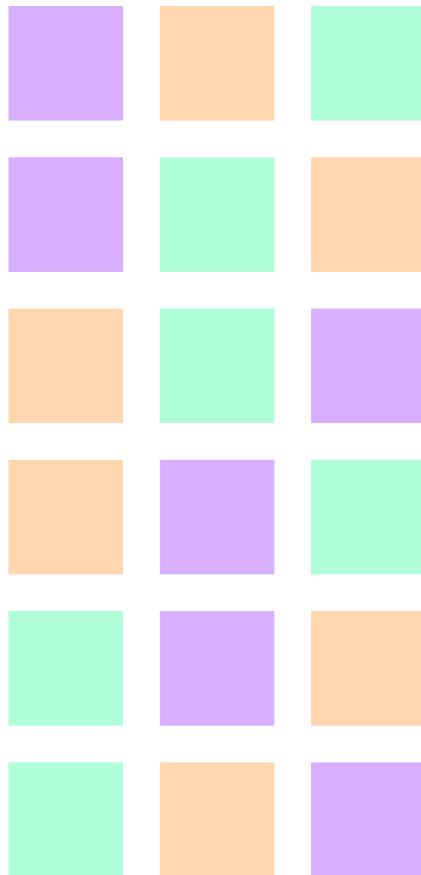


# PENSE

The Journal of the University of  
Edinburgh Philosophy Society

1 (2019/20)





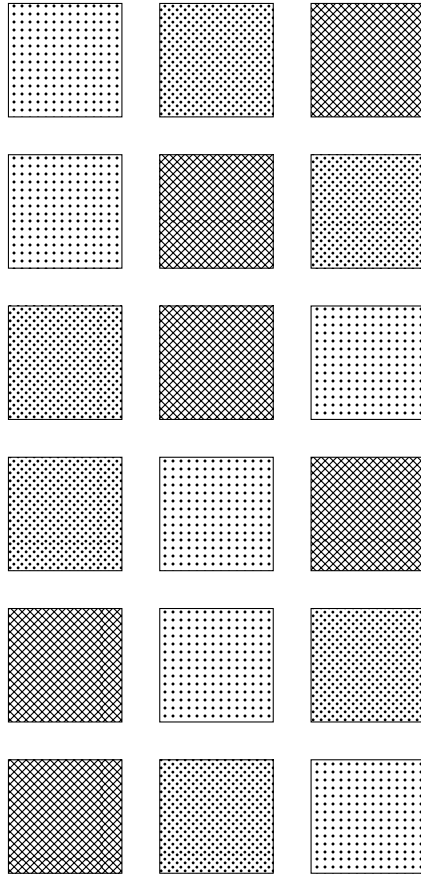
# PENSE

1 (2019/20)

Journal committee: Angus Forbes-Cable, Annika Cleland-Hura, Matthew McClure, Deniz Yalçın, Nathan Zou

<i>Editor's Note</i>	1
<i>Kierkegaard on how to Subjectively Relate to the Uncertainty of Death: The 'Right' Way is the Pathless Way</i> MARGHERITA PESCARIN	3
<i>Responsible Political Engagement and Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics of Ambiguity</i> STAV SALPETER	9
<i>On the Convincingness of Martin Buber's Grounding of Morality in Personal Relationships</i> MARTHA GIBBON	15
<i>Is Non-naturalist Realism Falsified by its Morally Objectionable Consequences?</i> MADELINE GOODLAD	21
<i>Death and Prudential Deprivation</i> MATTHEW W. G. MCCLURE	29
<i>Apocalypse and Our Existential Predicament</i> WILL PENKETHMAN-CARR	43
<i>Proceedings of the Philosophy Society</i>	51

Edinburgh University Philosophy Society  
euphilsoc.com



## EDITOR'S NOTE

Since the founding of the Philosophy Society in 1871, the journal has appeared four times. The central idea behind the journal has always been to create a space for those interested in the pursuit of philosophy, and who have wanted to have their work professionally edited and presented. However, this latest edition marks a new stage for its development. It has been baptised under a new name, *Pense*. Coming from Scots, 'pense' means 'thought', or 'mind', which considering this is a philosophy journal, we thought a fitting name. Yet the new name also fundamentally ties into what the journal is supposed to be. In an increasingly more polarised and labyrinthine world, it could hardly have passed anyone by that the demand to *think* about the events that engulf our lives, both recent and timeless, is becoming more pressing. To my mind at least, there is an ever growing tendency not to think philosophically, and to brand philosophy as irrelevant or too complicated and difficult to understand. This is also the reason why we have chosen to print the journal this year: it is a deliberate move to push philosophy further into the public's gaze, and show that philosophy is not about keeping obscure ideas hidden in an ivory tower (or a university, whichever you prefer). The journal then, as a project, has grown beyond its initial conception in 2011, and while remaining faithful to the vision the founding editors had, *Pense* aims to move into wider circles beyond the university, while simultaneously keeping close to the community already there.

This community, the Philosophy Society, alongside running and funding the journal, hosts a wide range of events available to everyone, including reading and discussion groups, as well as a high-profile lecture series that invites philosophers from across the globe. The journal is only one aspect of the Philosophy Society, and I encourage all those who are interested in philosophy to inquire into what else it has to offer.

Turning to the contents of the journal itself, this edition covers a range of philosophical fields from existentialism to logic and back. Throughout the career of the Philosophy Society's journal, we have invited papers with topics from all branches of philosophy including metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, to name only a few. Going forward, we encourage people to submit a paper on a subject of their own choosing (for there is no one theme behind the journal), and it is always refreshing to read papers on a range of ideas. Before I finish, I would like to thank the journal committee who have put this together. The work they have put into the editing process has been of exceptional quality, and I for one am proud to have had the opportunity to work with them. I would like to add my especial gratitude to

Matthew McClure whose help in editing and designing the journal has been invaluable to me, and also I would like to thank Sophie Williams, without whom the journal would not have made it to print.

Yours sincerely,

Will Penkethman-Carr, Editor-in-Chief

## *Kierkegaard on how to Subjectively Relate to the Uncertainty of Death: The ‘Right’ Way is the Pathless Way*

MARGHERITA PESCARIN

IN Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (Tolstoy 2019), Ivan Ilych, struck by a terminal illness, comes ‘face to face with his own *mortality* and realizes that, although he knows of it, he does not truly grasp it’ (Tolstoy 2019: 262), since ‘death is always uncertain’ (Kierkegaard 2009: 139). For the purposes of this essay then, I will show how Ivan Ilych can effectively grasp the uncertainty of his own death.

Firstly, I will illustrate how, according to *Climacus* in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Kierkegaard 2009), one can *subjectively seek knowledge* of what it is ‘to die’ by using the concept of *essential knowing*, asking what death ‘means to you’ as a distinct individual who essentially exists. Secondly, I will apply Climacus’ teachings to clarify how Ivan Ilych himself eventually managed to *subjectively relate* to the uncertainty of death by *seizing the moment in passion* (Kierkegaard 2009), drawing from Gerasim’s character in Tolstoy’s novel (Tolstoy 2019). Lastly, I will consider a problematic contradiction in Kierkegaard’s philosophy, since Climacus seems to assert that ‘seizing the moment in passion’ is the *single best way* to subjectively relate to the uncertainty of death (Kierkegaard 2009). Yet, I argue that one needs to be *charitable* in criticizing Kierkegaard’s philosophical project, as both his *works*, by means of his pseudonyms, and his *life*, by failing to become a knight of Christian faith, are merely suggestions for becoming subjective, – or ethical – that is ‘highest task set for human beings.’ (Kierkegaard 2009: 132). Therefore, I eventually advise Ivan Ilych that the ‘right’ way to grasp the objective uncertainty of death is to seize the moment in passion for the infinite by taking the *pathless way*, trusting this uncertainty to become subjective.

To understand how Ivan Ilych can subjectively seek knowledge of what it is ‘to die’, the distinction between *objectively* and *subjectively* seeking knowledge needs to be clarified. Granted that there are significant objective truths ‘out there’ in the world, e.g. mathematical laws, Climacus claims that what matters is not the objective truth itself, but how human beings existing in the world relate to these objective truths. Individuals can *relate* to them either by *objective reflection* or *subjective reflection* (Kierkegaard 2009: 138).

The early modern epistemologists, e.g. Descartes, tackled the question of knowledge by taking the path of *objective reflection*, i.e. objectively seeking knowledge: mirroring truth as an object disregarded from the individual human being. Nevertheless, this mode of reflection creates an impersonal relation between subject and object, which Furtak calls ‘the scandal of modern philosophy’ (Furtak 2010: 87), since it makes truth too theoretical, i.e. indifferent to the subject’s existence. Suppose I, a subject, relate to the equivalence of mass and energy,  $E = mc^2$ , by objective reflection. Thus, I come to know the object of  $E = mc^2$  only *in abstracto*. However, there is no interest for me in knowing *that*  $E = mc^2$ , unless I can make it personal to my own life in understanding *how* to use it: for example, by applying the formula *in concreto* because I want to pass a physics exam. So, what matters to me instead, as an individual existing in the world, is how I can relate to the objective truth  $E = mc^2$  by *subjective reflection*, i.e. subjectively seeking knowledge. Distinctly, the path of subjective reflection implies that knowledge belongs to the individual who essentially exists in the world. Thus, the knower is the one who exists, because existing is what is essential. Indeed, Climacus refers to *essential knowing* as the ethical and ethico-religious knowledge ‘that relates to the knower, who is essentially someone existing’ (Kierkegaard 2009: 166), since ethical and ethico-religious knowledge force us to think about our own existence. To demonstrate this, Climacus recalls the figure of Socrates, whose merit was ‘to be an existing thinker, not a speculator who forgets what it is to exist.’ (Kierkegaard 2009: 173). Socrates was concerned with pursuing practical wisdom, instead of acquiring items of theoretical knowledge simply for the sake of knowing. As someone existing, Socrates was merely interested in what existence meant to him and how he ought to live a ‘good’ life as an active moral *agent*, rather than being a passive observer (Furtak 2010: 101). On this line of thought, Climacus asserts that ‘the ethical [i.e. becoming subjective] is [...] the highest task for human beings’ (Kierkegaard 2009: 136), which is ‘over only when life itself is over.’ (Kierkegaard 2009: 132). As a result, the ethical question humans cannot dismiss, as knowers of the existential tragedy of mortality, is what it is to die (Furtak 2010: 108).

To grasp what it is to die, Climacus lists ordinary beliefs people hold about death (Kierkegaard 2009: 139). For instance, there are different kinds of deaths: e.g. the tragic hero dies with much more pathos than a bartender (Kierkegaard 2009: 139). Among other ordinary beliefs, science states that with death comes *rigor mortis*: post-mortem rigidity. That is an instance of death by objective reflection. However, Climacus argues that, when one enquires death by objective reflection, one can learn countless objective facts about death and yet remain ‘very far from having grasped death’ (Kierkegaard 2009: 142). This means that for Climacus death is *objectively uncertain*. The problem with the objective uncertainty of death is that it spreads ‘into every thought’ (Kierkegaard 2009: 139). Especially, ‘[i]f death is always uncertain, if I am mortal, then this uncertainty cannot be un-



derstood in general terms' (Kierkegaard 2009: 139), because someone living cannot objectively approach death without dying, before he/she is able to consciously and materially experience death.

Hence, the *solution* Climacus proposes is to undertake *subjective appropriation* – i.e. reflection – of this objective uncertainty. Firstly, to grasp it, one must not forget about it, but think about it in every moment of his/her life, 'for since [the uncertainty of death] is there at every moment, it can only be overcome by [one's] overcoming it at every moment' (Kierkegaard 2009: 140). Secondly, one should not simply ask what it is 'to die', but rather what death 'means to me' as a distinct individual who essentially exists in the world. This suggests there is an *ethical* question involved in how to give meaning to the uncertainty of death by actively thinking about it, that is by forming an intention of how to live a 'good' and meaningful life before death comes. As Climacus articulates it, in thinking about the objective uncertainty of death in every moment of one's life, the living individual prepares himself/herself to die, altering his perspective on how he ought to live: e.g. by taking responsibilities. (Kierkegaard 2009: 141).

Above all, stated by Climacus, the single best way to subjectively relate to the objective uncertainty of death is to seize the moment in passion (Kierkegaard 2009: 141). In *The Concept of Anxiety* (Kierkegaard 1980), Vigilius, another Kierkegaardian pseudonym, argues that the *moment* is the eternal figurative place in which 'time and eternity touch each other, and with this the concept of *temporality* is posited' (Kierkegaard 1980: 152). As Bernier (2015: 18) highlights, this temporality is 'neither determined by the future nor the past, but remains open', which means that the moment is eternal. However, paraphrasing Horace (1882/1999: Od. 1.11) while we speak, time will already have fled. So that, to make temporality the eternal moment one has to seize it in *passion for the infinite*, i.e. *carpe diem*: to grab the eternal moment before death comes. Fundamentally, seizing the moment in passion for the infinite is, according to Climacus, 'the highest truth [...] for someone existing' (Kierkegaard 2009: 171). That is because it corresponds to the highest subjective stage of existence, namely the ethico-religious stage in which the objective uncertainty of death is overcome by having *faith*: trusting in God's will that whatever happens will be good for you. (Kierkegaard 2009: 141).

For Kierkegaard personally, seizing the moment in passion for the infinite meant overcoming this uncertainty with Christian *faith*, i.e. a blind faith in God, to reach the ethico-religious stage of existence. Whilst, in Bernier's words, to seize the moment in passion at the ethical stage of existence, as 'the highest rational stage, [...] is to make a *wholehearted commitment* to something' (Bernier 2015: 23): to choose a passion that allows the individual to make sense of his/her own life. Moreover, for Bernier, it all depends on 'the attitude one takes with respect to' the task of living a 'good' life (Bernier 2015: 24).

Applied to *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (Tolstoy 2019), as an incumbent death approaches, Ivan Ilych realizes he did not have the ‘right’ attitude towards life. As mentioned above, Ivan Ilych knows he has to die, having learnt from a textbook that: ‘Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal’ (Kierkegaard 2009: 854), but he is not able to grasp this *abstract* item of knowledge. It seems impossible to him, a *concrete* human being, that death could concern him too. Similarly, his family and friends in late eighteenth-century aristocratic Russia deceive themselves by considering death something that does not concern them at all. In facing this reality, a desperate Ivan Ilych asks himself general questions such as ‘[W]hen I am not, what will there be?’ (Tolstoy 2019: 827). But, as Climacus demonstrated, there is no objective answer to Ivan Ilych’s question of what happens when one is dead, no one survives to testify it, which means death is objectively uncertain (Brombert 2013: 19). Eventually though, Gerasim’s – his servant – attitude of *love*, *compassion* and *pity* for him, forces Ivan Ilych to understand he didn’t live life as he ought to have done: taking care of others with genuine concern, committing to responsibilities and, most importantly, approaching the uncertainty of death with passion. Indeed, Gerasim’s joyous acceptance of death’s uncertainty, who, in a chapter, utters: ‘We shall all of us die, so why should I grudge?’ (Tolstoy 2019: 953), inspires Ivan Ilych to embrace the ‘right’ way to live by welcoming death at his deathbed with sheer joy. Krishek and Furtak (2012: 171) call this joyous acceptance of the objective uncertainty of death *trust in uncertainty*. That is how human beings, who essentially exist in the world as knowers, ‘discover the meaning of life: by being [...] *receptive* and *accepting* whatever happens.’ (Krishek & Furtak 2012: 168). In other words, being receptive is a matter of listening in silence without complaining, whereas being accepting is a matter of avoiding resistance to change, i.e. welcoming death (Krishek & Furtak 2012: 171). Therefore, having applied Climacus’ teachings to Ivan Ilych’s case, I argue that Ivan Ilych should have lived his life by taking the *pathless way* – that is the ‘right way’ to subjectively relate to the uncertainty of death *trusting* this *uncertainty* without necessarily having faith in God, but by seizing the moment in passion for the infinite to become his authentic self. Hence, joyfully accepting whatever happens, as Gerasim did.

Admittedly, there is a problematic contradiction for Climacus in claiming that there is a *single best way* to subjectively relate to the uncertainty of death: seizing the moment in passion by having faith in the infinite, i.e. God. Nonetheless, I argue that we should be *charitable* when criticizing Kierkegaard’s philosophical project, concerned with defending *subjectivity*, as authoritarian, i.e. falling into *objectivity*, for two main reasons (McLane 1977: 231).

Firstly, the contradiction enters Kierkegaard’s *works*. Indeed, advocating for a single best way to subjectively relate to the uncertainty of death is to make an

*objective* – almost *authoritarian* – ethical claim of how one should live his/her life (McLane 1977: 231). Moreover, Climacus is not simply concerned with a metaphorical faith, e.g. trusting uncertainty, but ‘precisely with the problem of becoming a *Christian subject*’ (McLane 1977: 216). Nonetheless, Climacus asserts that ‘[i]t is the passion of the infinite and not its content that is decisive; for its content is just what it is itself’ (Kierkegaard 2009: 171). This means that seizing the moment in passion for the infinite merely provides a ‘how’, i.e. a form – a pathless way – whose ‘what’, i.e. content, changes for every distinct individual. Furthermore, although Climacus is interested in Christian faith, he also claims that ‘he has no opinion of his own’ (McLane 1977: 216), as the constant use of pseudonyms in Kierkegaard’s works are all subjective. Thus, they offer *suggestions*, not orders, of how to seize the moment in passion for the infinite in the most personal way. Again, a striking example is Gerasim’s *trust in uncertainty*, which accepts mortality with joy.

Secondly, the contradiction enters Kierkegaard’s *life*. Worryingly, it seems that ‘[i]f we are to understand Kierkegaard and not simply make use of certain of his insights – we must keep in mind that he was throughout his life concerned with what it meant for him to become a Christian’ (McLane 1977: 218). This implies that Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy *cannot be separated* by the endorsement of Christian faith in his life, which has led many philosophers to define Kierkegaard’s project an archetype of *Christian existentialism* (La Vergata & Trabtoni 2011: 49). Nevertheless, I support Holmer’s notion of *stages of existence* which separates Kierkegaard’s faith from his philosophy (McLane 1977: 215). Indeed, Holmer argues that Kierkegaard’s works ‘are a presentation of kinds of possibilities, [i.e. the stages of existence, namely aesthetical, ethical and ethico-religious] which are neither true or false’ (McLane 1977: 215).

So, an individual, e.g. Ivan Ilych, can simply choose to become subjective, by simply becoming ethical: trusting death’s uncertainty, without necessarily trusting a Christian God, as Kierkegaard aimed to do. In addition, although one grants Kierkegaard’s faith is inseparable from his philosophy, Kierkegaard’s failure to become a knight of Christian faith, as he struggled to find something to live and die for (McLane 1977: 217) proves that not even Christian faith is the ‘right’ way to live a ‘good’ life. McLane emphasizes that Kierkegaard presumably took the path of Christian faith only out of *existential frustration*, since every other attempt at becoming ethical was not successful. (McLane 1977: 227). It follows there is no single best way to seize the moment in passion in order to subjectively relate to death, especially not by having faith in a Christian God. As McLane concludes: ‘Whether Kierkegaard is correct in thinking that man’s true need is for God and that Christianity satisfies this need - these are questions that can only be decided by each individual for him.’ (McLane 1977: 227).

In conclusion, I have argued that both Kierkegaard’s works, by using subjective

pseudonyms, especially Climacus in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Kierkegaard 2009), and his life, by failing at becoming a knight of Christian faith, show that there is no single best way to seize the moment in passion, i.e. to subjectively relate to the objective uncertainty of death. Therefore, we should be *charitable* when criticizing Kierkegaard's authoritarianism advocating for subjectivity, since he was also trying to make sense of death – and life – in his own way. Eventually then, I argue that in order to grasp the uncertainty of his own death Ivan Ilych should have taken the *pathless way*, i.e. trusting this uncertainty: accepting whatever happens, hence living a caring and meaningful life as someone who essentially exists in the world. As Lorenzo de' Medici proclaimed: 'Chi vuol essere lieto, sia: / Di doman non v'è certezza' (Getto 1979: 78).<sup>1</sup>

### References

- Bernier, M. (2015). *The task of hope in Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Oxford.
- Brombert, V. (2013). *Musings on mortality: From Tolstoy to Primo Levi*. Chicago, IL: Chicago.
- Furtak, R. (2010). *Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript: A critical guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge.
- Getto, G. (1979). L'enigmatico Lorenzo. *Lettere Italiane*, 31(1), 67–78.
- Horace. (1999). *The odes and carmen saeculare of Horace* (J. Conington, Trans.). London: George Bell and Sons. (Original work published 1882)
- Kierkegaard, S. (1980). *The concept of anxiety: A simple psychologically orienting deliberation on the dogmatic issue of hereditary sin* (R. Thomte, Ed. & R. Thomte & A. Anderson, Trans.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton.
- Kierkegaard, S. (2009). *Concluding unscientific postscript*. Cambridge: Cambridge.
- Krishek, S., & Furtak, R. (2012). A cure for worry? Kierkegaardian faith and the insecurity of human existence. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 72, 157–175.
- La Vergata, A., & Trabtoni, F. (2011). *Filosofia, cultura, cittadinanza* (Vol. 3). Milan, Italy: RCS Libri.
- McLane, E. (1977). Kierkegaard and subjectivity. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 8, 211–232.
- Tolstoy, L. (2019). *The death of Ivan Ilych: Annotated (English edition)*. London: Melville House.

---

<sup>1</sup>In English: 'Be happy if you want to, / For tomorrow is not certain'.

# *Responsible Political Engagement and Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics of Ambiguity*

STAV SALPETER

## Abstract

This paper explores the political implications of Simone de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity*, drawing on her own political engagement and lesser-known works of fiction to inform the discussion of her philosophical writings. It concludes that Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity may encourage taking responsibility for political action, but that it lacks a moral framework by which we could proceed to judge the actions taken.

FOLLOWING the upheavals of the Second World War, Simone de Beauvoir contributed to existentialism to construct a "new synthesis" that would provide a pragmatic framework for dealing with what she saw as a world permeated by ambiguity (Beauvoir 1947/2005b: 326). Ambiguity for Beauvoir (1945/2005a: 183) is the tension between facticity and transcendence, which has two main implications for political life: "In politics, the individual must [...] transcend himself toward others and transcend the present toward the future". How advantageous is this concept of ambiguity, and in what ways did it influence Beauvoir's view of responsible political engagement? This paper will commence by considering the ways in which two strands of the concept of ambiguity – subjectivity and temporality – influence Beauvoir's perceptions of political engagement. Firstly, it will examine the way in which the ambiguity of simultaneously being a *subject* and an *object* shapes her perception both of political oppression and of its reduction. Secondly, it will study the ways in which the ambiguity of existing in the *present* while looking to the *future* influences Beauvoir's views regarding political goal-setting. Finally, this paper will critically evaluate the very concept of ambiguity – concluding that the two strands of ambiguity considered may encourage taking responsibility for political action, but that as a concept ambiguity lacks a moral framework by which we could proceed to judge the actions taken.

Ambiguity entails being a "unique subject amidst a universe of objects" while concurrently being perceived as an object in the subjective universes of others (Beauvoir 1947: 7). Like the interactions of our being with physical existence, interactions with other individuals can restrain our freedom or allow us to expand

it. Hutchings (2007: 117) shows Beauvoir's differentiation between objectifying others as a necessary part of interacting with the world, in the sense of identifying them as separate from our subjectivity, and objectifying others oppressively, that is using them simply as tools and restraining their freedom. This idea becomes most pertinent in her feminist philosophy, wherein she claims that men objectify women as "sexed being[s]" (Beauvoir 1949: 6) in order to pose themselves as absolute subjects. Kruks (2014: 4) goes so far as to read Beauvoir as claiming that oppression becomes possible *because* of our intrinsic ambiguity; paradoxically it is the flexibility of ambiguity itself that allows men to deny it and assert themselves as essential subjects while treating women as mere objects. However, instead of treating ambiguity as a force structuring society, perhaps it is more useful to see it as a conceptual tool with which we can analyse both relationships of oppression and the political action taken to remedy them. In fact, Beauvoir applies ambiguity to situations that are much more nuanced than direct oppression, demonstrating that even when the politically engaged try to help women transcend their oppressed position, there is a tendency to treat them as "plants" (Beauvoir 1945: 79–80; Beauvoir 1947: 153), as objects that rely on external sustenance to grow, perpetuating their objectification. Thus, Beauvoir uses the lens of ambiguity to show that to circumvent oppressive forms of objectification we should treat others as ends; as subjects in their own right.

In fact, Beauvoir (1947: 78) shows that the ambiguity of our condition *necessitates* intervention on behalf of the oppressed: "[t]o will oneself free is also to will others free". As all humans share the precarious ambiguity of being both subjects and objects, to ensure one's personal freedom one must first ensure collective freedom. Is this an egocentric preposition? Let us evaluate it by examining its implications in practice, in the case of Beauvoir's political campaigning against the imprisonment and torture of the anti-colonial Algerian activist Djamilia Boupacha. Caputi (2006) attempts to refute claims that Beauvoir's actions were self-centred. Beauvoir was perceived as treating the case impersonally: using Boupacha as an example and rejecting meeting her in person. Caputi follows Stanley Cavell's philosophical differentiation between 'knowing' and 'acknowledging' to argue that Beauvoir's actions were justified because although she could not *know* Boupacha's pain, her *acknowledgement* of it was enough to act selflessly on her behalf. We can expand on this and see how Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity facilitated her emphasis on acknowledgement of the other as a part of political engagement: even though we cannot truly know the experiences of one another as separate subjective beings, we have the responsibility to be aware of each other as human beings like ourselves. However, there is another element of egocentrism that is engrained in Beauvoir's conception of ambiguity which Caputi ignores. Expanding the freedom of others in order to expand our own freedom is ultimately self-serving; even if in practice it justifiably leads us to act against the oppression of others. Thus, the

ambiguity of being separate subjectivities implicates each individual with taking action against oppression of others, for their own sake.

Now, Beauvoir is aware that we cannot each work for the freedom of humanity in its entirety and recommends that we prioritize our actions. Marso and Moynagh (2006: 9) claim that Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity in the form of an "embodied consciousness" bridges modern political tensions between universal values and traditional concerns, allowing individuals a balance between subjective experience and communal responsibilities. However, they omit mentioning Beauvoir's idea of "privileged lines of action" (Beauvoir 1947: 156) which would in fact suggest a more problematic approach to the non-universal side of political responsibilities. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir claims that we should privilege helping people that are "less distinct" from us: "[i]t is fitting that the negro fight for the negro, the Jew for the Jew, [and] the proletarian for the proletarian" (1947: 156). Although she qualifies her statement by saying that these actions must not "contradict [. . .] universal solidarity" (1947: 156), we must ask: why does she establish prioritisation on the bases that she does? Beauvoir proposes an allegedly pragmatic argument: people are more likely to accept help from those they already expect to receive help from (1947: 156). This, however, does not explain why she believes that people would expect more help from people of the same race, religion, or social class as them. Prioritisation could alternatively be made based on an individual's capacity to help (for instance, the proletarian may expect help from the capitalist) or on the basis of historical elements of personal relationships. It seems that the idea of a subjectivity rooted in an objectified body lends itself too easily to Beauvoir's emphasis on externalities in human interactions, with dangerous implications for her political recommendations.

Having considered the tension of individuals being both subjects and objects, let us now consider the political implications of a second strand of ambiguity – the tension between the present and the future. Similar to the need to negate ourselves in order to exist in the world, "the present must die so that it may live" (Beauvoir 1947: 137). Beauvoir encourages us to find a balance between languishing in the experience of the present and transcending it to create change for the future (Beauvoir 1947: 145). She is extremely critical of what she calls the fallacy of the 'serious man': deprioritizing the present in favour of an absolute goal for the future (e.g. Beauvoir 1947: 48-56). She sees this as a dangerous tendency within political engagement, and argues against following political ideologies with predetermined political goals (Beauvoir 1947: 157) because they undervalue the significance of present situations. Beauvoir (1947: 158-160) provides the example of Stalinist violence in the U.S.S.R., emphasizing that no single act of violence could bring about the completion of the whole of the revolution. She claims that no matter how grand the aim, it cannot be "detach[ed] [. . .] from the means which

defines it” – one needs to ensure a balance between the two (Beauvoir 1947: 124-138). Thus, she says that to reconcile the ambiguity of time in our political actions the ends must be “completely disclosed” (Beauvoir 1947: 135) in the means, and goals must be flexible enough to be re-defined according to present contingencies.

Drawing on the influence of ambiguity on Beauvoir’s view of responsible political engagement discussed above, we are now in the position to critically evaluate the concept of ambiguity itself. The two aspects of ambiguity which we have discussed designate people as subjective actors rooted in the present, who simultaneously have the capacity to transcend their condition through interactions with others and through acting to alter the future. Such a theory places responsibility on individuals and encourages immediacy – demanding action while demanding that it should be well weighed-out; Beauvoir (1947: 15) designates man’s actions as “definitive, absolute engagements”, without a higher order that could make amends for mistakes or set laws for appropriate action. She shows that accepting ambiguity means we cannot take “impartial interest” (Beauvoir 1947: 80) in the world. That is, we cannot distance ourselves too much from present developments, since inaction has as much consequence as action. In practice this is clearest in her example of intellectuals who were complicit in the Nazi occupation of France through their lack of resistance (Beauvoir 1947: 82).

However, what is the significance of ambiguity leading us to take responsibility for our actions if they cannot be demarcated as either bad or good? It can be argued that Beauvoir (1947: 96) sets a certain standard by which the morality of action can be judged in proclaiming that we should “serve the universal cause of freedom”. However, Beauvoir (1947: 161) herself admits that people have different perceptions of freedom stemming from their differing subjectivities, so we would still have no means by which to objectively assess action. Moreover, were she to set freedom as an absolute aim it would in fact negate the very essence of living in awareness of ambiguity; she would be committing the ‘serious man’ fallacy. Beauvoir (1947: 141) avoids this by emphasising that liberation is a “movement” rather than a “thing”, a process rather than an absolute aim. In fact, Beauvoir seemingly avoids setting moral standards *intentionally*. For her, in a world of ambiguity, “morality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning” (Beauvoir 1947: 144). She offers no set rules but encourages us to consider the righteousness of our actions on a case by case basis. Ultimately, although the concept of ambiguity may encourage us to take responsibility for our actions, it provides no ethical framework by which we can definitively decide what constitutes (ir)responsible political action.

This entails a form of moral relativism which is especially dangerous in a world that is defined by its very ambiguity. Since there is an uneasy balance between facticity and transcendence, we have already seen how an overemphasis on either

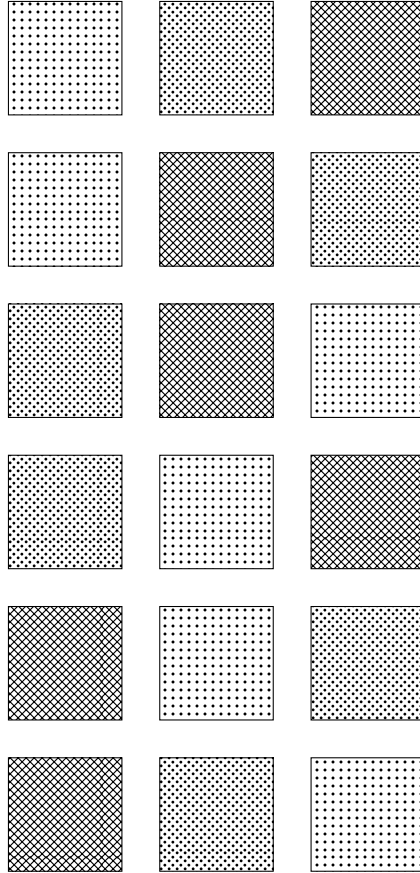


of them can be problematic, like in the cases of Beauvoir's conception of 'privileged lines of action' or her emphasis on expanding the freedom of others for the sake of oneself. Even if everyone were to follow her ethics of ambiguity, they would each have different perceptions of what it entails in terms of action. Thus, Beauvoir (1947: 112–114) envisions a world of constant conflict, which does not provide the consolation of harnessing its dialectic towards a Hegelian absolute Mind. Instead, she envisages a world in which each man is true to himself without any "outside guarantee" (Beauvoir 1947: 173) of the results of his transcendence, precariously setting individual whims over physical reality.

To conclude, the concept of ambiguity positively influences Beauvoir's views of the need for political engagement but dangerously proves less definitive with regards to what kind of political engagement is necessary. The tension between being both a subject and an object provides a useful lens with which to study political oppression and leads Beauvoir to claim we must all take responsibility for struggling against the subjugation of others, albeit with an allowance for privileging certain people. Likewise, the tension between the present and the future leads Beauvoir to encourage us to engage with the political issues at hand without hiding behind the predetermined aims of an absolute political ideology. Ultimately, ambiguity presents us as actors that are rooted in the current political situation while concurrently having the capacity to change it – encouraging us to take responsibility for our actions, but as a concept it lacks a normative framework by which such actions can be judged.

## References

- Beauvoir, S. de. (1945). *The blood of others* (Y. Moyses & R. Senhouse, Trans.). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Beauvoir, S. de. (1947). *The ethics of ambiguity* (B. Frechtman, Trans.). New York, NY: Philosophical Library.
- Beauvoir, S. de. (1949). *The second sex* (B. Constance & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). New York, NY: Random House.
- Beauvoir, S. de. (2005a). Moral idealism and political realism. In *Philosophical writings*. Urbana, IL, and Chicago, IL: Illinois UP. (Original work published 1945)
- Beauvoir, S. de. (2005b). What is existentialism? In *Philosophical writings*. Urbana, IL, and Chicago, IL: Illinois UP. (Original work published 1947)
- Caputi, M. (2006). Beauvoir and the case of Djamila Boupacha. In *Simone de Beauvoir's political thinking* (pp. 109–126). Urbana, IL, and Chicago, IL: Illinois UP.
- Hutchings, K. (2007). Simone de Beauvoir and the ambiguous ethics of political violence. *Hypatia*, 22(3), 111–132.
- Kruks, S. (2014). Beauvoir, Simone de (1908–86). In *The encyclopedia of political thought* (p. 263–270). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. doi: 10.1002/9781118474396.wbept0074
- Marso, L. J., & Moynagh, P. (2006). A radical approach to political thinking. In *Simone de Beauvoir's political thinking* (pp. 1–10). Urbana, IL, and Chicago, IL: Illinois UP.



## *On the Convincingness of Martin Buber's Grounding of Morality in Personal Relationships*

MARTHA GIBBON

**M**ARTIN Buber grounds his understanding of morality in personal relationships, detailing that ethical behaviour lies in responding to the eternal *thou*, which he believes is God. This paper will outline Buber's understanding of ethics, before arguing that his grounding of morality in *relation* is compelling, largely due to its appeal to people of any or no faith; its subjectivity in application which allows for continuous dialogue with the eternal *thou*; and its broad appeal to feminist ethicists in the shared high regard for personal and unique relations between persons as a means of non-objectification and its non-reliance on potentially patriarchal universal maxims and norms.

Buber grounds his theory of morality in personal relationships. He asserts that the world and our attitude towards it are twofold (Buber 1996: 82). Firstly, there is the I-It world. *It* in this world is any person, being or object that I does not engage with in personal relation. The connection between *I* and *It* is merely one of detached perception, observing oneself as distinct from that of other beings. *It* is used as a means to an end, merely objectified as a 'thing' within space and time, with no inter-relationship between oneself and *It*. This world is one of order, where we can build upon our knowledge through induction. It can be coordinated, described, and measured, and this knowledge can be taken as reliable.

Secondly, there is the I-Thou world. This world is one of reciprocal encounter and exclusive confrontation between *I* and *Thou*. Whereas the *It* 'does not respond but passively allows itself to be experienced', the I-Thou relation is one of complete and mutual absorption to the exclusion of any other potential object of attention (Friedman 2002: 67). This mutuality of the experience does not merely entail unity, as the *I* and *Thou* remain wholly themselves, but rather active participation in personal relation with each other. The experience is to some degree beyond the limits of description and cannot be made sense of through the categories of time or space. It is important to note that Buber does not argue that the I-It world should be eradicated, nor should we entirely transcend it, just that it is not all there is. Indeed, he asserts that the I-It world is entirely necessary to survival,

the measurable and quantifiable nature of the world providing the means to which we meet our physical needs. However, Buber contends, 'without *It* a human cannot live. But whoever lives only with that is not human' (Buber 1996: 85). The I-Thou relation encompasses something essential about our very nature, and it is this which 'makes possible authentic human experience' (Friedman 2002: 100).

Buber asserts that one can have an I-It or an I-Thou relationship with anything, even an inanimate object or an animal. Whilst the relationship between a human and an animal or inanimate object is easier to conceive of in the I-It iteration of relation, it is just as possible to engage in I-Thou relations in these instances. For example, a pet cat. Were you to view your cat with reference only to your own goals, such as to provide you with satisfaction, then you would have in some sense objectified the cat and would be engaged in a passive I-It relation with it. In contrast, were you to view your relationship with the cat as one of mutual companionship, then you would be fully respecting the cat's agency and be closer to an I-Thou relationship. Buber contends that, 'any phenomenon or being can convey something to man at some time. There is nothing that will refuse to be a vehicle of speech', making clear that relation is not rooted in verbal communication, but mutual respect and often silence (Bergman 1991: 231).

Buber's understanding of relation is what grounds his moral framework. Rather than offering a deontological picture of morality with rigid and universal maxims, he asserts that ethical decision making is informed by experience of 'the absolute other, with whom a genuine relationship constitutes the essence of ethical life.' (Walters 2003: 14) Through our I-Thou relations with others, we have encounters with the absolute other, which Buber believes is God. God is thought present in every moral situation, not in a predetermined general sense, but specifically. It is a subjective ethic, highly dependent on the individual's experience of the *I-Thou* world, and there can be no universal law that dictates moral action in any given circumstance. He asserts that, 'maxims command only the third person, the each and the none', not the *I* (Buber 1947: 144). Rather, we must be free to respond to specific circumstances as they are addressed. Buber's ethics can thus be understood as an ethic of response, whereby the *I* becomes responsible to a *Thou*. However, he also contends that God's demands cannot be fully realised by any human and so there is never a guarantee that a moral judgement is a correct one. Instead, humans must understand themselves to be 'standing every moment under the judgement of God', trying our best to respond to God, but ultimately sometimes falling short (Buber 1947: 69).

One of the most convincing elements of Buber's grounding of morality in personal relationships might be its universality in application. Whilst Buber himself believes the I-Thou relation to give way to an encounter with the eternal *thou*, God, the moral framework he proposes would seem to be of use to both those with

and without faith. For those with faith, the appeal is clear cut – an experience of the divine. Buber's work was heavily influenced by mysticism, and his description of the experience of the eternal *thou* appears similar to descriptions of other mystical religious experience, most notably Rudolf Otto's concept of the numinous. This experience is commonly understood as an apprehension of the wholly *other* and typically has a profound, transformative effect on the mystic. This same thinking can be found in Buber's work, those having enriched their relationships and experienced the I-Thou world compelled to respond to it in their ethical life. Moreover, for those without faith, Buber's grounding of morality in *relation* may be equally appealing and transformative. It is a common feature that people seek deeper meaning in life than the mundane occurrences of everyday routine, and Buber's ethical framework provides just that – an experience of something beyond the ordinary concrete nature of life through the strengthening of personal relationships. Buber's descriptions of relation and of ethics are written using such moving, emotive language that upon reading his works one is left with a longing to believe what he writes. He claims, 'no matter how I resisted, I was inescapably destined to love the world' (Buber 1960: 99). His words here seem to encapsulate the simple beauty underlying his understanding of reality, providing a powerful case for his grounding of morality in personal relationships.

Nonetheless, it is possible that the universal accessibility of morality as grounded in personal relationships could pose some problems as it allows the ethic to be subjective in application. It is conceivable that there be a universal character to any experience of the divine, regardless of the religious faith of the experienter, and these encounters are equally viable as experiences of the eternal *thou*. Yet, with such vast theological differences across all world religions, it appears likely that individuals will interpret their experiences differently, and as a result their resultant ethical action would be different. The subjectivity of morality as grounded in personal relationships may make Buber's ethical thinking less convincing, as there is a question of how we are to account for contradictions in what is thought 'ethical'. It might appear that Buber does not provide a very helpful guide to ethics in an everyday sense, as his ethics are too subjective. However, in response to this criticism it could be argued that the non-objective, non-rigid nature of Buber's grounds for morality is a strength, as, 'static concepts of philosophy thwart the living relation between the two poles of reality: person and God' (Walters 2003: 41). Buber's view of reality is underpinned by dialogue, which is ever changing and adapting. To construct a deontological, universal maxim-based ethic would be to ignore the constant dialogue between man and God, preventing ourselves from responding ethically to the eternal *thou*. He asserts that instances of responses to the I-Thou world which contradict the normative law are very rare, as the I-Thou relation implies and indeed makes necessary such norms as honouring one's parents or a ban on murder. Buber contends that, 'one cannot be evil

with the whole soul, i.e., one can only do it through holding down forcibly the forces striving against it' (Walters 2003: 57). Humans by their very nature are good and will strive to be ethical, yet the occasional mistake will be unavoidable. However, through our experiences of the I-Thou world we can respond ethically to the eternal *thou* and live moral lives. This appears to provide a cogent rebuttal of the criticism of Buber's grounding of morality in personal relationships as too subjective.

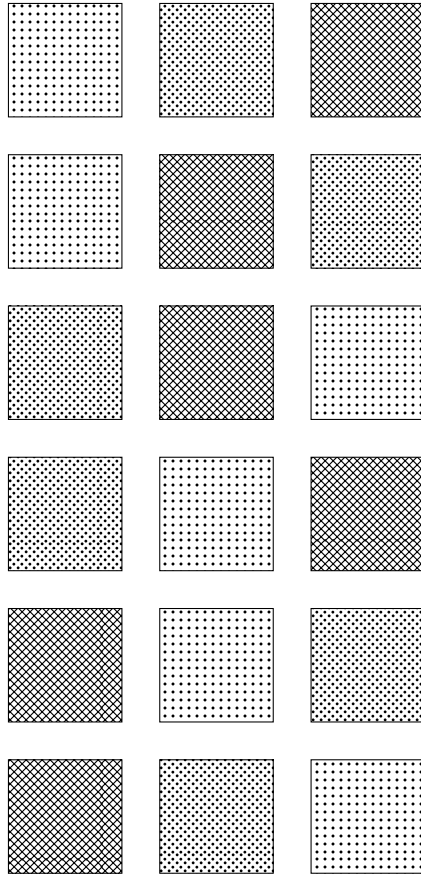
Buber's grounding of morality in personal relationships has broad appeal to feminists in their approaches to ethics. Buber emphasises that relationships of the I-Thou world are characterised by mutual respect for autonomy, in stark contrast to the relationships of the I-It world which are characterised by objectification and subjugation to one's will. Feminist ethicists and Buber share this high regard for the importance of personal and unique relations between persons. The objectification of women is a persistent problem addressed by feminists, where women are reduced to fulfilling the desires of men, treated as means rather than ends in themselves. Buber's notion of morality as grounded in personal relationships offers a powerful framework from which to reject this subjugation of women, as through experience of the I-Thou world we are made responsible for regarding each other as wholly unique, independent beings, not as mere objects for personal gain or satisfaction. The subjectivity of Buber's ethical framework also holds value for feminist ethicists.

Universal maxims and rigid laws that we could look to as guidance in ethical decision making are, to differing degrees, likely to always be derivative of the patriarchal society they are formed in, and when adhered to could be seen to perpetuate and further entrench patriarchal norms. In contrast, the experience of the I-Thou world provides an entirely subjective ethic, whereby one responds ethically to *thou* as specific situations allow, rather than adhering to a universal maxim. It would appear that the relative harmony with which Buber's framework and the frameworks of feminist ethicists complement each other provides a strongly convincing account as to the grounding of morality in personal relationships.

In conclusion, Buber's grounding of morality in *relation* provides a compelling and profound ethical framework. It has broad appeal, applicable to anyone of any or no faith, and appears able to contribute something of worth to contemporary debate in feminist ethical spheres, particularly in regard to focus on the persistent objectification of women. It also appears to withstand criticism of its subjectivity in application, in fact turning this into a strength in reference to enabling the ongoing dialogue with the eternal *thou*, God, as well as in application to feminist ethics, providing an ethical framework free of patriarchal norms.

*References*

- Bergman, S. (1991). *Dialogical philosophy from kierkegaard to buber* (A. Gerstein, Trans.). Albany, NY: SUNY.
- Buber, M. (1947). *Between man and man*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Buber, M. (1960). *The origin and meaning of hasidism* (M. Friedman, Trans.). New York, NY: Horizon.
- Buber, M. (1996). *I and thou* (W. Kaufman, Trans.). New York, NY: Touchstone.
- Friedman, M. (2002). *Martin Buber: The life of dialogue* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Walters, J. (2003). *Martin Buber & feminist ethics: The priority of the personal*. Syracuse UP.





## *Is Non-naturalist Realism Falsified by its Morally Objectionable Consequences?*

MADELINE GOODLAD

**M**ATTHEW Bedke and Max Khan Hayward have recently made separate yet related arguments which aim to show that acceptance of non-naturalist realism entails certain morally objectionable consequences (Bedke 2019; Hayward 2019). Bedke further argues that the non-naturalist realist who wishes to avoid immorality can only do so by behaving irrationally (Bedke 2019). I will argue that Bedke and Hayward succeed in showing that non-naturalist realism is committed to morally objectionable results by assessing how some of the non-naturalist realists' core commitments stand up to both arguments. I will argue that, even with multiple addenda attempting to strengthen the non-naturalists' position, the theory is still unable to overcome the charge of immorality without succumbing to irrationality. However, while I will accept the conclusion that non-naturalist realism entails immoral commitments, it remains to be seen if these entailments must falsify the view. Non-naturalist realism's demonstrated immorality may show it to be an unattractive theory, but more work needs to be done to show that the theory is false.

First, it is important to outline precisely what we mean when discussing non-naturalist realism. Following Hayward, non-naturalist realism will be understood in this essay as the commitment to three minimal claims: realism, non-naturalism, and normativity (Hayward 2019: 901–2).

### 1. Realism

Realism is the view that moral facts are distinct ontological entities which exist independently of any critical or commendatory beliefs or attitudes; they are judgement-independent. Realism is to be understood as separate from truth-aptness; indeed, many antirealists talk of our moral language being truth-apt in certain senses.

### 2. Non-naturalism

Moral facts are *sui generis* and irreducible to natural facts. As Hayward puts it, the non-naturalist claim is that “there has to be some deeper fact about

what natural facts matter morally” (Hayward 2019: 902). This is not a denial that moral facts supervene on natural facts (non-naturalists generally accept supervenience); rather, it is the further claim that there are non-natural facts that explain *why* some natural facts matter morally. These facts cannot be discovered empirically, and crucially, they must be understood as non-causal.

### 3. Normativity

This is the claim that “*only* non-naturalism captures what is necessary for something to count as a genuinely moral truth” (Hayward 2019: 902). As Parfit puts it, “nothing would matter” if there were no non-natural moral truths (Parfit 2011: 425). Only this special kind of property can carry real normative force.

Before turning to Bedke and Hayward’s arguments in detail, it is important to note that both are committed to one general underlying claim: that meta-ethical theories have normative consequences. That is to say, the particular meta-ethical theory to which we subscribe will necessarily influence our normative ethics. For Hayward, the relevant point is that our meta-ethics necessarily affects our “higher-order moral judgements” about the conditions under which we should change our moral attitudes (Hayward 2019: 899). For Bedke, it is that your meta-ethical theory should affect what facts you deem to be relevant when making moral decisions or normative judgements (Bedke 2019: 3).

I will now turn to the specifics of both arguments, beginning with Bedke’s claim that a non-naturalist realist must either be immoral or irrational.<sup>1</sup> Bedke argues that the non-naturalist realist must either:

- (a) Treat information about the patterns and existence of non-natural properties and facts as *relevant* when making up their minds about normative judgements, or else
- (b) Treat information about the patterns and existence of non-natural properties and facts as *irrelevant* when making up their minds about normative judgements (Bedke 2019: 1).

Bedke claims that (a) is morally objectionable, because it “makes one’s moral views objectionably hostage to a peculiar metaphysical fortune” (Bedke 2019: 7). In other words, whether or not there are non-natural properties, and what things

---

<sup>1</sup>Note that Bedke’s is an argument against the *realist*, not against realism per se. He accepts that it is an *ad hominem* argument and that more work needs to be done to show that the non-naturalist realist’s immoral or irrational state of mind falsifies non-naturalist realism itself (Bedke 2019: 3).

happen to have those properties, does not affect our experience of the actual world. Thinking that the instantiation or non-instantiation of some non-causal property is relevant to whether we deem pain (for example) to be bad is, Bedke argues, morally reprehensible. Bedke's is not simply the claim that it would be morally wrong to abandon our normative judgements *if* it were the case that non-natural properties did not track the natural facts we expect them to; rather, he argues that it is the very fact that non-naturalists are in a state of mind that would treat such considerations as relevant to their moral judgements at all which is immoral. In his own words, one "should change their mind based on how pain feels, its effects ... not ... on whether there is some non-natural property on the scene" (Bedke 2019: 7).

On the other hand, if the non-naturalist realist wishes to avoid this charge of immorality by sticking to their previous normative judgement that pain is bad regardless of the whether there is some non-causal property that all and only pain instantiates, Bedke argues that this move is irrational (Bedke 2019: 6). As explained above, a person's meta-ethical stance seems to rationally commit them to certain normative claims, namely which factors you must view as relevant to your normative judgements. If, as non-naturalist realists are, you are committed to the claim that 'badness' is equivalent to the instantiation of a particular non-natural property, then the question 'is there a non-natural property that all and only episodes of X instantiate?' (where X is something you judge to be bad, such as pain) becomes relevant to your normative judgements. If it is the case in fact that there is no non-natural property which all and only instances of X instantiate, then the non-naturalist realist is rationally obliged to either abandon non-naturalism or change their normative views on 'badness'. If they attempt to treat non-natural properties as irrelevant to their normative judgements, the non-naturalist realist behaves irrationally. Therefore, Bedke concludes that the non-naturalist realist is committed to being either immoral or irrational.

Hayward's argument, while closely related, is importantly different from Bedke's in that it objects to a conditional to which Hayward claims non-naturalist realists are committed, rather than to their psychological state. To set up his argument, Hayward first outlines the importance of "change conditions": the conditions under which we think we should change our normative judgements (Hayward 2019: 899). There are many change conditions which we judge to be acceptable, such as changing your duties and attitudes towards a friend on discovering that they have stolen from you. On the other hand, we would judge certain change conditions to be wholly unacceptable, such as if your duties and attitudes towards your friend were conditionalised on them having blonde hair. Clearly, even if the change conditions were never actually realised, the fact that you conditionalise your duties and attitudes upon your friend's hair colour is immoral. As Hayward says, identifying

change conditions is in itself a moral claim (Hayward 2019: 904).

Hayward claims that it is morally wrong to accept the following conditional, which is explicitly stated by Parfit (2011) but is, Hayward thinks, implicitly accepted by all non-naturalist realist theories:

Parfit's Conditional: "If naturalism is true, then nothing matters" (Hayward 2019: 904).

Hayward argues that the change conditions it posits are morally unacceptable.

One of the non-naturalist realist's three minimal claims is that *only* non-natural properties could adequately explain normativity. They are therefore committed to saying that if there were no such properties, nothing would matter, or indeed *could* matter. Hayward sees it as a morally reprehensible stance for one to conditionalise their normative judgements upon the existential claim that there are non-natural moral truths, particularly when those properties have no causal link to the experienced world (Hayward 2019: 904). Regardless of the existence or non-existence of these non-causal properties, *pain remains painful*: Hayward thinks that the existence or non-existence of non-causal properties are not the kinds of things upon which we should conditionalise our normative judgements (Hayward 2019: 904).

Now that we have outlined the immoral consequences of non-naturalist realism as described by Bedke and Hayward, I will examine some of the responses at the disposal of non-naturalist realists, beginning with the common non-naturalist realist claim that non-natural properties are metaphysically necessary.<sup>2</sup> When levelled against Hayward, this response is that since non-natural properties are metaphysically necessary, it is pointless to object to an immoral consequent of a conditional if its antecedent must necessarily be false (Hayward 2019: 907). If it could never be the case that there are no non-natural properties, then why care if their non-existence would entail unacceptable consequences?

As a rebuttal, however, this clearly fails. We can (and often do) criticise people for their attitudes towards impossible scenarios. If I were willing to kidnap and torture an elf for extra Christmas presents, you would rightly accuse me of having an immoral mindset or character. More importantly, though, it may well be the case that *if* something is true then it is *necessarily* true; but as Hayward argues, this "should do nothing to reassure us that it is, indeed, true". If God exists then They must necessarily exist; nevertheless, this alone should do nothing to assure me of God's existence. Analogously, the antecedent in 'if non-natural properties exist, then they exist necessarily' is not satisfied without further argument.

---

<sup>2</sup>Non-naturalist realists who attempt to avoid making this claim are so-called 'quietists' or 'relaxed realists', who hold that their view has "no positive ontological weight" (Hayward 2019: 909). However, I do not see this as a strong (or even coherent) view and will therefore not be discussing it here.

Furthermore, Bedke's argument means that even without the above response from Hayward, the non-naturalist realist cannot answer the charge of immorality by appealing to the metaphysical necessity of non-natural facts. Even if non-natural properties exist necessarily, Bedke's point is that even regarding them as relevant to your normative judgements is by itself immoral. Their metaphysical necessity does nothing to avoid this attack.

A non-naturalist might respond that, under non-naturalist realism, tracking the instantiation of non-natural properties and acting accordingly is simply what acting morally *means*. If the properties necessarily exist and we are tracking them correctly, we cannot, *ex hypothesi*, be doing something immoral by treating them as relevant. However, this addendum begs the question against those who reject the non-naturalist realist theory. In identifying a non-natural property with goodness, the non-naturalist must have shown that they have picked out "something we should promote" (Dasgupta 2017: 301). As Hayward points out, someone who has already accepted that water is Hg would argue that a substance boiling at 356.73°C can be evidence that it is water, but unless they have picked out a colourless, potable liquid (i.e. something everyone can agree is water), they are not "playing fair" against someone who denies that water is Hg (Hayward 2019: 905–6). The claim that our normative judgements should not depend on non-causal, stance-independent properties is *prima facie* just as plausible as the claim that normative judgements are statements of non-natural facts. The non-naturalist realist needs to show that they are identifying something *good* when they point out a certain non-natural property before the conversation can really begin.

In order to play fair, then, suppose that the vast majority of our core normative judgements do track non-natural properties in the way we expect them to. Suppose we are correct about our moral judgements, and things in the real world really do instantiate non-natural properties of 'goodness' and 'badness' in a way that aligns with our normative views. If this is the case, we can agree that the non-naturalist points out "something we should promote". Here, can we not agree that, if morality means acting in line with the instantiation of non-natural properties, and if the instantiation of these properties really does sort things into the normative categories we expect them to belong to, then it cannot be immoral to treat these properties as relevant to our normative judgements?

However, it is not clear how this supposition, even if true, would help the non-naturalist realist's case. In order to avoid irrationality and respect the normative entailments of their meta-ethical view, the non-naturalist realist must accept the following two conditionals:

- (c) If there had been no non-natural properties, nothing would have mattered.
- (d) If the non-natural properties had not aligned with our normative judge-

ments, we would have abandoned our previous normative judgements.

Clearly this is no defence at all. If they deny either of these in order to avoid Hayward's objection that these change conditions are unacceptable, then they are behaving irrationally (per Bedke). The non-naturalist realist must either commit herself to two unacceptable change conditions, or reject them and behave irrationally.

Some might be tempted to dodge these conditionals by claiming that, had the world been different and the antecedent of (c) or (d) were satisfied, then naturalism (or some other meta-ethics) would be true (Hayward 2019: 911). But surely this position is inconsistent with the non-naturalist realist view that non-normative properties exist, and crucially, that they exist necessarily. In virtue of being a realist, the non-naturalist realist must claim that non-natural properties *do* exist. But to dodge the conditional in the way described above, they must then accept that non-natural properties are contingent facts and that normativity *could* have been found in properties other than the non-natural, had the world been different (and, in doing so, deny the third minimal claim of non-naturalist realism).

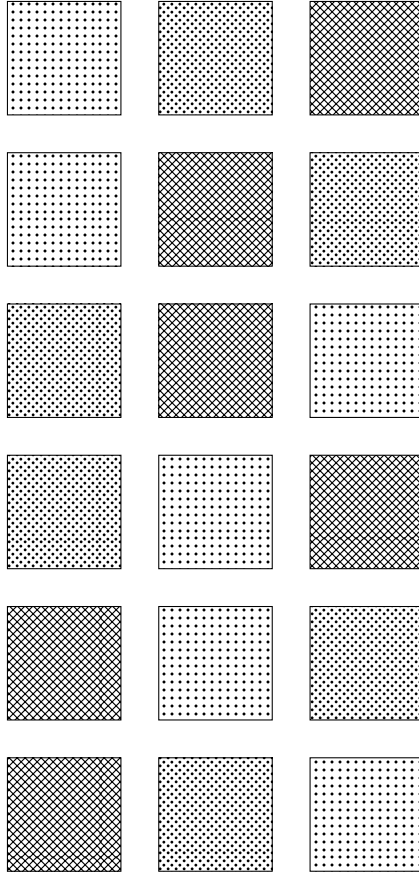
Further, as Hayward says, "if I argue that your theory has immoral implications, it's no defence to respond that you are not entirely convinced in your own theory anyway" (Hayward 2019: 911). It may well be the case that non-naturalist realists would be psychologically inclined to abandon the view if the antecedent of (c) or (b) were satisfied, but this does not amount to a denial of Hayward's claims about what the non-naturalist realist view itself entails. If anything, it is a concession of the plausibility of Hayward's charges.

We have seen then that the main responses at the non-naturalist realists' disposal fail to dismiss the charge of immorality levelled against them in Bedke and Hayward's arguments. I cannot identify a way for the non-naturalist realist to avoid immorality while both standing by their three minimal claims and avoiding irrationality. Despite the success of these arguments, however, it remains to be seen whether the theory's immoral entailments falsify it, necessarily or synthetically. I will simply note that when subscribing to a meta-ethical theory, that theory having immoral or unacceptable normative consequences should at least provide a strong *prima facie* reason to be wary of that theory, especially if there are theories on offer which do not entail such objectionable consequences.

## *References*

- Bedke, M. S. (2019). A dilemma for non-naturalists: Irrationality or immorality? *Philosophical Studies*, 177, 1–6.

- Dasgupta, S. (2017). Non-naturalism and normative authority. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 117(3), 297–319.
- Hayward, M. K. (2019). Immoral realism. *Philosophical Studies*, 176, 897–914.
- Parfit, D. (2011). *On what matters* (Vol. 2). Oxford: Oxford.





# *Death and Prudential Deprivation*

MATTHEW W. G. MCCLURE

## **Abstract**

Dying is (sometimes) bad for the dier because it prevents her from being the subject of wellbeing she otherwise would (the *deprivation account*). I argue for this from a (plausible) principle about which futures are bad for a prudential subject (the *future-comparison principle*). I explain how this principle rules out two influential objections to the badness of death (*timing* and *symmetry*), and defend it from objections. A *strengthened future-comparison principle* yields that death is not always bad, and that the badness of death does not consist in that it destroys the dier.

## *1 Introduction*

Is death bad for us?<sup>1</sup> The question falls prey to two ambiguities, those between *being dead* and *dying*, and between *existential* and *universal* quantification (Fletcher 2016: 145–6, 148). Here I am concerned only with dying. This narrows things down to claims about quantification:

*Weak harm thesis:* There exist lives where dying is (prudentially) bad for the dier. (Sometimes dying is bad for us.) In symbols:  $\exists S \exists t ((\emptyset \blacktriangleright S) \parallel_t)$ . (For notation see appx. A.)

*Strong harm thesis:* For all lives, dying is (prudentially) bad for the dier. (Dying is always bad for us.) In symbols:  $\forall S \exists t ((\emptyset \blacktriangleright S) \parallel_t)$ .

In this paper I'll argue for the weak harm thesis from a principle concerning which futures are bad for a prudential subject, the *future-comparison principle*. A plausible strengthening of this principle yields an argument against the strong harm thesis, and gives us reason to doubt the 'annihilation' account of the badness of dying (dying is bad in that it destroys the dier).

---

<sup>1</sup>I use 'harming' and 'bad for' interchangeably, and use 'prudential', 'prudentially', &c., as having to do with wellbeing.

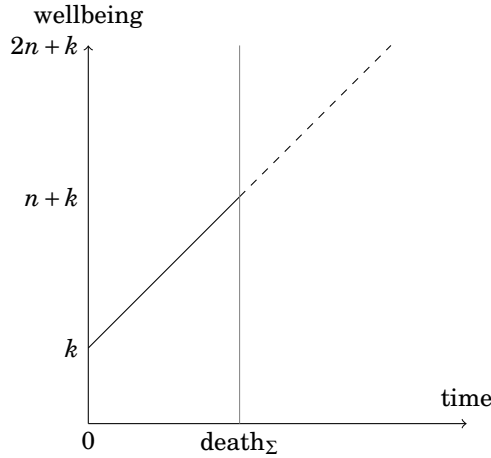


Figure 1:  $\Sigma$ 's life. Dying is bad for her.

## 2 *The deprivation account and the future-comparison principle*

Why is dying bad for us? On the ‘deprivation’ account (DA), dying (sometimes) prevents us from being the subjects of wellbeing that we would otherwise be, and failing to be the subject of this wellbeing is bad for us (since being so would be better for us). So dying is sometimes bad for us (cf. Fletcher 2016: 148–150; Luper 2009: ch. 5; Benatar 2017: 101–102).

The argument for the weak harm thesis from the prudential value of futures, a species of DA, focuses on one particular life,  $\Sigma$ .

$\Sigma$ :  $\Sigma$  has a linear uphill distribution, and her prudential level would continue to rise were it not for her death (fig. 1, p. 30). Her death does not feature any ancillary harms like pain.

$\Sigma$  is, of course, an abstraction, but there are lives of concrete prudential subjects that share its important features: net positive wellbeing before a death without significant ancillary harm, and plausible net positive wellbeing after the time of (actual) death.

To evaluate  $\Sigma$ , we formulate a framework modelling wellbeing over time, the ‘comparative’ framework. We start off with an ordinary Kripke triple often seen in the semantics of nonclassical logics

$$\langle \mathcal{T}, \mathcal{R}, [\cdot] \rangle$$

interpreted temporally, with  $\mathcal{T}$  being a set of instants and  $R$  a binary relation on  $\mathcal{T}$ , interpreting  $tRu$  as  $u$  being prudentially accessible from  $t$ .  $\llbracket \cdot \rrbracket_t$  is the denotation function at instants;  $\llbracket p \rrbracket_t$  iff  $p$  is true at  $t$ . In addition to instants, we have futures (this set  $\mathcal{F}$ ), tuples of instants along the accessibility relation; if  $\langle u, u^*, u^{**}, u^{***}, \dots \rangle$  is a future, then  $uRu^* \wedge u^*Ru^{**} \wedge u^{**}Ru^{***} \wedge \dots$ .<sup>2</sup> We impose a constraint on  $R$  similar to seriality ( $\forall t \exists u(tRu)$ ); specifically, future seriality ( $\forall t \exists f(tRf)$ ): all instants access a future (not necessarily an instant).

This all corresponds to the metalanguage of, say, a modal logic. We introduce further notions in a form corresponding to object language operators:

- a function  $w$  which maps prudential subjects to the reals (any sufficiently large totally ordered set will do) at instants and futures, interpreting  $w(S)_t$  as  $S$ 's wellbeing at  $t$  and  $w(S)_f$  her wellbeing in  $f$ .
- a relation  $\blacktriangleright$  between futures and prudential subjects, interpreting  $\llbracket f \blacktriangleright S \rrbracket_t$  as  $f$  being prudentially bad for  $S$  at  $t$ .

Given all this, the following principle about wellbeing and futures is the basis of a deprivation-style argument for the weak harm thesis:

*Future-comparison principle (FCP):* A sufficient condition on  $h$  being bad for  $S$  at  $t$  is for there to exist a  $t$ -accessible future  $g$  such that  $S$ 's wellbeing in  $g$  exceeds that in  $h$ . In symbols:  $\llbracket h \blacktriangleright S \rrbracket_t \leftarrow \exists g(tRg \wedge w(S)_g > w(S)_h)$ .

It seems that FCP should be relatively uncontroversial. Prima facie, it seems true: surely something is bad for you if it makes you worse-off in the long run. The argument for the weak harm principle is obtained when a characterisation of dying is given:

*Null future characterisation of dying (NF):* Dying is the null future ( $\emptyset$ ); it is therefore of no prudential value:  $\forall S(w(S)_\emptyset = 0)$

The argument, then, comes quite easily. Let  $G$  be any death $_\Sigma$ -accessible future with positive wellbeing (such things exist by definition – see the dashed line in fig. 1). By NF, dying ( $\emptyset$ ) has prudential value 0. So  $G$  is accessible at death $_\Sigma$  and has greater wellbeing than  $\emptyset$ . But for  $\emptyset$  to be bad for  $\Sigma$  at death $_\Sigma$ , it's sufficient that there be better death $_\Sigma$ -accessible futures for  $\Sigma$  (by FCP): viz.,  $G$ . So  $\emptyset$  is bad for  $\Sigma$  at death $_\Sigma$ . The weak harm thesis follows immediately by existential generalisation. (For the technical details, see appx. B.)

<sup>2</sup>Naturally, if  $\langle \dots, t \rangle$  and  $\langle u, \dots \rangle$  are futures, then  $\langle \dots, t \rangle R \langle u, \dots \rangle$  iff  $tRu$ .

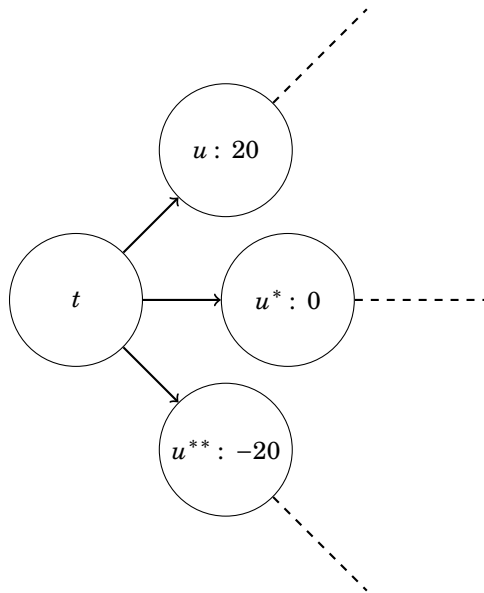


Figure 2: On FCP,  $[\langle u^* \rangle \blacktriangleright S]_t$  and  $[\langle u^{**} \rangle \blacktriangleright S]_t$  (since  $tRu$  and  $w(S)_u > w(S)_{u^*}$  and  $w(S)_u > w(S)_{u^{**}}$ ).

Since we define  $\blacktriangleright$  using  $R$  (the accessibility relation), it's worth pausing for a moment and considering what natural constraints on  $R$  yield for the badness of dying.

Transitivity ( $tRu \wedge uRv \implies tRv$ ) is a fairly natural constraint for temporal reasoning (especially if we think of  $R$  as a 'precedence' relation as in tense logics), though it would require a slight tweak of our reading of 'accessibility' (e.g. from 'directly precedes' to 'precedes'). Consider  $S$  at  $t$  with an accessible future  $u, \dots, \emptyset$  ( $uRu^*, \dots, u^{***}R\emptyset$ ). It then follows that

$$tRu, tRu^*, \dots, tR\emptyset, tR\langle u, u^* \rangle, \dots, tR\langle u^*, u^{**} \rangle, \dots, tR\langle u, u^*, u^{**} \rangle, \dots$$

and, consequently, that the  $t$ -accessibility of any future of which any part has net positive wellbeing entails the badness of death at  $t$  (since this positive part is accessible at  $t$ , and of greater prudential value than  $\emptyset$ ).

Reflexivity ( $tRt$ ) is a less natural constraint, but it yields an interesting result. Consider some moment  $t$  at which  $\emptyset$  is accessible. By reflexivity,  $tRt$ , so we can recursively construct an infinity of futures

$$\emptyset; t, \emptyset; t, t, \emptyset; t, \dots, \emptyset$$

It follows trivially that if  $t$  has net positive prudential value for  $S$ ,  $\emptyset$  is bad for  $S$  at  $t$ .

### 3 Objections

An influential objection to the badness of death comes from Epicurus:

Thus he is a fool who says he fears death not because it will be painful while present but because it is painful when it is still to come. For that which while present causes no distress causes unnecessary pain when merely anticipated. So death, the most frightening of bad things, is nothing to us; since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist. (Epicurus 1990: 315)

Following Bradley (2004: 1), I put this 'timing' challenge in the form of a modus tollens inference:

1. For any  $f$ , if  $f$  is bad for  $S$ , it is bad for her at some time;
2. There is no time at which dying is bad for  $S$ ;
3. So dying is not bad for  $S$ .

The natural response is to claim that (2) is false, since FCP is concerned with badness at particular instants. Keeping this, and the fact that dying is a future, in mind, it makes perfect sense to say there are times at which dying is bad for *S*, since dying is a future accessible at particular times and manifest at particular times. FCP entails that the prudential disvalue is borne by the instant before death, since in this instant dying is an accessible future, and the prudential value of an instant is partially determined by the future it manifests; to be stuck between Scylla and Charybdis is bad for *S* even before one of them eats her.

The classical ‘symmetry’ challenge of Lucretius (1997: 96–7 (3.972–979)) may be addressable too:

Look back upon the ages of time past  
 Eternal, before we were born, and see  
 That they have been nothing to us, nothing at all.  
 This is the mirror nature holds for us  
 To show the face of time to come, when we  
 At last are dead. Is there in this for us  
 Anything horrible? Is there anything sad?  
 Is it not more free from care than any sleep?

An argument for the nonbadness of dying can be given when we formulate the ‘symmetry’ principle:

*Symmetry principle (SP)*: Coming into existence (birth, the null past) and going out of existence (dying, the null future) are alike in all relevant respects.

There is no question of coming into existence being prudentially good or bad for us, since there was no ‘us’. Correspondingly, by SP, there is no question of going out of existence being prudentially good or bad for us, since there will be no ‘us’. Imagine if one flipped the axis of time (by ‘the mirror of nature’):  $\text{birth}_{\text{flipped}}$  would be  $\text{dying}_{\text{not flipped}}$ , as in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s ‘The Curious Case of Benjamin Button’. But wouldn’t  $\text{dying}_{\text{not flipped}}$  then fail to be *bad* for us? By SP the flipped and non-flipped lives are alike in all relevant respects, so  $\text{dying}_{\text{not flipped}}$  is not bad for us.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>A formulation a little closer to the poem (Lucretius seems to be concerned only with the nonbadness of being dead) is given by Luper (2009: 61–2) (his additions in parenthesis):

1. It is not bad for us that we once failed to exist.
2. Our posthumous nonexistence is like our pre-vital nonexistence in all relevant respects.
3. If two things are alike in all relevant respects, and one of them is not bad for us, then the second

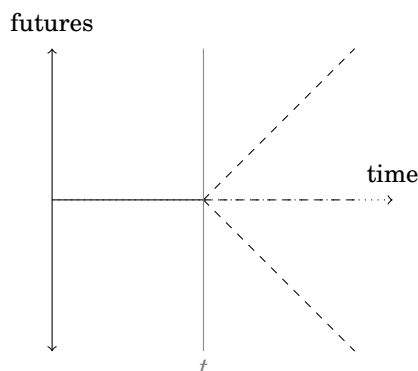


Figure 3: Asymmetry between the past and future

FCP allows us to assert, and to explain, the asymmetry. At most one past is accessible to any instant constrained by a history, so FCP does not apply to coming into existence. Prudential asymmetry mirrors temporal asymmetry (fig. 3, p. 35).

So much for the classical worries: let's consider objections to FCP specifically. The two particular objections concern a supposed consequentialist commitment FCP entails, and cases of marginal difference in wellbeing between futures, respectively.

The consequentialism objection proposes a counterexample to FCP. Consider a subject *S* who is having an awful life, her wellbeing significantly below 0 ('worse than nothing'). *S* is starving to death and strongly desires to be given food, even though she knows that, if saved, things will remain very bad.<sup>4</sup> On FCP, the objection goes, we ought not give *S* food: we ought to let her starve, or perhaps euthanise her.

But this objection is misplaced for two reasons. Firstly, whether FCP will judge death bad for *S* in this case turns on first-order prudential considerations: if desire-satisfaction contributes significantly to wellbeing, and *S*'s will to live is strong enough, it is plausible that the satisfaction of this desire (giving her food)

---

is not bad for us either.

4. So it is not bad for us that we will fail to exist once more.
5. (If the significant effect of a process is to place us into a state that is not bad for us, then that process is not bad for us either.)
6. (Therefore the process of death is not bad for us.)

<sup>4</sup>This example is due to Max Klaassen.

will bring her wellbeing up to above 0. Secondly, the comparative framework and FCP are both purely axiological, concerned only with when dying is *bad* for a subject. It says nothing (normative) about what we're obligated to do given these axiological facts, and is therefore not committed to the claim that if not dying is prudentially bad for  $S$ ,  $S$  ought die. So even if  $S$ 's wellbeing would remain negative after surviving, it doesn't follow that  $S$  ought die. If we accept utilitarianism, it follows that  $S$  ought die, but the FCP doesn't commit one to utilitarianism. It appears the consequentialism objection itself presupposes consequentialism.<sup>5</sup>

The objection concerning marginal differences in wellbeing runs as follows. Consider two accessible futures:  $f$ , which has (very high)  $n$  prudens,<sup>6</sup> and  $g$ , which has  $n - \epsilon$  (marginally less). Each would vastly improve  $S$ 's level of wellbeing, but on FCP  $g$  is *bad* for  $S$ . But this is absurd.

The response has two parts. First, we bite the bullet:  $g$  is bad for  $S$  given the accessibility of  $f$ . Then we show that biting the bullet is not so bad:  $g$  may be bad, but it's not as bad as, for example, a future with  $n - 35$  prudens, or  $\emptyset$ . Value comes, to some extent, in degrees – the goodness/badness of a future is proportional to its prudential value. This has the very intuitive implication that the degree to which dying is bad for  $S$  is proportional to the net value of her other accessible future.<sup>7</sup> It also sits very nicely with FCP. (Turns out the bullet is not so bad after all.)

As an example, take Fletcher's (2016: 149) 'dastardly David' case, in which a senior academic (David) prevents a brilliant junior academic (Beth) from taking up a prestigious and well-funded research fellowship so she can teach a course for him. Her wellbeing is still high – she still has a satisfying academic career, &c. – but it would've been higher had she been able to take up the fellowship. It should be clear that being prevented from taking up the fellowship is bad for Beth, even if her wellbeing is still very high. Though it is of course not as bad for her as, for example, dying in a bicycle accident on her way to work.

#### 4 *Is death always bad?*

So, dying is bad for some prudential subjects – but is it bad for all? Not if we accept the following principle:

*Strengthened future-comparison principle (FCP+):* A necessary and sufficient condition on  $h$  being bad for  $S$  at  $t$  is for there to exist a  $t$ -

<sup>5</sup>As an interesting technical point, FCP+ is structurally similar to consequentialism; interpreting ► as an impermissibility relation and  $w$  as the theory's axiological function yields consequentialism.

<sup>6</sup>A prudens is a unit of prudential value.

<sup>7</sup>Where there are more than one, some weighting is required, but this is outside of this paper's scope.



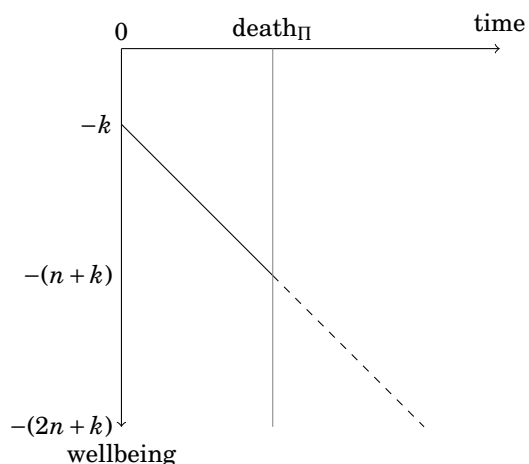


Figure 4:  $\Pi$ 's life. Not dying would be bad for her.

accessible future  $g$  such that  $S$ 's wellbeing in  $g$  exceeds that in  $h$ . In symbols:  $[h \blacktriangleright S]_t \Leftrightarrow \exists g(tRg \wedge w(S)_g > w(S)_h)$ .

To see the plausibility of FCP+, consider that whenever something is bad for you, your level of wellbeing falls relative to the best alternative. Indeed, it is bad for you only when your level of wellbeing is lower than the best alternative.<sup>8</sup> Thus that which is bad is extensionally equivalent with that which lowers your level of wellbeing relative to the alternatives, which is what FCP+ claims.

The argument against the strong harm thesis considers  $\Pi$ , who is the inverse of  $\Sigma$  (fig. 4, p. 37). At  $\text{death}_\Pi$  there are no accessible futures at which her wellbeing exceeds that in  $\emptyset$ , so by FCP+ it is not bad for her. But for that distinct future  $h$ , in which she does not die, there exists some future,  $\emptyset$ , whose prudential value exceeds that of  $h$ . To die would not be bad for  $\Pi$ ; to not die would be bad for  $\Pi$ .

Practically speaking, however, it's worth noting that death will always feature ancillary harms – pain, fear, projects being left unfinished. These are bad for  $S$  when  $S$  dies, but death *in itself* is only sometimes bad for her.

<sup>8</sup>Note that alternatives are given by prudential accessibility, which needn't be constrained by nomological possibility – or even metaphysical possibility. To evaluate alternatives, given the right theory of wellbeing, just evaluate the counterfactual.

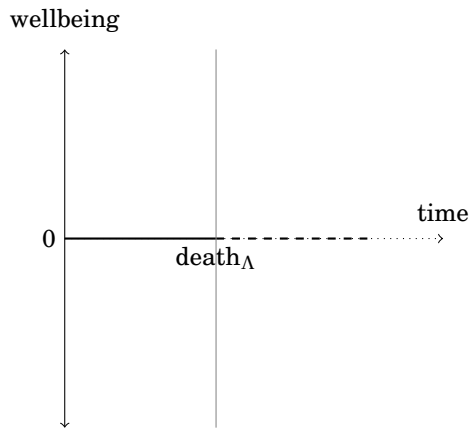


Figure 5:  $\Lambda$ 's life. Dying doesn't seem to be bad for her in virtue of her ceasing to be.

### 5 *The supposed badness of ceasing to be*

In the discussion above, I have argued that the badness of dying is not a special type of harm, but merely a token of comparative harm, that the badness of death is not peculiar to death. Benatar (2017: 102–110) suggests, in addition to DA, that dying is a special harm. The 'annihilation' account says that dying is bad for  $S$  in that it destroys her, makes her cease to be. This is inconsistent with FCP+, but we have independent reason to doubt it.

Dying is not bad in virtue of annihilation. Consider some life that, if destroyed, would have the same level wellbeing as it would otherwise have; as examples, take  $\Lambda$  (fig. 5, p. 38) and instantaneous death (below). Were such a life destroyed, death would be no worse from the perspective of its subject; wellbeing would be, broadly speaking, unaffected.

*Instantaneous death (ID):* a subject dies, but only for an instant. She does not remain dead, and continues to live a life of relatively high wellbeing.

Similar concrete cases have occurred, though they usually feature ancillary harms and last longer than an instant. In ID cases it hardly seems right to say that annihilation is bad for  $S$  since it makes the badness of death for  $S$  independent from that which is prudentially tangible.<sup>9</sup> (The same goes for  $\Lambda$ .) What, one might

<sup>9</sup>It fails to satisfy the experience requirement, for example.

ask, makes death such a special sort of harm?

Annihilation may not be bad in itself, as per the counterexamples,<sup>10</sup> but it is very often associated with harms. These include ancillary harms, like pain, and comparative harms of the sort considered above – that one will cease to be entails that one will not have access to other futures in which one's wellbeing might be higher.

Perhaps we can explain the annihilation intuition, then, by saying that dying entails that one can not manifest alternative futures, and the badness of death (when it is bad) consists in not being able to manifest better alternative futures than death. For example, there are certain goods which obtain because the painting *Guernica* exists. Destroying *Guernica* is bad because (and insofar as) it prevents those goods from obtaining. When death is bad, its badness is guaranteed by annihilation, but does not consist in annihilation.

## 6 Conclusion

Where does this discussion leave us? It seems the future-comparison principle (with the null future characterisation of dying) gives us good reason to accept the weak harm thesis on grounds of comparative harm/prudential deprivation. FCP can address influential objections to the weak harm thesis from timing and symmetry, and seems to address the objections levelled against it. Further, the strengthened future-comparison principle gives us good reason to reject the strong harm thesis on comparative grounds, and explains why the annihilation account fails despite the annihilation intuition not being misplaced.

And the upshot of all of this for us concrete prudential subjects? Dying is a harm when and only when things could be in some sense better than death. Plausibly, death is bad for just about everyone.

Some parenthetical remarks of a technical character to finish with: The comparative framework seems a useful tool for prudential analysis in general due to its enabling us to be (i) more abstract in its almost 'metaprudential' character (independence of any particular theory), and (ii) more precise and explicit in its formal framework (analogous to modal logic). It may be found helpful when applied to various other issues concerning wellbeing, for example, those of interpersonal wellbeing comparison and the prudential value of the shape (structural features) of a life. The comparative framework raises its own questions, two of the most significant of which being (i) what constraints there are on prudential accessibility, and (ii) whether the use of multiple prudential valuation functions, multimodal

---

<sup>10</sup>That ID is impossible given the permanence of death is not relevant – annihilation and mortal harm are still conceptually independent (recall fn 8).

extensions, &c. allow for richer analysis (e.g. an acceptability relation to model the prudential correlate of obligatoriness/impermissibility).

### *Acknowledgements*

For feedback on this paper I am grateful to an audience at St. Andrews; particularly helpful were the comments of Max Klaassen, Matthew Green, and Andrew Fish. Thanks are due also to Annika Cleland-Hura for helpful editorial suggestions.

### *References*

- Benatar, D. (2017). *The human predicament: A candid guide to life's biggest questions*. Oxford: Oxford.
- Bradley, B. (2004). When is death bad for the one who dies? *Noûs*, 38(1), 1–28.
- Cahn, S. M. (Ed.). (1990). *Classics of western philosophy* (3rd ed.). Cambridge, MA: Hackett.
- Epicurus. (1990). Letter to Menoeceus (B. Inwood & L. P. Gerson, Trans.). In S. M. Cahn (Ed.), *Classics of western philosophy* (3rd ed.). Cambridge, MA: Hackett.
- Fletcher, G. (2016). *The philosophy of well-being: An introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Lucretius. (1997). *On the nature of the universe* (R. Melville, D. Fowler, & P. Fowler, Eds.). Oxford: Oxford.
- Luper, S. (2009). *The philosophy of death*. Cambridge: Cambridge.

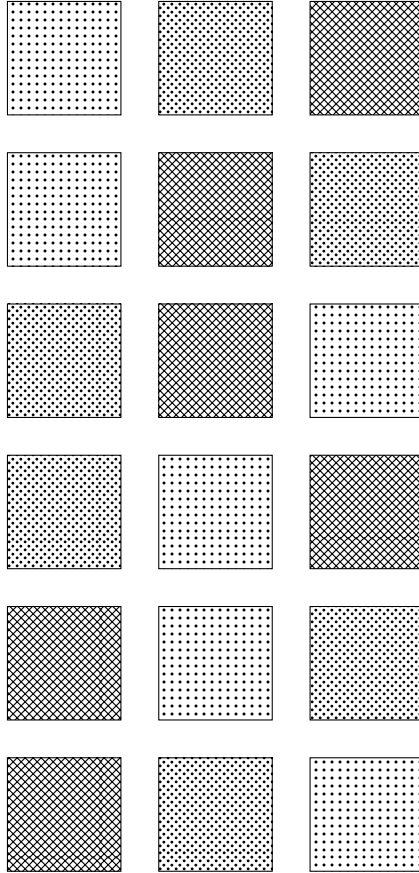
### *A Notation*

- $S, T, \dots$  are variables in domain  $\mathcal{L}$  (prudential subjects)
- $t, u, \dots$  are variables in domain  $\mathcal{T}$  (instants) in the metalanguage
- $f, g, \dots$  are variables (in  $\mathcal{F}$ ) standing for futures, which are chains of instants (tuples) along the accessibility relation ( $tRu, uRv, \dots$ ) (metalanguage)
- $\Sigma, \dots (\in \mathcal{L})$  and  $\emptyset (\in \mathcal{F})$  are constants
- $\blacktriangleright \subseteq (\mathcal{F} \times \mathcal{L})$  – it's read '(future) is bad for (prudential subject)'
- $w$  is the prudential valuation function (to an ordered set like  $\mathbf{R}$ ), at instants and over periods of time
- $\llbracket \cdot \rrbracket$  is the assignment function (at instants)

*B The argument for the weak harm thesis*

1.  $G := \text{death}_\Sigma RG \wedge w(\Sigma)_G > 0$  (def.)
2.  $\forall S(w(S)_\emptyset = 0)$  (NF)
3.  $w(\Sigma)_\emptyset = 0$  ( $\forall$ -elim. 2)
4.  $\llbracket h \blacktriangleright S \rrbracket_t \Leftarrow \exists g(tRg \wedge w(S)_g > w(S)_h)$  (FCP)
5.  $\llbracket \emptyset \blacktriangleright S \rrbracket_t \Leftarrow \exists g(tRg \wedge w(S)_g > 0)$  ( $\forall$ -elim. 4)
6.  $\llbracket \emptyset \blacktriangleright \Sigma \rrbracket_t \Leftarrow \exists g(tRg \wedge w(\Sigma)_g > 0)$  ( $\forall$ -elim. 5)
7.  $\llbracket \emptyset \blacktriangleright \Sigma \rrbracket_{\text{death}_\Sigma} \Leftarrow \exists g(\text{death}_\Sigma Rg \wedge w(\Sigma)_g > 0)$  ( $\forall$ -elim. 6)
8.  $\text{death}_\Sigma RG \wedge w(\Sigma)_G > 0$  ( $G$  def.)
9.  $\exists g(\text{death}_\Sigma Rg \wedge w(\Sigma)_g > 0)$  ( $\exists$ -in. 8)
10.  $\llbracket \emptyset \blacktriangleright \Sigma \rrbracket_t$  ( $\rightarrow$ -elim. 7, 9)
11.  $\exists t(\llbracket \emptyset \blacktriangleright \Sigma \rrbracket_t)$  ( $\exists$ -in. 10)
12.  $\exists S \exists t(\llbracket \emptyset \blacktriangleright S \rrbracket_t)$  ( $\exists$ -in. 11)

That  $G$  denotes should be easy to see from the stipulation of  $\Sigma$  (fig. 1, p. 30). (5–7) are valid instances of universal instantiation since  $h$ ,  $S$ , and  $t$  are free.



# *Apocalypse and Our Existential Predicament*

WILL PENKETHMAN-CARR

## Abstract

The idea of the annihilation of the human race isn't a recent one: from *Revelation* in the Bible to the most recent Hollywood apocalypse films, we have never ceased to have a colourful imagination about how we all die. Such thoughts come peppered with real life scares too, from the Cold War, to the depletion of the ozone layer, to global warming. So we have rich pickings to choose from; there's a myriad of different deaths we envisage to conclude our future.

But why this fascination? Why do we love to imagine it? And how does this affect our reaction to threats of extinction? To understand why this is so is the task of the following essay. I begin with outlining a sketch of the psyche and its relation to idea of apocalypse, which I claim is closely related to Freud's concept of the death drive. With this, I move on to analysing the relation of each individual's death drive to society at large, where a fantasied apocalypse comes into confrontation with potential genuine destruction. The danger that this confrontation creates, I argue, is that it obscures our ability to fully assess the actual threat of extinction. The obscuration manifests itself as a form of Sartrean bad faith. However the conclusion I draw from this isn't necessarily hopeless. Heidegger offers us a potential solution to bad faith via authentic reconciliation with the idea of death. This however runs against clichés from the culture industry such as Hollywood romanticism: Apocalypse films often deceptively hint at the idea for the unification of humanity. This, I claim, is delusional, for it implies that humanity can only ever achieve peace post-apocalypse, which is 1) not true, and 2) too late! Ideally, engagement with our existential position needs to be gained pre-apocalypse to avoid apocalypse altogether.

SO what is the relation in the psyche of the individual and the death of the species it is a part of? Freud, writing in *Civilisation and its Discontents*,<sup>1</sup> hints at one possible option: that the idea of the apocalypse is a manifestation of the 'death drive':

---

<sup>1</sup>I'm addressing at this juncture my awareness that many of my upcoming interpretations are possibly unorthodox, and have been somewhat lampooned for the purposes of the discussion.

It's the existence of the tendency to aggression, which we detect in ourselves and rightly presume in others, that vitiates our relations with our neighbour and obliges civilisation to go to such lengths. Given the fundamental hostility of human beings to one another, civilised society is constantly threatened with disintegration. A common interest in work would not hold it together: passions that derive from the drives are stronger than reasonable interests. (Freud 2002: 61)

It appears then that when we watch some doomsday movie or dip into a dystopian novel, we are purging ourselves in a cultural catharsis of the constraints of society. Our drives to break the society that tries to constrain our drives are given the ultimate, albeit imaginary, victory as we see on the screen civilisation blasted by a fireball or filled with zombies.<sup>2</sup>

But it is doubtful whether this is the sole reason (although its being an unconscious drive means we although it being an unconscious drive we could hardly be aware of it influencing our minds, thus we cannot dismiss the idea because we aren't certain that it's not the case) for, at the same time, the sympathies of the audience, reader, etc, are always aligned to those trying to survive in the post-apocalyptic world: their hearts go out to the (good) people and not whatever it is that is trying to kill them.<sup>3</sup> Freud, in the same text, again offers us some material to take the idea further:

The tension between the stern super-ego and the ego that is subject to it is what we call a 'sense of guilt'; this manifests itself as a need for punishment. In this way civilisation overcomes the dangerous aggressiveness of the individual, by weakening him, dis-arming him and setting up an internal authority to watch over him, like a garrison in a conquered town. (Freud 2002: 77)

---

<sup>2</sup>This may explain also where there are no utopia films: we never see any scenarios where the society and the individuals that compromise it function harmoniously. We don't want to envisage, or don't need to envisage, utopias because we don't get the same sense of catharsis that we do from damage and destruction.

<sup>3</sup>It's worth pointing out that there seems to be a contradiction involved in thinking that we desire our own destruction as a civilisation but we want the survivors to live on. But there is no contradiction in that it is the case that contradictory drives coexist in the same psyche, and so an analysis with the death drive directed towards civilisation and the goodwill to survivors is perfectly acceptable in Freudian theory. It has been suggested to me in correspondence that the dual reaction to the (perceived) apocalypse implies that the death drive hasn't yet transitioned to a species scale. Such an observation doesn't detract much from the main thesis (and there are counter-examples besides, for example *Melancholia* (2011, dir. Lars von Trier) and, furthermore, the presence of survivors is important. As I go on to explain, the presence of survivors is a candidate that fulfils two roles, 1) as evidence for the death drive having been fulfilled, and 2) as evidence of punishment from society at large for their apocalyptic fantasy.



Here, we see the introduction of guilt as a product of the individual's apocalyptic fantasies; guilt over having a death drive towards society at large (as opposed to a death drive aimed against ourselves or our neighbours). That guilt over the death drive towards society has now grown to such levels that we begin to fantasise about the death of the species as the ultimate form of punishment. Think of the concept of zombies: dead humans killing alive ones as the ultimate symbolic expression of the subconscious drive to annihilate humanity. It's far greater than an Olympian condemnation of humanity when the population's ancestors rise from the grave to slaughter and eat those who outlived them: humanity slaughters itself by its own hand. Unlike war films, the zombie apocalypse is more likeable to a suicide than a fight.

Freud identifies two parts of the psyche that leads to the apocalypse fantasy: the first is the death drive itself, wherein the caged beast that lies within humanity desires to strike and kill the societal authority that chains it, and this precipitates the second, the guilt enforced on the ego by the super-ego which fuels a need for punishment because of that death drive. To Freud, the super-ego acting as civilisation's mental authority, or "garrison", in the "conquered town" of the ego drives us to a guilt as punishment for our apocalyptic imagination.

In fact, the imagination seems incredibly versatile in this confrontation, for it can fulfil both sides at once: the death drive is fulfilled because the demise of society is (in some cases literally) on fire on screen, but also the guilt is appeased, for it is clear that much of humanity has died, often painfully, and has therefore in a twisted sense received punishment. In a sense it is like the soldier who is cut down but the battle is won: the ego imagines it has won over society by seeing its collapse, but in that victory it too is destroyed and punished as the pillars of civilisation come crashing down. Again, it is like a suicide, a 'queen exchange' in the mind. This idea of dual fulfilment can be found elsewhere, for example, in chapter three of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (2016: ch. 3) where the teacher describes to his pupils the burning pits of hell: here we see the drive to destroy (all things fall into hell) and the punishment (the torments of hell and the narrator taking a sordid pleasure in the thought of tortured souls) in one.

So with the genuine threat of the death of the species combined with a bizarre fantasy over its death, it seems odd that there appears so little action to try to counterbalance actions that lead towards our demise. How far beyond the tipping point must we go before real action is taken on global warming, say? It's a strange juxtaposition when in ordinary circumstances threats to someone's wellbeing provokes attempts to try and avoid it. Something appears to change when it reaches a global scale. An intuitive response is to say that the threat becomes so large that one cannot see beyond the pettiness of their actions. Or they choose not to think about it at all – to take the easier route to make one sleep easier at night – or even

gain the mentality of rather being hanged for a sheep than a lamb (the thought process of: ‘Well, I’m not going to be alive much longer anyway, so what the hell!’).

In that case, it appears that we see a version of what Sartre called ‘bad faith’. Granted, not quite in the context that he used it, but the same thought pattern is visible, in that one deceives oneself into thinking they believe something when in fact they know otherwise. In its being a self-deception, the individual must be conscious of the original fact (that the extinction is possible - and potentially imminent) in order to cover that fact up. The fantasy of apocalypse springing from the death drive directed at society brings with it a form of bad faith as it comes into conflict with the very real presence of potential extinction. The fantasy of apocalypse obscures our ability to properly recognise the danger of actual extinction, and as the fantasy and reality come to confront each other in the psyche, one manoeuvres themselves out of overcoming this confrontation by entering into bad faith.<sup>4</sup>

The person who is in bad faith is they who, upon knowing the facts, and seeing the plastic in the seas, and even acknowledging that global warming is occurring, nonetheless do nothing significant in order to combat it: they refuse to acknowledge the conclusion of the data, namely, that humanity could go extinct. This is because “Bad faith does not hold the norms and criteria of truth as they are accepted by the critical thought of good faith. What it decides first, in fact, is the nature of truth.” (Sartre 2003: 91). Given that the individual’s belief is prefigured into a desired truth, “Consequently a peculiar type of evidence appears; *non-persuasive* evidence. Bad faith apprehends evidence but is resigned in advance to not being fulfilled by this evidence, to not being persuaded and transformed into good faith” (Sartre 2003: 91, emphasis in original). It is this which allows them to go about their ordinary lives and believe that they will always be able to do so. Their predominant thinking is that *winters will get warmer, yes, and there will be more reports on the news of worse wildfires in California, yes, but crucially very little will change*. For obvious reasons, then, this form of bad faith is incredibly dangerous.

The question, then, becomes how we can overcome this bad faith, and so we now come to Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger’s discussion of death is a

---

<sup>4</sup>The use of Sartre here seems contentious given that he rejected Freud’s structuring of the mind into ego, id and super-ego. In his exposition of bad faith, he claims that it is not “possible to resort to the unconscious to explain bad faith; it is there in full consciousness, with all its contradictions. But this is not the way that the psychoanalyst means to explain this resistance; for him it is secret and deep, it comes from afar; it has roots in the very thing which the psychoanalyst is trying to make clear” (Sartre 2003: 75). Bad faith only works as part of the conscious ego because it is a self-deception, not a repression. This would call into question my use of the death drive in tandem with bad faith, but as Freud has already said the death drive is a drive we already “detect in ourselves and rightly presume in others” (Freud 2002: 61). Freud thought it to be a part of the ego, a part of consciousness that Sartre believes bad faith also resides.

far cry from many caricatures of existential analysis,<sup>5</sup> which tend to run along the nihilistic lines of ‘what’s the point of anything if we’re to die anyway?’. Rather, knowing of our forthcoming death should provoke us to action and not to wallowing in a sense of futility. To Heidegger, the immortal species completes nothing, because in endless time there’s no need to complete something now when there’s always another tomorrow. So while our extinction may put a cap on our possibilities, it at least grants us possibilities. When we consider our extinction authentically, while acknowledging it cannot be fully conceived, action can be taken to prevent it.

Acknowledgment of extinction should revolutionise how we act in life, e.g. at the very least, it ought to make us attempt to prolong it. Such a position of honesty cajoles the individual to break out of bad faith and into an authentic relationship between them and humanity at large.<sup>6</sup> Yet this move out of bad faith hardly ever emerges; we live our lives as they always have been, “the self of everydayness is the they that is constituted in the public interpretedness which expresses itself in idle talk” (Heidegger 2010: 242). We are often caught in meaningless chatter. The “they”, Heidegger’s term for the distracted and shallow general public, which is the individual’s most tangible representation of humanity, primarily expresses itself through “idle talk”, inconsequential nothings, the dead air time of vacuous TV channels and endless social media feeds. This distracts one from the very real presence of extinction – it is the bad faith of the public that feeds itself one what Theodor Adorno called the ‘culture industry’ (Adorno 2001).<sup>7</sup>

It is this chatter that keeps the individual complacent in the face of this danger, “The ‘fleeting’ talk about this [death], which is either expressed or else mostly kept back, says: one also dies at the end, but for now one is not affected” (Heidegger 2010: 243). So for while we admit to ourselves that the forest fires are growing worse each year in Australia, the implicit message in many news stories is that *at least it isn’t happening here to us*. The “they” cloaks these hints of environmental collapse with stories of celebrities and royalty: “The they justifies and increases the *temptation* of covering over for itself its ownmost being-towards-death” (Heidegger 2010: 243, emphasis in original). We are always provided with distractions, and “thus, the they provides a constant tranquillisation about death” (Heidegger 2010: 243) so the “idle talk” becomes “an evasion that covers over” (Heidegger

---

<sup>5</sup>Although it is worth noting that Heidegger never considered himself an existentialist.

<sup>6</sup>Not necessarily a relationship of benevolence, however.

<sup>7</sup>More specifically, the culture industry is, loosely, the systematic manipulation of the masses which aims to placate and control its consumers for profit. It demands little proactive thought from its consumers, except compliance to what is given for consumption. An example that Adorno uses is “a Wild West hero proclaiming the virtues of some breakfast cereal” (Adorno 2001: 64), where an item from culture is used to direct people’s attention towards a product while trying to avoid analysis into the product’s actual worth.

2010: 245) the bad faith of the “they”.

This is the position that the vast majority of us are in. This is the inauthentic position of bad faith made manifest in the public: “Everyday, entangled evasion of death is an *inauthentic* being *towards* it” (Heidegger 2010: 248-9, emphasis in original). The overcoming of bad faith then is by thinking in opposition to the “they”. “*Authentic* being-towards-death can-not *evade* its ownmost, non-relational possibility or *cover* it *over* in this flight and *reinterpret* it for the common sense of the they” (Heidegger 2010: 249-50, emphasis in original). And so, overcoming bad faith is the overcoming of being “in flight” from the confrontation between the death drive and the acknowledgement of potential extinction. Authenticity demands the realisation of our own self-deception in being in bad faith.

To overcome bad faith Heidegger argues that we should live in anticipation of death so that we are prepared for it, “Anticipation shows itself as the possibility of understanding one’s *ownmost* and extreme potentiality-of-being, that is, as the possibility of authentic experience” (Heidegger 2010: 252, emphasis in original). With this anticipation brings freedom, the freedom to act such that our extinction needn’t be imminent:

But anticipation does not evade the impossibility of bypassing death, as does the inauthentic being-towards-death, but *frees* itself *for* it. Becoming free *for* one’s own death in anticipation liberates one from one’s lostness in chance possibilities urging themselves upon us, so that the factual possibilities lying before the insuperable possibility can first be authentically understood and chosen. (Heidegger 2010: 253, emphasis in original)

Being in anticipation should be a constant state which we do not lapse from. It is one wherein the “they” would not be distracted by congratulating itself for doing the recycling, and instead take more revolutionary procedures.

It is then tragic that one is prevented from moving to authenticity. Returning to the discussion on disaster movies and cheap dystopian fiction, the culture industry in the vast majority of cases manufactures a predominant message: that everything will be alright in the end.<sup>8</sup> The post-apocalyptic world is, granted, harsh and violent, but it is implied that it is only at this stage when humanity can

---

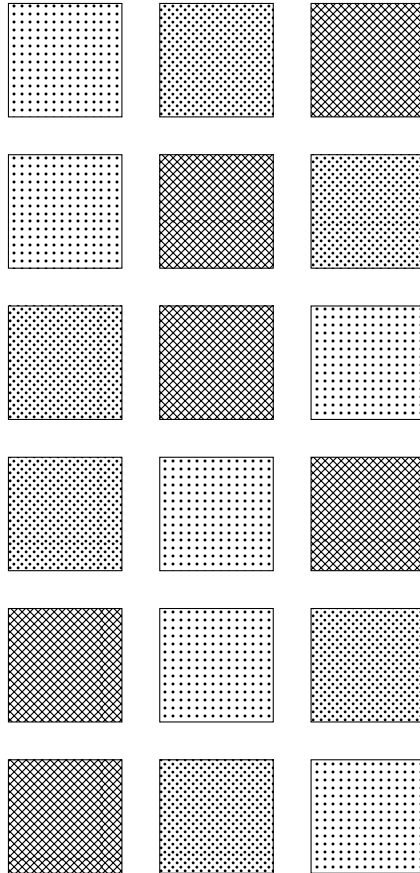
<sup>8</sup>It is a message that tells us to do nothing, and that in an apocalyptic scenario our lives would rebuild themselves naturally. It is then also a message for control, so that profits made from these cultural items can be maintained as they are. Any disturbance from the consumers (such as the realisation of bad faith) would damage this continuation of profit, and so is seen as a threat. Therefore, the message that ‘everything will be alright’ is repeated, repackaged and consumed again in another apocalypse film. People are then placated with this convenient idea, meaning that nothing is done and bad faith remains.

better itself as a species, become unified and truly 'learn from the mistakes of the past'. This kind of Hollywood romanticism, full of clichés of happy endings, manage to placate our fantasy of the death drive while keeping us sufficiently deceived so that minimal action is ever taken to confront extinction authentically. It seems a remarkable leap of faith to assume that once society has collapsed humanity will rally under the cause of survival, and not fall into vicious attacks on each other for dwindled resources. And even if such a leap did land on solid ground, then it is nonetheless too late. Measures for the safeguarding of humanity should surely take place pre-apocalypse, and not wait until after the fact to teach us humanity.

I can finally summarise with the following: our enjoyment at imagining the end of days is the attempt to fulfil the death drive, but one that almost always leads to bad faith. Thus there is a confrontation with our fantasies and reality, and this blinds us to being in an authentic position so that we can at least temporarily halt the possibility of extinction. Yet my discussion leaves out the sketching of a suitable praxis; I have only diagnosed a problem we are implicitly already aware of.

### *References*

- Adorno, T. (2001). *The culture industry*. Abingdon: Routledge.  
Freud, S. (2002). *Civilisation and its discontents*. London: Penguin.  
Heidegger, M. (2010). *Being and time*. Albany, NY: SUNY.  
Joyce, J. (2016). *A portrait of the artist as a young man*. London: Penguin.  
Sartre, J.-P. (2003). *Being and nothingness*. London: Routledge.



## PROCEEDINGS OF THE PHILOSOPHY SOCIETY

*A Radical Externalist, a Polyphonic Contextualist, and Simone Weil Walk into a Bar (in Rural Wisconsin)...* LOCHLANN ATACK. Presented to the Society at a *Proceedings* seminar on Wednesday, 29 January 2020.

This paper begins by showing how the political scientist Katherine Cramer's ethnographic work in rural Wisconsin exemplifies Miranda Fricker's virtues of epistemic justice. Cramer's work gathers testimony from white, working class Americans, which, I then claim, provides important resources for motivating contextualist accounts of epistemic responsibility. I then explore three distinct but potentially related upshots that this claim has for: (i) José Medina's polyphonic contextualist framework of epistemic responsibility, (ii) an intuition expressed by Amia Srinivasan in her recent motivation of radical externalism, and (iii) some aspects of Simone Weil's political philosophy.

*Materialism in Metaphilosophy* KENNETH NOVIS. Presented to the Society at a *Proceedings* seminar on Wednesday, 29 January 2020.

In this paper I discuss Williamson's conception of philosophy as a (degenerated) science, pursuing further his suggestion that sociological features are relevant to understanding philosophy and philosophical practice. In doing so, I consider problems with what I call 'formalism' in metaphilosophy (which sees philosophy as a conjuncture between e.g. politics and science), emphasising how this may deprive us of any positive characterization of philosophy. Lastly, I propose a materialist conception of metaphilosophy which successfully accommodates our intuitions about philosophical practice and the everyday use of the designation 'philosopher'.

*Meaning in Gibberish: In Defence of Deep Bullshit* TOM BURDGE (St. Andrews) [communicated by M. W. G. McClure]. Presented to the Society as a special lecture on Wednesday, 5 February 2020, cohosted with the University Buddhist Society.

This paper examines G. A. Cohen's notion of *deep bullshit*. An important criterion for being deep bullshit (which philosophers often leave implicit) is that deep bullshit is bad, dirty, and to be rooted out. I argue that the *kōans* of Chan Buddhists were deep bullshit, and that the Chan teachers were intentional deep bullshitters. But this deep bullshit is a counterexample: it is not bad and unphilosophical, since, in Chan, deep bullshit can spark philosophical discovery. I then respond to the Cohenian objection that 'suggestive' texts, *kōans* among them, are not deep bullshit; but since Alan Sokal's spoof article is deep bullshit (according to the Cohenian view), so must be Chan *kōans*. I then try to show that most allegations of deep bullshit are likely to be due to *epistemic trespass*, and make recommendations for how to avoid trespassing deep bullshit allegations in future.

*Death and Prudential Deprivation* MATTHEW W. G. MCCLURE. Scheduled to be presented to the Society at a *Proceedings* seminar in March/April 2020, cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper appears in the present volume.

