

NEO

Volume 2 – 2026

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Mission Statement

NEO is the undergraduate journal of the NYU Philosophy Forum. The journal is dedicated to publishing thoughtful, rigorous, and original philosophical writing by undergraduate students. It seeks to provide a space for students to engage seriously with philosophical questions, develop their own arguments, and participate in an ongoing intellectual community.

NEO welcomes work from across the many areas of philosophy, including ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, political philosophy, aesthetics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and the history of philosophy. The journal values clarity, creativity, and careful argumentation, and it aims to make philosophical inquiry accessible without sacrificing depth.

Submission Information

Undergraduate students interested in submitting work to *NEO* are encouraged to send original philosophical essays for consideration. The NYU Philosophy Forum accepts paper submissions on a rolling basis, typically from mid-October to late March. Contributing authors are also invited to present at our Annual Undergraduate Philosophy Conference.

Submissions and questions regarding future calls for papers may be directed to the NYU Philosophy Forum at:

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

It is with great pleasure and pride that I present to you the second ever edition of NYU's Undergraduate Philosophy Journal, NEO.

This edition is the product of remarkable diligence and dedication from our editorial team, contributing authors, and NYU Philosophy Forum members. Ex nihilo, nihil fit – the revival of NEO is no exception. This edition would not have been possible without the leadership of Co-President Sophia Wang. Her commitment to revivifying philosophical discourse and intellectual connection on our campus is both vital and admirable. I am fortunate to have worked alongside her and am honored to call her a friend.

Furthermore, the guidance of Jack Mikuszewski, Program Administrator for the NYU Department of Philosophy, was integral to the successful completion of this journal. On behalf of the entire NEO editorial team, I extend our deepest gratitude towards all those who contributed to this publication and supported its revival.

This edition explores a wide array of philosophical issues, ranging from existentialist thought to the philosophy of history. In so doing, it captures the breadth of interest and inquiry that we seek to foster at the NYU Philosophy Forum.

I hope you enjoy this glimpse into the kinds of philosophical problems that excite undergraduate students today.

Sincerely,

Valerie Franchitti
Editor-in-Chief, *NEO*

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Suicide, Affirmation, and the Fragility of Agency in Camus and Nietzsche

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Abstract. This paper examines the problem of suicide through a comparative analysis of Albert Camus and Friedrich Nietzsche, arguing that despite their apparent disagreement, both philosophers ground their positions in a shared commitment to life-affirmation under conditions of meaninglessness. Camus rejects suicide as a logical error that abandons the lucid confrontation with the absurd, while Nietzsche distinguishes between nihilistic death from exhaustion and voluntary death as the culmination of a self-shaped life. However, I argue that both frameworks presuppose the continued availability of agency—whether in the form of lucidity (Albert Camus) or strength (Friedrich Nietzsche). This shared assumption obscures a crucial category of cases in which suicide does not arise from metaphysical reflection on meaninglessness, but from conditions that erode the very capacity for revolt or self-creation. Engaging Paul Loeb’s severe interpretation of both thinkers, I clarify the limits of affirmation-centered accounts. The central philosophical issue is not whether suicide logically follows from nihilism, but whether the psychological and social conditions required for agency remain intact. Suicide, on this view, does not reveal the failure of meaning, but the fragility of the subject capable of responding to it.

1 Introduction

For many readers, suicide may not necessarily be thought of as a philosophical issue of discussion, but rather best addressed by medicine or psychology. Yet modern philosophical thinkers have repeatedly returned to this question not as a clinical problem, but as a fundamental test of meaning, agency, and value. In particular, the works of Albert Camus and Friedrich Nietzsche frame suicide as a revealing response to the problem of living itself: what it means to affirm life in the face of suffering, absurdity, and the apparent absence of objective meaning. Their treatments resist both moral condemnation and sentimentalization, instead positioning suicide as a philosophical weak spot through which broader ethical commitments are exposed. Suicide thus reveals what a thinker ultimately believes about agency, value, and the structure of human responsibility.

Despite this shared concern, Camus and Nietzsche are often read in isolation or opposition. Limited attention has been given to a direct comparison of their accounts of suicide. Camus famously treats suicide as the one truly serious philosophical problem, ultimately rejecting it as a form of surrender to the absurd. Nietzsche, alternatively, condemns life-denying moralities yet appears

to allow for self-chosen death under certain conditions. Existing scholarship tends to emphasize either Camus's ethics of revolt or Nietzsche's critique of resentment and decadence, rather than placing their accounts of suicide in sustained dialogue with one another. As a result, the question of suicide is often discussed descriptively rather than as a site of live philosophical tension between two influential accounts of meaning. In this paper, I place Camus and Nietzsche in direct philosophical dialogue to clarify both their shared commitments and their limits. I argue three central claims.

First, despite their apparent opposition, both thinkers agree that suicide is a test of life-affirmation under conditions of meaninglessness. Second, they diverge over whether suicide can ever constitute an act of agency, or whether it necessarily represents the collapse of revolt. Camus treats suicide as a refusal of revolt, while Nietzsche distinguishes between deaths that express strength and those that express exhaustion. Third, and most importantly, I argue that both frameworks overlook a crucial category of cases. They assume that the subject remains capable of adopting a stance toward existence. Yet some experiences of suicidality arise not from reflections on meaninglessness, but from conditions that undermine the very capacity for agency or affirmation. When the ability to revolt or create collapses, exhortations to affirmation risk becoming unintelligible. The philosophical problem, as I suggest it, is not merely how one responds to meaningless, but how fragile the conditions of agency themselves can be.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first offers a focused literature review of *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in which I analyze Camus' account of the absurd and revolt alongside Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism and account of voluntary death. The second section develops my own critical engagement with this literature, arguing that both thinkers frame suicide primarily as a response to meaninglessness while presupposing stable agency. The final section introduces a sustained objection by drawing on contemporary philosopher Paul Loeb's interpretation of both philosophers, assessing how his critique of Camus and Nietzsche might challenge the framework I propose.

2 Literature Review

This literature review reconstructs the core arguments of Albert Camus and Friedrich Nietzsche on suicide, affirmation, and meaninglessness through their literature, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, respectively. I first examine Camus' account of the absurd, his rejection of suicide, and his positive conception of revolt. I then turn to Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism, his account of value-creation, and his treatment of voluntary death.

2.1 Camus

a. The Absurd as a Relational Condition

Camus opens *The Myth of Sisyphus* with the claim that "there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (Camus, 1955, p. 4). This statement establishes suicide as philosophically significant not because of its moral weight, but because it responds to a more basic question: whether life is worth living at all. To address this question, Camus introduces the concept of the absurd. For Camus, the absurd does not reside solely in the world or in the human subject. Instead, it emerges from the confrontation between human consciousness and the world that resists rational explanation (Camus, 1955, pp. 5-7). Humans seek clarity and meaning, yet the world does not satisfy these demands. Camus describes the absurd as emerging from "the confrontation between the human need and the reasonable silence of the world" (Camus, 1955, p. 20). The absurd is therefore not a temporary emotional state or a solvable puzzle, but a structural feature of conscious

human existence. So long as human beings continue to demand meaning from a world that offers none, the absurd persists (Camus, 1955, p. 15). This relational account is essential to Camus' philosophy. If humans ceased to desire meaning, or if the world suddenly provided it, the absurd would disappear. Since neither is the case, the absurd persists as long as human consciousness remains lucid. By "lucidity", Camus means a clear-sighted awareness that refuses all comforting illusions and self-deception (Camus, 1955, p. 24). He emphasizes that lucidity is non-negotiable: the absurd must be faced clearly and without evasion (Camus, 1955, p. 5).

b. Philosophical Suicide and the Refusal of Escape

After outlining the absurd, Camus examines what he takes to be inadequate responses to it. One such inadequate response is what he calls *philosophical suicide*.¹ Philosophical suicide occurs when thinkers attempt to escape the absurd by appealing to transcendent meaning, whether through religious faith, metaphysical systems, or abstract rational principles. These approaches deny the absurd by dissolving the very tension that defines it (Camus, 1955, pp. 20-22).

Camus criticizes such responses on methodological grounds. To deny the absurd through faith or metaphysics is to abandon the very lucidity that revealed it. Philosophical suicide preserves meaning only by sacrificing intellectual honesty. As Camus argues, these approaches refuse to accept the limits of reason and instead posit answers that cannot be justified within human experience (Camus, 1955, pp. 20-23, 25).

Camus labels these responses "philosophical suicide" because they abandon the confrontation between human longing and worldly silence in favor of an answer that resolves the problem rather than living within it (Camus, 1955, pp. 20-23). In doing so, they negate the absurd by escaping it.

For Camus, remaining faithful to the absurd requires rejecting all forms of appeal beyond the world as it is. This commitment lays the groundwork for his rejection of literal suicide, which he treats as another attempt to escape rather than confront the absurd (Camus, 1955, p. 22).

c. Suicide and a Logical Error

Camus' rejection of suicide is often misunderstood as a moral condemnation (Camus, 1955, pp. 4-8). In fact, Camus is careful to avoid moralizing. He does not claim that suicide is sinful, cowardly, or socially harmful. Instead, he argues that suicide rests on a logical error. Suicide treats the absence of meaning as sufficient reason to stop living, but this inference assumes that life requires justification in order to be lived (Camus, 1955, pp. 6-8, 9-10).

Camus denies this assumption. Recognizing that life lacks ultimate meaning does not entail that life lacks value (Camus, 1955, p. 36). To conclude otherwise is to introduce a hidden premise that meaning is a necessary condition for worth. Camus rejects this premise and insists that the absurd reveals the conditions of existence, not a verdict against life (Camus, 1955, pp. 5-7).

Suicide also eliminates the possibility of response. By ending consciousness, it removes the very site at which the absurd can be faced. For Camus, suicide therefore represents not a resolution of the absurd, but a refusal to live with it (Camus, 1955, p. 6).

¹In addition to literal (physical) suicide and what he explicitly calls "philosophical suicide," Camus criticizes a broader range of evasive responses, including appeals to religious transcendence (e.g., Kierkegaard), metaphysical leaps beyond reason (e.g., Jaspers), and any posture of hope that dissolves rather than sustains the tension of the absurd (Camus, 1955, pp. 8, 16-17, 20-28).

d. Revolt and Lucidity

Camus proposes *revolt* as the proper response to the absurd (Camus, 1955, p. 8). Camus' philosophical revolt is not a political act or a single emotional reaction, but a sustained attitude of defiance. It consists of living without appeal, refusing consolation while maintaining full awareness of the absurd condition (Camus, 1955, p. 35). Revolt does not seek to overcome or resolve the absurd; instead, it preserves the tension it creates while refusing resignation and false hope (Camus, 1955, p. 38).

Concretely, revolt may take the form of continuing one's projects, commitments, or creative work while fully acknowledging that they lack ultimate justification. It is to live as though one's actions matter, without appealing to any transcendent purpose (Camus, 1955, pp. 5-6).

Revolt is continuous rather than episodic. Because the absurd does not disappear, revolt must be renewed constantly. Camus emphasizes that revolt gives life its intensity and seriousness precisely because it refuses false hope. The value of revolt lies in its persistence, not in its success (Camus, 1955, p. 35).

e. Freedom and Passion

From revolt, Camus argues, follow what he called *freedom* and *passion* (Camus, 1955, pp. 37-39, 112). "Freedom", for him, does not mean metaphysical free will or unlimited choice. Rather, it refers to freedom from "appeal"—that is, freedom from the demand that life be justified by a higher purpose or final end (Camus, 1955, p. 65). Once transcendent meaning is abandoned, individuals are no longer bound by expectations grounded in eternal ends or ultimate purposes. To live "without appeal" is to refuse consolation while remaining lucid about one's condition (Camus, 1955, p. 65).

"Passion" refers to the intensity with which life is lived, not indulgence or excess. The absurd life is not resigned nor detached; it is fully engaged (Camus, 1955, pp. 5, 8). Because there is no appeal to an afterlife or final redemption, each moment becomes more urgent. Camus insists that once one stops hoping for ultimate resolution, one is pushed back toward the concrete: lived experience, immediacy, and the present (Camus, 1955, pp. 31-32). In this way, the absence of ultimate meaning sharpens attention to lived experience rather than draining it.

f. Sisyphus as the Absurd Hero

Camus' discussion of revolt culminates in a concrete image meant to illustrate what life without appeal looks like in practice. He concludes *The Myth of Sisyphus* with the figure of Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to roll a stone up a mountain, only for it to fall back down again, repeating this task for eternity. At first glance, this punishment appears to represent the ultimate form of meaninglessness: endless labor without progress, achievement, or reward (Camus, 1955, p. 75).

Yet Camus insists that Sisyphus can be imagined as happy (Camus, 1955, p. 78). Camus emphasizes the moment Sisyphus becomes fully aware of the futility of his condition. There is no hope of escape, no final victory, and no justification beyond the task itself. Precisely because Sisyphus recognizes this, his fate becomes his own (Camus, 1955, p. 77).

Camus argues that what makes Sisyphus' condition bearable is a change in awareness: once Sisyphus fully understands the futility of his labor, his continued effort becomes an act of revolt rather than mere punishment. By fully acknowledging the absurdity of his situation and continuing nonetheless, Sisyphus refuses both resignation and hope. Camus famously writes that "the struggle itself...is enough to fill a man's heart," a claim meant to highlight that meaning need not be derived from success, completion, or transcendence (Camus, 1955, p. 78). Instead, meaning arises from the stance one takes toward one's condition.

Sisyphus, therefore, exemplifies the absurd hero. He neither denies the absurd nor attempts to resolve it. He lives within it, maintaining lucidity while refusing despair. Sisyphus' happiness is grounded in conscious defiance (Camus, 1955, p. 37), and in this sense he embodies the freedom and passion described above: freedom from appeal and an intensified engagement with the present task itself.

2.2 Nietzsche

a. The Death of God and the Collapse of Value

Having outlined Camus' account of the absurd and revolt, I now turn to Nietzsche, whose approach to the problem of meaning unfolds within a different philosophical framework. Nietzsche approaches the problem of meaning from a historical and cultural perspective rather than a purely existential one. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the declaration that "God is dead" names the collapse of the metaphysical and moral framework that had structured Western life for centuries (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 39-41).

This collapse does not merely eliminate religious belief; it undermines the foundations upon which concepts such as truth, goodness, and purpose were justified. When divine or metaphysical grounding disappears, inherited value systems lose their authority (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 51-52). Actions once considered meaningful because they had aligned with divine command or cosmic order no longer carry the same weight (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 84-85).

Nietzsche understands this moment as a profound cultural rupture rather than a private psychological crisis. Nihilism, in this sense, is a historical condition. The loss of transcendent grounding destabilizes the evaluative structures through which life had previously been interpreted (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 85-86).

b. Nihilism as a Crisis Rather than a Conclusion

For Nietzsche, "nihilism" refers to the moment when inherited moral and metaphysical values lose their authority and no longer command genuine belief or allegiance (Nietzsche, 1961, p. 85). Life appears to lack objective purpose, and moral systems that once provided direction are revealed as contingent or fabricated. However, Nietzsche does not treat nihilism as an endpoint. Instead, it is a transitional stage that exposes the need to create new values (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 84-85). While this is a historical condition, Nietzsche is also concerned with how individuals respond to this condition. Some succumb to nihilism by clinging to old values despite no longer believing in them. Others respond with despair, resignation, or a longing for nothingness. These responses, Nietzsche suggests, reflect an inability to affirm life in the face of uncertainty (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 72-73).

Throughout *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche criticizes figures who embody this life-denying response. He refers to them as "preachers of death," those who either glorify suffering or quietly wish for an end to existence (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 71-72). Such figures do not overcome nihilism; they internalize it.

c. Strength, Creation, and the Possibility of Overcoming

Nietzsche contrasts nihilistic resignation with the possibility of "overcoming". To overcome nihilism is not to return to the old certainties, but to create values anew (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 85-86). It demands that one muster the strength to accept the absence of transcendent meaning without collapsing into despair.

Creation, therefore, becomes central to Nietzsche's response to nihilism. For Nietzsche, life is justified by the capacity to shape oneself and one's values actively instead of adhering to inherited norms (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 43-44). Thus, meaning is no longer discovered but made.

In this respect, Nietzsche's view parallels Camus' critique of philosophical suicide. Just as Camus argues that appeals to transcendent meaning abandon the absurd instead of confronting it, Nietzsche suggests that resignation and the rejection of value similarly avoid the demanding work of creating new values in response to nihilism. Both thinkers reject responses that resolve existential tension by escaping it. Nietzsche's idea of "overcoming" nihilism does not mean escaping it. Rather, he defines this idea as staying within the crisis of meaninglessness and responding through creation rather than appeal (Nietzsche, 1961, p. 216). Nihilism thus becomes a necessary crisis that facilitates affirmation rather than a verdict against life itself.

d. Critique of Death from Weariness

Nietzsche sharply distinguishes what he calls "voluntary death" from deaths motivated by resentment, despair, or fatigue. He is deeply critical of those who seek death because they can no longer bear life. Such death, in his view, expresses weakness rather than strength and reflects a nihilistic refusal to affirm existence (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 71-72). Zarathustra, the fictional, prophetic figure through whom Nietzsche dramatizes philosophical ideals, repeatedly condemns those who preach resignation or glorify suffering (Nietzsche, 1961, p. 98). Zarathustra introduces the idea that death, like life, can be approached either well or poorly (Nietzsche, 1961, p. 97). These figures do not choose death out of fullness, but out of depletion (Nietzsche, 1961, p. 98). For Nietzsche, this distinction is decisive. Death chosen from weakness confirms nihilism; death chosen from strength resists it.

e. Voluntary Death as an Expression of Agency

Nietzsche's most explicit discussion of death appears in the chapter "Of Voluntary Death." Voluntary death is presented not as an escape from suffering, but as an expression of agency. Zarathustra praises the individual who chooses the moment of death deliberately rather than being dragged toward it by exhaustion or fear (Nietzsche, 1961, p. 97). When Zarathustra commends a death that comes "because I wish it," he is emphasizing control and authorship (Nietzsche, 1961, p. 97). Death, in this framework, can function as the final act of a self-shaped life. It is a culmination, not the negation of affirmation.

A recurring theme in Nietzsche's discussion is timing. Zarathustra insists that "many die too late, and some die too early" (Nietzsche, 1961, p. 97). The value of a life is not measured by its length, but by its form. To live too long without vitality is as problematic as to die prematurely out of despair. Voluntary death, therefore, presupposes a life lived affirmatively. It requires that one has actively shaped oneself, created values, and embraced existence as a whole. Only under these conditions can death function as a meaningful conclusion (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 97-99).

f. Affirmation and the Spirit of Gravity

Nietzsche's account of voluntary death presupposes a broader picture of what affirmation requires. To understand why strength and vitality matter so centrally, we must consider what, for Nietzsche, most fundamentally threatens affirmation in the first place.

A central obstacle to affirmation is what Nietzsche calls the "spirit of gravity." This spirit represents all forces that weigh life down and make it heavy: guilt, resentment, moral obligation, and

fear of change. The spirit of gravity fosters a kind of seriousness that lacks joy and an endurance that lacks genuine affirmation (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 211-212).

Zarathustra's task is to teach how to overcome this spirit. Overcoming gravity does not mean denying suffering or pretending that life is easy. Instead, it requires learning how to bear weight without resentment. Affirmation entails saying "yes" to life as it is, including its pain, uncertainty, and impermanence (Nietzsche, 1961, p. 211).

Nietzsche associates affirmation with lightness, creativity, and play. These qualities stand in contrast to the heaviness of moral seriousness that characterizes nihilistic life. To affirm life is not to escape its difficulties, but to embrace them without appealing to external justification (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 212-213).

Affirmation functions as Nietzsche's answer to nihilism. Where nihilism sees the absence of transcendent meaning as a reason for despair, affirmation treats it as an invitation to create. Life becomes something to be shaped rather than endured, and meaning becomes an activity rather than a discovery (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 85-86). Importantly, this emphasis on life-affirmation does not straightforwardly prohibit all forms of death; rather, it reframes the question of death in terms of whether a life has been actively shaped and affirmed up to its conclusion.

3 Suicide, Affirmation, and the Limits of Agency

3.1 Main Claims and Orientation

In this section, I will argue for four related claims. First, that Camus and Nietzsche are often treated as offering opposed positions on suicide, yet, as many interpreters have noted, they share a deeper commitment to life-affirmation under conditions of meaninglessness. Second, their disagreement concerns not whether suicide is permissible, but what kind of agency suicide can express. Third, neither framework adequately accounts for cases in which individuals experience suicide not as an escape from meaninglessness, but as a response to unrelenting suffering that undermines the very possibility of affirmation. Fourth, Camus' critique of philosophical suicide raises a distinctive problem for religious individuals, one that requires careful reconciliation rather than simple rejection or acceptance.

3.2 Camus: Revolt without Exit

Camus' rejection of suicide, both physical and philosophical, follows from his understanding of the absurd as a relational condition rather than a personal failing. The absurd arises from the confrontation between the human demand for meaning and the world's refusal to provide it. Because this condition is structural—that is, built into the very relation between human consciousness and the world—Camus insists that it must be endured rather than solved (Camus, 1955, p. 6).

Suicide, in Camus' view, fails because it misunderstands what the absurd reveals. He imagines that the person who seeks suicide does so because life lacks meaning, but this inference assumes that life requires justification in order to be lived. Camus denies this assumption. He proposes that the proper response is revolt: a sustained refusal to surrender lucidity or hope for transcendence (Camus, 1955, pp. 8, 35-36). Revolt, as Camus understands it—via continuing to live while fully understanding the absence of ultimate meaning—preserves the tension of the absurd. It neither resolves the conflict nor collapses under it. Importantly, revolt is not heroic in the sense of achieving an endpoint. It is valuable precisely because it has no final victory; its value derives from the ongoing act of lucid defiance itself. The absurd life is one lived without appeal.

However, Camus' account relies on an implicit assumption that lucidity remains available. Revolt requires the capacity to continue seeing the absurd clearly and to respond to it actively. Camus does not seriously consider cases in which this capacity itself is eroded by persistent suffering, psychological collapse, or social isolation.

This omission matters. Camus treats suicide as a logical error committed in response to a meta-physical problem (Camus, 1955, pp. 6-8). Yet not all experiences of suicidality arise from reflection on meaninglessness. Some arise from conditions that make revolt psychologically or practically impossible—that is, conditions in which sustained lucidity, emotional stability, or even minimal practical agency are compromised.

3.3 Nietzsche: Voluntary Death and the Ideal Strength

Nietzsche's approach appears, at first glance, more permissive. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he sanctions voluntary death when it expresses authorship over one's life (Nietzsche, 1961, p. 97). Death, in this framework, can function as a completion rather than a negation. What matters is whether one's life, and death, reflect strength, affirmation, and self-creation.

Nietzsche distinguishes between death chosen from fullness and death chosen from exhaustion (Nietzsche, 1961, p. 97). Death from weariness, resentment, or despair is condemned as nihilistic. It expresses a failure to affirm life amid uncertainty. By contrast, voluntary death can be an expression of agency when it completes a life actively shaped.

Yet this distinction raises a demanding normative standard. Nietzsche evaluates death by the quality of life that precedes it (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 97-99). This risks collapsing into a moralized hierarchy of deaths: some deaths count as strong and meaningful, while others are dismissed as failures of character. Moreover, Nietzsche's account presumes access to resources required for self-creation: vitality, autonomy, and a stable sense of agency. Individuals who lack these conditions are implicitly excluded from the category of justified death because they fail to meet the ideal of strength.

This raises a problem parallel to Camus'. Nietzsche, too, assumes that affirmation is always possible for those who are sufficiently strong. He offers little guidance for cases in which affirmation is unattainable.

4 The Shared Blind Spot: Fragility of Agency

Despite their apparent disagreement, Camus and Nietzsche share a deeper assumption that the central philosophical issue surrounding suicide is how one responds to meaninglessness. For Camus, suicide is a refusal to live without meaning (Camus, 1955, p. 6). For Nietzsche, nihilistic suicide is a refusal to create meaning (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 71-72).

But this framing overlooks a crucial category of cases. Some individuals do not experience suicide as a response to meaninglessness at all. Instead, they experience life as actively unlivable due to conditions that undermine their capacity for agency, affirmation, or revolt. These conditions may include chronic pain, severe mental illness, prolonged trauma, or extreme social isolation. In such cases, the problem is not that life lacks meaning, but that the individual lacks the psychological or practical resources required to stand in any evaluative relation to life whatsoever.

This shift from meaning to capacity is philosophically significant. Both Camus and Nietzsche treat suicide as a mistake in judgment: either an incorrect inference from the absence of meaning (Camus, 1955, pp. 6-8) or a failure to rise to the challenge of value-creation (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 85-86). In doing so, they assume the subject remains capable of deliberation, reflection, and stance-

taking. The debate, then, assumes a minimally intact agent who can choose revolt, affirmation, or otherwise.

Yet, there are cases in which this assumption fails. When agency is severely compromised, the language of revolt, affirmation, strength, or even logical error may no longer apply. The issue is not that the individual has reasoned poorly about meaning, but that the structural conditions necessary for sustained agency have deteriorated. In such contexts, appeals to remain lucid or to create values can sound less like philosophical guidance and more like inaccessible ideals.

Neither Camus' revolt nor Nietzsche's self-creation directly addresses this possibility. Both assume that the subject remains capable of adopting a stance toward existence. But when this capacity collapses, the entire evaluative framework shifts. Suicide is no longer primarily a metaphysical response to meaninglessness; it becomes a symptom of a breakdown of agency itself.

This does not mean that suicide is thereby justified. Rather, it suggests that the philosophical problem has been mislocated. The issue is not whether suicide follows logically from meaninglessness, but whether the conditions required for agency are morally and socially fragile—and what follows when they fail.

4.1 Toward a Revised Question

If the central difficulty concerns the fragility of agency rather than the mere absence of meaning, then the philosophical question must shift accordingly. Rather than asking whether suicide is a justified response to meaninglessness, a more precise question emerges: what obligations do individuals and societies bear in sustaining the material, psychological, and social conditions that make revolt or affirmation possible at all?

In this framing, suicide becomes a diagnostic indicator because it points to the breakdown of agency. Camus and Nietzsche offer powerful tools for thinking about life without transcendence, yet they provide less guidance for lives lived under conditions that render agency itself precarious.

Seen in this light, Camus and Nietzsche emerge not as refuted but as limited. Each offers a powerful account of how to live without transcendence so long as the subject remains capable of revolt or self-creation. What they do not fully theorize are the structural vulnerabilities that disrupt these capacities unevenly and, in some cases, destabilize them. Their frameworks illuminate the demands of affirmation.

5 Loeb's Dual Challenge

A serious objection to my argument arises from Paul Loeb's interpretation of both Camus and Nietzsche. He argues that Camus fundamentally misunderstands the problem of suicide and that Nietzsche's position is considerably harsher than Camus suggests.

Loeb begins by challenging Camus' starting point. Camus declares that suicide is "the one truly serious philosophical problem" (Camus, 1955, p. 4). Loeb contends that Camus' concept of revolt is ascetic—that is, it continues to resist life by appealing to a higher standard, instead of affirming life on its own terms (Loeb, 2008, p. 164). Camus proposes revolt as a way of living lucidly without appeal. However, Loeb argues that revolt continues to oppose life even as it claims to affirm it. He contends that Camus' retrospective value amounts to self-deception. In his writings, Camus derives value from resisting existence instead of willing it as necessary (Loeb, 2008, p. 167). He claims that Camus' revolt reflects exhaustion and degeneration rather than genuine strength of vitality (Loeb, 2008, pp. 167–168).

Loeb also criticizes Camus' interpretation of Sisyphus. Camus argues that Sisyphus creates value through his lucidity and defiant awareness (Camus, 1955, p. 78). Loeb denies this claim, arguing

that the reinterpretation fails because there is “nothing meaningful or successful” in Sisyphus’ task itself (Loeb, 2008, pp. 189–190).

At the same time, Loeb presents a far harsher interpretation of Nietzsche. He argues that Nietzsche sees human beings as inherently inclined toward suicide once inherited meaning collapses (Loeb, 2008, p. 165). According to Loeb, the ascetic ideal once preserved life by providing suffering a nihilistic interpretation that made it bearable (Loeb, 2008, p. 165). When that interpretive framework collapses, “decadents”—individuals whose psychological vitality is weakened and who experience life as burdensome—are left with two paths: continue living in a way that denies life, or choose a form of suicide that, paradoxically, affirms life’s standards (Loeb, 2008, p. 169).

If Loeb’s interpretation is correct, then my central claims cannot stand as written. I argue that both Camus and Nietzsche ultimately presuppose a subject capable of revolt or affirmation, and that they insufficiently theorize the fragility of agency. Yet according to Loeb, Nietzsche does not overlook collapse; he treats it as decisive, sorting human beings according to strength and allowing that some forms of life lack justificatory force. If that is correct, then my claim that Nietzsche fails to center fragility is undermined. Likewise, I rely on Camus’ revolt as a stable alternative to suicide available to the lucid subject. Yet if Loeb is correct that revolt remains ascetic and expresses exhaustion rather than strength, then Camus’ position is itself unstable.

The question, then, is whether Loeb’s dual critique accurately captures the philosophical commitments of Camus and Nietzsche.

6 A Response

Loeb’s reconstruction poses a substantial objection to my argument. It reveals a severity in Nietzsche that many commentators soften, and challenges whether Camus’ revolt is as stable as it first appears. However, it risks confusing Nietzsche’s diagnosis of weakness with an endorsement of eliminating the weak, and he may overstate the extent to which Camus’ revolt remains covertly ascetic. I offer four reasons for resisting this conclusion.

First, Zarathustra presents himself explicitly as a teacher rather than as a legislator or judge. “I teach you the Superman”, he says (Nietzsche, 1961, p. 41). Teaching presupposes that transformation is possible for its audience; it addresses listeners as capable of growth rather than as candidates for removal or death. Zarathustra seeks companions and fellow-creators, and his rhetoric is aspirational (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 41–43). If Nietzsche’s aim were the elimination of the weak, the sustained pedagogical structure of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* would be difficult to explain. Strength is depicted as something to be cultivated, not as a fixed biological status that simply divides humanity (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 54–55).

Second, voluntary death in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is presented as the fitting completion of a life that has already been deliberately lived, not as a mechanism for sorting or eliminating the weak. It assumes a life already shaped with intention and coherence (Nietzsche, 1961, p. 97). The emphasis falls on timing and authorship: one should die at the right time, after one’s life has taken form (Nietzsche, 1961, p. 97). Loeb is correct that Nietzsche distinguishes strength from weakness. (Loeb, 2008, p. 169) Yet to classify forms of life evaluatively does not mean to prescribe the removal of those who fall short. Nietzsche offers a typology of strength and decadence; he does not issue an eliminative directive (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 41–43, 97).

Third, “eternal recurrence”—a philosophical concept which posits that all events in existence, including every moment of one’s life, will repeat in an exact, infinite loop over unlimited time—function as a test of one’s relation to necessity rather than as a mechanism of selection. Loeb is right that recurrence intensifies nihilism and strips away consolations (Loeb, 2008, p. 182). Nietzsche presents

recurrence as a thought experiment that asks whether one could will the repetition of one's life in every detail, including its suffering and contingency (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 232-238). Yet the thought experiment asks whether one can affirm one's life in its entirety, not whether those who cannot should be removed. A test reveals the condition of the one tested; it does not itself enact elimination. Recurrence dramatizes the demand for affirmation by intensifying the weight of necessity, but it does not entail that those who fail the test ought to perish. Rather, it exposes the depth of one's attachment—or resistance—to life as given (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 232-238). Loeb's interpretation depends on reading Nietzsche's polemical language literally. But *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* operates through provocation and aspiration. Its aim is to awaken strength, not to eliminate the weak.

Fourth, Loeb's critique of Camus depends on a sharpened contrast with Nietzsche that may be overstated. Loeb argues that revolt affirms life "against" life and therefore remains ascetic (Loeb, 2008, p. 167). Yet Camus explicitly defines revolt as living without appeal (Camus, 1955, p. 35). Revolt does not judge life by appealing to a higher standard beyond it. It refuses transcendence while preserving confrontation. Nietzsche's concept of affirmation demands that one affirm existence as necessary (Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 211-213). Camus' revolt does not affirm necessity as Nietzsche does, but neither does it negate it. It remains within experience without resolving it. The difference concerns the tone of affirmation—joyful willing versus lucid defiance—rather than a division between strength and ascetic denial.

7 Clarifying my Position after Loeb

Loeb's claims do not overturn my thesis, but they do require me to specify exactly what my thesis commits me to and what it does not. He is correct that Nietzsche does not assume all individuals are capable of affirmation. Instead, Nietzsche distinguishes sharply between strong and weak responses to nihilism (Loeb, 2008, p. 169). He acknowledges that many may collapse under the weight of meaninglessness (Loeb, 2008, p. 184). In this respect, Nietzsche is less optimistic than Camus.

However, even on Loeb's severe reading, Nietzsche continues to evaluate collapse in terms of strength, vitality, and fidelity to life. For Nietzsche, suicide is evaluated in terms of the kind of person who chooses it. Even in collapse, the act is interpreted through the lens of strength, vitality, and affirmation rather than through a neutral moral framework (Loeb, 2008, pp. 169-170).

Camus, by contrast—and here Loeb's first line of attack becomes relevant—frames suicide as a logical error and revolt as universally available to the lucid subject (Camus, 1955, p. 3, 123). Loeb challenges precisely this universality, arguing that revolt remains ascetic and therefore unstable (Loeb, 2008, pp. 167-168). Yet even if revolt is coherent, it still presupposes the continued capacity for lucidity and resistance, a capacity that may itself be fragile.

Loeb, therefore, clarifies what both philosophers ultimately share. Despite their disagreement about revolt and affirmation, both entail a subject capable of taking a reflective stance toward existence. Camus builds his account on the availability of lucidity. Nietzsche builds his account on the availability of strength. Neither centers the possibility that agency itself may disintegrate beyond repair. The philosophical issue, then, is not simply whether suicide logically follows from meaninglessness. It is whether the conditions required for revolt or affirmation—material, psychological, social, etc.—remain intact. When those conditions deteriorate, the persistence to "revolt" or "create" can cease to be intelligible, not because it is rejected, but because the capacity to enact it has eroded.

Loeb's severe interpretation brings this limitation into clearer focus. By pushing Nietzsche toward elimination and exposing the fragility of Camus' revolt, he reveals that both frameworks

depend upon capacities they do not fully theorize.

My claim, therefore, stands in revised form: the central philosophical problem of suicide is not meaning, but the stability of agency under conditions that threaten it.

8 Conclusion

This paper began from the observation that suicide functions, for both Camus and Nietzsche, as a philosophical test rather than a purely moral or medical issue. I first reconstructed Camus' account of the absurd and revolt, showing how suicide appears to him as a logical error, a refusal to sustain lucidity in the face of meaninglessness. I then examined Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism and his account of voluntary death, arguing that he evaluates suicide not by its permissibility but by the kind of agency it expresses. In both cases, suicide becomes a revealing response to the collapse of transcendent meaning.

From this reconstruction, I argued that the disagreement between Camus and Nietzsche does not concern whether life is worth living in the abstract. Instead, it concerns what it means to affirm life under strain. Camus insists upon living in ongoing revolt while refusing any appeal to transcendent meaning or consolation. Nietzsche distinguishes between deaths that express strength and those that express exhaustion. Yet both frameworks presuppose that the subject remains capable of taking a stance toward existence. Camus assumes lucidity. Nietzsche assumes strength. Each treats suicide as a response to meaninglessness.

The challenge introduced by Loeb sharpened this analysis. He argues that Camus' revolt still carries residual asceticism and that Nietzsche's affirmation ultimately excludes those who cannot meet its demanding standard. His interpretation forces us to confront the severity within Nietzsche and the fragility within Camus. However, even on this severe reading, both thinkers continue to evaluate suicide within a shared framework that treats affirmation as the standard of evaluation. The central question, then, becomes whether one responds to meaninglessness through revolt or through value-creation.

What this analysis ultimately reveals is a deeper misidentification of the philosophical problem. The central issue is not whether suicide follows logically from the absence of meaning. Nor is it whether death can complete a shaped life. The more fundamental question concerns the stability of the capacities required for revolt or affirmation in the first place. When agency itself becomes precarious—when lucidity erodes or vitality collapses—the framework of revolt or self-creation risks becoming unintelligible. Suicide then signals not simply a judgment about meaning, but a breakdown in the conditions that make judgment possible.

We therefore return to the starting point transformed. Suicide remains philosophically serious, not because it answers the question of meaning, but because it exposes the fragility of agency under existential crisis. Camus and Nietzsche teach us how to live without appeal, how to will necessity, how to endure the silence of the world. But their teachings also depend on capacities that are neither guaranteed nor universally secure. The task, then, is not merely to ask whether life has meaning, but to ask what sustains the ability to stand in relation to life at all.

Sisyphus descends the mountain aware of the futility of his task, and yet the struggle itself fills his heart. The image endures because it locates affirmation not in victory, but in stance. This paper has argued that the philosophical problem of suicide does not rest solely on one's stance toward life, but on whether the capacity to take such a stance remains intact. Where lucidity and strength persist, revolt and creation remain intelligible responses. Where they collapse, the terrain changes.

The absurd has not disappeared. Meaning has not been restored. But we now see more clearly what is at stake: not simply life against death, but agency against disintegration. And, as Camus

asks us to imagine Sisyphus happy in his descent, *so too must we imagine this writer happy* — not because the absurd has vanished, but because the struggle itself remains possible.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Kiran Bhardwaj for her guidance, rigor, and intellectual generosity throughout the PHR600 course. Her insistence on clarity, precision, and argumentative discipline pushed this project far beyond what I initially imagined it could become. I am especially thankful for her careful feedback and for the seriousness with which she treated my ideas at every stage of their development.

I am also profoundly grateful to Dr. Sergia Hay for her mentorship and encouragement. Her willingness to engage my questions thoughtfully and to challenge me at crucial moments strengthened both the substance of this paper and my confidence as a philosophical thinker. I would like to thank my classmates in PHR600 for their generous peer feedback, thoughtful discussion, and steady support. Their questions sharpened my arguments, and their engagement made the process of writing this paper collaborative rather than solitary.

Finally, I extend my gratitude to the entire Philosophy and Religious Studies Department at Phillips Academy for fostering a community in which intellectual risk-taking, careful reading, and serious philosophical inquiry are genuinely valued. This project is a product of that environment.

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Does Not Solely Belong to Nature: Relations to Death and the Emergence of Sociality in G.W.F. Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*

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Abstract. I argue for an interpretation of G.W.F. Hegel's treatment of death in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* which recognises the instantiation of a certain relation to death as decisive in achieving what he terms 'spirit'—social self-consciousness which cannot be reduced to natural existence. This interpretation begins with Hegel's treatment of life, where organisms experience death as a complete annihilation of their existence. Following this, the struggle for recognition between two individuals is read as rooted in each's demand that the other recognise them as more than a mere living organism. The failure of the struggle leads to one individual submitting to the other as a slave, carrying out their master's demands. Labour as a form of externalisation here is combined with fear of death to provide the slave with an intuition that he could be recognised even after death brings an end to his natural existence. Finally, I argue that the discussion of Ancient Greek burial culture represents the realisation of this intuition, with burial practices here allowing an individual to self-consciously understand themselves to have a social being which is not extinguished alongside their natural existence. The placement of this section at the opening of the 'Spirit' chapter is taken to indicate that the relation to death is a fundamental element of what allows for such forms of life to exist.

1 Introduction

In his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (2018), G.W.F. Hegel claims that in Ancient Greece, burial 'makes the dead into a member of the polity' (PS §451). In what follows, I argue that this should be read as indicative of Hegel's claim that the achievement of a specific relation and practice towards death is a precondition of the development into spirit. My reading hinges on Hegel's treatment of death in the chapters on self-consciousness and spirit, beginning from the comprehension of death by non-self-conscious natural organisms as the simple end of their lives with no further significance. In the second section, I interpret Hegel's description of conflict between two self-conscious individuals as their struggling to be recognised as more than merely living things, and to thereby attain some aspect of existence lasting beyond the end of its particular life. Following Terry Pinkard and

Robert Pippin, I take the distinction between natural being and self-consciousness to hinge on a self-conscious individual's ability to respond to reasons rather than natural drives. Recognition is not achieved in the struggle, but in the master/slave relationship the slave's work mediates his understanding of death, giving him an intuition of his existence beyond his natural life insofar as his labour is objectified in the world and will remain there after he dies. Finally, I argue that Hegel's opening the spirit chapter with a discussion of Ancient Greek burial culture—which he sees as bringing individuals to awareness of their being recognised as part of a community extending into the future, even beyond the end of their life—is indicative of this relation's foundational importance in achieving the form of social reflection irreducible to the natural world which Hegel terms spirit.

2 Natural Death

My account begins from Hegel's discussion of life in the *Self-Consciousness* chapter. At this stage, self-consciousness is on one hand consciousness of the objective world, and on the other, consciousness of its unity with itself in 'the motionless tautology "I am I"' (PS §167). With the moments conceived as separate, Hegel begins an exposition of the objective world turned in on itself considered as *life*. In relation to life, death is experienced by the particular living thing as its absolute negation, with no higher purpose or continuance.

Hegel describes life as the '*sublation* of all differences' and a '*simple universal* medium' (PS §169), an essence from which particular organisms take shape. Life is conceived as a process, where 'the sublating of individual stable existence is... just as much its own engendering' (PS §171) entailing that particular organisms subsist through the consumption of other organisms. Thus, life is a self-perpetuating cycle, an essence, in which each organism is differentiated through birth, sustained through consuming other organisms, and reabsorbed into the essence through death. But whilst life is a simple universal, 'it does not exist for itself as this simple' (PS §172), particular organisms are not self-conscious of themselves as part of this process. Because they are not conscious of the fact that their death is a part of life's perpetuation, they therefore understand it as only being the cessation of their particular life. This unreflective death is one with no significance for the organism which will undergo it, where the particular organism is subsumed into the universal entirely without being conscious of itself as part of life's ongoing development.

Hegel conceives natural death as abstract negation, negation which preserves nothing of the thing negated and therefore the organism is fully coextensive with its particular natural life. Given that self-consciousness at this stage considers itself as *other* than mere life, it seeks to prove this fact by exhibiting that unlike the particular organism, which is extinguished entirely by death, self-consciousness has an aspect of its existence enduring past its natural life's end. In attempting to establish this, self-consciousness therefore strives to prove itself independent of natural life.

3 Self-Sufficiency and Struggle

This section outlines the relation between death and self-sufficiency in the struggle for recognition. Self-consciousness has failed to understand itself through the fulfilment of natural desires. Since, once the desire for some object is fulfilled, the object of that desire is destroyed, and therefore the desire in terms of which self-consciousness understood itself ends. Additionally, there is the concern that responses to desires need not involve any real form of self-consciousness, as the object of natural desire is pursued regardless of significance—whereas a self-conscious motivation for action involves one taking themselves to *be a certain way* (Pippin 2010, 66-67) and therefore to act for a certain reason. This brings Hegel to the thought that true self-consciousness is not dependent on anything

other than self-consciousness, and must thus prove itself not to be dependent on the unreflective demands of natural life. What Hegel lays out here is the beginning of what Robert Pippin (2008) calls ‘a “negative” relation to... the natural conditions and states of a being’, which he interprets Hegel to consider as the basic manifestation of spirit (55). What we see through the negative relation to natural death is the beginning of self-consciousness’s understanding itself in terms which are independent of its natural existence. This sort of self-consciousness of independence can be instantiated through the recognition of oneself as independent by another, confirming that how one takes oneself to be is also how others take one to be (Pinkard 1994, 53).

The struggle for recognition is motivated by the awareness that ‘a self-consciousness is for a self-consciousness’ (PS §177). Two self-consciousnesses encountering one another for the first time immediately recognise the other as a self-consciousness but have ‘not yet presented themselves to each other as pure *being-for-itself*’ (PS §186), and as such each must prove their self-sufficiency to the other. In order to achieve this, they must show that they are ‘fettered to no determinate *existence*’ (PS §187), which therefore requires their proving to the other that they are not dependent on life. They thus risk their life to demand that the other recognise their independence from the natural life which they each understand themselves as existing opposite, and—since at this point each is self-conscious only through knowing that the other is conscious of them—there follows a doubled action. Putting ‘one’s own life on the line’ means that at the same time, one ‘aims at the death of the other’ (PS §187). Hegel therefore sets up the struggle as self-consciousness attempting to realise itself as different from the natural world it understands itself in opposition to, attempting to enact this by demanding that the other recognise it as independent from its natural existence. Self-consciousness desires to be recognised beyond its death—such that, in contrast to the particular organism which is entirely extinguished at the end of its natural life, self-consciousness’s existence is able to endure after its death in this recognition.

Yet, we see at this stage that self-consciousness cannot attain such recognition. If one self-consciousness is to perish in the struggle, the survivor is left with no one to be recognised by. There is nothing mediating the relationship of self-consciousness to its death at this point, and as such death still constitutes only the end of the particular self-consciousness. Progression for self-consciousness will only come if one self-consciousness yields to the other, discovering that it is in some sense dependent on its life for its existence. Self-consciousness must therefore find a way of relating to its death which accepts its necessity whilst at the same time not being entirely negated by it.

4 Mastery and Servitude

We see the person who yielded becoming a *slave*, self-consciousness ‘in the shape of *thinghood*’, who out of fear of death recognises the other as its *master* with ‘stably existing self-sufficiency as its essential moment’ (PS §189). Fear of death and work for the master will turn out to give the slave an intuition of how he might not be abstractly negated in death. I now discuss how this transpires.

In coming face to face with death, the slave ‘felt anxiety about its entire essence’, and ‘all that was fixed within it had been shaken loose’ (PS §194). The slave had faced death as the end of its life, and this death would still have been understood as the end of a particular self-consciousness’s existence. Death conceived as such would leave behind nothing of the slave’s particular existence, and the slave therefore develops an acquaintance with pure negativity, realising that all the determinateness of his life will come to an end with his death. This would yield no change in the relation to death were it not for the work the slave is made to undertake for the master. Since the slave is forced to produce objects for the master’s consumption but cannot himself consume them, ‘work is desire *held*

in check' (PS §195), relating to Hegel's earlier discussion of desire as negating its object entirely. Because he cannot negate it, the slave views the object as 'something that *endures* because it is just for the labourer himself that the object has self-sufficiency' (PS §195).

As a result of this, the slave gains an intuition of how he might attain a being-beyond death. Although he is aware of his finitude through his encounter with death's negativity, the slave is also aware of his self-consciousness as externalised in the objective world through work. In working on an object, 'he destroys this alien negative and posits *himself* as such a negative within the element of continuance', externalising himself as '*an existing being* within that formative activity' (PS §196). I take this to mean that the slave recognises his self-consciousness as it has been externalised as something that will endure even when his particular life has ended. It is important to note that here, what is achieved is only the knowledge that he *could* have this recognised—he is aware that the fruits of his labour will last, but there is no certainty that *he* will be recognised as the individual who enacted them. Part of this is the one sidedness of the inter-subjective recognition obtaining here, as the objects the slave is producing only have significance from the master's point of view, and thus what the slave does is not yet a fully self-conscious action motivated by *his* reasons (Pinkard 1994, p.61).

Nonetheless, the slave has intuited that he has some kind of continuing existence beyond his natural one. This will be further realised as the spirit's development continues, moving beyond the one-sided recognition which the slave has, into forms of social recognition where one can achieve certainty that they will be recognised as an individual beyond their death. In order to outline how this certainty is manifested, I turn to Hegel's discussion of burial in the Ancient Greek world of *Antigone*.

5 Ethical Death

Until this point, self-consciousness considered itself primarily as an individual being, and its attempts to understand itself as such had failed. Hegel moves to undertaking an exposition of self-consciousness as something which can be understood only within the form of life it exists in a mutually constitutive relationship with. Hegel uses the term "spirit" to refer to reflective forms of social life which are able to motivate action based on a 'way things are done' (Pinkard 1994, 140). To have this reflective social self-consciousness will therefore be contingent on the sort of negative relation to natural existence being established socially such that individuals are able to relate to the social whole as providing reasons and significance.

The *Spirit* chapter begins with Hegel's discussion of *Antigone*, where he sees burial customs as allowing the individual to maintain a *social* being which extends beyond their natural existence. Burial provides the certainty that one is recognised as a member of the community even when they die, being part of a whole which exists beyond the particular lives of its members. To be in such a context is thus to have one's status as an individual recognised within the collective even when one has passed out of natural existence, establishing through concrete practice that one has an existence which is irreducible to that of natural life.

Spirit here is doubled into the polity, or 'the substance as awareness of its actual doings', and the family, 'an *immediate* consciousness of itself as essence' (PS §449). The doubling delineates a public domain where the polity governs through ethical laws and the power of the state, binding for all citizens, and the family tending to divine law which only governs family members. Since ethical law binds the individual as actual, divine law concerns the individual 'who as a *universal* being, is exempted from his sensuous, i.e., singular actuality' (PS §450). The individual exempt from actuality is the dead individual, so the family's positive obligation under divine law is thus

burial—with this obligation entailing that you bury only your own family members.

To bury the dead is to ensure that he ‘does not belong solely to nature and remain something non-rational’ (PS §451), as otherwise he would not be differentiated from a purely natural being. Burial transforms death from the individual’s ceasing to be spirit into a process whereby their place as part of a whole is recognised even when they are non-actual, retaining them as part of the spiritual essence. The family intervenes in dying through burial and ‘thereby makes the dead into a member of the polity’ (PS §451), instilling in the individual who is aware that they will be buried an awareness that they are a member of a community which continues to exist beyond their particular life. Whilst the slave had only the intuition of this kind of continuance, the ethical individual is affirmed in a form of recognition which provides them with its certainty. This recognition avoids the complete negation of the particular which inheres in life, as it at once makes the individual part of the whole whilst maintaining their individuality. In burial customs then, we do not see a non-natural form of being, but rather a sort of ‘negation of nature’ through social practice (Pippin 2008, p.57) which ensures the continued social intelligibility of the dead.

In ethical life, we see recognitional norms which mediate between the individual and their death, allowing individuals to attain self-consciousness of their being-beyond-death. Attaining this relation makes one into an *individual who now fully understands themselves as a self-conscious individual*, maintaining an existence as someone who can be recognised even in the face of their natural life’s end. To succeed in this attainment, one must understand that their activity finds its place within a community which temporally extends beyond them, an understanding instilled by their knowledge that they will be buried.

6 Conclusion

In summation, Hegel sees the correct relation to death as a necessary condition of social self-consciousness as part of what he terms ‘spirit.’ For a mere living organism, death is experienced as the total negation of its existence, as it is not self-conscious of itself as placed in a whole which continues beyond it. In attempting to realise itself as self-conscious and thus different from a mere living thing, self-consciousness attempts to prove that its being is not fully exhausted by death, through attaining another’s recognition of its independence from life. Whilst this is not achieved in the struggle, in an ironic turn of events, the slave who was posited as non-self-sufficient achieves an intuition of this independence through his externalisation in labour. This intuition becomes realised in spirit, where one is self-conscious as part of a social form of life which continues beyond one’s natural existence — a self-consciousness dependent on burial practices making one aware of their social individuality which will continue to be recognised after their death. Whilst this is not the end for Hegel’s discussion of death in the *Phenomenology*, it emphasises the fundamental importance of the relation to death in undergirding the forms of social mindedness which Hegel will continue to discuss throughout the progression towards what he calls “absolute knowing.”

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A Scholastic Interpretation of Descartes' Objective Reality in the Proof for God in Meditation III

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Abstract. This paper clarifies Descartes' puzzling concept of objective reality in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). Through a close textual analysis of the *Meditations* and *Replies*, I evaluate what objective reality is, a crucial notion Descartes introduces in his proof of the existence of God. Second, I analyze how these concepts operate in the proof for God itself. This historical contextualization and conceptual exegesis illuminates both Descartes' technical vocabulary and his continuity with the Baroque scholastic tradition.

1 The Meaning of Objective Reality

Prior to Descartes, the word “idea” (*eidos* or *forma*) typically referred to ideas in God's mind.¹ Ideas in God's mind acted as exemplars, that is to say, they were forms that God referred to in order to create creatures. Exemplars as such do not exist or have *esse* in the world without God's free action conferring *esse*. An analogy is a painter looking at a posing model as an exemplar for their painting.² However, Descartes' ideas do not function like exemplars, which are the causes of things. Ideas, for Descartes, have a passive role as the effects rather than the causes of things—whether inside or outside the mind.³ Even innate ideas for Descartes are effects of Descartes' nature, which is created by God.⁴

What is unique, as Descartes' argument for God in Med. III makes clear, is that he is more concerned with how ideas are caused than with the effects they may produce. What is new in the history of philosophy is Descartes' application of the ‘causal adequacy principle’ (CSM II 28) to the ‘objective reality’ of ideas. For most scholastics, the idea was regarded as an act of knowing, not a separate entity needing a cause. The only cause that was needed to explain an idea was that it was a product of a mind. This position was questioned by the likes of Descartes who thought that

¹See, for example, Aquinas, *ST* I, q.15, arts. 1-3.

²*Ibid.*, 96

³Normore, Calvin. “Meaning and Objective Being: Descartes and His Sources,” 237.

⁴“And indeed it is no surprise that God, in creating me, should have placed this idea in me to be, as it were, the mark of a craftsman stamped on his work” (CSM II 25).

a cause was needed to explain the being required for ideas to represent different things (objective reality). Scholastics dismissed this objection by arguing that the objective reality of an idea needed no cause other than the representation that was produced by the operation of the intellect.⁵ The rest of this paper will explore the arguments of these two views.

In this paper, I briefly describe the meaning of ‘objective reality’ and how it relates to the causality of ideas and his proof for God. Before proceeding, it is crucial to consider how objective reality is used by Descartes in two different senses. ‘Objective reality’ in the scholastic tradition was predicated of two subjects: (1) extra-mental and (2) intra-mental. (1) A thing has objective reality in the mind as an object of thought, and (2) an idea is said to contain a degree of objective reality in the mind.⁶ This is a tricky but important distinction. Most scholastics held position (1), whereas Descartes and certain scholastics from the Portuguese Coimbra school held position (2).

First, extra-mental entities always have a degree of formal reality⁷ and can potentially have objective reality. Extra-mental entities have formal reality, whether as substances or modes, and have objective reality only insofar as they are known by a knower. Considering the objective reality of a thing is to consider the degree of being a thing has as an object of thought (as represented). A thing does not exist formally in the mind,⁸ so it must exist objectively in the mind, as an object of thought. Thus, considering the objective reality of a thing is to consider the thing as an object of thought. To consider the thing as an object of thought is just to consider what is known. And what is known is just the thing. This can be expressed in Figure 1:⁹

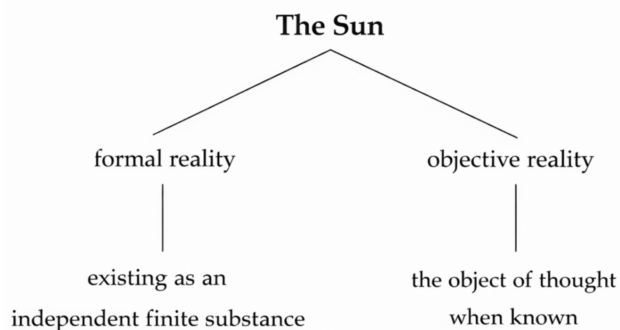


Figure 1

But it is important to note that a thing as an object of thought did not constitute any real change in the thing known. Being an object of thought was another way of saying that the knower is changed by considering X rather than Y. Thus, the real change was in the knower, not the

⁵For the threefold distinction, Descartes uses to distinguish the operation of the intellect, the representation, and the objective reality of an idea, see Jones, Elliott. “A Scholastic Interpretation of the Material, Formal, and Objective Aspects of Descartes’ Ideas,” in *Dialogue: Journal of Phi Sigma Tau*, forthcoming.

⁶See, for example (CSM II 28): “Undoubtedly, the ideas which represent substances to me amount to something more and, so to speak, contain within themselves more objective reality than the ideas which merely represent modes or accidents.”

⁷Formal reality refers to the type of existence a thing has, whether extra- or intra-mentally. Thus, an idea, in addition to objective reality, has formal reality insofar as it exists as a mode of thought.

⁸If it did, then the mind would become the thing known when known. For example, knowing a stone would cause your mind to be a stone.

⁹Figure 1 expresses the view that the Sun, when “known,” is simply an object of thought and nothing over the label designating it as “known.” See Adriaenssen, *Representation and Scepticism from Aquinas to Descartes*, 133, for the exemplar for my diagram.

object.¹⁰

Second, with regard to ideas (which is the position Descartes explicitly endorses in the *Meditations*),¹¹ they are always modes of thought and always represent something. Ideas always have a degree of formal reality and contain a degree of objective reality. Or more specifically, because they represent different things, they contain varying degrees of objective reality. Considering an idea objectively is to consider what it represents, namely the represented or the “thing.” The difference between considering the objective reality of a thing and the objective reality of an idea is between considering what the represented is and between considering what the being of the represented is in the mind. Put more simply: to consider an idea objectively is to consider its mental content, while to consider the objective reality of an idea is to consider the being of that mental content itself. Consider this diagram of the second sense of objective reality:¹²

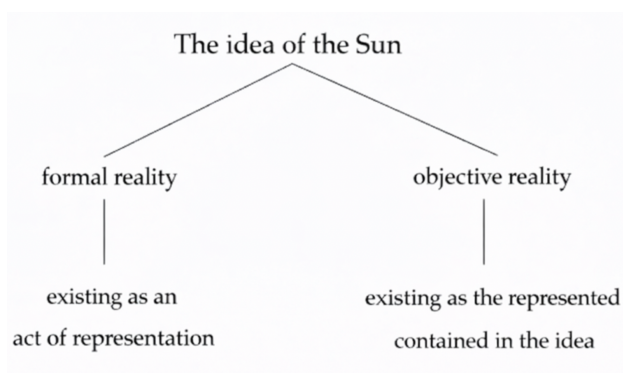


Figure 2

The insight here is that things known do not just exist as representations, but they also exist in the intellect as the represented, and this represented has a type of being. Consider the two meanings as expressed by Amaral:

"objective reality" and "thing known" have a twofold reference: they refer (a) to the objective presence of an object for the first-order (first intentional) cognition (the *esse objectivum* as such) or (b) the *esse* of being-an-object-of-thought (the *esse* of the *esse objectivum*)¹³

The first (a) refers to objective reality as a mere object of thought (this is sense (1) above, also seen in Figure 1). The second (b) refers to objective reality as a type of *esse* of this very object of thought (this is sense (2) above, also seen in Figure 2). But a question arises if this is true. In the second sense of objective reality, what does it mean for the represented to have a type of being in the intellect? Descartes, in reply to our question states, “‘objective being’ simply means being in the intellect in the way in which objects are normally there” (CSM II 75). We might ask further, ‘but what does this mean? Somehow objective reality is the type of being the represented has in the intellect as distinct from it being an object of thought.

Wells helps us grasp this confusing distinction between the two senses when he writes that, “We are not here in the presence of the-being-of-being-an-object [see ‘objective reality’ in Figure

¹⁰See note 21.

¹¹Though Descartes does indeed hold that “a thing exists in the intellect objectively through an idea” (CSM II 28), the main sense Descartes uses of “objective reality” is predicated of an idea, not the thing itself formally existing.

¹²This Figure expresses the view that Descartes and scholastics from the Coimbra school held. See, Descartes’ *Theory of Ideas*, 47-56.

¹³See Amaral, “Descartes’ Quantum Quid,” 388.

1]... Rather, we are in the presence of that being-of-being-in-an-intellect [see ‘objective reality’ in Figure 2]...¹⁴ This is still somewhat vague. What type of being is being considered? Not formal reality, because all ideas are equals as modes of thought, as representations. But objective reality is the “mode of being by which a thing exists objectively in the intellect by way of an idea” (CSM II 28). This all sounds obscure and perhaps a needless attribution of reality to an idea. But this obscurity and apparent complexity was heavily debated in the years prior to Descartes, and Descartes takes a clear stand. It is clear that objective reality is not something attached to an idea *qua* idea but only as an idea considered objectively (as the represented). It is something attached to an object of thought when the object is known. An idea is said to contain varying degrees of objective reality depending on what is represented.¹⁵ Objective reality here refers to the being of the idea of the sun as it exists contained in an idea. This view is discussed further below.

Before considering the proof for the existence of God, I must refer to the consequences of the two senses of objective reality considered in this section. Figure 1 is represented by Caterus in the *Replies* as well as most scholastics (e.g., most notably Suárez), while Descartes sides with Figure 2 (at least for his causal principle in *Med. III*) without completely rejecting Figure 1. A lot is at stake in these two views. For if objective reality is nothing more than a term denoting the object of thought as known, then this needs no causal explanation other than the mind as a thinking thing. Therefore, thought alone can be the cause of the objective reality of every idea and Descartes’ proof for God is dismantled, or so Caterus thinks. Whereas if the objective reality is over and above the term denoting the object as known, as what exists as the represented in the idea, then this (for Descartes) requires an efficient cause. Let us now turn to Caterus’ objection that the objective reality of an idea is nothing more than a label or “extrinsic denomination.” Examining this debate is now necessary to make sense of Descartes’ position on the ‘objective reality’ of ideas in preparation for examining his proof for God.

2 Caterus’ Objection

Caterus writes in response to Descartes’ adoption of ‘objective reality’ in Figure 2:

what sort of cause does an idea need? Indeed, what *is* an idea? It is the thing that is thought of, in so far as it has objective being in the intellect. But what is ‘objective being in the intellect’? According to what I was taught, this is simply the determination of an act of the intellect by means of an object. And this is merely an external denomination which adds nothing to the thing itself. Just as ‘being seen’ is nothing other than an act of vision attributable to myself, so ‘being thought of’, or having objective being in the intellect, is simply a thought of the mind which stops and terminates in the mind. And this can occur without any movement or change in the thing itself, and indeed without the thing in question existing at all. (CSM II 66-67)

As this passage makes clear, for Caterus, objective reality is an extrinsic denomination of a thing. A thing has objective reality when it is known. When known, this does not change the being of the thing. Instead, it changes the object of thought of the knower. The thing as known is not intrinsically changed but extrinsically by a label as what is “known.” ‘Objective reality’ simply designates a label of a thing as an object of thought. So the objective reality of the idea of God only means that it is an object of thought. If I inquire further as to what is in this object of thought, then I am aware of the mental content of said object (e.g., infinity, perfection, etc.). But this mental

¹⁴Wells, "Objective Reality of Ideas in Descartes, Caterus, and Suárez," 56.

¹⁵Schechtman, “Descartes’ Argument for the Existence of the Idea of an Infinite Being,” 489.

content itself is still merely an object of thought. ‘Objective reality’ designates nothing other than the thing being known in the intellect.

Caterus then argues that the extrinsic denomination, being nothing actual, requires no efficient cause. For an efficient cause terminates in actual being, but an extrinsic denomination, “can occur without any movement or change in the thing itself, and indeed without the thing in question existing at all. So why should I look for a cause of something which is not actual, and which is simply an empty label, a non-entity?” (CSM II 66-67). A label has no extra-mental existence, no actual being, and thus requires no efficient cause.

Descartes agrees with Caterus that, were ‘objective reality’ merely to designate an object as “seen” or “known,” it would indeed amount to nothing more than an extrinsic denomination of a thing. The question at hand, then, is something different. One might expect Descartes to give up his position after affirming Figure 1. But were he to do so, he could not claim to seek an efficient cause for the objective reality of his ideas.¹⁶ Extrinsic denominations are mere labels and, as such, require no being beyond the mind who labels. Let us consider Descartes’ reply:

Now I wrote that an idea is the thing which is thought of in so far as it has objective being in the intellect. But...the objector [Caterus] pretends to understand them in quite a different way from that in which I used them. ‘Objective being in the intellect’, he says, ‘is simply the determination of an act of the intellect by means of an object, and this is merely an extraneous label which adds nothing to the thing itself.’ Notice here that he is referring to the thing itself as if it were located outside the intellect, and in this sense ‘objective being in the intellect’ is certainly an extraneous label; *but I was speaking of the idea, which is never outside the intellect, and in this sense ‘objective being’ simply means being in the intellect in the way in which objects are normally there.* For example, if anyone asks what happens to the sun through its being objectively in my intellect, the best answer is that nothing happens to it beyond the application of an extraneous label which does indeed ‘determine an act of the intellect by means of an object.’ But if the question is about what the idea of the sun is, and we answer that it is the thing which is thought of, in so far as it has objective being in the intellect, no one will take this to be the sun itself with this extraneous label applied to it. ‘Objective being in the intellect’ will not here mean ‘the determination of an act of the intellect by means of an object’, but will signify the object’s being in the intellect in the way in which its objects are normally there. By this I mean that the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect — not of course formally existing, as it does in the heavens, but objectively existing, i.e. in the way in which objects normally are in the intellect. Now this mode of being is of course much less perfect than that possessed by things which exist outside the intellect; but, as I did explain, it is not therefore simply nothing. (CSM II 74-75) Emphasis added.

Descartes, in reply, agrees with Caterus in one aspect, but offers something new in a second respect (which corresponds to the second sense of ‘objective reality’ Figure 2 above and as described by Amaral and Wells. Descartes agrees with Caterus insofar as he considers objective reality to denote the extra-mental thing as it exists as an object of thought—nothing happens to the sun itself when it is known. But Descartes argues that Caterus is missing his point for he is not concerned with the extra-mental sun, but the intra-mental sun as an idea in his mind. If the ‘objective reality’ of an idea is something real, then it requires an efficient cause. But Descartes proposes that if ‘objective reality’ refers not to the thing as an object of thought but rather to the object of thought of the thing then ‘objective reality’ is not an extrinsic denomination of the thing.

¹⁶This, as is shown in Section I.3 is crucial to his argument for the existence of God.

For Descartes, the objective reality of an idea is not an extrinsic denomination (e.g., ‘sun in the sky’) but rather an intrinsic denomination (e.g., sun *qua* in the mind or the idea of the sun). This clarifies what he means by saying that objective reality refers to the existence a thing has as it exists “objectively” in the intellect. A thing intrinsically has a different type of being (*esse*) in the mind than outside.¹⁷ When we consider this type of *esse*, we consider the thing as represented *by* an idea in the mind. The objective being of the represented is a label only if the represented is considered as outside the mind. But the objective being of the represented is not a label if the represented is considered as inside the mind (Figure 2). The represented itself is in the mind as contained in the representation. Descartes is arguing that the sun has a type of being in the mind over and above the representation or label that represents it.

Thus, the intrinsic denomination ‘objective reality’ refers to the being of the idea of the thing. This objective reality is not nothing and therefore requires a cause. This mode of being is an intrinsic denomination of an idea because it is part of its nature.¹⁸ This means that objective reality is an intrinsic property of the idea.¹⁹ Wells argues on this point that Descartes is not concerned with how things are in our intellect as representations because this is explainable by the mind as an intellectual operation. Instead, Descartes is concerned with how things are in our intellect as represented, which is to say, as knowable, as intelligible. Being knowable or being intelligible is what it means to be in an intellect as represented. Considering ‘objective reality’ as an intrinsic denomination of his idea is to consider the *esse* of his ideas as known. Wells writes:

Descartes is concerned [with the]... question of why the idea taken ‘objectively’ is conceivable in the first place, or why it is representable.” So the tantalizing phrase used previously, “in the intellect in the way in which objects are wont to be therein”... has to do with being in an intellect in the sense of having the-being-of-being-intelligible or the-being-of-being-knowable?²⁰

As an intrinsic denomination, objective reality denotes a property of the represented in the mind. A property is actual and thus has *esse*. Therefore, the intrinsic denomination denotes a perfection in the represented contained in an idea.²¹ How? By the reduction from potentially intelligible being to actual intelligible being (i.e., existing objectively in the intellect). So while Descartes considers the *esse* of his ideas, this very *esse* is the intelligibility of a thing. The *esse* he is considering is the mental content, and to do this, he must consider the essence of this mental content. And this is precisely what is argued for in Med. III where he argues that what is represented (e.g., substances, modes, accidents) is directly proportional to the amount of objective reality (*esse*) his ideas have (CSM II 27-28).

In response to Caterus, Descartes position becomes more nuanced while retaining prior ambiguities, providing an innovation to popular scholastic understanding. From a mere object of thought as an extrinsic denomination (Figure 1) to considering the being of the represented itself as an intrinsic denomination (Figure 2), I have shown how Descartes develops his theory of ideas while utilizing ideas from the scholastic tradition. This conceptual preparation now prepares us for an analysis of

¹⁷Nothing changes essentially to the sun when I know it. But on the order of being (*esse*), something changes in the sun when it exists in my mind. This is intuitive, only if the sun in the mind is numerically identical to the sun outside the mind. See Descartes’ Theory of Ideas, 49-55.

¹⁸“For just as the objective mode of being belongs to ideas by their *very nature*...” (CSM II 29).

¹⁹Nadler writes, “It is essential to an idea that it has a representational content that it displays to the mind.” See Nadler, “The Doctrine of Ideas.” In *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes’ Meditations*, 92.

²⁰See “Objective Reality of Ideas in Descartes, Caterus, and Suárez,” 57.

²¹See Clemenson, Descartes’ *Theory of Ideas*, 53-54, for his argument as to why objective reality is a perfection of the represented.

his proof for the existence of God. This discussion attempts to include insights from Section I.1-2 to present a fuller picture of Descartes' theory of ideas applied in his arguments.

3 Objective Reality in the Causal Proof for God

Having established the background concepts for his proof for God in Med. III, I now turn to the argument itself. Descartes does indeed refer to the two senses of objective reality. First, I present the argument itself and second, I compare how the idea of God compares with our analysis of Descartes' theory of ideas in Section I.1-2.

A common response upon reading Descartes' first proof for God in Med. III is to question his assumption that the objective reality of an idea requires an efficient cause (e.g., Caterus). Furthermore, in this Meditation, Descartes implicitly adopts each meaning of objective reality I argued for in Section I.1-2. At one moment, he considers the meaning/essence/mental content of the object of thought (of the idea of God) to determine if it contains the notion of perfection, infinity, etc. At another moment, he considers the existence of the mental content (as the represented) itself.

In Med. III, Descartes must inquire whether a God exists and if he is a deceiver or not, for only then can he refrain from doubting all his ideas. But as he is only a thinking thing, he can only inquire whether God exists by reflecting on his ideas in his mind. His goal for this Meditation is to find an idea in him that must have a cause outside of himself. He proceeds by bracketing ideas as modes of thought and considers them only insofar as they represent different things. Considering ideas insofar as they "represent different things" (CSM II, 27-28), then is the solution for inquiring into whether or not the represented exists outside of his mind. Descartes notices that what is represented by an idea varies by degrees of "objective reality." An idea of a substance contains more objective reality than does the idea of modes or accidents. And the idea with even greater objective reality than a finite substance is the idea of God. How Descartes knows if an idea contains more objective reality than another idea is by considering what is represented. By considering the object of thought (Figure 1) and its mental content, he can consider the degree of objective reality of the represented contained in his idea (Figure 2). Implicit in his gradation of objective reality is a hierarchy of ontology.²²

This gradation has already been alluded to in the distinction of ideas as a "mode of thought" with "thought" being an attribute of a thinking substance. Indeed, Descartes writes that:

I have...made it quite clear how reality admits of more and less. A substance is more of a thing than a mode...and finally, if there is an infinite and independent substance, it is more of a thing than a finite and dependent substance. All this is completely self-evident. (CSM II 130)

A substance as independent (except, of course, from God) is more "perfect" than an attribute and more perfect than modes²³ which depends on its existence from a substance. While God is fully independent from any substance and hence is most perfect. But it must be noted that the passage (CSM II 27-28) refers to objective reality while (CSM II 130) refers to formal reality. What then is the relationship between a thing's formal reality and the objective reality of its idea?²⁴ It is a directly proportional relationship, whereby the greater formal reality a thing has, the greater

²²Schechtman, "Descartes' Argument for the Existence of the Idea of an Infinite Being," 490.

²³A mode is a certain way that a substance or attribute can be without causing a substantial change. For example, a mind can be modally doubting or modally affirming and still be a mind.

²⁴Schechtman put this idea well, in "Descartes' Argument for the Existence of the Idea of an Infinite Being," 489-490.

objective reality its idea has. But take note that he can only consider the formal reality a thing has by considering the mental content of the object of thought (Figure 1). And he can only consider the objective reality of his idea (Figure 2) based on the mental content. We see this understanding at work in the next step in the argument—the introduction of the causal adequacy principle:

Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much <reality> in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause. . . . It follows from this both that something cannot arise from nothing, and also that what is more perfect—that is, contains in itself more reality—cannot arise from what is less perfect. And this is transparently true not only in the case of effects which possess <what the philosophers call> actual or formal reality, but also in the case of ideas, where one is considering only <what they call> objective reality. (CSM II 28)

This is a crucial moment in the *Meditations*, and so it is worthy to understand the concepts at work here. To determine the cause of an idea, one must consider the formal reality of things and the objective reality of ideas. In this analysis, the notion of something coming from nothing arises. And so Descartes must determine the cause of the objective reality of his ideas. Typically, causal principles apply to real, formally existing things. Descartes, himself, gives the example of a stone. An extra-mental stone cannot be caused to exist unless it is produced by something that contains at least everything understood to be in the stone (i.e., its essence). For example, Descartes might suppose that a stone must be caused by *at least* something that is extended, mutable, etc. So too with the idea of a stone, for it to exist in Descartes' mind, it must have some cause "which contains at least as much reality as I conceive to be . . . in the stone" (CSM II 28). Let us say that the cause of Descartes' idea of a stone is a stone existing outside his mind. It must be qualified, that the way in which the stone is in the mind is not as it exists extra-mentally: as Descartes writes, "For although this cause does not transfer any of its actual or formal reality to my idea, it should not on that account be supposed that it must be less, real" (CSM II 28).

This qualification, however, suggests something more than the notion that a stone does not exist formally in the mind as it does outside the mind. Indeed, Descartes is responding to an objection that Caterus makes in the *Replies* (see Section I.2) that the way in which a thing exists in the intellect is not real being, and because it is not a real being, it does not require a cause. This, therefore, would refute an implicit premise in Descartes' proof for the existence of God: namely, that the objective reality contained in an idea is a true and real being requiring a cause. Caterus charges Descartes with mistaking what objective reality is, namely that it is a being requiring an extra-mental cause.

By claiming that there are grades of perfection in the objective reality of an idea, Descartes can now claim that the objective reality of ideas are beings that require a principle of causality for their existence (Figure 2). From here, he attempts to claim that the objective reality of his idea of God can be caused by no other being but God. The idea of God formally can be explained by the fact that his idea of God is simply a mode of thought consisting of both a representational operation and a representation.²⁵ But if Descartes considers the cause of the objective reality of his idea of God, he notices that he as a finite substance (his formal reality) cannot cause the objective reality of the idea of God, which is more "perfect" than a finite substance.

What is so crucial to this argument is that his "first and most important [ideas]" require something possessing formal reality as a cause, that is to say, something with independent existence (CSM II 29). So while Descartes can, in principle, be the cause of ideas that derive from his formal reality as a thinking substance, such as the idea of "substance or duration, and number," he still

²⁵See note 5.

needs to explain ideas that do not, seemingly, derive from his formal reality, such as the idea of God (CSM II 30). What then could possibly be the cause of the idea of an infinite substance?

First, it cannot be the logical result of any combination of his ideas. Descartes rejects the suggestion that his idea of God could be caused by the formal reality of himself as a “finite substance” by negating the term ‘finite’ to reach the idea of a non-finite or indefinite substance. This, he claims, is impossible for the grasp of the idea ‘finite’ is posterior to the grasp of the idea ‘infinite.’ Furthermore, “non-finite” means without limits which according to Descartes is not a “real thing” whereas infinity consists of *actual* infinite “true and real” perfections.²⁶ Thus, his idea ‘infinite’ is not created from other ideas nor does it come to him adventitiously. Instead, the idea of God is already somehow found as an idea he already possesses. And more than this, it somehow gives rise or causes the possibility of other ideas such as finitude. For example, Descartes writes that:

It is true that I have the idea of substance in me in virtue of the fact that I am a substance; but this would not account for my having the idea of an infinite substance, when I am finite, unless this idea proceeded from some substance which really was infinite. (CSM II 21)

The cause of the idea of finitude derives from his prior idea of infinity. But when Descartes considers the cause of the idea of infinity (which is a “first and most important [idea]”) he argues, it must come from the formal reality of an infinite substance.

In light of the arguments in Med. III, let me briefly mention the methodological importance of Descartes’ concepts. The priority for Descartes, when considering his causal principle in Med. III, is Figure 2 *not* Figure 1. The being of the represented by a representation needs a cause and it does not come from the representation itself. Representations causally explain the idea as a representation. They do not explain why this representation represents X rather than Y. X or Y as represented requires a cause and this cannot come from a mere label. Descartes argues as such in reply to Caterus:

For the precise question being raised is what is the cause of. . . [a thing’s] being conceived. Nor will it suffice to say that the intellect itself is the cause of the idea, in so far as it is the cause of its own operations; for what is at issue is not this, but the cause of the objective intricacy which is in the idea. (CSM II 75)

If Caterus is right and objective reality is just a label, then this can never be more perfect than Descartes’ objective being of himself, but because Descartes claims that it can be more perfect than him, objective reality has to have actual being in his mind. This is only possible if we consider Figure 2. His argument would not work if he only had an understanding of objective reality in Figure 1 as an extrinsic denomination. Because of the importance of understanding of ‘objective reality’ for his argument, Caterus targets Descartes’ understanding of it.

Upon first reading, it may seem puzzling how the conclusion of God’s existence was reached from the mere idea of God. In attempting to elucidate the assumed concepts undergirding this argument, I have tried to show how this conclusion is more conceivable and intelligible than may have been initially thought without expounding a judgment on the soundness of the argument.

4 Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to grasp the ambiguities of the two senses of the concept ‘objective reality’ (see Figures 1 and 2). I have applied these conceptual understandings methodologically to Descartes’ proof for the existence of God in Med. III.

²⁶Cf. Schechtman, “Descartes’ Argument for the Existence of the Idea of an Infinite Being,” 503.

I made sure to consider the indebtedness of Descartes to the Baroque scholastic tradition for his conceptual apparatus. As shown in the reply by Caterus, when Descartes is pressured by his objectors to clarify his concepts, he resorts to scholastic concepts even more. Yet, Descartes does propose innovative concepts that he utilized from the scholastics. He also used them in new ways such as attributing efficient causality to the objective reality of ideas.

I want to close by noting that I think better understandings of Descartes are achieved by resorting to the tradition preceding him. Furthermore, any conceptual study of Descartes in general must take note of the Scotistic influences in his thought (e.g., the Coimbra school), especially in his understanding of ‘objective reality’ and the cognitional theories of the scholastics at the time. A further study into how Descartes’ ideas are indebted and depart from the Baroque scholastic tradition will, I suspect, bear even more new understandings of his theory of ideas and deserves a more comprehensive review of the literature.

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The Soul of Man (That Makes History): William H. Ferris' Philosophy of History and Theory of (Racial) Progress in The African Abroad

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"They talked about the Romans and the Roman circus and the first Christians who were eaten by lions. But the lions will choke on our [B]lack flesh, he said."

— Roberto Bolaño, *2666*

Abstract. This paper will argue that William H. Ferris' philosophy of history and ethnology in *The African Abroad* leads him to conceive of the Black race's life in the Anglo-Saxon milieu of America as both a challenge and an opportunity. The violent removal of the African from his primitive home, thrust into the centre of white civilization, is posited as a deep and desperate challenge for the Black race to (continue to) overcome, and a step along the progression of man's history towards the ideals of heaven. Furthermore, he claims that the admixture of the Anglo-Saxon and Black races has produced the *Negrosaxon*, a racial stock uniquely capable of developing civilizational ideals and morals owing to its fortuitous fusion of the unique racial traits of each of its genealogical forebears. I aim to help rectify the institutional disservice done to Ferris' thought by giving careful thought to how he constructs his philosophy of history and theory of progress for the Black race in America. Further still, I argue that potential accusations of undue Eurocentrism or assimilationism, which place Ferris' philosophy as either implicitly or explicitly racist, are inaccurate. These claims fail to grapple with the complexity of his thought and do not comprehend the optimistic future he projects forward for the Black race.

1 Introduction

When William H. Ferris wrote, "sad is the fate of the world's great men," many of whom have "died poor and unpopular,"¹ he seems, in an eschatological register (common to the works of Black

¹William H. Ferris, *The African Abroad*, 370. (Hereafter cited as AA.)

philosophy produced throughout the 19th century) to have prophesied his own destiny.² He “died, penniless and obscure, in his room at 10 West 123 Street, Harlem.”³ Subsequently, respect and attention for his work have been sparse. Myriad interventions of luck and diligence were required so that he might be buried properly, or his works saved from the accrual of dust.⁴ This has left his intellectual contributions under-researched and his philosophy under-theorised, even by scholars attentive to the era of thought in which he was embroiled. This is symptomatic of a general unwillingness within the academy to treat Black intellectuals’ thought systematically — especially when considering those works published prior to 1950. Instead, they are championed under the banner of and so reduced to a single concept (we might think of Du Bois’ double consciousness) or construed as inheritors of the white, Euro-American philosophical tradition (to, in a now more race-conscious academic milieu, implicitly validate the insights of those whites seen as genealogically antecedent).⁵

First, I will focus on Ferris’ philosophy of history; his teleology of the universe, man’s place in the universe, and the role of philosophical inquiry in view of these understandings. Then, I will discuss his use of ethnology to resist anti-Black racism in the coining of the term *Negrosaxon*. Further, I argue that his ethnological grounding is central to his projection of the future for the Black race. These thematic threads will be woven together to produce an overview of his theory of racial progress. In the coda, the themes of intellectual dereliction with respect to Black thought will be revisited in light of the explication given of Ferris’ philosophy.

2 History, Teleology, and Revelation

It is important to recognise that despite the centrality of Blackness to Ferris’ writings, he is aiming at a grander account than just one of race. He cautions that within “the larger life of mankind,” that of “the Negro is but an eddy in a stream.”⁶ His philosophy of history, then, is aimed at illustrating the contours of this larger life.

Noting initially the evanescence of many things human — social status, wealth, memory — he contrasts this with two things that seem to be capable of weathering this cyclical storm: nature and ideas. In the narrative of the *Reverie*, from his “lofty eminence” upon Tower Hill, he observes the apparent eternity of nature, in the seas, the fields and the stars.⁷ In contrast, the actions of men—even those of great men, whose races dominate the world for centuries — seem transient and doomed to be forgotten. He enquires, then, as to what “the use of the strivings of man”⁸ is, and why anyone would strain towards greatness (or strain at all) if it is all fated to erode. The answer is in the capacity for ideas to outlast one’s lifetime, or even the lifetime of any civilization, laced into the fabric of human existence to come. Man, conceived as part of nature, then, strives in order to be eternal in his contributions to the “structure of civilization,” in his development of ideas, discoveries and inventions.⁹ Ferris identifies that while we don’t know the name of those who discovered fire, we owe them existentially for the fabric of our modern civilization, and that the same principle is true in the “intellectual inheritance”¹⁰ from those who introduced ideas of great import to their

²David Walker, *Walker’s Appeal*, in *Four Articles*, 11, is a horrifying example of the same phenomena.

³Wilson J. Moses, *Afrotopia*, 169.

⁴Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, “William Henry Ferris,” 549.

⁵See Tommy J. Curry, “Deliberate Misreadings” for a fuller exploration of this dereliction.

⁶Ferris, *AA*, 1.

⁷Ferris, *AA*, 6.

⁸Ferris, *AA*, 9.

⁹Ferris, *AA*, 10.

¹⁰Ferris, *AA*, 11.

descendants.

Ferris doubts that the world will endure, asking what kind of an eternity man is striving towards. If even nature, and the ideas that man was thought to pour into the stream of human life, may fade into oblivion at the world's end, then Ferris fears a total nihilism. So, he insists there must be a further purpose that justifies the immortality of ideas that he is committed to. He finds this purpose in the will of God, the only sort of being capable of endowing immortality into nature's movements and the ethical ideals of man. Man's spiritual strivings, then, come to be seen as their desire to, through "developing their manhood," also "develop a bit of the Absolute."¹¹ Our immortality, for Ferris, is justified in our being part of God, endowed with the capacities of reason and aimed at the conscious realization of the ideal world — exemplifying and developing those principles which make humans *men*. "Every living thing fulfils the laws of its being and realizes the immanent idea that Nature implants into it."¹² Here we can see the teleological bent of the universe that Ferris' philosophy holds centrally true.

Ferris' philosophy of history is that the gradual realization of the will of God is in the ethical principles embedded within the world at the ontological level. Physical and material facts have a role to play in the way in which God is manifested in the world through the actions of men and in the development of civilization. For example, geography determines how some civilizations are founded and their particular formal characteristics; weather determines the work required to live and so the values (of fastidiousness or laziness) that men embody. But they do not change the telos towards which the march of civilization as a whole is oriented, for the simple reason that just as "man is acted upon by his environment [...] it is still true that man reacts upon his environment and changes it."¹³ Ferris here deftly reframes the materialist principle he takes issue with, accepting some of its import but using it to restate his philosophy of history: even if the ideas and civilizations man forms are materially determined, that material can just as easily be altered by those ideas being grasped upon by souls in civilization towards the *telos* of the universe.

For Ferris, civilization is both a vehicle and tenor of historical progression. It is a vehicle, in the sense that each great civilization throughout history has worked to contribute some ideas to the general stock of humanity, emanating from its (racial) character. "Israel, Greece, Rome, the Germanic and Saxon races are the five great races that have thus far made important contributions to civilization."¹⁴ But in this passage we can see his use of civilization to show the tenor of humanity's spiritual strivings towards God-given ideals. Civilization thus refers to both the end-goal towards which human activity is oriented, and the mode in which it strives towards it. Civilizations are nonetheless irrepressibly racial in character (a theme further explored in §2).

For Ferris, the movements of history through civilizations are cyclical. In the course of history, great civilizations, exemplified in their ideals that are offered towards historical progress, will rise and fall in turn: "The entire cycle of history is replete with instances of a rich, luxurious but effeminate society falling before a hardier and stronger one."¹⁵ He understands this cycle as a churn between the initial rises of strong civilizations, with their great men, striking upon and unearthing gems of wisdom from their souls in alignment with God's will, before failing to exemplify this fully in their descent into degeneracy. Later civilizations then overtake them, inheriting the pertinent gems of wisdom from the societies they dominate, and using these to further the progression of humanity.

This concept of history lends itself to a particular view on the place of philosophy. Ferris is

¹¹Ferris, *AA*, 17.

¹²Ferris, *AA*, 19.

¹³Ferris, *AA*, 26.

¹⁴Ferris, *AA*, 33.

¹⁵Ferris, *AA*, 32.

distinctly opposed to the tradition of Black thought (exemplified in Booker T. Washington) that places industrial education, action, and the learning of one's senses and hands as the goal towards which Black racial activity (uplift) should take. Instead, he pursues an idealism—in the vein of Alexander Crummell—stating that “nothing is so powerful as ideas,” and that “all of the great movements of men, which have changed the course of human history [...] were caused by a few thinkers propagating, disseminating and scattering broadcast a few germ ideas.”¹⁶ Recalling his meditations on physical evanescence, we see how the place of philosophy, as the interdisciplinary mode of studies that aims to unify thought from across the breadth of human activity, is preferential to Ferris insofar as it takes as its object of inquiry the ideas that move history forward and so are eternal and bound up in God's project for the world. The application of principles is certainly important to Ferris, but far more so is the grasping of the “fundamental and basal ideas” that allow one to think creatively, express one's personality, and contribute to civilization¹⁷ — “measured by the greatness of the idea that dominates it.”¹⁸ Thus, the aim of philosophy is to equip man with the capacity to lead his civilization and contribute to the proper development of humankind. Without use of philosophy and the fundamental principles that it gives one knowledge of, man could achieve greatness (as did Napoleon, or Alexander the Great) but they cannot place themselves in the grand moral arc of the universe, sure of their place in and alignment with the destiny of man, making their souls unoptimistic, and so incapable of leading a civilization in the right sort of way.¹⁹ This attitude towards the role of philosophy is furthered in his claim that “the present can only be understood in light of the past.”²⁰ Given what we have noted about his perspective, it is clear that philosophy — “the study of man”²¹ — is the method by which he believes the past may be comprehended for the present.

In summary, we have seen Ferris' theo-teleological concept of the progression of history, as the world eternally moving toward the ideals of God in heaven. Humans are by nature endowed with the faculties to strive towards these spiritual goals through reason and creativity. These faculties have enabled great men in great civilizations or races to generate and disperse ethical ideals among society, contributing these to the stock of human understanding in being carried forward into the next phase of civilization. Philosophical inquiry, then, is posited as the activity of the human soul in line with God's purpose insofar as it aims to uncover and internalise these essential ideas from ages past to the end of actively progressing human life towards moral principles.

But what of his theories pertaining to race? He may be aiming at a philosophy of history, but he is doing so at least partly for the purpose of understanding his race's current situation. I therefore turn to consider Ferris' ethnological theory in his proposal of the term *Negrosaxon*, the worries that accompany it, and how Ferris resists any notion of Black inferiority or Anglo-Saxon supremacy through an appeal to the cycles of civilization and teleology of the universe.

3 The Negrosaxon and the Racial Character of Historical Progress

For Ferris, the capacities for striving that man is endowed with are not wholly universal. He proposes that each race possesses unique traits that enable them to contribute specific sorts of ideas to the development of mankind. He claims that “the great race stocks which have made contributions to

¹⁶Ferris, *AA*, 165.

¹⁷Ferris, *AA*, 169.

¹⁸Ferris, *AA*, 167.

¹⁹Ferris, *AA*, 180-181.

²⁰Ferris, *AA*, 236.

²¹Ferris, *AA*, 158.

civilizations have psychical and psychological qualities peculiar to themselves alone.”²²

A worry emerges. If Ferris buys so deeply into ethnological schema, and from our modern point of view, ethnology is inherently racist, then perhaps we were right to leave him out of the canon. How can he offer us any solutions to the color question, or philosophical insight, if his conclusions were reached via methodologies deeply mired in racism? But the late American historian and theorist Wilson J. Moses reminds us that at the time “Black intellectuals could no more ignore Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold than we can refuse to contend with Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida, or Simone de Beauvoir.”²³ Ferris was engaged in a milieu in which the racist polygenetic arguments of ethnology prevailed. His deployment of these same schema should be read as a Black scholar’s refiguration of these concepts, aimed at refuting them and their political implications for Black life in America. I further contend that the exclusion of Ferris and those who thought like him from the canon is markedly more racist than any aspect of his theories. This is especially true when considering the broad acceptance of figures like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who traded in much the same discursive formations, contemporaneously with Ferris, but to largely racist ends.²⁴ To occlude the way in which Black thinkers have articulated their rejections of subordination and inferiority, while allowing in those who motivated those same marginalisations, is, on the weakest line of attack, to leave gaping chasms in our intellectual historiography. On the strongest, it leaves us unable to comprehend the history of racism in America, and so its consequences contemporarily.

Ferris’ invocation of ethnology is done so as to resist anti-Black racism, not shore it up. He rejects a polygenetic thesis, whereby different racial stocks are considered as originating from distinct evolutionary paths, and positions whites as further along their evolutionary path.²⁵ He instead supports a monogenetic thesis. It is for this reason that, despite the Black race’s unique traits, Ferris refuses any notion that they are “outside of the pale of humanity,” insisting that there is an all-encompassing “solidarity of the human race, ”whereby “all the different races [...] have certain human traits common alike to all,” despite racial variation.²⁶ Here, we can see his careful usage of ethnological argumentation to propose a theory that both refutes the polygenetic racism of contemporary ethnology and coheres with his general philosophical project.

Ferris applies this theory of race and racial character to the color question—the challenge that the Black race’s presence in America poses. He believes that Negro is a misnomer as applied to Black people in an American milieu. It designates solely those of pure “African descent” and “heritage,” carrying with it connotations of “hatred, venom, disdain, contempt and odium. [...] The odour of that word Negro will cling to him like mud upon trailing skirts.”²⁷ The referent of “negro” is the racial stock of the African continent, and Ferris thinks that the Black man does himself a disservice in the Anglo-Saxon milieu by associating himself with that group, causing his being perceived as “a little lower than the rest of humankind.”²⁸ So, the colored race in America is best described, scientifically, as *Negrosaxon*.

The utility of the term is twofold. First, its accuracy; it is “the only ethnological term to describe the mixed colored population in America.”²⁹ This is because the colored race has begun to assimilate into the Anglo-Saxon racial stock, both by admixture of blood and by the conscious absorption of his racial ideals. “When this native African [B]lack was imported and transported to

²²William H. Ferris, “Typical Negro Traits,” 184.

²³Wilson J. Moses, “Eurocentrism, Afrocentrism, and William H. Ferris’s *The African Abroad*,” 86.

²⁴See Louise Newman, “Assimilating Primitives” and Gail Bederman, “Not to Sex—But to Race!” for accounts of Gilman’s racism in the context of her acceptance by contemporary feminists.

²⁵See Christopher Luse, “Slavery’s Champions Stood at Odds.”

²⁶Ferris, “Typical Negro Traits,” 183-4.

²⁷Ferris, *AA*, 302-305.

²⁸Ferris, *AA*, 309.

²⁹Ferris, *AA*, 302.

America, a genuine infusion of aristocratic Anglo-Saxon blood into his veins took place. [...] Then, too, this transported slave absorbed and assimilated the civilization, language and religion of the Anglo-Saxon race,” and so “ethnologically and psychologically he is a different being to whom the word Negro originally applied.”³⁰ Ferris sees the categorisation of the Black race in America as an exogenous imposition placed upon them by the oppressions and violence of white culture. Where other racial groups can be said to possess deep commonality in practices, blood, and history, the colored race under Caucasian milieu has been torn asunder and left adrift by their severance from any history and by admixture. The only unity experienced by Black people is that of dehumanisation, degradation, and violence at the hands of white America. If this were to disappear, the “integrity of the Negrosaxon or colored race in America will be destroyed.”³¹ So, Ferris holds centrally the importance of a unified Black self-conception (“an inner and organic unity”) that might hold the race together and give it the capacity to develop “spiritual integrity” towards heavenly ideals.³²

Second, the reflexive use of the term “defines [Black people’s] racial ideals.”³³ Ferris believes the colored person is best leaving behind any connection to African racial character they have to properly assimilate into America. This assimilation is to be first internal, then external. The Negrosaxon’s destiny is “not to build up peculiar racial ideals, but to become American citizens.”³⁴ In the process of becoming American, the Negrosaxon must first appropriate and internalise Anglo-Saxon racial traits and societal structures. Then, upon thinking of, and calling himself, the Negrosaxon, the whites around him will begin to first call him the same and in turn think of him as sharing in Anglo-Saxon culture. This is his political solution to the challenge posed by the Black race’s presence in America. But the racial ideals of the Negrosaxon are not exhausted by assimilating into American society. Ferris also believes that the Negrosaxon is uniquely capable of bringing about, through ethical and historical progress, the state of the world in alignment with God’s will for it (a theme that will be elaborated upon in §3). Here we see that the inception of the Negrosaxon is both a challenge and an opportunity for Ferris; once he has figured out how to assimilate into the American socio-political project, “he can hope to be made over in the image of God.”³⁵

A second worry: Ferris’ unwavering commitment to assimilationism seems to place Black civilization beneath Anglo-Saxon. If the racial ideal of colored people is to become the “black white man,”³⁶ then that seems to denigrate the character of Black people by indicating that it should be sublated and superseded by the acquiring of racial traits garnered from the (superior) stocks of Anglo-Saxon culture. Surely, it is hard to interpret Ferris’ claim that “we don’t want any Negro philosophy, Negro theology, Negro religion, Negro art” as anything other than a racist putting-down of Black culture?³⁷

But let us take a closer look. His cyclical view of history interprets the Anglo-Saxon race as firmly in the ascendancy, owing to its unique racial character and its inheritance from the great civilizations of ages past. Ferris says:

By its bold, daring, adventurous and aggressive spirit the Anglo-Saxon race has conquered every race that it has come into contact with. It has taken up Christianity and shown its aggressive spirit in carrying forward civilisation into the very heart of Africa and in carrying forward the missionary movement. That race, with its progressive spirit,

³⁰Ferris, *AA*, 306.

³¹Ferris, *AA*, 297.

³²Ferris, *AA*, 296-297.

³³Ferris, *AA*, 303.

³⁴Ferris, *AA*, 303.

³⁵Ferris, *AA*, 304.

³⁶Ferris, *AA*, 304.

³⁷Ferris, *AA*, 305.

is now developing and carrying still higher the twentieth century civilisation.³⁸

The particular racial character of the Anglo-Saxons—their pragmatism, spirit, and aggression—has enabled, for Ferris, their success and domination. But he also recognises the contributions of other groups to Anglo-Saxon civilization:

Each race developed a particular genius along one line and perfected it in an organised national life. [...] What has the Anglo-Saxon race contributed in philosophy, theology, and inward piety? Nothing. [...] The Anglo-Saxon race has assimilated the results of the Hebrew, Greek, and German genius and is aggressively carrying forward to all parts of civilisation the indestructible elements contributed by the Hebrew, Greek, and Roman mind. The Anglo-Saxon race is the advance guard of civilisation.³⁹

It is clear how Ferris' cyclical, teleological philosophy of history informs this view. The Anglo-Saxon race was (but perhaps not is, as we will see later) the racial stock best poised to dominate a particular era, given its racial traits and the civilizations over which it triumphed—and so learnt from. The Anglo-Saxon race did not come to dominate the world by inherent superiority, but by imitating and learning from others.

In Ferris' concept of race, all races can be imitative, original, or both. So, against the accusation that the Black race is uniquely predisposed to imitation, he identifies that his imitative behavior stems from the fact that “the American white man, whom he imitates, who is his god, is an imitative being, too.”⁴⁰ Further, he claims that “the Anglo-Saxon race has contributed no new ideas to civilization.”⁴¹ Imitation is, in fact, one of the enabling factors of Anglo-Saxon success, as it has allowed them to frequently and sensibly assimilate the innovations of other racial stocks into their civilizational ideals. Further still, he insists that “no one thinker, by solitary meditation, ever spun the philosophy and theology prevailing today out of his own unaided intellect.”⁴² The same holds for science. Ferris' concept of knowledge is therefore one constituted by unbroken chains of inspiration and imitation. The world of ideas is only built upon by great thinkers insofar as they are capable of ingesting, internalising, and utilising “the stock of thought and knowledge that was furnished to him by his predecessors.”⁴³ Originality is not a necessary condition in the capacity of a race to contribute to civilization. It is thus no slight against the Negro(saxon) that he largely imitates those around him—it is in fact, proof of their capacity to progress the world, so long as they also have the capacity for reflection.

Ferris contends that reflection is necessary for generating new ideas and contributions. So, the operative concern for the claim that the Black race is capable of generating civilizational progress is whether they are capable of reflection. His answer is yes, citing “the Negro who believes in the Niagara movement, in the Macon conference, in [W. E. B. Du Bois'] ‘The Souls of Black Folk,’ and in the principles enunciated in this book” in proclaiming that he “is a reflective being.”⁴⁴ The resistance of the Black community in the Jacksonville bus boycotts, or in the intellectual activity of scholars like Du Bois and Kelly Miller demonstrate that they are not taking the white man's word

³⁸Ferris, *AA*, 33.

³⁹Ferris, *AA*, 34.

⁴⁰Ferris, *AA*, 283.

⁴¹Ferris, *AA*, 285.

⁴²Ferris, *AA*, 287.

⁴³Ferris, *AA*, 287.

⁴⁴Ferris, *AA*, 294. In his argument for the Negrosaxon's capacity for reflectiveness, he also takes up a position on political debates surrounding the challenge of Black integration, aligning himself once again with Crummell, Du Bois, and those who advocate Black enfranchisement.

as law, but beginning to reflect and select for themselves the ideals and structures of American civilization that are good, desirable, and in line with the purpose of the world.

Having seen how Ferris understands and deploys the concept of the Negrosaxon to establish an equal place for the Black and Anglo-Saxon races in the cycles of historical progression, I turn to see how it poses for him an opportunity for further civilizational progress. I argue that Ferris' theory has an actively anti-racist dimension.

4 The Negrosaxon as an Opportunity for a New Era

In 'Typical Negro Traits,' Ferris claims that the Black racial stock possesses nine traits, four of which are unique: *imagination*, *gift of gab*, *religious emotion*, and *imitativeness*. Because the character of the races is not pre-determined by any evolutionary or ethno- biological structure, but the mostly universal character of human souls, Ferris argues that the Black race should be considered capable of operating in the realm of these universal ideas—of freedom, religion, and ethics. Further still, because the Negrosaxon is specifically attuned towards a capacity for imitation, which — conceived as the capacity to learn from and internalise the wisdom and activity of other great civilizations — is a necessary condition (when paired with proper rational reflectiveness) for the assimilation of the accrued wisdom of humanity, Ferris positions the Black race as particularly receptive to the civilizational boons of knowledge offered up to him by his place in the heart of Anglo-Saxon civilization. Recalling Ferris' invocation for the Black race to acquire the racial traits of American whites to fully embody the Negrosaxon, we see how he conceives of them as uniquely capable of ushering in the new era of God's purpose for the world. Scholar Tommy Curry argues that, by placing these four racial traits among the lineages of other great philosophical races (specifically, the Greeks, and their similar capacity for rhetoric) Ferris has framed "the gifts of the Negro [as] in line with that which creates and ushers in what we know as philosophy."⁴⁵ Recalling the role Ferris described the practice of philosophy as playing in the march of civilizational uplift and human progress, he places the Negrosaxon as the proper recipient of civilizational ideals, insofar as they are capable of treating these ideals philosophically. This equips the Black race in America with the capacity to select proper racial leaders, who might, through their souls' grasp on civilizational wisdom, generate understanding of the present and the answers for uplift.

This takes us to the summary argument in *The African Abroad*. Ferris places the Negrosaxon as the recipient of wisdom from, and so heir apparent to the throne of, civilization. He is not just advocating for an ethnological refutation of the polygenetic theories of Black racial inequality and so including them in the pale of humanity, but also advancing that the Black race might "hasten that day of the new world and new social order, when the Lord's Prayer shall become the world's heritage,"⁴⁶ as they "rise to the Universal and strike the Universal chord in the harp of God's world."⁴⁷ If "the great races only dominate the world for a few centuries,"⁴⁸ Ferris prophesies that the time has come for the Negrosaxon's reign to begin, and perhaps for the Anglo-Saxon's to end.

5 Coda. Understanding Ferris, Understanding Black Philosophy

To revisit the themes of institutional, academic dereliction touched upon in the introduction, it is my claim that works of this here sort, aimed at the careful consideration of the thought of Black

⁴⁵Tommy J. Curry, "The Racial Idealism of William H. Ferris," 39.

⁴⁶Ferris, AA, 309.

⁴⁷Ferris, AA, 35.

⁴⁸Ferris, AA, 9.

people (throughout history), are in pitifully short supply. This does two things. First, it prevents a furthering of our understanding concerning how Black people have thought systematically about anything, not just race. Second, and directly following on from the first, it twists and disfigures the historio-philosophical canon into one solely constituted by white pillars of intellectual contribution. When Black thought figures in — if it is not disregarded for having grappled with the theories in circulation at the time of its inception — it is primarily to adorn these white pillars with the decal of having addressed, inadvertently or otherwise, the problems of race.

We have not yet begun to consider properly how Black people have thought about the issues that affect them, and this flattening severely hampers our understanding of race, in particular, or the world philosophically. If Ferris is right that philosophy is the search for a unifying thought, in the dogged pursuit of the meaning in what people have said and done across the span of human history, then I argue we would do well to turn our attention towards the neglected contributions that make up our intellectual lineages. That many of these discarded figures are Black is no accident. So, it should be no accident that we pursue comprehensive, systematic accounts of Black thought either.

6 Conclusion

We have seen how Ferris' thought has been largely abandoned by our intellectual historiography. I showed that Ferris posits a theo-teleological philosophy of history, beginning with the world's endowment with purposes that align with God's vision; then, how these purposes imbue human history — and its cycles of civilizations — with a slant towards realizing heavenly ethical principles. Then, I explored his thinking on the color question and his coining of the term Negrosaxon to describe — and so begin to solve the problems of — the colored race's presence in America. I then brought into focus his theory of racial traits, refuting the claims of racism that his philosophy might provoke by demonstrating that he not only takes proving the Black race's proper inclusion within humanity to be a central project of his enquiry, but also argues, strikingly, that the Black race is poised to exceed the Anglo- Saxon race in contributing to civilization. Finally, institutional and methodological themes were revisited in light of Ferris' theory, and I claimed we should take a cue from Ferris (and my treatment of him) in how we, as academics, think and write about Black thought.

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