the former’s fundamental indifference to truth. For him, bullshit is not simply falsehood but a performative act, one that disregards the truth-value of its claims in favor of constructing a facade of authenticity.²⁸ Bullshit, in this sense, is not concerned with deception per se but with persuasion, often leveraging emotional resonance over factual rigor. This framework aptly captures how politicians, influencers, and media personalities weaponize ambiguity to manufacture credibility.²⁹ However, while Frankfurt’s account illuminates individual speech acts, it fails to account for the systemic evolution of bullshit – a phenomenon that has become especially pervasive in digitally mediated societies.

To bridge this gap, contemporary philosophers have expanded Frankfurt’s theory to incorporate structural, ethical, and epistemic di-

²⁵ Jaron Harambam, “Conspiracy Theory Entrepreneurs, Movements and Individuals,” in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, eds. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (Routledge, 2020), 280.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Frankfurt, 47.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 33

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

mensions of misinformation. A key limitation of Frankfurt's model is its focus on individual intent, which overlooks how digital platforms incentivize bullshit as a collective practice. As Nguyen argues, social media transforms bullshit into epistemic pollution: users are not rewarded for truthfulness but for maximizing engagement, often through sensationalism or moral grandstanding.³⁰ Unlike Frankfurt's solitary bullshitter, algorithmic platforms foster echo chambers in which epistemically unreliable claims circulate unchecked, further detaching public discourse from truth-seeking.³¹ This structural dimension amplifies bullshit's harm, making disinformation the norm rather than an aberration. Beyond digital platforms, Frankfurt's theory also neglects the social mechanisms that legitimize bullshit. O'Connor and Weatherall illustrate how false beliefs often spread not through individual malice but through epistemic network failures – for instance, through institutional distrust or partisan clustering.³² Consider, for example, the persistence of anti-vaccine rhetoric. Its traction does not stem solely from the mendacity of its proponents but from a broader crisis of credibility, in which scientific institutions are framed as untrustworthy. This epistemic breakdown creates fertile ground for bullshit to masquerade as alternative expertise.³³ In this light, bullshit is not merely a matter of individual bad faith but a product of structural epistemic erosion – a dimension that Frankfurt's individualistic framework fails to capture.

Frankfurt also treats bullshit as an issue of moral negligence, a stance that Seana Shiffrin complicates by distinguishing deception (intentional lying) from misleading (a careless disregard for truth).³⁴ On Frankfurt's terms, bullshit often falls into the latter category. However, as Shiffrin argues, misleading speech can be equally corrosive, for it exploits the audience's implicit trust in the norms of communication. A politician, for instance, may evade direct questions with vague, impassioned rhetoric, without outright lying. While this may not involve an intent to deceive, it nevertheless degrades democratic deliberation by normalizing vacuous discourse. This reframing shifts the ethical analysis of bullshit from a failure of individual integrity to a broader collapse of communicative responsibility.

³⁰ C. Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," *Episteme* 17, no. 2 (2020): 151.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 13-15.

³² Cailin O'Connor and James Owen Weatherall, *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread* (Yale University Press, 2019), 73-75.

³³ *Ibid.*, 132.

³⁴ Seana Valentine Shiffrin, *Speech Matters: On Lying, Morality, and the Law* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 135.

Moreover, Frankfurt's analysis is curiously apolitical, overlooking the unequal distribution of bullshit's harms. Drawing on Miranda Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice, we can see how bullshit disproportionately targets marginalized groups by preying on existing epistemic inequities.³⁵ Take, for example, the proliferation of medical misinformation in Black and Hispanic communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to historical marginalization from healthcare institutions, bullshit claims often appeared more credible than expert guidance, reinforcing cycles of epistemic disenfranchisement. This dimension – the way bullshit weaponizes preexisting structures of oppression – remains absent in Frankfurt's analysis. Finally, Quassim Cassam challenges Frankfurt's implicit emphasis on individual blame, arguing instead that systemic misinformation arises from collective epistemic vices – such as institutional laziness or societal gullibility.³⁶ While Frankfurt focuses on the bullshitter as an isolated agent, Cassam highlights how bullshit's success depends on an audience conditioned to value emotional appeal over critical scrutiny. For instance, clickbait journalism flourishes not merely because writers generate it, but because readers reward it, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of epistemic decay. In this view, the challenge is not merely to condemn bullshitters but to interrogate our own complicity in the structures that sustain them.

Thus, while Frankfurt's framework offers a compelling starting point for understanding bullshit, it remains insufficient in an era where misinformation is not merely an individual act but a structurally embedded practice. By expanding the analysis to include digital incentives, epistemic networks, and structural inequities, contemporary theorists expose bullshit's deeper social, ethical, and epistemic entanglements – a shift that demands not just a critique of the bullshitter, but a reckoning with the conditions that make bullshit so dangerously effective.

There have been recent attempts to explain empirically what bullshit is and what makes people fall prey to it. One study suggests that there may be a common psychological factor or factors that link receptivity or susceptibility to accepting various types of bullshit. It mentions pseudo-profound bullshit, which consists of abstract buzzwords arranged randomly in a sentence, and fake news headlines, which lack concern for the truth. Despite their differences, both can be categorized as bullshit. The study found that individuals who rated

³⁵ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 44-49.

³⁶ Quassim Cassam, *Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 89-95.

random bullshit sentences as profound were more likely to perceive fake news as accurate.³⁷ This suggests a positive correlation between the propensity to accept different types of bullshit and the perception of fake news accuracy. The term “fake news” is widely used in public discourse, but it remains a subject of academic debate, with scholars such as Habgood-Coote (2019) arguing that it is an imprecise and problematic concept. Nevertheless, in this study, we use the term as it aligns with common usage in media research and public understanding, while recognizing its contested nature.³⁸ However, the passage also highlights that prototypically profound (non-bullshit) sentences did not consistently correlate with judgments of fake news accuracy when controlling for bullshit receptivity. This suggests that the ability to detect bullshit is distinct from the capacity or willingness to think analytically. In other words, some individuals may be better at identifying bullshit, even if they are not necessarily highly analytical thinkers. Furthermore, the study found a strong positive association between over claiming (indicating prior knowledge about fabricated historical names, events, and topics in the physical sciences) and perceptions of fake news accuracy.³⁹

Author Daniel Kahneman and colleagues offer the following perspective: “to understand error in judgment, we must understand both bias and noise.”⁴⁰ Hence, they introduce a sensitive point, especially in our contemporary society – namely, noise. This perspective comes in a context where bias is always brought up when a decision may turn out to be wrong, but our judgment is also significantly affected by the surrounding noise. To illustrate what noise means, the authors come up with some real-life examples, such as medicine, particularly psychiatry, where subjective judgments are involved. At the same time, noise is also found in the field of radiology, where X-ray interpretation should be much more objective. Other examples extend to the decision on whether to grant asylum to a person who wants to move to the United States, job interviews and even forensic science, all of which are in one

³⁷ Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand, “Who Falls for Fake News? The Roles of Bullshit Receptivity, Overclaiming, Familiarity, and Analytic Thinking,” *Journal of Personality* 88, no. 2 (2019): 190-191.

³⁸ Joshua Habgood-Coote, “Stop Talking about Fake News!” *Inquiry* 62, nos. 9-10 (2018): 1041-1046.

³⁹ Pennycook and Rand, 190-191.

⁴⁰ Daniel Kahneman, Olivier Sibony, and Cass R. Sunstein, *Noise: A Flaw in Human Judgment* (Little, Brown Spark, 2021), 12.

way or another tainted by noise.⁴¹ Reflecting on these considerations, it becomes clear that combating bullshit and pursuing truth require both individual discernment and a collective commitment to honesty and authenticity. We must cultivate our ability to identify and reject bullshit, while also recognizing the impact of noise on our judgment. By valuing truth over manipulation and striving to reduce noise in our decision-making processes, we can contribute to a society that upholds the importance of genuine communication and accurate information.

IV. Post-truth and the current paradigm

The problem of countering disinformation poses a philosophical burden, one could argue. Not only because it requires answering some important questions such as what is truth, how can we determine what is a reliable source, and what are the criteria for establishing validity in information, questions that concern ethics and epistemology. Another reason is that, for a fact-checker or for people trying to counter this harmful phenomenon, this task seems like a *Sisyphian* task; for every lie debunked, ten others appear in its place. The issue of hostile epistemology⁴² and extreme skepticism and absurdism raises legitimate concerns about the credibility of fact-checking, particularly in environments where misinformation thrives. As Brian Keeley puts it, a conspiracy theorist embraces hyperskepticism, assuming large-scale deception by institutions, rather than accepting a world that appears irrational and meaningless.⁴³ This epistemological tension helps explain why unfalsifiable conspiracy theories persist – until a viable third option emerges, they will likely remain influential. In this light, fact-checking efforts risk being dismissed as part of the very dissimulation they seek to counter, as seen in cases like Joseph Mercola’s use of the fact-checking template to spread anti-vaccine misinformation. Moreover, as seen in cases like Joseph Mercola’s anti-vaccine rhetoric, fact-checking methods can be co-opted to undermine legitimate scientific consensus. This highlights the need for safeguards that ensure fact-checking remains a transparent and objective process.

One approach to addressing this challenge is ethical self-regulation, as seen in journalism. Organizations like the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) and the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) set clear guidelines to minimize bias and ensure

⁴¹ Ibid., 13-14.

⁴² C. Thi Nguyen, “Hostile Epistemology,” *Social Philosophy Today* 39 (2023): 11-15.

⁴³ Brian L. Keeley, “Of Conspiracy Theories,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 96, no. 3 (1999): 125-126.

methodological rigor. A key principle is that every fact-check should be replicable – a genuine fact-checker lays out the claims being assessed, the sources consulted, and the verification process so that any reader can independently reach the same conclusion. Transparency in methodology serves as the ultimate accountability mechanism, distinguishing genuine verification efforts from manipulative uses of the fact-checking format.

The emergence of ‘post-truth’ as a defining characteristic of contemporary discourse reflects a profound transformation in how societies negotiate the relationship between fact and belief. While Oxford Dictionaries’ recognition of ‘post-truth’ as 2016’s Word of the Year marked its lexical ascendance, this phenomenon transcends mere terminological novelty.⁴⁴ Scholars including Lee McIntyre and Steve Fuller situate this epistemic shift within broader philosophical and sociological frameworks. McIntyre posits that post-truth represents not merely an isolated cultural tendency, but rather a systematic degradation of institutional authority and expert knowledge, fundamentally accelerated by the fractured information landscapes of digital media.⁴⁵ Fuller’s analysis extends this perspective by illuminating how postmodern skepticism toward objective truth claims has been appropriated and repurposed within contemporary populist movements, transforming theoretical critiques of epistemological certainty into powerful tools of political mobilization.⁴⁶ The responses of people in different scenarios are therefore influenced more by emotions and personal beliefs than by objective facts. To illustrate how the post-truth burden works, let us consider some examples. We can find personal beliefs when it comes to climate change denial, where, despite scientific evidence pointing to anthropogenic causes, a significant part of the population remains skeptical about the impact humans have on climate change. In this case, personal beliefs play a more important role than scientific consensus.

Lee McIntyre surveys the ‘post-truth’ in his book, where he describes this phenomenon in which objective facts are disregarded. This trend stems from the fact that there is an increase in non-experts who question or disagree with scientific findings. Scientific results that go through a rigorous routine are therefore criticized by a growing group of people. It is important to mention that scientific results are constantly under scrutiny by scientists, which is an important aspect of sci-

⁴⁴ “Post-Truth,” *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, accessed July 4, 2023, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/post-truth>.

⁴⁵ Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (The MIT Press, 2018), 10-12.

⁴⁶ Steve Fuller, *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* (Anthem Press, 2018), 45-47.

ence.⁴⁷ The erosion of the credibility of science has a profound impact on the notion of truth in society. The emergence of the profession of fact-checker is a consequence of the decline of trust in facts, yet there is a danger in contemporary society, namely the lack of understanding of the work of a fact-checker. Although in the collective imagination the exercise is reminiscent of the Orwellian *Ministry of Truth*, whose windows are devoid of light,⁴⁸ making them appear secretive and bringing to mind the controlling and manipulative nature of government, the work is not about strictly controlling what is or is not true. As Jan Krasni argues, the concept of post-truth has evolved over the last three decades with the initial aim of criticizing the establishment media from an intellectual left point of view. However, the term has turned against its origins and now means the manipulation of public opinion through lies and emotional orchestration to support wrongdoing.⁴⁹ As the author continues, a significant development of the term happened in 2016, with the aim of criticizing fake news. The mainstream media, although a target of original criticism, positioned itself as an ideological opponent of post-truth without addressing the original point.⁵⁰

The philosophical burden of countering disinformation is exacerbated by the rapid proliferation of digital and social media platforms. These platforms have fundamentally transformed the landscape of information dissemination, making it easier for misinformation to spread widely and quickly. The ease with which false information can spread on these platforms underscores the urgency of developing effective strategies to counter disinformation. Philosophers such as Marshall McLuhan have long argued that the medium itself profoundly influences the message, a notion that is more pertinent than ever in the digital age. The properties of the media used to deliver information impact its content and perception. In the context of social media, the quick, fragmented, and emotionally charged character of communication fundamentally transforms how information is received and digested, frequently prioritizing speed and participation over accuracy and depth.

Moreover, the economic incentives for creating and spreading disinformation cannot be overlooked. Disinformation campaigns are frequently profitable, motivated by ad income, political ambitions, or other financial rewards. This economic dimension of fake news empha-

⁴⁷ McIntyre, 17.

⁴⁸ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four (1984)* (Penguin Books, 2000), 34.

⁴⁹ Jan Krasni, "How to Hijack a Discourse? Reflections on the Concepts of Post-Truth and Fake News," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7 (2020): 7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

sizes the importance of a holistic approach to countering disinformation, one that targets not only the cultural and philosophical issues, but also the financial reasons that drive it. The proliferation of disinformation represents not merely a sociocultural or ideological challenge, but rather constitutes a sophisticated commercial enterprise embedded within contemporary digital economies. As empirically demonstrated by Benkler, Faris, and Roberts in their seminal analysis, content aggregators and ideologically-driven media entities derive substantial financial benefits from the algorithmic amplification of inflammatory content, effectively monetizing audience outrage through targeted advertising mechanisms.⁵¹ A paradigmatic illustration emerged during the 2016 United States presidential election, wherein entrepreneurial actors in Macedonia systematically manufactured anti-Clinton narratives optimized for viral dissemination, thereby exemplifying how economic imperatives supersede purely political motivations in the disinformation landscape.⁵² This phenomenon is further perpetuated by major social media platforms, most notably Facebook, whose engagement-centric algorithmic architecture inherently privileges provocative content over factual accuracy, thereby fostering an ecosystem predicated on the commodification of misinformation.⁵³ Addressing this systemic challenge necessitates a robust regulatory framework targeting both content producers (through mechanisms such as financial penalties for demonstrably false content) and platform operators (via mandated transparency in content curation algorithms).

According to philosopher Jürgen Habermas, commercial interests have progressively invaded the public realm, undermining the circumstances required for rational-critical discourse.⁵⁴ In this sense, efforts to combat disinformation must address the economic systems that facilitate and promote the propagation of misleading information. The challenge of regulating social media platforms while upholding free expression presents a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, restricting harmful actors can curb the spread of disinformation; on the other, as Neil Levy warns, such measures risk entrenching existing power

⁵¹ Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 112-115.

⁵² Craig Silverman, "This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News on Facebook," *BuzzFeed News*, November 17, 2016, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook>.

⁵³ Sinan Aral, *The Hype Machine: How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy, and Our Health – and How We Must Adapt* (Crown Currency, 2020), 89-91.

⁵⁴ Habermas, 176.

structures if applied inconsistently or without clear, transparent standards.⁵⁵ This dilemma reflects a deeper philosophical concern: in seeking to combat falsehoods, governments and corporations may inadvertently gain greater power to silence dissent – often under the pretense of protecting the truth. A striking example of this paradox is the deliberate promotion of climate change denial, despite the overwhelming scientific consensus.⁵⁶ This case highlights how state actors themselves can manipulate information to serve political agendas, complicating the notion that government intervention alone can serve as a neutral safeguard against disinformation. To navigate this risk, principles of public reason, as articulated by Rawls, suggest that oversight mechanisms should be embedded within democratically accountable institutions rather than centralized authorities.⁵⁷ A more balanced approach may lie in fostering independent fact-checking networks and enforcing algorithmic transparency, as Benkler and colleagues propose.⁵⁸ These measures distribute epistemic authority more equitably, reducing the likelihood of both corporate and governmental manipulation. Ultimately, as Habermas reminds us, the strength of the public sphere does not depend on absolute free speech or heavy-handed regulation, but on institutions that ensure all voices can engage in meaningful, reasoned discourse – preserving what he calls “the parity of common humanity.”⁵⁹

The role of education, particularly media literacy, is crucial in this regard. Martha Nussbaum emphasizes the importance of cultivating critical thinking and the capacity for self-reflection as essential components of a well-functioning democracy.⁶⁰ By equipping individuals with the skills to critically evaluate sources and recognize misinformation, society can build resilience against the post-truth phenomenon. This educational approach aligns with the philosophical tradition of promoting autonomous thinking and skepticism, as advocated by thinkers like Immanuel Kant, who argued that enlightenment is the ability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another.⁶¹ In the

⁵⁵ Neil Levy, “No-Platforming and Higher-Order Evidence, or Anti-Anti-No-Platforming,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 5, no. 4 (2019): 100.

⁵⁶ Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 215-218.

⁵⁷ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 1993), 212.

⁵⁸ Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 327-330.

⁵⁹ Habermas, 36.

⁶⁰ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 45.

⁶¹ Immanuel Kant, “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?” *Berlinische Monatsschrift*

context of the post-truth era, fostering such intellectual independence and critical scrutiny is vital to counteracting the manipulative tactics of disinformation.

Legislation forcing political advertisements to reveal their financing sources, as well as making social media corporations accountable for the dissemination of disinformation, can help reduce the impact of fake news.⁶² The philosopher John Rawls' concept of "public reason" provides a valuable framework for considering the role of policy in establishing a democratic society that functions properly. Rawls defines public reason as the use of common reasoning principles that all citizens can accept, which is critical for maintaining a just and stable society.⁶³ Policies that improve media transparency and accountability can help to guarantee that the public sphere is a place for logical, critical discourse, rather than manipulation and deception.

The function of traditional media in the post-truth era is also worth considering. While traditional media outlets have been chastised for contributing to the spread of disinformation, they also have the potential to act as a barrier against it. Maintaining strong journalistic standards, emphasizing fact-based reporting, and cultivating a culture of critical inquiry in the newsroom are essential steps that conventional media may take to counteract the spread of misinformation. As philosopher Hannah Arendt points out, the search for truth is a necessary component of political action and public life.⁶⁴ Traditional media can assist in restoring public faith in factual reporting by adhering to strict journalistic principles and demonstrating a dedication to truth.

Although the concepts of truth and fact-checking are related, these activities are distinct. From a fact-checker's perspective, things go quite smoothly, they verify claims made in the public space, claims that should be based on certain facts available to anyone. From this point of view, the task of a fact-checker is to verify the reliability of claims and determine, based on the evidence, whether these claims are true. This is far from determining what is true and is merely a transparent method of verification without requiring anyone to believe or disbelieve a narrative. Fact-checking is not the sole determiner of truth;

Dezember-Heft (1784): 481.

⁶² Jon Penney, "Internet Surveillance, Regulation, and Chilling Effects Online: A Comparative Case Study," *Internet Policy Review* 6, no. 2 (2017): 4-7; Young Mie Kim et al., "The Stealth Media? Groups and Targets behind Divisive Issue Campaigns on Facebook," *Political Communication* 35, no. 4 (2018): 528-532.

⁶³ Rawls, 212.

⁶⁴ Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future* (Viking Press, 1961), 223.

rather, it plays a part in helping us understand what is true. Fact-checkers operate within the domain of evidence-based analysis. They have the responsibility of impartially evaluating claims using the information accessible to them at the time. Nevertheless, truth goes beyond the boundaries of fact-checking, encompassing individual perspectives, subjective encounters, and personal interpretations of the world. Society relies on fact-checking to verify the credibility and truthfulness of information in the public sphere. This important tool uncovers deception and promotes transparency. However, while fact-checking aids our comprehension of reality by examining assertions against evidence, it should not be seen as the ultimate arbiter of truth.

V. The importance of language in shaping reality

In the context of post-truth dynamics, language is not merely a means of communication but a powerful tool for shaping reality. The way information is framed, the words used, and the narratives constructed can determine what is perceived as true or false. This section explores how linguistic structures influence public perception and how they can be exploited to distort reality. Let us discuss the example brought up by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their book *The Social Construction of Reality*, where they come up with an example where personal experiences are transformed into shared knowledge through language. He describes a specific example within hunters, namely the loss of the hunting gun and hunting wild animals with bare hands; although it is a frightening experience and serves as a test of courage and skill, only a small proportion of individuals go through such an experience. When this experience is shared by multiple individuals, it has the potential to form a strong bond between them. Further, if this experience is transposed linguistically and passed on, it becomes accessible to individuals who have never experienced it, and language becomes an enabler of abstraction.⁶⁵ Promoting cultural continuity and the dissemination of norms and values, language allows for the conversion of individual experiences into collective knowledge.

It imparts the experience and its broader meanings to each new generation, or even transfers it to other cultures with different connotations. In an age of disinformation, it is crucial to cultivate media literacy and promote critical thinking to protect the integrity of collective knowledge. The objectification of experiences through language

⁶⁵ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Anchor Books, 1966), 86.

illustrates how individual encounters become part of shared knowledge among communities and generations. Nonetheless, this process can be exploited to manipulate collective knowledge and distort the truth in the context of disinformation and post-truth theory. The power of language to shape our understanding of the world emphasizes the need for a critical approach to information, ensuring that narratives are based on objective facts and evidence.

VI. The emotional appeal of conspiracy theories

Another factor that greatly strains the notion of truth is conspiracy theories that weave in people's imminent feelings of danger, fear, and uncertainty. From the famous Moon Hoax to the unfortunate Pizza-Gate in the US, they all seem to have one element in common. But how can we understand the behavior of people who, despite overwhelming evidence, choose to believe that the earth is flat and that the planet is ruled by lizard people? As Jovan Byford explains, everyone dealing with the phenomenon of conspiracy theories runs into a conundrum, namely that conspiracy theories happen quite often, from various scandals or cover-ups that happen with the help of the government. In this sense, the question arises: how can we differentiate real conspiracies from those that are pejoratively associated with conspiracy theories?⁶⁶ As van Prooijen and Douglas argue, conspiracy theories' psychological underpinnings have an impact on how people recall and transmit knowledge about historical events. Conspiracy theories sometimes start with feelings of helplessness or doubt. However, they can easily come together to form compelling stories that influence how people view the past. Conspiracy theories have the ability to condense complicated events into a tale about a strong adversary organization executing a sinister scheme. Because of their clarity, they are simple enough for the general public to understand, which aids in the spread of their cultural traditions.⁶⁷

According to a series of five studies conducted by Roland Imhoff and Martin Bruder, there is evidence supporting the notion that conspiracy mentality can be considered a distinct and coherent political attitude. One significant finding is that conspiracy mentality predicts

⁶⁶ Jovan Byford, "How to Spot a Conspiracy Theory When You See One," *The Conversation*, March 16, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/how-to-spot-a-conspiracy-theory-when-you-see-one-133574>.

⁶⁷ Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas, "Conspiracy Theories as Part of History: The Role of Societal Crisis Situations," *Memory Studies* 10, no. 3 (2017): 329-330; C. Thi Nguyen, "The Seductions of Clarity," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 89 (2021): 227-230.

prejudice uniquely, even when accounting for other well-established political attitudes such as right-wing authoritarianism, and social dominance orientation.⁶⁸ The researchers also found that conspiracy mentality is associated with attributions of intentional misconduct as well as unintentional errors by authorities, and with behavioral intentions aimed at undermining or influencing those authorities. Conspiracy mentality was specifically linked to disliking and feeling threatened by powerful groups, which aligns with the nature of conspiracy theories that often attribute negative events to the malicious intent of conspiring groups. Conspiracy thinking may serve as a coping mechanism for negative social identity when group boundaries are rigid and leaving the group is not an option.⁶⁹

VII. Conclusion

Summarizing the ideas addressed in this paper, we can note that truth is a complex concept with multiple facets, a subject under continuous debate both in philosophy and in society. The prevalence of disinformation and the rise of post-truth represent a new hurdle in the already complicated race to pursue truth. This essay explores multiple perspectives, including how disinformation, language, and emotion play an important role in the value of truth. This essay draws attention to the dangers of misinformation and the manipulation of public opinion, insisting on the development of defense mechanisms against noise. These mechanisms include fact-checking and critical thinking. Being able to differentiate between lies, bullshit, and truth is the most valuable skill in the contemporary era. This essay further draws attention to the impact this noise has on our judgments, indicating that outside biases and influences can distort our perception of the truth. Language shapes our understanding of reality, facilitating the transmission of acquired knowledge. This aspect can also be exploited from a manipulative perspective to distort the truth. Belief in conspiracy theories is a result of people seeking quick explanations and blaming others for negative events.

Uncovering the truth requires not only independent judgment but also a collective commitment to sincerity and authenticity. This paper argues that trust alone is not enough in today's post-truth landscape. Trust can be misplaced, and authoritarian regimes or ideologically

⁶⁸ Roland Imhoff and Martin Bruder, "Speaking (Un-)Truth to Power: Conspiracy Mentality as a Generalised Political Attitude," *European Journal of Personality* 28, no. 1 (2014): 39.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

driven actors often exploit it to spread misinformation. Instead, this paper proposes a more holistic approach – one that weaves together epistemological, psychological, and socio-linguistic perspectives. Rather than relying solely on institutional credibility, it is essential to equip individuals with the skills to critically evaluate information for themselves. By exploring the impact of cognitive biases, informational noise, and the persuasive power of language, this study highlights that combating disinformation requires more than just faith in reliable sources; it demands an engaged and discerning public capable of navigating complex narratives.

Looking ahead, efforts to counter disinformation must extend beyond trust-building initiatives and fact-checking mechanisms. The findings of this study suggest that a more resilient information ecosystem emerges when individuals cultivate *epistemic resistance* – the ability to scrutinize narratives, recognize manipulative language, and resist the emotional pull of misinformation. Strengthening these critical faculties not only reinforces democratic discourse but also ensures that truth-seeking remains an active and participatory process, rather than a passive acceptance of authoritative claims.

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Communication Skills of the Leader in the School Unit: Applied Ethics and Rule Utilitarianism

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to highlight the importance of developing and cultivating the communication skills of school unit leaders and teachers, and the connection between these skills, based on rule utilitarianism. Utilitarianism is fundamental for maximizing the benefits for the greatest number of people. Rule utilitarianism, through its moral norms, values, and principles, sets the foundations for human thought and behaviour regarding decisions and actions that do not harm society as a whole, but create a sense of moral perception of the good, the just, and self-interest. The communicative rationality of utilitarianism contributes significantly to making critical and difficult decisions in the school unit, in which the principal and teachers are the main guides in learning and understanding the ethical and social value of communication in the transformations of contemporary social reality.

Keywords: *communication; skills; education; utilitarianism; leader; decision making*

I. Introduction: Communication in ethical education

For philosophers, ethics has a broad scope as it refers not only to the definition of what is good and bad, but also to the way human beings behave in their lives and interact with each other. There is a basic distinction between ethics and moral theory. The term ethics is perceived as the set of rules or principles which govern the behavior of people, which are characteristic of the common culture within a social group or set. Ethical theory or theories, as formulated from time to time within the environment of philosophy by the proponents of moral philosophy, consist of answers to the questions of what is morally right or wrong, what is morally good, and what is bad, and in general are an attempt to indicate how people should behave.¹ According to Aristotle, virtuous people demonstrate their virtues in every aspect of their lives, and that is why children must be trained to respond virtuously to the demands of life.² Through virtuous actions, people advance toward what they desire, ensuring not only their survival but also the prospect of prosperity.³ Noddings points out that on the issue of moral guidance of man in life, Aristotle answers by accentuating the ability of the person of virtue to know when and how to exercise each virtue.⁴ This ability presupposes the moral education of the individual from the first developmental period of his life, which is the school period. Education plays an important role in the moral development of the individual. Towards this end, the teacher must be effective and prepared in their role, having as their main assets the primarily communication skills and knowledge, which make them a leader of themselves and of young people in their moral education, acting as a model in terms of behavior and decision-making.

A human being as an ethical person plays an important role in the way they communicate with others, in the way they lead and take decisions in critical circumstances, manifesting through their choices and decisions the quality of their character. Human ethics became the springboard for the emergence of Kant's ethical universality and deontology and Mill's evaluative utilitarianism, which, together with Aris-

¹ Melanie Killen and Audun Dahl, "Moral Reasoning Enables Developmental and Societal Change," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 16, no. 6 (2021): 1209-1225.

² Nel Noddings, *Philosophy of Education*, 4th ed. (Taylor & Francis, 2016), 149-150.

³ Purissima Emelda Egbekpalu, "Aristotelian Concept of Happiness (Eudaimonia) and Its Conative Role in Human Existence: A Critical Evaluation," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 75-86.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

totalitarian virtues, dominate decision-making and organizational ethics in general.⁵

Kantian moral autonomy of the person is the basis of Kant's deontology and universality, where the person obeys universal moral laws with universal force, which they themselves have established, attempting to preserve their freedom and the moral choices dictated by their will.⁶

Although Kantian ethics and Mill's utilitarianism stem from different fundamental principles, they converge on certain ethical ideas, including the importance of rationality, consideration for others, and a concern for universal moral principles.⁷ Furthermore, Kantian morality is revived in Mill's rule utilitarianism, according to which human actions are judged by whether or not they conform to the established rules of society, with the basic orientation of ensuring the general good. In this way, Mill breaks away from Bentham's hedonistic utilitarianism, which defined utility purely in terms of pleasure and pain. Bentham's approach linked utilitarianism closely to hedonism and,⁸ arguably, to a form of egoism that legitimized the pursuit of self-interest, or to a form of foolish Machiavellianism.⁹

Hegel attempted to limit the foolish decision-maker by putting man in charge of his moral life, which he must define, and therefore his freedom. The result of the act will judge the motives of the individual, who must benefit not only himself but also others. Hegel emphasizes the need for human self-consciousness which transforms the individual personality into a universal one, since individual benefit must be committed to the universal benefit.¹⁰ Nietzsche extols individual responsibility and accountability as the birth of man's free will, attempting to give new meaning to the ethics of men through their actions and their natural will to power.¹¹

⁵ Sotiria Triantari, *Ethics in Decision Making: Aristotelian Ethics in Decision Making* (K. & M. Stamoulis, I. Arch. Harbandidis, 2021), 8-9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 62-67. For a comprehensive discussion on dignity as related to autonomy from an impartial standpoint, see Filimon Peonidis, "Making Sense of Dignity: A Starting Point," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (2020): 85-100, esp. 87ff.

⁷ Simone De Colle and Patricia H. Werhane, "Moral Motivation across Ethical Theories: What Can We Learn for Designing Corporate Ethics Programs?" *Journal of Business Ethics* 81 (2008): 751-764.

⁸ Triantari, *Ethics in Decision Making*, 8-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 70-73.

¹⁰ Robert M. Wallace, *Hegel's Philosophy of Reality, Freedom, and God* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 8-9.

¹¹ Daniel Harris, "Nietzsche's Social Account of Responsibility," *Southwest Philosophy Review* 28, no. 1 (2012): 103-110.

The power of human actions through Aristotle's moral vision was emphasized by Marx, supporting that the rational man is the creator of himself and the social conditions in which he lives. Marx's ethics, adopting Aristotelian terminology, considers practical ethics on a matrix of responsibility, accountability, beliefs, principles and rules to address the social and class inequalities and come up against the unbridled liberation of capital.¹²

The brief reference to the ethical theories of philosophers highlights the necessity of human education to be oriented towards knowledge of the systems of values and norms on the basis of which one must act and make rational decisions on moral principles that do not offend human value and personality, transcend self-interest and are oriented towards the happiness of the greatest number of people. Moral education contributes to the formation of the individual's personal identity and highlights the need for moral education, in the context of school education.¹³ The skills that frame and highlight their moral identity focus on their ability to communicate and to be in constant interaction with fellow human beings in the workplace and society. Teachers' knowledge and skills have a strong impact on students' learning and moral development.¹⁴ The essence of moral education is the process by which teachers transform certain social norms and moral virtues into individual thoughts and ethics of learners through certain educational means. Thus, moral education is mainly the process of moral social transmission.¹⁵ According to E. Campbell the teacher is a role model for the student, since moral behavior and practice in their professional field inevitably affect the moral climate of the school.¹⁶ Moral education plays an important role in shaping the character of students, causes social and cultural changes but also creates a foun-

¹² Michael DeGolyer, "The Greek Accent of the Marxian Matrix," in *Marx and Aristotle: Nineteenth Century German Social Theory and Classical Antiquity*, ed. George E. McCarthy, 107-153 (Rowman & Littlefield, 1992); Triantari, *Ethics in Decision Making*, 86; Sotiria Triantari and Elias Vavouras, "Decision-Making in the Modern Manager-Leader: Organizational Ethics, Business Ethics, Corporate Social Responsibility," *Cogito* 16, no. 1 (2024): 7-28.

¹³ Wohabie Birhan et al., "Exploring the Context of Teaching Character Education to Children in Preprimary and Primary Schools," *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 4, no. 1 (2021): 100171. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2021.100171>

¹⁴ Fon-Yean Chang, "School Teachers' Moral Reasoning," in *Moral Development in the Professions: Psychology and Applied Ethics*, eds. J. Rest and D. Narvaez (Erlbaum, 1994), 71-83.

¹⁵ Jingying Chen et al., "Development and Status of Moral Education Research: Visual Analysis Based on Knowledge Graph," *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2023): 1-2.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Campbell, "Moral Lessons: The Ethical Role of Teachers," *Educational Research and Evaluation* 9, no. 1 (2003): 25-50.

dation of moral values that become a guide to decision-making.¹⁷ The moral development of a person is oriented towards cognitive development, which emerges through knowledge and the process by which the individual argues, highlighting their character and morals as an orator. It is also oriented towards social interaction,¹⁸ which, being empirical, determines the rational orientation of the arguments for deeds, starting from wisdom.¹⁹

Education plays an important role in the moral development of a person, so it should not be limited to theory but should be expanded into practice, through simulations and programs that focus on the exercise of self-control, self-motivation, emotional intelligence, consciousness, self-awareness, attention focus, adaptability, etc.²⁰ These are skills that frame an individual's communication skills and contribute to leadership roles and their contribution to team cohesion and cooperativeness. Training is considered complete when it leads to the all-round development of the individual, which includes not only cognitive development but also moral development.²¹

The moral formation of the individual is based on the transition from individual responsibility and action to intersubjectivity in which the moral and social value of communicative action is founded, with the basic parameter that the consequences of this action and interaction are focused on the common good. This perspective ensures the greatest happiness for the majority of people. The utilitarian perspective has contributed and continues to contribute to the development and cultivation of communication skills of teachers and students in taking leadership roles in decision making.

¹⁷ Hyemin Han, "Analysing Theoretical Frameworks of Moral Education Through Lakatos's Philosophy of Science," *Journal of Moral Education* 43, no. 1 (2014): 32-53. Moral education is also highly dependent upon moral evaluation in education. See Georgios Tsitas and Athanasios Verdis, "Proposing a Frame of Ethical Principles for Educational Evaluation in Modern Greece," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2021): 135-158.

¹⁸ Maria Mammen and Markus Paulus, "The Communicative Nature of Moral Development: A Theoretical Framework on the Emergence of Moral Reasoning in Social Interactions," *Cognitive Development* 66 (2023): 101336.

¹⁹ Sotiria Triantari, *Ethical and Social Philosophy of Communication: Communication Strategies and Techniques* (K. & M. Stamoulis, I. Arch. Harbandidis, 2020), 32.

²⁰ David A. Pizarro and Peter Salovey, "Being and Becoming a Good Person," in *Improving Academic Achievement: Impact of Psychological Factors on Education*, ed. Joshua Aronson (Academic Press, 2002), 247-266.

²¹ Ning Fang, "Research on Practice Effect of 'Fostering Integrity and Promoting Rounded Development of People' on Students' Moral Development in Universities and Colleges," *Frontiers in Educational Research* 3, no. 10 (2020): 91-92.

II. Utilitarianism as a harbinger of the importance of communication in education

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), the main founder of utilitarianism, considered the principle of utility as the starting point that can approve or disapprove any human action and at the same time is a criterion for the happiness or, on the contrary, the misery of some people. Happiness or unhappiness depends on the quantity and quality of pleasure and pain. Bentham scientificised ethics by setting up a systematic psychometric method, the “felicific calculus” for measuring the quality and quantity of pleasure and pain.²² By comparing the total happiness produced by different choices, individuals can determine which action is morally preferable, thus serving the greatest good for the greatest number of people.²³ Pleasure, according to Bentham, becomes the criterion of utility for most people. Bentham developed act utilitarianism, according to which we ought to act in terms of the consequences or effects of a particular act for the common good.²⁴ Bentham’s utilitarianism focused on maximizing profit, but without evaluating the rightness of the act on the basis of a code of moral conduct.²⁵ Practical utilitarianism, despite the fact that involves the communicative partnership and coordinated action of a group of people for the common good, ignored the moral correctness of communicative interaction. Bentham advanced the benefit of the many at the expense of morally rational means to achieve the end, nullifying the moral and social value of communication as a key tool in the morality of an act or decision.

At the opposite end of Bentham’s utilitarianism there is the moral utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), who argued for a direct relationship between the superiority of higher qualitative pleasures and the superiority of the common interest, putting forward as a measure of his utilitarianism the right moral conduct that concerns not only the person acting, but also all persons associated with him.²⁶

²² Johan E. Gustafsson, “Bentham’s Binary Form of Maximizing Utilitarianism,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 26, no. 1 (2018): 87-109.

²³ Ruut Veenhoven, “Greater Happiness for a Greater Number: Is That Possible and Desirable?” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 11 (2010): 605-629.

²⁴ Andrew Gustafson, “Consequentialism and Non-Consequentialism,” in *The Routledge Companion to Business Ethics*, eds. Eugene Heath, Byron Kaldis, and Alexei Marcoux (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 83-84.

²⁵ James Henderson Burns, “Happiness and Utility: Jeremy Bentham’s Equation,” *Utilitas* 17, no. 1 (2005): 46-61.

²⁶ Gustafson, “Consequentialism and Non-Consequentialism,” 84; Triantari, *Ethics in Decision Making*, 70.

Mill focused on the service of the common interest, thinking of the strengthening of social bonds and healthy living of human society through the moral responsibility of the individual in the communicative act. The ethics of communication was later emphasized by J. Habermas through the three kinds of validity claims. The claim of truth, the claim of correctness, which concerns rules and values that indicate the horizon of the statement and the claim of honesty.²⁷ J. Habermas formulated the strategy of communication on the basis of an ethical dialogue, which presupposes an ethical argumentation, aiming at the rationality of the act. In his reflection exists the Aristotelian thinking on the moral responsibility of the individual and also Mill's evaluative utilitarianism, where the evaluation of the general good is assessed by an act that is or is not in accordance with the established rules of society, so that the general good is ensured through an ethical stance. Mill argued for the necessity of educating young people in evaluative or rule utilitarianism, as this education can lead to moral norms of action, such as respect, kindness, justice, etc. These are virtues that define behaviors that aim to achieve a moral act with the ultimate goal of common benefit.²⁸ The view of rule utilitarianism is a starting point in the development of communication in the school unit, where teachers and students communicate effectively in the context of coordinated and organized actions ensuring the common benefit as well as the individual's personal happiness.²⁹ Mill makes a decisive contribution with rule utilitarianism to the obedience of teachers and students to commonly accepted rules that are assimilated by its members in the school society. Normative or evaluative utilitarianism appears more just than practical utilitarianism, as correctness in decision-making is based on rules of general behaviour.³⁰

Communication is more effective in rule utilitarianism because it better achieves the combination of the corporate interest with the common social interest, as it approaches the process or means for action to become moral by setting the rules and moral principles.³¹ Rule

²⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Ethics of Communication* (Alternative Editions, 1997), 21.

²⁸ Triantari, *Ethics in Decision Making*, 71.

²⁹ Fei Xie and Ali Derakhshan, "A Conceptual Review of Positive Teacher Interpersonal Communication Behaviors in the Instructional Context," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021): 2-8.

³⁰ Dale E. Miller, "Mill, Rule Utilitarianism, and the Incoherence Objection," in *John Stuart Mill and the Art of Life*, eds. David Weinstein, Ben Eggleston, and Dale E. Miller (Oxford University Press, 2011), 94-118; Triantari and Vavouras, "Decision-Making," 10-11.

³¹ Tom L. Beauchamp and Norman E. Bowie, *Ethical Theory and Business*, 5th ed. (Prentice-Hall, 1997), 26-28.

utilitarianism reinforces and develops the learning of the importance of communication and communication skills in the school unit, because it strengthens the sense of justice, which includes some other rights such as the freedom of the individual, directly setting rules of respect for human actions, so that the whole social system is not overturned by actions that will be to the detriment of the common good. Rule utilitarianism emphasizes human responsibility, the need for the individual to be responsible, since with the help of reason and knowledge of moral norms, with their actions, they can be responsible for the general good, or otherwise responsible for the negative consequences of their actions.³² The teacher and the student train in social responsibility, which also determines the quality of their actions.³³

Under the prism of rule utilitarianism, communication enters dynamically into the educational reality and becomes effective in optimal decision-making, reducing conflicts, bringing out the team spirit, the sense of reciprocity, justice and individual responsibility. The teacher is the model communicator, who as a leader empowers themselves and their students, as they shape their values and influence their culture. The teacher in this communicative interaction with students takes on the role of a moral leader, giving guidelines for ethical conduct.³⁴ The same role is supported by the head of the school unit towards the teachers, thus creating a chain of dynamic relationships in the small community of the school unit, in which the ethical communicative leader is authentic, honest, fair, responsible.³⁵ This dynamic relationship is strengthened through the degree of learning of communication skills, which contribute decisively to the ability of the principal-teacher leader and students to integrate into the school unit through the achievement of positive interpersonal relationships.

III. Interpersonal skills of the effective educational leader

The concept of an effective leader moves away from the concepts of authority, power and influence, which can give opposite results when in

³² See Maria Sartzetaki et al., "The Ecosystem of Ethical Decision Making: Key Drivers for Shaping the Corporate Ethical Character," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (2025): 221-238.

³³ Florian Wettstein, "Social Responsibility," in *The Routledge Companion to Business Ethics*, eds. Eugene Heath, Byron Kaldis, and Alexei Marcoux (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 167-183.

³⁴ John M. Schaubroeck et al., "Embedding Ethical Leadership within and across Organization Levels," *Academy of Management Journal* 55, no. 5 (2012): 1053-1078.

³⁵ Dimitrios Dimitriou, "Corporate Ethics: Philosophical Concepts Guiding Business Practices," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2022): 33-60.

excess and lead to confusion and disorientation. The effective leader, and particularly in the field of education, influences the thoughts, actions, attitudes, behaviors and decisions of subordinates or of a group and voluntarily and willingly achieves their cooperation and joint participation in the successful implementation of goals, with the ultimate goal of the well-being and happiness of teachers and students. The effective leader exercises two basic functions in which they bring out the strength of character and abilities: communication and decision making.³⁶ The role of an effective leader requires continuous improvement of interpersonal skills such as dynamic complex problem solving, creativity, human resource management, emotional intelligence, collaboration, decision-making, negotiation and cognitive flexibility.³⁷

In a historical-ideological review of the key characteristics of the leader,³⁸ we find that all interpersonal skills presuppose the ability to communicate with others in a two-way process, where both they and others are given the opportunity to speak and listen, to control their perceptions of what they hear, respecting principles of verbal and non-verbal communication.³⁹ The communicative competence of the school leader makes them effective and a role model for the student, so that they can adapt to the environment, and be able to process and decode messages and information throughout the communication process. In the school unit, communication is constant and daily not only between students, but also between the principal and teachers and between teachers and students. Communication impacts the educational reality of principal-teachers-students-parents, as well as learning and teaching in the classrooms of the school.⁴⁰ In this communicative complex one of the basic interpersonal skills is active listening, which helps and leads to a better perception of information, especially when the information provided is important and necessary for decision making in the educational community. Active listening not only encourages continuing communication, but also contributes to the stability and

³⁶ Sotiria Triantari, *Leadership. Leadership Theories. From the Aristotelian Rhetorician to the Modern Leader* (K. & M. Stamoulis, I. Arch. Harbandidis, 2020), 230.

³⁷ Suzanne de Janasz, Karen Dowd, and Beth Schneider, *Interpersonal Competencies in Organizations* (McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2012), 18-35.

³⁸ Sotiria Triantari, "From Coaching to Mentor Leader: Profile and Skills of the Mentor Leader in Human Resources Management," *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy* 15 (2024): 104-105.

³⁹ Triantari, *Ethical and Social Philosophy*, 49-57.

⁴⁰ Vasiliki Brinia et al., "The Impact of Communication on the Effectiveness of Educational Organizations," *Education Sciences* 12, no. 3 (2022): 1-16.

duration of collaboration and negotiated problem solving.⁴¹ Active listening is enhanced by verbal and non-verbal communication,⁴² which manifest the direct and indirect behavior of an effective leader, which inspires trust between the principal, teachers and students. Optimal listening success in effective communication is directly related to the skill of emotional intelligence.

According to D. Goleman, emotional intelligence is the ability of a person to understand, feel, evaluate and practically apply the power of their emotions as a source of energy, information, confidence, creativity and influence. There must be balance and harmony between the emotional and logical mind, since emotion feeds and shapes the functions of the logical mind, which in turn exerts a certain influence on the emotions.⁴³ The content of the concept of emotional intelligence is first captured in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where the philosopher referred to the appropriate time and circumstance, in which the wise -in this case the leader- can feel the emotions of others without being directly emotionally involved themselves.⁴⁴ Emotional intelligence contains the main dimensions, which are social awareness, which involves understanding the emotions of others, self-management, i.e. self-perception and self-control in the management of personal emotions, and social awareness, which refers to understanding the feelings of others, where the leader has the ability through relationship management to inspire vision, create shared goals and integrate the abilities of subordinates. Emotional intelligence combined with empathy are the skills that give the leader clear and stable awareness, self-control and control over reality and the current situation and enhance teamwork and cooperation.⁴⁵

In this context, it is understood that the skills of the school unit manager are highlighted through their actions, which also reveal the levels of emotional intelligence, which is a promotional factor in the educational process, the working climate, the management of educa-

⁴¹ Janasz, Dowd, and Schneider, *Interpersonal Competencies*, 179-180.

⁴² Allan Pease and Barbara Pease, *Definitive Book of Body Language: How to Read Others' Attitudes by Their Gestures* (Orion Publishing Co., 2017), 33-34, 71; Müge Demir, "Using Nonverbal Communication in Politics/Utilization de la communication non-verbale dans la politique," *Canadian Social Science* 7, no. 5 (2011): 1-4.

⁴³ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (Bantam Books, 2006): 32-41.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 1106b.

⁴⁵ Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence. Leading with Emotional Intelligence* (Harvard Business School Press, 2002): 60-69.

tional change, the achievement of objectives, feedback and conflict management. Emotional intelligence as a basic communication skill is considered to be crucial in students' self-efficacy and especially in the acceptance of diversity and difference. The principal and teachers are the key transmitters in communication that focuses on removing prejudices, stereotypes and behaviors that can be perceived as bullying and empowers students' creative thinking.⁴⁶ The actions of principals-leaders directly influence the culture and climate of the school as well as teachers' perceptions of school climate and are directly related to student outcomes.⁴⁷

It is evident that the communication skills of the education leader-principal are the driving force behind the way they exercise leadership and especially the way they make decisions, as they can stimulate teachers' emotions and influence their thoughts and actions but also their creativity. In addition, effective and fair school leaders communicate their goals and visions for the school, inviting teachers to adopt them as their own,⁴⁸ and impart ethical principles to others.⁴⁹ This point reinforces the importance and the role of communication in the collaborative decision-making process.

IV. The Communicative rationality of utilitarianism in decision-making

The ethical viewpoint of utilitarianism approaches the basic behavior of the leader through communicative interaction with others, as they attempt to make decisions that protect the interests of the minority, and in the case of the school unit, without endangering the lives of others. This point orientates the social view of utilitarianism and communicative rationality in decision making, which have as a background the strategy of communicative action.⁵⁰ Communicative rationality largely

⁴⁶ Mehdi Zirak and Elaheh Ahmadian, "Relationship Between Emotional Intelligence & Academic Achievement Emphasizing on Creative Thinking," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 6, no. 5 (2015): 561-570.

⁴⁷ Raquel Gomez-Leal et al., "The Relationship Between Emotional Intelligence and Leadership in School Leaders: A Systematic Review," *Cambridge Journal of Education* 52, no. 1 (2021): 16-18.

⁴⁸ Kenneth Leithwood, "A Review of Evidence about Equitable School Leadership," *Education Sciences* 11, no. 8 (2021): 11-12.

⁴⁹ Olga Kourtoglou, Elias Vavouras, and Nikolaos Sariannidis, "The Stoic Paradigm of Ethics as a Philosophical Tool for Objectifying the Concepts of Organizational Ethics, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Corporate Governance," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (2024): 119-143.

⁵⁰ Arne Roets et al., "Utilitarianism in Minimal-Group Decision Making Is Less Common Than Equality-Based Morality, Mostly Harm-Oriented, and Rarely Impartial," *Scientific Reports* 10 (2020): 13373.

involves skills such as emotional intelligence, sensitivity, self-control, and language control. According to Mill, any expansion of the formal education promotes social mobility and sociability, because “education brings people under common influences” and gives them access to its facts and feelings, while improved means of communication promote education.⁵¹ In Mill’s rule utilitarianism, communicative rationality transcends self-interest, which in Bentham’s pragmatic utilitarianism is linked or identified with the common good. Mill advanced as a measure of the utilitarianism of the common interest the right conduct, which is proportional to the rightness of the moral communicative act. From this position Mill does not isolate the individual who acts and decides, but relates all persons to them in a communicative reasoning interaction, in which the dominant element is respect for each other.⁵²

Mill’s normative rationality evaluates and secures the common good through an ethical stance applicable to decision making, through a communicative strategy that focuses on the wisdom and moral virtue of the actor. Based on Mill’s theory, the school leader must formulate a strategy established on a good and open communication climate in the school unit and on moral and social values that promote freedom of expression, respect, trust and cooperation between teachers and students.⁵³ Rule utilitarianism is oriented towards the construction of a common communicative language through which the principal and teachers interact to make decisions on the basis of common moral principles of behavior, aiming at the common good. On the basis of social constructionism,⁵⁴ the communicative reality is linked to the rational choice and decision of the leader and the teachers, so that there is a harmonious coexistence in the school unit. The compatibility of communication and rational rule utilitarianism strengthens the strategic attitudes and actions of the leader-principal for making an ethical decision, and also the strategies of a joint decision of the principal and teachers in a climate of cooperation, which obviously strengthens the harmonious integration of principal and teachers in conjunction with the students in the school unit.

The communicative rationality of utilitarianism is very important in group settings, where decision making is more complex. Recipients

⁵¹ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Broadview Press, 1859), 125-126.

⁵² Ben Eggleston, “Consequentialism and Respect: Two Strategies for Justifying Act Utilitarianism,” *Utilitas* 32, no. 1 (2020): 5-9.

⁵³ Triantari, *Ethical and Social Philosophy*, 140-141.

⁵⁴ Tom Andrews, “What Is Social Constructionism?” *The Grounded Theory Review* 11, no. 1 (2012): 39-40.

need to determine reality through information, experience and prior knowledge in order to gain acceptance of their viewpoint by their peers and consent to a preferred practical action. The identification of mutual interests characterizes the predominance of the option over other alternatives.⁵⁵ In this common course of action, communication skills play a vital role in achieving common benefit in the school unit. In decision making, the decision makers are distinguished for virtue and wisdom, which ensure the means of realization to achieve the end. The moral conduct of the recipient is also brought out by the means of persuasion.⁵⁶ These are communicative skills, which enhance the skill of thinking and acting directly as a leader, having as basic parameters emotional intelligence and conscientiousness from which skills such as: self-control, self-awareness, responsibility, adaptability, aptitude, honesty, insight, active listening, restraint, creativity, etc. are derived.⁵⁷

Creativity, resourcefulness and responsibility are key criteria for excellence in dynamic decision making and strengthen the link between utilitarianism with decision-making, as the basic concept of school social responsibility emerges from the common good.⁵⁸ Each school unit, with the principal and teachers as key parameters, is inextricably linked to society as a whole and should recognize through the decisions they make their responsibility towards students, parents, society and the environment.⁵⁹ Social Responsibility in schools is a key element in 'communicative utilitarianism,' as it is oriented towards skills that aim to achieve the interests of the wider community. Decisions are taken and actions are carried out by the headmaster and teachers, based on their moral responsibility and accountability.⁶⁰

Rule utilitarianism along with virtue ethics and deontology contributes to the development and strengthening of fundamental communication skills, particularly in situations requiring difficult or spontaneous decisions, by promoting consistent ethical standards that guide interper-

⁵⁵ Suzanne C. De Janasz, Karen O. Dowd, and Beth Z. Schneider, *Interpersonal Skills in Organizations* (McGraw-Hill Education, 2025), 532.

⁵⁶ Triantari, *Leadership*, 112.

⁵⁷ Triantari and Vavouras, "Decision-Making," 10-15.

⁵⁸ Christos Kanavas and Sotiria Triantari, "The Rational Decision-Making and the Social Responsibility in the Optimal Functioning of the School," *Cogent Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2024): 2419542.

⁵⁹ Wayne R. Mondy and Joseph Martocchio, *Human Resource Management*, trans. I. Phirippi (Tziola, 2019), 57; Maria Vaxevanidou, *Corporate Social Responsibility* (K. & M. Stamoulis, 2011), 73.

⁶⁰ David Chandler and William B. Werther, *Strategic Corporate Social Responsibility: Stakeholders in a Global Environment* (Sage, 2006), 6-44.

sonal interaction.⁶¹ Rule utilitarianism, also emphasizes adherence to rules that maximize overall well-being, encourages self-control and moral decision-making.⁶² This ethical framework promotes respect for human rights, inclusivity of vulnerable groups, commitment to established moral principles and legal standards, thereby guiding both reasoning and behavior in a consistent and ethically sound manner.⁶³ In fact, this behavior takes a dominant role in interpersonal relations when it concerns the principal and teachers, who are the standard in their advisory guidance to students.

V. Conclusions and philosophical reflections: Can utilitarianism constitute an objective ethical basis for the educational process and communication skills in decision-making?

Ethical education is a vestibule in students' attitudes, perceptions and interpersonal relationships. The teacher plays a key role in this education as a model of behaviour and a rational decision-maker. A person brings out the morality of their personality through choices, decisions and the quality of character. Utilitarianism, especially John Stuart Mill's rule utilitarianism, contributed significantly to the emergence of the moral person. Mill's utilitarianism was influential in enhancing the communication skills of teachers and students for both leadership roles and decision making.

Rule utilitarianism emphasized the moral and social value of communication and provided the basis for learning communication skills, strengthening the sense of justice, individual freedom and respect for the individual as a means to achieve the common good. Rule utilitarianism was the starting point for the communicatively rational decision of the recipient, bringing out responsibility, community social responsibility, self-control, self-awareness, and other skills that highlight the basic interpersonal skills of the effective educational leader and teachers, seeking to live harmoniously in the school unit in a spirit of cooperation, teamwork.

Mill's utilitarianism advocates the greatest possible benefit for the greatest number of people. A principal often must make decisions that affect students, teachers, and the wider local community and has the ability to encourage the members of the school community to change and to do things they would not normally consider without his influ-

⁶¹ Shannon A. Bowen, "Strategic Communication, Ethics of," in *The International Encyclopedia of Strategic Communication* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2018).

⁶² Reynold J. S. Macpherson, "The Legacies of Roman, Christian, Kantian, and Utilitarian Ethics in Contemporary Theories of Educative Leadership," *Values and Ethics in Educational Administration* 17, no. 1 (2024): 1-10.

⁶³ Triantari, *Ethics in Decision Making*, 115-121.

ence.⁶⁴ By applying rule utilitarianism principles, the principal can prioritize actions that will benefit the majority the most. The skills of effective communication allow the principal to articulate these decisions clearly, helping all participants in the educational process to understand the rationale and feel included, while principals who wish to help an oppressed social group in the school through utilitarianism can promote collective change and mobility, and therefore act as a kind of motivational ethic.⁶⁵

Author contribution statement

All authors have contributed equally to the conception and design of the work, the drafting and revising of the manuscript, and the final approval of the version to be published.

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⁶⁴ Yongmei Ni, Rui Yan, and Diana Pounder, "Collective Leadership: Principals' Decision Influence and the Supportive or Inhibiting Decision Influence of Other Stakeholders," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (2018): 216-248.

⁶⁵ Izhak Berkovich and Ori Eyal, "Transformational Leadership, Transactional Leadership, and Moral Reasoning," *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 20, no. 2 (2021): 131-148.

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The non-Thomistic Character of Aristotle's (and Thomas's) Ethics

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Abstract

Even today, some Thomists follow the Early Modern, Neo-Scholastic tradition in reading Thomas Aquinas's ethics as an Aristotelian, reason-dominant model in which emotions play a secondary role in the virtuous life. The virtuous person is one for whom reason is superior to and rules over the emotions. Alternatively, Eleonore Stump dissociates Thomas Aquinas's ethics from Aristotle in an effort to overcome intellectualist interpretation. In this paper, I draw on Eugene Garver's Aristotle scholarship to offer a reading of Aristotle's ethics free of its Neoplatonic intellectualist reception in the Thomistic Commentary tradition. In doing so, I support Thomists who see emotivist elements in Thomas Aquinas's ethics but do not yet see them in Aristotle. For these Thomists, Thomas Aquinas's ethics will turn out, once again, Aristotelian.

Keywords: *Aristotle's ethics; Thomas Aquinas's ethics; emotions; reason*

I. The non-Thomistic character of Thomas Aquinas's ethics

Members of the Early Modern Commentary Tradition on Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*¹ exhibit the early stages of an emphasis on reason and the conceptual over emotion and the ineffable, an emphasis which would reach a zenith in Modern philosophy with the ethical rationalism of Immanuel Kant. Perhaps the most

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Brothers, 1947).

visible representative of such a ratiocentric trend is the 16th-century Jesuit, Francisco Suárez.² For Francisco Suárez, theology as such requires no faith in the truth of its claims, given the sufficiency of the proposition (*propositio sufficiens*) to carry the content of divine revelation.³ For Francisco Suárez, metaphysics begins philosophy and is a systematic study of the concept of “being,” which is graspable by the human intellect; that is, philosophy begins with ontology.⁴ Francisco Suárez and many of his Thomistic contemporaries believed that when Thomas Aquinas receives the moral philosophy of Aristotle, he receives it with Plato’s intellectualist privileging of reason over emotion intact.⁵ All as such, it is not surprising that when Francisco Suárez comments on Thomas Aquinas’s treatment of emotion and moral virtue in the *Prima Secundae*, he offers an “intellectualist” reading of Thomas Aquinas’s ethics, that is, for Suárez’s Thomas Aquinas, in the morally virtuous person, emotions are inferior and obedient to the intellect, their master.⁶ Whether or not Thomas Aquinas himself accepts a ratiocentric

² It should be noted that for the medievals, *intellectus* and *ratio* are not identical powers, and the former is closer to non-inferential intuition while the latter closer to conceptual reasoning. The distance between the two is progressively narrowed in the increasingly rationalist epistemologies featured in Early Modern to Modern thought. Huw P. Owen, “The Evidence for Christian Theism,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 64 (1963): 130-132.

³ For discussion in relation to the notion of Christian revelation see Jean-Luc Marion, *D’ailleurs, la révélation* (Grasset, 2020), 88.

⁴ See Francisco Suárez’s preface at Francisco Suárez, *Opera omnia*, ed. Charles Berton (Apud Ludovicum, Vivès, 1856-1878) 8-9. “Ontologia” appears first in the contemporaneous Rudolf Golcenius, *Lexicon philosophicum, quo tanquam Clave Philosophiae fores aperiuntur* (Mathäus Becker, 1613), 16 (“ontologia, philosophia de ente”), but was popularized in Modern thought with Christian Wolff, *Philosophia prima, sive ontologia* (Rengeriana, 1730), 1. The equation of “being” and the conceptual in Modern ontology is a defining feature of that period’s rationalism.

⁵ Francisco Suárez comments on Thomas Aquinas’s treatment of the passions in *Summa theologiae* I-II in the following treatises: *De ultimo fine hominis* (“On the Ultimate End of Man”), *De voluntario et involuntario* (“On the Voluntary and the Involuntary”), *De bonitate et malitia actuum humanorum* (“On the Goodness and Evil of Human Acts”), *De passionibus et habitibus* (“On Passions and Habits”), and *De vitiis atque peccatis* (“On Vices and Sins”), which appear together at Francisco Suárez, “*Tractatus quinque ad primam secundae D. Thomae*,” in *Opera omnia*, 456-512. Suárez’s more explicitly ratiocentric interpretation of Thomas Aquinas appears also, for example, in vol. V, *De legibus ac deo legislatore* (“On Laws and God the Lawgiver”), 1-48, presented as a commentary on Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 90-108.

⁶ On the question of the suitability of emotion for the wise man: “For it must be supposed that without freedom no act is morally good or bad: in turn, the sensitive appetite as such has no freedom in its operation [...] Secondly, it is certain that such movement (*motus*, emotion) can take place (*cadere*) in the wise man [...] because it does not contain the appetite *such that it never precedes reason* [...] It is certain that these emotions (*motus*) are occasionally bad, occasionally good, relative to the object and circumstance, made so by the consent of the will (*consensu voluntatis*) [...]. The reason for this is that when the appetitive motion (*motus appetitus*) is properly ordered, *if it follows the will’s consent* in the end, it will be good, proceeds from

account of moral virtue, his Early Modern commentators, represented here by Francisco Suárez, read him as so doing.

Attributing a ratiocentric ethics to Thomas Aquinas will not go out of fashion, however, after the 16th century. Neo-Scholastic Thomism sees a revival in the 19th and early 20th centuries and today continues to have representatives in the broadly Anglo-American philosophical tradition.⁷ According to this interpretative tradition, Thomas Aquinas holds an Aristotelian ethics in which the virtuous person is one in whom reason rules over the passions, directing them away from excessive and deficient expression and determining them as fitting in relation to the good.⁸ To be sure, Thomas Aquinas's moral theory is in-

a good cause, and tends to a good object; thus, it is aligned with the *rational nature* itself (naturae rationali), and in a certain way necessary for the completion of the work. For it is easier for a man to work well, whenever appetites assist toward (facilius) a good work, and therefore it often benefits the wise man to arouse these movements, which are like a kind of kindling energizing virtue, as Plato said, and like soldiers serving their leader, or as weapons of virtue, as Aristotle used to say (referenced by Seneca) [...], for which reason Plutarch, in his *Virtute Morum*, said that it is not wise to uproot the radical affections (sapientis affectus radicitus) because it is neither possible nor useful, but to order them properly. We can confirm that the affections of the wise man hold good effect, such as is clear from the fear of punishment, mercy, and from the sorrow of the sin committed, etc., and pleasure by its nature accompanies virtue. All this to say, virtue does not destroy nature, just as health does not destroy the humours nor their quality, nor does music destroy sound but moderates it." Francisco Suárez, "*De ultimo fine hominis*," in *Tractatus quinque ad primam secundae D. Thomae*, 456-457 (emphases mine).

⁷ For a principal representative of the Neo-Scholastic school see Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Le réalisme du principe de finalité*, (Desclée de Brouwer, 1932): 148, 209 and 285; Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *La synthèse thomiste*, (Desclée de Brouwer, 1946): 109-114. For recent representatives see, Wim Decock, Bart Raymaekers and Peter Heryman, eds., *Neo-Thomism in Action* (Leuven University Press, 2021); Edward Feser, "Natural Law Ethics and the Revival of Aristotelian Metaphysics," in *Natural Law Ethics*, ed. Tom Angier (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 276-296. Francisco J. Romero Carrasquillo centers ratiocentric passages seeming to render Thomas Aquinas's anthropological views misogynistic (without denouncing the views) in Francisco J. Romero Carrasquillo and Hilaire K. Troyer de Romero, "Aquinas on the Inferiority of Woman," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2013): 685-710.

⁸ For example, John Finnis describes Thomas Aquinas's theory as follows. "The virtues, like everything else in one's will, are a response to reasons [...]. Aquinas accepts Aristotle's notion that every virtue is a mean between too much and too little, and he constantly stresses that it is reason – with the principles and rules (regulae) it understands – that settles the mean and thus determines what is too much or too little. Indeed, the principles of practical reason (natural law) establish the ends of the virtues: *ST* II-II q. 47 a. 6." And "Although Aquinas subscribes to Aristotle's thesis that practical reasonableness (phronesis, prudentia) concerns means rather than ends." And "although Aquinas subscribes to Aristotle's thesis that practical reasonableness (phronesis, prudentia) concerns means rather than ends, he eliminates any quasi-Humeian reading of that thesis by emphasizing that what "moves" *prudentia* is not one's passions but one's underivative understanding of the first practical principles and of the intelligible goods to which they point (synderesis movet prudentiam: *ST* II-II q. 47 a. 6 ad 3)." John Finnis, "Aquinas's Moral, Political, and Legal Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2021), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/aquinas-moral-political>.

debted to Aristotelian ideas, such as the idea of virtue being a mean between extremes.⁹ Also like Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas divides human powers into divisions such as the sensitive and the intellectual, of which the former houses the “passions,” that is, emotions in their basic sense.¹⁰ On an intellectualist reading, however, moral decision-making is primarily a matter of the intellect and will, and passions either get in the way or follow suit. Peter King puts it this way: “Thomas Aquinas holds *contra* Hume, that reason is and ought to be the ruler of the passions; since the passions *can* be controlled by reasons they *should* be controlled by reason.”¹¹

In contrast, Eleonore Stump’s work has helped to overcome the Neo-Scholastic intellectualist influence on Thomistic interpretation by drawing attention to the three-tiered account of the passions in Thomas Aquinas’s anthropology. Beyond the psycho-physiological passions in the sensitive appetite (*sensus appetitus sensitivus*)¹² which are inferior to reason, Thomas Aquinas, Eleonore Stump tells us, includes the “analogue of the passions” in the intellect, a higher order emotion, and moreover, incorporates the theological Fruits and Gifts of the Holy Spirit, which infuse spiritual emotion and second-personal contact with God, elevating natural, acquired virtue to a level required for realizing virtue in its truest sense.¹³ Thomas Aquinas’s virtue ethics is, for Stump, non-intellectualist in the sense that emotions feature at

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Q.64.

¹⁰ For Aquinas’s treatment of the passions of the sensitive appetite, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, QQ.22-48. For Aristotle’s psychic faculties, a sense of “passions” beyond the sensitive appetite, see Guy C. Field, *The Works of Aristotle: De anima*, trans. John A. Smith (Clarendon Press, 1931), II.2, 413b4-413b 7, 429a 9-429a10. Aristotle’s “intellect” (*nous*) will feature later in our discussion of moral knowledge.

¹¹ Peter King, “Aquinas on the Passions,” in *Aquinas’s Moral Theory*, ed. Scott MacDonald and Eleonore Stump (Cornell University Press, 1999), 126.

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Q. 75, a. 1.

¹³ Eleonore Stump, “Aquinas’s Ethics: The Infused Virtues and the Indwelling of the Holy Spirit,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 95, no. 2 (2019): 269-281; Eleonore Stump, “Aquinas’s Virtue Ethics and its Metaphysical Foundation,” in *Was ist das für den Menschen Gute? / What is Good for a Human Being*, eds. Jan Szaif and Matthias Lutz-Bachmann (Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 209-228. Eleonore Stump’s arguments are promoted in Andrew Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective in Aquinas’s Ethics: Virtues and Gifts* (Routledge, 2011). On Thomas Aquinas’s psychology of “passions” in the basic sensitive appetite sense, see the following monographs: Nicholas Kahm, *Aquinas on Emotion’s Participation in Reason* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2019); Diana Fritz Cates, *Aquinas on the Emotions: A Religious-Ethical Inquiry* (Georgetown University Press, 2009); Robert Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions: A Study of summa theologiae* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1a2ae 22-48; Nicholas E. Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire: Aquinas on Emotion* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2011). Of these, Nicholas Kahm’s gives most attention to emotion’s role in moral judgment, but his Thomas Aquinas has reason despotically ruling over the never praise or blameworthy passions.

every level of moral decision-making, which includes divinely infused and “intellectual” emotion.

However, to reclaim Thomas Aquinas’s ethics from its Neo-Scholastic influence, Eleonore Stump thinks she has to reject Aristotle’s influence on Thomas Aquinas. For Stump, Thomas Aquinas’s non-intellectualist ethics is non-Aristotelian. To be sure, Aristotelian “acquired virtue” isn’t yet a theologically elevated virtue as in Thomas Aquinas. But if Saurez’s Thomas Aquinas is unduly influenced by ratiocentric presuppositions, can we not say the same about Thomas Aquinas’s Aristotle? The Scholastics received Aristotle through the Neo-Platonists and their intellectualist ethics. If that’s right, then for Thomists to restore emotivist elements to a non-intellectualist ethics in Thomas Aquinas, they may not need to part from Aristotle in the process.

In the remainder of this paper, I argue that they do not.¹⁴ To do this, I first propose to read Aristotle as giving a motivational theory of emotion. Emotions are motivational states or their dispositional equivalent. Secondly, I show that, for Aristotle, moral deliberation, or practical reasoning, makes no sense apart from these motivational states. “Reasoning” about what I ought or ought not to do is just my having and reflecting on motivations. Finally, I show that virtues, which are indispensable to right practical reasoning, are simply emotional dispositions. These three features of Aristotle’s ethics make this ethic decidedly non-intellectualist and, after all, closer to Hume than some Thomists would want to admit.

II. Emotions as motivations

Now, there are three elements in the soul which control action and truth: sense perception, intelligence, and desire.
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*¹⁵

Aristotle’s theory of motivation is not limited to emotional states (pathe). Sometimes, he talks about our desires being subordinate to our reasons for desiring.¹⁶ Other times, he speaks of desires without ex-

¹⁴ I set aside contemporary Aristotelian scholarship supportive of a non-intellectualist reading of Aristotelian ethics to focus my aim on persisting neo-scholastic influence on our reading of Aristotle vis-a-vis Thomas Aquinas. For Aristotle scholarship on this topic, see the important Jonathan Barnes, Malcolm Schofield, and Richard Sorabji, eds., *Articles on Aristotle: Volume 2 Ethics and Politics* (Duckworth, 1977); Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford University Press, 1991).

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Oswald (Prentice Hall, 1999), 1139a 206.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1149a 25-1149a 35. Aristotle speaks of general desire (orexis) for example in *De anima* (433a 27-433a 28) as for the real or apparent good. Giles Pearson notes that cognizing the good intended by orexis cannot be restricted to reason since

ternal reasons for having them, for example, when we hate a person in their person and not for any other reason.¹⁷ What matters here is that emotions motivate, not that they are the only faculty that does so.

To show that emotions are motivations, first consider what Aristotle says about desire:

Choice is the starting point of action: it is the source of motion but not the end for the sake of which we act, (i.e., the final cause). The starting point of choice, however, is *desire and reasoning* directed toward some end.¹⁸

But since thought alone moves nothing, “choice is either intelligence motivated by desire or desire operating through thought, and it is as a combination of these two that man is a starting point of action.”¹⁹ Without desires for anything, all the reasoning in the world will not motivate us to act. But what is a desire? Aristotle gives us a clear example at the heart of his reflections on emotions in *Rhetoric*. “Let anger be understood as a desire, accompanied by pain, for revenge for a perceived belittling of oneself or anything of one’s own, when that belittling is not appropriate.”²⁰ Anger is an emotion. So, if Aristotle’s extensional definition of desire is a list of emotions, and desire is clearly the motivational foundation for action, then emotions are motivations.

Another way to see the motivational character of emotions is by considering the basic pleasure/pain dichotomy underwriting Aristotle’s motivation theory. For Aristotle, all of our actions are fundamentally motivated by pain or pleasure. “Every man is motivated by what is pleasant and noble in everything he does.”²¹ Furthermore, “it is painful to act under constraint and involuntarily, but the performance of pleasant and noble acts brings pleasure.”²² Without any perception or feeling of pleasure or pain toward anything, we cannot be motivated

animals also grasp it. Giles Pearson, *Aristotle on Desire* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 62. Humans desire (*boulêsis*) higher rationally grasped goods, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1113a 23-1113a 24.

¹⁷ Plato and Aristotle, *Plato Gorgias and Aristotle Rhetoric*, trans. Joe Sachs (Focus Publishing, 2009), 1382a.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139a 30-1139a 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1139b 4.

²⁰ Plato and Aristotle, *Plato Gorgias and Aristotle Rhetoric*, 1378a 30.

²¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1110b 11.

²² *Ibid.*, 1110b 12.

to act, which means that motivations to act do not depend solely on our power to reason. Says Aristotle:

In matters of action, the principles or initiating motives are the ends at which our actions are aimed. But as soon as a man becomes corrupted by pleasure or pain, the goal no longer appears to him as a motivating principle.²³

Our being moved toward or away from an object of choice depends on our responsiveness to positive and negative states or dispositions. In fact, even without external reasons for acting, our choices can make sense on the basis of these responses. For example, when asked why I chose to go see this film instead of that one, I can answer that I wanted to see this film instead of that one. This answer is legitimate even if I have no further reasons to give. Similarly, Aristotle thinks that we can have hatred for a person without having any reason to hate them, and this is what separates hatred from anger.

For someone who is angry wants to see the other person suffer, but in the other case [hatred] that makes no difference [...]. The former feeling [anger] is also accompanied by pain, while the latter [hatred] is not, since someone who is angry is pained and someone who feels hatred is not [...]. The former [anger] wants the person to suffer in return, while the latter [hatred] wants the person he hates not to exist.²⁴

Hatred begins with anger, which is a response to pain, but moves beyond it. Our motivational states move beyond reasoning, even beyond immediate considerations of pleasure and pain.

If this is right, then it is a quick step to see the importance of emotions for decision-making. The experience of pleasure and pain is just an emotion. Aristotle defines emotions (passions) as follows:

The passions are all those sources of change on account of which people differ in their judgments *that are accompanied by pain and pleasure*; examples are anger, pity, fear, and everything else of that sort, as well as their opposites.²⁵

²³ Ibid., 1140b 15-1140b 20.

²⁴ Plato and Aristotle, *Plato Gorgias and Aristotle Rhetoric*, 1382a.

²⁵ Ibid., 1378a 20.

Insofar as pleasure and pain are motivational experiences, they are also emotional experiences. And since all of our actions are motivated by pleasure and pain, emotions are motivations too. This line echoes a passage from David Hume, which reads as though it were written by Aristotle himself:

Ask a man *why he uses exercise*; he will answer, *because he desires to keep his health*. If you then enquire, *why he desires health*, he will readily reply, *because sickness is painful*. If you push your enquiries farther, and desire a reason *why he hates pain*, it is impossible he can ever give any. This is an ultimate end, and is never referred to any other object. Perhaps to your second question, *why he desires health*, he may also reply, that *it is necessary for the exercise of his calling*. If you ask, *why he is anxious on that head*, he will answer, *because he desires to get money*. If you demand *Why? It is the instrument of pleasure*, says he. And beyond this it is an absurdity to ask for a reason. It is impossible there can be a progress *in infinitum*; and that one thing can always be a reason why another is desired. Something must be desirable on its own account, and because of its immediate accord or agreement with human sentiment and affection.²⁶

Without any reference to motivational states or emotions, our deliberation faces an infinite regress of reasons. Aristotle's deliberation theory does not face this objection since he does not reduce choice to reasoning without emotion.

It might be objected that emotions cannot be identified with motivation because some emotions are clearly non-motivational. Consider the shame one feels after having done something wrong.²⁷ Or consider the love (*charis*) one feels for another person and their needs.²⁸ These emotions do not entail a desire for any particular action. So, emotions are not just motivations.

However, even if some emotions are not an immediate desire for a particular course of action, this does not mean that these emotions are not motivational in any sense. I can be motivated by shame in the sense

²⁶ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Lewis Amherst Selby-Bigge (Clarendon Press, 1975), 285-294.

²⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1128b 15-1128b 20.

²⁸ Plato and Aristotle, *Plato Gorgias and Aristotle Rhetoric*, 1385a 15-1385a 20.

that my past actions stand out to me as important and regretful, even if this importance does not lead me to immediate action. I can later be motivated to act from my shame, say, to apologize to my victim. After all, feeling shameful is, for Aristotle, voluntary because we praise or blame people for the feeling.

That actions of this kind are considered as voluntary is also shown by the fact that sometimes people are even praised for doing them, for example, if they endure shameful or painful treatment in return for great and noble objectives.²⁹

Similarly, my feeling of love towards the other can later lead to a motivation to act on their behalf. Not all motivation is immediately action-oriented.

Moreover, Aristotle distinguishes between motives or desires that are natural, “thoughtless,” reactions, and those desires which are responses to reasons.

For reason and imagination indicate that an insult or a slight has been received, and anger (*thymos*), drawing the conclusion, as it were, that it must fight against this sort of thing, simply flares up at once.³⁰

However,

Appetite (*epithymia*), on the other hand, is no sooner told by reason and perception that something is pleasant than it rushes off to enjoy it. Consequently, while anger somehow follows reason, appetite does not.

This distinction between higher and lower-order desires helps remove ambiguities about the motivational status of emotions. For example, Aristotle gives a second definition of emotion later in *Rhetoric*: “By passions I mean anger, desire, and the sorts of things we have been discussing.”³¹ If desire were not disambiguated, this definition would seem to contradict our earlier understanding of anger as a desire. But here Aristotle is talking about *epithymia* (irrational reactions to pleasure and pain, appetites) and not *thymus* (anger which is a response to

²⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1110a 20.

³⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1149a 30-1149a 33.

³¹ Plato and Aristotle, *Plato Gorgias and Aristotle Rhetoric*, 1388b 33.

reasons). Emotions in the full sense are perceptions of pleasure and pain, and, in this sense, are conscious motivations either to immediate or subsequent actions.

Even so, could Aristotle's account of willing weakly (*akrasia*), as when we know the good, we ought to do but are unable to do it, restore an intellectualist character to his ethics? While *akrasia* is certainly relevant to the possibly misleading effect of emotions in moral decision-making, as above, "control" over emotions only features with respect to our lower, irrational desires. In *Rhetoric* 1389a 3, Aristotle observes that the young are quick to carry out their desires, especially the sensual pleasure of bodily desires, of which they lack control (*àkratéis* "uncontrolled," whence *akrasia*). However, desire here (both the general and the bodily) is *epithymia*, the lower-order base appetites, and not *boulêsis*, the higher-order "rational" desires. The concept of *akrasia*, therefore, isn't sufficient to re-establish a ratiocentric ethics in Aristotle.³²

These considerations undercut a non-sentimentalist reading of Thomas Aquinas's account of decision-making. Reason alone is not sufficient to motivate. I next turn to the relation between the reasoning involved in deliberation and emotions.

III. Practical reasons and emotions

The other element is the seat of the appetites and of desire in general and partakes of reason insofar as it complies with reason and accepts its leadership; it possesses reason in the sense that we say it is "reasonable" to accept the advice of a father.
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*³³

Aristotle distinguishes between different types of reasoning. Theoretical reasoning proceeds from speculative wisdom, which is intellectual intuition or insight into unchanging and universal principles. Scientific reasoning follows from speculative wisdom (*nous*) in arriving at what can be known through demonstration or deductive reasoning.³⁴ Practical reasoning about what is right or wrong to do, on the other hand, proceeds from practical wisdom, which is an intuition or insight about which par-

³² On the non-ratiocentric features of *akrasia*, see Nafsika Athanassoulis, "Akrasia and the Emotions," in *The Moral Life: Essays in Honor of John Cottingham*, eds. Nafsika Athanassoulis and Samantha Vice, 87-110 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). This paper goes further than Nafsika Athanassoulis, in motivating an emotivist reading of moral knowledge. See also, Purissima Emelda Egbekepalu, "Aristotelian Concept of Happiness (*Eudaimoia*) and its Conative Role in Human Existence: A Critical Evaluation," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 75-86.

³³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1102b 27-1102b 32.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, VI.2,3,6,7.

ticular course of action is best.³⁵ Practical reason (*phronesis*) requires an apprehension of particulars in lived experience, which cannot be universalized to an abstract principle. As such, the principles of right action do not follow from abstract theorizing or deductive demonstrations from truths removed from the immediacy of our lived situation.

Phronesis is further distinguished from the knowledge an artist acquires through technical training (*techne*). The artist's knowledge is a knowledge *how* which requires a specific skill for a specific task.³⁶ In contrast, *phronesis* is not a special technique applied to an object (e.g. playing the piano), but a characteristic which permeates the *phronimos* and colors all his actions. The mark of the master technician is to be able to err intentionally in the performance of the art. But the mark of the *phronimos* is that she always correctly determines the right course of action. It is not sufficient to acquire a technique for good moral decision-making – there is no such artificial technique – one must be (possess) good to see what is the right choice to make; *phronesis* is a necessary characteristic (though not sufficient as we will see) for being a good decision maker.

The relation between practical reason and emotions is made clear in considering the route to knowledge of particulars. We know how to behave towards our friends by attending to the particular situation we are in.

In aiming to avoid giving pain or to contribute to pleasure, he [the *phronimos*] will act by the standard of what is noble and beneficial. For his concern seems to be with the pleasures and pains that are found in social relations.³⁷

Theoretical knowledge, or knowledge of abstract, universal principles, is insufficient for practical wisdom because there is another kind of knowledge gained by familiarity.

If a person were to know that light meat is easily digested, and hence wholesome, but did not know what sort of meat is light, he will not produce health, whereas someone who knows that poultry is light and wholesome is more likely to produce health.³⁸

³⁵ *Ibid.*, II.8 and II.9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, II.4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1126b 28-1126b 230.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1141b 15-1141b 20.

The poultry worker is more equipped to know the difference because of his lived experience of the particulars of meat. Practical wisdom attains not just any particulars, but ultimate particulars, the ones which are worth apprehending for the sake of right deliberating.

Not only must a man of practical wisdom take cognizance of particulars, but understanding and good sense, too, deal with matters of action, and matters of action are ultimates [...] For it is particular facts that form the starting points of principles for (our knowledge of) the goal of action.³⁹

What does knowledge of particulars have to do with emotion? Since particulars are only encountered in lived experience, we must be physically, not just mentally, present to the object of our feeling. For Aristotle, when we feel an emotion, we “are affected by the matter at the same time as the form.”⁴⁰ We can think and imagine whatever we like,⁴¹ but feeling is not as voluntary.⁴² The reason is that feeling is not completely abstractable from the material particularity in which it occurs. This explains why the perception of ultimate particulars is, at the same time, the arousal of a desire.

All the things people desire as a result of being persuaded are combined with reason, for people desire to see or acquire many things from hearing about them and being persuaded.⁴³

Practical judgment is not enough to produce right action; we also need goodwill (*eunoia*) which, alongside *thymos*, constitute the basic attitudes toward ourselves and the community. Practical reason requires emotion to motivate the narrowing of choices to this or that particular good.

Here, it might be objected that certain passages in the *Nicomachean Ethics* clearly subordinate emotions to reasoning. Emotions are said to obey reason as a father,⁴⁴ and anger is only useful when it obeys:

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1143a 30-1143a 35.

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *De anima*, II.12.424b 3 quoted in Eugene Garver, *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 133-134.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, II.5.417a 27, III.3.427b 15-21.

⁴² *Ibid.*; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106a 2-1106a 3.

⁴³ Plato and Aristotle, *Plato Gorgias and Aristotle Rhetoric*, 1370a 25.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1102b 32.

For in a way, anger seems to listen to reason, but to hear wrong, like hasty servants, who run off before they have heard everything their master tells them, and fail to do what they were ordered, or like dogs, which bark as soon as there is a knock without waiting to see if the visitor is a friend.⁴⁵

Emotions are only useful insofar as they slavishly obey reason, but if they do not, they can be ignored. On this reading, *Rhetoric* isn't giving us an account of the rationality of emotions; but rather suggesting their temporary utility, later to be discarded. The virtuous man no longer needs the aid of manipulated arousal of emotions to see and choose rightly.

However, our previous analysis of anger shows that the anger (thymos), which accompanies reason, is not subordinate to reason as a slave, but drives reason toward the right particulars. While this rightly ordered anger “obeys” reason as a father, it is also itself “reasonable” since “it is correct to say that the appetitive part, too, has reason.”⁴⁶ Continuing,

it follows that the rational element of the soul has two subdivisions: the one possesses reason in the strict sense, contained within itself, and the other possess reason in the sense that it listens to reason as one would listen to a father.⁴⁷

Recall that “reason” here is practical wisdom, which, as before, relies on our being motivated by pleasure and pain to deliberate between particulars. As such, when Aristotle talks of an anger like a dog barking at someone before knowing if they're a friend, this is best read as the thoughtless reactionary appetites (epithymia) and not the emotions in their proper sense. In that same passage, Aristotle describes anger, which is “drawing the conclusion that it must fight against this sort of thing [slights].”⁴⁸ Desires which are slaves to whatever controls them (impulse or reason) are not responsive to reasons and so are not dialectical in this way.

Moreover, *Rhetoric* gives us a picture of emotions which are responsive to arguments, not just immediate objects of pleasure and pain.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1149a 25-1149a 30.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 1103a.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1103a 4.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 1149a 33.

Three things are responsible for making the speakers themselves be believed, because that is how many things there are, apart from demonstrative arguments, on account of which *we feel trust*. These are judgment (*phronesis*), virtue (*arete*), and goodwill (*eunoia*).⁴⁹

Eunoia is the general feeling of benevolence toward others. The speaker believes that through argument, the proper emotion can be communicated to the audience; if this is right, then emotions themselves enter into the dialectical and rational process of moral deliberation. Recall that emotions are defined as “sources of change on account of which people differ in their judgments.” How does this change occur? It cannot be through artificial technique (*techne*). Eugene Garver explains this change:

The relative independence of thought, action, and passion allow the emotional coloring of a decision to place a proposed course of action in a context of a wider or narrower range of possibilities, so that it looks like the only thing to do [...]. These further ways in which the emotions can “change” a judgment make all the difference. Without them, it is only weakness that allows us to modify judgments in the light of our feelings, and only efficacy that makes it necessary for the art of rhetoric to include treatments of the emotions. The emotions are part of the *Rhetoric*, however, because they provide accessible evidence for *eunoia*. The orator learns how to appear virtuous and practically wise as a side effect of learning what people think about *arete* and *phronesis* in Book I. But if the speaker is to arouse emotions in the audience, the definitions and expositions of the passions in Book II must be more than reports of what people believe – they must be true. The asymmetry is crucial: the speaker must instantiate commonly held conceptions of virtue and *phronesis*, but he must *cause* emotions.⁵⁰

My sense perception can be fooled by a magician such that I falsely believe that he has disappeared. Similarly, a salesman might deceive me into believing that he is trustworthy in estimating the economic value of the product he’s selling. Both can be learned art forms. However,

⁴⁹ Plato and Aristotle, *Plato Gorgias and Aristotle Rhetoric*, 1377b 8-1377b 10.

⁵⁰ Garver, 116-117.

the rhetorician cannot trick me into feeling the emotions beneficial to his cause. He must present arguments which themselves cause emotions, such as anger, to arise on account of presenting what is truly upsetting. This account of emotion is incompatible with an account which subordinates it to reason as the only source of morally good decision-making.

Our analysis of practical reason and emotion suggests a surprising claim about emotions: emotions are *rational* processes. Aristotle distinguishes between motions which do not rise to the level of intentional actions, *kenesis*, and motions which are properly actions because the end of the activity is internal to the activity itself, *energeiai*. Emotions, as passive experiences, are *kenesis*, but this is not the whole story. Eugene Garver observes that, when Aristotle “narrows artful rhetoric to argument in contrast to emotion, he means *energeia* as opposed to *kinesis*.”⁵¹ This is because there is an artful–rational dialectic treatment of emotions in the *Rhetoric*, which shows that even in the emotions there are *energeia*.⁵² In contrast, whenever emotions are subordinated to reason, Aristotle recalls that *kinesis* are incomplete and inferior to *energeia*.⁵³ This is consistent with what has been said so far. Not all desires rise to the level of proper emotions, and the ones that do engage with the motivations of pain and pleasure in a rational way. Practical reasoning requires this higher-level emotion, a kind of *energeia*, which is responsive to arguments, and decisive for the ultimate particulars upon which moral deliberation proceeds.

IV. Virtues as motivational dispositions

To be pleased or pained is to act [...] towards what is good and bad.

Aristotle, *De Anima*⁵⁴

What remains is to show the essential connection between emotions and moral life. *Phronesis* alone is not sufficient for moral action because, without virtue, what we aim at in our practical deliberation is worthless, even if practical reasoning helps us achieve that end.

There exists a capacity called “cleverness,” which is the power to perform those steps which are conducive to a

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 431a 10-431a 11. All translations of *De anima* in this paper are from Garver.

goal we have set for ourselves and to attain that goal. If the goal is noble, cleverness deserves praise; if the goal is base, cleverness is knavery.⁵⁵

Practical reasoning without virtue is just cleverness; it is not moral wisdom. A first clue, then, to the non-rationalist character of Aristotle's ethics is that virtue is not reducible to reason in action. Virtue is not a capacity (*dynamis*), but rather a characteristic or habit (*hexis*) which is "guided by right reason, but also a characteristic which is united with right reason; and right reason in moral matters is practical wisdom."⁵⁶ In other words,

while Socrates believed that the virtues *are* rational principles – he said that all of them are forms of knowledge – we, on the other hand, think that they are *united with* a rational principle.⁵⁷

Virtues are not rational principles, but instead, they "determine the end, and practical wisdom makes us do what is conducive to that end."⁵⁸ This space between reason and principles, which determines the end of action, allows for a greater unity between emotion and virtue.

How are we to understand these characteristics which determine the ultimate particular from which moral deliberation proceeds? I propose to understand virtues as emotional dispositions. That is, whereas emotions in their basic sense are occurrent events – I now feel angry or loving – virtues are the enduring disposition to have occurrent emotions under specific circumstances. And not just any sort of emotion, but the right or appropriate emotion.

Anyone can get angry – that is easy – or can give away money or spend it; but to do all this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, for the right reason, and in the right way is no longer something easy that anyone can do.⁵⁹

Good conduct is rare because appropriate emotions are hard to cultivate, which makes them praiseworthy. The rationalist reading of Ar-

⁵⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144a 23-1144a 27.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1144b 25-1144b 30.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1144b.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1145a 5.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1109a 25-1109a 30.

istotle's ethics paints virtue as a rational principle with total control and dominance over emotion. In support, some translate *sophrosyne* as "self-control" or "temperance," but these terms have negative connotations. Read this way, practical reason is a whipping hand over emotion, as Robert George says.⁶⁰ For example, Aristotle says, "This also explains why we call 'self-control' *sophrosyne*: it 'preserves' our 'practical wisdom.'"⁶¹ In light of our previous analyses, however, a better translation of *sophrosyne* is "cultivated emotion," that is, the *sophron* has developed the higher-order emotions over and against the thoughtless, reactionary appetites, not that he has rational control over all emotion. The passage from *Nicomachean Ethics* in full lends support to my reading of virtue as an emotional disposition:

This explains why we call "cultivated emotion" *sophrosyne*: it "preserves" our "practical wisdom." What it preserves is the kind of conviction we have described. For the pleasant and the painful do not destroy and pervert every conviction we hold – not, for example, our conviction that a triangle has or does not have the sum of its angles equal to two right angles – but only the convictions we hold concerning how we should act. In matters of action, the principles or initiating motives are the ends at which our actions are aimed. But as soon as a man becomes corrupted by pleasure or pain, the goal no longer appears to him as a motivating principle.⁶²

Since we have already seen that the principle motivators are emotions, and emotions are defined in terms of perception of pleasure and pain, it cannot be that all relations to pleasure and pain destroy our convictions. Instead, those immediate and irrational pleasures and pains destroy the deeper cultivated pleasures and pains which are not always occurrently felt. In other words, cultivated emotions become dispositions toward or away from the good, virtues and vices, which can be undercut by immediate temptations. Our moral character is constituted by our enduring attitudes toward the good. Aristotle is showing us that those attitudes are just higher-level emotions or their dispositional equivalent.

⁶⁰ Robert George quoted in Eleonore Stump, "The Non-Aristotelian Character of Aquinas's Ethics: Aquinas on the Passions," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 28, no. 1 (2011): 43.

⁶¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140b 11.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 1140b 10-1140b 20.

Aristotle, in many places, identifies virtuous action with emotion. “Now virtue is concerned with emotions and actions; and in emotion and actions, excess and deficiency miss the mark, whereas the median is praised and constitutes success.”⁶³ To be sure, virtue is a characteristic involving a choice of the mean between extremes, and this finding of the mean just is practical reasoning.⁶⁴ All the same, the mean has its worth for the virtuous person in being an aim desirable for its own sake. “For the mark of someone with practical judgment is seen in the pursuit of something beneficial, while that of a *good* person is seen in the pursuit of something beautiful.”⁶⁵ And it is a mean “because some vices exceed and others fall short of what is required *in emotion* and in action, whereas virtue finds and chooses the median.”⁶⁶ It cannot be that virtues stand aloof from emotion and serve to subordinate them, since emotion itself has “requirements.” We are required to cultivate the right emotions as motivations for what is right to do.

However, in other passages, Aristotle seems to dissociate virtue and emotion.

Now the virtues and vices cannot be emotions, because we are not called good or bad on the basis of our emotions, but on the basis of our virtues and vices. Also, we are neither praised nor blamed for our emotions.⁶⁷

Instead, virtues are characteristics which are

the condition, either good or bad, in which we are, in relation to the emotions: for example, our condition in relation to anger is bad, if our anger is too violent or not violent enough.⁶⁸

Aristotle distinguishes three things in the soul: characteristics, capacities, and emotions.⁶⁹ Since virtues are characteristics, it seems that we cannot conclude that they are motivational dispositions. This poses a difficulty to my reading of virtues as emotional dispositions.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1106b 20-1106b 26.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1106b 25-1106b 40.

⁶⁵ Plato and Aristotle, *Plato Gorgias and Aristotle Rhetoric*, 1417a 25-1417a 30.

⁶⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107a 4-1107a 5.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1105b 29-1105b 35.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1105b 25.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1105b 20.

One way to resolve this difficulty about virtues and emotions is to emphasize the many passages that do identify emotions and praise-worthy action. Earlier, we saw that enduring shame is praiseworthy.⁷⁰ Other passages strengthen this claim. For example:

A man who abstains from bodily pleasures and enjoys doing so is self-controlled; if he finds abstinence troublesome, he is self-indulgent; a man who endures danger *with joy*, or at least without pain, is courageous; if he endures it *with pain*, he is a coward. For moral excellence is concerned with pleasure and pain; it is pleasure that makes us do base actions and pain that prevents us from doing noble actions.⁷¹

As before, pleasure and pain feature in the definition of emotion. Here, pleasure and pain are given praise or blame. Eugene Garver is right to put weight on a passage in the *De Anima*: “To be pleased or pained is to act [...] towards what is good and bad.”⁷² Pleasure and pain are ineluctably tied to the praiseworthy and blameworthy. More generally, emotions themselves garner praise and blame:

Not every action nor every emotion admits of a mean. There are some actions and emotions whose very names connote baseness, e.g., spite, shamelessness, envy; and among actions, adultery, theft, and murder. *These and similar emotions and actions imply by their very names that they are bad.*⁷³

And the emotions in *Rhetoric* are no exception.

In general, some sort of excellence (virtue) and moral goodness are the basis on which good will (*eunoia*) arises when a person *strikes us as beautiful*, brave, or something similar.⁷⁴

Eunoia is an umbrella term for the political emotions featured in *Rhetoric*. These passages are difficult to make sense of if virtues, after all, are entirely distinct from emotions.

⁷⁰ But see *ibid.*, 1128b 150-1128b 20.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 1104b 3-1104b 15.

⁷² Plato and Aristotle, *Plato Gorgias and Aristotle Rhetoric*, 431a 10-431a 11; Garver, 125.

⁷³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107a 10-1107a 15.

⁷⁴ Plato and Aristotle, *Plato Gorgias and Aristotle Rhetoric*, 1167a 18-1167a 21.

Moreover, the above-cited passage follows a pattern we saw earlier wherein Aristotle first divides emotion from rational decision-making only to then re-include it. Emotions are said to obey reason like one listens to a father, but then emotions themselves are called “rational.” Here we are told that virtues are not emotions since we are not praised for feelings, but, then, the full passage reads:

Now the virtues and vices cannot be emotions, because we are not called good or bad on the basis of our emotions, but on the basis of our virtues and vices. Also, we are neither praised nor blamed for our emotions: a man does not receive praise for being frightened or angry, nor blame for being angry *pure and simple, but for being angry in a certain way*. Furthermore, *no choice is involved* when we experience anger or fear, while the virtues are some kind of choice or at least involve choice. Moreover, with regard to our emotions we are said to be “moved,” but with regard to our virtues and vices we are not said to be “moved” but to be “disposed” in a certain way.⁷⁵

Drawing on our distinction between higher and lower emotions, we can clearly see that Aristotle is only extracting reactionary, lower-level emotions from the definition of virtue. It is not that anger goes without blame or praise, since being angry in a certain way does. As mentioned earlier, the emotions which are responsive to arguments do involve choice,⁷⁶ and as such are praise or blameworthy. Finally, as we've already seen that higher emotions are *energeiai* and not only *kinesis*, meaning that they are not only a being moved. All of these considerations clear a path for virtues as emotional dispositions. They also suffice to overcome the famous passage in the *Politics* where Aristotle says that “law is reason without the passions.” *Phronesis* generalizes beyond abstract laws and policies because we cannot legislate universally every right choice to make. We need emotions to discern the particulars. And even still, the emotions which pervert judicial discourse can be read as the lower-level emotions. Surely we will still want the right attitudes and dispositions in discerning the goodness or badness of actions of the accused in judicial discourse. So, we will still want underlying emotional dispositions operative in these arguments. Otherwise, our reasoning faces the infinite regress of motivations for actions.

⁷⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105b 30-1106a 7.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 1110a 19.

A final consideration in favor of my reading is that, as Eugene Garver observes, the range and generality of the virtues in *Nicomachean Ethics* mirrors the range and generality of emotions in *Rhetoric*. Certain hinge virtues in *Nicomachean Ethics*, like justice, cover a range of particular civic virtues; so too, benevolence (*eunoia*) and anger (*thymos*) cover a range of civic emotions. This suggests that Aristotle is giving an interpersonal ethic where virtues as emotional dispositions are other-directed. In *Rhetoric*, we are told that we feel shame for people we respect, even if we are not the ones who committed the shameful action.⁷⁷ And we feel more angry in the presence of people we admire and shame in the presence of those we are close to.⁷⁸ This other-directed character of civic emotions lends further support for their relevance to moral action. And since these other-directed emotions can be group-directed, we can hate a class of people or love a family, these emotions are in a further way not limited to the immediate particular but extend, in a way analogous to reasoning, to generalities. For Eugene Garver,

The fact that emotions have as their objects people, not propositions, does not make them less rational [...]. Even though emotions have people as objects, I can make inferences from one emotion to another just as from one proposition to another: if I am afraid of you, I cannot be angry with you.⁷⁹

But if Eugene Garver is right, then these higher emotions, as civic emotions, are certainly subject to the scrutiny with which one assigns moral praise and blame. I think this shows that virtues and vices, the morally praised and blamed characteristics, clearly include emotional dispositions, civic emotions, if you will, in their definition. If this is right, Aristotle's ethics is clearly not a rationalist ethic in which the morally good man acts on reason and not emotion.

V. Conclusion

I have argued that, contrary to some persistent Neo-Scholastic readers of Thomas Aquinas's ethics, Thomas Aquinas's ethics is not Aristotelian in the way they think. Three features of Aristotle's virtue ethics show a

⁷⁷ Plato and Aristotle, *Plato Gorgias and Aristotle Rhetoric*, II.6.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 1379b 25-1379b 30 and 1385a 1-1385a 5; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1126b 20-1126b 33.

⁷⁹ Garver, 127.

clearly non-intellectualist character: motivations are emotional states as Aristotle does not distinguish between the “will” and the emotions which allows his view to avoid subordinating the emotions to some other faculty; practical reasoning, that by which we deliberate about what is right to do, is impossible without emotions since emotions perceive particulars, and any talk about reason governing emotions must, then, be read as the sort of reasoning which already presupposes them; and I proposed to understand virtues as kinds of emotional dispositions, since many passages support the close identity of emotions and virtues as praiseworthy features of the virtuous agent. If Eleonore Stump’s resourceful re-purposing of higher-order emotions and their corresponding divinely infused Fruits and Gifts is a plausible reading of Thomas Aquinas, then Thomists advancing an emotivist-friendly Thomistic ethics no longer need leave Aristotle behind.

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Chreos and Philotês in Homeric Ethics: Beyond Enlightenment and Reverence

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Abstract

*This article offers a philosophical reinterpretation of Homeric ethics by bringing into debate the opposing views of Peter J. Ahrensdorf, Richard Ruderman, and Darrell Dobbs. Ahrensdorf and Ruderman highlight the whimsical, capricious, selfish, and morally indifferent behavior of the Homeric gods. Given these divine flaws, humans lack perfect safeguards against calamities caused by fate (Moira) and necessity or by their flawed judgments. For both authors, rational judgment serves as the most reliable antidote to suffering and destruction. Ruderman, in particular, interprets Homer as a defender of “enlightenment,” grounded in the rejection of false hopes on divine providence, which in the Homeric context is considered unreliable and untrustworthy. Blind faith in gods, he argued, indulges thymos, the most self-assertive innermost human longing that incites rampant anger, often culminating in hubris (extreme moral transgression). In contrast, Dobbs focuses on Homer’s *Odyssey* and defends a vision of reverence as morally stabilising. For him, rational action cannot guarantee morality and justice. More importantly, the instrumentality of rationalism can lead to recklessness and hubris. Reverence for divine powers, on the other hand, encourages moral resilience, even in the face of suffering imposed by the gods themselves or Moira. This article evaluates both positions and argues that neither rational autonomy nor reverence alone suffices to secure justice and well-being. It another another aspect of Ahrensdorf’s interpretation of the *Iliad*: the virtue of friendship (or philotês), which (in the author’s view) is best exemplified by the character of Achilles. Drawing on Plato, Aristotle, and Empedocles, I explain that since philotês is grounded in a sense of chreos (moral necessity), it lays the foundations for a stable community of solidarity anchored in mutual recognition and respect. Thus, chreos and philotês emerge as the twin foundations of Homeric ethics.*

Keywords: *Homeric ethics; Iliad; Odyssey; Achilles; friendship; reverence; mênis; Odysseus*

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I. Introduction

By general consensus, Homeric gods show little concern for morality or justice; they share a range of human-like flaws, such as lust for power, jealousy, indifference, and rugged self-interest.¹ For Peter J. Ahrensdorf, Homer is “a demure critic of the gods,”² who portrays them as capricious and self-centered beings, incapable of enforcing justice and common decency in the unstable world of mortals.³ Homer “demystifies the gods” and reveals their whimsical nature, doubting their wisdom and justice;⁴ and warns his audience to place greater importance on human responsibility instead of relying on divine justice.⁵ Thus, Ahrensdorf assumes that Homer’s poems are not about divine providence, but solely about human beings.⁶ As also the French philosopher and mystic, Simone Weil, famously argued, “moments of grace are rare in the *Iliad*;⁷” “[n]early all the *Iliad* takes place far from hot baths,⁸ far from peace and reunion. These longings “violently negated by the realities of war,” by the reality of force (or might), “which Weil understands as an enduring and inescapable feature of the human condition” in a world lacking divine protection.⁹ Hence, in the absence of powerful divine constraints, the mortals must develop intelligence and wisdom to steer away from calamities caused by their flawed judgments that often culminate in *hubris* (implying folly, exaggeration, and moral transgression in the pursuit of selfish glory),¹⁰ or by the harsh challenges imposed by fate and neces-

¹ Peter Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue: Creating the Foundations of Classical Civilization* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 25, 57; cf. Arthur Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Clarendon Press, 1960), 62-64; Naoko Yamagata, *Homeric Morality* (Brill, 1994), 3-21; Janny Clay, *The Wrath of Athena: Gods and Men in The Odyssey* (Princeton University Press, 1983), 230, 237.

² Ahrensdorf, 63.

³ *Ibid.*, 57; Peter Ahrensdorf, *Homer and the Tradition of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 21-22, 24.

⁴ Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 66.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 63; Ahrensdorf, *Homer and The Tradition*, 71, 73, 77, 80-81.

⁶ Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods*; cf. Emily Kearns, “The Gods in the Homeric Epics,” In *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, ed. Robert Flower, 59-73 (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 70.

⁷ Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks* (Routledge, 2024), 48.

⁸ Weil, 26.

⁹ Michail Theodosiadis, “Introduction to Issue 18,” *Dia-Noesis: A Journal of Philosophy* 18 (2025): 10.

¹⁰ This definition of *hubris* can be found in my previous works: Michail Theodosiadis, “Republican Perspectives on Populism and Hope (Beyond Christopher Lasch)” (PhD diss., Goldsmiths University of London, 2021), 7; Michail Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy and American*

sity, which often lead to disaster and ruin. Likewise, Richard Ruderman argues that in the context of divine imperfections, justice and morality require rational thinking.¹¹ He critiques Darrell Dobbs' assumption that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* convey reverence (or respect) for the sacred,¹² claiming that divine providence in the Homeric context is unreliable and often deceptive.¹³ In his view, Homer urges his readers to invest in their rational potential, striving for "enlightenment," rejecting false hopes and aspirations fueled by *thymos*, which the sacred enflames and indulges.¹⁴ In brief, *thymos* refers to our most self-assertive innermost desires and longings, incited by selfish impulses that prompt recklessness or uncontrollable (and often *hubristic*) forms of anger. Hence, the most significant achievement for Homer "is the liberation of one's soul from the 'mythological' [i.e., religious or divine] ... world."¹⁵

This article engages with Ahrens Dorf's and Ruderman's perspectives, providing a philosophical analysis of Homer's epics. Section one explores the limitations of divine providence, evaluating the views of these authors. Then, it turns to Dobbs' analysis, which considers Homer's epics a sophisticated exploration of the limits of rational choice. Dobbs – contra Ruderman – argues that rational judgment is not a reliable safeguard and "can even be the instrument of recklessness."¹⁶ He centres on the character of Odysseus, whose transformation into a hero of epic stature derives from his reverence for the gods; reverence, he explains, stands for a correct approach to and respect for the sacred.¹⁷ To ease the tension between human rationality and divine providence, this study considers another aspect of Ahrens Dorf's interpretation of *The Iliad*: the virtue of friendship (or *philotēs*),¹⁸ which (in

Republicanism: Prometheus in Political Theory (Edinburgh University Press, 2025), 18. "[T]he hubris of Agamemnon" ("ὕβριν ἰδὴ Ἀγαμέμνονος") is translated by Ahrens Dorf as "folly" (or madness) (Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 143).

¹¹ Richard S. Ruderman, "Odysseus and the Possibility of Enlightenment," *American Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 1 (1999): 143, 145, 148, 154, 160.

¹² *Ibid.*, 142, 149, 156, 157, 159.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 144, 147.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁶ Darrell Dobbs, "Reckless Rationalism and Heroic Reverence in Homer's *Odyssey*," *The American Political Science Review* 81, no. 2 (1987): 498.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 493.

¹⁸ The word *philoī* denotes persons who are in loving (or "friendly") relation with each other, see Seth Schein, *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad* (University of California Press, 98). In Homeric Greek, being *philos* meant sharing responsibility for supporting the

the author's view) is best exemplified by the character of Achilles. A similar type of *philotēs*, grounded in *chreos* (*chreos*, meaning duty or indebtedness)¹⁹ to respect and uphold the dignity of others, is also evident in Homer's *Odyssey* (in the character of Odysseus, more specifically). Sections two and three suggest that while enlightenment and reverence play a crucial role in defending moral decency, they should be considered secondary to the more powerful virtues of *chreos* and *philotēs*. In different terms, *chreos* and *philotēs* are complementary to both reverence and rational judgment. *Chreos* emphasises companionship, respect, and mutual recognition of each other's worth and value, alleviating the suffering caused by fate or the flawed judgments of both immortals and humans.

To illustrate how *philotēs* surpasses rationality in preserving human decency, section two elaborates on Dobbs's interpretation of the Thriakian episode, which the author positions "literally at the center of the *Odyssey*."²⁰ Simultaneously, I engage with Platonic readings of *thymos*, coupled with Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom. In section three, I examine Achilles' *μῆνις* (*mēnis*), implying "fruitless, self-defeating anger and frustration,"²¹ "madness" and "frenzied" behaviour.²² It is commonly held among Homeric scholars that Achilles' *mēnis* exhibits a selfish *thymotic* longing that hinders enlightenment,²³ and that this

members of a community, as well as providing hospitality to one another (*ibid.*). In *The Iliad*, an "emotional color" is also attached: being a *philos* means also sharing a commitment "beyond the bounds of the institution," demonstrating deep affection and personal attachment to someone who is "dear" or "beloved" (*ibid.*). These two layers, the communal and the personal, are interrelated; they are not separated (*ibid.*) as in the modern age, where "friendship" refers mainly to personal relations.

¹⁹ In Book 21 of *The Odyssey*, we see Homer recounting how Odysseus travelled to Messenia to claim a debt (or *chreos*) (Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 21, 17). However, this form of respect/*chreos* is presented as stemming from a reciprocal obligation, not solely from his royal status; it stems from some past assistance the Ithacan king provided to the Messenians, who feel obligated to repay him out of a sense of reciprocal duty. The specific wording used by Homer in line 21, 17, "ἦλθε μετὰ χρεῖτος, τό βῶα οἱ πᾶς δῆμος ὄφελλε" ("arrived to claim a debt/*chreos*, which the entire people owed to him") (*translation mine*), does not refer to Odysseus' royal position; instead, it strongly suggests a debt because of some specific action or service that occurred in the past by the Ithacan king. Thus, the word *chreos* in the Homeric context denotes obligation for respect based on mutual benefit.

²⁰ Dobbs, 494.

²¹ Schein, 96.

²² Michael Clarke, "Manhood and Heroism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, ed. Robert Flower, 74-90 (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 81.

²³ Cf. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. David Marsh (Penguin Books, 1999), 19, 350, 351, 356-358.

raw sentiment “nullifies or paralyzes his *philotēs*.”²⁴ It is also assumed that Achilles comes to fully appreciate the value of friendship and love only in Book 24, after relinquishing this wrath. Instead, I will suggest that the warrior’s anger communicates broader disappointments with the actions of the Achaians, whom he urges to repent by condemning Agamemnon’s unjust rule.²⁵ His love for his compatriots intensifies his hope that they will repudiate their past choices and reclaim their moral integrity. Thus, Achilles’ *mēnis* is not an extreme *thymotic* desire driven by “unenlightened” passions;²⁶ it derives from the betrayal of one’s expectations that their *philoī* (friends) would uphold the principles of justice.²⁷ Put differently, *mēnis* often reflects a sense of care and *duty* (*chreos*) toward mutual recognition and respect, which are central to the notion of *philotēs*.

In the next section, I will examine Homer’s portrayal of human susceptibility to calamities in light of flawed divine providence. This analysis will lay the groundwork for understanding how *chreos* and *philotēs* function as stabilising counterforces.

II. On the limits of divine providence

As Kearns argued, in Homer’s *Iliad*, the gods are often portrayed as morally remorseless (and, sometimes, self-interested).²⁸ They are “*makares*” and “*rheia zoiontes*,” meaning “blessed ... who exist always” and “live easily” (per Schein’s translation), while the mortals endure a life marked by “pain and toil.”²⁹ Since the gods are untouched by worldly calamities, they struggle to empathise with the suffering of humanity. There are, of course, expectations that Zeus, at the very least, will punish wrongdoing.³⁰ Yet, he often demonstrates profound indifference to the suffering his actions cause to mortals. As we read in Books 1 and 2, Zeus considers the prayers

²⁴ Schein, 98.

²⁵ Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 98. Cf. Dean Hammer, “Homer and Political Thought,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Political Thought*, ed. Stephen Salkever, 15-41 (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 25; Michail Theodosiadis, “The Flame and The Lyre: Promethean Echoes in Homeric Epic,” *Cogito – A Multidisciplinary Journal* 7, no. 3 (2025): 88, 100-2.

²⁶ Cf. Schein, 115-116.

²⁷ On the notion of moral justice in the Homeric epics, see Anthony Arthur Long and Despina Vertzagia, “Antiquity Revisited: A Discussion with Anthony Arthur Long,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (2020): 111-122, esp. 113.

²⁸ Kearns, *The Gods in the Homeric epics*, 67.

²⁹ Schein, 53.

³⁰ Kearns, *The Gods in the Homeric epics*, 67-8.

of Thetis to “Give Troy the upper hand” until the Achaians would “grow desperate” and restore Achilles’ honor, punishing “Agamemnon the king,” who took “away his prized reward.”³¹ In response, Zeus misleads “Agamemnon by means of a dream.”³² The king is convinced that the gods will assist the Achaians in conquering Troy on that day.³³ And he prepares his army for a full-scale assault. However, “Zeus did not plan that triumph so soon.”³⁴ Consequently, the Achaians suffer a heavy defeat and are forced into a chaotic retreat to their ships. As a matter of truth, Zeus only uses the Trojans to destroy many Achaians. He hoped they would “turn to Achilles, in desperation, and honor him.”³⁵ As Homer writes, Zeus “was about to unleash misery / of harsh combat on both Trojans and Greeks.”³⁶ In response, Agamemnon convenes a council, where he publicly admits that he was “ensnarled” and deceived by the all-powerful god.³⁷ When “the entire assembly stirred and, shouting, / raced for the ships ... [and] thinking of home,”³⁸ Odysseus, urged by Athena, steps in;³⁹ he brings the Achaian soldiers back to the field, and Nestor reinforces discipline, preventing their full retreat. As both armies prepare for battle, “handsome Paris” steps forward and boldly challenges any Achaian warrior “to fight him face to face till one lay dead.”⁴⁰ Once Menelaus, the husband of Helen, “learned of Paris’ challenge / he wasted no time but raced to the front line.”⁴¹ This duel was meant to settle things peacefully if one side won, thus preventing further bloodshed. Since “Menelaus has won the victory” and Paris runs to hide, Agamemnon declares that the Trojans should return “Helen and all her riches” to the Achaians, so that they will sail home peacefully.⁴² While the Achaians agree, the Trojans hesitate.⁴³ At this point, Zeus sends Athena to sabotage the truce “by inducing the Trojans to violate the sworn agreement,” which is surprisingly insidious considering that “in the eyes of

³¹ Homer, *The Iliad* 1.503-510.

³² Homer, *The Iliad* 2.5.

³³ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁵ Ahrens Dorf, *Homer and The Tradition of Political Philosophy*, 50.

³⁶ Homer, *The Iliad* 2.39-40.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 111-15.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 149-154.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴⁰ Homer, *The Iliad* 3.16-20.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 456-457.

⁴³ Ahrens Dorf, *Homer and The Tradition of Political Philosophy*, 66.

the human beings of the poem, he is the *enforcer* of oaths.”⁴⁴ Menelaus, more precisely, places faith in Zeus to punish those who disrespect sworn oaths; however, we can see that it is Zeus himself who “induces the Trojans to “violate” this very oath.”⁴⁵ We also see Agamemnon praying to Zeus and other gods to uphold the truce and punish violators.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, Homer’s portrayal shows that the gods’ plans never fit within the human sense of justice. Agamemnon, like many other characters of *The Iliad*, takes for granted that Zeus is just; he calls Zeus “the Father of Men and Gods,” assuming “that he rewards the good and punishes the wicked, and that he specifically punishes those who violate their oaths sworn to him.”⁴⁷ But, as Ahrens Dorf claimed, the Homeric gods are perfectly willing to deceive men into betraying their oaths. In this way, the poet underscores “the shocking contrast between what humans believe” about divine justice and the true nature of gods.⁴⁸ He, therefore, sends an explicit and clear warning against trusting divine providence. This is also evident in Book 4, where we see Zeus encouraging the Trojans to accept Menelaus’s victory and end the war, while Hera complains that a truce would allow the father of the gods to undermine her efforts to harm Priam and his children. But while Zeus judges Hera’s rage for being malevolent, he suddenly yields to her requests and agrees to the destruction of Troy, betraying Achilles and showing fundamental indifference towards human suffering.⁴⁹

A similar example of gods using manipulative and self-serving power is given in Book 24 and 3, where Aphrodite expresses a sham love toward Helen; her affection is rather manipulative, coercive, and self-serving. In short, during the Judgment of Paris, Aphrodite “vied in his courtyard,”⁵⁰ promising Paris the most beautiful mortal woman, “the one who stirred hot-blooded lust.”⁵¹ To fulfil that promise, she interferes with Helen’s life and orders her to go with Paris, notwithstanding that she had already married Menelaus.⁵² And when Helen shows reluctance, Aphrodite appears in her angry manifestation,

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁹ Homer, *The Iliad* 4.25-30. Scholars offering commentary on Zeus’s immoral actions include: Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 53; Yamagata, 24.

⁵⁰ Homer, *The Iliad* 24.29.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵² Homer, *The Iliad* 3.390-413.

demonstrating her anger and promising to punish the mortal woman for her disobedience.⁵³ Aphrodite's actions here do not differ from those of Zeus (and other Iliadic gods), who lack a strict moral code and resort to all forms of deception in the pursuit of their self-interest, often expressing indifference towards the suffering they inflict on mortals. For example, in Book 17, we find Zeus expressing pity for human beings as a whole: "No other creature that breathes and crawls the earth / is half as miserable as mortal man."⁵⁴ But it is the same god who, in Book 8, killed many Achaians and plunged both sides into a disastrous conflict.⁵⁵

Thus, in the *Iliad*, the gods are ambivalent and often cruel towards the mortals. More importantly, they are plagued by human-like flaws, such as self-interest and greed.⁵⁶ Despite their divine status, they are subject to the same physical frailties as humans are. This is particularly evident in Book 5, where we see the goddess Aphrodite being severely wounded by Diomedes in a battle:

The point breached her skin –
beneath the ambrosial gown the Graces had made –
near the hand, releasing the immortal fluid,
ichor, that flows inside the blessed gods.⁵⁷

The wounding of the goddess reveals not only that the immortals can at times exhibit vulnerabilities akin to those of humans; they may, as Kearns suggests, be inferior to mortals in strength and skill.⁵⁸ Likewise, god Ares throws

a spear over harness and yoke,
a bronze spear intended to take a life,
but gleaming-eyed Athena grabbed the weapon,
shunting the point, useless, wide of the chariot.⁵⁹

⁵³ Ibid., 413-20; cf. Anna Afonasiina, "The Image of Aphrodite in Empedocles," *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy* 16 (2024): 153.

⁵⁴ Homer, *The Iliad* 17.446-447.

⁵⁵ Homer, *The Iliad* 2.1-4; 4.64-72; 7.476-479; cf. Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 58.

⁵⁶ Adkins, 62-64; Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 25, 57.

⁵⁷ Homer, *The Iliad* 5.337-341.

⁵⁸ Kearns, 72.

⁵⁹ Homer, *The Iliad* 5.851-854.

This scene indicates that quarrels pervade the divine realm as the gods share a good deal of human imperfections (including jealousy and aggression). Hence, they cannot provide absolute moral guidance. According to Adkins, the Olympian gods do not think “in moralistic terms;”⁶⁰ they are “far from just,” and can only “guarantee some moral relationships.”⁶¹ Therefore, calamities arise either from the moral indifference (or selfishness) of the gods or from human recklessness (*atasthaliai*). To escape this cycle of pain and suffering, the human mind must cast off *thymotic* longings and false expectations of divine providence, as Ruderman assumes. In turn, one must commit to rational action, pursuing “genuine enlightenment,”⁶² that is, one must rely on individual intelligence to navigate challenges and make rational, moral decisions.

However, while in *The Iliad* the moral weaknesses of the immortals are vividly portrayed through their selfish indulgences, which often justify and glorify warlike vengeance and rampant enmity, in *The Odyssey*, we are told that they have shifted their stance, urging human beings to behave justly and piously.⁶³ For Kirk, *The Iliad* portrays “the tragic aspect of life, where suffering predominates, whereas the *Odyssey* offers a simpler, moralizing view,” and the gods must “ensure that we will eventually suffer beyond our due if we misbehave.”⁶⁴ We read in the second half of the poem about the gods forming a united front to help Odysseus return. This unity, Kearns writes, is founded on a moral basis. The gods (especially goddess Athena) assume that it is right for Odysseus to triumph “over his enemies and be reinstated as ruler of Ithaca,” punishing the suitors, who are “wicked men”⁶⁵ and have violated the sacred laws of *xenia* (hospitality), dishonouring the king’s household while exploiting his absence for their personal gain. Of course, this shift is not perfect, considering that Poseidon delays Odysseus’ homecoming. However, in the assembly of gods, Poseidon is absent, as he is feasting with the Aethiopians on the fringes of the world.⁶⁶ One could speculate that

⁶⁰ Kearns, 68.

⁶¹ Adkins, 62-65.

⁶² Ruderman, 142, 143, 147.

⁶³ Kearns, 69; Segal Charles, “Divine Justice in the *Odyssey*: Poseidon, Cyclops, and Helios,” *The American Journal of Philology* 113, no. 4 (1992): 492, 515.

⁶⁴ Geoffrey Kirk, “The Gods in Homer: Further Considerations,” In *The Iliad: A Commentary*, ed. Richard Janko, 1-7 (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 6.

⁶⁵ Kearns, 69.

⁶⁶ Tobias Joho, *Style and Necessity in Thucydides* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 237; cf. Homer, *The Odyssey* 1.22-27.

if Poseidon had not been away from the deliberations on Olympus, he would have opposed the homecoming of Odysseus, who, in that case, might have returned even later than he does.⁶⁷

For Segal, *The Odyssey* brings “the polycentric and polytheistic world order” of the various gods and their conflicting interests under a single, unified moral system governed by Zeus.⁶⁸ Poseidon represents the old “pre-Olympian” chaotic order of “monsters, Titans, and Giants,” which has been replaced by the new order of Zeus.⁶⁹ Thus, Poseidon fades out of relevance, disappearing as the world moves forward in time.⁷⁰ From now on, Zeus will be in charge of mankind’s *Moîra*; and he will judge the moral deeds of each mortal, punishing those who disobey while rewarding those who align their actions with his conception of justice. As we read in Book 5, Hermes informs Calypso that Odysseus’s homecoming is predetermined;⁷¹ “Zeus orders you to send him on his way,”⁷² since it is not his *Moîra* (*aisa*) “to die here far away from those he loves.”⁷³ It is his *Moîra* “to see his friends and his family” (“μοῖρ’ ἐστὶ φίλους τ’ ἰδέειν καὶ ἰκέσθαι”),⁷⁴ and to “come back home, to his own native land.”⁷⁵

The divine order in *The Odyssey* is, certainly, more unified and moralistic in comparison to the chaotic world of *The Iliad*. Yet, moral ambiguities are still present in the poem. It has been suggested that Athena’s support for Odysseus’s revenge against the suitors is grounded in a moral judgment; the goddess upholds the restoration of justice through harsh punishment inflicted on those who oppress others and abuse the norms of *xenia*.⁷⁶ However, in Book 18, we find Athena making the suitors “more overbearing and arrogant so that Odysseus may be all the more angry and their punishment more certain.”⁷⁷ Thus,

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Segal, 498.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Joho, 236.

⁷² Homer, *The Odyssey* 5.113.

⁷³ Ibid., 114.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 115.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 113-115.

⁷⁶ Kearns, 69.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

the goddess indulges Odysseus' *thymos*, permitting him to commit *hubris*. According to Ruderman, this indulgence ultimately prompts the Ithacan king to fatally compromise "his project of enlightenment."⁷⁸ As Ahrens Dorf also argued, "[d]uring the battle with the suitors, "[o]nce the suitors are slaughtered," the Ithacan king "needlessly and [...] imprudently, tortures and kills two children of a faithful servant" and cuts off the head of the prophet Leiodes" as he "rightly protests his innocence."⁷⁹

Additionally, while examining this new divine order, we observed that Zeus is in charge of the *Moîra* of humanity; he oversees mankind's *Moîra*, but without determining fate itself.⁸⁰ As Schein argued, a god "never causes *Moîra*" although there are occasional passages where the immortals prevent it "from happening prematurely or inopportune-ly."⁸¹ In short, the gods bear primary responsibility for ensuring that events unfold in accordance with what is predetermined to occur. For example, in Book 8 (of *the Iliad*), we read Zeus making

ready his golden balance
 On each pan he placed a portent of doom,
 one side for the Trojans, one for the Greeks.
 When he lifted the scale, the Greek side dropped.
 The Greeks' fate sank toward the bountiful earth
 while that of the Trojans rose toward heaven.⁸²

In Book 22, Zeus weighs the fates of Hector and Achilles and prepares his golden scale.⁸³ Zeus's scale offers a visual representation of the appetites of *Moîra*. Through such an act of weighing, he measures the remaining lifespan of a mortal. Thus, he "placed in each pan a portent of death, / one for Peleus' son [Achilles], the other for Hector."⁸⁴ And then he "raised the center, and Hector's side sank / toward Hades."⁸⁵

⁷⁸ Ruderman, 154.

⁷⁹ Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 203.

⁸⁰ It is striking that neither Ruderman nor Dobbs made substantial reference to the role of *Moîra* in their efforts to shed light on the complex relationship between human agency and fatality in the poems. However, *Moîra* occupies a significant position within the narrative, imposing constraints (though not absolute) on rational human action.

⁸¹ Schein, 63.

⁸² Homer, *Iliad* 8.69-74.

⁸³ Homer, *The Iliad* 22.209.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 210-11.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 212-13.

Notice that herein Zeus does not *choose* who will die; he can only influence the circumstances surrounding Hector's *keros* (doom or death).⁸⁶ Seemingly, *The Iliad* presents a less flexible depiction of Moîra than the *Odyssey*. But even within this rigid framework, there is room for human action. The *Iliad* is full of examples of characters making choices that influence the course of events, even if the outcome remains fixed. For instance, Agamemnon's choice to take Briseis away from Achilles, driven by a sense of entitlement,⁸⁷ sets in motion a chain of events that significantly affect the course of the war: Achilles withdraws from battle;⁸⁸ the Achaians suffer numerous losses (as recorded in Book 11). Therefore, while the outcome (the fall of Troy) is dictated by Moîra, Agamemnon and Achilles' choices alter the path by which that specific outcome is reached.

Moîra is linked to the word *moros*, "used so often of someone's death or doom."⁸⁹ The poet chooses the words "ἴση μοῖρα" (*isoîn Moîra*), to suggest that "[f]ate is the same whether one fights or no. / The coward's reward is the same as the hero's / Death awaits both the diligent and lazy."⁹⁰ Achilles "cannot escape his fate of death," he does have the option to "return home, live a peaceful life, and grow old," or remain in Troy "to fight for honor, but at the cost of dying in a foreign land."⁹¹ Thus, "[w]hile the fate of death is irreplaceable, people can choose glory and honor, or they can opt for a mundane and unremarkable existence."⁹²

It is assumed that not even Zeus can override Moîra;⁹³ for Schein, he is clearly able to do so, but refrains in order to avoid disrupting the cosmic order that Moîra herself protects.⁹⁴ However, the same author contends that we should distinguish Moîra from the concept

⁸⁶ Dean Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics: The Performance of Political Thought* (Oklahoma University Press, 2002), 54.

⁸⁷ Homer, *The Iliad* 1.184-188.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁸⁹ Schein, 62

⁹⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey* 9.318-320.

⁹¹ Mingyi Sui, "The Concept of Fate in Homer's Epic – An Interdisciplinary Perspective," in *Proceedings of the 2023 5th International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development (ICLAHD 2023)*, eds. Elisabetta Marino et al., 1128-1136 (Atlantis Press, 2023), 1131.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 1132.

⁹³ James Duffy, "Homer's Conception of Fate," *The Classical Journal* 42, no. 8 (1947): 477; cf. Amora Zilento Cilento, "Considerations on Fate in the *Iliad* and the Remarkable Interventions of the Divine," *Religions* 16, no. 5 (2025).

⁹⁴ Schein, 64.

of destiny; for former does not prescribe an absolutely fixed course of events.⁹⁵ This understanding of Moîra, Schein assumed, is informed by the Latin term *fatum* from where the English “fate” derives;⁹⁶ and more importantly, this misinterpretation has been influenced by “Christian notions of predestination.”⁹⁷ Thus, we must avoid this translation, which is associated with a concept “that is in no way Homeric.”⁹⁸ While the author rightly cautions against projecting utterly deterministic interpretations (rooted in later historical contexts) onto Homer’s Moîra, the case of Odysseus’s homecoming demonstrates that fate holds significant sway over human affairs. In fact, the degree to which human agency in the Homeric world is truly free from the appetites of Moîra is critical.⁹⁹ In some instances, mortals can come close to doing something “so exceptional” and “so remarkable” that it could have gone beyond Moîra (“beyond portion”) (*huper moron, huper Moîran, huper aisan*). Certainly, the limits set by Moîra herself will hold firm.¹⁰⁰ However, her existence does not diminish human agency to shape the unfolding of events; Moîra sets a precise destination; but the path remains subject to personal choices; that is, the quality of one’s journey is subject to the decided course of action. In Hammer’s words, “[f]ate does not control all aspects of human action.”¹⁰¹ In this way, the mortals are responsible for fulfilling their ordained paths; flawed human choices (*atasthaliai*) play a crucial role in the broader process of moral development and self-understanding.

According to Kirk, sometimes “in the Odyssey mortals can suffer beyond what is fated, because of their own wickedness.”¹⁰² He knows that there is a Moîra “for the life of Odysseus ... over which he has no control.”¹⁰³ However, even within such tight constraints, the king can retain a measure of agency and capacity to navigate. In addition, Moîra does not determine the specific means by which Odysseus will accomplish his homecoming; nor does she prescribe the moral insights a protagonist will

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*; Sui, 1130.

⁹⁷ Schein, 62.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

⁹⁹ Theodosiadis, “The Flame and The Lyre,” 93-94.

¹⁰⁰ Schein, 63-64.

¹⁰¹ Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics*, 54.

¹⁰² Kirk, 6.

¹⁰³ Segal, 502.

acquire throughout his journey.¹⁰⁴ In light of this, Ruderman would suggest that since humans bear responsibility for their actions, they must trust their rational agency, abandoning fickle divine promises and mythological constructs that spring from dark impulses and often prompt *hubris* and utter ruin. This emphasis on human agency is also highlighted in Book 9 (of the *Odyssey*), where Odysseus progresses toward his fate by trusting his cleverness and cunning. He devises a plan to test “whether or not the gods are reliable supporters of justice.”¹⁰⁵ When he approaches the cave of the temporarily absent Cyclops, he attempts to discover if these men are “lawless aggressors” or hospitable to “strangers, and fear the gods.”¹⁰⁶ However, Polyphemus (Poseidon’s son) proves to be brutal; he disrespects the gods, claiming that the Cyclops “think nothing of ... Zeus with his big scepter, / nor any god; our strength is more than theirs.”¹⁰⁷ In vain Odysseus awaits the assistance of his patroness Athena, Yamagata argued; he has to rely only on his judgments, blinding the Cyclopes and then escaping by hiding under the bellies of their sheep. There is “no sign of divine aid,” and Zeus “does nothing which we could expect from a ‘moral’ god,” such as intervening to remind Poseidon that his son violated *xenia* and disrespected the mortals.¹⁰⁸ In the absence of divine intervention, Odysseus “displays a tremendous capacity for self-reliance by brilliantly and effectively saving himself and his men from the monstrous Cyclops.”¹⁰⁹ He is, as Ruderman claimed, “enlightened” about the nature of his situation.¹¹⁰ While Homer considers Odysseus’ *eventual* return as “fated,”¹¹¹ he ultimately describes him as a man of action, who trusts “his own unaided reason” so that he can escape extreme hardship and save the lives of his shipmates.¹¹² In simple terms, Odysseus’ experiences “bring him face to face with the harsh truth that the gods are fundamentally unreliable.”¹¹³ Therefore, to pursue his destined course, he must become *polymēchanos* (πολυμήχανος), that is, he must depend on his resourcefulness and intellect.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁴ Joho, 238.

¹⁰⁵ Ruderman, 153.

¹⁰⁶ Homer, *The Odyssey* 9.173-176.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 274-277.

¹⁰⁸ Yamagata, 6-8.

¹⁰⁹ Ahrens Dorf, *Homer and The Tradition of Political Philosophy*, 81.

¹¹⁰ Ruderman, 153.

¹¹¹ Homer, *The Odyssey* 11. 90-137.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Ahrens Dorf, *Homer and The Tradition of Political Philosophy*, 81.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* Moreover, Odysseus is referred to as *polymēchanos* seventeen times in the *Odyssey*.

Of course, Homer does not propose the complete removal of the realm of mythology from secular life. However, in Ruderman's eyes, mythological concepts in Homer's epics serve only as a springboard for reflection on the frailty of the human condition, rather than a realm through which humans can seek salvation.¹¹⁵ Dobbs, conversely, argues that this frailty is not mitigated by rationalism,¹¹⁶ but instead by recognising the limits of rational action itself.¹¹⁷ Odysseus' greatness, he explains, does not rest only on "his intellectual resourcefulness" (*polymēchanon*) or intelligence, as it is commonly understood; it also stems from his reverence for the gods. As I will explain in the following section, this reverence tempers one's rationalism and aligns their actions with divine will.¹¹⁸ Finally, I will argue that Odysseus' reverence is coextensive with his ethic of *philotēs* (or *chreos*), whose significance is further explored in section four.

III. On the limits of rational action

Upon reflecting on the Thrinakian episode, Dodds draws our attention to Odysseus' descent into the Underworld, where he encounters the blind prophet Teiresias. There, the prophet warns that if the king hopes to win his return "despite great losses,"¹¹⁹ he must avoid eating the "grazing cows and fine fat sheep" on the island of Thrinakia, because they belong "to the god who sees and hears / all things – the Sun God."¹²⁰ Teiresias warns that violating the sanctity of these divine cattle will result in a type of punishment that would entail utter destruction. But as we read, the Ithacans remain stranded on the island for nearly a month. And when the "ship's supplies ran out" and hunger "gnawed their bellies," the men attempted to fish and hunt birds, but without success.¹²¹ Then, Odysseus leaves his shipmates to seek advice

According to *The Oxford New Greek Dictionary* (164), a *polymēchanos* man is "resourceful." is the word *polymēchanos* is compound; it derives from *polys*, meaning "many," and *mēkhanē*, meaning "device" or "contrivance." Thus, to be *polymēchanos* (especially in the Homeric context) is to devise multiple solutions to a particular problem, demonstrating ingenuity that may include both clever reasoning, rational strategy, and cunning.

¹¹⁵ Ruderman, 151.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 143, 145, 148, 154, 160.

¹¹⁷ Dobbs, 493.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Homer, *The Odyssey* 11.111-112.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 107-10.

¹²¹ Homer, *The Odyssey* 12.330-333.

from the gods.¹²² However, his men give in to their urge and decide to slaughter the cattle. Eurylochus proposed a “foolish” (or reckless) plan:¹²³ “If the gods should fail to cooperate in punishing the men, slaughtering the cattle is clearly preferable to the alternative” of starvation and slow death.¹²⁴ In the event the gods decide to inflict punishment, then slaughtering the cattle is still a better option; for an immediate death is physically and morally more preferable to the torturous death of starvation.¹²⁵ The “most miserable of all.”¹²⁶ In response, Helios demands revenge from Zeus,¹²⁷ who sends a thunderstorm to destroy Odysseus’ ship,¹²⁸ drowning all of his shipmates. Only Odysseus survives; and he is washed up on the island of Calypso.

For Clay, Odysseus’ shipmates are fundamentally innocent; yet, they receive “no consideration whatsoever,” as Helios acts “with complete ruthlessness” to protect his “offended honor.”¹²⁹ In the author’s mindset, the gods “capriciously bestow good and evil” while attempting “to ruthlessly protect their own prerogatives without any sense of justice or fairness.”¹³⁰ Thus, Odysseus must rely on his personal abilities; in this way, he will become “the hero of a world without justice.”¹³¹ Dobbs challenges this view and underscores “the culpable recklessness of the crewmen,” in the light of which “the dawn of reverence in Odysseus” is substantiated.¹³² But why are such rational choices condemned as “reckless?”¹³³ To address this we must consider Dobbs’ emphasis on the actual message conveyed by Teiresias’ warning: the prophet’s urge for abstinence from food carries an educational (or moral) dimension; through this instruction, Odysseus and his shipmen are urged “to check [their] heart[s]” (θυμὸν ἐρυκαχέειν),¹³⁴ that is, to restrain their *thymos*.¹³⁵ In this context, *thymos* does not ex-

¹²² Ibid., 333.

¹²³ Ibid., 339.

¹²⁴ Dobbs, 496.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Homer, *The Odyssey* 12.342.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 376-82.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 419.

¹²⁹ Clay, *The Wrath of Athena*, 230.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid, 231.

¹³² Dobbs, 494.

¹³³ Ibid., 497.

¹³⁴ Homer, *The Odyssey* 11.105.

¹³⁵ Dobbs, 495.

clusively refer to explosive emotions of anger; rather, it encompasses a broad range of meanings. It can also be associated with chaotic human desires that must be disciplined in the face of temptation, hardship, and suffering. In Plato's philosophy, *thymos* is triggered by the *epithymetikon* (ἐπιθυμητικόν) – the so-called appetitive – part of the soul,¹³⁶ which deprives the *logistikon* and “rules like a beast” (“ἄγοντος ὡσπερ θηρίον”), activating the spirits, namely the *thymoeides* (θυμοειδές).¹³⁷ According to Ruderman, Homer hews closely to this Platonic psychology, defining *thymos* as a form of proud self-respect that prompts us to blindly trust divine entities, which “alone can assist us in punishing those wrongdoers who escape, as so many do, earthly punishment.”¹³⁸ *Thymos* makes the “renunciation of (low) pleasures a kind of pleasure itself” and often indulges “the most tempting pleasure of all: pleasure of righteous indignation in the face of undeserved suffering.”¹³⁹ However, in Dobbs' view, this “righteous indignation,” this *thymotic* impulse, is not fueled by reverence; rationalistic judgments, which rely on calculated choices (or commensuration), can also indulge this demand for action in the pursuit of what *prima facie* seems just. In his own words, “[r]ationalism is ... a form of licentiousness,” as it works its influence from within.¹⁴⁰ In simple terms, rationalism inherits an instrumental logic; it grants full autonomy to mechanisms that lead to a desired end or ultimate purpose/objective (*telos*), which is often decided by our deepest *thymotic* drives that frequently legitimise and glorify wrath or rebellion. In simple terms, driven by the *thymotic* belief that we deserve better, we pursue a (rational) *telos*: to alleviate (or dismantle) this perceived inequity. Nonetheless, by resisting or defying perceived sources of injustice – divine or otherwise – mortals risk overlooking the moral lessons these seemingly unfair trials contain. In fact, such trials often serve as catalysts for personal moral development. In the Homeric context, the gods use suffering as a form of divine testing: the more the mortals suffer, and yet refrain from giving in to their *thymotic* desires, the more they learn to endure with patience and regulate their catastrophic passions (including *hubris*).

Consequently, what is being tested here is reverence; that is, trust in divine providence. Through patience, humility, and trust, one re-

¹³⁶ Plato, *Republic*, 439a.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 439e.

¹³⁸ Ruderman, 155. As also Kirk argued, in Homer's epics the god's actions usually evoke “the whole range of [human] emotions” that Aristotle has urged us to expect from such literature (*Introduction*, 2).

¹³⁹ Ruderman, 147.

¹⁴⁰ Dobbs, 500.

strains the *thymotic* motivational system. The whole Thrinakian episode makes reverence seem high as it becomes a mirror for the internal state of the characters: (1) the crew is ruled by appetite and despair; (2) Odysseus shows restraint and respect; yet he cannot lead effectively, as his men indulge their *thymos*, violating divine orders. Moreover, the cattle serve as a powerful symbol of temptation, appealing not only to appetites but also to the calculating mind that evaluates all moves and ostensibly identifies the fairest decision or move. Thus, we see a rational choice leading to a transgression of

the limits imposed by the sacred [...] which commands respect on its own terms, not in virtue of comparison or analogy with something else. By its very nature, the sacred defies commensuration.¹⁴¹

Instead, the purpose of the sacred is “the proper cultivation of the human soul” in the face of struggles and hardships.¹⁴² In this context, every form of disobedience to divine rules is a reckless choice (or *atasthalia*). It is a dangerous move, as it prevents the mortals from developing high moral capacities by “win[ning] their soul” (“ἀρνύμενος ἥν τε ψυχὴν”).¹⁴³

To further substantiate this claim, Dobbs discusses the case of Aigisthos, who murders Agamemnon to marry Clytemnestra.¹⁴⁴ The gods had warned not to murder the king “or court his wife,” because “Orestes would grow up / and come back to his home to take revenge.”¹⁴⁵ However, his desire for power outweighs the consequences of Orestes’ vengeance. Thus, he makes a rational decision, weighing benefits and costs.¹⁴⁶ Such “reckless” moves, in Homer’s eyes, treat divine prohibitions not as perfect moral lessons but reduce them to calculative domains of choice in pursuit of individual self-interest. This choice, as Aigisthos’ case reveals, is often susceptible to the very human impulses that give rise to *hubris*. Furthermore, rationalism “upholds the limitless possibility of commensuration because it presumes the ultimate hegemony of reason,” or “intelligence ... in the pursuit of wisdom.”¹⁴⁷ How-

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 499.

¹⁴² Ibid, 500.

¹⁴³ Homer, *The Odyssey* 1.5; cf. Dobbs, 503.

¹⁴⁴ Dobbs, 497-501.

¹⁴⁵ Homer, *The Odyssey* 1.40-42.

¹⁴⁶ Dobbs, 499.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 500.

ever, the flourishing of true “reason into wisdom” requires (as I have already explained) “a recognition of its limits.”¹⁴⁸ To put it bluntly, rationalism is an abuse of reason; “[p]erhaps this can be clarified most effectively with the aid of a political analogy. Rationalism is to reason as majority tyranny is to democracy.”¹⁴⁹ Or – to use my own terms – rationalism is to reason what intelligence is to wisdom. Intelligence relies on scientific forms of evidence in order (1) to unveil the main *causes* of an *effect*/problem and (2) to identify “potential solutions, either by eliminating the causes or by repairing and rectifying the resulting damages (the effect).”¹⁵⁰ The intelligent person *calculates* the consequences of various actions, considering which ones offer the greatest benefit for the completion – or *telos* – of a particular desired goal; however, this *telos*, where all objectives are finally accomplished,¹⁵¹ is not always judged by considering its ethical content and purpose. In other words, intelligent actors (such as Aigisthos or Odysseus’ crew) prioritise outcomes based on a cost/benefit calculation, without always anchoring “benefit” to hidden moral principles.

To further highlight the distinction between wisdom and intelligence, I will turn to Aristotle. The philosopher delineates practical wisdom – or prudence (*phronesis*) – as a virtue concerned with ethical deliberation, in contrast to mere rational knowledge. Prudence is a virtue that “encourages constant re-evaluation, reflection, and reassessment” of opinions, actions, and ideas through deliberation and dialogue.¹⁵² Here, there is no *telos*, and nothing is considered definitive or self-evident.¹⁵³ Prudent persons can “deliberate nobly” about what “conduces to living well.”¹⁵⁴ In this regard, practical wisdom (or prudence) encourages us to engage with others in search of common understanding; prudent persons, in other words, acknowledge the multiple facets of a problem, viewpoint, concept, or idea while seeking deliberative compromise.

In light of the Thrinakian episode, Odysseus’s efforts to navigate between divine injunctions and the immediate needs of his crew reflect

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 500-501. “This recognition respects the sacred, “such as that which determines Odysseus’ refusal to join his crewmen in their rationalistic smorgasbord” (ibid). On this, see also Pia Valenzuela, “Fredrickson on Flourishing through Positive Emotions and Aristotle’s Eudaimonia,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 37-61.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 500.

¹⁵⁰ Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy*, 119.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁵² Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy*, 119; cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140b.

¹⁵³ Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy*, 131.

¹⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140a.

a display of prudence/phronesis. Notice that in *The Odyssey*, he is referred to as *polymēchanos* (πολυμήχανος) seventeen times. As previously explained, to be *polymēchanos* is to engage in multiple “machinations” or strategic responses to a given problem. In this sense, a *polymēchanos* is an intelligent person who places trust in rational mastery. However, to be truly *polymēchanos* is not merely to rely on rational methods; to possess the ingenuity to identify “multiple” answers implies that a person can employ a wide range of approaches (rational, intuitive, emotional, and so on) in order to navigate challenges arising from human *hubris* or natural misfortune. This becomes all the more evident in Odysseus’ portrayal, not simply as *polymēchanos* but as *polyphron* (πολύφρων). According to Ahrens Dorf, *polyphron* is the man who possesses profound wisdom¹⁵⁵ (and, more specifically, practical wisdom), rather than intelligence alone; for *polyphron* comes from polys (“many” or “multiple”) and *phron* (φρων), the root of *Phronesis*. Thus, the *polyphron* Odysseus is characterized by manifold prudence and practical wisdom, rather than mere intelligence.

To suggest that practical wisdom knows no *telos* in the process of evaluating facts and arguments is to assume that the *polymēchanos* and *polyphros* Odysseus does not take any assumption or concept as given once and for all. Simply put, the morality of divine injunctions is not absolute. Therefore, Odysseus – as a practically wise actor – does not see divine injunctions as being entirely inviolable; he evaluates both sides of the divine character: he knows that the gods sometimes act with a sincere desire to morally uplift mortals; but he is also aware that divine beings are not always morally stable. After all, his experience on the island of the Cyclopes made him aware that the Olympian gods are capricious and, quite often, morally indifferent and self-interested. Thus, the Ithacan king is aware that divine orders can be excessive and unbearable. Even so, he hesitates to defy their will; he recognises that trials and hardships imposed by divine providence often serve a greater purpose: the moral development and elevation of mortals. As a *polymēchanos* and *polyphros*, he invents a method of interaction and communication with the sacral, conveying the plight of his men, threatened by hunger and starvation under harsh divine orders. At the same time, even justified disobedience in the face of suffering can impede moral development, which is essential for one to “win their soul.” Through this method, divine and mortal wills are brought into dialogue; in other words, gods and mortals engage in deliberation, led by Odysseus himself.

¹⁵⁵ Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 199.

In short, Odysseus's communication with the gods can be seen as an attempt to curb the consequences of unchecked *thymos*, even when it is cloaked in the guise of reason. At this point, Dobbs' assertion becomes fully clear: Odysseus' homecoming is not merely a physical return; it is not merely a physical journey but also a moral one, during which the king acquires moral strength through his hardships and wanderings. However, it has become evident that while reverence plays an important role in shaping his ethical character, it is not the sole driving force; nor does his "enlightenment" alone (his intelligence and rational mastery) constitute the core of his ethical growth. Instead, it has been revealed that the core of his ethical personality rests with his prudence, marked by a reflective engagement with conflicting values and a drive toward compromise. Through practical wisdom, Odysseus strives to avert calamities inflicted by the gods' harsh orders or even by the perils of *thymotic* human desires. Consequently, practical wisdom is a complementary ethical foundation to both reverence and rational judgment. At the same time, we have seen that his prudence is urged by *chreos* and *philotēs*. *Chreos* towards his men encourages Odysseus to deliberate with the gods; in the pursuit of justice, the king reflects on the pain and anguish of his crew and actively responds by striving to bridge the chasm between divine mandates and mortal necessities. Therefore, *chreos* and *philotēs* are essential additions to both reverence and rational judgment. It is time to move on, explaining how *chreos* is also portrayed in *The Iliad*, particularly by the figure of Achilles.

IV. *Chreos* and *philotēs*; beyond "enlightenment" and reverence

In the first half of the *Iliad*, Achilles is (seemingly) depicted as a ruthless warrior, consumed by *mēnis* (or *thymos*), that is, by an extraordinary, and almost supernatural, insanity "that can be seen in both gods and wild beasts."¹⁵⁶ As explained in the previous section, *thymos* is commonly associated with self-assertive, and often unruly, human impulses that incite recklessness, selfishness, and often anger or rebellion. We have seen that on certain occasions, when a person is wronged and endures hunger, cold, or a different type of suffering, their spirit seethes and grows fierce, often aligning with what seems to be right.¹⁵⁷ However, does *thymos* always deprive self-control and self-mastery? Does the passion of anger always deprive the *logistikon*, signalling a failure to align one's actions with reason and virtue? Plato was not so cat-

¹⁵⁶ Clarke, 81.

¹⁵⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 440b.

egorical on this issue: in some cases, he assumed, this type of spiritedness aligns with reason (σύμμαχον τῷ λόγῳ γιγνόμενον τὸν θυμὸν τοῦ τοιούτου);¹⁵⁸ these passionate tempers (περὶ τοῦ θυμοειδοῦς) often provoke inner turmoil or rebellion (τῆς ψυχῆς στάσει τίθεσθαι), which in many respects enhances prudent thinking, instead of undermining the human ability for moral judgment.¹⁵⁹ Aristotle defines anger as a longing for revenge, in the view of “a real or apparent slight, affecting a man himself” or his relatives.¹⁶⁰ Therefore, anger is not always “irrational;”¹⁶¹ it often stems from the (rationally accessible) judgments of persons who are held in low esteem and suffer the injustices committed by another.¹⁶² As Aristotle wrote,

[τ]here is praise for someone who gets angry at the right things and with the right people, as well as in the right way, at the right time, and for the right length of time.¹⁶³

The Greek thinker condemns “insensibility,” namely, the condition that plunges persons into apathy; insensible people, he contends, never express anger because they are indifferent to pain and suffering.¹⁶⁴ Aristotle also uses the term (πραότητα) *praotēs*, as a middle state between insensibility (ἀναλγησία) and *orgilotēs* (ὀργιλότης) – or “irascibility” (extreme anger),¹⁶⁵ which refers to the condition where persons are angered not with the “right things,” the “right people,” and “in the right way.” *Orgilotēs* is a prolonged *thymos* that endures even when the reasons for its existence no longer apply or hold sway.¹⁶⁶ Specifically, it is *orgilotēs*, rather than every manifestation of *thymos*, the primary enemy of reason. With this in mind, I will argue that Achilles’ *mēnis* should not be equated with arrogant or insolent anger of *orgilotēs*; instead, it is an expression of righteous anger over betrayal and dishonor inflicted upon him; but, more importantly, it expresses his deep disappointment for the failure of the Achaians, that is, for his *philoī*, to uphold genuine

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, 1378a32-1378b2.

¹⁶¹ Bernhard Koch, “Anger and Reconciliation,” *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2023): 284.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1125b.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

justice. We understand, then, that Achilles *mēnis* and *philotēs* are not two conflicting forces; they are the opposite sides of the same grading scale.

It is worth briefly revisiting Achilles' withdrawal in Book 1, following Agamemnon's dishonourable actions. He is confident that someday the Achaeans "will come to repent" of their injustice to conform to the decisions of the king;¹⁶⁷ they will be "hard-pressed and desperate / but helpless, as under Hector's hand so many / are falling dead."¹⁶⁸ When Achilles wishes Zeus "to let the Trojans / drive the Greeks to the ships' sterns and the sea,"¹⁶⁹ he desires to see his comrades punished, so that they "will resent their king" recognising their injustice;¹⁷⁰ the "Greek chiefs" would "crouch at [his] knees, / begging" for his return.¹⁷¹ This is exactly how the story unfolded: in light of heavy losses, Agamemnon sends Phoinix, Ajax, and Odysseus to persuade Achilles to return. Phoinix finds no fault in his anger. However, he advises Achilles to let go of his *mēnis* by telling the story of Meleagros, who also withdrew from battle in anger, only to return when his wife implored and reminded him of "how much / horror there is when warriors take a city," as "they slaughter the men" and "burn the buildings down."¹⁷² Phoinix appeals to their personal and communal bonds: for, like Ajax and Odysseus, he shares a close bond with Achilles. Thus, the embassy does not present itself as a messenger of Agamemnon; the three Achaians invoke their friendship.¹⁷³ Finally, Odysseus conveys to Achilles Agamemnon's offer of compensation:

ten talents of gold, seven new tripods,
twenty burnished kettles, a dozen horses
bred for racing [...]
lands or lustrous objects made of coveted gold [...]
seven skilled women
from Lesbos.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁷ Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 145.

¹⁶⁸ Homer, *The Iliad* 1.241-3.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 408-409.

¹⁷⁰ Homer, *The Iliad* 1.410.

¹⁷¹ Homer, *The Iliad* 9.609-10.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 591-593.

¹⁷³ Schein, 112-113, 115.

¹⁷⁴ Homer, *The Iliad* 9.264-271.

And Phoinix reminds him that Meleagros “saved his people without recompense,”¹⁷⁵ while Achilles is offered abundant wealth and honor by the king. Yet the warrior remains unmoved.¹⁷⁶ Though the causes of this *mēnis* have been (seemingly) addressed, he does “not quiet the anger that still / consumes him.”¹⁷⁷ He insists that he “will not consider fighting [the Trojans],” even when “Priam’s battle-crazed son Hector / reaches the Myrmidon vessels and camps,” and burns the Achaean ships, slaughtering every Greek in his path.¹⁷⁸ Only when the Trojans near Achilles’ “lodge and unburnt crafts” would he “stop Hector, however hard he fights.”¹⁷⁹ But why does our hero remain angry even after his honor is seemingly restored? Does this not suggest that he is, indeed, possessed by the savage spirit of *orgilotēs*? As we read in Book 1, Achilles

never received a prize like yours when we
 attacked one of the towns neighboring Troy.
 Even though all the hard, riskiest fighting
 fell on my hands, when time came to divide,
 your share was greater by far, and very little
 wound up at the ships where I lay, war-weary.¹⁸⁰

Ahrens Dorf contends that Achilles’ *mēnis* arises not solely from Agamemnon’s threat to take his prize, but more fundamentally from the king’s unjust nine-year reign,¹⁸¹ which lacks the credentials to deliver justice.¹⁸² More to the point, in the Homeric world, justice (*themis*) does not reside with the leader’s prerogative,¹⁸³ while public wisdom constitutes its vital guardian. Hence, when the *basileus* is unable to separate his private desires from public claims, considering justice an issue of his own arbitrary and unchecked prerogatives,¹⁸⁴ he enacts a form of oppressive, despotic, and unjust rule; for “[t]he voice of the

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 599.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 612.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 678-679.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 653.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 654-655.

¹⁸⁰ Homer, *The Iliad* 1.163-168.

¹⁸¹ Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 138.

¹⁸² Hammer, *Homer and Political Thought*, 24.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 24-25.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

people was the supreme law for *basileus* and *boule*.”¹⁸⁵ In this context, Agamemnon is judged as being selfish, “vindictive ... and [a] devouring” usurper;¹⁸⁶ he profits greatly from the war, claiming the lion’s share while Achilles and the Achaians for almost nine years “in a noble spirit of generosity” were risking their lives on a daily basis, only “to gratify Agamemnon and to win honor [*kleos*] for him.”¹⁸⁷ Thus, Agamemnon’s rule was so selfish and unrighteous that Achilles finds it “unreasonable for any of the Achaians to obey him.”¹⁸⁸ From this, it follows that the warrior’s wrath on Agamemnon’s rule is not solely directed against the *basileus* himself; he “implicitly criticizes the Achaians for acquiescing in the foolish and unjust rule of Agamemnon.”¹⁸⁹ Moreover, the Achaians’ attempts to convince Achilles to return to the battlefield through promises of abundant wealth and honor only exacerbate his sense of alienation; the warrior perceives himself not as a respected companion in arms; rather, he is a mere instrument in their “fruitless war.” However, Achilles loves “the Greeks ... more than any.”¹⁹⁰ Despite nine years of toil and sacrifice met only with ingratitude, disrespect, and humiliation,¹⁹¹ he refuses to abandon the Achaians, sailing back home; this is because he “cares” about his compatriots.¹⁹²

In other words, Achilles wants to hold the Achaians accountable for their unjust choices to prolong a war that only serves Agamemnon’s ambitions. His love for them manifests in a yearning for collective repentance, directed not only towards him as a person of value; his “harsh and destructive anger,” Ahrens Dorf claimed, “is a sign of his love, his desire that others be good, good for him but also good for themselves.”¹⁹³ Achilles wants the Achaians not only to understand the

¹⁸⁵ Abraham Feldman, “Homer and Democracy,” *The Classical Journal* 42, no. 8 (1952): 341. For further discussion of Homer and democracy, one may consult the following works: Lewis Morgan, *Ancient Society* (MacMillan and Co., 1877), which argues that Homer’s epic poems emphasize popular participation in political decision-making through public assemblies; Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics*; Dean Hammer, “Homer, Tyranny, and Democracy,” *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 39, no.4 (1998): 331-360; Theodosiadis, *The Flame and the Lyre*, 97-106.

¹⁸⁶ Hammer, *Homer and Political Thought*, 24; cf. Homer, *The Iliad* 1.150.

¹⁸⁷ Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 138; cf. Schein, 102. As recounted by Homer, “I have little to show for all my struggles, / often risking my life to wage fruitless war” (Homer, *Iliad* 9.321-322).

¹⁸⁸ Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 138.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁹⁰ Homer, *The Iliad* 9.521-522; cf. Ahrens Dorf, *Homer and The Tradition of Political Philosophy*, 85.

¹⁹¹ Homer, *The Iliad* 1.162, 168; cf. Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 140.

¹⁹² Ahrens Dorf, *Homer and The Tradition of Political Philosophy*, 91.

¹⁹³ Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 98.

importance of his virtues; “[h]e wants genuine honor, a genuine recognition of his excellence from men who are capable of genuinely recognising excellence.”¹⁹⁴ We could contrast this expression of *thymos* with Ruderman’s depiction of Odysseus’ wrath. While Teiresias urges him to “win his soul” by restraining his *thymos*,¹⁹⁵ Odysseus shows no mercy upon his return to Ithaca, slaughtering the suitors. For this reason, Odysseus fails to “win his own soul” from the *thymos* that directs him into violent battles, through which he may win fame, “but only at the cost of derailing his quest for enlightenment.”¹⁹⁶ Accordingly, it is Odysseus’ *thymos* that reflects the spirit of *orgilotēs*, whereas Achilles’ *mēnis* is better understood as an expression of *philotēs*.

Nonetheless, how does Achilles’ deep care for the Achaians, rooted in his desire for their moral improvement, reconcile with the consequences of his *mēnis*, which sent “uncounted hosts of his own comrades to death” merely “to prove what folly it was for Agamemnon to belittle him in the assembly of his peers?”¹⁹⁷ Let us consider Ruderman’s view of *thymos* as a vice that elevates lesser pleasures and, more seriously, the pleasure of indignation, “the most tempting pleasure,”¹⁹⁸ which frequently gives rise to *hubris* and moral transgression. As discussed earlier, *thymos* prompts persons to insist on their worth and dignity by bestowing blind faith in unreliable divine sources, expecting retribution for all wrongdoers who escape earthly punishment.¹⁹⁹ From this, it follows that even if *thymos* is not motivated by selfishness, even if anger is triggered by a spirit of love and care (as in Achilles’ case), its resulting expression may prompt irrational actions that yield catastrophic outcomes. Therefore, if we consider the contribution of Homeric gods to mortal suffering and Ruderman’s argument that humans should avoid indulging their *thymos* by placing blind faith in divine retribution, we may conclude that Achilles’ *mēnis*, though rooted in love and *philotēs*, was the primary cause of the “uncounted” losses of his comrades. However, in Book 1, we do not see Thetis and Achilles pleading for the destruction of the Achaians; the widespread death and devastation we see are exclusively decreed by Zeus himself. Certainly, the father’s actions were the direct response to Achilles’ call for ret-

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 98.

¹⁹⁵ Ruderman, 155.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 156.

¹⁹⁷ Clarke, 74.

¹⁹⁸ Ruderman, 147.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 154-155.

tribution, incited by his *mēnis*. But can we attribute the warrior's trust in the "unreliable" divine providence solely to his *thymos*; this would, certainly, be too far a stretch; for such a trust was mainly driven by his powerlessness as a mortal facing fate.²⁰⁰ Indeed, when addressing Thetis, he uses the following words:

Mother, since you gave me only a brief life,
the Olympian ought to favor and honor me,
high-thundering Zeus, but now he does not.
Atreus' son, powerful Agamemnon,
has shamed me by making my woman his own.²⁰¹

And when Thetis approaches Zeus, she only begs him to "Give Troy the upper hand until the Greeks / grow desperate and exalt my son Achilles!"²⁰² Achilles seeks divine intervention because he is born *minithadios per eonta* ("μινυθηάδιόν περ εόντα"), namely, "with a brief life."²⁰³ This awareness leads him to assume that Zeus has the *ophelen* (ὄφελεν), or the *chreos*, to rectify an injustice inflicted upon him.

Achilles' trust in divine providence, though ultimately misplaced, does not diminish his moral integrity. His decision to speak out and help the Achaeans out of *chreos* and love is well recorded in the poem. In fact, when the Achaians had to face the destructive wrath of the god Apollo, it was Achilles who alone combined "prudence and devotion to themselves with the necessary courage" and intervened to save them from destruction "through his speeches," while neither Nestor nor Odysseus spoke up, "evidently fearing, as the prophet Calchas fears, the anger of their hubristic king Agamemnon."²⁰⁴ Achilles, "spent as many days in bloody strife," laying waste "a dozen cities / near Troy, another eleven on foot," and seizing "fabulous treasure," bringing it "all back here to Agamemnon," while "Atrides, who waited safely near his ships [...] kept most himself and shared very little."²⁰⁵ Thus, Achilles' speech-

²⁰⁰ Human frailty and powerlessness, especially in the context of mortality, rather than *thymos*, is the primary motivation of trust in divine providence, Clay also argued by elaborating on *The Odyssey* (*The Wrath of Athena*, 238). Homer, *The Iliad* 1.352-356.

²⁰¹ Ibid.,

²⁰² Ibid., 509-10.

²⁰³ According to Achilles: "[m]other, since you gave me only a brief life / the Olympian ought to favor and honor me / high-thundering Zeus, but now he does not. / Atreus' son, powerful Agamemnon, / has shamed me by making my woman his own." (Homer, *The Iliad* 1.352-356).

²⁰⁴ Ahrens Dorf, *Homer and The Tradition of Political Philosophy*, 90; cf. Schein, 99.

²⁰⁵ Homer, *The Iliad* 9.325-333.

es reflect “the spirit of duty” and devotion, the spirit of *chreos* (in my terms) “to the well-being of the Achaians.”²⁰⁶

However, the Achilles we see after the death of his close friend, Patroclus, is markedly transformed; he is no longer a man who simply expresses his *thymos* in the face of collective disrespect. *Orgilotēs* entirely possesses him.²⁰⁷ This vengeful passion (*epithymetikon*), driven by a ruthless impulse to transgress moral boundaries (by killing and destroying without restraint or a sense of remorse), does not invoke any divine promises of justice and retribution. We can see in Book 21 that Achilles’ “thoughtful compassion” and “friendly affection,” as depicted through his love for Patroclus, have given way to a “savage fury,”²⁰⁸ which is not fueled by the gods; it arises from within himself. As we read, mighty Achilles “lifted and poised his long spear” while Lycaon, the son of Priam,

grabbed at his knees
and crouched so the spear flew by to hit the ground
where it stood upright, still craving human flesh.
One of Lycaon’s hands clasped Achilles’s legs,
the other clenched the spear and would not let go.²⁰⁹

Lycaon, powerless and disarmed, begs for his life: “Achilles, I beg you to pity me!”²¹⁰ Lycaon attempts to explain the reasons Achilles should spare his life:

I face you as a suppliant, owed respect
because you and I shared Demeter’s grain
the day you seized me in the orchard rows,
then took me far from father and friends to sell,
in Lemnos, my price a hundred oxen’s worth.
I bought freedom for three times that, and this day 80
is only the twelfth since I returned home,
weary from trials.²¹¹

²⁰⁶ Ahrens Dorf, *Homer and The Tradition of Political Philosophy*, 90.

²⁰⁷ In Ahrens Dorf’s words, “[t]he Achilles we see after the death of Patroclus is a man out of balance, shifting suddenly between terrible grief and friendly affection, and between savage fury and thoughtful compassion.” (Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 179); cf. Schein, 98-99.

²⁰⁸ Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 179.

²⁰⁹ Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 21, 66-72.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 75-80.

Thereupon, Homer attempts to draw his reader's attention to Lycaon's distress: "Now you have me again. / Such is my dismal fate."²¹² Priam's son, powerless, disarmed, and wounded, knows that his death is imminent: "Lycaon listened and knew he was doomed."²¹³ In Book 23, he kills Hector and defiles his corpse before the eyes of his grieving parents.²¹⁴ The poet depicts his "extreme savagery and utter inhumanity" when he kills angrily twelve Trojan youths on Patroclus' tomb,²¹⁵ "slaughter[ing] them, brutal intent in his heart."²¹⁶ Indeed, in these passages, Achilles "has virtually ceased to be human both physically and ethically; he has become a force of sheer destructive energy, annihilating whatever gets in his way."²¹⁷

Ahrens Dorf's account of Odysseus shares much in common with this frenzied image of Achilles; the Odysseus we see in Book 22 of *The Odyssey* 22 is not the *polymēchanos* and *polyphros* Odysseus of the Thrinakian episode, nor the "the most sensible among the mortals" ("νόον ἐστὶ βροτῶν"), for whom Zeus was proud;²¹⁸ he is *orgilos*, "possessed by a blind fury," to use Ahrens Dorf's words, and commits *hubris*.²¹⁹ As the same author claimed, "[d]uring the battle with the suitors, Odysseus angrily cuts off the head of the prophet Leiodes" as he "rightly protests his innocence" and "[o]nce the suitors are slaughtered," the Ithacan king

needlessly and, it would seem, imprudently, tortures and kills two children of a faithful servant whose family – not yet aware of the killing – later provides valuable support to him against the relatives of the suitors.²²⁰

But neither the *hubris* of Achilles in Book 21 nor Odysseus' savagery during the slaughter of the suitors is rooted in what Ruderman calls "mythological expectations" (implying blind faith in divine providence). Achilles' *orgilotēs*, his uncontrollable rage, emerges as a result of the physical loss of

²¹² Ibid., 81-83.

²¹³ Ibid., 114.

²¹⁴ Homer, *The Iliad* 22.395-474.

²¹⁵ Schein, 47.

²¹⁶ Homer, *The Iliad* 23.175-176.

²¹⁷ Schein, 145.

²¹⁸ Homer, *The Odyssey* 21.66-67.

²¹⁹ Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 203.

²²⁰ Ibid.

the foundations that guarantee human solidarity. In short, Patroclus, as a *philos*, was a vital part of Achilles' emotional and social world, which produced meaning and orientation. His death represents the destruction of the spirit of companionship, namely, of the very foundations of this common world of solidarity. This leaves Achilles desperate. When Thetis argued that "Zeus has done all / that you beseeched him for,"²²¹ the warrior responds with the following words: "The Olympian, / Mother, did answer that prayer, / but what is the use when my best friend is dead."²²² Achilles seems to have lost the will to live, and he is ashamed "to stay alive among men unless Hector / topples beneath my spear, losing his life / to pay for that of Menoetius' son Patroclus."²²³ To escape the torment of distress, Achilles resorts to vengefulness; he makes Hector and the Trojans the immediate objects of his *orgilotēs*.

Turning to Empedocles' approach to love and *philotēs*,²²⁴ we can shed light on the reasons this destruction of the "common world" incites violence and strife. For the Greek thinker, love and *philotēs* are beneficial powers; they are associated with Aphrodite,²²⁵ who often appears under the name of Cypris. The goddess deals

with the purification and rebirth of souls. [...] Cypris is proclaimed [as] the only deity to whom no bloody sacrifices are ever made, because, as Porphyry explains [...] when Love and a sense of kinship rule, no one kills anyone, considering all animals to be kin.²²⁶

To put it in my terms, when *philotēs* (or love) manifests as mutual respect, the impulse towards violence and aggression is tempered; for *philotēs* establishes the foundations for respect and recognition, understood in terms of obligation (or *chreos*). As discussed in the previous section, *chreos* powers practical wisdom, urging action in the pursuit of justice. Practical wisdom, it has been also argued, operates without a

²²¹ Homer, *The Odyssey* 18.74-75.

²²² *Ibid.*, 79-80.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 91-93.

²²⁴ For a detailed account of *philotēs* see Željko Kaluđerović, "Empedocles on Ensouled Beings," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2023): 167-183, esp. 169ff.

²²⁵ Afonasina, 153. Afonasina notes that Empedocles' depiction of Aphrodite differs substantially from that of Homer (*ibid.*, 156); in Empedocles' poem, Aphrodite is not the goddess of deception we find in *The Iliad* (Book 3). Herein, the goddess displays love and god-craftsmanship; she is, also, involved in metal casting, pottery, and artwork.

²²⁶ Afonasina, 154.

fixed *telos*; nothing here is taken as self-evident;²²⁷ it considers different aspects of reality and encourages the constant re-evaluation and reassessment of opinions and moves.²²⁸ In short, *chreos* paves the way for ethical deliberations; by seeing no fixed *telos* in meanings, identities, and intellectual constructs, it contributes to the gradual dismantling of rigid views. Thus, it bridges divides, making opposition (and often aggression) feel unnecessary. In this way, *chreos* urges us to recognise our interconnectedness with our peers and to consider our fellow citizens as integral parts of our own physical and spiritual existence. But as opposed to *philotēs*, Achilles' actions in Book 21 invoke a type of anger that divides and destroys. By losing the world within which he and Patroclus share a common *chreos* towards each other, receiving mutual respect and recognition, he ends up isolated; he has nobody to deliberate with, that is, to *think* and *talk with*; he has no companion to soothe his extreme *thymos* and feelings of desperation, from which he becomes entirely consumed.

However, if Achilles' wrath is at all tempered by the poem's conclusion, it might be due to the shared tears shed with Priam over their lost loved ones. In Book 24, we find the Achaian warrior deliberating with the Trojan king; and through such deliberations, their shared experiences are brought to light. This scene could be examined as a psycho-spiritual process: Achilles' and Priam's egos no longer strive to reassure their supremacy; both heroes come to terms with the limits of their mortal nature. By doing so, they tame their anger and desire for supremacy; and their egos are humbled through their encounter with the universal reality of human vulnerability, trauma, and suffering. Achilles sees in the distress of the king his own grief. And gradually, enmity gives way to mutual recognition. Thus, in Book 24, we see the two enemies forgiving each other. Achilles no more confronts Priam as an opponent but rather as a man who shares the same pain that fate often inflicts on all human beings equally. We also witness how "the purification and rebirth of souls" and, subsequently, the repeal of hatred are prompted by love (or *chreos*), which prevents utter destruction per Empedocles.²²⁹ As it has already been claimed, the loss of friendship in earlier books represents the collapse of the structure that once gave Achilles meaning, affection, and orientation. In this moment of mutual forgiveness, that consoling order is recovered. Crucially, this reconciliation, "the noblest and most compassionate act in the poem,"

²²⁷ Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy*, 131.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

²²⁹ Afonasia, 154.

according to Ahrens Dorf, “is entirely independent of the gods.”²³⁰ It is “an act of human rather than divine compassion, an act of human rather than divine providence.”²³¹ Once again, the gods remain indifferent to the plights of the mortals. Yet their moral silence and absence make room for human will to become the sole protagonist in this profound moment of moral decency. But this will, we can see, does not merely depend on “enlightenment,” namely, on rational thinking that (in Ruderman’s view) must shepherd human conduct in the pursuit of moral decency.²³² This will to coexist, this will to love, which binds human relationships and shields our common world from the savagery of *hubris*, can often thrive on the stir of human emotions, awakened in the view of a shared suffering and vulnerability, of a shared recognition that human life is bound to death, error, and destruction.

V. Conclusion

Homer’s epics are profoundly complex works; they are open to diverse philosophical interpretations. In this regard, questions about morality in the poems are subject to debate. This paper casts a critical eye on Ruderman’s and Ahrens Dorf’s interpretations concerning the limitations of divine providence. Both scholars assume that, without absolute protection from human frailties and insecurities, mortals must rely solely on their own rational agency. Moreover, we have seen that while *Moîra* determines the outcome of many human endeavours, she does not decide the means through which the protagonists will reach their final (predetermined) destination. Thus, the protagonists are vulnerable to their own weaknesses (including *atasthaliai* and *hubris*), which often brings about devastation and ruin. Dobbs’ arguments express a diametrically opposite view: rationality alone cannot safeguard moral decency. Instead, morality is a matter of reverence; the mortals must consider hardships sent by the gods as moments where their *thymos* is tested. They incite rebellious passions, directed against the gods themselves. However, the purpose of this suffering is “education.” By learning how to control their *thymos*, humans “win their souls.” Conversely, our analysis of Aristotle’s account of practical wisdom urges caution in relying solely on rational action. In this context, Ruderman’s and Ahrens Dorf’s interpretations merit careful and critical engagement; but so does Dobbs’ emphasis on reverence. Thus, *chreos* and *philotēs* serve

²³⁰ Ahrens Dorf, *Homer and The Tradition of Political Philosophy*, 80.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² Ruderman, 160; Ahrens Dorf, *Homer and The Tradition of Political Philosophy*, 71, 73, 77, 80-81.

as essential complements to both rational action and reverence, helping us to secure more stable ethical foundations.

Certainly, no Homeric hero is free from error; as Ruderman argued, “Homer [...] does not simply celebrate Odysseus;”²³³ in the same way, the poet does not idealise mighty Achilles. No human character in Homer’s world is infallible. In section two, we have seen Odysseus exhibiting intelligence but also prudence and moral strength (incited by friendship/*philotēs*) towards his shipmates. Conversely, section three has highlighted the selfish aspects of Odysseus’ character. In the same way, Achilles expresses *philotēs* and love in one instance, but we also noticed that at times he demonstrates numerous weaknesses: we can find our hero blindly trusting the gods or crossing the line to an extreme type of anger (or *orgilotēs*). Homer’s world cannot afford a vision of perfection; the poet ardently highlights the instability, fragility, and vulnerability of human life, exposed to all forms of calamities, caused by Moîra, divine capriciousness, or by flawed human judgments. This tragic vision permeates every aspect of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and affirms a moral agency rooted in a clear recognition of love’s significance.

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²³³ Ruderman, 142.

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Nurturing Resilience through Ethical Living: The Noble Eightfold Path as a Framework for Overcoming Childhood Adversity

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Abstract

Childhood adversity encompasses a range of experiences that can severely impact an individual's mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Yet, resilience – the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change – has been a focal point of research, aiming to understand how some individuals not only survive but thrive despite such challenges. Emerging evidence suggests that faith and spirituality significantly contribute to resilience, offering a framework through which individuals can find meaning, hope, and strength. This article aims to explore the Eightfold Path of Theravāda Buddhism as a protective factor against childhood adversity, arguing that its principles can serve as a foundation for developing resilience. By integrating philosophical inquiry with psychological research, this article will examine how the Eightfold Path's emphasis on ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom can offer a transformative perspective to those who have faced early life challenges.

Keywords: *resilience; The Noble Eightfold Path; Theravāda Buddhism; childhood adversity; spirituality; mindfulness; Buddhist ethics*

I. Introduction: Resilience, spirituality, and ethical living

Childhood adversity poses one of the most formidable challenges to long-term psychological and emotional well-being, encompassing a spectrum of harmful experiences such as emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, neglect, parental loss, and exposure to domestic violence. These early-life stressors profoundly affect cognitive, emotional, and physical development, shaping patterns of thought, be-

havior, and social interaction that often persist into adulthood. Studies indicate that emotional abuse – including verbal mistreatment, emotional neglect, and psychological manipulation – heightens the risk of adverse mental health outcomes, notably depression, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in later life.¹ Similarly, childhood physical abuse has been linked to heightened impulsivity and difficulties in emotional regulation, exacerbating long-term psychological vulnerabilities.² Sexual abuse, in particular, induces persistent emotional distress, often manifesting in deep-seated shame and humiliation, which can lead to complex mental health struggles in adulthood.³

Neglect, defined as the failure to meet basic emotional and physical needs, represents another critical dimension of childhood adversity, correlating strongly with the development of anxiety, depression, and personality disorders in adulthood.⁴ The impact of parental loss – whether through death or separation – further intensifies early-life distress, predisposing individuals to mood disorders and attachment-related difficulties.⁵ Additionally, exposure to domestic violence during formative years disrupts neurobiological development, increasing susceptibility to PTSD, depression, and other stress-related disorders.⁶ Peer-related adversity, such as bullying, compounds these risks, frequently resulting in elevated rates of suicidal ideation, social withdrawal, and emotional instability.⁷

¹ Thomas Crow et al., “Emotion Dysregulation as a Mediator between Childhood Emotional Abuse and Current Depression in a Low-Income African-American Sample,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 38, no. 10 (2014): 8-9; Joanna Cahall Young and Cathy Spatz Widom, “Long-Term Effects of Child Abuse and Neglect on Emotion Processing in Adulthood,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 38, no. 8 (2014): 12; M. Dolores Braquehais et al., “Is Impulsivity a Link between Childhood Abuse and Suicide?,” *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 51, no. 2 (2010): 125.

² Young and Widom, 12; Braquehais et al., 125.

³ Claudio Negrao et al., “Shame, Humiliation, and Childhood Sexual Abuse: Distinct Contributions and Emotional Coherence,” *Child Maltreatment* 10, no. 4 (2005): 359-360.

⁴ Hudson W. De Carvalho et al., “Childhood Trauma Is Associated with Maladaptive Personality Traits,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 44 (2015): 22-23.

⁵ Laura Canetti et al., “The Impact of Parental Death versus Separation from Parents on the Mental Health of Israeli Adolescents,” *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 41, no. 5 (2000): 362, 366; Linda J. Luecken and Danielle S. Roubinov, “Pathways to Lifespan Health Following Childhood Parental Death,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 6, no. 3 (2012): 244; Luca Cerniglia et al., “Parental Loss During Childhood and Outcomes on Adolescents’ Psychological Profiles: A Longitudinal Study,” *Current Psychology* 33, no. 4 (2014): 362, 366; Carline J. M. van Heijningen et al., “Long-Term Effects of Experiencing Childhood Parental Death on Mental and Physical Health: A NESDA Study,” *Stress and Health* 40, no. 3 (2024): 8-9.

⁶ Martin H. Teicher and Jacqueline A. Samson, “Annual Research Review: Enduring Neurobiological Effects of Childhood Abuse and Neglect,” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, and Allied Disciplines* 57, no. 3 (2016): 12, 14, 20.

⁷ Syed Faraz Ali and Aqeel Khan, “Association between Bullying or Peer Victimization and

Beyond psychological repercussions, childhood adversity induces significant neurodevelopmental changes. Research shows that prolonged exposure to maltreatment and chronic stress alters the architecture of brain regions responsible for emotion regulation, stress response, and cognitive processing, thereby heightening vulnerability to psychiatric disorders.⁸ The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) framework underscores how cumulative exposure to childhood trauma correlates with an elevated risk of both mental and physical health complications, revealing the pervasive and enduring impact of early adversity.⁹ Cognitive deficits – manifesting as impairments in learning capacity and academic performance – have been consistently associated with childhood trauma, with long-term consequences for intellectual and professional development.¹⁰ Moreover, childhood adversity has been linked to a heightened risk of immune dysfunction, cardiovascular disease, and metabolic disorders, reinforcing the intricate connection between psychological trauma and physical health.¹¹

The emotional and behavioral outcomes of childhood adversity are equally significant. Empirical studies reveal a strong correlation between early-life trauma and the development of mood and anxiety disorders, including PTSD and depression. More recent evidence suggests an increased likelihood of psychosis and schizophrenia among individuals who have experienced severe childhood adversity, indicating the complex relationship between early stress and serious mental illness.¹² Chronic emotional dysregulation and maladaptive coping mechanisms often ensue, rooted in the neurobiological imprint of trauma.¹³ Nev-

Psychopathology Symptoms among Adolescents,” *Cultural Communication and Socialization Journal* 3, no. 2 (2022): 32-33; Dieter Wolke and Suzet Tanya Lereya, “Long-Term Effects of Bullying,” *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 100, no. 9 (2015): 879-884; William E. Copeland et al., “Adult Psychiatric Outcomes of Bullying and Being Bullied by Peers in Childhood and Adolescence,” *JAMA Psychiatry* 70, no. 4 (2013): 424-25.

⁸ Teicher and Samson, 26, 28, 29.

⁹ Philippe Mortier et al., “Childhood Adversities and Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors among First-Year College Students: Results from the WMH-ICS Initiative,” *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 57, no. 8 (2022): 1596; Maxia Dong et al., “The Interrelatedness of Multiple Forms of Childhood Abuse, Neglect, and Household Dysfunction,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 28, no. 7 (2004): 779-781.

¹⁰ Debora Lee Oh et al., “Systematic Review of Pediatric Health Outcomes Associated with Childhood Adversity,” *BMC Pediatrics* 18, no. 1 (2018): 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13-15.

¹² Catherine Tunnard et al., “The Impact of Childhood Adversity on Suicidality and Clinical Course in Treatment-Resistant Depression,” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 152-154 (2014): 127-128.

¹³ Martin H. Teicher et al., “The Effects of Childhood Maltreatment on Brain Structure, Function and Connectivity,” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 17, no. 10 (2016): 662-663.

ertheless, resilience – the ability to withstand and adapt positively to adversity – can emerge through protective factors such as supportive relationships and effective coping strategies. These buffers foster emotional regulation, adaptive functioning, and overall psychological well-being.¹⁴ In light of the multifaceted impact of childhood adversity on cognitive, emotional, and physical health, early intervention and robust support systems remain essential for mitigating long-term harm and nurturing resilience.¹⁵

Resilience research widely acknowledges that the capacity to navigate adversity is crucial for sustained well-being.¹⁶ The capacity to “bounce back” from life’s challenges correlates with improved mental and physical health outcomes, highlighting the need to explore resilience-building mechanisms beyond conventional psychological models.¹⁷ While social support, problem-solving skills, and adaptive coping mechanisms are frequently emphasized, an increasing body of research identifies *faith* and *spirituality* as potent yet often overlooked contributors to psychological endurance.¹⁸

Faith and spirituality provide individuals with a framework for meaning-making, self-efficacy, and psychological resilience in the face of distress. Spiritual engagement – whether through religious beliefs, rituals, or personal contemplative practices – cultivates a sense of transcendence and purpose, reinforcing one’s ability to endure hardship.¹⁹ Empirical studies demonstrate a positive correlation between spiritu-

¹⁴ Sukhdip K. Purewal Boparai et al., “Ameliorating the Biological Impacts of Childhood Adversity: A Review of Intervention Programs,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 81 (2018): 100-101.

¹⁵ Anne E. Berens et al., “Biological Embedding of Childhood Adversity: From Physiological Mechanisms to Clinical Implications,” *BMC Medicine* 15, no. 1 (2017): 7-9.

¹⁶ Gang Wu et al., “Understanding Resilience,” *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* 7 (2013): 1; Mary C. Davis et al., “Resilience in Common Life: Introduction to the Special Issue,” *Journal of Personality* 77, no. 6 (2009): 1-2; Bruce S. McEwen et al., “Recognizing Resilience: Learning from the Effects of Stress on the Brain,” *Neurobiology of Stress* 1 (2015): 1-2.

¹⁷ Patricia Tempiski et al., “Relationship among Medical Student Resilience, Educational Environment and Quality of Life,” ed. Monika R. Asnani, *PLOS ONE* 10, no. 6 (2015): 7; McEwen et al., 1, 2, 7-8.

¹⁸ Gisela Van Kessel, “The Ability of Older People to Overcome Adversity: A Review of the Resilience Concept,” *Geriatric Nursing* 34, no. 2 (2013): 125; Bruce W. Smith et al., “Spirituality, Resilience, and Positive Emotions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Spirituality*, ed. Lisa J. Miller (Oxford University Press, 2012), 442; Christopher C. H. Cook and Nathan H. White, “Resilience and the Role of Spirituality,” in *Oxford Textbook of Public Mental Health*, eds. Dinesh Bhugra et al. (Oxford University Press, 2018), 514-118; Donna E. Stewart and Tracy Yuen, “A Systematic Review of Resilience in the Physically Ill,” *Psychosomatics* 52, no. 3 (2011): 206-7.

¹⁹ Cook and White, 513; Barbara Hanfstingl, “Ego and Spiritual Transcendence: Relevance to Psychological Resilience and the Role of Age,” *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* 2013, no. 1 (2013): 2-4; Smith et al., 441-42.

ality and overall health while also identifying an inverse relationship between spiritual engagement and psychopathology, suggesting that faith-based coping mechanisms contribute to emotional stability and trauma recovery.²⁰ For many, particularly within older populations, spirituality constitutes a primary means of coping with adversity, guiding psychological healing and personal transformation.²¹ Systematic reviews confirm a moderate positive correlation between spirituality, religiosity, and resilience, underlining the protective role of faith-based engagement.²² By acknowledging these existential and ethical dimensions, resilience interventions can transcend purely psychological constructs, providing a more holistic model of human adaptability for individuals and communities.²³ Recent work likewise shows how philosophical and spiritual traditions function as resources for coping with stress and suffering. Nikos Dimou, for instance, interprets early Buddhism and Greek Skepticism as converging paths to serenity, non-attachment, and philosophical stress-management, while Emmanuel Roberto Goffi argues that eudaimonia in the post-Covid context must be understood as an ethically demanding, socially embedded ideal rather than a merely individual state.²⁴

Increasingly, scholars observe that structured ethical and contemplative practices – such as those integral to Theravāda Buddhism’s Noble Eightfold Path – bolster resilience by uniting moral integrity, mindful awareness, and cognitive flexibility. This synthesis extends conventional resilience models, offering not merely symptom-based solutions

²⁰ Cook and White, 515, 517; Fábio Duarte Schwalm et al., “Is There a Relationship between Spirituality/Religiosity and Resilience? A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Observational Studies,” *Journal of Health Psychology* 27, no. 5 (2022): 1225-29; Patty Van Cappellen et al., “Self-Transcendent Positive Emotions Increase Spirituality through Basic World Assumptions,” *Cognition & Emotion* 27, no. 8 (2013): 1390-91; B. Nygren et al., “Resilience, Sense of Coherence, Purpose in Life and Self-Transcendence in Relation to Perceived Physical and Mental Health among the Oldest Old,” *Aging & Mental Health* 9, no. 4 (2005): 355.

²¹ Lydia Manning et al., “Spiritual Resilience: Understanding the Protection and Promotion of Well-Being in the Later Life,” *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging* 31, no. 2 (2019): 12-13.

²² Schwalm et al., 1225.

²³ Kari A. O’Grady, “Spirituality in Resilience Processes in International Contexts: An Introduction,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 44, no. 2 (2016): 107-8; Pavithra Lakshmi Narasimhan and Heru Saputra, “Contriving Emotional Resilience through Spirituality in the Light of Vedanta,” *IJoReSH: Indonesian Journal of Religion, Spirituality, and Humanity* 2, no. 1 (2023): 16-19; Sophia Ahmed Hussen et al., “Spirituality, Social Capital and Service: Factors Promoting Resilience among Expert Patients Living with HIV in Ethiopia,” *Global Public Health* 9, no. 3 (2014): 294-95.

²⁴ Nikos Dimou, “The Two Greek Buddhas,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 80-83; Emmanuel Roberto Goffi, “Back to Eudaimonia as a Social Relation: What Does the Covid Crisis Teach Us about Individualism and Its Limits?” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 109-12.

but a profound existential approach to overcoming adversity. The Noble Eightfold Path (*Ariya Aṭṭhaṅgika Magga*), a core doctrine in Theravāda Buddhism, offers a systematic framework for ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom.²⁵ More than a set of moral injunctions, it serves as a comprehensive path for transcending suffering (*dukkha*) and achieving liberation (*Nibbāna*), defined as the cessation of suffering and the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*).²⁶ Structured around the Fourth Noble Truth, the Path encompasses three interrelated domains – moral discipline (*sīlakkhandha*), concentration (*samādhikkhandha*), and wisdom (*paññākkhandha*) – each fortifying the others in pursuit of enlightenment.²⁷

At the foundation of this path lies moral discipline (*sīlakkhandha*), which governs an individual's ethical conduct. Right speech (*sammā vācā*) emphasizes truthfulness, kindness, and non-harmful language, as illustrated in the *Dhammapada*, which underscores the potency of words in shaping ethical interactions and karmic outcomes.²⁸ Right action (*sammā kammanta*) involves abstaining from harm of oneself and others, theft, and sexual misconduct, resonating with the *Vinaya Pitaka*'s directives for moral living.²⁹ Right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*) further extends ethical principles to professional life by eschewing exploitative or injurious occupations, including those related to weaponry, human trafficking, animal slaughter, and intoxicants.³⁰ Together, these tenets underpin the stability required for deeper introspective practices.

Concentration (*samādhikkhandha*), the second pillar, purifies and focuses the mind.³¹ Right effort (*sammā vāyāma*), as presented in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, involves fostering wholesome mental states and counteracting harmful tendencies.³² Right mindfulness (*sammā sati*), heralded in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* as the direct route to enlight-

²⁵ Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, OPUS. (Oxford University Press, 1998), 81-84.

²⁶ Walpola Rāhula, *What the Buddha Taught* (Grove Press, 1974), 49-50; Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 82.

²⁷ Harvey, 82.

²⁸ Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering* (Pariyatti Publishing, 2020), 45-52.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 52-59.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

³² *Ibid.*, 61-63; Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya; Translated from the Pāli; Original Translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi* (Wisdom Publications, 2000), 45/1529.

enment, trains individuals to observe bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts or mental states and phenomena non-judgmentally.³³ Right concentration (*sammā samādhi*) aims toward meditative absorptions (*jhāna*), systematically described in the *Visuddhimagga* as pivotal for introspective clarity and cognitive stability, emphasizing their role in cultivating wisdom and insight.³⁴

Completing the triad is wisdom (*paññākkhandha*), comprising Right View (*sammā diṭṭhi*) and Right Intention (*sammā saṅkappa*). Right View entails accurately perceiving the nature of suffering, impermanence (*anicca*), and non-self (*anattā*).³⁵ In the *Majjhima Nikāya*, Right View is depicted as both the inception and culmination of the Path.³⁶ Right Intention, discussed in the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta*, orients aspirations toward renunciation, good will, and non-harming.³⁷ Rather than being linear steps, these eight interdependent factors are cultivated simultaneously: ethical conduct fosters mental calm, which in turn supports insight, ultimately dismantling the ignorance at the heart of suffering.³⁸

In Theravāda Buddhism, this integrated approach underscores that moral discipline, mental concentration, and wisdom must permeate daily life for profound spiritual and psychological transformation.³⁹ By fully engaging with the Eightfold Path, individuals cultivate a mental equilibrium that fosters well-being, self-awareness, and ethical fortitude, allowing them to recognize the interdependence of all phenomena.⁴⁰ Nibbāna, far from an abstract concept, emerges as a tangible experience through the consistent practice of these intertwined principles.⁴¹ Such insight dismantles illusions

³³ Bhikkhu Bodhi, ed., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A[New] Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya; Translated from the Pali*, 4. ed, The Teachings of the Buddha (Wisdom Publications, 2009), 145; Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path*, 75-79.

³⁴ Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa and Bhikkhu Ñāṁamoli, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* (Buddhist Publication Society, 2010), 82-83; Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path*, 93-104.

³⁵ Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path*, 23-24 and 113.

³⁶ Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 132-33.

³⁷ Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path*, 29-32; Bhikkhu Thanissaro, trans., "Culavedalla Sutta: The Shorter Set of Questions-and-Answers (MN 44)," 1998, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.044.than.html>.

³⁸ Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path*, 13; Vanessa Wang and Bryant M. Stone, "Buddhism in Addiction Recovery," *Encyclopedia* 2, no. 1 (2022): 531-32.

³⁹ B. Alan Wallace and Shauna L. Shapiro, "Mental Balance and Well-Being: Building Bridges between Buddhism and Western Psychology," *American Psychologist* 61, no. 7 (2006): 698-99.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 691-93.

⁴¹ Xiaojun Ding et al., "The Therapy of Desire in Times of Crisis: Lessons Learned from Buddhism and Stoicism," *Religions* 14, no. 2 (2023): 10-12, 17.

of self and external reality, propelling practitioners toward the cessation of suffering.⁴² By internalizing Right View and Right Intention, individuals refine their ethical sensitivities, aligning every thought and action with core Buddhist teachings.⁴³ The ultimate realization of Nibbāna – defined by the cessation of craving – then signifies the culmination of one’s spiritual journey.⁴⁴

Turning back to resilience and the broader role of spirituality, contemporary psychological discourse traditionally emphasizes cognitive flexibility, emotional regulation, and social support as paramount. Yet numerous studies demonstrate that spirituality, including beliefs and communal rituals, fosters meaning-making and psychological equilibrium, mitigating moral stress and encouraging post-traumatic growth.⁴⁵ Specific research indicates that compassion-based spiritual care attenuates moral conflict, enhancing emotional regulation and resilience by connecting individuals to a broader sense of purpose, meaning, and community.⁴⁶ Among trauma survivors, especially those grappling with anger or violence, spiritually informed coping can facilitate emotional recovery and sustainable well-being.⁴⁷ In clinical contexts, spiritual frameworks open pathways from mere survival to transformative healing and self-improvement.⁴⁸ Furthermore, correlation studies show that spiritual engagement correlates with lower rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality, though the specific mechanisms remain under-explored.⁴⁹ However, certain negative religious interpretations – for example, viewing suffering as divine punishment – can exacerbate psychological distress.⁵⁰ To ensure that faith-based interventions genuine-

⁴² Ibid., 10-11.

⁴³ Heesoon Bai et al., “Waking up from Delusion: Mindfulness (Sati) and Right Mind-and-Heart (Bodhicitta) for Educating Activists,” *Religions* 13, no. 4 (2022): 6.

⁴⁴ Ding et al., “The Therapy of Desire in Times of Crisis,” 11; Bai et al., “Waking up from Delusion,” 6-7.

⁴⁵ Kathryn M. Connor et al., “Spirituality, Resilience, and Anger in Survivors of Violent Trauma: A Community Survey,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 16, no. 5 (2003): 491-93; Schwalm et al., “Is There a Relationship between Spirituality/Religiosity and Resilience?,” 645-47; Patricia Burke, “Enhancing Hope and Resilience Through a Spiritually Sensitive Focus in the Treatment of Trauma and Addiction,” *Journal of Chemical Dependency Treatment* 8, no. 2 (2006): 203-4.

⁴⁶ Carrie Doehring, “Resilience as the Relational Ability to Spiritually Integrate Moral Stress,” *Pastoral Psychology* 64, no. 5 (2015): 645-47.

⁴⁷ Connor et al., 491-93.

⁴⁸ Burke, 203-4.

⁴⁹ Dustin A Pardini et al., “Religious Faith and Spirituality in Substance Abuse Recovery,” *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment* 19, no. 4 (2000): 347, 351-52; Giancarlo Lucchetti et al., “Spirituality, Religiousness, and Mental Health: A Review of the Current Scientific Evidence,” *World Journal of Clinical Cases* 9, no. 26 (2021): 7626-27.

⁵⁰ Angela Jones et al., “Relationships Between Negative Spiritual Beliefs and Health Outcomes

ly serve recovery, careful ethical and therapeutic considerations must guide the integration of spirituality into psychological practice.⁵¹

Against this backdrop, the Noble Eightfold Path presents a structured, ethically anchored means of fostering resilience. Its comprehensive integration of moral discipline, mindful concentration, and existential insight extends beyond conventional psychological approaches, embedding adversity in a broader ethical and philosophical framework. Rather than simply restoring a stable sense of self, the Path calls for self-transcendence grounded in the understanding of impermanence and interconnectedness of all phenomena. In doing so, it aligns with resilience models that emphasize adaptive cognition, community support, and deeper meaning-making. By interpreting suffering as both an ethical challenge and a vehicle for profound insight, the Eightfold Path transforms adversity into a catalyst for holistic growth. Such an integrative approach resonates with current resilience literature, reinforcing the notion that enduring psychological well-being may be most robustly achieved through an interplay of cognitive, ethical, and spiritual dimensions.

II. Philosophical foundations: Ethics, dependent origination, impermanence, and the path to liberation

The Noble Eightfold Path is firmly grounded in the philosophical framework of Buddhism, particularly in the doctrines of the Four Noble Truths, the principle of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), and the doctrine of impermanence (*anicca*).⁵² These foundational concepts not only shape Buddhist ethics and mental discipline but also offer profound insights into the nature of suffering, the dynamics of existence, and the path to liberation. Far from being abstract metaphysical propositions, they constitute an experiential and practical orientation toward self-transformation and ethical living.

At the core of Buddhist thought, the Four Noble Truths provide a systematic account of suffering (*dukkha*) and the means to overcome it. The first truth (*dukkha*) recognizes the pervasive nature of suffering, encompassing not only overt physical and emotional pain but also

for Individuals with Heterogeneous Medical Conditions,” *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 17, no. 2 (2015): 146-48.

⁵¹ Elizabeth Johnston Taylor, “Health Outcomes of Religious and Spiritual Belief, Behavior, and Belonging: Implications for Healthcare Professionals,” in *Spirituality in Healthcare: Perspectives for Innovative Practice*, eds. Fiona Timmins and Sílvia Caldeira (Springer, 2019), 79.

⁵² Jay L. Garfield, *Buddhist Ethics: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 3, 73.

subtle existential discontent. The second truth (*samudaya*) identifies craving (*taṇhā*), attachment, and ignorance (*avijjā*) as the primary causes of suffering. The third truth (*nirodha*) asserts that the cessation of suffering is possible through the eradication of its underlying causes, culminating in *Nibbāna*, the state of liberation. The fourth truth (*magga*) prescribes the Noble Eightfold Path as the practical method for transcending suffering, integrating ethical conduct (*sīla*), mental discipline (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) as interdependent elements of self-cultivation and liberation.⁵³

Central to this discussion is the understanding of desire within Buddhist teaching. Virtuous choices arise from a desire for what is genuinely good – a desire ultimately validated by the final good (*Nibbāna*). Buddhism does not call for the eradication of all desire; rather, it distinguishes between unwholesome craving (*taṇhā*) and a wholesome, purposeful aspiration (*chanda*). To suppress all feeling (*vedanā*) would be to stifle an essential aspect of human nature, leading only to apathy. Instead, the teachings advocate for liberating the affective faculties from attachments born of ignorance (*avijjā*). Unwholesome desire is not a formless emotion but a craving for things superficially deemed good, one that perpetuates a cycle of longing detrimental to spiritual progress. In contrast, a proper “will to accomplish” or right desire is seen as indispensable in the pursuit of what is truly beneficial. Even the Buddha, having overcome delusional attachment, maintained a resolute aspiration for the well-being of others, demonstrating that the desire for *Nibbāna* – when rightly understood – is not an impediment but a necessary commitment to a higher good. In this light, the aim is to transform desire by curbing its excessive, misguided forms and redirecting its energy toward genuine, ethically grounded ends that foster enlightenment.⁵⁴

The principle of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) further reinforces Buddhism’s radical deconstruction of selfhood and independent existence. This doctrine posits that all phenomena arise in dependence upon others, thereby negating the notion of an autonomous or permanent self.⁵⁵ In doing so, it lays the groundwork for ethical responsibility – emphasizing compassion, non-harming, and mindfulness in one’s actions. Similarly, the doctrine of impermanence (*anicca*) underscores the transitory nature of all conditioned phenomena, demonstrating that thoughts, emotions, and material conditions are in

⁵³ Hammalava Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics: The Path to Nirvāna* (Wisdom Publications, 1987), 53.

⁵⁴ Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), 222-25.

⁵⁵ Garfield, 3.

constant flux. Recognizing this impermanence facilitates detachment from clinging to fleeting experiences, thus fostering mental equanimity (*upekkhā*) and wisdom (*paññā*).

These philosophical foundations are seamlessly integrated into the Eightfold Path, manifesting in both ethical and contemplative dimensions. Right Understanding (*sammā diṭṭhi*) and Right Intention (*sammā saṅkappa*) cultivate an awareness of the Four Noble Truths, leading to a clarified perception of reality. Right Speech (*sammā vācā*), Right Action (*sammā kammanta*), and Right Livelihood (*sammā ājīva*) correspond to the ethical ramifications of interconnectedness, urging conduct that minimizes suffering and promotes collective well-being. Meanwhile, Right Effort (*sammā vāyāma*), Right Mindfulness (*sammā sati*), and Right Concentration (*sammā samādhi*) cultivate the mental discipline necessary to perceive impermanence, ultimately guiding practitioners toward detachment and spiritual liberation.

Philosophical discourse has extensively examined these foundational principles, affirming their relevance in both traditional Buddhist practice and contemporary applications. Basant Kumar Basnet underscores the integrated nature of the Four Noble Truths within Buddhist soteriology, highlighting how they provide a holistic and interdependent framework for ethical and meditative cultivation.⁵⁶ Richard P. Hayes explores the doctrinal basis of impermanence and dependent origination, demonstrating how these concepts undermine essentialist metaphysical views. The assertion that everything is in flux and exists only within a web of causation reveals the fundamentally contingent nature of reality, shaping both Buddhist metaphysics and ethics.⁵⁷ Jay L. Garfield further examines the ethical dimensions of the Four Noble Truths, illustrating how their acceptance fosters ethical behavior and mental discipline.⁵⁸ By acknowledging the universality of suffering and its causes, individuals are motivated to act ethically and cultivate wisdom as a means of liberation. William Van Gordon et al. contribute to this discourse by investigating the relationship between mindfulness and the Four Noble Truths, emphasizing how meditative practice deepens one's insight into suffering and its cessation.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Basant Kumar Basnet, "Mathematical Model of the Relationship between Four Noble Truths," *Rupandehi Campus Journal* 3, no. 1 (31 2022): 12.

⁵⁷ Richard P. Hayes, "Principled Atheism in the Buddhist Scholastic Tradition," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (1988): 24-25.

⁵⁸ Garfield, 76-77, 88-89.

⁵⁹ William Van Gordon et al., "Mindfulness and the Four Noble Truths," in *Buddhist Foundations of Mindfulness*, eds. Edo Shonin, William Van Gordon, and Nirbhay N. Singh (Springer,

Beyond the domain of Buddhist studies, the integration of these philosophical principles with contemporary psychology has been widely explored. William L. Mikulas draws parallels between the Four Noble Truths and behavioral therapy, arguing that Buddhist thought provides a systematic approach to emotional regulation and self-transformation.⁶⁰ Ronald Y. Nakasone further aligns Buddhism's diagnosis of suffering with medical frameworks, emphasizing their shared methodology of identifying causes and applying corrective interventions.⁶¹ These scholarly contributions affirm the ongoing relevance of the Eightfold Path, demonstrating its role as both a philosophical paradigm and a pragmatic framework for psychological and ethical transformation. By integrating ancient Buddhist philosophy with contemporary scholarship, the Noble Eightfold Path remains a vital and enduring framework for ethical living, mental clarity, and spiritual liberation. Its synthesis of the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, and impermanence offers a comprehensive approach to understanding human existence, navigating suffering, and fostering wisdom and compassion in everyday life.

III. The Eightfold Path: Ethics, mindfulness, and psychological well-being

The Eightfold Path offers a structured framework for ethical living, mental cultivation, and wisdom, articulating a way to alleviate suffering (*dukkha*) while promoting psychological well-being. Traditionally regarded as a soteriological path in Theravāda Buddhism, its principles have found increasing resonance within contemporary psychology, particularly in areas such as resilience theory, emotional regulation, and therapeutic interventions.⁶² Scholars have thus turned to the Eightfold Path to illuminate how Buddhist ethics and contemplative disciplines can be integrated with modern psychological research to foster both individual and collective well-being.

2015), 23-25.

⁶⁰ William L. Mikulas, "Four Noble Truths of Buddhism Related to Behavior Therapy," *The Psychological Record* 28, no. 1 (1978): 6566.

⁶¹ Ronald Y. Nakasone, "Suffering and Healing: An Interpretation of the Buddhist Doctrine of the Four Noble Truths," *The Journal of Medical Humanities* 14, no. 2 (1993): 84.

⁶² On a similar vein concerning therapeutic interventions based on ethical frameworks, albeit in the context of a different approach, see Albrecht Classen, "Management of Stress through Philosophical Reflections: Teachings by Boethius (d. 524) for Our Modern Life," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 63-78. For a documented pilot study on this see Christos Yapijakis, Evangelos D. Protopapadakis, and George P. Chrousos, "Philosophical Management of Stress based on Science and Epicurean Pragmatism: A Pilot Study," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 229-242.

Mindfulness (*sammā sati*) has drawn particular interest in psychological research because of its strong affinities with modern therapeutic approaches. A bridge between ancient philosophical exercises and contemporary therapy is traced by Panagiotis Kormas, who interprets Stoic cognitive practices – such as cognitive distancing and attentive awareness of the present moment – as predecessors of modern cognitive and mindfulness-based treatments aimed at emotional self-regulation.⁶³ Studies confirm that mindfulness enhances emotional regulation, reduces stress, and alleviates symptoms of anxiety and depression. Furthermore, self-compassion, an essential dimension of mindfulness, has been linked to greater psychological resilience and reduced emotional distress.⁶⁴ By cultivating non-attached awareness of thoughts and emotions, mindfulness – as emphasized in the Eightfold Path and in Stoic and other Hellenistic ethical traditions – serves as a foundation for long-term psychological stability and well-being.⁶⁵

Yet mindfulness does not operate in isolation. Buddhist ethics, as embodied in right speech (*sammā vācā*), right action (*sammā kammanta*), and right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*), significantly contributes to psychological well-being by fostering moral integrity and social cohesion. Contemporary research indicates that individuals with a well-grounded sense of moral purpose and self-awareness report higher life satisfaction and emotional resilience.⁶⁶ Buddhist ethics nurture moral awareness and ethical conduct that reinforce interpersonal harmony, which in turn serves as a protective factor against mental distress by fortifying supportive social relationships.⁶⁷ These findings echo resilience theory's emphasis on both external resources (e.g., social support) and internal strengths (e.g., ethical self-awareness) as critical for navigating adversity effectively.

Resilience, particularly in overcoming adversity, further illuminates the synergy between Buddhist practice and contemporary psychology. Studies indicate that resilience functions as a protective factor,

⁶³ Panagiotis Kormas, "Stoic Cognitive Theories and Contemporary Neuropsychological Treatments," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 88, 94-98.

⁶⁴ Kristin D. Neff, "The Development and Validation of a Scale to Measure Self-Compassion," *Self and Identity* 2, no. 3 (2003): 225, 244-45.

⁶⁵ On a parallel, see a quite instructive analysis of the Stoic approach to non-attached awareness in Nancy Sherman, "Stoic Consolations," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2023): 565-587.

⁶⁶ Livia Yuliawati et al., "Who I Am and Who I Want to Be: The Positive Effect of Self-Concept Clarity on Purpose, Life Satisfaction, and Personal Meaning among Chinese and Indonesian Emerging Adults," *Current Issues in Personality Psychology* 13, no. 1 (2024): 55.

⁶⁷ Dipty D. Sangma and M. Bharani, "Spiritual Values in Buddhism and Christianity: A Philosophical Study," *Journal of Advanced Zoology* 45, no. 2 (2024): 797-98.

enabling individuals to confront adversity with greater adaptability.⁶⁸ The emphasis on right effort (*sammā vāyāma*) and right mindfulness (*sammā sati*) encourages individuals to engage with adversity proactively, fostering personal growth and emotional endurance. By reconceptualizing suffering as an essential catalyst for transformation rather than a mere affliction to be endured, individuals transcend passive endurance and cultivate a resilience grounded in wisdom. This shift reorients adversity from an obstacle to be resisted into a profound vehicle for ethical and existential growth, aligning resilience not with the fortification of the self, but with its enlightened transcendence.

Closely related is meditation (*sammā samādhi*), another core element of the Noble Eightfold Path. Neuroscientific research has extensively documented its benefits for cognitive flexibility, emotional regulation, and overall mental health.⁶⁹ Functional neuroimaging further reveals that meditation induces structural and functional changes in brain regions responsible for attention, stress regulation, and emotional processing, thereby reducing psychological distress and promoting long-term stability.⁷⁰ Such findings situate Buddhist meditative practices not only within the sphere of spiritual cultivation but also in the domain of empirically validated therapeutic interventions.

The relationship between spirituality and mental health further underscores the relevance of the Eightfold Path in contemporary psychology. Scholarly inquiry reveals that spiritual engagement, including Buddhist practices, correlates with increased life satisfaction and reduced symptoms of mental illness.⁷¹ The Eightfold Path, with its emphasis on ethical conduct and mental discipline, provides a structured approach to integrating spirituality into psychological well-being, fostering self-awareness and existential meaning, which are crucial for resilience in the face of adversity.

⁶⁸ Xue Zhong et al., "Parenting Style, Resilience, and Mental Health of Community-Dwelling Elderly Adults in China," *BMC Geriatrics* 16, no. 1 (2016): 1-2.

⁶⁹ Rafał Marciniański et al., "Effect of Meditation on Cognitive Functions in Context of Aging and Neurodegenerative Diseases," *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* 8 (2014): 5-7.

⁷⁰ Maddalena Boccia et al., "The Meditative Mind: A Comprehensive Meta-Analysis of MRI Studies," *BioMed Research International* 2015 (2015): 6-7; Richard J. Davidson et al., "Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation," *Psychosomatic Medicine* 65, no. 4 (2003): 569; Tobias Esch, "The Neurobiology of Meditation and Mindfulness," in *Meditation – Neuroscientific Approaches and Philosophical Implications*, eds. Stefan Schmidt and Harald Walach, vol. 2 (Springer, 2014), 166-67.

⁷¹ Kanako Taku and Arnie Cann, "Cross-National and Religious Relationships with Posttraumatic Growth: The Role of Individual Differences and Perceptions of the Triggering Event," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 45, no. 4 (2014): 611-13.

Social support and communal engagement, essential elements of psychological well-being, are also emphasized within the Buddhist framework. The concept of *Sangha* (community) underscores the importance of shared spiritual practice in fostering resilience. Research affirms that strong social connections mitigate the effects of stress, reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, and enhance overall well-being.⁷² By participating in supportive communities, individuals reinforce their psychological resilience through shared ethical commitments and mutual encouragement.

The integration of the Eightfold Path into modern therapeutic practices has gained recognition in psychological research. Contemporary approaches such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) incorporate key Buddhist principles, including mindfulness, acceptance, and cognitive restructuring.⁷³ These modalities emphasize non-judgmental awareness, ethical engagement, and adaptive coping mechanisms, demonstrating the alignment of Buddhist teachings with contemporary therapeutic frameworks. By integrating these principles into clinical settings, individuals can achieve sustained psychological transformation and improved mental health outcomes.

Beyond clinical applications, the Eightfold Path fosters personal agency and ethical responsibility. It encourages individuals to take an active role in their mental health by cultivating self-awareness, ethical integrity, and mindful living. This proactive approach aligns with modern psychological theories that highlight personal agency as a crucial factor in well-being.⁷⁴ The Eightfold Path empowers individuals to engage in self-improvement, reinforcing the idea that suffering can be mitigated through conscious effort and ethical living.

The concept of post-traumatic growth similarly dovetails with the Buddhist interpretation of suffering as a potential avenue for transformation. Empirical evidence indicates that individuals who reframe trauma

⁷² Pi-Ming Yeh and Gavin Waters, "Path Analysis Testing the Development of Personality and Psychological Well-Being Model," *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 43, no. 1 (2021): 31-33. For a different expression of spirituality and its effects on mental well-being, see also Pavlos Kavouras, "Between and Betwixt the Other Theatre and the Theatre of the Other: Performativity as (Re)presenting, Show and Self-Awareness in the Myth of Barba," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2023): 201-232.

⁷³ Christopher D. Graham et al., "A Systematic Review of the Use of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) in Chronic Disease and Long-Term Conditions," *Clinical Psychology Review* 46 (2016): 55-56.

⁷⁴ Stephen Joseph and P. Alex Linley, "Positive Adjustment to Threatening Events: An Organismic Valuing Theory of Growth through Adversity," *Review of General Psychology* 9, no. 3 (2005): 275-76.

ma as an opportunity for personal growth often experience profound psychological transformation.⁷⁵ The Eightfold Path, through mindfulness and ethical conduct, provides a structured framework for this process, enabling individuals to reinterpret adversity in ways that foster insight, compassion, and adaptive coping strategies.

In addition to resilience, meditation, and ethical living, the Eightfold Path aligns with broader psychological frameworks. Mindfulness-based interventions, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), have been shown to significantly reduce anxiety and depression while enhancing cognitive flexibility and stress resilience.⁷⁶ Ethical dimensions, including non-attachment to harmful behaviors and the cultivation of compassion, have also been linked to increased subjective well-being and life satisfaction.⁷⁷ Scholars observe that the compatibility of Buddhist ethics with CBT principles, such as cognitive restructuring, underscores the importance of reshaping maladaptive thought patterns.⁷⁸ Likewise, humanistic psychology's emphasis on self-actualization finds parallels in the Path's call for self-awareness, empathy, interconnectedness, and altruism.⁷⁹

The Eightfold Path offers a comprehensive and integrative approach to psychological well-being. Through mindfulness, ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom, it cultivates resilience, emotional stability, and personal growth. Its alignment with contemporary psychological theories and therapeutic practices affirms its relevance in modern mental health discourse. By bridging Buddhist philosophy with empirical psychological research, the Eightfold Path presents a holistic framework for resilience-building, reinforcing its enduring applicability in addressing contemporary challenges related to suffering and well-being.

The psychological implications of the Eightfold Path extend beyond individual flourishing to broader conceptualizations of mental

⁷⁵ Surbhi Khanna and Bruce Greyson, "Near-Death Experiences and Posttraumatic Growth," *Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease* 203, no. 10 (2015): 752-53; Joseph and Linley, 275-76.

⁷⁶ Torbjörn Josefsson et al., "Self-Reported Mindfulness Mediates the Relation Between Meditation Experience and Psychological Well-Being," *Mindfulness* 2, no. 1 (2011): 55-56.

⁷⁷ Malcolm Huxter and Leandro Pizutti, "Principles and Practices of Buddhism in Relationship to Mental Health," in *Spirituality and Mental Health Across Cultures*, eds. Alexander Moreira-Almeida et al. (Oxford University Press, 2021), 233; Samantha Sys et al., "A Qualitative Comparison of Secular and Buddhist-Informed Mental Health Practitioners' Perceptions of Non-Attachment," *Mindfulness* 15, no. 2 (2024): 355-56.

⁷⁸ G. Alan Marlatt, "Buddhist Philosophy and the Treatment of Addictive Behavior," *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 9, no. 1 (2002): 48-49.

⁷⁹ Heidi A. Wayment et al., "Doing and Being: Mindfulness, Health, and Quiet Ego Characteristics Among Buddhist Practitioners," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 12, no. 4 (2011): 586-88.

health as a dynamic balance, allowing individuals to effectively mobilize their cognitive and emotional resources and maintain functional social relationships even under duress.⁸⁰ Hillary Peter Rodrigues, for instance, explores the role of the Eightfold Path in alleviating psychological suffering, underscoring existential awareness and resilience cultivated through mindfulness-based Buddhist practices.⁸¹ Similarly, B. Alan Wallace and Shauna L. Shapiro trace Buddhism's historical focus on mental balance and resilience, proposing a model of mental equilibrium – conative, attentional, cognitive, and affective – that aligns with core principles of the Path.⁸²

Empirical inquiries reinforce these philosophical and historical analyses. Malcolm Huxter and Leandro Pizutti illustrate how mindfulness, compassion, and a nuanced understanding of suffering can inform clinical interventions for anxiety and depression, highlighting the efficacy of Buddhist ethics and contemplative practices in emotional regulation and stress management.⁸³ Extending this discourse, Sanjay Kalra et al. establish a compelling link between mindfulness, ethical living, and physical health, particularly in managing chronic illnesses such as diabetes. Their study underscores the profound interconnection between mental and physical health, further substantiating the broader implications of Buddhist practices beyond psychological well-being.⁸⁴ Additionally, Josefsson et al. document a strong correlation between sustained meditation practice, mindfulness, and improved psychological outcomes, lending further empirical support to meditation's role in the cultivation of emotional regulation and resilience.⁸⁵

By bridging Buddhist principles with modern psychological interventions, individuals can cultivate self-awareness, emotional stability, and resilience. The Eightfold Path thus functions not only as a soteriological guide within Buddhist thought but also as a comprehensive framework for psychological well-being, stress reduction, and the

⁸⁰ Silvana Galderisi et al., "Toward a New Definition of Mental Health," *World Psychiatry* 14, no. 2 (2015): 231-32.

⁸¹ Hillary Peter Rodrigues, "Buddhist Orientations to Mental Health," in *Global Psychologies*, ed. Suman Fernando and Roy Moodley (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 130-31.

⁸² Wallace and Shapiro, 693-98.

⁸³ Huxter and Pizutti, 233. On this, see also Darija Rupčić Kelam and Ivica Kelam, "Care and Empathy as a Crucial Quality for Social Change," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 157-172.

⁸⁴ Sanjay Kalra et al., "Diabetes Management and the Buddhist Philosophy: Toward Holistic Care," *Indian Journal of Endocrinology and Metabolism* 22, no. 6 (2018): 809-10.

⁸⁵ Josefsson et al., 55-56.

cultivation of long-term mental equilibrium. As contemporary mental health challenges continue to escalate, the enduring relevance of the Eightfold Path remains evident, offering a holistic approach that synthesizes ethical conduct, contemplative discipline, and existential insight in fostering human flourishing.

A parallel line of inquiry highlights the importance of integrating mindfulness with ethical cultivation. Anne Harrington and John D. Dunne caution that severing mindfulness from its ethical underpinnings reduces it to a technique devoid of its transformative purpose, though they acknowledge its therapeutic validity.⁸⁶ Siyin Chen and Christian H. Jordan similarly argue that incorporating ethical instruction within mindfulness practices deepens its efficacy, boosting prosocial behavior and life satisfaction while reinforcing self-awareness.⁸⁷ These perspectives affirm the Eightfold Path's insistence on placing mindfulness within a broader moral and existential framework, aimed not just at managing symptoms but at radically reorienting one's relationship to self and others.

In line with resilience theory, mindfulness also bolsters emotion regulation. Lizabeth Roemer, Sarah Krill Williston, and Laura Grace Rollins show that mindfulness fosters adaptive strategies – such as reducing distress and improving emotional recovery – in ways that resonate with the Eightfold Path's emphasis on right effort and right mindfulness.⁸⁸ A review by Shian-Ling Keng, Moria J. Smoski, and Clive J. Robins similarly identifies broad-ranging benefits of mindfulness for conditions such as depression, anxiety, stress, and interpersonal sensitivity, reaffirming its holistic efficacy in alleviating suffering.⁸⁹ Beyond emotional well-being, mindfulness even correlates with healthier behavioral choices, as Desleigh Gilbert and Jennifer Waltz observe in increased physical activity and improved dietary habits – outcomes that parallel right action and right livelihood within the Path's ethical framework.⁹⁰

Taken together, these multidisciplinary findings demonstrate that the Eightfold Path does more than offer a spiritual route to liberation:

⁸⁶ Anne Harrington and John D. Dunne, "When Mindfulness Is Therapy: Ethical Qualms, Historical Perspectives," *American Psychologist* 70, no. 7 (2015): 14-15.

⁸⁷ Siyin Chen and Christian H. Jordan, "Incorporating Ethics Into Brief Mindfulness Practice: Effects on Well-Being and Prosocial Behavior," *Mindfulness* 11, no. 1 (2020): 25-27.

⁸⁸ Lizabeth Roemer et al., "Mindfulness and Emotion Regulation," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 3 (2015): 54-55.

⁸⁹ Shian-Ling Keng et al., "Effects of Mindfulness on Psychological Health: A Review of Empirical Studies," *Clinical Psychology Review* 31, no. 6 (2011): 1050-52.

⁹⁰ Desleigh Gilbert and Jennifer Waltz, "Mindfulness and Health Behaviors," *Mindfulness* 1, no. 4 (2010): 251-52.

it encompasses a robust framework for resilience-building, ethical engagement, and psychological growth. By situating mindfulness within an ethical matrix and emphasizing interconnectedness and compassion, Buddhist teachings surpass mere symptomatic relief to promote enduring mental and social well-being. The synergy between Buddhist ethics, resilience theory, and contemporary psychology thus emerges as a compelling avenue for both scholars and practitioners, illuminating how introspective practice, moral clarity, and communal support collectively strengthen one's capacity to flourish. In bridging ancient philosophical insights with modern empirical research, the Eightfold Path affirms its continuing relevance for addressing the psychological challenges of the contemporary world – underscoring its potential to inform not only clinical interventions but broader societal efforts toward holistic well-being.

IV. Resilience through ethical living: The noble Eightfold Path in overcoming adversity

The Eightfold Path, as a framework of ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom, offers profound resources for addressing the enduring effects of adversity, including those rooted in childhood. Grounded in the Buddhist understanding of suffering (*dukkha*), it fosters resilience through self-regulation, ethical engagement, and cognitive flexibility. While direct empirical studies on the Eightfold Path and childhood adversity remain scarce, broader resilience research underscores key protective factors – adaptive coping, positive relationships, and problem-solving – closely aligned with Buddhist teachings. The interdependence of the Path's eight factors suggests that resilience is not merely a psychological trait but a cultivated ethical and contemplative disposition that transforms the very structure of one's cognitive and emotional responses to adversity.

Ann S. Masten, Karin M. Best, and Norman Garmezy emphasize problem-solving abilities, cognitive flexibility, and self-regulation as pivotal for resilience, stressing the need for emotional and cognitive stability under stress.⁹¹ These dimensions closely correspond to Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration, which encourage intentional discipline of thought, perception, and awareness, thus fostering cognitive adaptability and emotional regulation. Likewise, a systematic review by Jessica Fritz et al. pinpoint resilience factors at indi-

⁹¹ Ann S. Masten et al., "Resilience and Development: Contributions from the Study of Children Who Overcome Adversity," *Development and Psychopathology* 2, no. 4 (1990): 438-39.

vidual, familial, and communal levels, advocating a holistic approach to overcoming adversity.⁹² Such an integrative perspective aligns with the Eightfold Path's comprehensive structure, uniting ethical, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions in the pursuit of psychological and moral flourishing.

Resilience, however, is not simply a matter of psychological adaptability; it also involves moral engagement and interpersonal ethics. Michael Rutter underscores the importance of cognitive and emotional development in mediating the effects of adversity, emphasizing that individuals must not only process suffering but also situate it within a meaningful ethical framework.⁹³ This view resonates with the Noble Eightfold Path's focus on cultivating mental discipline and understanding, which recalibrates one's ethical and existential commitments in response to suffering. The ethical component of resilience is further highlighted by research on nurturing caregiving environments that serve as protective buffers against adversity. Byron Egeland, Elizabeth Carlson, and L. Alan Sroufe underscore how supportive social structures foster resilience, a principle deeply woven into Buddhist ethics, wherein moral conduct embodies not merely an isolated virtue but a relational commitment to compassion, non-harm, and harmonious interactions.⁹⁴ Consequently, ethical dispositions are not incidental to resilience but foundational for transcending individual coping mechanisms and nurturing communal well-being.

The conceptual overlap between the Noble Eightfold Path and contemporary psychological frameworks suggests that Buddhist ethics and contemplative practices could provide a distinct, adaptive model for mitigating the long-term psychological consequences of childhood adversity. Rather than functioning as isolated strategies, mindfulness (*sammā sati*), wisdom (*paññā*), and ethical action (*sīla*) operate as an integrated discipline that reshapes perception, response, and transcendence of suffering. Buddhist resilience-building extends beyond psychological well-being, effecting an ontological and ethical transformation in how suffering itself is understood. The Eightfold Path, far from being a set of moral prescriptions, constitutes a systematic

⁹² Jessica Fritz et al., "A Systematic Review of Amenable Resilience Factors That Moderate and/or Mediate the Relationship Between Childhood Adversity and Mental Health in Young People," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 9 (2018): 13-15.

⁹³ Michael Rutter, "The Promotion of Resilience in the Face of Adversity," in *Families Count: Effects on Child and Adolescent Development*, eds. Alison Clarke-Stewart and Judy Dunn, The Jacobs Foundation Series on Adolescence (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 39-41.

⁹⁴ Byron Egeland et al., "Resilience as Process," *Development and Psychopathology* 5, no. 4 (1993): 524-26.

reorientation of consciousness – an existential framework that seeks not just to alleviate suffering but to dissolve the attachments and delusions that render it inevitable.

This intersection of Buddhist philosophy and resilience research invites deeper exploration of how contemplative traditions and modern psychology can converge to address the enduring effects of childhood adversity. While contemporary models of resilience emphasize self-efficacy, cognitive restructuring, and social support, Buddhist thought frames resilience as an ontological transformation, viewing suffering not as an aberration or a mere obstacle but as an inherent aspect of existence to be comprehended and transcended. Aligning mental discipline, ethical integrity, and wisdom, the Eightfold Path cultivates a form of resilience that is not reliant on external contingencies but rooted in a profound reconfiguration of perception and selfhood. Unlike many Western paradigms, which often presuppose a stable self to be fortified, Buddhism questions the very premise of selfhood, proposing self-transcendence rather than self-preservation as the ultimate solution to suffering.

Therefore, the philosophical and psychological dimensions of resilience converge in the Eightfold Path, providing not simply a coping mechanism for childhood adversity but a transformational route toward ethical and existential awakening. Future studies might explore more deeply how Buddhist ethics and mental discipline could be woven into resilience-building programs, thereby broadening our grasp of how ancient contemplative teachings inform modern therapeutic methodologies. This synthesis emphasizes Buddhism's continuing relevance in ongoing conversations about suffering, resilience, and human flourishing, positioning the Eightfold Path as a dynamic framework for navigating the complexities of the human condition.

The Eightfold Path's structured and holistic perspective on resilience becomes particularly salient when applied to real-world strategies for overcoming adversity. Incorporating ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom, the Path offers a blueprint for psychological healing and overall well-being. Its focus on right action, right mindfulness, and right concentration directly supports resilience-building efforts, facilitating personal and social dimensions of recovery. Promoting supportive relationships, for instance, aligns with the Path's ethical principles: cultivating trust and safety through compassionate engagement reflects right speech and right action, which emphasize honesty and non-harming communication.⁹⁵ Alongside this, the development

⁹⁵ Suniya S. Luthar and Dante Cicchetti, "The Construct of Resilience: Implications for Inter-

of problem-solving, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence resonates with right effort and right mindfulness, equipping individuals with the psychological flexibility to deal effectively with adversity.⁹⁶ Empirical findings further support that self-efficacy and self-regulation play a crucial role in resilience, and mindfulness-based practices – rooted in right mindfulness and right concentration – have been shown to enhance emotional regulation and adaptive coping strategies.⁹⁷

Beyond fostering personal resilience, the Eightfold Path encourages individuals to derive meaning from adversity. Developing a sense of purpose through spiritual practices, ethical engagement, and community involvement reinforces right view and right intention, offering individuals a sense of direction and reinforcing a positive outlook on life.⁹⁸ Strengthening social support networks further enhances resilience, as positive social interactions are vital for mental well-being. The ethical guidance embedded in right speech, right action, and right livelihood promotes prosocial behavior, highlighting the communal aspects of resilience and ensuring that individuals can rely on strong interpersonal connections.⁹⁹ By integrating these principles into resilience-building strategies, individuals can cultivate coping mechanisms that address both psychological and practical aspects of overcoming adversity, fostering long-term well-being.

While the Eightfold Path is grounded in Buddhist tradition, its core tenets – ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom – exhibit cross-cultural relevance and can be adapted to diverse social settings. Resilience, shaped by an interplay of individual, environmental, and communal factors, may be nurtured through moral conduct and mindfulness practices that transcend cultural boundaries.¹⁰⁰ In both collectivistic and individualistic contexts, resilience-building typically involves fostering robust relationships, cultivating personal growth, and acquiring new knowledge. The Path parallels these endeavors

ventions and Social Policies,” *Development and Psychopathology* 12, no. 4 (2000): 32.

⁹⁶ Fritz et al., 12.

⁹⁷ Alexandra M. Rodman et al., “Neurobiological Markers of Resilience to Depression Following Childhood Maltreatment: The Role of Neural Circuits Supporting the Cognitive Control of Emotion,” *Biological Psychiatry* 86, no. 6 (2019): 469-70.

⁹⁸ Flora Traub and Renée Boynton-Jarrett, “Modifiable Resilience Factors to Childhood Adversity for Clinical Pediatric Practice,” *Pediatrics* 139, no. 5 (2017): 3, 5, 9.

⁹⁹ Deirdre Gartland et al., “What Factors Are Associated with Resilient Outcomes in Children Exposed to Social Adversity? A Systematic Review,” *BMJ Open* 9, no. 4 (2019): 11.

¹⁰⁰ Michael Ungar et al., “Annual Research Review: What Is Resilience within the Social Ecology of Human Development?” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 54, no. 4 (2013): 262-63.

by promoting self-awareness, prosocial actions, and deliberate decision-making.¹⁰¹

While resilience exhibits universal patterns, its expression is shaped by cultural and contextual factors. The Eightfold Path's adaptability ensures that its core principles – such as mindfulness and ethical conduct – can be tailored to different cultural realities, providing effective support in diverse settings.¹⁰² Research on youth resilience across cultures suggests that while global aspects of resilience exist, local and cultural contexts shape its application.¹⁰³ This further enhances the Eightfold Path's potential as a valuable framework for resilience-building, provided it is adapted to reflect the lived realities of individuals in different cultural settings.

Besides, the psychological structures underlying the Eightfold Path correspond to fundamental human needs. Ethical behavior (right speech, right action), self-awareness (right mindfulness), and disciplined effort (right effort, right concentration) align with well-established principles of psychological well-being, including emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, and social cooperation.¹⁰⁴ This suggests that the Eightfold Path can function as a versatile framework for resilience-building, addressing both the universal aspects of human experience and culturally specific variations in resilience strategies. By emphasizing core values that resonate across cultures, the Path provides an ethical and contemplative structure that can be adapted to diverse social and psychological needs.

In summary, the Eightfold Path provides a comprehensive yet flexible roadmap to resilience, synthesizing ethical living, mental discipline, and personal growth in ways that accommodate both individual and cultural variations. By fostering resilience without disregarding diverse perspectives, the Path proves itself a valuable resource for individuals confronting adversity in multiple contexts. Integrated into resilience-building frameworks, it transcends theoretical discussions by proposing actionable methods for cultivating well-being at both personal and collective levels. Ongoing research is needed to further validate and refine the Path's integration into clinical and communal interventions, potentially broadening its role in promoting enduring psychological health. Its adaptability and philosophical depth ensure the Eightfold Path's continued relevance, not

¹⁰¹ Patricia M. Greenfield et al., "Cultural Pathways Through Universal Development," *Annual Review of Psychology* 54, no. 1 (2003): 481-82.

¹⁰² Michael Ungar, "The Social Ecology of Resilience: Addressing Contextual and Cultural Ambiguity of a Nascent Construct," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 81, no. 1 (2011): 12-13.

¹⁰³ M. Ungar, "Resilience across Cultures," *British Journal of Social Work* 38, no. 2 (2006): 226-32.

¹⁰⁴ Shalom H. Schwartz and Wolfgang Bilsky, "Toward a Universal Psychological Structure of Human Values," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 53, no. 3 (1987): 551.

only as a historical doctrine but as a living source of insight into the universal quest for resilience, ethical clarity, and flourishing.

V. Conclusion: From endurance to liberation: Reconceptualizing resilience

This study has examined the intersection of Buddhist soteriology and contemporary resilience theory, demonstrating that the Eightfold Path is not merely a set of ethical prescriptions or psychological techniques but a transformative philosophical paradigm. Unlike conventional resilience models, which emphasize cognitive restructuring, behavioral adaptation, or emotional fortification, the Buddhist approach challenges the very premise upon which these models rest. It does not seek to reinforce an enduring self, nor does it frame resilience as mere endurance. Rather, it offers a radically different ontological and ethical orientation, in which suffering (*dukkha*) is not an anomaly to be overcome but a fundamental condition to be transcended through wisdom and ethical purification.

Unlike many spiritual or developmental approaches that primarily aim to strengthen a coherent self through skills training or virtue cultivation, the Buddhist approach advanced here is soteriological and integrative: ethical conduct (*sīla*), mental discipline (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) work together toward the cessation of suffering by attenuating self-clinging (*anattā*) and reconfiguring perception (*paṭiccasamuppāda*, *anicca*). In this respect, the article complements Emmanuel Roberto Goffi's argument that genuine eudaimonia is irreducibly relational, extending his concern with the ethical limits of individualism by articulating a Buddhist framework in which resilience is likewise inseparable from moral transformation and communal responsibility.¹⁰⁵ This article is intended for scholars and practitioners in psychology, education, pastoral and spiritual care, and the allied health professions, as well as instructors of philosophy – especially in ethics, Buddhist philosophy, philosophy of mind, philosophy of education, and applied fields such as bioethics and professional ethics – who seek theoretically grounded, ethically robust frameworks for resilience. Its chief implication is programmatic: the Eightfold Path can inform the design of interventions that embed mindfulness within explicit ethical training and existential meaning-making. The present work therefore serves as a conceptual foundation for subsequent practical and empirical work, including manualized curricula, feasibility studies, and outcomes research.

¹⁰⁵ Goffi, 112.

This philosophical reorientation carries profound implications beyond theoretical discourse. The widespread adoption of mindfulness-based therapies in contemporary psychology attests to the increasing integration of Buddhist contemplative techniques into Western models of mental health. Nonetheless, the prevalent trend of extracting mindfulness from its ethical and soteriological framework raises an urgent question: Can the therapeutic efficacy of Buddhist practices be fully realized without their moral and metaphysical foundations? While mindfulness enhances cognitive flexibility and emotional regulation, the Eightfold Path is a holistic system aimed not merely at alleviating suffering but at uprooting its causes through moral integrity, disciplined effort, and wisdom.

Further inquiry is needed to determine whether the ethical dimensions of the Eightfold Path function as a moral resilience framework comparable to Aristotelian virtue ethics or represent a fundamentally distinct epistemological approach to well-being. If Buddhist resilience is not the reinforcement of an autonomous agent but the transcendence of self-clinging, what implications does this have for Western models of personal growth and agency? Moreover, how does the Buddhist emphasis on impermanence (*anicca*), dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*) challenge the foundational assumptions of psychological resilience, which often presuppose a stable self-concept as the basis of flourishing?

These questions are not merely of academic interest but of profound ethical and existential significance. As psychology increasingly engages with contemplative traditions, it must also critically examine its own presuppositions about selfhood, suffering, and well-being. Comparative studies assessing the Eightfold Path alongside cognitive-behavioral, existential, and contemplative interventions will be instrumental in determining its relevance to global mental health paradigms. Yet if resilience is to be understood in a truly transformative sense, it cannot be reduced to a psychological mechanism for restoring equilibrium. It must instead be recognized as a radical ontological shift – one that not merely enable individuals to endure suffering but ultimately allows them to transcend it.

By bridging Buddhist philosophy with contemporary psychological inquiry, the Eightfold Path emerges as a compelling model for understanding suffering, selfhood, and ethical cultivation. Unlike Western resilience frameworks that seek to strengthen personal agency, Buddhism offers a more radical alternative – one that does not reinforce the self but dismantles the very attachments that render suffering inevitable. Its principles transcend cultural and disciplinary

boundaries, offering a new way of conceptualizing resilience – not merely as survival, but as the unfolding of wisdom and the cessation of suffering. If resilience research is to evolve beyond mechanistic models of adaptation, it must engage with philosophical traditions that do not simply optimize the self but challenge the very premise of selfhood itself.

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On the Divine and the Humane in Modern Context

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Abstract

Ever since the dawn of humanity and civilization, the question of divinity has been a major power of thought, conflict and inspiration for cultures, individuals, religions, and countries. In modern times, the term of God has been structured in terms of either religion, or conservative viewpoints that in many ways, are no longer relevant to the world of science and knowledge discovered throughout the years of modern history. Along with scientific and technological developments that improve and reconstruct humanity, a question arises: where are we all heading? To be more precise, we wish to reveal what is the ultimate goal of mankind. Solutions that were once given by religions of all sorts, are now a matter of technicality. As longevity, physical and mental wellness, communication, human knowledge of the universe all become more and more advanced, omnipotence of the human race as a whole is no longer a belief, but a goal, that gets closer as time advances. This paper aims to investigate these purposes and goals of humanity in light of our current state and knowledge, and what challenges we have left to complete our journey in time.

Keywords: *humanism; divinity; concept of God; analytical philosophy; futurism*

I. Introduction

Throughout history, humanity has been captivated by the question of divinity and the pursuit of understanding our place in the world. This inquiry has been a driving force behind cultural development, individual belief systems, religious institutions, and even political ideologies. However, in the modern era, the concept of divinity and the traditional understanding of God have become increasingly challenged by scientific and technological advancements.

As societies have progressed, our knowledge and understanding of the world have expanded exponentially. The principles once used

to explain the mysteries of existence, such as religious doctrines and conservative viewpoints, are now being questioned in light of new scientific discoveries. These discoveries have undoubtedly shaped and reshaped our perception of the world and our place within it. In light of these advancements, it begs the question: where is humanity ultimately headed? What is the ultimate goal of the human race? With the continuous improvement of longevity, physical and mental well-being, communication, and our expanding knowledge of the universe, the concept of human omnipotence – the idea that we, as a species, can become all-powerful – has become less of a belief and more of a tangible goal that appears closer within our reach as time progresses.

The philosophical implications of humanity's trajectory toward divinity cannot be fully explored without addressing foundational critiques of technological advancement, ethical foresight, and the evolving conception of the human. By drawing on the works of Martin Heidegger, Hans Jonas, and contemporary post humanist/transhumanist thinkers, we deepen our analysis beyond aspirational narratives and root it in critical traditions of thought.

Heidegger¹ posits that modern technology is not a neutral tool, but a mode of revealing – a way in which reality discloses itself to us. He describes this as *Gestell* (enframing), wherein all entities, including humans, are reduced to *Bestand* (standing reserve), mere resources to be stored, optimized, or manipulated. In this view, the quest for immortality or omnipotent intelligence may not represent liberation, but rather the consummation of enframing: a world where divinity is redefined as total utility. As we develop artificial intelligence and life-extending technologies, Heidegger compels us to ask whether we are truly transcending humanity or simply deepening our instrumental view of existence.

Hans Jonas² argues that the unprecedented scope of technological power, genetic engineering, artificial life, climate manipulation, requires a new kind of moral philosophy: one that emphasizes responsibility across generations. His imperative of responsibility demands that we act not for immediate outcomes alone but for the sustainability of genuine human life. This extends directly to our vision of “divinity”: if future technologies make us God-like, Jonas would insist that we ask first whether such power is morally survivable, and whether it preserves human dignity, identity, and continuity.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (Harper & Row, 1977).

² Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (University of Chicago Press, 1984).

The project of overcoming human limitations, often associated with transhumanism (e.g., Bostrom³) envisions a future where biological boundaries are transcended via technology. Yet post humanist theorists, such as Rosi Braidotti,⁴ N. Katherine Hayles,⁵ and Francesca Ferrando⁶ emphasize the need to decenter the liberal-humanist subject, warning against the illusion that divinity can be achieved solely through rational mastery or enhancement. Instead, they stress relationality, vulnerability, and embodiment. A truly humane future, in this view, is not one of domination over nature or self, but of symbiosis, humility, and ethical interdependence.

This critical posture challenges utopian narratives by suggesting that “becoming like gods” without rethinking what it means to be human risks replicating older hegemonies, only now in digital or genetic form. While the possibility of controlling time represents the ultimate symbolic transcendence of human limits, Heidegger’s critique of technology and Jonas’s ethics of responsibility remind us that such aspirations must be tempered by ontological humility and ethical foresight. If time itself is to be reframed, as our perception of space once was, then this act must be situated not only in imaginative speculation, but also in philosophical responsibility and moral restraint.

The purpose of this paper is to delve into the goals and aspirations of humanity in relation to our present state of affairs and knowledge. It aims to navigate the challenges that lie ahead for us as we strive to fulfil our potential and complete our journey through time. By analysing the current scientific and philosophical landscape, we hope to gain insight into our highest aspirations as a species and the potential obstacles we must overcome to realize them.

In doing so, we will explore the evolving nature of divinity, the impact of scientific and technological progress on our understanding of the human potential and contemplate the implications of our collective goals on the future of humanity. By examining these factors, we hope to deepen our understanding of the purpose and trajectory of our species, as well as the importance of continually reassessing our understanding of divinity in light of new knowledge.

³ Nick Bostrom, “Transhumanist Values,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 30 (Supplement) (2005): 3-14; Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Polity Press, 2013).

⁵ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁶ Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

Ultimately, this investigation aims to stimulate thoughtful discourse and inspire further research into the philosophical implications of our ever-evolving understanding of the goals and purposes of humanity. As we stand poised on the precipice of a new era, defined by unprecedented advancements, we must critically examine and question the foundations upon which our beliefs and aspirations are built. Through this exploration, we endeavour to shed light on the true essence and direction of the human journey.

II. Background and related work

Throughout history, the question of divinity has played a significant role in shaping cultures, inspiring individuals, and influencing religious beliefs and practices.⁷ The concept of God has traditionally been associated with religious ideologies, providing answers to existential questions and guiding moral and ethical frameworks.⁸ However, with the advancements in science and the widening scope of human knowledge, the definition and relevance of God have come under scrutiny.

In the modern era, science and technology have profoundly transformed our understanding of the world and our place within it. The knowledge gained through empirical investigations and critical thinking has challenged traditional religious notions, leading to a growing divergence between conservative viewpoints and scientific progress. This shift has prompted a re-evaluation of the ultimate goal or purpose of humanity.⁹ Cerutti¹⁰ examines the ethical and moral implications of considering the interests of future generations when determining the ultimate goal of humanity. It discusses the concept of “long-termism” and the responsibility of current generations to secure a positive future for subsequent generations. Habermas¹¹ explores the challenges and possibilities of biotechnology and genetic engineering in shaping the future trajectory of humanity. The book discusses the ethical dilemmas associated with these advancements and raises questions about the ul-

⁷ Georgia Petridou, *Divine Epiphany in Greek Literature and Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Valeschka Martins Guerra, “Community, Autonomy and Divinity: Studying Morality across Cultures,” (PhD diss., University of Kent, 2008).

⁸ Pamela Ebstyn King, “Religion and Identity: The Role of Ideological, Social, and Spiritual Contexts,” in *Beyond the Self*, ed. Felicity Callard et al., 197-204 (Routledge, 2019).

⁹ Hubert Joly, “A Time to Lead with Purpose and Humanity,” *Harvard Business Review*, March 24, 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/03/a-time-to-lead-with-purpose-and-humanity>.

¹⁰ Furio Cerutti, “Why Should We Care for Future Generations?” *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* 6 (2009): 132002.

¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Polity Press, 2003).

timate goals humans should pursue in light of these developments. Bostrom delves into the potential impact of artificial intelligence (AI) and its role in determining the future goals of humanity. The book raises concerns about the potential risks associated with developing superintelligent AI and highlights the need for careful consideration and ethical guidelines in shaping the future of AI. Appiah¹² explores the concept of identity and its influence on goal setting for humanity. He argues for a broader, inclusive understanding of identity that transcends narrow boundaries and fosters a global perspective on the ultimate goals of mankind. Hill Jr¹³ explores the idea of humanity as an intrinsic value, or an end in itself. Hill argues against views that diminish the moral significance of humans in favour of other entities or ideas, such as maximizing pleasure or promoting the natural world. He contends that recognizing humanity as an intrinsic value is crucial for moral decision-making. Hill starts by addressing utilitarian theories that prioritize maximizing overall happiness or pleasure. While acknowledging the importance of promoting happiness and reducing suffering, Hill criticizes the utilitarian view for potentially disregarding the inherent worth of individuals and for failing to protect their rights and autonomy. He argues that treating humanity as merely a means to an end undermines the moral significance of human beings. Next, Hill examines environmental ethics that prioritize preserving the natural world over individualistic concerns. While acknowledging the importance of environmental preservation, Hill argues against the view that human beings are just equal parts of nature. He asserts that humans possess a unique capacity for self-awareness and autonomy, which should not be diminished but rather respected and protected. Hill then introduces the concept of humanity as an end in itself, drawing from Immanuel Kant's philosophy. This perspective holds that human beings have intrinsic worth, and they cannot be used merely as a means to achieve other ends. Hill argues that this perspective aligns with our moral intuitions, which reflect our recognition of individuals' inherent dignity and worth.

Recent philosophical literature underscores the need to critically examine the aspirations of transhumanism and techno-divinization within broader metaphysical and ethical frameworks. As Juozelis¹⁴ argues, many transhumanist goals, such as immortality, omniscience, and engineered perfection, subtly mirror religious teleologies and eschato-

¹² Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* (Liveright Publishing, 2018).

¹³ Thomas E. Hill, Jr., "Humanity as an End in Itself," *Ethics* 91, no. 1 (1980): 84-99.

¹⁴ Evaldas Juozelis, "Religious Dimensions in Transhumanist and Posthumanist Philosophies of Science," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2021): 125-133.

logical myths. These secular projections of transcendence may not represent radical breaks from the past but rather reconfigure longstanding theological narratives in a technological guise. At the same time, discussions of artificial intelligence and posthuman cognition benefit from more rigorous philosophical foundations.

Anderson¹⁵ et al. emphasize the importance of distinguishing between autonomy and agency in AI systems, warning against overly simplistic analogies between human and machine intentionality. This serves as a critical counterweight to utopian visions of AI as an all-knowing divine mind.

In the realm of biotechnology, Boutlas¹⁶ highlights the moral complexities that accompany the manipulation of genetic material, especially when enhancement is prioritized over therapeutic intervention. Likewise, Psarros¹⁷ stresses the significance of embodiment in discussions of technological transcendence, arguing that efforts to overcome the body risk undermining its ontological and ethical value. These insights deepen the ongoing dialogue around human enhancement, calling for a more grounded view of what it means to “perfect” the human form. Kaldudjerovic¹⁸ extends this conversation by offering a normative framework for evaluating the permissibility of genetic interventions, cautioning that any such project must consider both distributive justice and the preservation of human dignity.

Finally, while the present paper explores divinity through the lens of future potentialities, it is crucial to acknowledge that the question of God remains philosophically alive. As Swinburne and Meichanetsidis¹⁹ note, theism is not merely a relic of metaphysics but continues to evolve in dialogue with scientific progress and existential inquiry. Incorporating this perspective affirms that discussions of divine aspiration, even those framed around human potential, must remain open to theological as well as philosophical interpretation.

¹⁵ Michael Anderson et al., “Towards Moral Machines: A Discussion with Michael Anderson and Susan Leigh Anderson,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2021): 177-202.

¹⁶ George Boutlas, “Bioethics as the ‘Third Culture’: Integrating Science and Humanities, Preventing ‘Normative Violence,’” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2018): 9-29.

¹⁷ Nikolaos Psarros, “Practice and Human Form.” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2018): 45-62.

¹⁸ Zeljko Kaldudjerovic, “Bioethics and Hereditary Genetic Modifications,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2018): 31-44.

¹⁹ Richard Swinburne and Vasilis Meichanetsidis, “Proofs for the Existence of God: A Discussion with Richard Swinburne,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (2024): 305-314.

These papers and research provide insights into the evolving philosophical and ethical debates surrounding the ultimate goal of humanity in the context of modern knowledge. By considering perspectives on future generations, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and rethinking identity, scholars have attempted to understand the challenges and possibilities that lie ahead in defining the goals of human progress.

III. Definitions

To ground the inquiry presented in this paper, it is necessary to clarify several core terms.

Divinity, as used here, does not denote a strictly theistic being, but rather the ensemble of traditionally divine attributes: timelessness, omniscience, creative power, and the transcendence of natural limits. In this sense, divinity functions symbolically, echoing both theological complexity and technological aspiration.²⁰ *Humane*, by contrast, refers not merely to compassion, but to the essential characteristics of human moral and existential experience: rationality, dignity, embodiment, and ethical agency.²¹ In discussions of posthuman transformation, it marks the qualities we seek to preserve or transcend. *Omnipotence* is understood here not as metaphysical absolutism, but as the theoretical human capacity to overcome all limitations: biological, spatial, or temporal via scientific mastery. This concept merges classical philosophical notions of divine power with contemporary models of computational and informational agency.²² Lastly, *immortality* is used to denote the indefinite extension of life through biological enhancement or digital continuation, rather than literal eternal life. It is both a technical pursuit and a moral challenge that touches on the nature of personhood and finitude.²³ Each of these terms functions not only descriptively but normatively, guiding the kinds of futures that appear possible or desirable.

²⁰ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Rafael Capurro, "Digital Ontology and Religious Imagination," *AI & Society* 24, no. 1 (2009): 35-42.

²¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, "Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings," in *Women, Culture, and Development*, eds. Martha C. Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover, 61-104 (Oxford University Press, 1995); Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 149-181 (Routledge, 1991).

²² Edward Wierenga, *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes* (Cornell University Press, 1989); Luciano Floridi, *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

²³ Leon R. Kass, "L'Chaim and Its Limits: Why Not Immortality?" *First Things* 113 (2001): 17-24; Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*.

IV. Current state of humane towards divine

In our journey as humanity towards divinity, the current state of human development highlights numerous advancements and challenges. Scientific and technological progress has propelled humanity towards unparalleled heights, enabling us to better understand and manipulate the world around us. The exponential growth of knowledge in fields such as genetics,²⁴ artificial intelligence,²⁵ nanotechnology²⁶ and space exploration²⁷ has opened up unprecedented possibilities for humanity's future.

One notable development is the increasing focus on longevity and physical well-being.²⁸ With advancements in medicine and healthcare, we have witnessed a significant increase in life expectancy and the alleviation of numerous diseases. Furthermore, the emergence of regenerative medicine and the potential to enhance human capabilities through genetic engineering and bio-enhancement have raised the prospect of extending human lifespan and overcoming biological limitations. The pursuit of physical immortality and the quest for optimal health have become central to the vision of a god-like human existence. In parallel, there has been a remarkable growth in our understanding of the human mind. Advancements in neuroscience and cognitive sciences have shed light on the complexities of consciousness, memory, and decision-making processes.²⁹ The development of artificial intelligence and neural interfaces has further blurred the boundaries between human and machine intelligence. These advances pave the way for the possibility of enhancing cognitive abilities, achieving superior intellect, and potentially transcending human limitations altogether.

Communication and interconnectedness have also undergone immense transformations with the advent of global networks and the

²⁴ Kaitlin Myers et al., "Epilepsy Genetics: Current Knowledge, Applications, and Future Directions," *Clinical Genetics* 95, no. 1 (2019): 95-111.

²⁵ Vítor Pereira et al., "A Systematic Literature Review on the Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Workplace Outcomes: A Multi-Process Perspective," *Human Resource Management Review* 33, no. 1 (2023): 100857.

²⁶ Saima Malik et al., "Nanotechnology: A Revolution in Modern Industry," *Molecules* 28, no. 2 (2023): 661.

²⁷ Rocco Santomartino et al., "Toward Sustainable Space Exploration: A Roadmap for Harnessing the Power of Microorganisms," *Nature Communications* 14, no. 1 (2023): 1391.

²⁸ Howard S. Friedman et al., "Personality and Health, Subjective Well-Being, and Longevity," *Journal of Personality* 78, no. 1 (2010): 179-216.

²⁹ Francesco Calzavarini, "Rethinking Modality-Specificity in the Cognitive Neuroscience of Concrete Word Meaning: A Position Paper," *Language, Cognition and Neuroscience* 39, no. 7 (2023): 815-837.

digital age. The rapid development of information and communication technologies has revolutionized the way we connect, share knowledge, and interact with one another.³⁰ As our ability to access and process information exponentially increases, the boundaries of human knowledge expand, enabling us to comprehend and navigate the universe with previously unimaginable precision. However, amid these remarkable developments, significant challenges lie ahead. Ethical dilemmas surrounding the pursuit of God-like attributes arise. The implications of modifying human biology or creating sentient machines raise concerns about the potential loss of human identity and the erosion of moral values.³¹ The unequal distribution of resources and access to these advancements also raises ethical questions about the potential for exacerbating existing inequalities.³² Furthermore, the quest for God-like abilities necessitates considering the impact on our environment and the potential consequences of our actions. Balancing our ambitions with the sustainability of our planet and the preservation of biodiversity becomes increasingly crucial as we redefine our relationship with nature. In conclusion, the current state of human development in relation to the aspiration of becoming gods in the future reflects an extraordinary trajectory of scientific and technological progress. While we have made significant strides towards transcending our biological limitations and improving our understanding of the universe, a multitude of challenges loom. As we embark on this transformative journey, grappling with the ethical, social, and environmental implications becomes increasingly imperative to ensure a responsible and inclusive future for humanity.

V. What is next? Goals towards divinity

In light of our current state and knowledge, it is imperative to explore the goals that lay ahead for humanity in its quest for divinity. These goals can be broadly categorized into three main areas: immortality with

³⁰ Bright A. Gyamfi et al., "Synthesizing the Impacts of Information and Communication Technology Advancement and Educational Developments on Environmental Sustainability: A Comparative Analysis of Three Economic Blocs – BRICS, MINT, and G7 Economies," *Sustainable Development* 31, no. 2 (2023): 744-759.

³¹ Rajakishore Nath and Vineet Sahu, "The Problem of Machine Ethics in Artificial Intelligence," *AI & Society* 35, no. 1 (2020): 103-111.

³² Alessandra Geraci and Luca Surian, "The Developmental Roots of Fairness: Infants' Reactions to Equal and Unequal Distributions of Resources," *Developmental Science* 14, no. 5 (2011): 1012-1020.

well-being, Earth’s constant sustainability, and scientific knowledge of the universe. Humanity’s journey and goals over time towards divinity are depicted in Figure 1. The first goal towards divinity is the pursuit of immortality with well-being. As advancements in medical science continue to unravel the mysteries of human existence, the possibility of extending our individual lifespan becomes a tangible aspiration. However, mere longevity is not sufficient; it must be accompanied by physical and mental wellness. The goal is to not only prolong human life but also ensure that it is lived with good health and vitality, enabling individuals to thrive and contribute to the collective progress of humanity.

The second goal focuses on Earth’s constant sustainability. In an era characterized by pressing ecological concerns, it is essential to recognize the interdependence between humans and the environment. To strive towards divinity, mankind must seek to harmonize its existence with the natural world, respecting and preserving the delicate balance of ecosystems. This necessitates sustainable practices in all aspects of life, from energy consumption and resource utilization to waste management and conservation efforts. By ensuring the continuous well-being of our planet, humanity works towards its own transcendence.

The third goal embodies the pursuit of scientific knowledge of the universe. Throughout history, humans have been driven by a deep fascination with the cosmos and a desire to unravel its mysteries. As our technical capabilities expand, so does our ability to uncover the secrets of the universe. This pursuit of scientific understanding grants us insight into the intricate workings of the cosmos, bridging the gap between the known and the unknown. By seeking to comprehend the universe, humanity strives towards a higher state of consciousness and a closer connection with the divine.

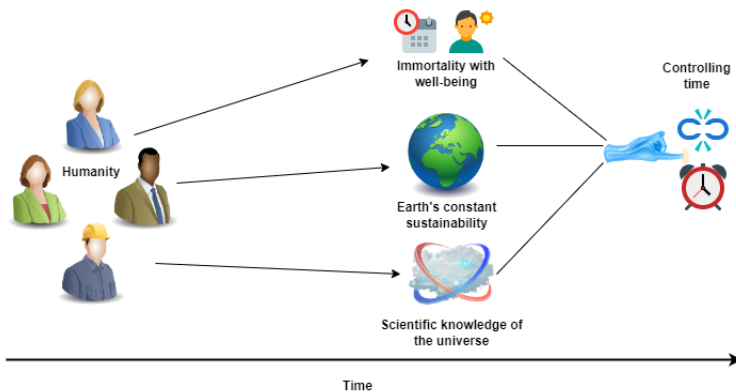


Figure 1. Humanity’s journey and goals over time towards divinity

These goals towards divinity present significant challenges that must be overcome. Achieving immortality with well-being requires not only advancements in medical technology but also ethical considerations regarding the implications of prolonged life. Earth's constant sustainability demands a concerted global effort to mitigate climate change, protect biodiversity, and promote sustainable living practices. The quest for scientific knowledge of the universe necessitates continued investment in scientific research and exploration, along with a willingness to challenge traditional beliefs and ideologies.

In conclusion, the goals towards divinity in our current era are centered around immortality with well-being, Earth's constant sustainability, and scientific knowledge of the universe. As humanity continues to move forward, these objectives remain crucial in our journey towards a higher state of existence. By striving towards these goals, we can transcend the limitations of the past and propel ourselves closer to the divine.

VI. The final frontier

As for the final frontier of mankind in its journey towards divinity, the only thing that actually is defining for this power is the control on time. Once this target, that seems imaginary in many ways, is achieved, all other purposes are negligible in this light. This may seem as an unapproachable target, since only theoretical attempts of describing time travel or time manipulation have been done so far, and the realm of time travel has been in areas such as science fiction, literature and cinema. But if we look at higher perspective, we can easily say that the world we live in today could seem nothing but imaginary in the eyes of a person that lived several hundreds of years ago, let alone a person that lived a couple of thousands of years ago. The technology, the abundance, and even the world itself, that was once considered flat, is at our hands, with the ability to fly, that was not so long ago, in historical terms, was considered impossible and imaginary by humanity, is now an ordinary fact of life, along with even flying to space and exploring it. So, it may possibly be that in a couple of hundred years, or several thousands of years from these days, this will also be a trivial fact to some extent, as an option of observing the past, and maybe affecting on it in some ways, and that will complete the journey of mankind towards divinity.

Usually in great changes of perception, there is an element of looking at an object, formula, physical law or any other well-accepted fact of science, from a different perspective. For example, as we can see in Figure 2, when the earth was believed to be flat, and no other way

could be considered, this was due to the fact that humanity lived, and still lives within it, thus not being able to perceive its actual form. It is only when another dimension is being scaled up (from two-dimensional perspective to three dimensional) we can see it's true form being round as a sphere. If we take this reduction to the element of time, we can see, as portrayed in Figure 2, that as we live inside of time and see it as three dimensional, it seems linear and thus, also infinite. If we scale up to the fourth dimensions, which is indeed time itself, we might perceive that it is not in the form we thought it was.

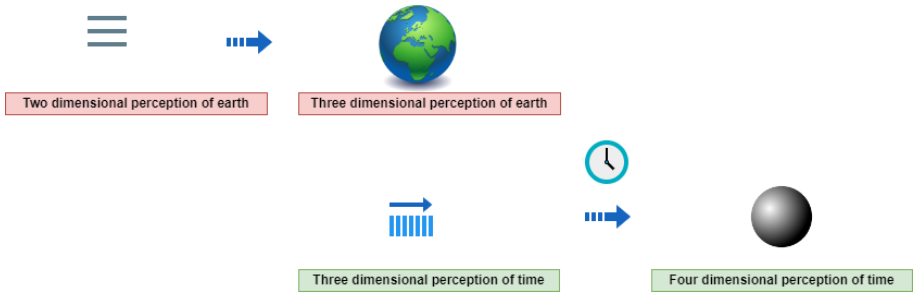


Figure 2. Changes in perception in earth and time as a scaling up a dimension is done

VII. Conclusion

The pursuit of divinity in the modern era is shaped by our evolving understanding of the world and our place within it. Scientific and technological advancements have challenged traditional notions of divinity and opened up new possibilities for humanity's ultimate goals. As we strive towards immortality with well-being, Earth's constant sustainability, and scientific knowledge of the universe, we must navigate the ethical, social, and environmental implications that arise along the way. Our current state and knowledge offer a glimpse into the potential future of humanity, where the control of time may be the defining factor in our journey towards divinity. While the realization of this goal may seem distant or even unimaginable, history has shown us that what was once considered impossible can become a reality. As we continue to push the boundaries of knowledge and progress, we have the opportunity to transcend the limitations of the past and propel ourselves closer to the divine. Through thoughtful discourse and continued exploration, we can deepen our understanding of our purpose and trajectory, ensuring a responsible and inclusive future for humanity.

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