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Rethinking Recollection and Plato's Theory of Forms

Lydia Schumacher

I

Since the late Medieval period, philosophers have tended to think of Platonic Forms as totalized mind-and-language independent realities that subsist in their own 'Platonic heaven': fixed essences, after which physical objects are inferiorly copied. Accordingly, many have understood the recollection of Forms as an act that involves summoning innate ideas of the Forms up from the recesses of the mind that perceived them before birth. In order to retrieve a Form from the intelligible realm of immutable 'being', it is generally believed that the mind must shun and see past those mutable instances of the ultimate essences that clutter the sensible realm of 'becoming'. Only in this way can the human intellect conceive a thought that corresponds to the way things really are.

Although this 'essentialist' or 'ontologizing' interpretation of Platonic Forms and the understanding of recollection that goes along with it has long gone uncontested, it is by no means standard in the history of philosophy. Recent research has shown that an essentialist interpretation of Forms and the concomitant theory of knowledge by correspondence did not become popular until the early thirteenth century, when members of the Franciscan intellectual tradition appropriated them from the recently translated works of the Arab scholar Avicenna.¹ Through late Medieval Franciscan thought, which set the stage for early modern thought, an essentialist reading of Plato came into circulation, and before long, it became the common view.

¹ See Dag Nikolaus Hasse, *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West* (London: Warburg Institute, 2001).

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In recent years, scholars have started to question the viability of this inherited reading of Forms and recollection.² Of special interest in this context is the work of Christoph Helmig, whose inquiry into Plato's *Phaedrus* led him to conclude that the knowledge of Forms the mind possessed before birth was not knowledge of individual, totalized entities, but knowledge of all things in unity with the divine source, namely, the One.³ What the mind remembers when it recollects, on Helmig's account, is the very ability to think in unifying terms, or to make generalizations. Effectively, then, the work of recollection is that of abstraction, which Plato's student Aristotle most famously described. As Plato's own words in the *Phaedrus* confirm, recollection consists in, "bringing many perceptions together into a reasoned unit"⁴ or "seeing together things that are scattered about everywhere and collecting them into one kind."⁵

Following Helmig's lead, I strive in this article to rethink recollection along the lines of abstraction, with special though not exclusive reference to Plato's *Phaedo* and *Parmenides* dialogues. This reevaluation of the nature of the knowledge of Forms, I will explain, helps show how Plato's account of Forms and recollection can evade the philosophical problems that arise for it when Forms are construed in an essentialist sense—problems which lead many to pronounce the account outmoded, their general recognition of Plato's ingenuity notwithstanding. At the same time, moreover, the effort to reassess recollection serves to reconfigure the ontological status of Forms and elucidate

² For example, Lloyd P. Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Nicholas White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976).

³ Christoph Helmig, "What is the Systematic Place of Abstraction and Concept Formation in Plato's Philosophy? Ancient and Modern Readings of *Phaedrus* 249 b-c," in *Platonic Ideas and Concept Formation in Greek and Medieval Thought*, ed. Caroline Mace and Gerd Van Riel (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004), 83-105; in the same book, see also Richard Sorabji, "Aristotle's Perceptual Functions Permeated by Platonist Reason," 99-118.

⁴ Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 249B-C.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 265D.

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the function the Forms perform in promoting an ethical life. In these ways, the present inquiry throws the tenability of Plato's philosophical perspective into relief. In the same instance, it hints at the continuity of the Platonic and Aristotelian systems of thought.

II

Plato's mid-career dialogue *Phaedo* is typically thought contain his earliest explicit account of Forms and recollection. Speaking through Socrates, Plato observes that acts of recollection are instigated by encounters with empirical objects that exhibit similar or dissimilar traits.⁶ These experiences incite the mind to secure a concept or know a Form through which it can class similar things together and distinguish things that differ and thus "give an account of what it knows."⁷

When the mind registers experiences of equal and unequal objects, for instance, it is prompted to recollect the Form of 'Equal Itself'.⁸ Although it is clearly not unthinkable to read this as an attempt to retrieve an infallible innate idea from the mind, as the common conception of recollection confirms, it is equally plausible to understand the cognitive effort described in the *Phaedo* as one in which the mind "refers its sense perceptions"⁹ of equal objects to a universal concept of Equal, which it forms of its own accord. By contrast to a fixed and final concept of some reality that precludes awareness of material instances of that reality, this concept acquired through abstraction is a provisional one that both allows the mind to comprehend the equal and unequal objects that are presently in view and that can be employed in future efforts to make sense of empirical data.

⁶ Idem., *Phaedo* 74A.

⁷ Ibid., 76B.

⁸ Ibid., 75B.

⁹ Ibid.

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Far from a retrieval of *a priori* ideas, in other words, recollection as Socrates describes it involves the use of an *a priori* cognitive capacity to form an idea on the basis of experiences of similar things, which serves in turn to relate and unite those things in the mind. Through further experience, the original concept of equality can be revised and expanded to include more equal things. By these means, the mind's idea of the Form of Equality can grow to match the Form of Equal that encompasses all instances of equality. In sum, it can learn to conceive of all equal things together in unity as they are perceived in the realm of the gods.

When the recollection of Forms is construed in this way, certain problems commonly associated with the account are implicitly resolved, such as its alleged tendency to undermine the indispensability of empirical knowledge and promote a dualistic division between the sensible and intelligible realms that makes it difficult to determine how exactly recollection allows one to intellectually breach the divide between them. Although Plato admittedly states that the Forms cannot be grasped "with any of our bodily senses,"¹⁰ this claim need not be taken to imply that the sense faculties are inferior or irrelevant to the intellect, if recollection is conceived as abstraction.

According to that interpretation, Plato's distinction between the knowledge of particular equal objects and Equal Itself highlights the fact that the perceptive faculties are not suited to accomplishing the mind's abstractive work, just as the intellect cannot perform its abstractive function without empirical input.¹¹ In this instance, the difference between sensible and intellectual is not the difference between an imperfect sensible object and a perfect intelligible one, located in incommensurable ontological realms.¹² Rather, it amounts to a difference between two ways of knowing, namely, the sense perception of an empirical particular and the intellectual apprehension of a universal that

¹⁰ Ibid., 65C. cf. 66eE

¹¹ Ibid., 75B.

¹² Ibid., 74.

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cooperatively enable the mind to grasp equal things in the world, and therefore take priority each in its own way.

In addition to highlighting the role of empirical knowledge and its relatedness to the work of the intellect, the definition of recollection as abstraction reveals how the doctrine of recollection solves the notorious *aporia* of learning Plato poses in the earlier *Meno* dialogue, as Plato insists it does. The problem raised there concerns how it is possible to come to know X if X is not already known, given that one could not identify X upon encountering it if one did not already know it, and one would not need to learn X if one already knew it.¹³

The solution to this problem is fairly straightforward if recollection is likened to abstraction, for the following reason: when the mind abstracts, it infers a universal concept from images of related objects that have been formed on the basis of sense experiences. Those images as well as ideas previously abstracted represent the mind's stock of latent knowledge, or the information it brings to bear in efforts to render new experiences intelligible. Whenever the mind is stimulated by some new experience to offer an explanation for that experience, it draws on this store of information to do so.

Anytime it accomplishes the feat of knowing, or successfully engages in recollection, the idea that results is one that was effectively waiting to be discovered. In producing this idea, the mind transforms the potential for understanding its existing knowledge created into actual understanding. That distinction between potential and actual knowledge is what makes it possible to say without contradiction that the mind already knew what it came to know before it came to know it, and also that it did not know what it came to know until the very moment of discovery.

One of the more significant points about recollection that can be learned from the *Meno*, incidentally, concerns the frame of mind that fosters this activity. In his dialogue with Meno's uneducated slave boy, Socrates makes it clear that the success of recollection depends upon an attitude of open-

¹³ *Idem.*, *Meno* 80E.

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mindedness. Interestingly enough, the slave boy's acute awareness of his inadequacy to answer the difficult question that Socrates posed to him at the outset of the discussion is precisely what put him in the position to work towards an answer to that question in a step-by-step fashion, through efforts to answer more basic questions that simply required him to connect ideas he already had, that is, to transform his potential into actual knowledge.¹⁴

In Plato's earliest dialogues, which are marked by Socrates' 'search for definitions', the same point about the importance of open-mindedness is stressed. In the *Euthyphro*, for example, Socrates asks Euthyphro to identify the form that makes all pious actions pious, "so that I may look upon it, and using it as a model, say that any action...is pious."¹⁵ At the start of the discussion, Euthyphro over-confidently asserts his ability to define piety. As Socrates questions him further, however, he only proves able to offer examples of pious actions. In each instance, Socrates responds with counter-examples, which prove that the definitions of piety Euthyphro has presented fail to exhaust the meaning of piety.

Finally, Euthyphro admits that, "it is a considerable task to acquire any precise knowledge of these things."¹⁶ In the face of his inability to perfectly define piety, Euthyphro finally flees the scene of the discussion, where his counterparts in *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Charmides*, simply resorted to admitting that they did not know how to give the definition Socrates sought.¹⁷ In reaching this conclusion, Socrates' interlocutors acknowledged what they should have recognized from the outset, namely, that human beings are not omniscient and that they will always have more to learn about piety and everything else.

Because Socrates himself was willing to admit, "I do not know,"¹⁸ when appropriate, he was pronounced "the wisest man on earth" by the Oracle of

¹⁴ Ibid., 82-5.

¹⁵ Idem., *Euthyphro* 6D-E.

¹⁶ Ibid., 14B.

¹⁷ Idem., *Laches* 199E; *Lysis* 223A; *Charmides* 176B.

¹⁸ Idem., *Apology* 17A.

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Delphi.¹⁹ By accepting his finitude, Socrates came to terms with the provisional nature of his ideas and put himself in a position to revise them and grow in wisdom. The wisdom he seems eager to pass on in the early dialogues is that anyone wishing to inquire into the nature of piety, courage, friendship and so forth, must adopt a similar attitude of receptiveness. Ironically, then, it would seem that motive behind his search for definitions was not to achieve exhaustive definitions of different virtues, or to impose a set of doctrines or philosophical concepts, but to encourage interlocutors to relinquish pride and preconceived notions and therefore help them learn how to learn, which is just what they consistently refused to do.

III

Like the *Phaedo*, Plato's *Parmenides* dialogue is considered to be a key text on Forms, but for the unfortunate reason that it is generally taken as a sign of the philosopher's mature decision to abandon the theory. The dialogue consists of two main sections, the first of which lists a number of fatal criticisms of the theory of Forms. The second section goes through a series of dialectical exercises.

The theory of Forms criticized in part one is an essentialist one, and it is for this reason that readers who assume this view was Plato's own suppose that the theory is being rejected. For the same reason, many find it difficult to discern the relationship between the two parts of the dialogue, and so conclude in many cases that the parts are not purposefully connected. In the following analysis, I interpret the *Parmenides* on the assumption that recollection is abstraction. By these means, I demonstrate that the two halves of the dialogue are not unrelated, but comprise a two-part effort to clarify and confirm Plato's longstanding views on Forms and recollection in the face those that wrongly interpreted them, as per part one.

¹⁹ Ibid., 23A-B.

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The *Parmenides* opens with a conversation between Parmenides, Zeno, and their young unstudied pupil Socrates regarding the relationship between unity and diversity. According to the elder interlocutors, it is necessary to posit that one Form exists and that it can be known in order to affirm the possibility of knowing the many particular instances of that Form.²⁰ The juvenile Socrates is clearly under the impression that the Forms to which his teachers refer are totalized ontological entities that must be known in totality if they are to be known at all.

The interlocutors all agree, however, that such an interpretation of Forms undermines the belief that Forms are knowable, for if Forms must be fully known in order to be known in any sense whatsoever, it is impossible to account for the observable fact that people have different and limited ideas about what certain Forms are.²¹ If Forms exist in their own separate realm, moreover, and human knowers are confined to the realm of physical objects that are merely inferior copies of Forms, then it becomes difficult to show how they can access to the realm of Forms in order to truly know.²²

With these problems in view, Socrates remarks: “how great the difficulty is if one marks things off Forms, themselves by themselves.”²³ In spite of the challenges that have been mentioned, Parmenides insists that it is necessary to affirm that there are Forms for things, lest human learners lose a place to ‘turn their thoughts’ and so destroy the possibility of knowledge.²⁴ If Socrates only had more training, Parmenides argues, then he would be able to grasp what Forms are, what it means to know them, and why the aforementioned problems are not genuine problems for the theories in question. In response to this, Socrates inquires what manner of training Parmenides has in mind.²⁵

²⁰Plato, *Parmenides* 129B.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 132B.

²² *Ibid.*, 133C-34E.

²³ *Ibid.*, 133A.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 135B-C.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 135D.

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The training, Parmenides explains, is training in the art of dialectical reasoning, which involves forming hypotheses that are based on and account for experiences, and testing those hypotheses by setting them against counter-arguments, revising them in the process.²⁶ Since this brief explanation does not seem to bring Socrates any closer to seeing what it means to know the Forms, Socrates asks Parmenides to lead him through some dialectical exercises.²⁷ At that point, Parmenides calls upon the young Aristotle to participate with him in the series of dialectical exercises that comprise the second part of the dialogue.

From Parmenides' perspective, these exercises seem to illustrate clearly the process of knowing Forms and the plausibility of the theory of Forms more generally. While this is genuinely puzzling if one operates on the definition of Forms that was rejected in the first part of the dialogue, one can see why Parmenides comes to his conclusion if recollection is roughly interpreted as abstraction. According to this interpretation, knowing Forms entails participation in the activity of producing universal concepts.²⁸ It involves thinking about related things in unifying terms, or including them all under one concept, which gives the mind somewhere to 'turn its thought' whenever it encounters a new instance the object in question.²⁹ Through such encounters, the concept is revised and the mind improves at the skill of knowing the relevant Form.

So defined, the process of recollecting Forms does not involve knowing totalized ontological entities, but is much akin to the process of dialectical reasoning, which involves forming, testing, revising, and expanding hypotheses formed on the basis of experience. The dialectical exercises performed in the second part of the *Parmenides* save the theory of Forms that was criticized in the first part, because they illustrate that the knowledge of Forms differs from

²⁶ Ibid., 136A.

²⁷ Ibid., 136C.

²⁸ See Leo Sweeney, "Participation in Plato's Dialogues: Phaedo, Parmenides, Sophist, Timaeus," in *Divine Infinity in Greek and Medieval Thought* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

²⁹ Plato, *Parmenides* 135B-C.

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what it is there assumed to be. Far from precluding differences in perspective and the possibility of growth in knowledge or requiring recourse to a realm that is inaccessible to human minds, recollecting Forms involves engaging in an abstractive mode of reasoning which makes it possible to comprehend the real world order, and to do so in increasing measure.

Although the interpretation of recollection as abstraction helps disclose the connection between the two parts of the *Parmenides*, it does not entirely explain why the criticisms mentioned in part one were originally raised. A study of the context and peculiarities of the dialogue provides this explanation. In discussing these matters, Lloyd Gerson points out that what I have called an ‘ontologizing’ view of Forms had arisen in Athens among those to whom Plato refers in his *Sophist* as “friends of the Forms.”³⁰ These false ‘friends’, possibly some of Plato’s own students, either failed or refused to recognize that “Forms never were ultimate entities.”³¹

Perhaps there was a legitimate reason for their mistake. As Nicholas White has pointed out, Plato frequently exhibits a tendency to “assimilate the claim that a term is meaningful or significant with the claim that there is an entity in the universe that it in some sense stands for or picks out.”³² In other words, he sometimes makes Forms sound very much like great, big, perfect ‘things’, which is not really what they are. When Plato raises problems for this understanding of Forms in the first part of the *Parmenides*, Gerson contends, he is not rejecting his own account of Forms but the one that the so-called friends were espousing.

Gerson bolsters his contention by noting that for centuries Neo-Platonists, “universally supposed that Plato did not regard the arguments [in *Parmenides*] as fatal to Forms as he conceived them”³³ but that such “arguments were used in

³⁰ Lloyd P. Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, 216, 231.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 219.

³² Nicholas White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality*, 9. For examples, see passages like *Timaeus* 51C-D and *Phaedo* 75A.

³³ Lloyd P. Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, 228.

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the Academy to separate inadequate from adequate understandings of Forms.”³⁴ Pieter d’Hoine likewise situates *Parmenides* in this illuminating context.³⁵ The upshot is that the criticisms of Forms presented in part one do not apply to Plato’s own view of Forms but rather to a common misinterpretation of it.

In addition to the external evidence Gerson mentions, there is internal evidence that supports this point, which arises from the special features of the *Parmenides* dialogue itself. The most striking peculiarity concerns Socrates’ role in the discussion. The vast majority of Plato’s dialogues depict a mature Socrates in dialogue with members of other philosophical schools. Normally, Socrates is found challenging opponents to examine the validity of their assumptions, ones the reader might suspect Plato regards as untenable.

In the *Parmenides*, however, Socrates is depicted as the unlearned pupil of Parmenides and Zeno, philosophers Plato regarded as his own forerunners. Atypically, Socrates is represented as the over-confident advocate of the view being challenged in the dialogue. This seems to signal that the *Parmenides*, unlike other dialogues that mainly relate interschool debates, is a conversation amongst proponents of Platonism itself. As Gerson contends, it is a pedagogical text that was composed to help students of Platonism differentiate between accurate and inaccurate versions of Plato’s Theory of Forms—and it is not insignificant that Aristotle, the master of knowledge by abstraction himself, is called onto the scene to help explain what knowing Forms really means.

When regarded as an intraschool discussion and pedagogical text, the *Parmenides* emerges as a mature restatement of the account of Forms and recollection Plato had already articulated in places like *Phaedo*, rather than a mid-career rejection of it. Plato offers his restatement through the example of the dialectical exercises. In presenting these, his primary concern as ever was

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Pieter d’Hoine, “Four Problems Concerning the Theory of Ideas: Proclus, Syrianus and the Ancient Commentaries on the *Parmenides*,” in *Platonic Ideas and Concept Formation in Greek and Medieval Thought*.

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not to impose actual philosophical positions but to communicate what would help the willing student learn how to learn.

All this evidence notwithstanding, some readers may still insist that Plato abandons the theory of Forms at this stage in his career on the grounds that he virtually eliminates all references to Forms in later dialogues. In the subsequently composed *Theaetetus*, for instance, Plato makes no appeal to Forms whatsoever. Though this is true, one need not conclude that he abandons his ideas about Forms and recollection if one conceives of recollection as abstraction, for one can see that the concept of knowledge he espouses in the later texts is consistent with the one propounded in earlier works.

In the *Theaetetus*, for instance, Plato indicates that there are no innate ideas—only an innate capacity for knowing—as he likens the human mind to a birdcage that is empty at birth.³⁶ On his account, one forms ideas in the mind in the way one might gather birds into a cage: originally, “one has none of them; it is only that one has acquired a certain power with respect to them,”³⁷ that is, a power to get them under control and enclose them. At times, Plato writes, the effort to enclose an idea is not entirely straightforward; in grasping at ideas as they fly about, in hopes of gaining some desired understanding, one may seize hold of something that does not actually satisfy that desire.³⁸ For this reason, it is often necessary to make numerous attempts to gain understanding before the sought-after understanding is actually obtained.

Whenever anyone captures a concept in this cognitive ‘pen’, Plato states, “we should say the this one has learned.”³⁹ Having done so, one “has the power to hunt for any idea one likes at any time, to take it and have it whenever one chooses, and let it go again.”⁴⁰ The idea that has been formed is a permanent resource readily available to aid in future efforts to gain understanding.

³⁶ Plato, *Theaetetus* 197E.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 197E.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 199B.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 197C.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 197D.

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Although Plato fails to mention the recollection of Forms in this context, it seems obvious that he is not rejecting that theory but only explaining in a new way the process of discursive reasoning he described elsewhere under the rubric of recollecting Forms. While there are readily detectable alterations in terminology and methodology from the early to the middle to the later dialogues, there does not appear to have been any monumental change in the basic structures of Plato's thought. From start to finish, he conceives of cognition along the same lines. The 'doctrines' of Forms and recollection he put forward in the middle of his career were not philosophical positions to be accepted or rejected so much as they were means to explaining how to engage in an abstractive mode of cognition.

That is the approach to cognition that is taken in the search for definitions in the early dialogues, and it is the one that Plato describes in terms of perceiving unity in difference or even in terms of bird cages in the later dialogues. Although it is true that Plato rephrased his account of recollection in these works, he only apparently did so in the interest of highlighting the true contours of his account in the face of those 'friends of the Forms' who had misunderstood it. Far from revising his views on how to learn how to learn, Plato spent his career looking for fresh and effective ways to explain the method of inquiry that was the hallmark of his thought.

IV

Already, I have intimated that the interpretation of recollection as abstraction I am espousing tends to reconfigure the ontological status of Forms. On this interpretation, 'going to the Forms' or knowing them means forming universal concepts, which become even broader or more universal as knowledge is accumulated. Accordingly, the Forms themselves are those intangible entities whereby things of a similar sort are related and united. Rather than free standing, fixed entities to which thoughts must exactly correspond, Forms are

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'henological' entities, after the Greek word for 'one' (*hen*),⁴¹ which exist inasmuch as they exhibit unity, and which are known to the extent that the human mind encompasses all that the Form itself includes.

For Plato, it is not merely Forms but all things that exist to the extent that they exhibit unity, and there is nothing that fails to do so. Natural objects, for example, manifest oneness in the sense that they have essences that hold their parts together and dictate how those parts should cooperate to perform particular functions, by means of which the beings become the beings they were made to be. Although natural objects are united in this way, they do not manifest a unity that gives them power to encompass other things. For this reason, they exist 'less' than the Forms that do have this unifying power. The Form of Beauty, for example, is so abstract as to be able to include many other things in its 'henological' category. Because this Form exists and includes all conceivable manifestations of beauty, Plato writes in the *Phaedo*, it is possible for embodied beings to be beautiful in different ways, to different degrees, and to grow in their distinct ways of being beautiful.⁴²

Just as human ideas about Forms improve as the mind situates more of its objects under the conceptual categories it has crafted, so objects participate in Forms the more they exhibit the qualities whereby the Forms unify similar things, that is, the more they encompass all that the Forms by definition include. Participation in a Form does not involve any one-to-one correspondence, however shadowy, between an instance of an essence and the essence itself, consequently. Rather, it is a matter of greater and lesser degrees.

Insofar as Forms are henological entities, they are not ends of knowledge in themselves, as is presupposed in the essentialist model, according to which a successful attempt to know a Form ends with a thought that fully corresponds to it. Far from cognitive termini, Forms point beyond themselves to the higher Forms or levels of unity in which they themselves are included. The Form of a

⁴¹ Leo Sweeney, "Basic Principles in Plotinus' Philosophy," in *Divine Infinity in Greek and Medieval Thought*, 255: on the difference between ontology and henology.

⁴² Plato, *Phaedo* 102B-D.

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tree, for example, is a Form that can help one make sense of one's experiences of many kinds of vegetation. Yet that Form itself points towards others that are even more encompassing, such as the Forms of 'brown' and 'hard', which include not only trees but all sorts of other beings. The Form of Brown, in turn, is included in the Form of Color, which is included in the Form of Beauty.

The higher Forms precontain the lower ones because they always already include that which exists to a lesser degree. To know the higher Forms, consequently, is to implicitly know the lower ones, their functions, limitations, and their proper places with respect to one another. To be a successful knower of Forms is not to regard Forms as ontologically totalized ends of knowledge in themselves but to see them as steps towards the knowledge of higher Forms.

The higher a Form, the more it unites, exists, and is akin to the one Form that includes and unites all other Forms and objects that participate in Forms like Colour by variously manifesting beauty. This Form is the Good, which is the source of the specific sort of unity that all sensible and intelligible things have and that therefore causes them to be and to be good in a finite respect. The Good exists more than anything else because it includes more than anything else: everything. Because it unifies all things, it is the proper object of all efforts to consider things in unifying terms.

The point of Plato's *Symposium* is apparently precisely this, namely, that what is ultimate is the true goal of all knowing; and that for this reason, one should proceed past narrow-minded ideas of, in this case, beauty, in the way one would climb the rungs of a ladder and gain a broader perspective on what is below, gradually acquiring a more inclusive concept of what is beautiful that allows one to see the beauty in all things.⁴³ The first rung of the ladder represents the ability to discern the beauty of a particular body.⁴⁴ By refusing to fixate on this body as if it were the only beautiful thing, one can come to the realization that there is beauty in many bodies.⁴⁵

⁴³ Idem., *Symposium* 210A-12C.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 210A.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 210A-B.

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This experience may lead to the discovery that there is beauty in human souls that is more precious than the beauty of bodies, which may in turn enable the knower to identify the beauty in a wide range of perspectives, customs, activities, and so on. If one finally forms a habit of finding the beauty in not just one or a few but in all things, then one comes to know the Form of Beauty Itself, which is not to gaze on some ontologically totalized thing in itself but to acquire the skill of seeing every single thing inasmuch as it is beautiful.⁴⁶

The goal of knowing particular Forms, according to Plato, is to achieve this broad-minded perspective: the awareness of the universal that makes sense of particulars. Contrary to what is commonly supposed, then, coming to know the universal Form, for Plato, does not mean abandoning the physical world or denigrating the senses. To the contrary, it means obtaining for the first time the level of understanding at which one can see things in the physical realm in their proper places with respect to one another and show appreciation for them accordingly.

Implicitly, Plato acknowledges that this level of understanding is difficult to achieve, as a result of the fact that human beings make first contact with the many different instantiations of Beauty and are therefore predisposed to take instances of Beauty as ultimate goods, rather than as signs of the existence of a Higher Good. This tendency creates all kinds of problems in the *polis*, for it causes human beings to reduce the Form of the Good to some specific good and to stake all hopes for happiness on a finite good that is bound to be fleeting or hard to find in the realm of human experience.

In overestimating the goodness of the finite good, human beings set themselves up for disappointment as well as for conflict with those who have different ideas as to what the ultimate good is. The natural human resistance to seeing the good in any but a finite good, in summary, inhibits the ability to see what is good in all circumstances, and thus renders it impossible to be happy. A keen awareness of this situation and its problematic political and practical repercussions seems to stand behind Plato's efforts to point the way out of the

⁴⁶ Ibid., 211A-D.

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situation as he does in the *Republic*. The parallel metaphors of the sun, the divided line, and the cave he presents there illustrate how one can habituate oneself to attend from finite goods, first sensible, then intelligible to that Good which imparts the goodness of all good things, and thereby check the human tendency to fixate on the finite goods themselves as if they had infinite powers to bring happiness.

According to Plato, this is the training that is required to become a philosopher-king, or a ruler of the city.⁴⁷ While ordinary citizens and craftsmen are preoccupied with their particular line of work, and are prone to regard it as of utmost importance, a person who has relinquished all limited ideas of what is ultimately Good and has therefore formed a habit of finding the good in all things, is able to identify how to order the city in a way that works for the benefit of all.

The allegory of the cave is of course the most famous attempt Plato makes to teach his interlocutors how to do this. In presenting it, Plato asks his readers to imagine a group of prisoners trapped deep inside a cave and chained such that they can only stare at a wall. Behind the prisoners, a fire blazes, and between them and the fire, a variety of objects are carried back and forth so that they cast shadows on the wall. Those shadows are the only reality the prisoners know.

If a prisoner manages to break free and turn around to face the fire, Plato writes, he is bound to be blinded by the light at first and thus unable to see the objects he previously perceived in a shadowy way. At last, however, his eyes adjust; he can perceive the objects and proceed to make his way out of the cave into the light of day. On arriving at the cave's opening, the former prisoner is blinded once again by the brightness of a light that is too strong for his eyes to bear and that prevents him from seeing the objects that surround him.

Once his eyes adjust again, however, he can see the world of Forms outside the cave by the light of the sun. Ultimately, he can turn his gaze to the sun or the Good Itself and recognize that entity as the source of the light by

⁴⁷ Idem., *Republic* 519B.

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which he had seen shadows, then shapes, and finally, the world outside the cave. The one who reaches this point, Plato insists, is able, so long as he is willing, to go back down into the cave and bring his clear understanding of things to bear in efforts to help those that lack such knowledge see how to order their lives.⁴⁸

Here in the *Republic*, as in the *Symposium*, the idea is not to denigrate the senses or to suggest that they must be transcended and abandoned if genuine knowledge is to be attained. To the contrary, the point of the cave metaphor is to encourage readers to overcome narrow concepts of what is ultimately Good by checking the human tendency to think of finite things as though they are all-inclusive and all-important so as to gradually habituate themselves to see that there is good in all things, which is what it means to see the Good Itself. Far from dividing sense from intellect and downplaying the former, Plato is explaining the only way to learn to appreciate and appropriately use all that the world has to offer.

By unlearning the tendency to regard specific things as ultimate goods and learning to see the ultimate Good in each specific thing, the philosopher-king acquires the skill required to order the city by coordinating its citizens and their unique contributions in a way that fosters the well being of all. Here at last the practical and ethical importance of the theory of Forms comes into relief, inasmuch as the knowledge of the Form of the Good emerges as that which equips one to govern the *polis* Plato envisions in the *Republic* in a manner that promotes the Common Good, eudaimonia, or happiness of all.⁴⁹

V

The primary objective of this essay was to rethink the nature of Platonic recollection in terms of abstraction. The study of a number of relevant passages, especially in *Phaedrus* and *Parmenides*, confirmed that such a reading of recollection finds support in Plato's writings. At the same time, it highlighted

⁴⁸ Plato, *Republic* 514A-20.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 327 & 514-20.

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the continuity of Plato's thought on Forms over the three phases of his career. The work that was done to reassess the meaning of recollection simultaneously re-constructed Forms as homologizing or unifying entities that propel the mind through higher grades of universality until the 'most universal' universal, namely, Form of the Good, is grasped, such that the practical, ethical, or political goal of the theory of Forms can be fulfilled, which is happiness.

In relating recollection and abstraction, Forms and universals, the knowledge of the Good and eudaimonia, I have hinted at the continuity of thought that connects the works of Plato and Aristotle. Even more, I have suggested that Plato's theory of Forms and recollection—far from an outmoded account of reality and knowledge—provides a viable explanation of what and how human beings go about knowing, which has the added benefit of instructing them how they may obtain what they want: happiness and harmony.

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Human Life and Its Value: Would You Want to Be a Brain in a Cyborg?

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Introduction

If human life is a foundational human good, as some of us think, then its value cannot be strictly proven. As a foundational good, it is an ultimate starting point in practical reasoning (“it is what I am finally striving for”), and as a foundational good, it is an ultimate resting point for the human heart (“in it I can find enormous fulfillment”). But to maintain that human life is a foundational good that cannot be strictly proven to be such does not mean that its value can only be grasped by appeal to opaque intuitions, which some people claim to have but few other people seem to have, or by strident insistence that its value is just obvious. Instead, the value of human life can be manifested by indirect proofs that back into a corner the person who denies its value and by dialectical considerations that lead to insight. An example of an indirect proof is the reduction-to-the-absurd argument outlined in Joseph Boyle, John Finnis, and Germain Grisez’s *Nuclear Deterrence, Morality and Realism*.¹ That argument says the denial of the goodness of human life entails a body-mind dualism which is untenable. Why body-mind dualism is untenable has been recently argued in brief by Christopher Tollefsen and Robert George in *Embryo: A Defense of Human Life*² and at length by Patrick Lee and Robert George in *Body-Self Dualism in Contemporary Ethics and Politics*.³ Indirect proofs for the value of human life like that one, however, are not for the philosophically fainthearted, whereas this article is. So, I turn instead to a dialectical consideration that leads to insight.

¹ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 307-309.

² (New York: Doubleday, 2008), chap.3.

³ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), chap.1.

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The argument that I will develop is a thought experiment. Since it does something similar to Robert Nozick's famous experience machine and it does this because it is a product of the reverse engineering of his thought experiment, let us recall and analyze the experience machine first.⁴

I. The Experience Machine

Suppose there were an experience machine that could stimulate your brain so that you had the subjective experience (thought, sensation, feeling, volition, and memory) of doing anything you deemed worthwhile. You will not do anything but lie in, on, or near the machine and experience. Do you want to hit the walk-off home run in the final game of the World Series, finally bringing a championship back to Chicago Cub fans? You can experience what that is like. Do you want to compose music like Mozart? You can experience that too. Any experience you can imagine is, in fact, available in the experience machine. Moreover, so good is the simulation of experiences in the machine that you cannot distinguish those experiences from the veridical experiences. Would you be willing to plug in? The right response (the reasonable response) is "no." We should, if we do not already, recognize that how our experiences feel from the inside is not the only thing we value.

In his 1983 book *Fundamentals of Ethics*,⁵ John Finnis critiques plugging into the experience machine, and he explains how the experience machine experiment shows more than the negation: "pleasure or, more generally, desirable subjective states are not all that matter most to us." Following some of Nozick's own suggestions, Finnis points out three things that matter to us deeply and are part of the positive content of human flourishing but that are lost in the experience machine. First, activity matters to us. We want to do things or at least try to do things, and the experience machine cuts genuine activity out of experience and leaves us completely passive. Though when plugged into the

⁴ *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 42-45.

⁵ (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1983), pp. 37-42.

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machine you might think you had raised a family, hit a home run, solved a math problem, or planted a tree, in fact you would have done nothing. You would have failed to drink the whole cup of life. As Finnis says about a life spent hooked up to the experience machine, it is as though “you never lived.” Thus, reflection on the experience machine reveals that human activity is desirable for itself.

Second, while the experience machine can provide appearances, it cannot provide the genuine contact with reality that we want. Illusions, ignorance, and dreams do not suffice. We want real species preservation in the biosphere rather than the illusion that all is well in the animal and plant kingdoms. We want actual people honestly and freely to love us rather than an electronic brain massage that makes us feel loved by other people. We want genuine understanding of the real world rather than the mere subjective conviction that we have the wisdom of Solomon. As Finnis puts this point, to opt for the experience machine “would be to bury oneself in a tomb far deeper than Plato’s Cave.” At least Plato’s prisoners had genuine conversation with one another about the shadows they beheld.

Third, Finnis says that plugging into the experience machine also costs people their very identity. How so? Certainly, a person’s generic identity as a certain type of thing—a human being—would endure. We would say “The human being Bob Anderson previously was not in the experience machine, now is, and later is no longer.” So also, strict or numerical identity would also be maintained. Unlike the *Star Trek* teleporter that only can produce duplicates of the original, the experience machine leaves in tact the original person that plugged in. We can point to the same spatial and temporal ‘this’ before, during, and after the encounter with the experience machine. Moreover, much of a person’s specific identity would survive as well. Concrete memories, linguistic abilities, the Pythagorean theorem, a short-temper, the hankering for prime rib, the dream of living to a ripe old age, and more would all survive the experience machine. So, if these personality traits were part of a person’s specific identity before, then a person would, it seems, still possess them

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afterwards. What then is the personal identity that Finnis thinks is lost in the experience machine? It is two more aspects of a person's specific identity. First and in agreement with Nozick, some personality traits would be lost in the machine and others would remain undeveloped. If we were a dedicated, loving parent before, we would no longer remain so after an extended stint in the machine because we would have failed to make the repeated choices that maintain our character as that sort of parent. Likewise, if we were not already this or that kind of person, the chance to develop into this or that kind would be lost so long as a person was in the machine. In short, what is commonly called *personal character* would be at risk, for it is something that can only be constructed and maintained by genuine acts of the will.⁶ Second, Finnis maintains that the choices I make, besides making me a type of person, also construct the *I* that I am. My choices create the particular narrative that make *me* married or in the Army, an owner or a debtor, committed to a friendship or inattentive and uncaring, morally good or bad, deserving of praise or punishment, and so forth. Choices make people not only what's but also who's. They do not just create *a* character for a person, but also a person's *own* character. Since choices would cease while a person was plugged into the experience machine, the creation of a particular personal character or a particular personal narrative would also cease while a person remained plugged into the experience machine.

II. The Cyborg Thought Experiment

Now, a second thought experiment. Suppose that after Cyberdyne Systems Corp.—the maker of the experience machine—fails dismally because a discriminating public snubs its first product, the company reorganizes as Cyborgdyne Systems Corp. and next ventures into human cyborgs. Its new product rectifies the shortcomings of the experience machine. No more

⁶ For more on the significance of acts of will for moral agents, see Christopher Tollefsen, "Experience Machines, Dreams, and What Matters," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 37 (2003) 153-164.

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simulated or faux experiences. Users of the new product will remain active in and in contact with the world. All aspects of personal identity will also remain. In fact, users might in some ways live more fully than ever before, and they might become more fully the people that they have always wanted to be.

Cyborgdyne's new product is a cyborg body that will replace most of a person's natural, organic body. All of the cyborg body's parts and functions are synthetic. The cyborg body is a complex, sophisticated, high-tech, man-made product that can do all that an organic body can do and more. You can retain a human appearance (even your own), the five senses, and the ability to move, eat, drink, and breathe in all the ways that you currently can. You can have sensations, emotions, memories, imagination, hopes, dreams, thoughts, and choices just as you do now. So also, your interior existence can be as seamless with your exterior existence as it is now. The interface between body and psyche which now leads you to say, "I don't have or possess a body; I am a body," is preserved so that you will experience your cyborg body as your very self. You too will be led to say, "I don't have or possess a cyborg body; I am a cyborg." You will experience your cyborg body as your very self, but you will also know the sober truth that most of your body is a man-made machine and not really you at all. In addition, your cyborg body will be readily and painlessly repairable after injury, mutilation, and disfigurement. As well, it will be immune to hideous, crippling, and deadly diseases. Finally, it will be able to escape the ravages of time and many horrors of old age.

The details of how an organic body is swapped out for a cyborg body are unimportant. Cyborgdyne takes care of the details. Cyborgdyne *knows* cyborgs. Perhaps a person's brain plus anything else essential for personal identity and numerical identity are transplanted into a cyborg. Perhaps, instead, the cyborg comes to the person rather than the person to the cyborg. A colony of nanobots (molecular-sized robots), for example, might be injected, and they might cannibalize the body's cellular components, replicate themselves, coordinate their activity, and organize into highly complex systems, all the while leaving the brain or brain-plus-whatever-else alone. In either case, the

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crux of the brain-in-a-cyborg thought experiment is the preservation of all that is lost in the experience machine (which thus makes it immune to all of Nozick's and Finnis' criticisms) and the elimination of most all, and as much as possible, human biological life. Certainly much of our biological life is not necessary for personal identity and numerical identity to remain in tact, and this thought experiment pushes that fact to its limit. (Think, for example, about how personal identity and numerical identity survive mutilation, disfigurement, severed limbs, broken spinal cords, organ and bone marrow transplants, joint replacements, blood transfusions, cell replacement, cochlea implants, pacemakers, insulin pumps, and more.) The crucial question is, of course: would you want to be a brain (or brain-plus-whatever-else) in a cyborg?

I suspect that our answer to this question will not be as immediate as the rejection of the offer to plug into the experience machine, especially as we contemplate the attractiveness of some of a cyborg body's amenities. Nonetheless, the answer for many of us would be in the end, "No, I don't want to be a cyborg even with all its amenities." Moreover, that "no" need not be a mere expression of stubborn resistance to change, sentimentality for the natural and organic, or nostalgia for our historical mode of existence. Nor need the rejection of cyborg existence merely express a mild preference between minimally different alternatives. Rather, from the rejection of the cyborg option we can recognize that something matters to us in addition to personality traits, character, self-constitution, and numerical identity. We can recognize that human biological life is also a great good which matters to us

But why does our biological life matter to us? In recognizing the goodness of human biological life we have drilled down almost as far as we can go, but we have not yet hit bedrock. We can still ask what is at the bottom of biological life's importance to us. Perhaps one reason for its importance is that, if something is going to exist physically, then it has to exist in some way or other, and we recognize that existing as a living organism is one desirable way of physically instantiating the good of existence. After all, organic life is a beautiful thing and an engineering marvel. Perhaps a second reason is that our

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biological life ties each of us to the whole family of man (past and present) and puts us in communion with the living world. Each of us shows up on this planet with something else here that is and has been like us. That we are not alone in this world but rather born into the community of humankind and the living is also something we value. Perhaps a third reason is that biological life is just one of the brute facts about us that also constitutes who we are. Like other brute facts—living on planet Earth, close but not too close to a helpful star, male or female, born in the 20th century, and so forth—they need not have been, but since they are and since they construct who we are, they are great gifts the universe has given us.

While many of us would reject the opportunity to be a brain in a cyborg, not all of us might. This fact points to a difference between the experience-machine thought experiment and the brain-in-a-cyborg thought experiment. The former requires that every person should reject the option of plugging into the experience machine. In contrast, the brain-in-a-cyborg thought experiment does not require unanimous rejection of the cyborg option to show its point. Perhaps existence as a cyborg is also good and choiceworthy,⁷ but so long as some of us can reasonably say “we would not want to be cyborgs” then the experiment has done its work. After all, no basic human good—not health, knowledge, beauty, friendship, sport, or any of the rest—is desired and pursued by every single person. One can always find someone somewhere who does not like kids, is careless of health, finds that beauty leaves her flat, turns a cold shoulder to physical exertion in sport, or is uninterested in whether God exists and whether we owe him anything, if he does. Goods are not basic because every single person is equally attracted to each one of them. Instead, goods are basic because at least some people do find them to be ultimate sources of human fulfillment, and no good reasons exist to deny that those goods can function in this way.

⁷ Although the cyborg option might be good and choiceworthy, exercising that option by swapping an organic body for a synthetic body might still run afoul of moral norms prohibiting the intentional destruction of one good for the sake of the realization of another good.

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III. Four Objections

First, a person might object that since at least brain life remains in the brain-in-a-cyborg thought experiment, the thought experiment does not show that the whole of human biological life is a fundamental good. True enough. The experiment does not swap out brain life for something else. But brain life (or brain life plus) is retained to maintain personal identity and numerical identity, and the value of those identities has been shown, or can be shown, by reflection on what is lost in Nozick's experience machine, teletransportation, and other thought experiments which filter out aspects of personal identity and numerical identity. So, the value of brain life (or brain life plus whatever else is needed to preserve personal identity and numerical identity) has been, or can easily be, also established.

A person might object in a second way: the brain-in-a-cyborg thought experiment fails to consider several familiar problems in the philosophical literature on the relation of brains to personal identity. For example, in a cerebrum transplant would personality identity come with the cerebrum, or stay with the cerebrum-less brain, or both, or neither? Would splitting a brain with identical hemispheres and then transplanting each hemisphere into a different body result in two new people, or one old and one new person, or one old person in two new bodies? How we answer these questions might impact what we should say about a brain in cyborg, so says the objector. But, I do not see how. While undoubtedly puzzles about personal identity exist, my argument does not require a solution to those puzzles. So long as the brain in a cyborg preserves the conditions of personal identity and numerical identity together with a divorce from most of our generic identity as living animals, then the thought experiment does its work. Whether all of the brain, part of the brain, or the brain plus other bodily parts and systems is required for personal identity and numerical identity can be left unresolved.

A person might object in yet a third way: though the brain-in-a-cyborg thought experiment does seem to show something, it is not clear that it shows

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what it is supposed to, namely, that human biological life is a *fundamental* good. A person might object that since nobody is satisfied just being alive, human biological life is not an ultimate good. No one would choose to exist as a frozen, non-developing embryo, or asleep in a coma, or in a persistent vegetative state, or behind the mental eclipse that results from advanced stages of Pick's and Alzheimer's disease. So, biological life is not valuable in itself. While, no doubt, human life adequately impoverished is not attractive, the problem with this objection is that it demands more of fundamental goods than they can deliver. Its excessive demands result from the conflation of valuable *for itself* with valuable *by itself*. I doubt anything in this world is desirable by itself. No good by itself is so good that it can absorb completely the attention of minds like ours and the affection of hearts like ours. Just the opposite is the case. People always want an ensemble of goods, and the removal of even one can leave the rest disappointing. The mind of Stephen Hawking and all the rest that comes from that with the unhealthy body of Stephen Hawking is not desirable. Health, knowledge, and beauty in isolation on a deserted island disappoint. The Shakers' life of God, family, community, and craftsmanship coupled with profound ignorance, or psychological illness, or a guilty conscience come up short. But that the pursuit of any fundamental good by itself is found to be deficient says nothing about the pursuit of it for itself. Something is choiceworthy for itself because it is sought for the goodness it brings us, as opposed to its functioning as the means to yet something else that may or may not fulfill us.

Finally, a person might try one last time: instead of proving that human biological life is a fundamental good, one might object, the brain-in-a-cyborg thought experiment only shows that such life has derivative goodness. It is neutral, and the only goodness it has is a product of the goods made possible because a person is alive, such as knowledge, love, and the enjoyment of the beautiful. According to this objection, it is all the extras that make human life good, not the life itself. This objection, however, fails to pay attention to the illustrative force of the thought experiment. If the extras in life are what make

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human biological life good, then the extras in life would also make existence as a cyborg good. Yet many of us would not want to be cyborgs. We want to be the living animals that we are. So, human biological life is desirable for itself. That life's goodness is not dependent on the extras is also evident from reflection on the enormous satisfaction derived when life is achieved but the extras are still an open question. When parents bring forth new life into this world, they are tremendously pleased even though the child may not live out the day. After doctors have patched together the violent inner-city gang member who has been stabbed or shot, they can be quite satisfied at that moment even though the gang member later may revert to former ways and die in the next fight. If in 1889 a local villager pushed a young, unsuspecting Joseph Stalin away from a runaway horse-drawn cart in his mountain-side Georgian village, the life saved was a life worth saving regardless of what the young Joseph Stalin was ultimately to become. In each case, people can honestly say: "So far, so good. We have served the good of life."

IV. A Few Moral Considerations

The recognition that human biological life is fundamental human good rather than an instrumental good (like money or dental work) or a secondary good (like pleasure and enjoyment) or a derivative good (like honor and fame) is an important truth, but that truth does not, of course, by itself establish what, if anything, is the appropriate response by us to its reality. In fact, people have strenuous moral obligations with regard to human life precisely because it is a fundamental good, and these obligations follow the general pattern of our obligations to other basic goods. The short answer to the question "what are our obligations to human life?" is: To promote the good of human life and to respect that good by not intentionally harming it. As for promoting human life, the obligation is indeterminate with respect to when, how often, and to what extent people are required to promote human life. As for respecting human life, the obligation not to harm is indefeasible for all people and in all circumstances.

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Here are a few brief considerations which make more plausible the claim that our obligations to human life are as stated.

Consider this alternative to the obligation to promote human life sometimes: promote the good of life always. That we are obligated always to promote human life might seem to be plausible because the good of life in itself and in its well-being (health) is presupposed in the pursuit of all other goods. We cannot pursue anything when we are dead, and we cannot pursue many goods when we are ill or injured. But, even though life is a necessary condition for human pursuits, it is not the only good that human beings want. A world in which every inhabitant is uninjured, healthy, and secure in the possession of life is not a happy world, if its inhabitants are merely uninjured, healthy, and alive. The answer to the question “what are they doing now that they uninjured, healthy, and alive?” will decide whether or not they are happy. Because other things matter to us and matter deeply to us, we often can reasonably risk life and neglect health when we are in pursuit of other goods besides life. Thus, the obligation to promote human life is limited.

Next, consider three alternatives to the obligation never to harm human life intentionally, and consider first the supposed necessity involved in moral dilemmas. Cannot people sometimes be in difficult circumstances such that, no matter what they do, they must harm human life? For example, when the evil tyrant presents us with only two alternatives “you kill persons P, R, and Q or your loved ones will be killed,” then are we not stuck? Either way we must do harm, no? Moreover, if ought implies can and if sometimes we must intentionally do evil, then sometimes doing evil must be morally permissible. In fact, though, all moral dilemmas are only apparent. For, whatever the circumstances, the option of doing nothing at all is always among a person’s options, and when a person does nothing, the person does not harm anyone. No doubt, in many circumstances the world or other people will do harm while a person stands on the sidelines doing nothing. Similarly, no doubt, the opportunity for doing the good of preventing the world or other people from doing harm will be lost while a person stands on the sidelines doing nothing.

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Nonetheless, if a person decides to do nothing, that person does no harm, and the refusal to do harm by doing nothing provides an escape from the bind which putative moral dilemmas appear to cause.

Second, we might think that there is hierarchy among fundamental goods such that intentionally harming a lower good is justified when it is done for the sake of a higher good. If such a hierarchy exists, what good is highest? Human life? But if human life is highest, then we will not find in the appeal to a hierarchy of goods a justification of intentional harm to human life. For in that case, lower goods can be attacked for its sake, but it cannot be attacked for their sake.

How about autonomy instead? Certainly, autonomy is prized by all, and many people view it as the preeminent and overarching good. Accordingly, if a person wants to die, then the person is permitted to bring about her death because bringing it about is an expression of autonomy. But if autonomy is the highest good, then ending another person's life even when the person wants to live should also be permissible because ending the person's life can be the expression of somebody else's autonomy. Most people, however, find this conclusion morally unacceptable. The deep problem with autonomy as the highest good is that autonomy by itself cannot explain why we should take other people's autonomy more seriously than our own when their wishes conflict with ours. After all, they are no more and no less willing agents than we are. If their wishes matter, then so do our wishes. So, their desire for X can be countered by our desire for their not having X, and thus autonomy can not guide us in what we should do. One might try again to defend autonomy by adding something else like a principle of consistency. Accordingly, we should respect other people's autonomy by not overriding their wishes so that in consistency they too will be obligated to respect our autonomy by not overriding our wishes. Consistency, however, is a two-edged sword. Instead of the non-compete agreement and détente of wills that results from mutual non-violations of autonomy, we could just as well opt for competition and conflict among wills and agree that to the victor go the spoils. Thus, we are allowed to attempt to

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violate other people's autonomy when doing so suits us, and in consistency other people are allowed to attempt to violate our autonomy when doing so suits them. Since which version of consistency we embrace is arbitrary, so also is a morality founded on the combination of autonomy and consistency as the highest good.

The previous failure to identify the highest good indicates the difficulty in maintaining a hierarchy of fundamental goods. Indeed, every candidate for the highest good can be defeated by careful inspection of the good and its functioning in the lives of real people. Because a hierarchy of fundamental goods is ultimately indefensible, reference to such a hierarchy will not justify the intentional harm of human life.

Finally, we might think that the losses caused by the intentional harm of human life can be balanced against the gains brought about by the intentional harm. Since the gains might sometimes outweigh the losses, we are sometimes justified in harming human life intentionally. This calculation of losses and gains is the utilitarian's creed. However, no one has ever produced a plausible utilitarian calculation of anything. Invariably, utilitarian calculations are never calculations of something objective. Instead, they rely on base appeals to preexisting biases or feelings. For example, the utilitarian might ask us to suppose that the life of a multi-murderer is worth 80% of the life of an innocent person, that a multi-murderer unless executed will kill seven more people, and thus that the execution of a multi-murderer brings about more good than bad. Or, again, we might be asked to contemplate the merits of abortion when the female has been raped...and is a young girl...and her own uncle was the rapist...and the baby suffers terrible birth defects...and so forth. Since talk in ethics of *balancing* pros and cons or *weighing* goods and evils is ultimately an empty metaphor, we cannot justify intentional harm to human life by appeal to concepts like *balancing* or *weighing*.

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Conclusion

Admittedly, the last section is an extremely brief and general account of our moral requirements with respect to human life. For present purposes, the crucial point is that the goodness of human life is not an idle curiosity. Rather, it makes a difference morally. Showing what difference it makes, however, requires the elaboration of moral theory.

Just as the cyborg thought experiment can lead us to recognize the goodness of human life, so also recognizing the goodness of human life can also enable us to make sense of human experience. Why, for example, are even post-menopausal women sometimes reluctant to remove a cancerous uterus or cancerous ovaries? Certainly, fear of medical complications is one reason. But the main reason in many instances seems to be sorrow over the prospect that bodily parts intimate to their reality as women and child-bearers will be lost. Again, why do some war veterans refuse to remove a functionless, unfeeling arm damaged from war injuries? Certainly, hopes of restoration and aversion to disfigurement are some reasons. But another reason seems to be an unwillingness to sacrifice the good of bodily integrity. Finally, why are some people reluctant to and why do other people refuse to replace a dying heart with a baboon's heart or a mechanical heart? Certainly, there are many reasons. But included among the reasons also seems to be a desire to remain fully what they are and always have been: a living human organism.

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The Moral Virtues and Instrumentalism in Epicurus

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Julia Annas, in *The Morality of Happiness*, claims that the more traditional interpretation of Epicurus—i.e., one which sees him along more straightforward hedonistic or monistic lines and therefore as recommending justice and the other moral virtues as instrumental means to one's pleasure—is mistaken. She argues that Epicurus regards virtue as a part of happiness, that he takes seriously the independent value of the moral virtues, and so agrees, or is in alignment, with the likes of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics. However, Annas' treatment of Epicurus' ethics is controversial and open to several crucial objections. My objective in this paper is to try to cash out these objections. It is my belief that the traditional interpretation of Epicurus' ethics is indeed the correct one.

Instead of viewing him in the traditional sense, that is, along more straightforward hedonistic or monistic lines and therefore as recommending justice and the other moral virtues as means to one's pleasure or self-confined end, Annas, in her *TMOH*, begins by arguing that Epicurus has something like John Stuart Mill's position in mind when he speaks of his ultimate end (p.339). She interprets his relation between the moral virtues and an individual's happiness or pleasure as implying something to the effect that we can seek a thing such as virtue, for its own sake when we seek it 'as a part of happiness'. The thought is that the virtues like friendship and justice are parts or ingredients of happiness, and that in aiming for it one is thereby aiming for them; consequently they are valued for themselves and not for a relation that they bear to it.

This is problematic. That is, it is somewhat odd that Annas would attempt to elucidate Epicurus' position by comparing it to Mill's when Mill's own claims about happiness are taken by most—and rightly so it would seem—to be discordant.¹ Mill is a hedonist who conceives of happiness or welfare as pleasure and absence of pain (*Utilitarianism*, 2.2). Following in the British

¹ G.E. Moore, e.g., was convinced Mill was uttering "contemptible nonsense" (*Principia Ethica*, 1959, p.72).

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utilitarian, empiricist tradition of Bentham, happiness, for Mill, in its starting point, is plainly concerned with the maximization of the *feeling* of pleasure and the minimization of the *feeling* of pain. However, when Mill goes on to speak more in detail about the substantive content of happiness, he appears to trade on the ambiguity in English between *pleasure* and *a pleasure*. That is, between pleasure as a feeling or experiential state—as was standard in the utilitarian tradition²—and the pleasure-source or activity; for instance, between saying something like reading produces or gives you pleasure or that reading is a pleasure of yours. This apparent equivocation on ‘pleasure’ enables Mill to speak of certain states or activities, such as music, health and virtue, *as pleasures*. This, in turn, allows him to call these sorts of activities *ends in themselves, as integral parts* of happiness. But if the ultimate goal of happiness is a feeling of pleasure it cannot also be a composite of states and activities that are sources of this pleasure. The only value activities connected to happiness *as construed in this way*, i.e., as a feeling of pleasure, can have is a causal or instrumental one. Mill, it would seem, is not entitled to have it both ways. *Either* he is a hedonist in the way he starts out, i.e., where happiness as pleasure is some distinct and self-confined psychic state, and where therefore activities like the virtues are viewed as merely instruments for its acquisition, *or* he is some sort of non-hedonist pluralist concerning happiness, perhaps in the Aristotelian vein, and attaches to activities like the virtues a value that is independent of their bringing about some enjoyable state of oneself. In any case, if Mill’s position is open to this incoherence, then an appeal to his conception of happiness on Annas’ part does not show that Epicurus can consistently hold the position that she ascribes to him.³

To put it somewhat differently: Although Annas *maintains throughout* that Epicurus’ position is a hedonistic one (e.g. p.334), she appeals to the workings of Mill’s position to show how it is that Epicurus makes his ultimate end emerge

² Bentham, for example, calls pleasures and pains ‘interesting perceptions’, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 5.1.

³ See Irwin, 1994.

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as somewhat more plural, comprising, among other things, the virtues such as justice. Yet, it is clear to most that Mill himself is not entitled to such a move if he is to retain his initial hedonism which says, not unlike Epicurus, that happiness just is the feeling of pleasure and absence of pain. Appealing specifically to Mill therefore, does not, at least in any outright convincing way, show how it is Epicurus can be a hedonist and yet be aligned with the other ancient theorists in holding to the independent value of the virtues.

A further problem, as it seems to me, is the extent to which Annas might be seen to exaggerate the similarities between Epicurus and Mill in regards to the completeness of their final end (happiness is complete, we remember from Aristotle, in so far as it achieves all that we want –EN 1097b20-21, EE 1215b17-18). Annas appeals to the position of Mill, which she likens in many of the relevant ways to Epicurus', in order to better make us see just how much Epicurus thinks virtue must be a part of the happy life, lest it be deemed incomplete (e.g. 236ff). However, judging from Chapter IV of his *Utilitarianism*, it is difficult not to see Mill as being far more worried about, or conservative with respect to, showing how pleasure or happiness could be our all-encompassing good (that it includes, among various other goods, the virtues) than Epicurus ever does. For instance, in that chapter Mill states that “the ingredients of happiness are very *various*” (italics added); some of the ingredients he mentions are money, power, fame, health, music, and, of course, virtue. He also says that “life would be a poor thing” if it did not contain all such “sources of happiness”, and that they are valuable in part with respect to the “space of human existence that they are capable of covering”. This sounds very much like someone intent on showing that the final end conceived of as pleasure or happiness has to be such as to incorporate or include what is commonly taken to be all, or many, of our worthwhile aims; the final end in life needs to allow in commitments to virtue and all sorts of other goods. But apart from perhaps a small passage in his *Letter to Menoeceus* (1 32), nowhere is it made as explicit or stressed as severely in Epicurus as it is in Mill that the final good has to be such as to accommodate all other aims, most importantly, the

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virtues, as part of it. This is a further sign, I think, not that Epicurus is not concerned with completeness –far from it (e.g. Cicero, *Fin* I 29), but rather, as pointed out above, that he holds more determinably to a monistic and self-confined final end than does Mill. That is, Mill thinks of completeness of happiness as covering a great range of necessary goods and activities presumably because, coherently or not, he conceives of pleasure or happiness as having many parts. Epicurus takes the completeness of happiness in a different sense because for him what seems to matter is only the state of pleasure or *ataraxia* that results –the goods or activities are not as indispensable to those results as they are in Mill. What appears to matter for Epicurus is not so much the things we have or do, or whether our life is cut short (Cicero, *Fin* II 87-8; *KD* 19, 20), but rather the condition of being untroubled, and this makes more sense if we see him as *not* holding a part or component view of happiness, but rather, a view of happiness as an entirely self-confined state of mind.

This last point, Epicurus' apparent thesis that pleasure, the final end in life (if achieved), does not make a longer life any better than a shorter life, is, it seems to me, particularly revealing in this regard. The idea here seems to be that if I can achieve *ataraxia* now, at a young age, then I will have no reason to desire to live until old age rather than to die now; and this is because if I am already happy now, more time cannot give me anything I do not now already have. But one might wonder how pleasure construed in this way and fit to be our final end is meant to be such as to fully include the exercise and demands of the moral virtues, or, for that matter, many of life's other goods, as we find in Mill. We usually think of the other-regarding virtues as committing us to the kind of concern for others which extends far into the future; similarly, we normally think of many of life's other goods as long-term projects to be fulfilled. But what real sense can be made of such commitments if living a life free of irritation, trouble and disturbance is good, without being made better, if this life, along with those commitments, is cut short? Again, this is not to suggest that Epicurus is not concerned with the notion of completeness. It is

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only to say that he has drastically shifted the application of completeness because he presumably holds a particular self-confined and monistic final end.

But Annas is not dependent solely on an appeal to Mill in order to encourage an interpretation of Epicurus as someone who regards virtue as a part of happiness. She also focuses heavily on his *conception* of pleasure as the final end in order to do so. At first (p.334-35) Annas says that since Epicurus' final end is not *kinetic* pleasure but *katastematic*, ultimately, the pleasures of *ataraxia* and *aponia*, –and hence not amendable to quantitative measurement, Epicurus cannot be any sort of maximizing hedonist. So far this seems undoubtedly right. Epicurus is, it seems to me, clearly unconcerned with any sort of project where one pursues those pleasures which will yield higher degrees of intensity and are of longer duration. Invoking anything like Bentham's style of measurement therefore, does not really fit what Epicurus has to say.⁴ But then Annas goes on to state that because Epicurus' theory is not one in which rationality takes the form of this sort of maximizing it cannot be that he takes the virtues or any actions aiming at pleasure to be merely instrumental or interchangeable means (p.334). The thought is, in other words, that because Epicurus' theory is not really consequentialist in nature where the ethical goal amounts to the production of the greatest state of affairs or is not such as to tell us that the right thing to do is calculate what will maximize pleasure in each action, but is instead more of an attempt to transform pleasure into a candidate for *eudaimonia*, it cannot be of the sort whereby the virtues are construed instrumentally. This seems to be somewhat of a puzzling claim. Of course it may be true that because of this Epicurus cannot be an instrumentalist about the virtues in this particular way, i.e. in the more modern consequentialist way, as she puts it, but this suggests nothing to rule out the possibility that he may be committed to being an instrumentalist about the virtues in other ways or for other reasons, *even though* he is faithful to important features of eudaimonism.

⁴ Though, for some further discussion on Epicurus and quantitative calculation see, Warren, "Epicurus and the Pleasures of the Future", 2001. N. White, 2002, p. 302ff.

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In any case, Annas drops her emphasis on maximizing and goes on in considerable length to defend Epicurus from the charge of instrumentality by appealing to the kind of state the final end of *ataraxia* is. Her contention here seems to be that the nature of *ataraxia* as happiness is such that it can accommodate the virtues as a part of it. She apparently thinks that this description of happiness, i.e. as *ataraxia*, is such that it removes those difficulties raised by *kinetic* hedonism, or the hedonism of Mill, i.e. happiness as a state of pleasure and absence of pain. She describes this ‘unique’ and ‘expansive’ end (p.239) as, “being in a condition in which bodily and mental pleasures of satisfying our needs result in a state of satisfaction...” (p.337), and as a “state where...you are not hindered or upset by mental or bodily troubles.” (p.338) But we might wonder how exactly this description is supposed to do the job Annas wants it to? Being virtuous, for example, does not seem to be the same thing as being in a state of freedom from mental or bodily troubles. This state of *ataraxia*, though it may not be the more positive sense of pleasure as traditionally defined, is nevertheless *some sort of psychological state of oneself that is self-confined, namely, one’s own feeling of untroubledness or tranquillity*. It is difficult to see how Epicurus could be thinking that the virtues are either identical with, or parts of, *this* type of state. Epicurus may believe that such a state ensues on being virtuous or that *ataraxia* is the untroubled state that one achieves by being virtuous, but this is not to say that the virtues and virtuous actions themselves are what *ataraxia* is. Even if he insists that optimal *ataraxia* requires the exercise of the virtues, this does nothing to establish that the virtues are chosen for their own sake, and not as strictly instrumental.⁵

Sometimes Annas seems to be insinuating that *ataraxia* is not some sort of psychological state *at all* but a kind of condition of activity or functioning. For instance, she describes it as, “the *condition of normal functioning* unimpeded...” or as, “*doing whatever we are doing* in a way which is not hindered...” (p.337-38, italics added) Strictly speaking, since it makes no reference whatsoever to experiential states or states of consciousness or perception, this would not be

⁵ See Irwin, 1994.

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any kind of recognizable hedonism, This, it seems, would be stretching Epicurus' position beyond anything we find in the testimony. After all, his hedonism has some pretence to be empiricist (Cic. *Fin.* i. 30) and to begin from some point of common sense (Cic. *Tusc. Disp.* 3.41-2). In any case, even under such a description it does not seem that Annas (if indeed she sees it this way) will get the result she wants. That is, it is hard to see how virtuous actions could ever be made identical with, or a part of, the final end of unimpeded functioning. It seems that the demands of virtue would often prove to be such as to interfere, not acquiesce, with normal untrammelled activity. However, even if this were (somewhat bizarrely perhaps) not the case, and instead virtuous action *always* resulted in unimpeded functioning, this still does not show that such action is chosen for its own sake, as part of that end.

Nonetheless, Annas moves forward to the texts and points out three characterizations of the relation between virtue and pleasure which she believes counts against the view that virtue, according to Epicurus, is valuable only insofar as it results in pleasure (as he conceives it). They run as follows.

“Epicurus describes virtue as the *sine qua non* of pleasure, i.e. the one thing without which pleasure cannot be, everything else, food, for instance, being separable, i.e. not indispensable to pleasure.”
(DL X 138)

“Therefore prudence is even more precious than philosophy, and it is the natural source of all the remaining virtues: it teaches the impossibility of living pleasurably without living prudently, honorably and justly, [and the impossibility of living prudently, honorably and justly] without living pleasurably.” (*Ep Men* 132)

-which continues,

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“For the virtues are naturally linked (*sumpephukasi*) with living pleasurably, and living pleasurably is inseparable from them.” (*Ep Men* 132)

Before moving on to a closer analysis, it might perhaps be seen as significant that Annas, in an attempt to cast doubt on the traditional interpretation that Epicurus gives the virtues merely instrumental status, can only bring to the fore two passages in the whole of the Epicurean literature which she thinks are able to do this. There are, first of all, numerous other passages, attributed to Epicurus (and to Epicureans in general) which clearly, and somewhat viciously, debunk the virtues, if they do not contribute to pleasure (for instance, Cic. *Tus. Disp.* 3.42, Cic. *On ends* 2.69). In these passages it appears unmistakable that Epicurus is unwilling to adapt his hedonism to fit the sort of belief about virtue Annas wants to assign to him and likens to the other ancient moralists. But *even if* we chalk these up as overly-hostile or ripped out of context –as Annas notably does (p.341), there are what seem like an endless amount of other passages which, though perhaps not as iconoclastic and vehement as those in the first group, are just as forthright and clear about a systematic view that strives for a single, monistic measure to be used in deliberation. There is no other consideration for a reasonable person to deliberate over, outside of aiming at pleasure in the sense of *ataraxia*, or one’s own tranquillity –everything else derives value from that (e.g. *Ep Men* 127, *Kyriai Doxai* 25, Cicero *On ends*, I. 29). One might wonder then why Annas would think that the enormous bulk of *this* evidence can be overturned or somehow tempered by only two passages suggesting (according to her) the attachment of some intrinsic value to moral virtue.

That said, let us now take a look at Annas’ reading of these two aforementioned passages, and see if she is right in thinking that they provide clear evidence that Epicurus regards the virtues as a part of happiness. Annas presents two interpretations of the Diogenes passage. The first says that one may get pleasure from food or fail to do so but one cannot fail to get pleasure from virtue, while the second says that food is only one among many ways to get

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pleasure, whereas virtue is unavoidable as a way of getting pleasure (p.340). While it is not quite apparent what status she assigns to food in its relation to pleasure, it seems clear, from both interpretations, that she thinks virtue to be a necessary condition for pleasure. In his *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus, in abridged form, says that it is impossible to live pleasantly without living justly and impossible to live justly without living pleasantly. Annas' interpretation here is that one cannot fail to live pleasantly if one has the virtues (as one could if one has food) since having the virtues entails living pleasantly and, further, that having the virtues is unavoidable as part of living pleasantly, not just one among alternative means to it, since living pleasantly entails having the virtues (p.341). The first clause suggests that she thinks that the virtues are sufficient for living pleasantly, while the second suggests that she thinks that they are necessary. And finally, Annas appears to take the third quoted text to count as the best evidence for her view. She is able to count it as her best evidence because she translates *sumpephukasi* as 'grown to be part of' (p.341). By translating it in this way, she makes it easier to incorporate or import the claim that happiness has virtue as a part of it, or that the two are somehow conceptually inseparable.

Now, putting aside for a moment the *sumpephukasi* line, Annas seems to suppose that the conditions suggested are enough to show that Epicurus gives the virtues a non-instrumental role in the pleasant life. However, the claim that virtue is necessary and sufficient for the pleasant life is not enough to provide this evidence, since this claim can be made consistent with an entirely instrumentalist status for virtue. It can be made consistent if we interpret Epicurus to be making the necessity claim an empirical one. That is, we might read Epicurus to be saying that, as a matter of empirical fact, virtuous action results in a more pleasant life overall, understood as one with less trouble and disturbance, than results from any alternative course of action. There is good reason to suppose that Epicurus is indeed making this sort of empirical claim in the aforesaid *Menoeceus* passage, since directly preceding it, in an explanation of what it is that yields an untroubled soul, he says, "sober reasoning which

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tracks down (*exeurisko*) the causes (*aitia*) of every choice and avoidance” (132). Here, Epicurus seems to be saying that in order to identify the acceptable or choiceworthy and unacceptable or unchoiceworthy pleasures, one must know a great deal about what causes people to enjoy themselves and to suffer. In other words, what produces the pleasant life looks to be a kind of knowledge, in the form of discovery, about what causes what in the world and in the realm of human experience. The ideal Epicurean will have what amounts to a clear and comprehensive understanding of the various causal relationships between objects of pursuit and avoidance and subsequent effects. It would make sense then to understand the subsequent ‘virtue is unavoidable as part of living pleasantly’ bit as indicative of a claim about empirical necessity.

Something very similar can be said about the Diogenes passage, especially so if we consider it alongside the passage which directly precedes it and which opens the section. This says, “And we choose the virtues too on account of pleasure and not for their own sake, as we take medicine for the sake of health.” (X 138) This *indubitably* assigns instrumental status to the virtues.⁶ It is so forthright that we cannot ignore this in our reading of the immediately ensuing virtue passage. This is not to say that we should not take ‘virtue as the *sine qua non* of the pleasant life’ seriously, it is rather, it would seem, that we are obliged to do so in a way which makes it compatible with the opening instrumentalist claim. The ‘medicine for the sake of health’ analogy can be seen to shed some light on this compatibility. That is, it is through experience that there is seen to be some reliable and general connection between a certain sort of treatment or medicine and the result of alleviating sickness or improving health. Thus we might view the virtue passage as making the same kind of empirical point. One goes out and discovers that, unlike food, which does not always yield pleasure, the way the world happens to be is such that being virtuous is the one thing without which pleasure will not arise. This reading makes sense of both passages *considered alongside each other*. I take this to be an advantage over

⁶ Cf. Plato, *Rep.* ‘third class of good’ at 357c4-6.

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Annas', who takes no account whatsoever of the instrumentalist claim in her interpretation of its neighboring virtue passage.⁷

Now, the point here is not necessarily to argue for an interpretation of Epicurus which makes the virtues necessary for happiness –since, as mentioned, the bulk of the evidence would seem to count against this –rather, it is to show that *even if* we follow Annas in these particular passages and take seriously these necessity claims, they will best be understood empirically –and that from this, it simply does not show that virtue, according to Epicurus, is to be chosen for its own sake and not simply as instrumental to happiness.

There is something more to notice about the 'medicine for the sake of health' claim. Through his analogy with medicine and health, Epicurus indicates that he conceives of virtue and pleasure as two separable and distinct notions. Now Annas says that Epicurus means virtue and pleasure to be 'mutually entailing' (p.340), which she takes the *sumpephukasi* line to be indicating. To take this at face value would mean that Annas thinks that Epicurus takes the concepts of virtue and pleasure to be in some sense derivable from one another. But Epicurus' comparison of virtue and pleasure with medicine and health shows that such a mutual entailment cannot be the case. It is clear that in principal the concepts of medicine and health are wholly extricable from, and

⁷ Annas does briefly mention the 'medicine for the sake of health' text, but chalks it up as one of those iconoclastic passages ripped out of context and coming from overly-hostile sources, or, if taken more seriously, as one "designed merely to make the point that virtue is not our final good, without being supposed to give a full account of the relationship of virtue to pleasure." (341) But to say this of this particular passage seems highly dubious. First of all, Diogenes was an Epicurean, whose biographical account here is largely dominated by a desire to refute those authors who attempt to defame Epicurus. The very fact that he does include this passage in his account should testify to its importance and legitimacy. Second, for Annas to attribute to this passage the vagueness she does seems somewhat disingenuous, since it *clearly does* give an account of the relationship of virtue to pleasure. Elsewhere (2003, 81), Annas claims that Mill uses exactly the same analogy 'evidently thinking it consistent with what he says about virtue and pleasure'. I find this difficult to accept for the reason that when Mill employs the medicine-health analogy he does so in Chapter I of his *Utilitarianism* and in such a way which suggests he is only concerned with elucidating the formal structure of ultimate ends and means, not with any specific relation between them.

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independent of, one another; there is nothing about health as a concept which entails the concept of medicine as a part of it, and vice versa. Likewise should we be wary, following the comparison, of any conceptual necessity between virtue and pleasure. There is nothing, that is, in the concept of *ataraxia*, as a self-confined psychological state, which is linked by analytic necessity to the concept of virtue, and again vice versa. It is for this reason that we should be distrustful of Annas' translation of *sumpephukasi*. That the virtues have, according to her, 'grown to be part of' pleasure suggests some sort of conceptual closeness or inseparability which does not, upon closer analyses of these other passages, seem to be there. Long and Sedley, in their *The Hellenistic philosophers* and Inwood and Gerson, in their *The Epicurus Reader*, translate this passage as "...the virtues are *naturally linked* with living pleasurably..." and "...the virtues are *natural adjuncts* of the pleasant life..." respectively (italics added). These translations seem closer to the mark, as they fit perfectly with our above examination of the two other selected passages. That is, the suggested closeness between virtue and pleasure is best viewed not as a conceptual one, but as a natural and empirical one. And this, once again, simply does not show that Epicurus is not an instrumentalist about the virtues.

It turns out then that Annas' construal of Epicurus' position is difficult to square with the literature, even with those (very few) passages she herself thinks strongly support her case. This might lead us to think that Annas exacerbates the extent of the agreement among ancient moralists about the relation of virtue to happiness.⁸ That is, it is hard to see Epicurus, who is undeniably a major figure in ancient ethics⁹, as someone who thinks virtue is to be chosen for its own sake as part of happiness, as Aristotle and, perhaps, Plato do.

⁸ See Irwin, 1994, Sect. VII, for a discussion about the extent of this agreement amongst ancient moralists.

⁹ Diogenes reports that Epicurus eclipsed all before him in the number of his writings (X 26).

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Anselm's *unum argumentu* and its Development in St. Bonaventure

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In this article, I show the actual essence of the Anselmian *unum argumentum*, which has been abundantly misunderstood by modern Philosophers as an “ontological proof”. In particular I detect its original source in Parmenides’ intuition of the reciprocal belonging of Thought and Being, the fundamental principle developed through time by Platonic Tradition. The research implies a reconsideration and redefinition of words, such as *ratio* and *intellectus*, which gave rise in modern times (Descartes, Kant, Hegel: I establish a comparison with these authors), since they were not correctly interpreted, to important hermeneutical mistakes. After understanding what Anselm actually meant with his *id quo maius cogitari nequit*, by means of an analysis of both *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, I explain how Bonaventure improves it, by increasing its qualitative meaning (in different ways, but, in short, particularly substituting *maius* with *melius*).

Few problems kept philosophers’ minds busy more than the so-called “ontological proof”. Since it was formulated, almost all of them, more or less directly, more or less explicitly, felt the urge to have a confrontation with it.

Why such a consistency? Because in the epochal Anselmian saying is saved and transfigured the core of western philosophy: *Parmenides’ intuition about the relationship between Being and Thought*.

Parmenides begins his Poem with the description of a real *raptus*:

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The goddesses lead me on the very much celebrated way / that through every region guides the man who knows¹.

The revelation of the Truth has, since the very beginning, the tone of something different, compared to what ordinary experience usually offers. The chariot, dragged by horses, is pushed by the daughters of the Sun toward the light, that is, as Sextus Empiricus comments, the *condicio sine qua non* of the sight².

The poet-philosopher arrives in the presence of Justice (*Dike*) “that punishes a lot” and who “has the keys that open and close”³. She tells Parmenides about the existence of two ways of research:

The one <which says> that it is and that it is not possible that it is not [...] The other one <which says> that it is not and that it is not possible that it is.⁴

Here is the most important fragment:

This one [the second way] I declare to you that is an absolutely undetectable path: / because you can neither think (it is in fact impossible), / nor express the not-being.⁵

I add a fragment that, probably, has to be juxtaposed to the previous one:

...in fact thinking implies being.⁶

¹28 B 1 DK, vv. 2-3.

²Ibid., vv. 9-10.

³Ibid., v. 14.

⁴28 B 2 DK, vv. 3.5.

⁵Ibid., vv. 6-8.

⁶28 B 3 DK: “...τό γάρ αὐτό νοεῖν ἐστὶν τε καὶ εἶναι”.

Anselm's unum argumentu

In these two verses, there is, *in nuce*, the whole western philosophy. These other fragments allow us to draw the conclusions:

It is necessary that saying and thinking are being: the being is in fact given, while the nothing is not.⁷

It is the same thing to think and to think that it is.⁸

Ergo, the Thought, when it rises, knows itself as belonging to Being. To think is to think the Being. Thought is not given, but starting from the preliminary positivity of the Being, that funds it and constitutes it *qua talis*⁹. The Being qualifies as the wider horizon, within which the nothing appears as internal determination. The Being is the original + that funds the possibility of the polarity +/- . There is a primary + that establishes the possibility of opposition. This brief introduction reveals already the necessity to recover the essence of *unum argumentum* in its own pureness.

For that purpose, it is indispensable to leave the misleading expression “ontological proof”. Anselm talks neither about proof, nor, *a fortiori*, of ontology, which is a neologism coined in XVII century.

To understand the matter, it is not fruitful to neglect the *Monologion*, and to concentrate only on the three brief paragraphs of the *Proslogion*, where the argument is enunciated and exposed, ignoring the twenty-six ones that form the whole book and where those three ones are solidly set. The heart of the

⁷ 28 B 6 DK, vv. 2-3.

⁸ 28 B 8 DK, v. 38.

⁹ See Arthur Schopenhauer, *Sämtliche Werke*, hrsg. von Arthur Hübscher, 3. Auflage, Band 2 und 3: *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. Erster und zweiter Band (Wiesbaden: F. A. Brockhaus, 1972), I, 483-484, § 71.

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Monologion is *ratio* with its own power¹⁰. What can we know *sola ratione*, within the limits of mere reason?

In the *Prologus*, Anselm let us know, that his mates pressed him in order to obtain a meditation that could satisfy this requirement:

quatenus auctoritate scripturae penitus nihil in ea persuaderetur, sed quidquid per singulas investigationes finis assereret, id ita esse plano stilo et vulgaribus argumentis simplicique disputatione et rationis necessitas breviter cogeret et veritatis claritas patenter ostenderet.¹¹

The purely rational enquiry is really a theoretical and moral duty, for a Christian thinker.

Mono-logion means dialogue of the reason with itself, without any extraneous, further or previous condition. With that, the author does not intend to present himself as subversive toward the tradition, since he states he is a faithful commenter of it. Rather, the point is that authentic Tradition cannot say anything that is in a real contrast with what the soul, in an act of pure interiority, can find inside itself. There is non need of a doctrine of the double truth. The *rationes necessariae* manifest a necessity that is somehow temporary, inasmuch as it needs to be confirmed by a greater authority. Coherently with these premises, the word “God” appears only in the last paragraph, the eightieth.

In the first part of his work, Anselm only shows that

est igitur unum aliquid summe bonum et summe magnum, *id est summum omnium quae sunt.*

¹⁰ See, on the theme, Sofia Vanni Rovighi, “‘Ratio’ in sant’Anselmo d’Aosta”, in *Studi di filosofia medievale*, I (1978): 22-36; Paul Vignaux, “Nécessité des raisons dans le ‘Monologion’”, in *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologique* 64 (1980): 3-25.

¹¹ I quote Anselm’s works from: F. S. Schmidt, *Sancti Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi Opera Omnia* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstat: F. Fromann Verlag, 1968), vol. I (*Monologion*, 7-87; *Proslogion*, 93-139).

Anselm's unum argumentu

It is an attempt to eliminate, where possible, all the presuppositions that cannot be accepted by an “even mediocre” reason. It is true that, in the prologue of the *Proslogion*, Anselm says he tried its composition, because he was unsatisfied by *Monologion*'s proofs; but such a dissatisfaction attains to the *multiplicity* of the proofs, not to their value; shortly, the *argumentum* is better because it is *unum*, not because it replaces the previous ones. Moreover, we can anticipate, that, since the four proofs in the *Monologion* are obtained *sola ratione*, it is not acceptable to individuate the difference between the two booklets in the hendiadys *a priori/a posteriori*; it is better attested by the couple *ratio/intellectus*.

On the other hand, there is a certain unity in the *Monologion* too, insofar as the proofs there brought are pooled by one principle: the complex implies the simple, the different implies the identical, the relative implies the absolute, the plural implies the one; in just one expression: *what subsists per aliud implies what subsists per se*.

The first proof (§ 1) points out the necessity of a unique and identical good, since goodness is attributed in the same way to different and many things. The goods are goods not *per se* but by virtue of *the Good*.

The second proof (§ 2), similarly, shows that the existence of an *unum aliquid in diversis* is necessary in reference to measure¹², as it was before to goodness.

The third proof (§ 3) considers the pure being: there is an *ens*¹³ that is one, identical, by itself, criterion of the unity and of identity of different and various events.

The fourth proof (§ 4) starts from the axiological diversity of the many, that need to be referred to a *maximum* where *plus* and *minus* must be implied as internal determinations.

¹² “Dico autem non magnum spatio, ut est corpus aliquod; sed quod quanto maius tanto melius est aut dignius, ut est sapientia”: measure is meant not quantitatively but qualitatively.

¹³ *Ens* ought to be meant as pure act of being, like St. Thomas *ipsum esse subsistens*.

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So, as we said, the proofs agree in establishing, as a decisive character of the qualitatively highest Being, the *esse per se*, as the condition of possibility of the many and different beings:

quod tale est, maximum et optimum est omnium quae sunt.

At § 6, Anselm observes that, in the highest nature, *essence (essentia)*, *Being (esse)* and *being (ens)* are in the same relationship than *light (lux)*, *to shine (lucere)* and *what shines (lucens)*.

The distinction between *per se* and *per aliud* is also the key to understand the considerations about creation, developed in the second part of his work: he rejects the opinion of Fredegiso of Tours, who, in *De nihilo et tenebris*, posed the nothing on the same plane of being, and sustain the possibility to think the nothing only as no-thing, not-being, that is only as determined negation of the preliminary positive notion of Being¹⁴.

Now, in *Proslogion's Prooemium*, Anselm is worn out, by his incapacity of finding an

unum argumentum, quod nullo alio ad se probandum quam se solo indigeret.

The more intense is the effort, the more the solution seems to slip away. At last, just as he, exhausted, is about to give up, all of a sudden his mind gets illuminated: the origin manifests itself only when the pretension of catching and conceiving it is abandoned.

We are already beyond Descartes, because it is not all about finding a God that corresponds to the representation we have of it, but it is about God, who lets the humble and faithful man find Him.

Anselm exhorts to leave behind the occupations, the tumultuous thoughts, the grave preoccupations, the tiring distractions, all things that hamper the

¹⁴ About Anselmian notion of “nothing”, see Ben Novak, “Anselm on nothing”, *International Philosophical Quarterly* vol. 48, no. 3, issue 191 (2008): 305-320.

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contemplation and the quietness in God: the mind must be empty, in order to be able to make itself ready for the careful listening of the Word.

Monologion was a meditation about rationality of faith, a dialogue of the reason with itself; *Proslogion* is a work of the intellect that, dialoguing with God, aspires to gain His contemplation. The first one is developed on the dimension of *meditatio*; the second one raises itself to the plane of *oratio* and, at least in perspective, to the one of *contemplatio*. The still “too human” desire—if there was any—to “prove God”, becomes here wish to find and love Him. *Proslogion* starts where *Monologion* ended: here we reach God after a dialectical and rational procedure; there, what earlier was the searched becomes the re-searched, though *ab origine* known.

In Anselm, and in medieval theology in general, the relationship between intellect and reason is opposite, compared to the one we give for granted from Descartes on.

In Kant, there is nothing beyond the reason, in order to elaborate the intuition's matter and to submit it to the supreme unity of thought¹⁵:

If the intellect is a faculty to give unity to appearances through rules, the reason is then the faculty to give unity to intellect's rules, on the basis of principles.¹⁶

In Hegel, the intellect (*Verstand*) is the power that has aptitude to analysis¹⁷, while reason (*Vernunft*) is the power that concerns synthesis and gains the universal, recomposing the elements elaborated by the intellect.

¹⁵ See Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Riga: Hartknoch, 1787), Transcendental Dialectic, Introduction, II, A *About reason in general*, 355.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 359.

¹⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1937), 32: “The activity of splitting and separating is the activity and the strength of the intellect”.

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In the Middle Ages

with the word ‘intellect’ was meant man’s possibility to turn intuitively and, somehow, participatively to Being as the fontal light, to the principle of each sight and possibility to see; and it was called ‘reason’ the discursive ability to elaborate conceptual systems inside the interior light.¹⁸

Ergo, the intellect is higher than the reason: it is the faculty that tries to reach the One, the *complexio oppositorum*, while reason only works by opposition and never reaches a further result. The dimension, in which the *Proslogion* moves, is that of *intus-legere*. From this viewpoint, *fides quaerens intellectum* does not mean that faith demands the reassuring conclusions of demonstrative reason, but that a faith, already steady because of the evidence of its own object, wants to be completed by the vision, which is, at the highest grade, charity’s adhesion¹⁹. Prayer, in medieval perspective, is not a fall in the irrational, but the landing to the necessary meta-rational dimension.

Mens is not the calculating and ratiocinative mind, but the soul disposed to the intellectual intuition—as long as we consider the right meaning of “intellect”—of the Being that constitutes it. There isn’t any gnosis: man can only *aliquatenus intelligere* the divine nature.

At § 2, finally Anselm delivers his intuition:

Et quidem credimus te esse aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit.

An ergo non est aliqua talis natura, quia ‘dixit insipiens in corde suo: non est deus’? Sed certe ipse idem insipiens, cum audit hoc ipsum quod dico [...] intelligit quod audit; et quod intelligit in

¹⁸ Maurizio Malaguti, *Liberi per la verità* (Bologna: Cappelli Editore, 1980), 98. See also Teodorico Moretti-Costanzi, *L’ascesi di coscienza e l’argomento di S. Anselmo*, in id., *Opere* (Milano: Bompiani, 2009).

¹⁹ See Karl Barth, *Fidens quaerens intellectum* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1981).

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intellectu eius est, etiam si non intelligat illud esse. [...] Et certe id quo maius cogitari nequit, non potest esse in solo intellectu. Si enim vel in solo intellectu est, potest cogitari esse et in re, quod maius est²⁰.

The *credimus*, that holds the first sentence, is faith in what is *massime* evident. This is testified by the use of the first plural person: it is not an opinion of mine—seems to say Anselm—but such a clear fact, that can be shared by anybody. Only the ignorant (*insipiens*)²¹, who does not use necessary reasons, can affirm the contrary: he can affirm it, not actually think of it, because the not-being of every being's fundament cannot be thought.

At § 3, Anselm, after having showed God's real existence, states also its noetic necessity: inasmuch as it is thought, it must be thought as existent—it cannot be thought as not-existent.

This is not a second proof, since the strength of the argument is in its being *unum*²². It is rather a necessary consequence drawn by the argument, an explication of something implicit there: the *id quo maius cogitari nequit* not only actually exists—because otherwise it would be possible to think of it as existent, that is greater as it is, which is contradictory—but it is moreover

²⁰ I don't think, anybody ever duly recalled the similarity between Anselm's *argumentum* and this excerpt from Seneca's *Naturales Quaestiones* (I (V), 13): "Quid est deus? Mens universi. Quid est deus? Quod vides totum et quod non vides totum. Sic deum magnitudo illi sua redditur, *qua nihil maius cogitari potest* [my italics], si solus est omnia, si opus suum et intra et extra tenet". Obviously, Seneca's viewpoint leans towards the Stoic one, without nonetheless excluding other possibilities (such as Epicureanism, often considered the opposite of Stoicism. It is absolutely possible, that he met Christian people). But we know for sure that Seneca was one of the main sources of St. Augustine's, so that his philosophy, with its own basic expressions, could easily become part of Christian linguistic arsenal.

²¹ About the figure of the *insipiens*, see G. d'Onofrio, "Chi è l'insipiens? L'argomento di Anselmo e la dialettica dell'Alto Medioevo", in *Archivio di filosofia* 1-3 (1990).

²² In Latin, *unum* means "the one", "the only one", not one among other possible ones.

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thinkable *only* as existent—because not being able to be thought of as not-existent is greater than being able to be thought of as not-existent.

The sentence “non est Deus” is nonsense; it can be pronounced, said, not thought. In ignorance’s assertion, there is a gap between *vox* and *res*.

Anselm’s starting point is not apologetic, but rigorously philosophical: I recognize myself as thinking and, *qua talis*, funded in and by a light that makes possible my being and knowing myself as thinking; as a thinker, I know myself as belonging to a source that precedes and funds my essence as a thinker. We call this fundament God. If there were not such a *Principium* as an event in my conscience, there would not be any conscience. But there is the conscience; ergo, the possibility of God’s existence is real and precedes it.

Kant inherits Anselmian arguments from Descartes’ re-elaboration of it²³, as he declares when he talks about the “famous ontological demonstration (Cartesian)”²⁴, without ever nominating explicitly Anselm.

He treats the problem—already considered in relation to the fourth antinomy—diffusely in the *Transcendental Dialectic*²⁵. According to Kant, a merely verbal definition of the concept of the absolutely necessary being is very easy: it is something, the not-being of which is impossible. But this does not let us know anything about the conditions, that make necessary to consider the not-being of something as not thinkable. The unconditioned necessity of sentences does not determine an absolute necessity of things.

This critique is close to the one St. Thomas already advanced:

²³ What Descartes talks about in the *Meditationes de prima philosophia* and in the *Discours sur la Méthode* (which is a summary of the Meditations), part IV, is a knowledge of a representative kind, not participative. So, even if the form is similar to Anselm’s one, his observations are animated by a completely different spirit. See E. Scribano, *L’esistenza di Dio. Storia della prova ontologica da Descartes a Kant [God’s existence. History of the ontological proof from Descartes to Kant]* (Bari: Laterza, 1994), 232.

²⁴ Immanuel Kant, op. cit., *Transcendental Dialectic*, Book II, Chapter III, Section IV, 630.

²⁵ See *Ibid.*, Sections III-IV.

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Dato etiam quod quilibet intelligat hoc nomine Deus significari hoc quod dicitur, scilicet illud quo maius cogitari non potest; non tamen propter hoc sequitur quod intelligat id quo significatur per nomen, esse in rerum natura; sed in apprehensione intellectus tantum. Nec potest argui quod sit in re, nisi paretur quod sit in re aliquid quo maius cogitari non potest: quod non est datum a ponentibus Deum non esse²⁶.

An identical sentence is contradictory if I deny the predicate and I save the subject. But if they are both denied, there is no contradiction, because there isn't anymore something that can be contradicted. Saying "God is not", all predicates are denied together with the subject, so that the sentence is not contradictory, and the related thought is not, consequently, impossible:

You say that there is yet a concept—and precisely just one—the not-being of which, or the negation of its object, is in itself contradictory: and this is the realest concept among beings. This being—you say—has each reality, and you are authorized to admit such a being as possible [...] Within the global reality, moreover, is included also the existence [...] I answer: you already fell into contradiction, when you introduced in the concept of something [...] the concept of its own existence²⁷.

The illusion, therefore, came from an illegitimate *metàbasis*, "from the exchange of a logical predicate with a real one", of an analytical predicate with a synthetic one.

²⁶ Sancti Thomae de Aquino, *Summa Theologiae* (Cinisello Balsamo (Milano): Edizioni Paoline, 1988), 12 (I, q. 2, a. 1).

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, op. cit., pp. 624-625.

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As Kant already established in *The one possible argument for a demonstration of God's existence*²⁸, existence is not a real predicate that adds something to the concept expressed by the subject (it is not, in short, a “perfection”. “Being” is simply the position of something or of certain determinations in themselves. From the logical point of view, it is just the copula that binds two concepts, not a further predicate. If I say: “God is”, I do not add anything new to God's concept, but I just pose the subject, with all its real predicates. Object and subject must have the same content, so that to the concept—which expresses the simple possibility—nothing is added, by the fact that its object is thought as absolutely given: the real does not contain anything else but the simply possible. If it were not like that, it would not exist the thing I thought of in my concept, but something more, so that I could not say that the exact object of my concept exists: the one hundred coins I have in mind correspond to the ones I find in reality; nothing is added to them, by the fact that they actually exist. Through the concept, we do not do anything but thinking of the object in accordance with the universal conditions of the possible experience: our thought receives a possible perception more.

This way, the effort of the “famous ontological demonstration” did not lead to any result, as regards the certification of the existence of a supreme being:

A man, starting from simple ideas, could become rich of knowledge so little as much as a merchant could increase his own patrimony by adding a few zeros to his account.²⁹

Already Gaunilo of Marmoutiers, moved by noble intents, replied to Anselm with the famous example of the lost island. Here are his conclusions:

²⁸ See Immanuel Kant, *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes* (Königsberg: Johann Jacob Kanter, 1763), Fourth Consideration.

²⁹ Immanuel Kant, op. cit., 630.

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Si inquam per haec ille mihi velit astruere de insula illa quod vere sit ambigendum ultra non esse: aut iocari illud credam, aut nescio quem stultiorem debeam reputare, utrum me si ei concedam, an illum si se putet aliqua certitudine insulae illius essentiam astruxisse, nisi prius ipsam praestantiam eius solummodo sicut rem vere atque indubie existentem nec ullatenus sicut falsum aut incertum aliquid in intellectu meo esse docuerit³⁰.

But careful: the lost island, like every other particular being, real or fictitious, is not the only *id quo maius cogitari nequit*; God is not in the mind like all other ideas or representations, but He is there as the principle that structurally and *ab origine* constitutes the intellect itself.

Anyway, Anselm had already answered *ante litteram*:

Solus igitur verissime omnium, et ideo maxime omnius habes esse: quia quidquid aliud est non sic vere, et idcirco minus habet esse.³¹

And for what attains to the passage from the logical plane to the ontological one, it can be considered arbitrary only if Parmenides' intuition is forgotten: Thought and Being are co-funded in one another, without any division: the Thought expresses the Being that funds it and that in it announces itself.

Bonaventure welcomes with enthusiasm Anselm's conclusions; he intends just to perfect and deepen them. The means to do that are already contained at the end of Anselm's *De veritate*, where he puts in evidence the ontological difference between the eternal Truth and the single true affirmations³²: the Truth is not generated by true sentences, but, vice versa, the sentence is true inasmuch as it is adequate to the Truth.

³⁰ Gaunilo's "Pro insipiente" is included in F. S. Schmidt, op. cit., 125-129.

³¹ Ibid., 103.

³² See also *Monologion*, XVIII: "Verum non potest esse sine Veritate".

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The references to the Anselmian theme are, in Bonaventure, very frequent; but he develops it for the very first time in his *Comment to the I Book of Sentences*³³:

Tanta est veritas divini esse, ut non possit cum assensu cogitari non esse nisi propter defectum ex parte intelligentis, qui ignorat, quid sit Deus; ex parte vero intelligibilis non potest esse defectus nec praesentiae nec evidentiae, sive in se, sive in probando.

One thing is to conceive a word; another one is to think with consent, assuming the responsibility of total involvement in what we are thinking.

It is possible to think that something is not in two ways:

Aut in ratione falsi, sicut cogito de hac: homo est asinus; et hoc cogitare nihil aliud est quam quid est, quod dicitur, intelligere. Hoc modo potest cogitari non esse veritas divini esse. Alio modo est cogitare cum assensu, sicut cogito aliquid non esse, et credo non esse.

The thought that something is not can depend on a defect of the intelligent one (*ex defectu intelligentis*) or on a defect of the intelligible one (*ex defectu intelligibilis*). The first one is blindness or ignorance (*caecitas vel ignorantia*): the mind thinks as real, something that has the same nature of what it already acquired; so that, when it ignores something (= it did not previously get it as a datum), it thinks that it is not:

³³ Commentarius in I librum Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi, d. VIII, p. I, a. I (De veritate Dei), q. II (Utrum divinum esse sit adeo verum, quod non potest cogitari non esse), concl. I quote Bonaventure's works from Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventurae, Opera omnia edita studio et cura PP. Collegii a S. Bonaventura ad plurimos codices mss. emendata, anecdotis aucta, prolegomenis scholiis notisque illustrata (Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi): Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1882-1902), 10 voll.

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Contingit autem dupliciter esse cogitationem de aliquo ente, videlicet *si est* et *quid est*. Intellectus autem noster deficit in cogitatione divinae veritatis quantum ad cognitionem, *quid est*, tamen non deficit quantum ad cognitionem, *si est*.

Saying that God, the Truth, is not, we deny what we should affirm. God, as the principle of thinking, is condition of possibility of affirmation and negation, so He cannot be denied together with His own predicates, as Kant says. *What I deny is my representation of God, not God Himself.*

It is true, that the intellect is lacking, as regards the *quid est* of the divine truth, but it is equally true that it is not deficient as regards the *si est*: it cannot understand *what* is Truth, but, at the same time, it cannot ignore or doubt³⁴ *that* it is, because God *temperavit* the notion in the mind, which means that He put it there in a form compatible with man's mental *capacitas*. Intellect, therefore, cannot be unsuitable to *cognitio si est Deus*: the *quaestio utrum Deus sit an non* is already decided since the beginning:

Quia ergo intellectus noster nunquam deficit in cognitione Dei, *si est*, ideo nec potest ignorare, ipsum esse simpliciter, nec cogitari non esse.

The intellect that denies God, in reality, does not think of the God of Scriptures, the highest Truth, the supreme Unity, the sweetest Goodness. It owns a false idea, which can, indeed, be denied, but this would not have any relevance inside a coherent theological enquiry.

Who is lacking of the *cognitio quid est*, thinks that God is what actually He is not (*Deus esse quod non est*), an idol, for instance, or he believes that God is not what actually He is (*vel non esse quod est*), just, for instance (*sicut Deum iustum*). Then, since who thinks that God is not what He is, consequently thinks

³⁴ Since God's presence is a *veritas indubitabilis*; see *Quaestiones disputatae de Mystero Trinitatis*, quaestio I, art. 1.

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that God is not (*ipsum non esse*), so, because of this deficiency of intellect, he concludes that God is not *summa Veritas*, not simply but generally, as who denies that beatitude is in God, denies God Himself.

Enough about intelligent one's lacking. In another way, it is possible to believe that something is not, because of a defect of the thing itself, or, better, *propter defectum a parte intelligibilis*; and this defect, can be twofold: of presence or of evidence (*aut defectus praesentiae aut defectus evidentiae*). We have the first one, when the intelligible one is not present always, everywhere and totally. But this is not the case of God, because

Deus autem est semper et ubique et totus semper et ubique : ideo non potest cogitari non esse. Hanc rationem assignat Anselmus in libro contra insipientem.

The intelligible one that is not evident can be so *in se* or *in probando*. But *divini esse veritas est evidens et in se et in probando*. *In se*, it is evident because, as the cause of the predicate is included in the subject, so

Deus sive summa veritas est ipsum esse, quo nihil melius cogitari potest: ergo non potest non esse nec cogitari non esse. Praedicatum enim clauditur in subiecto.

On the other hand, God is evident *ex probatione*,

quoniam divinam veritatem esse probat et concludit omnis veritas et natura creata, quia si est ens per participationem et ab alio, est ens per essentiam et non ab alio. Probat etiam ipsam et concludit omnis intelligentia recta, quia omni animae eius cognitio est impressa, et omnis cognitio est per ipsam. Probat iterum ipsam et concludit omnis propositio affirmativa; omnis enim talis aliquid ponit; et aliquo posito ponitur verum; et vero posito ponitur veritas, quae est causa omnis veri.

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The divine Truth is therefore fount and condition of possibility of every knowledge, of every truth and of every being, as essence of the necessary Being that constitutes and lets subsist each creature. Our thought turns toward the Being, because from Being it comes: God is not a being among the other ones, but He is the one who donates the being, so that He is originally and authentically. Only God properly is; we just have the feature of being; everything comes to existence, called by God who gives it. If we think truly to what we say, we cannot think that He is not: the existence of created truth, testifies the presence of the Truth that lets them be.

If the Truth, as essence of Being, were not, then nothing would be. But if I say: "There is not any truth", I admit at least this truth, which, again, refers to his transcendental condition:

Concedendum est igitur, quod tanta est veritas divini esse, quod cum assensu non potest cogitari non esse nisi propter ignorantiam cogitantis, qui ignorat, *quid* est quod per nomen Dei dicitur.

Here ends our text. Since this thought cannot be deduced from experience, and since, on the other hand, *nihil est in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in sensu*³⁵, we must conclude that it is inside us *ab origine*: it is the one innate idea that forms the mind and guides it. There is nothing truer than it: it is the truest principle of everything in man. We could not know anything true, if there were not a fundament of truth, a criterion that allows us to recognize³⁶ the truth.

Now, Bonaventure concludes, the meta-transcendental condition of our thought cannot be but Anselm's *id quo maius cogitari nequit*. Anselm already

³⁵ Even though Bonaventure can be considered a representative of the Platonic Tradition, he always calls Aristotle "the Philosopher", with the capital letter, as he calls St. Paul "the Apostle".

³⁶ In the literal meaning of *re-cognoscere*, to know again, to find again in reality what we found already inside us.

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passim uses *melius* instead of *maius*³⁷; at any rate, he had clarified in the *Monologion* the *qualitative* meaning of his idea of measure.

Bonaventure removes every possible residue equivoque, as he talks about *melius* and *verius* instead of *maius*:

Quod non potest cogitari non esse verius est quam quod potest cogitari non esse³⁸;

about *intelligere* (*intus-legere*) instead of *cogitari*:

Simplex esse est simpliciter perfectum esse: ergo est quo nihil intelligitur melius³⁹.

At the end, the true core of the argument is Parmenides' intuition: nothing can be denied, unless we start from a preliminary positive element, that funds the possibility of every thought.

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³⁷ Even though Bonaventure can be considered a representative of the Platonic Tradition, he always calls Aristotle "the Philosopher", with the capital letter, as he calls St. Paul "the Apostle".

³⁷ In the literal meaning of *re-cognoscere*, to know again, to find again in reality what we found already inside us.

³⁷ See, for instance, F. S. Schmidt, op. cit., 103.

³⁸ *Quaestiones disputatae de Mysterio Trinitatis*, Quaestio I, art. 1.

³⁹ *Collationes in Hexaëmeron sive illuminationes Ecclesiae*, V, 31.

What Blindsight Can See

Jared Butler

The pathological phenomenon known as blindsight, indicated by visual processing without awareness, has provided fodder for recent debate in the philosophy of mind. Inspired by blindsight, Daniel Dennett (1991) turns out a thought experiment in which he imagines the abilities of a blindsight subject progressing to the extent that the patient seems to have regained his lost consciousness. Jason Holt (2003) objects to what he mistakenly views as a direct Dennettian assault on *qualia*, or the qualities of experience. He attacks the essential claim in Dennett's thought experiment that a super blindsight subject and normal perceiver would be functionally indistinguishable. By pointing out the confusion in Holt's somewhat overzealous objection and providing two simple, additional thought experiments, this essay will show that, given what is stipulated to be imagined in the super blindsight, Mary the Neuroscientist, and *Demoiselles d'Avignon* thought experiments, there is indeed no place we can identify in the brain where consciousness happens, no special "juice" that must be added to an experience to make it conscious.

An Historical Overview of Blindsight

Blindsight is a neural pathology in which patients who have suffered particular forms of brain damage can process visual information despite the fact that they report no visual consciousness of stimuli. A *scotoma*, or blind spot, occurs after damage to or excision of a portion of the visual cortex. Blindsight patients retain the ability to make discriminations about stimuli presented within their scotoma but are unaware of the stimuli themselves, and thus their reports appear to be mere guesswork. However, patients' abilities to guess about shape, pattern, motion, and even color far exceed mere chance; their "shots in the dark betray excellent marksmanship."¹

¹ Jason Holt, *Blindsight and the Nature of Consciousness* (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2003), 7.

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Traditionally, damage to the visual cortex had been thought to cause permanent blindness in the corresponding, contralateral visual field. Following early investigations in the 1970s, the phenomenon was dubbed *blindsight* by Lawrence Weiskrantz.² Patient D.B., whose visual cortex was removed in 1973 at the age of thirty-three, was a famous pioneer case of blindsight. He attracted attention only six weeks after surgery when medical observers noticed that he could locate objects in his blind field more adeptly than expected. Maintaining his reported lack of awareness, his abilities opened up the rigorous study of blindsight.³

Two types of blindsight have been described. Patients with Type I blindsight possess no awareness of visual stimuli in the blind field, but show reflexive responses (e.g. pupillary reaction and improved performance in processing when exposed to stimuli in both the blind and normal visual fields). Conversely, Type II blindsight patients demonstrate a limited awareness of stimuli in the blind field (e.g. target detection, saccadic eye movements, and manual pointing that show a modicum of movement and orientation detection).⁴

Since the abilities of blindsight patients vary to a considerable degree, criticisms, grounded in both physiology and methodology, have been put forth that challenge the phenomenon's legitimacy. Physiologically, it has been suggested that intact remnants of the primary visual cortex can account for the residual visual function observed in blindsight. In addition to the problem of blindsight's neural substrates, methodological inadequacies of the initial research may have resulted in unreliable results. Inadequate eye fixations that fail to keep track of saccadic movements may not have isolated the blind field to the precise standard necessitated by the nature of the experiment. Light scatter, where light from the blind field is deflected into and processed by the normal

² Holt, 2003, 19; Ptito and Leh, "Neural Substrates of Blindsight After Hemispherectomy" in *The Neuroscientist* Vol. 13, 2007: 506-518.

³ Laurence Weiskrantz. *Blindsight* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 86-87.

⁴ Ptito and Leh, 2007, 506.

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visual field, could also explain away blindsight. Finally, the forced-choice paradigm, where patients are forced to guess about the presence of a stimulus in their blind field, has been said to result in a response bias where patients' reactions are independent of sensitivity to stimuli.⁵

Recent studies on hemispherectomized patients—patients whose right or left cerebral hemispheres have been completely removed—have demonstrated that blindsight is in fact a legitimate phenomenon. Since no functional patches of the striate cortex remain, the physiological criticisms of blindsight's neural substrates are rendered inert. Further, to avoid light scatter, patients are shown stimuli in both visual fields. This indirect method of testing shows that, in cases of blindsight, the patient can make discriminations in shorter amounts of time than when shown a stimulus in the visual field alone.⁶ These studies have also shown that peripheral structures such as the superior colliculus play a role in unconscious visual processing left over despite damage to the striate cortex.

Dennett's Super Blindsight Thought Experiment

In his *Consciousness Explained* (CE, 1991), Daniel Dennett gives a thought experiment imagining a blindsight subject's abilities advancing to the point that his treatment of stimuli is functionally indistinguishable from that of a normal perceiver. He calls this imaginary case *super blindsight*. Before turning out his thought experiment, or what he calls derisively "intuition pump," he makes an important distinction between hysterically blind patients and blindsight patients. Like blindsight subjects, the hysterically blind report blindness, but display no physiological damage or cause—they suffer from psychosomatic blindness in effect.

Are they really blind? They might be. After all, if psychosomatic pain is real pain and psychosomatic nausea is real enough to make

⁵ Ptito and Leh, 2007, 507.

⁶ Weiskrantz, 2005, 26–27.

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one vomit, why shouldn't psychosomatic blindness be real blindness?⁷

We doubt the abilities of the hysterically blind patient because hysterically blind patients sometimes use the information their eyes provide them in a way unlike blindsight patients do—they “have an uncanny knack of finding chairs to bump into.”⁸ With the support of scans of both brains, our skepticism is confirmed when we see physical evidence of blindness on the one hand, and a healthy brain on the other.

But we believe when a blindsight patient reports no conscious experience and say that he does not possess visual awareness. What if a blindsight patient who comes to recognize the information presented to him indirectly (without direct awareness), but can represent to himself the dispositions he undergoes in response to a stimulus. If he does come to be in such an informed state, does he regain visual awareness, and if so, when can conscious experience be ascribed to a perceiver? His thought experiment prompts these questions with the following structure. Provided a standard blindsight patient whose guesses when cued are better than chance:

1. Despite their abilities, blindsight patients have no visual awareness in their blind fields.
2. Blindsight patients are not unchanging in their talents and can improve with practice.
3. After time and practice, suppose an improving patient could guess about a stimulus in the blind field without having been cued.
4. If the subject continues to perform significantly above chance and to a high degree of reliability, then he could treat those stimuli on

⁷ Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York, NY: Hachet Book Group, 1991), 327.

⁸ Dennett, 1991, 327.

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par with any conscious experience, such as those of normal perceivers.

5. If there's no difference between how a super blindsight subject and how a normal perceiver treat stimuli, then there is no difference between their ability to make themselves consciously aware of a stimulus

There is nothing more “added on” to the normal perceiver to account for visual consciousness beyond “blind mechanical processes.”⁹

If the ways in which these two subjects come into an informed state are indistinguishable, which would seem to be the case if we imagine (4), then there is no special place where the “juice” of consciousness must be added. Is there any real difference between coming to an informed state and being conscious?

Holt's Objections

Super blindsight, being a thought experiment, asks the reader to imagine a possibility. Holt maintains that blindsight itself “seems essentially to depend on at least minimal help in the form of cues or options, except in cases where the relevant options are conceptually decidable (e.g., present/absent) rather than informative (e.g., red/green).”¹⁰ Despite this reservation, he entertains Dennett's argument and makes an attempt to critique it. He denies that a super blindsight patient's visual field would have overall functional equivalence and, if it did, then super blindsight could no longer be described as a pathology. Without this functional equivalence, there is a real difference between a super blindsight patient and a normal perceiver.

⁹ Dennett, 1991, 330; 343.

¹⁰ Holt, 2003, 60.

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Dennett's move, according to Holt, is to "idealize blindsight out of the functional impairments patients suffer," so that, although the imagined patient is bankrupt of visual consciousness, he is functionally equivalent to normal perceivers in processing visual information.¹¹ Holt makes his case precisely against this functional equivalence, denying that visual fields would be on a par in a super blindsight patient.

Now it may be true that both visual fields contain information about visible properties, and functionally the patient treats them on a par. "However," Holt contends, the "imagined patient will make the same perceptual judgments about the world, but he will not make the same reports on how he arrived at those judgments.... Consider what the patient would say about the two fields."¹² His argument hinges on this question of the functional difference between blind and visual fields.

1. For overall functional equivalence, one must not be able to tell the difference between two sets of sense data, e.g. visual and blind fields.
2. Blindsight patients can tell the difference between their visual and blind fields.
3. If super blindsight patients can distinguish between their visual and blind fields, then no overall functional equivalence is present.
4. But if a super blindsight patient cannot distinguish between visual fields, then he wouldn't have blindsight but in fact, would possess normal vision.

An imagined super blindsight patient must be able to tell the difference between visual fields if he remains a blindsight patient.

¹¹ Holt, 2003, 61.

¹² Holt, 2003, 62.

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Say a normal perceiver comes across a set of dice; naturally, he could tell either by sight or by touch that these dice are cubes. Two sensory modes make things seem the same way, but there is a noticeable difference between touch and sight.¹³ As there is a functional difference between two sensory modes, so too would there a difference between the blind field and the normal visual field, despite the fact that stimuli can be treated on a par. If there were no reportable difference, then the super blindsight patient would possess normal vision. Therefore, in order to understand blindsight and its imaginary offspring as pathologies, we must understand what is missing from normal vision, namely visual awareness.

A Dennettian Response

Dennett would not counter that what is pathologically missing in blindsight are real representations. However, he would contend that these representations are not real structures in the brain; there is no need to report information back to some “central meaner” in order for consciousness to arise. It is clear that visual processing is not a simple matter of electromagnetic radiation striking the retina and traveling through brain circuits. Perception is a matter of context and interpretation.¹⁴ Since perception is informed by a constellation of concepts and associations, the informed state of being dispositionally affected by a stimulus is a matter of self-representation on a level higher than the visual tract in isolation. If a super blindsight patient can make the self-representation of his affect, then he is visually conscious, regardless of pathology and physiology.

Nor does the patient have to bear the title “blindsight patient.” If functional equivalence means his condition has been idealized out of the impairments of blindsight and thus has normal vision, his condition is a mere

¹³ This is a derivative of Molyneux’s Problem, which first appeared in John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. See Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Molyneux’s Problem” (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/molyneux-problem>) or Locke, J. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690).

¹⁴ Sekuler and Blake, *Perception*, fourth ed. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 33.

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play on terminology. In other words, call it what you'd like, but our imaginary subject has still regained consciousness and this is marked precisely by the onset of an informed state. Thus, Holt's challenge is really just a matter of terms on the one hand. On the other hand, even if there is a physiological difference in visual function, if this physiological difference fails to manifest itself in behavioral output, then it is simply a difference that makes no difference. There may very well be a physiological difference in the way two normal perceivers come to be in an informed state in response to the same stimulus, but if the behavioral responses are effectively indistinguishable, then the physiological difference(s) make no difference.

Holt's arguments against Dennett probably rest on a misunderstanding of Dennett's aim in his thought experiment. The most obvious evidence of this is Holt's extended use of the term "visual qualia" throughout his chapter on super blindsight. Dennett, in his initial argument, primarily references visual consciousness and brings up qualia in a way rather tangential to his main discussion of informed states and intentionality, or the "aboutness" of a conscious state. He simply makes the claim that, add enough to an imagined case of blindsight and you end up with a super blindsight patient whose talents, indistinguishable from visual awareness as they are, allow him to chuckle to himself while reading the comics because he can bring himself into the same dispositional states any normal observer could.¹⁵ Dennett's particular aim in this passage is simply not a direct offense against qualia, as Holt mistakenly implies. If Holt's charge against Dennett is to prevent him from co-opting arguments in his project against qualia, then Holt should have picked a more relevant passage from Dennett.

Mary and the Demoiselles

Indeed, Dennett's super blindsight says more about the nature of thought experiments as philosophical tools than it has anything to do with the debate

¹⁵ Dennett, 1991, 343.

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over qualia. As noted, he refers to thought experiments as intuition pumps, “often fiendishly clever devices” that

invite the “audience to imagine some specially contrived or stipulated state of affairs, and then—without properly checking to see if this feat of imagination has actually been accomplished—inviting the audience to “notice” various consequences in the fantasy.¹⁶

Of the thought experiments that Dennett tinkers with in Part Three of CE, Frank Jackson’s classic Mary the Neuroscientist has a structure most relevant to purposes here. We are invited to imagine Mary, who is deprived of color experiences for the duration of her life. Despite having no experience of color, she is a brilliant scientist and knows everything there is to know about the physical processes of color vision. From retinal input to processing in the central nervous system to speech acts, she knows all the physical information. Were she exposed to a color, say the blue sky, would she *learn* anything?¹⁷

Dennett puts a clever twist on this thought experiment to illustrate his point about their status as intuition pumps. Say we showed Mary a blue banana. Much to our surprise, she scoffs at our attempt to trick her, claiming she knows that this banana is blue and real bananas are yellow. Recalling that she’s had no exposure to color in the real world, we’re shocked and demand an explanation. She gives one:

‘You have to remember that I know *everything*—absolutely everything—that could ever be known about the physical causes and effects of color vision...I realize it is *hard for you to imagine* that I could know so much about my reactive dispositions that the way blue affected me came as no surprise. Of course it’s hard for

¹⁶ Dennett, 1991, 282.

¹⁷ Frank Jackson “Epiphenomenal Qualia” (1982), excerpt, in Dennett, 1991, 398.

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you to imagine. It's hard for anyone to imagine the consequences of someone knowing absolutely everything physical about anything!¹⁸

Obviously no one can really imagine what it's like to possess all the physical knowledge there is to know about *any* subject, especially one as complex as color perception. If we must imagine that Mary possesses this knowledge, then we must assume she possess the knowledge about the subsequent brain states that correspond to color perception. If she knows this, then what is to stop her from putting herself in those brain states, and thus, what is to stop her from having a color experience? More precisely, what must be *added* to her dispositional states to give her color consciousness or qualia?

We can adapt the super blindsight intuition pump to drive this sentiment home. Imagine the experience of a super blindsight subject shown a familiar painting in his blind field, one that prompted an intellectual and emotional response. Since the subject is able to treat objects in the blind field on a par with those in the visual field, a response normally associated with visual consciousness is perfectly conceivable. Suppose he could identify Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* and can remember learning about its composition, or being surprised and intrigued by the figures' mask-like faces and unusual colors. Say he sees that painting in person, and, overcome by the experience of gazing at his favorite painting first hand, tears begin to well in his eyes. How could anyone deny that our subject has visual consciousness?

Say our super blindsighted art lover comes across a completely novel picture. Having never seen it before, he has no memories of the composition or what it looks like, yet he can describe a woman's pale profiled face crowned and jeweled against a mustard yellow background, with squares of pink, purple, and blue littering the bottom half of the screenprint. He reports that although

¹⁸ Dennett, 1991, 399 (emphasis in original).

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the woman is pretty, he hates that shade of yellow, the other colors are too sour for him and, frankly, he hates pop art.¹⁹

These examples remind us about the temptation that carelessness thought experiments present when they invite imaginings. If we imagine the abilities of blindsight patients to progress beyond what looks like mere guesswork, then they could indeed come to be in an informed state about the stimuli they “perceived” in their blind fields to the extent that the scare quotes around perceived become quite unnecessary. So too, if we imagine Mary to know everything there is to know about color perception, then there’s nothing for her to learn when she sees clear blue skies over open green fields for the first time. Dennett invites readers to thoroughly consider what it means when we’re asked to imagine such great bounds. He also shows that if, as in the imagined case of super blindsight, two responses are functionally indistinguishable and both subjects possess the ability to make themselves aware of the onset of an informed state via a self-representation integrating the web of concepts, dispositions, and associations characteristic of any conscious experience, then there can be no central place where information is reported to “make it” conscious. There can be no seat of power, no “Central Meander,” Inner “I,” or Mind’s Eye, only blind, mechanical processes that give rise to what *seems* to be the miraculous.

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¹⁹ He’s just come across Andy Warhol’s Queen Margrethe II of Denmark, 1985, 39.25 " x 31.5", Screenprint on Lenox Museum Board.

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