

# High School Journal of Philosophy and Ethics

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**Can Foundationalism Survive Revision?**

*By Christopher K. Morris*

**"We Regret to Inform You": College Admissions Angst in  
the U.S. through a Lacanian Lens**

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Philosophy**

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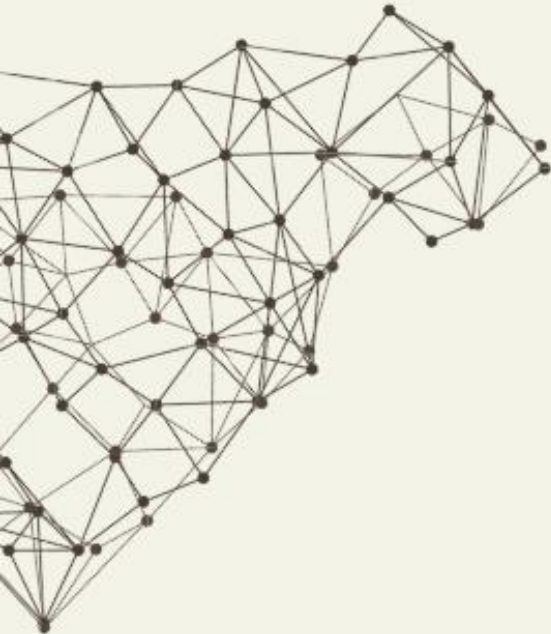
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# HIGH SCHOOL JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS

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## Editorial and Introduction

Alexander Wang

Philosophy is not a commonly taught subject at the secondary level (or even at the university level, for many students who simply choose not to take philosophy courses). For high school students, philosophy *as a discipline* is often viewed only from afar, relegated to the ancients or behind the walls of academia. And yet, this fact does not stop adolescents from being passionate about philosophy. It has been our experience that students are not only curious but have something genuine to say about the kinds of philosophical questions posed by life, lack of formal experience notwithstanding.

The quote that “all philosophy begins in wonder” has been variously attributed to Plato and/or Aristotle (if not others). Regardless of its veracity or original meaning, the spirit of the quote persists: philosophy is inextricably related to a sense of curiosity, awe, and questioning. Who better, then, to philosophize than children, with their sense of wonder? The belief that the youth share an affinity with philosophers is, we believe, far from uncommon. We firmly hold that this philosophical instinct remains alive and flourishing among high school students. Unfortunately, unlike other subjects, philosophy does not have anywhere close to the amount of extra-curricular (or curricular) opportunities. Especially given the fact that philosophy is often (but not always) done by way of writing, there is a dearth of avenues for students to engage in philosophical dialogue—to voice their arguments, receive feedback, and hear the perspectives of their peers.

This journal seeks to address this critical gap between the philosophical instincts of students and their ability to engage the academic discipline of philosophy. Our goals are multifaceted. We aim to create an outlet for students already interested in philosophy to test their writing and voice their ideas, a showcase for curious students to see philosophy as a youth-accessible and worthwhile area to pursue, and a channel where this group’s unique insights and perspectives may assist peers and others alike.

In this inaugural edition, we are incredibly grateful to the authors, reviewers, and friends who made this endeavor possible. We have attempted to include a diverse set of papers from a diverse group of authors, which we believe showcases the best of youth philosophy. We begin in epistemology, with Christopher K. Morris’s paper, “Can Foundationalism Survive Revision.” In it, Morris observes that neither the strong, classical variety of foundationalism, nor modest foundationalism are adept at handling the challenges posed when we revise our beliefs. He argues that because we commonly revise our beliefs, including supposedly foundational beliefs, classical foundationalism cannot accurately describe our *actual* belief processes, and modest foundationalism becomes essentially a disguised coherentism. In the end, then, all epistemic theories of our *actual* beliefs are, at core, theories of how willing we are to revise our beliefs.

Next, Jackson Newton provides a refreshing analysis of the college admissions system (or “game”), through the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis. In his paper, “‘We Regret to Inform You’: College Admissions Angst in the U.S. through a Lacanian Lens,” he shows how the college admissions process creates a foreboding anxiety where students wonder what the Other (college admissions offices) want. Using Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Newton unveils the power behind the commonplace discourse of the college admissions system—master signifier phrases like “holistic review”, etc. What’s more, Newton argues, following Zizek, that the rejection letters only worsen the blow. Their couched language subtly reinforces (their power and) the belief that students are *solely* to blame for their rejections, which are for their own good. Ultimately, the analyst and student may reclaim their power through a Lacanian method.

The next paper, “*Thus Spoke Zarathustra: Widening the Bounds of Philosophy*,” by Max Lan, argues that our current conception of philosophical method as being relegated to only that of academic papers is severely limited. Instead, he takes inspiration from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, reading Nietzsche as espousing a pragmatic theory of truth. For Lan, a natural result of being pragmatic about truth is that *stories* and *context* become essential to and inseparable from any ‘argument.’ Thus, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* becomes a case study for a new method of literary philosophy, stretching the bounds of philosophical method as appropriate for innovative ideas. Here, its literary elements do not detract from but constitute the philosophical argument and merit. Lan further reads *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to have on loneliness and the eternal recurrence, with the book subtly arguing for an active readership, encouraging readers to take their individual burdens of value-seeking.

We then move to the philosophy of religion in Alexander Wang’s paper, “Is It Reasonable to be Grateful to God for Protection from Natural Evil He Caused?”. In this paper, Wang argues that gratitude is fundamentally about intentions: whether or not your benefactor acted with a benevolent intention towards you. With this in mind, he argues that even in cases where God is, in some senses, responsible for natural evil, it is still nonetheless reasonable to thank Him when He protects us from said evil. To make his argument, Wang takes a Thomist stance on divine action, arguing for a distinction between primary and secondary causes. I make note here that this paper was authored by one of our editors for the journal. However, we also add that it was blind-reviewed like all other papers.

Continuing on, we enter the domain of ethics and justice with a paper by Anupam Panthi, entitled “Moral Accountability and the Need for Rehabilitation.” The central claim of this paper is that we have a moral duty to rehabilitate criminals, not just punish them. Panthi argues that our moral duty to rehabilitation is not just utilitarian; it stems from the same fact about human rationality which justifies retribution for Kant. To establish his argument, Panthi traces the arguments for punishment under a Kantian, Social Contract, and Utilitarian theory of justice, before turning his attention to rehabilitation. Here, he adds another prong to the argument, observing

that if fault can be ascribed to society writ-large for, in a sense, producing crime, then it must also bear the responsibility for rehabilitating criminals.

Finally, we end with Paolo Passalacqua's piece entitled "Recontextualizing Kant in a Seemingly Anti-Enlightenment Age." It is no surprise that our (post)modern age is rife with misinformation, fake news, and a slew of content that seeks to obscure the truth—if *one* even exists. Passalacqua marshals a Kantian critique and analysis of these phenomenon, drawing from Apel's reading of Pierce, Habermas, and Deleuze. He provides insight into how exactly contemporary developments in information obscure Enlightenment independence, making a critical observation on the increasing relevance of a *public* and *communicative* sphere.

As with starting anything new, we have faced many challenges in creating this journal. Most of all, we have faced the hurdle of simply lacking experience. However, what was *truly* unexpected for us was the sheer number of quality papers we would receive! This is, in our opinion, a vindication of the belief that there exists a flourishing philosophical spirit among the youth, and has given us the (fortunate) quandary of having to reject papers despite what we can see is significant hard work. We would like to formally encourage those who were not part of this current issue to resubmit their papers (especially those who we were able to pass along feedback/edits for). We look forward to future submission cycles, in which we are confident we will receive more high-quality papers (and perhaps be required to raise our judging criteria yet again)!

We hope you will enjoy reading the culmination of many months of work.

Sincerely,

*The Editors*

## Can Foundationalism Survive Revision?

Christopher K. Morris

USA

### Abstract

It is typically assumed that foundationalism as a theory of epistemic justification is distinct from coherentist and infinitist positions. Moreover, it is accepted that foundationalism can be further distinguished into “classical” (or strong) and “modest” varieties. However, in this paper, I outline an argument that purports to show that there are no classical foundationalists and that modest foundationalism ultimately reduces to a form of coherentism or infinitism. Specifically, I argue that current approaches to foundationalism are insufficient for dealing with the notion of revision, or how we *actually* go about believing things.

## 1. Foundationalism, Coherentism, and Infitism

Defining the justification relation between beliefs and perhaps sometimes non-doxastic elements like experiences is notoriously difficult.<sup>1</sup> The problems of justification in epistemology can be (loosely) cut up into two main “questions:” (1) when are our beliefs justified and (2) what does it mean for a belief to be justified? The former is a standard epistemic question, whereas some philosophers may call the latter a meta-epistemic question. Those said philosophers will also usually agree that it is ultimately a metanormative question, since we usually will say “P justifies belief in  $\Phi$ ” is true when P gives reason to believe in  $\Phi$ , and we are back to simple normative discourse—discourse nonetheless about beliefs.<sup>2</sup> The former question is a more classical question in epistemology and epistemologists typically divide up approaches into three camps: foundationalist, coherentist, and infinitist approaches.

Once again, demarcating between and defining these categories is excruciatingly difficult. A simple account of a foundationalist thesis is one which claims that there are some foundational beliefs which are positively justified and these beliefs do not depend in any profound sense on other beliefs for their positive justification.<sup>3</sup> We may appeal to some illustrative geometric intuitions, such as knowledge being like an inverted “pyramid” that builds “upwards” from a small set of foundational beliefs and many inferentially justified, non-foundational beliefs.<sup>4</sup> Then, and perhaps as a more recent solution to some of the many problems plaguing epistemology, there is coherentism. Certain popular brands of coherentism have some difficulty distinguishing themselves from foundationalism because they tend to privilege certain sources of justification or certain beliefs, and it is difficult to fit these into a “web of belief” without falling back into some (perhaps fallible, but still) foundational structure of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Then there is infinitism, which is the least popular choice of the three, which proposes that our knowledge is an infinitely extending series of justifications where each belief is justified by some other belief all the way down. In part, the seeming impossibility of *actually* having infinitely many beliefs to justify at each step suggests that infinitism in an extremely primitive sense is incoherent. Famously, Charles Sanders Peirce accepted infinitism during a certain duration of his career, but this view is different from the aforementioned naive account.<sup>6</sup> Indeed the defense of infinitism given by Peter Klein accepted

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<sup>1</sup> Erik Olsson, “Coherentist Theories of Epistemic Justification,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023), eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/justep-coherence/>.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Chrisman, “Metanormative Theory and the Meaning of Deontic Modals,” in *Deontic Modality*, eds. Nate Charlow and Matthew Chrisman (Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Paul K. Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> I leave other problems, such as whether such foundational beliefs are incorrigible outside of the scope of defining foundationalism.

<sup>5</sup> Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Harvard University Press, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Scott F. Aikin, “Prospects for Peircean Epistemic Infinitism,” *Contemporary Pragmatism* 6, no. 2 (2009): 71–87, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18758185-90000117>.



infinetism as a view about *possible* justification.<sup>7</sup> These are still left with the issue that at any given point, the infinitists' set of beliefs must actually be finite, and therefore the infinitist distinguishes herself only from the foundationalist in the sense that she would (ideally) have no foundational beliefs—all her foundational beliefs are incidentally foundational.

So, we are left in the depressing position that almost all views are (practically) identical to some form of foundationalism, or at the very least are very difficult to distinguish from various different brands of foundationalism. Yet very clearly these views are distinct—coherentists approach epistemology very differently from foundationalists, likewise foundationalists approach epistemology differently from infinitists, and so on. What, then, is the difference?

## 2. Justification and Inference

It is obvious that we sometimes revise our beliefs about things. However, many problems in keeping with our definitions of knowledge come when we must deal with the problems of revising beliefs.

For now, we may take the perspective of a classical foundationalist, letting us have a set of true, infallible, incorrigible, non-inferentially justified beliefs  $\Phi_0, \Phi_1, \dots, \Phi_n$ . From these beliefs we may derive some non-basic, inferentially justified beliefs  $\Pi_1, \Pi_2, \dots, \Pi_n$ . It follows from the incorrigibility of our basic beliefs that no  $\Pi_i$  can imply the negation of any  $\Phi_i$  or the need to revise—our basic beliefs hold come what may. Yet, there is nothing physically stopping a foundationalist from simply rejecting or revising some  $\Phi_i$ , or making an error in deduction (as we humans regularly do) from the basic beliefs to derive some belief  $\Pi_i$  from which she derives the negation of (and thereby the need to revise) one of her basic beliefs. The situation becomes even worse if we weaken our requirements for basic beliefs and allow them to be fallible, since now it is possible to (ideally) derive from a set of basic, non-inferentially justified beliefs their negation! In either of these scenarios, there is nothing in reality which prevents a foundationalist from merely tossing some of her beliefs and revising or mistakenly concluding one of her beliefs is incorrect! When this occurs, she is forced to revise her beliefs accordingly. She has two options: either she can *modus ponens* and simply reject her basic belief  $\Phi_i$ , or she can *modus tollens* and discard as many non-basic beliefs as she can until she can no longer derive a contradiction. For the classical foundationalist, the choice is clear: because her basic beliefs are incorrigible, she should toss her inferentially derived beliefs until all her basic beliefs are preserved. But there are no *actually* incorrigible beliefs! Yet again we are in a dismal situation, only this time we have discovered there are no actual classical foundationalists (only perhaps, ideal ones).

Looking to the modest foundationalist for answers, we will notice two important details: (a) there is nothing wrong with rejecting basic beliefs, because they are fallible, and (b) when we

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<sup>7</sup> Peter D. Klein, "Human Knowledge and the Infinite Regress of Reasons," *Noûs* 33, no. 13 (1999): 297–325, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0029-4624.33.s13.14>.

reject our basic beliefs, we have reason for revising our beliefs accordingly, namely the beliefs we use to derive our basic belief(s)' negation. However, (b) looks especially damning to our old account of foundationalism, because it implies both that our basic beliefs may, in fact, depend on other beliefs, and not just that they depend on our other beliefs, but our other beliefs may give reason for holding our basic beliefs, because they can both negatively justify negating a certain basic belief and positively justify a modification. So, we are now in a situation where perhaps all of our beliefs may depend, and be justified by, other beliefs, all without doing anything prohibited by the modest foundationalist! So modest foundationalists appear to be no different than coherentists. In the opposite direction for coherentists, there is nothing stopping us from simply choosing beliefs to "hold come what may." We could for whatever reason, perhaps because we are possessed by some nature of our psychology, find it extremely difficult to discard a set of beliefs  $\Phi_1, \Phi_2, \dots, \Phi_n$  and simply modus tollens whenever such beliefs are implied to be false by auxiliary beliefs in our web. Note that at any given point, merely looking at the way in which our beliefs are justified in the web does not tell the whole story, because it does not tell us which beliefs we want or actually privilege. So, there is evidently something additional that we are losing if we require coherentism, infinitism, and foundationalism to be distinguished merely by the justification relation.

We may then observe that the structure of the beliefs for the modest foundationalist and the coherentist may end up looking the same, in that we may ultimately end up having justified our basic beliefs inferentially from other basic beliefs, but the modest foundationalist can always simply reject the inferential justification (which was a historical reason for their belief, but not an epistemic-normative one) and take their newly acquired basic belief to be non-inferentially justified, while the coherentist will always be required to treat the historical reason as an epistemic-normative reason for their belief within a larger web of belief. This response is, however, extremely lacking. If there is no practical difference between modest foundationalists and coherentists, why do we draw the distinction at all? In fact, the modest foundationalist is merely pretending they did not infer their new basic belief when in reality it was the inference from other beliefs which rationally compelled them towards their new basic belief. This charge takes the form of the following argument:

1. If all beliefs can ultimately be inferentially justified and then inserted into a belief system, then such a system is either coherentist or infinitist.
2. In modest foundationalism, all beliefs can ultimately be inferentially justified and inserted into the belief system.
3. Therefore, modest foundationalism is either coherentist or infinitist.

It is difficult to dispute either premise, 1 seems to be true by definition and given that rejecting (2) would require denying that the modest foundationalist can inferentially justify rejecting or revising an old basic belief into a new one, neither premise looks easy to reject. We may recall the following charge against infinitism, mentioned earlier: since nobody can actually hold infinitely many beliefs, (actual) infinitists are foundationalists (incidentally). Our charge against classical foundationalism is similar in that while we may be able to conceive of individuals with beliefs they do not ever reject, in practice there is no guarantee that a belief will be held forever. Thus, the coherentism–foundationalism distinction seems to be getting increasingly dubious and there is little hope of piecing it back together, or so it seems.

### 3. Revision

One immediate response to the objections raised in the previous section is that foundationalism, coherentism, and infinitism are all views about what knowledge structures should ultimately look like. Then, however, they tell us nothing about what our beliefs (and their structure under the justification relation) actually look like! They may, however, tell us what revision will look like. This is apparent as when we revise our beliefs, we do so with the goal of approaching what we have deemed the ideal; the foundationalist will try to revise their beliefs such that they do not have any circularity or unjustified non-basic beliefs while minimizing loss to their basic beliefs, the coherentist will try to have their beliefs cohere under revision, and the infinitist will try to extend the chains of justification within the finite time and resources that restrict them. If, then, foundationalism, coherentism, and infinitism are about revision as previously outlined, then we can reasonably conclude that it was a mistake to divide our views into three firm categories, as we are willing to revise certain views more than other views

An immediate consequence of the new approach is that certain beliefs are more basic than others in two distinct senses: some beliefs are more integrated into the belief network than others and some beliefs we are more likely to revise than others. We derive the following argument:

1. If what distinguishes a basic belief from a non-basic belief is ultimately a continuous property, then there are degrees of basicness.
2. What distinguishes a basic belief from a non-basic belief is a continuous property.
3. Thus, there are degrees of 'basicness.'

The premise in question is 2, but it is clear that either account (or perhaps a synthesis of the two) is continuous: if basicness is about justification within a web of belief, then some beliefs are more justified (integrated) within the web than others, and if basicness is about willingness to revise, some beliefs we are more willing to hold come what may than others. Recalling from

the previous section, we established that foundationalists do not want to ideally reject that their beliefs can be supported, at least in some historical (revision) sense, by other beliefs they may have or currently do hold. So, we are left finally in a position where the previous seemingly rigid distinction is dissolved, and we have now found out that, in actuality, we cannot appeal only to justification for understanding the distinction between foundationalism, coherentism, and infinitism.

#### 4. Conclusion

To conclude, examining the way we *actually* believe things leads us to discover the crucial role of revision in our epistemic theories. If we accept that we routinely revise either falsely assumed basic beliefs, or simply wrong basic beliefs, this throws a serious wrench into any division between classical foundationalism, modest foundationalism, or coherentist/infinitist positions. Relegating such differences to an *ideal* realm which we strive to shows that such distinctions really become matters of how willing we are to revise different beliefs, creating degrees of basicness. Future work in epistemology can be done on examining which factors create relevant differences in how willing we are to revise beliefs.

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## **“We Regret to Inform You”: College Admissions Angst in the U.S. through a Lacanian Lens**

Jackson Newton  
Lakeview Academy, Georgia, USA

### **Abstract**

The college application process in the United States has become increasingly competitive. This competition has contributed to a growing sense of anxiety among educators, admissions counselors, and applicants. This article aims to, first and foremost, highlight the frustration, alienation, and anxiety of students, educators, and admissions officers in the face of a precarious admissions landscape. Using an eclectic mix of Lacan’s earlier and later thoughts, including his theory of anxiety, concept of “the subject supposed to know,” and theory of the four discourses, this paper will explore the underlying dynamics that govern the college admissions process in the United States.

## 1. An Anxious Youth

Written in Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) form, Sarah Hecklau's thesis entitled "Everyone is Anxious: A Narrative for Admissions Professionals, Students, and Parents, on College Admissions and Anxiety" recounts the author's experience of admission anxiety, both as a student and admissions counselor. Hecklau writes, "the entire process of applying to college is riddled with anxiety. Each person involved in the process feels some level of anxiety."<sup>1</sup> Notoriously frustrating, college admissions in the U.S. have, over the past thirty years, become increasingly cutthroat. As applications increase and slots in America's top universities remain primarily unchanged, students have turned to extreme methods to enhance their applications, often sacrificing their psyche and body in pursuit of an acceptance letter.<sup>2,3</sup> Juggling deadlines, extracurricular activities, social pressures, and high-stakes examinations, students are pushed to the brink.

A study by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling found that seventy-three percent of applying students expressed concern that even a minor error in their application may adversely affect their likelihood of admission. Furthermore, fifty-two percent of applying students indicated that this experience has proven to be more stressful than any other academic endeavor they have undertaken.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond a source of anxiety, the college admissions process—particularly among the so-called "Professional Managerial Class"—has become a means of social currency and comparison.<sup>5</sup> Under the current regime, universities have become brands, empty signifiers of class, intellectual, and social positioning. Look no further than the "Varsity Blues" scandal in which wealthy Americans invested hundreds of thousands of dollars to, through cheating and manipulation, secure their children's spots in elite institutions.<sup>6</sup> Association with a "good college" carries with it a sense of "worthiness" as if to say, "Look at me. I belong among the best, the smartest, and the richest."

In this context, one can understand Hecklau's frustration: "You compare their schools to the schools you applied to and try to decide if it is a stronger one. If they got into Colgate, will I

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah F. Hecklau, "Everyone is Anxious: A Narrative for Admissions Professionals, Students, and Parents, on College Admissions and Anxiety," MEd thesis, (University of Vermont, 2017), 5, <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/grad-dis/667>.

<sup>2</sup> John Bound et al., "Playing the Admissions Game: Student Reactions to Increasing College Competition," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 23, no. 4 (2009): 119–146, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.23.4.119>.

<sup>3</sup> Common Application, *End-of-season Report, 2023–2024: First-year Application Trends*, August 22, 2024, [https://www.commonapp.org/files/FY\\_application\\_trends\\_end\\_season\\_report\\_23-24.pdf](https://www.commonapp.org/files/FY_application_trends_end_season_report_23-24.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), *The State of College Admission, 2023*, [https://www.nacacnet.org/wp-content/uploads/NACAC-College-Admission-ProcessResearch\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.nacacnet.org/wp-content/uploads/NACAC-College-Admission-ProcessResearch_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Liu, *Virtue Hoarders: The Case against the Professional Managerial Class* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Sophie Kasakove, "Varsity Blues trial ends with a guilty verdict," *New York Times*, October 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/09/us/varsity-blues-scandal-verdict.html>.

get into Skidmore? You like to think that it works... You want to think that the system is just.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, one does want to think that the system is just.<sup>8</sup>

The reality, however, is much more complex; race, class, and privilege play a significant role in shaping admissions. A study by Bussey et al. from the Institute of Higher Education Policy (IHEP) found the process to be riddled with disparities.<sup>9</sup> Further, the Lumina report of the National Association of College Admission Counselors (NACAC) and National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) described the college admission process as a virtual “obstacle course” with many hoops to jump through that is difficult, especially for people of color.<sup>10</sup> Not only is the process undoubtedly flawed, it is, as Hecklau identifies, “riddled with anxiety.”<sup>11</sup> Our purposes here are to investigate this anxiety, how it arises and to offer a potential way out. For this question, we turn to Jacques Lacan.

## 2. The Desire of “the Other” and the Idealized Admitted Student

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan described anxiety as “a sensation of the desire of the Other.”<sup>12</sup> This “Other,” differing from the lowercase “other,” is “that absolute otherness that we cannot assimilate to our subjectivity... the symbolic order... [the] foreign language that we are born into and must learn to speak if we are to articulate our own desire.”<sup>13</sup> Žižek expounds on this definition, describing this Other as “acting like a yardstick against which I measure myself... [which] can be personified or reified in a single agent: the ‘god’ who watches over all real individuals, or the cause that involves me (Freedom, Communism, Nation) and for which I am ready to give my life.”<sup>14</sup>

Anxiety originates in our relationship with this Other. This Other’s ambiguity, its obliqueness, births our anxiety. To explain this, Lacan asks us to imagine one dressed in the skin of a male praying mantis, unsure whether one is recognized as a mate (for whom the female praying mantis cannibalizes). One looks into the eyes of the female praying mantis but cannot see his reflection due to her globe-shaped eyes. One is, as it were, unable to recognize himself in the gaze

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<sup>7</sup> Hecklau, “Everyone is Anxious,” 20.

<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, finding a wholly *just* college admissions system is a difficult task, one which I do not take on in this paper. See perhaps the section “Justice in University Admissions” in Joan McGregor and Mark C. Navin, eds., *Education, Inclusion, and Justice* (Springer International Publishing, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Karen Bussey et al., *Realizing the Mission of Higher Education Through Equitable Admissions Policies*, (Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), June 2021), 56, [https://www.ihep.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/IHEP\\_JOYCE\\_full\\_rd3b-2.pdf](https://www.ihep.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/IHEP_JOYCE_full_rd3b-2.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) and National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA), *Lumina Report on College Admissions and Financial Aid*, 2022, 37, [https://nacac-net.org/wpcontent/uploads/2022/08/nacac\\_nasfaa\\_lumi-na\\_report\\_0122\\_10.pdf](https://nacac-net.org/wpcontent/uploads/2022/08/nacac_nasfaa_lumi-na_report_0122_10.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Hecklau, “Everyone is Anxious,” 5.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A. R. Price (Polity Press, 2014), 10.

<sup>13</sup> Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (Routledge, 2004), 70.

<sup>14</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 9.

of the Other.<sup>15</sup> Anxiety, thus, is created through the subject's awareness of the onlooking Other, whose true desires are impossible to ascertain. As Lacan taught, "I do not know what I am as [an] object for the Other."<sup>16</sup> It is this precarious quality, stemming from unknowingness, that creates the sensation of anxiety. The subject feels constantly under observation, unsure of how to perform.

Moreover, this anxiety, stemming from a desire *to be desired*, leads the subject to ask, "Che Vouï?" or "What does the Other want with me?"<sup>17</sup> In the context of the college admissions process, the question is: "How do I compare to the "idealized imaginary reference" of the admitted student?"<sup>18</sup> A student, in asking, "What does Harvard want of me?" asks as well: "Who is the ideal student for college admissions?" Of course, such a student does not exist, "there is no Other of the Other."<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that admitted students are not real, but rather that some "idealized imaginary reference" point (acting as an Other to compare oneself to) does not materially exist.<sup>20</sup>

Curiously, if we follow Lacan in that there *really* is no big Other, we see a parallel with the college admissions process. There is no all-encompassing college admissions machine which objectively determines one's acceptance. Neither the yardstick nor the measurer really exist. Instead, there are only individual admissions officers, with their personal inconsistencies and subjectivity.

It is important to note here that the source of the student's anxiety is not merely a product of pressure from parents, educators, or peers; instead, the student's anxiety originates from the student's precarious relationship with the Other. The student is forced to ask: What would an admitted student do? Would the admitted student prioritize soccer or theater? Would he take AP Biology or AP Chemistry? Would she join the robotics team or do student government?

### 3. The Admissions Officer "supposed to know"

The Lacanian concept of the "subject who is supposed to know" can be useful here in analyzing the various roles in the college admissions process. As Lacan's *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* outlines, the "subject who is supposed to know" is the one presumed to know, the one presumed to have truth. For Descartes, this subject is God; for the analysand, the subject "supposed to know" is the analyst.<sup>21</sup> In the classroom, the "subject who is supposed to know" is the teacher, while the "subject who is supposed not to know" is the student.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lacan, *Seminar X: Anxiety*, 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book IX: Identification (1961-1962)*, trans. Cormac Gallagher (Karnac Books, 2002), 197.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 300.

<sup>18</sup> *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, directed by Sophie Fiennes (2012; New York City, NY: Zeitgeist Films, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Lacan, *Seminar IX: Identification*, 195.

<sup>20</sup> Sophie Fiennes, *Pervert's Guide to Ideology*.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, rev. edition, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 224.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Bracher et al., eds, *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society* (New York University Press, 1994) 164.



It is not a far leap, then, to assert that the figure occupying the position of the “subject supposed to know” in the college admissions process is the admissions officer, while the “subject supposed not to know” is the applying student. It is this belief in the knowingness of the admissions officer that enables the institution’s power over the student. In this sense, the admissions officer becomes an oracle of truth, a grand predictor of student success. Such an officer cannot, of course, *truly* predict the success of every applying student if they were to attend their university, but still, through no fault of their own, they attempt to. The student, too, must accept their fate, whether it be an acceptance, rejection, or the dreaded waitlisting, as they are assumed “not to know.”

#### 4. The Postmodern Father Regrets to Inform You

What follows are sample rejection letters from a website that purports to allow its users to simulate their rejection letters from several leading institutions, based on rejection letters from previous years:

*Harvard*: “I am sorry to inform you that we cannot offer admission to the Class of 2024”

*University of Chicago*: “We appreciate the interest you have shown in the University of Chicago. Please accept our best wishes as you pursue your educational goals.”

*Princeton*: “The committee’s conclusion is not a judgment about your worth...”<sup>23</sup>

As if the existence of this website (one that allows its users to “brace themselves” for their rejections) was not sign enough of a problem within the college application process, one is also struck by the faux-comforting language of these letters. Is one really expected to believe that someone at Harvard is truly “sorry” for denying students? Or that the University of Chicago has sincerely given their rejected students “best wishes”? Or, perhaps most absurd, that Princeton is not making “a judgment about [one’s]... worth.” This is, on its face, ridiculous. The harsh reality is that these universities are making judgments about whom they perceive to be most able to succeed (and, therefore, contribute to the university’s alums and donation networks). This is not done out of cruelty; instead, it is rooted in the reality that highly desirable universities have more applicants than they have slots for – a product of their unwillingness to forfeit exclusivity.

These rejection letters embody what Slavoj Žižek calls the “Postmodern Father.” He describes the postmodern father as follows:

Let’s say that you are a small child and one Sunday afternoon you have to do the boring duty of visiting your old senile grandmother. If you have a good old–

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<sup>23</sup> IvyHub Education, “Rejection simulators,” August 25, 2022, <https://ivyhub.org/rejection-simulators>.

fashioned authoritarian father, what will he tell you? "I don't care how you feel, just go there and behave properly. Do your duty." A modern permissive totalitarian father will tell you something else: "You know how much your grandmother would love to see you. But do go and visit her only if you really want to." Now every idiot knows the catch. Beneath the appearance of this free choice there is an even more oppressive order. You seem to have a choice, but there is no choice, because the order is not only you must visit your grandmother, you must even enjoy it.<sup>24</sup>

The admissions officer - in the position of the "subject supposed to know" - is sending a clear message: "You are not up to par." Rather than reject the applicant in the way of the "good old-fashioned authoritarian father," which is to say bluntly that "you are not up to par," the admissions officer asks the applicant to accept their unknowingness, to accept that they are "supposed not to know" and to do so with zeal. In some sense, the rejected applicant is asked to say, "Thank you for rejecting me. It was for my own good."

## 5. A Brief Introduction to Lacan's Discourses

In *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan lays out his theory of the four discourses that govern desire, knowledge, and power in the social sphere.<sup>25</sup> These discourses are the discourses of the master, university, hysteric, and analyst. The master's discourse serves the purpose of governance, the university's the purpose of education, the hysteric's the purpose of protesting, and the analyst's the purpose of revolutionizing (Bracher, 1994, p. 107).<sup>26</sup> For relevance and brevity, this paper will only cover the discourse of the university and the analyst.

Lacan uses elements to represent distinct aspects of each discourse. These elements are the master signifier ( $S_1$ ), knowledge ( $S_2$ ), the divided subject ( $\$$ ), and the object  $a$  ( $a$ ).<sup>27</sup> The master signifier is the organizing, domineering term that defines the discourse. This is best explained as follows by Hook and Vanhuele:

As way of introducing the concept of the master-signifier, one might imagine the following scenario. You are accosted by a camera crew who ask to film you as you list in a few words what is of greatest significance in your life and why. "What," the interviewer asks you, "would you be prepared to give your life for?" True

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<sup>24</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "The Superego and the Act," Lecture at the European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, Switzerland. August 1999, <https://zizek.uk/1999/08/01/the-superego-and-the-act/>.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Bracher et al., *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, 107.

<sup>27</sup> Bracher et al., *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, 111.

enough, not everyone would be reduced to a state of stumbling inarticulacy by such a situation. Many might quite happily offer an initial response (“My children,” “The church,” “My country,” “Science,” “Humanity,” etc.). Then again, even those who can summon up an appropriate response will doubtless be dogged by a sense of the inadequacy of their words, by their own inability to fully articulate the reasons for the depth of this libidinal investment. Added to this is the inevitable prospect that the words one uses in such situations will seem hopelessly derivative, abstract and formulaic, devoid of any real personalized significances...such signifiers refer on and on to other signifiers without ever “hitting the Real.”<sup>28</sup>

<b>The Divided Subject (\$)</b>	<b>The Master Signifier (S<sub>1</sub>)</b>
<b>Knowledge (S<sub>2</sub>)</b>	<b>Object a (a)</b>

**Figure 1:** Chart of Lacan’s Elements

Knowledge (S<sub>2</sub>) is self-explanatory. Knowledge is technology, “know how”, or what can be known. The split subject (\$) represents the subject divided through language, the incohesive subjectivity we all embody. The object a (a), represents the object cause of desire, or that lack which spurs us into desire.<sup>29</sup> Using Bracher et al. in Figure 2, each of these factors can be mapped onto a respective position which “provides unique insights into the interrelationships between knowledge, truth, subjectivity, and otherness, and how particular configurations among these elements are produced by different discourses.”<sup>30</sup>

<b>1) Place of agency</b>	<b>2) The other</b>
<b>4) The underlying truth</b>	<b>3) The by-product/loss</b>

**Figure 2:** Schemata of the Roles of Each Position Within Lacan’s Discourses<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Derek Hook and Stijn Vanheule, “Revisiting the Master-Signifier, or, Mandela and Repression,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 6, (2015), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.02028>.

<sup>29</sup> Bracher et al., *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, 107-114.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew Clarke, “The Other Side of Education: A Lacanian Critique of Neoliberal Education Policy,” *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives* 1, no. 1 (2012): 52.

<sup>31</sup> From Clarke, “The Other Side of Education,” 46-60, adapted with permission.

## 6. The Discourse of the University in the Context of College Admissions

The university discourse is essential for understanding the current state of the college admissions process. In this discourse, the master signifier is in the position of truth, yet the position of agency is filled by knowledge (see Figure 3). In this way, knowledge seems to have agency within the symbolic system. However, this agency is simply a veneer for the true power of the master signifier. As Bracher et al. write, the discourse of the university "insofar as master discourse of overt law and governance is suppressed, functions as an avatar of the Master discourse, promulgating master signifiers hidden beneath systematic knowledge."<sup>32</sup> Master signifiers in the college admissions process include terms like "holistic admissions," "comprehensive review," and "well-rounded." These terms exert power over the entire discourse by acting through systematic knowledge onto the object cause of desire (*a*) – the idealized student – which produces as a by-product the barred subject (\$) in the form of the alienated student.<sup>33</sup> This systematic knowledge – in the context of college admissions in the U.S. – takes the form of the GPA, high-stakes examinations (ACT, SAT, etc.), and the college application CV. While seemingly meritocratic, this kind of bureaucratic system merely reinforces the interests of the master, of power, and of hegemony (see Figure 4).

$S_2$	<i>a</i>
$S_1$	\$

Figure 3: Schemata of the Discourse of the University<sup>34</sup>

<b><math>S_2</math>—GPA, standardized testing, extracurriculars, etc.</b>	<b><i>a</i>—the idealized student</b>
<b><math>S_1</math>—holistic admissions, "well-rounded" class, etc.</b>	<b>\$—alienated students</b>

Figure 4: Lacan's Theory of the Discourse of the University in the College Admissions Context<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Bracher et al., *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, 117.

<sup>33</sup> Clarke, "The Other Side of Education."

<sup>34</sup> From Lacan, *Seminar XVII: Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 69.

<sup>35</sup> From Clarke, "The Other Side of Education," 46-60, adapted with permission

## 7. The Discourse of the Analyst

Therefore, how does one exit the oppression of the discourse of the university? Lacan proposes entering into the discourse of the analyst. In the analyst's discourse, the subject's object cause of desire (*a*) takes center stage in the position of agency (see Figure 5). Informed by knowledge (*S*<sub>2</sub>), which is in the position of truth, the subject (\$) can produce "a master signifier that is a little less oppressive...less absolute, exclusive and rigid."<sup>36</sup> Entering into this discourse means, in essence, robbing the master signifier of its power. As Mathew Clarke outlined in his Lacanian analysis of education policy, entering into the discourse of the analyst means "thinking how education can be rethought more in terms of a collaborative adventure and less of a competitive race."<sup>37</sup> In the context of the college admissions process, entering into the analyst's discourse means encouraging students to define their own discourses, create their own meanings, and use the admissions process for their own ends, not the other way around (see Figure 6).

<i>a</i>	\$
<i>S</i> <sub>2</sub>	<i>S</i> <sub>1</sub>

**Figure 5:** Schemata of the Discourse of the Analyst: Explanations of the Roles of Each Position within Lacan's discourse.<sup>38</sup>

<i>a</i> – the student's passion/true desire	\$ – the student
<i>S</i> <sub>2</sub> – Knowledge of the inequity and unfairness in the system	<i>S</i> <sub>1</sub> – The student's unique master signifier

**Figure 6:** Application of Lacan's Theory of the Discourse of the Analyst to the College Admissions Process

This transformation can be seen in Bunn et al.'s qualitative pedagogical research into five students within marketized universities. One student, Molly, underwent a transformation from the discourse of the university, where she "jumped through hoops" to please her teachers,<sup>39</sup> into the discourse of the analyst, transforming herself from an "uncertain undergraduate to a firebrand."<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Bracher et al., *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, 124.

<sup>37</sup> Clarke, "The Other Side of Education," 57.

<sup>38</sup> From Lacan, *Seminar XVII: Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 69.

<sup>39</sup> Geoff Bunn et al., "Student Subjectivity in the Marketised University," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12, (2022), 7, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.827971>.

<sup>40</sup> Bunn et al., "Student Subjectivity," 8.

In essence, Molly, through entering into the discourse of the analyst, was able to create her own master signifiers, to define her own discourse.

## 8. Conclusion

To conclude, the college admissions process in the U.S., operating within the university's discourse, is filled with immense angst. Students are pushed to the brink as they experience anxiety as a "sensation of the desire of the Other."<sup>41</sup> Admissions officers occupy the position of the "subject supposed to know," while applicants occupy the position of the subject "supposed not to know." In an attempt to minimize this anxiety, college rejection letters use the faux-comforting language of the "postmodern father," concealing a more sinister command: that the rejection is not only necessary but for the student's good. In the context of the college admissions/rejection system, hegemonic, self-justifying master signifiers (ex. "holistic review" and "well-rounded") dominate the current discourse through the veneer of knowledge (GPA, test scores, etc.), creating the alienated educational subject. To exit this discourse is to enter into the liberatory, revolutionary discourse of the analyst, a discourse in which the student's object *a* takes center stage.

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<sup>41</sup> Lacan, *Seminar X: Anxiety* (Polity Press, 2014), 10.

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# ***Thus Spoke Zarathustra: Widening the Bounds of Philosophy***

Max Lan

The Webb Schools, California, USA

## **Abstract**

This essay shows that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra's* literary nature does not disqualify it as philosophy, but rather makes it literary philosophy. Through reading Nietzsche as a pragmatic truth theorist, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra's* literary devices and narrative become a radical but plausible form of philosophical inquiry. In a world where the philosophy paper is often seen as the only way to write academic philosophy, I argue that Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* uncovers and bucks the underlying epistemological assumptions behind this trend. For pragmatic truth theorists such as Nietzsche, literary philosophy is just as viable for philosophy, if not superior, to the treatise or paper.



## 1. Introduction

In 1869, when Friedrich Nietzsche was just twenty-five, Friedrich Wilhelm Ritschl exclaimed that his pupil “can make his scientific discourses as palpitatingly interesting as a French novelist his novels.”<sup>1</sup> This was no coincidence on the side of Nietzsche, who considered himself not just a philosopher but an artist. Idolizing the composer Richard Wagner, Nietzsche lamented that his *The Birth of Tragedy*, “should have *sung*, this “new soul”—and not spoken!”<sup>2</sup> Given Nietzsche’s love for the arts, his career represents a struggle to reconcile the philosophical and the artistic through writing. Near the end of his career this struggle produced *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, his only novel and a work Nietzsche believed brought “the German language to its acme of perfection.”<sup>3</sup> The book retells the story of the historical prophet Zarathustra, who goes on a journey to spread the word of Nietzsche’s philosophy. Zarathustra’s observations and sermons act as layered metaphors for Nietzsche’s philosophy. The layered and often contradictory nature of the metaphors themselves in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* also acts as a philosophical rejection of conventional truth theories during Nietzsche’s time. Thus, I argue that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* can be defined as literary philosophy, works with merit as both literature and philosophy. Indeed, a truth-based reading of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* will show that literature has a necessary place in philosophy as medium for those with radical truth beliefs.

Explicitly argumentative and non-literary philosophy papers dominate contemporary (Anglophone) philosophy, mimicking the sciences. These papers allow for a newfound clarity in philosophy, leading many to believe that works of philosophy must be in paper form to have merit.<sup>4,5,6</sup> By contrast, the metaphors and plots of literature require readers to interpret them, inviting an inherent ambiguity. Amy Kleppner argues that this reveals a fundamental tension between literature and philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Philosophy requires systematic reasoning and clarity, while literature requires imagination and subtlety.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the standard contemporary philosophical view is that for a work to have merit in literature, it must sacrifice its merit as philosophy, and vice versa. But, the excessive focus on the paper needlessly pushes out other mediums, such as literature, from the scope of philosophical discussion.

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<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. William A. Haussmann, ed. Oscar Levy (Project Gutenberg, 2016), 15, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52915/52915-h/52915-h.htm>.

<sup>2</sup>Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 5.

<sup>3</sup>Nietzsche to Rhode, February 22, 1884, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Trans. Anthony M.

<sup>4</sup>Robert Gooding-Williams, “Literary Fiction as Philosophy: The Case of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 11 (1986), 668.

<sup>5</sup>Arthur C. Danto, “Philosophy As/And/of Literature,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 58, no. 1 (1984), 5.

<sup>6</sup>Amy M. Kleppner, “Philosophy and the Literary Medium: The Existentialist Predicament,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 23, no. 2 (1964), 217.

<sup>7</sup>Kleppner, “Philosophy and the Literary Medium,” 214.

<sup>8</sup>Kleppner, “Philosophy and the Literary Medium,” 214.

I contend that works of literary philosophy are proper philosophy, differentiating itself from merely *philosophical* fiction, a term coined by Lewis White Beck.<sup>9,10</sup> While in philosophical fiction, the author represents philosophical themes in literature, literary philosophy is a proper work of philosophy itself, the same way a philosophy paper is. In other words, raising philosophical ideas or questions is different from maintaining a philosophical argument. Thus, I argue that literary philosophy does not sacrifice philosophical merit for literary merit or vice versa. Instead, works of literary philosophy such as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* make proper philosophical assertions through their literary nature—in both form and content—simultaneously being works of philosophy and literature.

## 2. Truth and Language

Many contemporary philosophers believe that truth is largely stable and the primary goal of philosophy. For such philosophers, systematic, logic-based inquiry would make sense as the only form of philosophy—hence the academic paper. Literary philosophy cannot exist if philosophy is solely understood as such. However, this current understanding of philosophical methodology is not the *only* one. As Arthur Danto notes, it is possible that “philosophers with really new thoughts have simply had to invent new forms to convey them with.”<sup>11</sup> I contend that Nietzsche is one such philosopher.

Nietzsche’s motivation for writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* begins with his rejection of what he calls the will to truth, or the pursuit of objective knowledge. Nietzsche argues instead that there is no truth for its own sake, independent from our desires.<sup>12</sup> There is no universal, mind-independent truth because any truth reflects the individual who believes in it. For Nietzsche, the fault lies within language, which cannot describe reality *as it is*. Adopting a sort of nominalism, Nietzsche argues that when humans assign a word (or category) to something, they “[overlook] individuals and reality.”<sup>13</sup> The word “marriage” overlooks the intricacies of each marriage, and the word “leaf” overlooks the unique details of each leaf. Language is a metaphor for reality, yet Nietzsche asserts that humans have forgotten this over time and take concepts to truly represent (or substitute for) it.

Thus, reading Nietzsche with an epistemological lens suggests that he defines truth in a pragmatic and contextual fashion, specifically that truth is only *meaningful* when it promotes an

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<sup>9</sup> Gooding-Williams, “Literary Fiction as Philosophy,” 671.

<sup>10</sup> Plenty of science fiction books are philosophical in theme but not works of philosophy. For instance, Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, while philosophically thought-provoking, is not considered philosophy in the same way an academic paper is, and thus does not qualify as literary philosophy.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur C. Danto, “Philosophy As/And/of Literature,” 8.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, ed. Oscar Levy (Project Gutenberg, 2016), §481. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52915/52915-h/52915-h.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-moral Sense*, trans. A. K. M. Adam (Oxford, 2019), 6.

individual's passion in life.<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche writes that philosophers who pursue the will to (objective) truth do not eliminate their personal, subjective presence, but instead always present an "unconscious autobiography."<sup>15</sup> Philosophers, by virtue of being human, cannot help but insert their own biases into their theories. And, if truth is active and can only be given meaning in individual contexts, it follows that it is not necessarily found through the detached reasoning of a contemporary academic paper.<sup>16</sup> By revising truth as pragmatic (and personal), philosophy thus requires a subjective medium. Since *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is literature and thus has a main character with a subjective worldview, I claim it *embodies* philosophy under a pragmatic truth system in the same way a traditional paper embodies a truth system where truth can be found through reasoning.<sup>17</sup>

Under this pragmatic interpretation of Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra's* goal is clear. It is not merely an alternative medium for his theories on morality or truth; literature is the most coherent medium for (his) philosophy. Nietzsche uses the literary aspect to make the book about both his philosophy and himself, "and behind almost every word there stands a personal experience." Literary philosophy becomes *conscious* autobiography, the continuation, and solution to his claim that all previous works of philosophy were unconscious autobiographies. The philosophical messages in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* are presented pragmatically because they are presented under the context of Zarathustra's and Nietzsche's lives.

### 3. Reading *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

For instance, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra's* beginning marks Nietzsche's departure from the will to truth in his writing. Zarathustra leaves the mountain in which he has confined himself for ten years. He has accumulated much philosophical knowledge but has become "weary of [his] wisdom" and seeks to descend and share his knowledge with others.<sup>18</sup> Here, metaphor is already imperative to understanding Nietzsche's message: he describes Zarathustra's knowledge-sharing as emptying a cup full of honey. This usage of honey continues the metaphor Nietzsche uses for scientists. However, unlike the scientists (or other philosophers), who view the pursuit of

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<sup>14</sup> Pragmatism, under an epistemological context, refers to the belief that truth is inseparable from the processes of inquiry and assertion. For instance, a pragmatist about truth may believe that a truth assertion is defined by how useful the assertion is to believe. Nietzsche does not believe that truth is inseparable from its usefulness, but that people should act like it was inseparable, nonetheless. This deviates from the traditional view that Nietzsche was a perspectivist. See Capps, John. "The Pragmatic Theory of Truth." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2023)*, edited by Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman. Stanford University, 2023. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-pragmatic/>.

<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (Project Gutenberg, 2009), §6, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4363/4363-h/4363-h.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Note that due to Nietzsche's ambiguous writing style, there are people who argue that Nietzsche believed otherwise, and this assertion is a part of the argument. For an overview of this debate, see Remhof, Justin. "Nietzsche's Conception of Truth: Correspondence, Coherence, or Pragmatist?" *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 46, no. 2 (2015): 229–38.

<sup>17</sup> Note that multiple epistemological theories justify the systematic, logic-bound paper structure. All forms of rationalism fall under this category, and most forms of empiricism believe that logic plays a role.

<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Zarathustra's Prologue" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. "Wisdom" is used in the text but is equivalent to knowledge. Zarathustra goes down to share his wisdom of the world, pertaining to metaphysical concepts like eternal recurrence, or the concept of the Superman.

knowledge as a never-ending pursuit, Zarathustra is “weary of his wisdom” and wants others to take knowledge from him so he may become a man once more.<sup>19</sup> Zarathustra’s cleansing is not for the sake of wisdom, like a scientist cleansing himself of biases, but of wisdom itself. This cleansing of wisdom signals a departure from the futile pursuit of the will to truth.

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*’s first message is thus in favoring individual virtue judgments over following a religion or the will to truth. This is done through Zarathustra’s journey as a teacher, which reflects Nietzsche’s own role as a teacher of his philosophy. Zarathustra’s sermons seek not to force the people Zarathustra’s own position, but rather to give them clarity to decide for themselves. By rejecting the will to truth, as Zarathustra does in the opening scene, anyone can choose what is valuable or virtuous for himself based on their own passion. And since every person is different, every virtue is “thine own virtue, thou hast it in common with no one.”<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche acknowledges that the reader’s sense of virtue may be different from Zarathustra’s, and the interpretive aspect of literature plays into Nietzsche’s goal for the reader to decide for themselves what is virtuous. Nietzsche simply warns against blindly accepting virtues based on our environment.

As a work of literary philosophy, Zarathustra’s character development plays a key role in the book’s message of individualism. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche addresses Zarathustra: “No fanatic speaks to you here; this is not a ‘sermon’; no faith is demanded in these pages.”<sup>21</sup> While Nietzsche insists that Zarathustra does not preach, he writes him as a preacher at the beginning of the story. This is a common criticism of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; Zarathustra’s religious tone is grating, especially since the book is supposed to reject religion in favor of individual decisions on virtue.

However, Zarathustra’s tone is an intentional utilization of irony meant to set up his development as a teacher. In Zarathustra’s first sermon, he says: “Lo, I teach you the Superman! The Superman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: The Superman SHALL BE the meaning of the earth!”<sup>22</sup> Zarathustra speaks with passion and authority, expecting the audience to be moved by his words. Instead, because Zarathustra spoke at a marketplace, the people mistook him for a clown and laughed. Here, Nietzsche acknowledges that not all people will understand Zarathustra’s teachings. However, part of the fault lies within Zarathustra as well. Zarathustra reflects that “I far from them, and my sense speaketh not unto their sense. To men I am still something between a fool and a corpse.”<sup>23</sup> He is hopelessly out of touch with community life, and his

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<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, “Zarathustra’s Prologue” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, “Joys and Passions” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Ecce Homo*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (Project Gutenberg), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Zarathustra’s Prologue” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In Nietzsche’s philosophy, the superman is the ideal being that humanity strives for. What this exactly entails and the purpose of the superman in Nietzsche’s philosophy are a subject of debate. I will make my own interpretation in a later section. Generally, the superman would live dangerously, embrace suffering, and strive for greatness.

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche, “Zarathustra’s Prologue” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

attempt fails because he fails to connect to the individual. While Zarathustra's message is Nietzsche's, Nietzsche is simultaneously criticizing the dogmatic tone Zarathustra uses to spread it.

In part two, Zarathustra recognizes that most people are unwilling to live Nietzsche's philosophy and instead chooses a few disciples who are the closest to understanding him. However, Zarathustra still maintains his authoritative and religious tone. Most previous sections are composed of Zarathustra preaching on a variety of topics, ending with "Thus Spake Zarathustra!" Zarathustra always has the right words for any group of people, and Zarathustra always speaks with absolute authority. This authoritative mask crumbles at the end of part two, when Zarathustra realizes he has not fully grasped his own teachings. In chapter forty-two, Zarathustra gives a speech on redemption when one disciple asks a question he cannot answer. In an uncharacteristic moment of silence, Zarathustra is overcome by terror. Despite quickly returning to his usual persona, Zarathustra is clearly disturbed. Chapter forty-two does not end with "Thus Spake Zarathustra," but rather self-doubt: "But why doth Zarathustra speak otherwise unto his pupils— than unto himself?"<sup>24</sup>

Zarathustra's struggle with his own ideology and his authoritative status ends with his decision to return to solitude in the mountains. To his disciples, he says: "Now do I bid you lose me and find yourselves; and only when ye have all denied me, will I return unto you." This marks the end of Zarathustra's character development as a teacher, as he and Nietzsche finally align. Zarathustra understands that the correct way to teach is to encourage his disciples to become independent of his teachings. For a teacher of Nietzsche's philosophy, success means overcoming and rejecting the teacher.

For a philosopher who believes truth is fixed, the message of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* would be relayed through an argument of why individual choices about virtue are superior. However, if *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* were written as a philosophy paper, the book's advocacy for individualism would collapse. Such a detached and 'impersonal' paper conceals personal biases to attempt to convince the reader of a claim based on logic. As a pragmatist, truth must be presented in the context of an individual's belief in it. Thus, Nietzsche's method of literary philosophy becomes the only sustainable method. After all, if virtues should be individually decided, decisive arguments for specific virtues or virtue systems are futile.

Nietzsche does this through Zarathustra, who has to overcome his authoritative nature in order to truly grasp what individualism means. Rather than arguments, pragmatic truth essentially operates in *stories*. The reader, rather than be decidedly convinced, is meant to be inspired by Zarathustra's self-overcoming and undergo their own journey towards moral individualism. However, with individualism comes loneliness, which is the second philosophical message of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Zarathustra's return to the mountains finishes his development as a teacher but only marks the halfway point of Zarathustra as a person dealing with loneliness.

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<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche, "Redemption" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

#### 4. Loneliness, subjectivity, and eternal recurrence

With the idea of loneliness, and not will to truth in mind, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra's* opening scene reveals a second meaning. Perhaps Nietzsche is tired of being isolated by his knowledge, and he wishes to share his wisdom through *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, as Zarathustra does in descending from the mountains. Nietzsche's personal letters support this. Just when he finished the first three acts of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he exclaims to a friend: "How is it possible that we should have so little in common now, and that we should be living as if in different worlds!"<sup>25</sup> However, since truth is subject to change under the pragmatic framework, the opening scene does not reflect all Nietzsche has to say on the topic.

As a result, when Zarathustra returns to the caves once again in part two, he learns to enjoy his solitude once more. He cherishes his walks in solitude, and the endless time he has to think uninterrupted. Although loneliness pervades the book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is no remedy for loneliness, but rather a bold embrace of it. In a later letter, he writes: "It is absolutely necessary that I should be misunderstood; nay, I would go even further and say that I must succeed in being understood in the worst possible way and despised."<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche's final statement on loneliness is not contained within an event Zarathustra witnesses but in the very style of the book itself. In a contradictory way typical of Nietzsche, the often-incomprehensible metaphors and double meanings in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* are Nietzsche's way of embracing the loneliness and isolation his philosophy brings.<sup>27</sup> Once again, the philosophical message, in this case, the embrace of solitude, is presented in a pragmatic fashion. Instead of using the context of Zarathustra, Nietzsche decides to use the implications *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* has on himself.

Zarathustra's return to the cave symbolizes both Nietzsche's growth as a teacher and his embrace of solitude. These two elements combine in part three to represent eternal recurrence, the theory that every moment in time will eternally repeat itself that Nietzsche claims it to be "the fundamental idea of the work."<sup>28</sup> However, while Zarathustra constantly preaches it, it is never clear whether eternal recurrence was meant to be taken literally. After all, it seems to be the very sort of objective metaphysical truth that Nietzsche despises. Some philosophers dismiss the concept as too bizarre and detached from the rest of Nietzsche's philosophy.<sup>29</sup> A reading *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as literary philosophy resolves this mystery surrounding Nietzsche's philosophy.

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<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche to Rhode, February 22, 1884, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, <https://archive.org/details/selectedletterso00nietuoft/page/174>.

<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche to Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, August 1883, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, <https://archive.org/details/selectedletterso00nietuoft/page/164>.

<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche was a talented philologist during his time and could have lived the comfortable life of a professor. However, his philosophical works lost him respect in the academic circle at the time, largely isolating him.

<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 97.

<sup>29</sup> Timothy J. Freeman, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra Notes," University of Hawaii Website, October 19, 2010, 1. <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~freeman/courses/phil360/12.%20Zarathustra%20notes.pdf>. The extent to which Nietzsche believed in the existence of eternal recurrence, and its place in Nietzsche's philosophy is heavily debated. See chapter 7 of *Nietzsche's Zarathustra* by Kathleen Marie Higgins.

Zarathustra's return to the caves in part two is Nietzsche's way of acknowledging the philosophical immaturity of eternal recurrence. In chapter forty-four, a voiceless clock speaks to Zarathustra about his refusal to teach eternal recurrence, and Zarathustra responds with whispers: "Then was there once more spoken unto me without voice: 'Thou knowest it, Zarathustra, but thou dost not speak it!' And at last I answered, like one defiant: 'Yea, I know it, but I will not speak it!'"<sup>30</sup> The silence of this conversation marks Zarathustra's most vulnerable moment when he is furthest from his preacher persona. Zarathustra gives various excuses for not speaking about eternal recurrence but eventually returns to his original excuse. Zarathustra simply does not want to speak of eternal recurrence because he will crumble under its weight. Recognizing that he is not mature enough for his message on eternal recurrence, Zarathustra plans to return to the caves one final time.

Subtly, the beginning and end of *Zarathustra* form a narrative representation of eternal recurrence that situates the concept with the rest of his philosophy. At the beginning of the book, Zarathustra descends from the mountains, like "[the sun] doest in the evening," to disperse his wisdom.<sup>31</sup> The end of the book mirrors the beginning. In the final chapter, Zarathustra acknowledges his failures, and embraces his work as a teacher, despite knowing that it does not give him happiness, for no one truly understands him. In this moment Zarathustra affirms his identity as both a teacher and solitary man. Feeling elated, Zarathustra walks out of his cave like "like a morning sun coming out of gloomy mountains," preparing his descent once again.<sup>32</sup> Zarathustra embodies eternal recurrence, repeating the cycle of going down the mountain, dispersing his wisdom, failing, and returning up the mountain again.

Unlike most, who would lament that their suffering is eternal, Zarathustra feels elated by his descent since it symbolizes his growth as a teacher and person. Eternal recurrence is a thought experiment to be overcome, a symbol of the goal of humanity: to love one's own fate profoundly and wish to live one's life eternally, with no changes. In the final scene of the book, instead of teaching eternal recurrence through preaching, which would go against the pragmatic theory of truth, Zarathustra chooses to teach it through living it. When Nietzsche says that eternal recurrence is the central theme of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he is not talking about the concept as a metaphysical truth where life really does repeat itself forever. Eternal recurrence is instead an analogy for Zarathustra choosing to live even if it means repeating his suffering.

His conversations with his friends support this interpretation. When a friend tells Nietzsche that he could not understand *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche responded that most people wouldn't. For Nietzsche, "to have understood six sentences in that book—that is to say, to have lived them—raises a man to a higher level among mortals than 'modern' men can attain." The

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<sup>30</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "The stillest Hour" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

<sup>31</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Zarathustra's Prologue" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

<sup>32</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "LXXX. The Sign" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

key here is that Nietzsche equates understanding his philosophy to living it. This supports reading Nietzsche as a pragmatist who believed in the individual and subjective nature of truth.

## 5. Conclusion

The end of Zarathustra's journey finishes the overall theme of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Zarathustra begins his journey knowing most of Nietzsche's philosophy, yet not living it. He teaches because he fears solitude, yet his sermons are never fully understood. At the end of the book, in choosing to descend from the mountains a second time, he affirms his life in all its struggles. He creates meaning for himself in teaching, despite knowing his teachings will never be understood. In doing so, Zarathustra lives Nietzsche's philosophy, embracing life with all its sufferings through creating individual meaning.

Because the narrative and literary devices in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* are necessary for its philosophical message, it provides a strong example of why philosophers should consider widening the bounds of what is considered philosophy. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is not only a work of both literature and philosophy; it uses the literary aspects to present its philosophy, proving that literature is a viable philosophical medium. The backbone of literary philosophy is a radical truth belief. By revisioning truth to require subjectivity, literature becomes the superior medium for philosophical truths. Many contemporary philosophical stances, such as pragmatism or radical skepticism, contain the prerequisites for literary philosophy. By changing the structure of philosophy itself, literary philosophy is a viable or even superior method of writing radical philosophy that promotes innovation within the field.

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## **Is It Reasonable to be Grateful to God for Protection from Natural Evil He Caused?<sup>1</sup>**

Alexander Wang

Cranbrook Kingswood, Michigan, USA

### **Abstract**

The problem of evil is an enduring question within the philosophy of religion. Yet, the question has a underexplored cousin: how ought we react in the face of nearly averted evil? Religion seemingly calls us to be grateful unconditionally, yet intuitively it feels hard to thank someone who has merely solve *their own* problems. In this paper, I attempt to outline a defend the religious claim, at least within the context of preventing natural evil, as being reasonable under roughly the same paradigm of gratitude that we use amongst other people. Specifically, I find that this account of gratitude is inherently *intentionalist* in nature, meaning that good intentions are the key determining factor in whether we ought to give gratitude. After responding to several objections, I bring in a Thomist metaphysics of causation and divine action to show the difference between when God ‘causes’ harm and when He causes benefit.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the John Locke Essay Competition Theology Category Winning Paper

The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord

*Job 1:21*

## 1. Introduction

In the ruins of the churches destroyed by the 2010 Haiti earthquakes, Juliette Tassy, a local parishioner, observed that “the cross in front [was] still standing...It means that we need to keep our faith.”<sup>2</sup> Just months later, the *New York Times* reported Haitians were “thirsty for faith.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, after Job lost his wealth and family, he cried out not in anger but, puzzlingly, in thanks to God.<sup>4</sup> Even in immense suffering and tragedy, the religious individual is called to give thanks to God. This remained the case for Job even as he ascribed responsibility to God for his suffering.

How could this be? I offer two ways that thanksgiving to God is distinguished from ordinary notions of gratitude. First, as Kierkegaard observed, because we are in a position of epistemic uncertainty relative to God, we cannot know whether any circumstance is *truly* good or bad.<sup>5,6</sup> Anything may be a blessing in disguise, even if that blessing is only visibly fulfilled in the afterlife. Indeed, the religious person must hold dogmatically to God’s omnibenevolence. Second, we do not truly own or possess what God gifts to us. In the words of theologian Arthur McGill, we do not thank God for “liberating [one] from need...for God.”<sup>7</sup> Instead, the religious person is always in a state of need vis-à-vis God, and her blessings are always only God’s (as in Job). Considering these facts, we therefore ought not to thank God for His gifts (which are never really ours), but we are called to be *unconditionally* thankful to God, for His inherent goodness and love *as* God (and His relationship with us).<sup>8,9</sup>

At this point, it seems as though we have ‘answered’ our stated question: It is always reasonable (for the religious person) to thank God. Yet to merely claim that one ought to always

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Kaste, “Haitians’ Faith Unshaken By Earthquake,” *NPR*, April 3, 2010, <https://www.npr.org/2010/04/03/125477173/haitians-faith-unshaken-by-earthquake>.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Barnard, “Suffering, Haitians Turn to Charismatic Prayer,” *New York Times*, November 24, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/25/nyregion/25nychaiti.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Here, the word translated as “to bless” stems from the Hebrew *barak*. However, as Leithart notes, this word is often used interchangeably in the Hebrew bible to mean “to give thanks”. Peter J. Leithart, *Gratitude: An Intellectual History* (Baylor University, 2014), 60.

<sup>5</sup> See footnote t. in Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 374.

<sup>6</sup> See the chapter “The Lord Gave, and the Lord Took Away; Blessed be the Name of the Lord” which begins on page 109 in Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses (Kierkegaard’s Writings, Volume 5)*, trans. Edna Hong and Howard Hong (Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Arthur C. McGill, *Dying Unto Life*, ed. David Cain (Cascade Books, 2013), 45.

<sup>8</sup> I use the excellent work of Kent Dunnington who surveys several leading Christian theologians throughout history to distinguish gratitude to God. It is here that I find reference to Kierkegaard and McGill. Kent Dunnington, “The Distinctiveness of Christian Gratitude: A Theological Survey,” *Religions* 13, no. 10 (2022): 889, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100889>.

<sup>9</sup> I draw from Roberts’s account of cosmic gratitude and his recalling of Kierkegaard. Robert C. Roberts, “Cosmic Gratitude,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6, no. 3 (2014): 65–83, <https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v6i3.163>.

thank God seems an unsatisfying answer indeed.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it is an unreasonable requirement that religion bestows upon us. Therefore, in an effort to minimize this uneasiness, I will seek to show that even using roughly the same conceptions of gratitude as with other people, we are still justified in thanking God for protecting us.<sup>11</sup>

I will begin with some qualifying observations. In saying that it is reasonable to do X, I do not claim we have an obligation to do X. It also does not imply that it would be unreasonable to not do X. For example, in criminal courts, a verdict of “not guilty” may reflect both a reasonable belief in the accused’s innocence, and a reasonable belief in her guilt. Thus, I need only defend a pro tanto case for giving thanks. In addition, some facts may also only be reasonable considering certain other facts. In this case, my argument is based on the premise that the conception of classical Abrahamic God exists.

The structure of my argument is as follows: First, I outline and defend what I believe to be sufficient conditions that could *reasonably* warrant giving thanks. I then refute several prima facie arguments for believing God’s protection does not warrant gratitude, given the outlined criteria. Finally, I use a Thomist account of divine action and causation to argue against a ‘net-benefit’ criterion.

## 2. Criterion for Gratitude

In *De Beneficiis*, Seneca claims the *first* thing that we learn about gratitude is that “the benefit is not the gold, the silver... rather, the benefit is the intention of the giver.”<sup>12</sup> But it is not just ancient wisdom that supports the primacy of intention. Following Roslyn Weiss and Fred Berger (in the modern philosophical literature), I advance what I will call an intentionalist account of gratitude. By this, I mean that the key factor in determining whether we ought to be thankful is whether the benefactor has benevolent intentions.<sup>13,14</sup> In the proceeding discussion, I denote the benefactor as A, and the beneficiary as B.

At first blush, it may seem that some concrete benefit must be necessary to our feelings of gratitude. Yet, in the following examples, we can see how thanksgiving can be divorced from any physical benefit.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> One might ask, then, why do we feel unsatisfied by this answer? It may be the religious and pastoral task to conform one’s (flawed) intuitions to what one theologically holds to be the case.

<sup>11</sup> Albeit I do modify certain standards of interpersonal gratitude where they obviously are not applicable with God. I do not take this to be the same type of move employed earlier, where we completely distance human gratitude with thanksgiving to God.

<sup>12</sup> Lucius Seneca, *On Benefits*, trans. Miriam Griffin and Brad Inwood (The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 23.

<sup>13</sup> Fred R. Berger, “Gratitude,” *Ethics* 85, no. 4 (1975): 298–309, <https://doi.org/10.1086/291969>.

<sup>14</sup> Roslyn Weiss, “The Moral and Social Dimensions of Gratitude,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 4 (1985): 491–501, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.1985.tb00419.x>.

<sup>15</sup> It is likely that the degree of gratitude and thanks owed is less than in a case where the benefit is actualized. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to assess degrees of gratitude, as long as *some* amount of gratitude is warranted.

Consider the case where a thief throws you her stolen goods to hide them from the police. Although B benefits because of A's actions, it is unreasonable to claim that therefore B ought to thank A. The missing piece here is A's lack of an intent to act to benefit B for B's sake. B may be thankful for the fortunate circumstance, but not to A. Let us consider the opposite case. When a teacher nominates a student for an award hoping the student wins, it is reasonable for the student to genuinely thank the teacher, even if the student does not win. While the student may not be *thankful* for the overall circumstance, it is not unreasonable that the student may nevertheless thank the teacher for her intent. Therefore, I take Weiss's criteria<sup>16</sup> as a starting point for intentionalist gratitude:

1. A does x, which he perceives as a benefit to B
2. A does x because he wishes to help B, and not seeking a return
3. A does x at some cost to himself.
4. A does x voluntarily and intentionally.
5. It is not the case that A has no business doing x.
6. B has no right to, or claim upon, x.

It is (mostly) undisputed that God acts voluntarily and intentionally, and that God has a 'business' to be doing any action (criterion 4 and 6).<sup>17</sup> Thus, I find three remaining areas where God's acts of protection may be disqualified from gratitude, which I will deem standards: the sacrifice standard (criteria 3), the ulterior motive standard (criterion 2), and the "net benefit" standard (criterion 1 and/or 6). I will show how these standards either do not apply to God, or how God's protective actions meet them.

### 3. God's Benevolence

First, given an omnipotent God, God incurs no real cost for any action. By the sacrifice standard, it therefore seems we ought never to thank God. Yet, there are obviously scenarios where one could reasonably thank God. It is reasonable for an individual born into a life of complete luxury to thank God for her blessings, for example. Thus, by *modus tollens*, it is not gratitude to God that we must discard, but the sacrifice standard, which seems inapplicable to God.

Second, perhaps God only protects us from harm for His own glorification, expecting later praise. Thus, He is no longer worthy of our sincere gratitude. This account, however, falsely

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<sup>16</sup> I paraphrase and condense some of the criteria. Weiss, "The Moral and Social Dimensions of Gratitude," 491–501.

<sup>17</sup> Although there is disagreement as to the status of acts that a beneficiary does not want, I will also assume that we would like to be protected from natural harm as much as possible

assumes it is God who benefits from glorification or praise. Instead, as Joshua Hinchie (referencing Aquinas) notes, the doctrine of divine perfection means that God cannot be benefited in any way by our actions. There can be no *quid pro quo*. Instead, because God's glory is simply a *manifestation* or *communication* of His perfect goodness to us, "God's glorification does not involve an increase in [His] own possession of goodness, but only in *our possession* of that goodness."<sup>18</sup> God can only further benefit us by receiving glory for His actions, and there is no 'ulterior motive' beyond love.

Finally, let us consider criterion 1 and 6. Taken individually, it seems obvious that God's actions would satisfy these standards. After all, it seems trivial that God seeks to benefit us in protecting us, and we do not generally conceive of us having any right to God's actions. Yet, taken together, they imply what I call the "net benefit" standard. If God first 'harms' us, is it possible that He owes us some compensation for that harm? By this logic, we ought only to be thankful when we are benefited (or rather, when the benefactor intends to benefit us) on net considering the affair holistically. Does this line of reasoning work? I argue it does not.

This holistic logic does not resemble how we ordinarily approach gratitude. After all, we hardly tally up a net account of beneficence (especially over the span of years). Indeed, it would reasonably be quite *ungrateful* for B to not give thanks for A's current benevolence, and instead remain preoccupied over past injuries. An objector may claim that if the two actions were intimately linked (such as cleaning up after a spilled drink), then it may not be reasonable to thank A.<sup>19</sup> However, in God's case, there is no reason to assume that God's causation of natural harm is closely related temporally or metaphysically to His protection. For example, a hurricane today may be traceable to small disturbances millennia ago, while God may act to protect us presently. It hardly seems reasonable to hold a thousand-year grudge, as it were. As it stands, then, it seems that we have vindicated giving thanks to God for His acts of protection.

Yet perhaps, the objector bites the bullet, or simply holds differing intuitions. In this case, it is perhaps possible that one may insist upon the validity of the 'net benefit' standard. The objector may argue that a balance sheet of harms and benefits is, in some cases, appropriate. I take it that it is at least plausible that an objector may flesh out the idea of two actions being 'intimately linked', so as to warrant our consideration of them as one (for the purposes of gratitude). I will title this objection the modified 'net benefit' standard. While I won't sketch out the specifics of such an argument, what is important for the sake of the current argument is this standard relies upon some nexus and/or similarity between the (intent behind) actions which harm and help.

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<sup>18</sup> Italics mine. Joshua Hinchie, "Divine Glory: Responding to Another Euthyphro Problem," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 94 (2020): 183–92, <https://doi.org/10.5840/acpaprocc202292137>.

<sup>19</sup> Even this standard does not seem wholly reasonable. Consider the case where a robber steals \$100 dollars from me, but graciously returns the money. Should I thank him? Contrast this with the scenario where our robber was caught and forced to hand over the stolen money. It seems that, not only is it *reasonable* to thank the robber specifically for their change-of-mind (without being grateful to them in general), but that this is based on their intent.

With this in mind, I submit that a Thomistic account of divine action and causation allows the theist to ‘meet’ the standard.

#### 4. Divine Action—A Thomist Account

The Laplacian determinism of classical mechanics appears to leave no room for intervening divine action outside of sustaining natural laws. In response, one might preserve divine action in broadly two ways. First, developments in science allow us to search for “causal joints”, areas where God may influence the world, such as using the indeterminacy in areas such as quantum mechanics and chaos theory.<sup>20,21</sup> The second method, which I will be pursuing, claims that making use of a distinction between primary causation and secondary (or instrumental) causation allows divine action to be compatible with deterministic natural law.<sup>22,23</sup>

Aquinas argued that causation for God is not necessarily the same univocal causation that the natural world (and creatures) exhibit.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, even though we say God has ‘caused’ both protection and natural harm, the nature of the two actions (of causation) may differ. For Aquinas, in the same way that a carpenter and her saw both “cause” a wooden plank to be cut, God (the primary cause) works through natural secondary causes.<sup>25</sup> Critically, the primary cause is *not* mutually exclusive with secondary causes, such that only one cause *truly* causes the event (or they both only contribute partially). Instead, the secondary causes depend on God for their very being and force. Thus, any event may have a genuine multiplicity of causes, each *fully, though differently* causing it.

However, when God works through corruptible natural causes, even though he fully causes the event as the primary cause, we may attribute specifically the *harm* to the natural, secondary cause, without locating any real fault in Him. Recalling our carpenter, suppose her saw has malfunctioned. While she is the primary cause of a miscut plank, she does not have any active or meaningful responsibility for the harm *qua* harm. It is the harm that seeps in from the imperfect natural world. As Michael Dodds notes, “Natural evil is part of the structure of creation, since

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<sup>20</sup> My argument on intervention most likely still applies to an incompatibilist or “causal joint” account, but I do not make any positive claim.

<sup>21</sup> See chapter 3 specifically for an analysis of modern scientific advancements. However, chapter 5 and 7 also contrast a Thomist approach with other accounts. Michael J. Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), Chapter 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* Chapters 1, 5, and 7.

<sup>23</sup> I also follow Edward’s analysis of Stoeger’s insight into natural law being merely an approximation. Denis Edwards, “Toward a Theology of Divine Action: William R. Stoeger, S.J., on the Laws of Nature,” *Theological Studies* 76, no. 3 (2015): 485–502, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563915593478>.

<sup>24</sup> Here, I refer to the work of Ignacio Silva, among others, who interprets and advances the Thomist account of divine action. This paper specifically outlines the analogic conception of causality. Ignacio Silva, “A Cause Among Causes? God Acting in the Natural World,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7, no. 4 (2015): 99–114, <https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v7i4.89>.

<sup>25</sup> Although, even such an analogy is incomplete because we do not sustain the wood or saw like God does for all beings.

creation includes beings that are capable of failure...God allows the natural evil of the corruption...without directly intending it."<sup>26</sup>

In other words, evil arises from an imperfect 'transmission' from God as the primary cause to the secondary causes of the world. As an analogy, consider the game of telephone, where one must transmit a message by whispering it into the ear of the next person in a long chain of people (who must each do the same). By the time the message has reached the other end, it may have been completely corrupted and distorted. Such distortion is made easier if one subscribes to a privation or 'lack' theory of evil. This is because the 'distortion', as it were, is not anything substantive, but merely gaps, or lacunae in the transmission. To use another telephone-related analogy, consider how an audio recording can be wholly distorted merely by there being gaps in the audio. In addition, it is critical for our purposes that God does not directly "intend" such evil, as Dodds writes. As our general paradigm for gratitude is intentionalist, the lack of any ill intent vindicates the role of God in natural evil (at least for the purposes of our thanksgiving). Indeed, the religious individual holds that God's providence means that he intends some greater good arise because of said corruption/evil.

By contrast, God's protection may be far more proactive and intentional. There are two potential categories here. First, it is possible that what we call "protection" sometimes refers to instances where we were never "in harms way", so to speak. In this case, God never "harmed" in the first place us in the sense that is required by the "net benefit" standard. Indeed, we *do* find God's benevolence in His sustaining of the natural law in that particular manner which leaves us safe. Thus, in the first case, it is reasonable to thank God. What about the other cases?

In cases of genuine miracle, a Thomistic account finds that God acts not against nature but *beyond* it to protect us from harm. It is not that God has contradicted Himself or His prior action of creating natural law. Rather, God has "corrected" some external corruption (or lack) in nature which 'created' said harm.

This has important implications for our purposes. Recalling that the modified net-benefit standard relies upon a similarity between God's 'harming' and his 'helping' actions/intents, the account here shows that the two are meaningfully distinct. Whereas God's actions in the case of natural harm are only incidental, God's action to protect us is fundamentally of a different *type*: one where He *actively* works precisely *against* the corruption. Thus, by differentiating where the harm in natural harm comes from, God's protective actions can now reasonably meet the "net benefit" standard. From Him, only good flows.

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<sup>26</sup> See also the following discussion of moral evil. Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action*, 236-243.



## 5. Conclusion

There may be many ways to defend what religion and faith already hold to be true. In this case, we find that, after a Thomist clarification of divine action and glory, it is reasonable to thank God for protection under the same intentionalist paradigm that we thank humans. We therefore can “give thanks always for all things unto God.”

*Ephesians 5:20*

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## **Moral Accountability and the Need for Rehabilitation**

Anupam Panthi  
St. Xavier's College, Nepal

### **Abstract**

This paper outlines the interplay between rehabilitative and retributive justice, advocating for a balanced approach that acknowledges both as essential components of justice. First, the paper outlines the philosophical foundation for punishment based on moral wrongdoing, focusing on Kantian ethics. However, it argues that punishment alone is insufficient considering the moral obligation of the state for the rehabilitation of offenders. The paper highlights the importance of considering individual circumstances that impact moral responsibility. The argument is made that rehabilitation is not merely a utilitarian tool, but a necessary measure to respect the inherent dignity of all individuals. The conclusion calls for a justice system that integrates both retribution and rehabilitation to foster personal responsibility without compromising social equity.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of imprisonment is almost as old as human civilization itself. Even three thousand years ago, the ancient Mesopotamians had prisons of their own.<sup>1</sup> Despite mankind's long history with penal institutions, our opinions about punishment and justice are still deeply divided. Some philosophers justify punishment as a moral imperative in itself, whereas others deem it necessary *only insofar* as it produces positive consequences such as deterrence. It is my argument that regardless of how one justifies punishment, rehabilitation is just as important as retribution and a moral obligation of the state.

## 2. The Justification for Punishment

A wide array of different perspectives can be broadly categorized as a retributivist perspective of punishment, but they all differ drastically in their nuance. Still, they have in common that they maintain an inherent link between punishment, responsibility and moral wrongdoing. The general consensus among legal theorists today is that as a society, we are steadily committed to both rights and utility. But most would certainly agree that its legitimacy is the ultimate determining factor on the infliction of a punishment. Even the most brutally consequentialist thinkers, like Jeremy Bentham, who advocate for punishment primarily as a means of deterrence, still require the legitimacy of punishment.<sup>2</sup> However, in this section, I will mainly analyze the Kantian and social contract perspectives.

When an individual commits a crime, causing harm to another person, they are deserving of punishment because they have committed a moral transgression. According to Kant, we ought to "act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end".<sup>3</sup> When a robber steals from an innocent civilian, he is using civilians as a mere means to accomplish his monetary needs. By doing so, he has rendered himself deserving of punishment. To justify this punishment, Kant invokes the "lex talionis": the principle of retaliation. In order to *restore* justice after the occurrence of a crime, the perpetrator should be given a punishment similar to that of his crime. Kant's argument can thus be summarized with two premises:

1. If one is morally responsible for a moral transgression, this entails that they deserve punishment. (Lex talionis)

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<sup>1</sup> J. N. Reid, *Prisons in Ancient Mesopotamia: Confinement and Control until the First Fall of Babylon* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *The Limits of Jurisprudence Defined: Being Part Two of an Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, new edition, ed. Charles W. Everett (Greenwood Press, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant and Christine M. Korsgaard, *Kant: Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

2. Humans, being rational agents, are morally *responsible* for their actions, including moral transgressions. (Rationality principle)
3. Thus, human beings deserve punishment. (Modus ponens)

While much can be argued about premise (1), as shown, Kant's argument is also crucially based on premise (2) that humans have rationality and consciousness. The intrinsic value of human life is unwavering and inconsequential. It is for this reason that we punish criminals; because this is what they deserve as logical and morally liable creatures. If they are not given the punishment that they rightfully deserve, then it is tantamount to treating them as animals (or other inanimate objects), incapable of the faculties of reason. As he writes, "If justice and righteousness perish, human life would no longer have any value in the world."<sup>4</sup> Hence, Kantian ethics necessitates punishment on the grounds that accountability for their crimes affirms their dignity as moral agents responsible for their actions.

While Kant views punishment as a recognition of human dignity and moral agency, other thinkers take a more severe stance. Locke believed in the "forfeiture" of rights.<sup>5</sup> As per his theory of natural rights and government, rights like liberty, life and property are inviolable and granted by nature itself. They form the basis for his social contract theory. When an individual commits a criminal act, infringing on the rights of others, they violate the social contract. According to Locke, such actions can be interpreted as a forfeiture of the criminal's own rights. Thomas Hobbes presents a similar approach for the justification of punishment. Hobbes describes the societal conditions prior to the social contract as 'the state of nature'.<sup>6</sup> He argues that individuals who violate the laws of the social contract have reverted to the state of nature, whereby they may be subjected to punishment. To summarize roughly the argument of a social contract theorist for punishment:

1. We gain our rights (i.e. to life or property) through engaging in a social contract with others
2. When we commit crimes or other moral transgressions, we violate and negate that social contract.
3. But since it was only from the social contract that we got our rights (1) we lose the source of our rights when we commit crimes and negate the source of our rights. In other words, we open ourselves up for punishment.

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<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant and Roger J. Sullivan. *Kant: The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Hackett Publishing, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Penguin Random House, 1982).

### 3. Rehabilitation as a Moral Necessity

In the same light as punishment, I find it necessary for rehabilitation to be viewed through the lens of legitimacy. Rehabilitation, while undoubtedly producing positive consequences, should not be seen merely as a consequentialist choice. Instead, putting aside the utilitarian perspective, I argue that rehabilitation must be regarded as a moral necessity for its own sake, grounded in human dignity and rationality. In this section, I will argue that rehabilitation is a moral necessity based on two arguments (respective to the aforementioned Kantian and social contract theories): first, the dignity and rationality asserted by Kantianism requires rehabilitation; and second, that crime results from the failure of the state to meet its obligations.

Beginning with the Kantian defense of punishment, recall that it is maintained by the premise that humans act with rationality. Under this view, the reason we punish criminals is because we believe that they have reason and the capacity to act otherwise. But the capacity for rational decision-making exists in a wide spectrum. To illustrate, let's consider a corrupt statesman who greedily steals public property and a beggar who steals out of necessity. It is ridiculous to argue that both of the two individuals have the same capacity to act morally. The statesman chooses corruption out of greed, while the beggar, driven by desperation, resorts to theft as a means of survival. Their circumstances and motivations are vastly different, which means that their capacities for moral action are also different. Hence, it is unreasonable to assume that all individuals have equal capacities for moral action, and thus for punishment.

One might argue here that since not all needful men resort to theft, it is inexcusable for those who do so. However, the crux of my argument is not to exonerate criminals from punishment, but merely to note the *necessary* role of contextualizing their crime. Disregarding their circumstances is a disregard for their justice and fairness. Therefore, under this Kantian view, punishments should not only be proportional to the crime but also to the criminal's capacity for reason. An uneducated, starving beggar is far less capable of Kant's cold 'reason' than a corrupt, wealthy politician. It is far harder for him to overlook his starvation and remain faithful to reason and morality.

Still, we must concede that there are plenty of cases where human beings commit abominable crimes even when they seem perfectly capable of reason. But even in these cases, it is important to inquire why a human, completely capable of rational action, might commit a crime. Again, turning to Kantian ethics, morality is intrinsically tied to rationality. However, if the Kantian concedes this, they must concede that in each instance of moral transgression, there is a driving force that strays an individual out of rationality – and thus seemingly out of the requirements for punishment.

The upshot of our analysis so far is that a Kantian justification of punishment necessarily binds one to basing their treatment of criminals based on not only their capacity for reason, but also the underlying *factors* that caused them to stray from reason. However, we of course cannot

*excuse* every criminal because of their inability to act rationally. Even if our circumstances and our impulses drive us to act unjustly, (most) human beings have the capacity to differentiate right from wrong.

Instead, if we accept the Kantian justification for punishment as valuing the inherent dignity of humans, then justice must not only respect the criminal's rationality by providing the punishment a rational agent deserves, but also *restore* the wounded rationality of the criminal by addressing the underlying factors that lead rational beings to commit irrational acts. In the case of the beggar whose capacities for reason may be diminished, if one is to deem respecting the beggar's limited rationality a justification for punishment, then one also must deem restoring their capacity for rationality a justification for rehabilitation. After all, the end goal remains the same: to respect the rational dignity of the criminal, else there cannot be punishment either.

To treat human beings in accordance with their human dignity means to be considerate and mindful of their unique circumstances. Given this, it becomes clear that rehabilitation is not merely a utilitarian measure to reduce crime but a moral necessity if we are to be consistent Kantians. Mere punishment cannot do justice to a criminal's life because it completely disregards their ability for change and rationality. When the state subjects criminals to harsh sentences without serious consideration for their circumstances, it gives up on the value that their lives hold — the potential for growth, reflection, and rehabilitation. It becomes akin to treating them as animals who cannot reason or grow, something the Kantian cannot accept.

#### **4. Social Responsibility**

Transitioning to the social contract justification of punishment, recall that any particular crime is viewed as an individuals' violation of a *social* contract, which justifies either their return to a state of nature or the forfeiture of *their* rights. However, if crime isn't merely a moral fault on the criminal, but a structural fault of society at large, then this logic of individual blame and consequence becomes tenuous.

Adding the state into the picture, this social contract does not merely involve other individuals but a state with its own responsibilities. Indeed, most modern democracies are built on a reciprocal social contract, where the state must uphold its own obligations in exchange for the power we vest upon the state (to enact justice). Rousseau argued that inequality and social injustices, often created and perpetuated by societal issues, corrupt human nature. This leads individuals to act in ways that may harm others. Hence, crime can be seen as a symptom of a societal failure to provide for its members. As such, the government can be seen as bearing responsibility for (numerous, but not all) crimes, especially the ones involving the marginalized and the poor. For example, recalling our example of the beggar, when the state fails to provide the poor with their right to food, it is entirely likely that they resort to stealing. When the state fails to look out for homeless children on the streets, it gives birth to violent gangsters and terrorists.

However, if we acknowledge the role of the state, then we must modify the original argument for punishment from the social contract. Here, if we concede that we *forfeit* (or otherwise) lose our rights by violating (negating) the social contract from whence we got our rights, so too does the state also lose its rights—in particular the right to power and to exact justice—if it violates its obligations. Not only does the state become implicated in the crimes caused by its neglect, but it forfeits its very power for punishment!

Of course, as with the Kantian, we do not wish to remove all punishment. Instead, part of the duties of the state must be to rehabilitate the criminals which it birthed. The state owes rehabilitation to criminals because its neglect of poverty, good education, mental illness, and social inequality led to said crime in the first place.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, rehabilitation is not merely a utilitarian measure aimed at reducing recidivism or deterring would-be criminals; it is a moral obligation rooted in human worth and dignity, and the role of the state. Therefore, the justice system must strike a balance between retribution and rehabilitation. It is important to acknowledge and account for moral wrongdoing and instill responsibility in criminals through punishment. At the same time, it is also important for punishments to be proportional to the criminal's capacity to reason. Moreover, it must also be acknowledged that the capacity for moral reasoning is greatly influenced by factors outside of oneself. Hence, the state must bear accountability for the circumstances and reconcile punishment with an opportunity for growth.

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## **Recontextualizing Kant in a Seemingly Anti-Enlightenment Age**

Paolo Passalacqua  
St. John's County, Florida, USA

### **Abstract**

It has been said that much of modern philosophy lives in the shadow of Kant. Indeed, the modern, Enlightenment spirit of reason and critique owe much of their legacy to Kant. However, recent developments in misinformation, fake news, and information overload threaten to fatally challenge the entire Enlightenment project. Thus, in this paper, I use a Kantian understanding of Enlightenment to critique not only these recent anti-rational phenomena, but to examine their very foundations. In doing so, I draw upon the semiotic, communicative, and psychological work of Karl Otto Apel (and his reading of C. S. Pierce), Jurgen Habermas, and Gilles Deleuze. This paper argues that misinformation can be theorized as divorcing semiotic-linguistic concepts from their Kantian objects, while information overload presents a fundamentally novel challenge to the Kantian paradigm. In the end, a new communicative and public sphere of rationality is both pragmatically and theoretically necessary.



## 1. The Kantian Enlightenment's Status Quo

It appears simplistic that the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, in its nuance, profundity, and status as foundational to 'Modern Philosophy,' may be essentialized to a singularity. However, if there is a single 'red thread' that underlies Kant's philosophy, it is in its binding of notions previously thought incongruent. Whether it be in the ascription of frameworks of cognition to every epistemic claim, the granting of rationality and autonomy to every individual, or the connection between objects and the concepts that unite them, the driving agent behind much of Kant's critical philosophy is an active unity. Throughout the over two-hundred and fifty years since Kant's critical system, this active attitude has served as a basis for the modern enlightenment project which he so exalted, no matter how far it has strayed from Kant's work itself.

However, despite its influence, the Kantian attitude now faces significant threats born uniquely out of the digital age, intent on unseating its lofty post—misinformation, sensory overload, and 'false news.' I argue that such developments put the Kantian impetus to reason past natural ignorance such that humans become "more than machines"<sup>1</sup> at risk. And, as a result, regression into the hazards of fragmentation, dogmatism, and public intellectual submission become a very legitimate threat.

This paper seeks to investigate the instability of the modernist episteme in light of *Aufklärung* and the broader Kantian epistemic project. The goal is twofold: to situate this new digital 'irrationality' within the context of the Enlightenment, and to argue that the practice of Kantian critique offers a way out. Keeping with the ethos of *Sapere Aude*, one must now dare to go beyond Kant himself in an analysis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's 'counter-Enlightenment.' In doing so, I incorporate the perspectives of Karl-Otto Apel's reading of C.S. Peirce, Jürgen Habermas, and Gilles Deleuze to the theoretical, practical and psychological domains.

In the end, I argue, through the case studies of misinformation and information overload, that for the Enlightenment epistemic project to function against new threats, our cognitive faculties must possess some *public* commonality such that knowledge may have a far-reaching, communicable synthetic *unity* (as between our objects and concepts). And, it is only the Kantian critical attitude which restores this rationality.

## 2. Semiotic Misinformation

I begin with misinformation and Kant's Transcendental categories. In Kantian terms, misinformation can be thought of as symbolically manipulating the *concepts* we employ and disjoining them from real *objects* of experience. By eschewing reality, misinformation thus attempts to force one beyond the possibility of experience in a sensible manifold. It thereby disregards the

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Hackett Publishing, 1983), 42..

categories' necessary apriority as detailed by Kant, for it is "by them alone that [one] can understand something in the manifold of intuition, that is, think an object in it."<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, because the vessel by which contemporary misinformative processes operate is via language (and the various accompanying signs used to represent objects under concepts), misinformation attempts a semiotic deception. Misinformation frequently operates via digital media and its linguistic-semiotic (mis)representations of reality. Here I marshal Karl-Otto Apel's transcendental semiotics and his recontextualization of Kant's categories through C.S. Peirce's triadic transformation to analyze misinformation.

Apel reads Peirce as having performed his own transcendental move, but one of signs rather than metaphysical categories, namely the "...three types of signs parallel with the three types of inferences as illustrations of the three universal categories,"<sup>3</sup> where a sign is "something that stands for something in some respect or quality to an interpretant."<sup>4</sup> Thus, in both Kant and Peirce's transcendental deductions, the aim is a synthetic consistency (or unity) to all possible experience, with Peirce approaching the matter through language, which he believed to be entirely semiotic.<sup>5</sup> To Apel's Peirce, this makes transindividual semiotic unity the vantage point from which the experiences of objects are validated.<sup>6</sup> By asserting a connection here between Peirce and Kant, Apel incorporates language into the transcendental deduction's emphasis on the validation of long-term experience. These (linguistic) signs synthesize the representation of a quality to an interpretant (subject) across all possible experience.

In the context of misinformation, whereas misinformation divorces concepts from the objects of experience, this Apelian-Kantian project works directly contrary to misinformation through its requirement of verifying the symbols (or concepts) against the objects of experience. Whether it be in the manifold of sensible intuition or in semiotic representations of language, only unified, consistent objects that fit within the bounds of categories and signs may be held to be true.

The need for intellectual coherence and systematic clarity in communicating knowledge, two things threatened by false news's inconsistency and inaccuracy, is recognized by Gilles Deleuze in his retrospective on the Kantian project, as he aligns with Kant in claiming that "Knowledge implies a common sense, without which it would not be communicable and could not claim universality,"<sup>7</sup> further stating the need for the faculties to "harmonize with one

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<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), A81/B107.

<sup>3</sup> Karl-Otto Apel, *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby (Routledge, 2023), 84-85.

<sup>4</sup> Apel, *Transformation of Philosophy*, 85.

<sup>5</sup> Charles S. Peirce, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (1868): 141.

<sup>6</sup> Apel, *Transformation of Philosophy*, 83.

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 21.

another.”<sup>8</sup> The goal of false news is to disrupt the understanding’s ability to rationally reach knowledge about the sensible world through its misrepresentation of empirical reality. By considering the harmony between the faculties of sensibility, reason, and the understanding required for knowledge as defined by Kant and recontextualized by Deleuze, one clarifies the positive aspect of the critique of Enlightenment philosophy and the need for reason’s sustained use in acquiring knowledge.

### 3. Information Overload

However, *misinformation* is not the only contemporary development. Having recontextualized the Transcendental Logic into a triadic semiotics, I turn my attention to *information overload*. Information overload, in presenting such wildly extravagant amounts of (irrational) information, challenges Kant’s vision of conducting philosophy “before the public of the ‘people,’ [so as] to encourage it in the use of its own reason.”<sup>9</sup> It is the sheer quantity of information that isolates individuals from their own reason and renders genuine philosophical acts difficult. Specifically, overload works in two ways: 1) by clouding rationality in the public sphere and 2) by obstructing individual practical reason.

The first of these extracts from the *public sphere* its communicative and common rationality. For Kant, individuals express reason as a speech act aimed at a communicative end; Enlightenment becomes a *public* procedure. In information overload, then, is a reversal of Kant’s reversal of “the principle [that authority, not truth, makes law].”<sup>10</sup> Instead, in its place is an authoritative and deliberate overwhelming of sensations, which takes precedence over communication. Herein lies the prescience of Jürgen Habermas’s revitalization of practical reason in the public sphere, as it halts the undoing of Kant. In depicting the Enlightenment as an ongoing project, Habermas simultaneously ends the removal of rationality from the public sphere and acts affirmatively towards the basic proposition of *Sapere Aude*: that individuals may use reason to better reach a mutually intelligible truth. Instead of abandoning the possibility of public rationality or rationally acquired knowledge and submitting communication to irrational overflows of information, Habermas makes a fundamentally Kantian move and affirms that “...there is, on the side of persons who behave rationally, a willingness to expose themselves to criticism, and, if necessary, to properly participate in argumentation.”<sup>11</sup> In forming a rearguard that enables individuals to communicate their ideas despite an overload of stimuli that puts communicability in doubt,

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<sup>8</sup> Deleuze, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (The MIT Press, 1991), 105.

<sup>10</sup> Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 103.

<sup>11</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action Vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Beacon Press, 1989), 18.

Habermas underlies the universality of the rational expression of ideas: reason in public communication will always pragmatically triumph.

Secondly, information overload acts as a counterpoint to reason's use in practical matters by creating such a tremendous amount of sensuous content that individuals become disoriented in their attempts to judge, and therefore to reason. Here, the need for a return to Kant becomes evident, as he elucidates the proper writ of reason in providing intellectual orientation. Just as the senses are used in physical orientation, Kant asserts "...reason's need, as a subjective ground for presupposing and assuming something which reason may not presume to know through objective grounds, and consequently for orienting itself in thinking."<sup>12</sup> Reason alone acts as that which can provide grounds for assuming concepts when lacking the presence of an object of possible experience. After again scrutinizing reason from the Kantian perspective, its practical use extends into the digital age as well; in the increasingly large internet information sphere, reason is the principal manner by which adherence to sensible intuition and the avoidance of being swept away in a 'tide of information' are possible. The understanding's orientation through reason is its sense of direction; pure reason, which does not lend itself to supersensible forms of intuition, creates the possibility for accurate subjective assumptions.

#### 4. Conclusion

The increasingly pervasive nature of misinformation, information overload, and 'fake news' target humanity's "emergence from [its] self-imposed immaturity,"<sup>13</sup> aiming to revert humanity's source of understanding to an anti-rational "lack of resolve and courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance."<sup>14</sup> The question now, following this dense philosophical defense, is of the immediate value of adhering to Kant and his vision of rationality in a digital age that seems increasingly irrational. This is only exacerbated if, arguably, the vices of misinformation, information overload, and false news arose due to inherent inadequacies of the Enlightenment project. However, despite these developments, it is *only* through the unifying Kantian critical *attitude*, or liberated use of reason, that one can counter the current vices of deintellectualization. It is only through *individual* critique that Kant's first question regarding reason of "What can I know?"<sup>15</sup> can be reclaimed, whose mere possibility of answering has been recently cast into doubt.

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<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 137.

<sup>13</sup> Kant, "What is Enlightenment," 41.

<sup>14</sup> Kant, "What is Enlightenment," 41.

<sup>15</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A805/B833.

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## Call for Papers and Reviewers

We hope that you have enjoyed reading the first ever issue of the *High School Journal of Philosophy and Ethics*! This journal, of course, would not have been possible without the hard work of the many authors who have submitted, and the reviewers who have spent time giving much-needed feedback and authority.

To that end, we hope that this edition will encourage you to participate, whether as a writer or a reviewer. Indeed, in editing this current volume, our shortage of reviewers meant that we were only able to publish so many articles. In other words, this means that if your article was not featured in this publication, it may very well have been because we were not able to get to it in time! All of this is to say two things:

1. We strongly urge all those who are curious about *anything* to try their hand at writing and submitting a paper, *especially* those who have already submitted. Those who have submitted may email us at [admin@hsjpe.org](mailto:admin@hsjpe.org) to request a status update.
2. If you are reading this, have a formal philosophical background (or in a related field), and are willing to assist, please do not hesitate to contact us at the same email: [admin@hsjpe.org](mailto:admin@hsjpe.org). We are quite flexible with the refereeing workload!

For hopeful writers, we hope that this edition has served not only as inspiration that anyone can write a great philosophy paper, but also will serve as a model for future writing. In particular, we would like to stress that the papers shown do not represent *all* that philosophy can be. Merely, they showcase examples of what we believe are clear, original yet showcasing, interaction with the literature and well-argued.

Best of luck philosophizing!

