

KRITIKE

An Online Journal of Philosophy

VOL.19, NO. 2

ISSN 1908-7330



K R I T I K E

An Online Journal of Philosophy

Volume 19, Number 2

September 2025

ISSN 1908-7330



KRITIKE is a member of the Asian Journals Network and is supported by
the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts and Letters,
and the Office of the Vice-Rector for Research and Innovation, University of Santo Tomas

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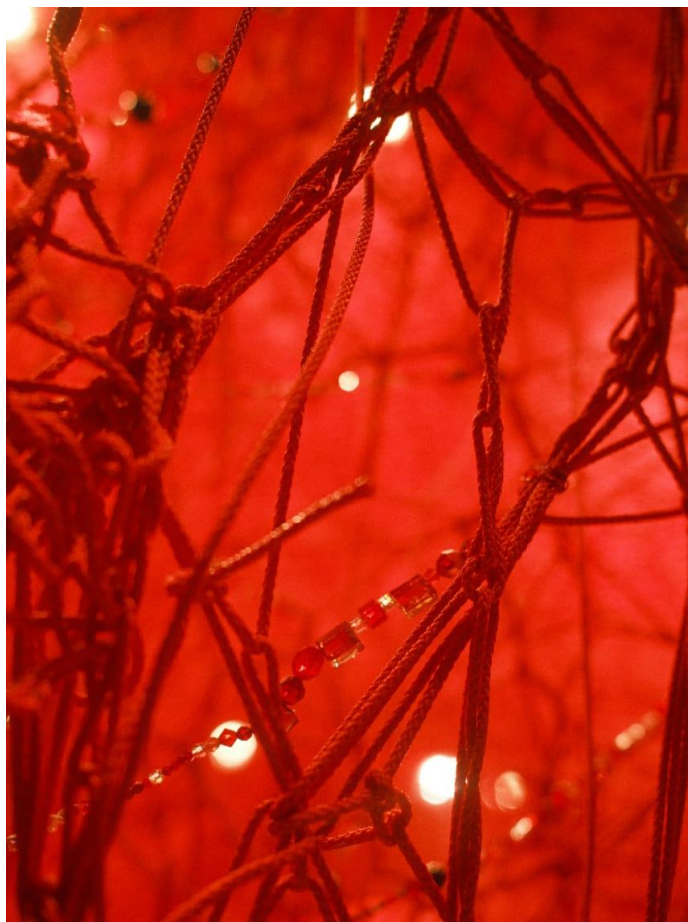
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ABOUT THE COVER



“Strings and Crystals”

The photograph shows a section from Chiharu Shiota’s installation “Crystallizing Identity” on display at Swarovski Kristallwelten in Wattens, Austria. Shiota combines red wool with sparkling crystals to create a complex web that displays both weak and powerful elements. What is created is an intricate yet delicate network, bringing together seemingly contrasting elements latent in both the wool and the crystal. The weakness of the string is made ever real by the crystal’s density; the string’s deep hue gleams through the crystal’s own doing. What results is a network of threads and crystals that functions as a visual representation of the connection among human beings. The interweaving lines are symbolic representations of individual lives, shared memories, and experiences. Through the interplay of the soft and hard, of the bright and the dull, Shiota presents how the individual becomes part of the collective through relationships and the unnoticeable bonds that we build, how we all complement each other, and how we come to life because of these very relationships.

KRITIKE: An Online Journal of Philosophy
19:2 (September 2025)

Photograph by Paula Nicole C. Eugenio, 2025
Layout and caption by Kritike Editorial Board

About the Journal

KRITIKE is the official open access (OA) journal of the Department of Philosophy of the University of Santo Tomas (UST), Manila, Philippines. It is a Filipino peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary, and international journal of philosophy founded by a group of UST alumni. The journal seeks to publish articles and book reviews by local and international authors across the whole range of philosophical topics, but with special emphasis on the following subject strands:

- **Filipino Philosophy**
- **Oriental Thought and East-West Comparative Philosophy**
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The journal primarily caters to works by professional philosophers and graduate students of philosophy, but welcomes contributions from other fields (literature, cultural studies, gender studies, political science, sociology, history, anthropology, economics, inter alia) with strong philosophical content.

The word "kritike" is Greek from the verb "krinein," which means to discern. Hence, kritike means the art of discerning or the art of critical analysis. Any form of philosophizing is, in one way or another, a "critique" of something. Being critical, therefore, is an attitude common to all philosophical traditions. Indeed, the meaning of philosophy is critique and to be philosophical is to be critical.

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KRITIKE is a biannual journal. Regular issues are published in March and September; occasional special issues are published between October and February.

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Philosophical Précis

The Current Decline in Aesthetic Sensibility and the Recovery of Auratic Space (Lessons from Benjamin and Adorno)

Paolo A. Bolaños

Abstract: I intend, in this précis, to revisit the notion of “auratic space” in the works of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. I will specifically draw on insights from Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” where he defines “aura” as the unique specificity of a work of art in time and space, an ambivalent feeling of distance and proximity. In the same work, Benjamin laments the decline of the aura due to the mechanical and mass production of art. Meanwhile, I draw on Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* where he highlights the “indefiniteness” of a work of art, that is, its “nonidentical” character that transcends its immediate “givenness.” I will use this Benjaminian-Adornoian description of “auratic space” to critique the current decline in aesthetic sensibility against the backdrop of the rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI).

Keywords: Adorno, Benjamin, auratic space, artificial intelligence

Art is dead, dude!”¹ These are the words of Jason Allen, the graphic artist who won first place in the 2022 Colorado State Art Fair’s competition with his entry “Théâtre D’opéra Spatial.” To be fair, Allen competed under the “emerging digital artists” category, but something about the winning entry did not sit well with his fellow artists. “Théâtre D’opéra Spatial” is a computer-generated image created using a “generative artificial intelligence program” called Midjourney. Similar to ChatGPT or Gemini AI, Midjourney operates through natural language descriptions or “prompts.” In other words, Midjourney has replaced brush strokes with

¹ “An A.I.-Generated Picture Won an Art Prize. Artists Aren’t Happy,” in *The New York Times* (September 2022), <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/02/technology/ai-artificial-intelligence-artists.html>>.

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linguistic prompts and the painter's canvas with the computer screen. While his fellow artists were bothered and many were insulted, Allen could not be more correct with his acerbic retort: "It's over. A.I. won. Humans lost."² This controversy involving Allen and his AI generated image is, however, just a symptom of an underlying problem that is more complex and ubiquitous. The problem haunts not only the world of art; as educators we are now experiencing the impact of AI.

The tribulations brought about by the emergence of artificial intelligence forces us to question our basic normative assumptions about the world and our perception of it. The artwork—which is the most human, all too human form of expression—has been undermined by generative AI. This forces us to reevaluate the role of the artwork—both as a mode of expression or creation, and a source of meaning in our lives. Such reevaluation is necessary because the undermining of the artwork in the age of AI means the undermining of human creativity, more specifically the replacement of the potentialities of the human body with machine technology. This results in the decline of aesthetic sensibility on our part as creators and receivers of the artwork.

In the following précis, I intend to revisit the notion of "auratic space" in the works of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. I hope that through an exposition of the idea of auratic space I would be able to further describe what the decline in aesthetic sensibility entails. There is something fundamentally human that gets lost when we become overly reliant on AI. The decline in aesthetic sensibility involves losing our ability to "create art" (art as a mode of articulating human experiences) and "receive art" (to be enthralled by art). Creation and reception are, to my mind, the twofold dimension of auratic space—a story of human joy and pain, as well as an opening to a hopeful utopia. It must be said that, for both Benjamin and Adorno, aesthetic sensibility is profoundly related to our perception and engagement with our socio-political environment. When we lose such sensibility, we become disconnected from reality—from our ability to be affected by the material environment or to be enraged by the wrong state of things. The definition of "aura" comes from Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," where aura is described as the unique specificity of a work of art in time and space, an ambivalent feeling of distance and proximity. The mechanical and mass production of the artwork, Benjamin laments, spells the decline of the aura. It is in his last book, *Aesthetic Theory*, where Adorno highlights the "indefiniteness" of a work of art, that is, the artwork's "nonidentical" character that transcends its immediate "givenness." Through a Benjaminian-Adornoian notion of auratic space, I

² *Ibid.*

present a critique of the current decline in our aesthetic sensibility against the backdrop of the rise of artificial intelligence.

In 1935, the German philosopher and cultural critic, Walter Benjamin, published “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” an essay where he presented a political critique of the state of artwork production during that period. The essay became a seminal text for the early members of the Frankfurt School, especially Theodor Adorno, as Benjamin offered a critical analysis of the aesthetic implications of the “mechanical reproduction” of artworks—that is, how the intervention of technology impacts not only the creation of artworks but also how they are appreciated. More specifically, Benjamin chronicled how the technologically oriented artforms of film and photography profoundly changed the way people experience artistic content. Central to Benjamin’s critical position is the notion of the “aura,” about which he says, “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.”³ Moreover, aura is “the unique phenomenon of distance” of an object, “however close it may be.”⁴ In the context of a piece of artwork, its aura is its unique specificity in time and space. One experiences it ambivalently—inasmuch as the artwork is experienced from a distance within close proximity. It is some sort of illusive materiality, a historicity that commands the artwork’s authority.

However, the rise of mechanical reproduction effectively led to the depreciation of auratic space. Benjamin appropriates Karl Marx’s emphasis on the rise of bourgeois culture and industrial capitalism as having paved the way for the emergence of mechanical reproducibility of consumer goods, including “copies” of cultural artifacts. This resulted, Benjamin laments, in the withering of the aura, where “the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition,” and by “making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.”⁵ It must be noted that Benjamin observes two contrasting consequences of mechanical reproduction. On the one hand, since it causes the decline of the aura, mechanical reproduction results in “a tremendous shattering of tradition”; on the other hand, it leads—ironically—to a “renewal of mankind.”⁶ In other words, while the mechanical reproducibility of an artwork marks the decline, perhaps death, of the material authority of an original artwork, the technological reproduction “democratizes” the artwork inasmuch as it becomes more accessible to more people. As such, Benjamin is

³ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), 223.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁶ *Ibid.*

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not in total disagreement with the democratization—or more specifically, secularization—of the artwork, since, by evolving from its traditional religious or “ritualistic” function, it is now able to assume a more practical function. Perhaps, the artwork is now able to function as a critique of society. But here's the rub: Benjamin cautions,

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence.⁷

I wish to add that the historicity of an artwork involves the role of the human who, for G.W.F. Hegel, is the agent of a historical and cultural period in the sensuous expression of a significant experience—more specifically, to the sensuous expression of freedom. Hegel writes:

“... man brings himself before himself by *practical* activity ... to produce himself and therein equally to recognize himself. ... Man does this in order ... to enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself.”⁸

The practice of art reproduction is not entirely new. As a matter of fact, Benjamin notes that, “Manmade artifacts could always be imitated by men.”⁹ Imitation has been the longstanding pedagogical tool of great artists in teaching their students their craft. Take for instance, the reproductions of Rembrandt’s paintings by his students. However, there is something radically different in mechanical reproduction as opposed to human reproductions. With the use of machines in the process of reproduction, the human element in artworks started to diminish. Eventually, the manual imitation of students of a master’s work was replaced by copperplate printing which allowed a much faster process of producing copies which were sold in large quantities. In the middle of the 1800s, photography began to replace mechanical printing. Fast forward to today, the invention of digital photography along with the rise of computer-generated images has made physical media obsolete. With all these changes, the quality of our experience

⁷ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Volume I, trans. by T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 31.

⁹ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 220.

of these objects of art also radically changed. Our experience is more of the consumption of billions of digital images circulated every bit second through the internet. Not only do these images lack the physical attributes of the original objects, they also do not have the command of the auratic element of the original. The current state of art is symptomatic of our contemporary *Zeitgeist*. Today, people are consumers of digital products which are purchased because of their entertainment value, not because of their aesthetic value. Today, there is a decline in aesthetic sensibility because consumers simply consume and they are unwilling to actively engage in the auratic space of objects, which may have religious, social, or political implications. We do not participate in art in order to fulfill our humanity, we download in order to fulfill the demands of the market. Simply put, the decline in aesthetic sensibility is our diminished ability to respond to the auratic experiential quality of works of art.

It was Theodor Adorno who responded and paid critical attention to Benjamin's notion of aura. However, Adorno interpreted Benjamin's description of the age of mechanical reproduction to be too fatalistic and somewhat pessimistic about the aura. Adorno writes: "Benjamin's definition of aura touched on this inner-aesthetic element, though it relegated it to a past stage and declared it invalid for the contemporary age of technical reproducibility."¹⁰ Moreover,

The failure of Benjamin's grandly conceived theory of reproduction remains that its bipolar categories make it impossible to distinguish between a conception of art that is free of ideology to its core and the misuse of aesthetic rationality for mass exploitation and mass domination, a possibility he hardly touches upon.¹¹

While Adorno sees promise in Benjamin's discussion of the aura and agrees with him on most points, he appears to diverge on the notion that the aura is lost in modern times; rather, he suggests it is somewhat hidden. Despite Adorno's disagreement with Benjamin, he did draw from the latter the notion of auratic distance. Adorno agrees with Benjamin that the experience of the aura presupposes space or distance, as when one gazes at an artwork. Moreover, the artwork itself, like a landscape painting, demonstrates the "appearance" or "semblance" of distance. What is called aura, according to Adorno, "is known to artistic experience as the atmosphere of the artwork ... whereby the nexus of the artwork's elements points beyond

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 1997), 310-311.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

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this nexus and allows each individual element to point beyond itself.”¹² Adorno further adds that aesthetic aura “goes beyond its factual givenness, its content”¹³ and “the purportedly immediate experience itself depends on what goes beyond pure immediacy ... in which what is mediated becomes immediate.”¹⁴ There is something more than meets the eye when one gazes at an artwork; something more “indeterminate” that cannot right away be placed a finger on. Hence, beyond the factual givenness of an artwork is its indeterminate character—it points beyond its determinate materiality or objectivity. Adorno uses the example of a “fleeting musical passage” that “depends on the intellectual comprehension of its function in a whole that is not present.”¹⁵ In this context, a musical piece demands from the listener both an “active” and “passive” relation. Active listening entails some level of intellectual or cognitive engagement, while passive listening happens when the listener receives the music or allows herself to be moved by the music. There is in an artwork an enigmatic indeterminacy that requires one’s active and passive attention. Adorno maintains: “Every artwork is a picture puzzle, a puzzle to be solved, but this puzzle is constituted in such a fashion that it remains a vexation.”¹⁶ In other words, there is something in the artwork that is profoundly nonidentical.

The auratic distance that we, as observers, have from traditional manmade art allows space for possible contemplation. That contemplation is neither common nor banal because an artwork has its own singularity and irregularity (or peculiarity). Today, the auratic space of human art is forced to compete with the ubiquity of AI. With AI applications being readily available in desktops and mobile phones, the presumption that AI generated images are works of art banalizes the creative process. Such regularity frustrates the contemplative and critical potential of art. All elements that make works of art great are undermined because of the ability of AI to create something devoid of historical and cultural situatedness. Therefore, the artwork ceases to be a sensuous expression of human freedom, to put it in Hegel’s parlance. Art will be devoid of spirit.

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¹² *Ibid.*, 274.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 338.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

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Ang Loob ng Tao at Laro ng Sarili

Agustin Martin G. Rodriguez

Abstract: This essay is an exploration of the experience of self as play and dynamism. It is a reflection on the empiricist theories of self and responds to these theories based on the Derridean conception of *différance* and leading Filipino philosophers' conception of the self as *loob* and *kapwa* (or as an opening interiority which is immediately and intimately engaged with the other). It will argue that a more dynamic conception of the self at play is truer and more fruitful for the human experience than the fiction of the self, produced by the memory and self-awareness proposed by the empiricists. This essay argues that the human self is a dynamic presencing engaged with the world in its creative acts of self-realization as a response to the giving of the play of *différance* that gives all beings to presence as play.

Keywords: Derrida, *différance*, loob, sarili, pagka-ako

Sa pagmumuni-muning ito, susuriin natin ang kabalintunaan ng pagka-ako ng tao. Dadaanan natin ang mga pagdududa nina Hume at Locke sa pagmemeron ng pagka-ako, haharapin ang kanilang pag-uwi sa pagka-ako bilang epekto ng mekanismo ng kamalayan, gagamitin ang teorya ni Derrida ng *différance* para mapakita ang posibleng tugon sa eskeptisismo ni Hume, at bubuuin ang teorya ng sarili¹ sa pamamagitan ng paggamit ng teorya ng kapwa at loob nina Albert Alejo, Katrin de Guia, at Virgilio Enriquez. Sa ganitong paraan, susubukan nating makabuo ng isang dinamikong pag-unawa sa sarili na tapat sa kasalukuyang karanasan ng pagpapakatao.

Sa kontemporaryong pilosopiya, mahalaga ang tanong ukol sa sarili. Ika nga ni Charles Taylor, may nangyari sa pag-unawa sa pagiging subjek sa modernidad ng Kanluran. Sa panahong ito, naging mas malay ang mga tao sa sarili bilang indibidwal na may sariling halaga na dapat paunlarin at pangalagaan. Ito ang panahon kung kailan namalayan ng mga tao na sila'y indibidwal na subjek na may karapatang dapat galangin ng iba at may

¹ Sa sanaysay na ito, gagamitin ang salitang "pagka-ako" at "sarili" para tukuyin ang nararanasan natin ukol sa sarili na nananatili at isinasatupad sa panahon.

sariling dapat niyang kilalanin at isagawa nang malay at malaya.² Malinaw sa ating karanasan bilang tao, lalo na tayong mga nahubog na Kanluraning pag-unawa sa sarili, na may sarili nga tayong nililinang at isinasabuhay. Makikita ito sa ating mga pagsisikap na makahanap ng makahulugang trabaho na nakakabuo ng sarili, makatagpo ng tunay na kasintahan na pahahalagahan ang ating pagkabukod tangi, at paghahanap ng mga gawain na magpapaunlad at magsasabuhay sa ating bukod-tanging pagkatao. Malinaw sa mga karanasang ito na may kinikilala tayong sariling talagang umiiral at kailangang isabuhay ayon sa sariling pagka-ako. Kung hindi man totoo na merong sarili, pinapalagay pa rin natin na meron tayong sariling isinasabuhay.

Subalit, bagaman tilang malinaw sa lahat na merong ako,³ maitatanong pa rin natin kung “Merong ba talagang ako?” Hindi nito tinutukoy kung meron bang umiiral na nagtatanong kung meron ako. Malinaw na merong nagtatanong nang ganito: na merong isang dumaranas sa mundo at may pagmamalay sa sariling pag-iral. Hindi kaduda-duda na may umiiral na ganito. Ang pinagtatakahan, kung hindi man pinagdududahan, ng tanong ay kung merong ako: isang umiiral na may pagmamalay sa sarili bilang may makabuluhang kasarinlang at malayang pagpapatupad o pagsasabuhay ng sarili. Hindi nga ba sa karanasan ng karaniwang tao, meron tayong karanasan ng may katuturang pagka-ako kaya natin sinisikap na isabuhay ang pinakamabuting posibilidad ng sarili?

Sa kasalukuyang panahon, sa eksistensiya na krisis na dinala ng pandemya ng COVID-19, maraming nag-lakas ng loob na pagdudahan ang halaga ng kanilang mga hanapbuhay at iwan ito. Ito yung “Great Resignation”⁴ na tinutukoy ng ilang manunulat bilang isang mahalagang epekto ng “lockdown.” Dahil naranasan ng mga tao ang posibilidad ng kamatayan, at naranasan din ang posibilidad ng uring pamumuhay na hindi kulong sa pagka-abala at alipin sa gawaing hindi nagdadala ng pagbubuo ng pagkatao o kaginhawahan, naisip nilang maghanap ng hanapbuhay na nakakabuo ng sarili o mas tapat sa sarili, i.e., pagka-ako. Sa krisis na ito, tila naging malinaw na mayroon ngang sariling dapat pangalagaan. Karanasan ito ng karaniwang tao. Subalit, may mga pilosopong pinagdudahan ang realidad nitong “ako” na pinagsisikapan nating tupdin.

² Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

³ Tinutukoy din ng paggamit ng salitang “ako” ang sarili. Ginagamit ang pagka-ako sa sarili kapag nais bigyang diin ang sarili bilang isinasatupad ayon sa pagmemeron nito.

⁴ Abhinav Chugh, “What Is ‘The Great Resignation’? An Expert Explains,” in *World Economic Forum* (29 November 2021), <<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2021/11/what-is-the-great-resignation-and-what-can-we-learn-from-it>>.

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Para sa ilang mahalagang pilosopo ng Modernidad, kaduda-duda na mayroon ngang ako dahil wala naman talagang matutukoy na ako bilang bagay man o esensiya. Para sa kanila, mas totoong sabihin na epekto lamang itong nararanasan bilang ako ng pagkakaroon ng kamayalang tumatanggap at nagpoproseso ng datos ng pandama. Posibleng kailangan ng ilusyon ng sarili para mas mabuti nitong maiproseso ang datos na natatanggap ng kamalayan. Mahalagang suriin ang kanilang mga teorya dito.

Ang Sariling Pinagdududahan ng Empirismo

Si David Hume ang isa sa pinakamalinaw na nagpahayag ng pagdududa sa realidad ng ako. Para sa kanya, mahirap tanggapin na mayroon ngang ako dahil, bilang empiriko, walang malinaw na batayan ang karanasan na pagkakaroon ng ako. Wala talagang isang malinaw na makabuluhang bagay na pinagmumulan ng datos na pinagbabatayan ng paniniwala na mayroong ako. Sa kanyang akdang *Treatise on Human Nature*, sinuri niya ang pinagmumulan ng ating paniniwala na mayroong ako:

May mga pilosopong nag-iisip na sa bawat sandali ay malalim nating nararamdaman ang tinutukoy nating SARILI; na nararanasan natin ang pag-iral nito at ang patuloy na pag-iral nito; at na katiyak-tiyak tayo, higit pa sa anumang ebidensiya ng patunay, sa ganap na pagkakakilanlan at pagiging simple nito. Ang pinakamatinding pandama, o ang pinakamalakas na damdamin, ayon sa kanila, sa halip na makagambala sa pananaw na ito, ay lalong nagpapalalim nito, at nagpapapansin sa atin ng impluwensiya nito sa sarili sa pamamagitan ng kasiyahan o sakit. Ang pagsisikap na magbigay ng karagdagang patunay nito ay magpapahina sa ebidensiya nito; dahil walang patunay na maaaring makuha mula sa anumang katotohanan na lubos nating nararamdaman; at wala ring bagay na maaari nating tiyakin kung pagdududahan natin ito.⁵

Malinaw na para kay Hume ang mga pilosopong naniniwala na may sarili ay nagmumula sa katiyakang sanhi ng mga karanasan ng matinding damdamin at ng pandama. Ito ang nagpapatiyak na may akong tumtatanggap sa pagpepresensiya ng mga bagay kaya ako may damdamin

⁵ David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature* (London: Penguin Book, 1985), 299. Ang salin ay akin.

at pandama. Subalit, malinaw na hindi ito sapat na patunay na merong ako para kay Hume.

Ikokontra niya ang paniniwala ng mga nagpapalagay na may sarili sa ganitong paraan:

... ang sarili o persona ay hindi iisang impresyon, subalit ito ang pinapalagay na tinutukoy ng mga iba't ibang impresyon. Kung may impresyon na nagbibigay sa ideya ng sarili, dapat nanatili itong impresyong ito, sa buong daloy ng ating buhay; dahil ganoon dapat nananatili ang sarili. Subalit walang iisang impresyon na hindi nagbabago at nananatili. Ang sakit at ginhawa, kalungkutan at ligaya, damdamin at pandama ay sumusunod sa isa't isa, at hindi sabay-sabay na nadarama. Kaya hindi maaaring nagmumula sa alin man sa mga impresyong ito, o mula sa ano pa man, ang pinagmumulan ng ideya ng sarili, at kung ganoon wala talagang ganoong ideya.⁶

Malinaw na tinatanggihan ni Hume ang realidad ng sarili dahil ang ideya nito at ang mga impresyong maaaring pinagbabatayan nito ay walang payak na pinagmumulan. Para kay Hume, masasabi lang na may sarili kung may payak, hindi nagbabago, at malinaw na pinagmumulan ang mga impresyon na pinagbabatayan natin ng kaalaman tungkol dito. Subalit kung tutuusin, kung susundin ang epistemolohiya ni Hume, wala namang tiyak sa kaalaman ukol sa ako. Nababatay lang ang kaalaman natin sa kinasanayang paraan ng pagbubuo sa mga empirikal na datos na dala ng kaisipan.⁷ Ganoon pa man, mahalaga ang kanyang ginagawa sa pagdududang ito. Ipinapakita niya na wala talagang matatag na batayan ang impresyon na merong ako. Kaya maitatanong kung bakit tiyak ang tao sa kanyang pagkakaroon ng sariling isinasabuhay. Makakatulong sa tanong na ito si John Locke.

Bagaman hindi kasing radikal ng kay Hume ang kanyang pagdududa, may pagtatagpo ang kanilang pag-unawa sa pagka-ako ng tao. Ganito niya pinapaliwanag ang sarili:

... an existing thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that

⁶ *Ibid.*, 300. Ang salin ay akin.

⁷ Tingnan ang Section III hanggang V ng David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it ...

... isang umiiral na nag-iisip at nakakaalam, isang may katwiran at kakayahang magmuni-muni, at may kakayahang iturin ang sarili bilang sarili, ito pa ring sariling nag-iisip, sa iba't ibang lugar at panahon; na nagagawa lamang sa pamamagitan ng kamalayang hindi mahihiwalay sa pag-iisip, at, para sa akin, esensiyal dito⁸

Para kay Locke, ang kamalayan ang sarili. Nakatali ang pagmamalay sa ako sa kakayahang makaranas at magpoproseso ng kaalaman. Ang kamalayang nananatili sa panahon at kalawakan ang bukal ng kaakohan ng tao at ng pagmamalay sa sarili bilang talagang naririto. Pinagpapatuloy niya ito:

Dahil laging sinasabayan ng pagmamalay ang pag-iisip, at ito ang batayan ng pag-unawa ng lahat sa tinatawag na sarili, at sa ganoong paraan itinatangi ang sarili mula sa ibang mga nag-iisip, ito lamang ang batayan ng kasarinlan ng persona, i.e. sa pananatiling kanyang sarili ng isang makatwirang nilalang: at, hanggang mapapaabot ang kamalayan sa nakaraang kaisipan o gawain, ganoon din ang abot ng kanyang pagka-ako; ito pa rin ang sariling noon at ngayon; at pareho ang sariling kumilos noon sa sariling nagmumuni-muni ngayon tungkol sa nakaraang gawain.⁹

Nanatili ang ako sa panahon. Naiisip ng tao na may sariling nananatili bilang kanyang sarili dahil mayroon tayong pagmamalay sa nakaraang karanasan. Itong nakaraang karanasan ay nauunawaan natin bilang dinanas ng parehong sariling nararanasan ngayon. Malay tayo sa sarili bilang tagatagpo at tagatanggap ng karanasan sa mundo. Malay din tayo sa sariling tagatanggap ng karanasan mula noon at nananatiling siya pa rin anumang pagbabagong nagaganap sa mundo.

Para kay Locke, bunga ang paniniwala na may sarili ng pagmamalay na may isang tumatanggap sa pagprepresensiya ng mundo. Hindi lang ito isang tagatanggap kundi nakakaalala sa natanggap at bumubuo ng kaalaman

⁸ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1998). Chapter XXII. Ang salin ay sa akin.

⁹ *Ibid.*

mula sa naaalala nito. Merong ideya ng ako dahil may nakakaalala sa kanyang inisip at ginawa. Dito natin masasagot si Hume tungkol sa sarili. Bakit may paniniwala ang tao na may sarili? Dahil may karanasan tayo sa isang tumatanggap sa pahayag ng mundo at nagpoproseso ng kaalaman at karanasan gamit ang kaisipan, at malay itong nagpoproseso sa pananatili nito sa panahon mula sa nakaraang karanasan tungo sa posibleng hinaharap.

Tinatanggihan ni Hume ang anumang pananaw ng sarili bilang isang umiiral na bagay. Para sa kanya, kathang-isip ang sarili na walang malinaw na batayan kundi sa karanasan na may isang dumaranas. Sa kanyang pananaw, bunga ang karanasan na merong sarili “mula sa tuloy-tuloy at walang sagabal na daloy ng mga kaisipan sa tren ng magkakaugnay na ideya.”¹⁰ Kaya masasabing epekto ang sarili ng proseso ng pagmamalay at hindi substansiyang umiiral. Kung tatanggapin ang teorya ni Locke, epekto ang sarili ng pakikitagpo ng kamalayan sa mundo at sa pag-alaala nito sa kanyang pakikitagpo sa panahon. Ang katiyakan na may sariling nananatili ay nagmumula sa alaala na nagpaparanas sa tao na may nagbubuklod sa mga nadarama, nararanasan, at naiisip; at nanatili itong ito sa pagdaloy ng panahon. Para din kay Hume, ang “alaala lamang ang nagbibigay malay sa atin na may ugnayan at kabuoan ang daloy ng mga nadarama.”¹¹ Naniniwala siya na kung wala tayong alaala “wala tayong ideya sa prinsipyo ng pagsasanhi, ni walang pagmamalay sa kadena ng mga sanhi at bunga, na bumubuo sa ating pagkatao.”¹² Pinahihintulutan tayo ng alaala na isipin na ang ating mga karanasan ay bahagi ng isang buong daloy at dahil din dito nagiging posibleng maniwala ang tao na talagang merong akong nananatili; dahil ang daloy ng mga karanasan ay nagmula sa nakaraan at patungo sa hinaharap. Tilang merong makabuluhang ako na nananatili para tanggapin ang mga karanasang nararanasan, nararanasan, at mararanasan pa. Naiisip nating nananatili itong dumaranas dahil naaalala pa ang mga dinaanan nito. Sa ganitong pananaw, malapit si Hume kay Locke.

Wala talagang sarili, mayroon lang itong pangangailangang maniwala na meron itong “kung anuman, o bagay o substansiyang *orihinal*, bilang prinsipyo ng pagbubuo” na pinapangalanan nating sarili nang sa ganoon magkaroon ng sentro ng kaayusan at kabuoan ang ating mga karanasan.¹³ Hinahabi ng alaala ang iba’t ibang kaisipan, mga kaisipang walang likas na pagkakaisa o pagkakatulad, dahil kailangan ng tao ng ganitong kaayusan at pagkabuo. At para maging totoo para sa tao itong pagkakabuong ito, kailangan nating maniwala na merong sarili na tumatanggap at nagpoproseso ng lahat nang ito. Kailangan nating isipin na

¹⁰ Hume, *Treatise*, 308.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 270-271.

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kahit iba-iba at kalat-kalat ang mga pangyayari sa mundo, may iisang ako na tumatanggap nito at nagbibigay ng makahulugang kaayusan sa lahat ng tinatanggap. Para kay Locke, kamalayan ang nagbibigay ng kahulugan bilang isang talagang umiiral na sentro ng pagporposeso. Kung babasahin siya, posibleng maunawaan na itong umiiral na sentro ng pagbibigay kahulugan ang sarili. Subalit para kay Hume, walang talaga itong sarili. Iniisip lang natin na meron ito dahil nararanasan natin ang isang kilos ng kaisipan—ito ngang sentro na tagatanggap at tagaproseso ng kaalaman. Binubuo lang ng kaisipan itong ideya ng sarili dahil ito ang pinagmumulan ng posibilidad na makita ang lahat ng karanasan bilang maiipon sa isang makahulugang kabuoan.

Kung maniniwala tayo kay Hume, hindi talaga isang bukod tanging ako itong sarili na umiiral na may katotohanang dapat ipatupad. Isa lang itong gunita na binuo ng kaisipan bilang isang bagay na may katuturan dahil ito ang namamalayan natin mula sa karanasan na may isang nananatili sa panahon na dumaranas sa mundo at naghahanap ng kaayusan dito. At dahil nararanasan natin na mayroon talagang isang nananatili sa panahon na tilang may identidad o nananatili bilang isang siya na hindi pabago-bago, naiisip natin na meron talagang ako na baka nga may kahulugan at katuturan:

Dahil nagmumula lamang sa alaala ang ating pagmamalay sa pananatili at abot nitong pagsusunod-sunod ng karanasan, maaari natin itong ituring...bilang bukal ng personal na identidad. Kung wala tayong alaala, wala tayong kamalayan sa pagsasanhi, ni sa kadena ng mga sanhi at epekto, na batayan ng ating sarili o persona. Subalit dahil nabuo na itong kaisipan ng pagsasanhi mula sa alaala, maaari nating gamitin itong kadena ng pagsasanhi, at kaugnay nito ang identidad ng ating persona sa ibayo ng ating alaala, at maaaring unawain ang panahon, at pagkakataon, at kilos, na maaaring ganap nang nakalimutan, subalit sa kabuoang pinapalagay na umiiral.¹⁴

Walang duda na para kay Hume nagsisimula ang pagmamalay sa sarili sa alaala at ito ang buong batayan nito. Anuman ang kanilang pagkakaiba, pinatitibay ng teorya ni Locke ang pag-unawa ni Hume sa sarili. Pareho nilang pinapakita na ang paniniwalang may sarili ay epekto ng mga proseso ng kamalayan.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 308. Ang salin ay sa akin.

Bakit natin pinag-uusapan ang teorya ni Hume kahit parang hindi ito malapit sa ating karanasan? Ito'y dahil makakatulong ang kanyang teorya sa isang mas mamalim at marahil mas tapat na pag-unawa sa sarili. Mahalaga ang kanyang teorya na ang ako ay epekto ng mga proseso ng kamalayan at hindi bagay. Ito ang kanyang mahalagang kontribusyon mula sa empirical na eskeptisismo. Hindi isang bagay ang ating pagka-ako, at sa kanyang pagsusuri, pinapakita niya na sa halip na isang matatag at umiiral na bagay, posibleng epekto ito ng kilos ng mga proseso ng kamalayan. Kaya, masasabi nating bunga ang sarili ng laro ng kilos ng kamalayan.

Ang Karaniwang Karanasan ng Tao sa Sarili

Para linawin kung mahalaga nga ang teorya ni Hume sa paglilinaw ng pagka-ako ng tao, pag-usapan natin ang karaniwang karanasan ng sarili. Paano ba nararanasan ang sarili ng tao? Nararanasan ng tao ang sarili bilang isang nagtataglay ng halaga at katuturan. Hindi man sa nibel ng indibidwalismo ng modernidad, may pagpapahalaga ang karaniwang tao sa kanyang pagka-ako. Ang patunay ng paglibing ng mga tao ang unang palatandaan ng sibilisasyon. Ito'y dahil palatandaan ang paglibing na malay ang komunidad na may halaga ang sarili higit sa kanyang payak na pag-iral. Nakikita nila ang halaga ng paggalang sa pumanaw dahil makahulugan ang kanyang pag-iral bilang isang bukod tanging ako. Ibig nitong sabihin mayroong angkop na paggalang sa pagka-ako ng tao.

Makikita rin ito sa karanasan ng tradisyonal na Pilipino sa pagpapahalaga sa dangal. Ang dangal ay ang aspekto ng tao na nagpapahayag na ginagagalang at pinapahalagahan nang ayon sa nararapat ang sarili. Hindi isang bagay ang dangal subalit aspekto ng sarili na nagpaparamdam kung hindi tinuturing ayon sa nararapat ang sarili. Kaya naman may mga taong handang mamatay o pumatay para ipagtanggol ang kanyang dangal. At maraming mga ritwal ng pakikipagkapwa para pangalagaan ang dangal ng tao.

Ano ang pinapahayag ng dangal tungkol sa sarili? Una, malinaw na pinapahayag nito na merong akong umiiral na maaaring ituring nang ayon sa nararapat o hindi. Ikalawa, ipinapahayag nito na maaaring mabuo o malabag ang nagmemerong ako. Samakatwid may karanasan tayo sa sarili bilang isang umiiral na kung-ano-man na may katiyakan at katatagan. May katiyakan ang ako dahil may nararapat at hindi nararapat na pagsasabuhay at pagturing sa sarili. Kung ganito nga, may katiyakan tayo ukol sa pag-iral ang ako. Subalit ano ang batayan ng katiyakang ito? May tradisyon na tinatanaw ito bilang tinakdang pagka-ako.

Maaaring isipin ang sarili bilang takdang pagka-ako. Tinutukoy nito ang karanasan ng sarili bilang isang umiiral nang may tiyak na pag-iral dala

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ng nakatak dang esensiya. May takdang esensiya ang tao mula sa kung anumang bukal na kailangan niyang matuklasan at isabuhay. Kung tutuusin, maaaring sabihin na nararanasan na may dangal ang tao dahil may sarili siyang nakatakda bilang esensiya ng kanyang pagkatao. Maaaring isipin ang itinakdang pagka-ako bilang isang esensiya na nagbibigay depinisyon sa ating pagmemeron bilang tao. Kung ano ang mabuti, angkop, at nararapat para sa tao'y nakatakda na, binibigyang depinisyon ng kanyang esensiya na kinikilala natin bilang kanyang pagka-ako. May itinakdang ako na may itinakdang halaga. Batay sa itinakdang esensiya ng ako, may nararapat na pagsasabuhay nito at may nararapat na pakikipagsapalaran dito. Kaya naman may mga karanasan tayo ng hindi pagbubuo. Halimbawa, kapag pumasok sa hanapbuhay na lumalabag sa pagka-ako, masasabi ng tao na hindi ako nabubuo ng gawaing ito. O kung makagawa ang tao ng isang gawaing angkop sa kanyang esensiya, masasabi niyang nabubuo ako nito. Bakit may nakakabuo at may nakakasira? Dahil may takdang ako na isinasabuhay ayon sa nararapat. Kung hindi nagagawa ang nararapat ayon sa pagka-takda, hindi nabubuo ang sarili. Kaya kung kumilos ang kapwa sa paraang hindi ginagalang ang nararapat ayon sa itinakda nasasaktan ang dangal. Ganoon din, kapag kumilos ang tao sa paraang nilalabag ang nararapat ayon sa itinakda, maaaring sabihin na sinaktan niya ang sariling dangal.

Maitatanong natin kung nararanasan ba ng tao ang sarili bilang takdang pagka-ako? Tapat nga ba sa karanasan ng tao ang itinakda ng kanyang esensiya? Kung itinakda nga ang pagka-ako, ang nararapat lamang sa tao ay matuklasan ang kanyang mahiwagang esensiya at tupdin ito. Kumbaga, ang katuparan ng buhay ay pagsisikap na matuklasan ang esensiya ng sarili at patuloy na pagsunod dito. Subalit, ito ang pinupuna ni Hume—meron ba talagang matutukoy na buod ng paka-ako na nagtatakda ng aking pagiging ako? Hindi naaangkop ang ating karanasan sa sarili sa ideya ng itinakdang ako.

May dinamismong dala ang pagka-ako na hindi bunga ng esensiya. Patuloy ang pagtuklas ng tao sa kanyang mga posibilidad dala ng kanyang konkreton pag-iral sa buong panahon ng kanyang buhay. Patuloy na binibigyang depinisyon ang sarili ayon sa mga posibilidad na dala ng kanyang kalagayan. Subalit, hindi masasabing pabago-bago ito at walang batayan. May katatagan ang pagka-ako ng ako, subalit hindi ito batay sa takdang depinisyon. Batay sa ating karanasan ng pagtubo at pagpapayaman ng sariling pag-iral, nalalagay sa alanganin ang ideya na may itinakdang pagka-ako ang tao. Hindi talaga natin mapapatunayan kung oo o hindi dahil walang sukat ng patunay ang esensiya. Sa halip, maaari lamang maipakita kung mas mabunga ang alternatibo sa itinakdang pagka-ako.

Ang Laro Ayon kay Derrida

Mahalagang panimula ang mga teorya ni Hume at Locke dahil nilalagay nito sa alanganin ang ideya ng ako bilang isang itinakdang batayan ng pagpapatupad ng pagkatao ng tao. Subalit, hindi nito ganap na napapaliwanag ang ating karanasan ng sarili maliban sa kung paano nagmumula ang katiyakan ng sarili sa ating karanasan ng ako bilang isang taga-proseso ng karanasan na nananatili sa panahon. Hindi nahuhuli ng eskeptisismo ng empirisismo ang karanasan ng tao sa kanyang pagka-ako maliban sa pagiging isang taga-proseso ng karanasan at bunga ng mga proseso ng pag-danas at pag-unawa. Subalit sinubukang ipakita sa nakaraang bahagi na higit ang sarili sa di-inaasahang epekto ng mga proseso ng kamalayan. Iba ang pagka-ako sa pagiging isang makinang taga-proseso. Mas malapit sa karanasan ng karaniwang tao ang sarili bilang isang ako na malayang isinasabuhay nang ayon sa kanyang pagka-ako. Subalit maaari nating makita kay Hume na dinamiko ang sarili dahil sangkot ang pag-iral nito sa dinamismo ng mga proseso ng pag-iral ng kamalayan sa mundo. Malaking bahagi ng karanasan ng tao ang dinamismong ito.

Tulad ng ipinapakita ni Locke, sa anumang bahagi ng buhay ng tao, malinaw na siya pa rin siya. Subalit ano nga ba itong nanatiling ako? Isa ba itong estatikong esensiya na nagtatakda sa pagmemeron ng tao mula sa simula ng pagmemeron? Mas totoong sabihin na mula sa pagkabata hanggang sa pagtanda, nananatili sa tao ang karanasan na ako pa rin ako subalit, sabay nito, hindi lang ako yung dating ako at may dala akong pangako ng meron pa. Ako pa rin ang batang kumakapit sa aking nanay kapag may kulog subalit hindi na rin ako ang batang iyon dahil tatay na ako at naranasan nang kapitan ng aking mga anak kapag kumulog nang malakas. Ako pa rin ang batang guro na nangangapa sa pagpapaliwanag sa *eidōs* ni Husserl sa mga estudyante pero hindi lang ako ang gurong iyon dahil propesor na ako at mas malalim na ang pag-unawa sa *eidōs* at mas malinaw na magpaliwanag sa mga estudyante. Ito ang karanasan ng sarili: sabay na nananatili akong ako, subalit hindi lang iyong ako ng nakaraan at laging meron pa. Batay sa karanasang ito, madali sanang isipin ang sarili bilang isang entidad na walang katatagan sa kanyang pagka-sarili. Subalit hindi lang isang umiiral na walang malinaw na kasarinlan at matatag na identidad ang sarili dahil anumang pagbabago na nangyayari sa buhay ng karaniwang tao, nararanasan niya ang sarili bilang nananatiling ako na isinasabuhay ayon sa nararapat. Para mapaliwanag ito, hiramín natin ang teorya ng Derrida sa laro ng *différance*.

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Para kay Derrida, may larong nagbibigay sa pagpepresensiya ng mga nagpepresensiya. Ito ang laro ng *différance*.¹⁵ Ito ang hindi nagmemeron o nagpepresensiyang laro na ginagawang posible ang pagpepresensiya ng mga nagmemeron bilang laro. Makikita natin ito sa pagtalakay niya ng kilos ng *différance* bilang laro ng wika. Ang mga salita ay may matatag na kahulugan batay sa laro ng talaban ng mga iba't ibang salita. Kumbaga, kung nais ninomang maunawaan ang kahulugan ng anumang salita, kailangan itong ipaliwanag sa kanya gamit ang ibang mga salita sa wika. Ito'y dahil binibigay ang kahulugan ng salita ng laro ng talaban ng mga iba't ibang salita na may kaugnayan dito. Bunga ang katatagan ng kahulugan ng anumang salita ang talaban ng mga salitang kasangkot sa laro ng pagbibigay kahulugan sa wika. Laro ito ng *différance* dahil tinutukoy ng *différance* ang pagtatalaban ng iba't ibang mga salita na may sarili nilang kahulugan at lugar sa isang wika. Sa laro ng pagkakaibang ito, nakasangkot ang bawat isa sa matatag na lambat ng kaugnayan. Isa itong talaban ng mga bagay na magkakaiba subalit nasa relasyon ng pagtatalaban ang laro ng *différance*. Ang buong larangan ng wika ay laro ng talaban ng mga salitang nagkakaiba. Ito ang laro ng *différance*. Dahil sa larong ito, lumilitaw ang mga salita na may katatagan sa sariling kahulugan. Dahil sa dinamismo ng laro ng *différance*, nagiging posible ang pagpepresensiya ng salita sa tiyak nitong kahulugan at wika sa tiyak nitong pagbibigay kahulugan.¹⁶ Sa ganito ring paraan, nagpepresensiya ang lahat ng umiiral. Madiing sinasabi ni Derrida na "walang eksistensiya o esensiya" ang *différance* na batayan ng pagpepresensiya ng mga bagay.¹⁷ Ito ang mismong batayan ng posibilidad ng pagpepresensiya ng anumang nagpepresensiya.¹⁸ Tulad ng sa salita, laro ng *différance* ang buong katalagahan na, sa pagtatalaban ng mga samu't saring nagmemeron, binibigay ang bawat nagpepresensiya bilang nagpepresensiya.

Binibigay ng laro ng pagtatalaban ang buong katalagahan. Bahagi ang lahat ng nagmemeron sa tensiyon ng dinamismo ng pagtulak at paghatak, pagbigay at pagtanggap. Isipin ang kahit anong nagpepresensiya bilang bagay, halimbawa, ang bituin. Laro ng talaban ng mga atom ng hydrogen ang anumang bituin tulad ng ating sariling araw. Bunga ang pagsinag nito sa kalawakan ng masalimuot na laro ng pagtatalaban ng mga atom na ito. Subalit hindi lang ito. Hinuhubog ang pagpepresensiya ng araw ng ibang mga bituin, planeta, at ng dimabilang na mga bagay sa kalawakan na nakikipagtalaban sa araw.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Maiisip natin ang anumang nagprepersensiya sa katalagahan bilang binibigay ng laro ng *différance*. Nagpepersensiya ayon sa larong nagbibigay ang anumang mineral, halaman, o hayop. Ganyan ang aso mo dahil binibigay ito ng laro ng pagtatalaban ng katawan nito, ng kanyang kasaysayan, ng kasaysayan ng kanyang species, ang kanyang kapaligiran, ang kanyang kapanahunan, at ang kanyang kaugnayan sa pamilyang nag-aalaga sa kanya. Ganoon din si Crisostomo Ibarra, bilang nagpepersensiya na likhang sining: bunga ng laro ng buhay at karanasan ni Rizal, ng impluwensiya ng kanyang kapanahunan at kilos ng pagbabago ng kamalayan nito, at ng kasaysayan ng mga nobelang kanluranin, ng *Pasyon*, at karanasan ng mga Tagalog, lalo na ng mga *ilustrado*. Nasa laro ang buong katalagahan. Ito'y larong nagbibigay sa pagpepersensiya ng lahat ng nagpepersensiya. *Différance* ang tawag ni Derrida sa larong ito.

Kahit ang sarili ay nagpepersensiya ayon sa pagkabinigay nito ng laro ng *différance*. Mapagdududahan man na merong takdang pagka-ako, hindi mapagkakailang merong ako na nagpepersensiya. Nagpepersensiya ang ako hindi lang bilang isang tagapagtanggap ng karanasan at nagpoproseso nito, kundi bilang nagtataglay ng dangal, na may tiyak na pagiral na maaaring mabuo o di-mabuo, na umiiral nang tapat o hindi tapat sa kanyang pagka-ako. Meron talagang ako na umiiral at kailangang isabuhay ayon sa nararapat. Subalit kung walang akong itinakda, saan nagmumula ang katiyakan at katatagan ng nagpepersensiyang ako? Sa usapang ito nagiging mahalaga ang teorya ng *différance*.

Para kay Derrida, hindi natin masasabing umiiral ang mga nagpepersensiya (maging bagay, hayop, o likhang sining) nang parang may matatag at nakatakandang *nuclei*.¹⁹ Sa halip, nagmumula sa pagbibigay ng laro ng *différance* ang katatagan ng anumang nagpepersensiya. Laro din ang nagbibigay ng sarili. Binibigay ang aking pagka-ako ng laro ng aking kasaysayan (personal, pang-angkan, pambansa, pandaigdig, at ng sangkatauhan), ng aking pangangatawan (dala ang kalusugan at mga kondisyong bunga ng kalagayan nito), ng kalagayang sikolohikal (na hindi lang dala ng pisikal na kalagayan ng katawan), klima, heograpiya, at ibang mga aspekto ng laro na nagbibigay sa akin ng sariling katangian. Sangkap ang lahat ng elementong binanggit sa laro ng pagtatalaban na binibigay ako sa pagprepersensiya.

Ang *différance* ang larong nagbibigay sa aking pagka-ako. Dahil binibigay ako ng laro, maituturing laro ang aking pagka-ako. Batay sa timpla ng mga elemento ng laro na nagbibigay sa sarili, nagkakahugis ang aking pagka-ako. Ayon sa timplang ito, umiiral ako na taglay ang mga katangian na nagbabalangkas ng aking pagka-ako. Ito ang nagtatakda kung ano ang

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

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mabuti at nararapat, angkop at hindi angkop, sa aking pagkatao. Talinhaga itong timpla at balangkas na nagpapahayag na merong katatagan ang pepresensiya ng ako batay sa aking pagkabinigay ng laro. Meron talagang paraan ng pag-iral na tapat sa aking pagkabinigay ng laro. Hindi ito tulad ng sariling ipinapalagay nila Hume at Locke; isang makinang bumubuo ng makahulugan karanassan mula sa datos ng pandama. Ang akong binibigay ng laro ay isang dinamikong pag-iral na mulat na sinusubukang mabuhay ayon sa nararapat ayon sa pagkabinigay ng laro ng *différance*. Hindi lang ito isang palagay ng kamalayan upang epektibong maproseso ang datos na natatanggap nito. Meron talagang umiiral na ako na bunga ng laro. Pagpepresensiyang binibigay ng laro ang pagmemeron nito: hindi ng substansiya o ng palagay ng katwiran. Kaya kailangang kilatisin ang akong binibigay ng laro nang sa ganoon mapanatiling buo ang pagpepresensiya ng ako.

Ito ang karanasan ng tao: may mahiwaga siyang pagka-ako na hindi mabigyang depinasyon subalit tiyak na nagpepresensiya at may taglay na balangkas ng nararapat—balangkas na kapag natutupad ay nagdudulot ng pagbubuo, at kapag nilabag, nayayanig ang pagka-ako. Mahiwaga ang pagka-ako dahil ito’y nagpepresensiya bilang laro na binibigay ng dinamikong laro ng *différance*. Matatag ang pag-ako dahil sa tiyak na katangiang bunga ng laro ng *différance*. Bunga ng tensyon ng interaksyon ng mga elementong nagtatalaban, merong estruktura o balangkas na nabubuo. Dinamiko ito dahil nagbabago ang timpla ng pagpepresensiya kung may mga elemento ng laro na nagbabago. Subalit hindi arbitraryo ang mga pagbabago ng larong nagbibigay, gaya halimbawa sa likhang sining.

Nakatakda na ang pagtugtog ng Opus 61 Concierto para sa solong biyolin mula nang sinulat ito ni Beethoven noong 1806. Marami sa mga pinakakilalang *orchestra* (hal., Berlin Philharmoniker at Royal Philharmonic Orchestra), mga biyolinista (tulad ni Itzhak Perlman, Anne-Sophie Mutter, at Jascha Heifetz), at mga konduktor (Leonard Bernstein, Von Karajan, at Toscanini) ang tumugtog nito. Masasabing nakatakda na kung papaano magpepresensiya ang piyesang ito dahil nakasulat na at nilagda ang bawat nota, areglo ng instrumento, at kumpas nito. Subalit sa bawat pagtugtog nito, may bukod tangi itong presensiya. Ito’y dahil laro ng pagtatalaban ng iba’t ibang elemento ang pagpepresensiya ng piyesang ito. Naroon ang sinulat na piyesa, naroon ang mga iba’t ibang tagapagtugtog, at naroon din ang iba’t ibang manonood, lugar, at kapanahunan. Bahagi ang lahat ng ito ng dinamismo ng partikular na pagpepresensiya ng Opus 61. May iba’t ibang timpla ang mga *orchestra*, depende sa mga tumatao nito, sa pakikiugnay ng mga tao dito, sa siyudad na inalalagyan nito, at sa mga ideya ukol kay Beethoven noong mga panahong ito. Ito ang dahilan kung bakit nangongolekta ang mga nagmamahal sa Opus 61 ng iba’t ibang plaka nito.

Hindi ganap na pareho ang bawat pagpresensiya ng mga ito. May posibleng hiwaga ang bawat bukod-tanging presensiya nito—at madalas meron nga. Depende sa timpla ng pagtatalaban ng mga dinamikong elementong ito, magpepresensiya ang piyesa. Masalimuot na tensyong ang laro ng pagbibigay ng musikang ito, may balanse ng tunog at damdamin ang larong ito. Makikita natin ito sa kalikasan.

Bagaman binibigay ng laro ng *différance* ang pagpepresensiya ng isang masalimuot na *biome*, *galaxy*, at katawan ng tao, may katatagan ang mga ito. Ilang bilyong taon nang nananatili sa partikular na laro ng pagpepresensiya ang Andromeda *galaxy*? Walang nagbabalangkas dito kundi ang laro ng talaban ng mga elemento ng laro nito. Subalit naroon ang katatagan. Maaari din nating gamiting halimbawa ang katawan at *biome* na may larong-balangkas na kung hindi ginalang, hindi magiging malusog. Posible na kung may radikal na pagbabago sa laro ng pagbibigay na magbago rin ang balangkas ng kalusugan ng mga ito. Subalit, nakasalalay sa partikular ng larong nagbibigay ang nararapat sa *biome* at katawan. Ganoon din ang ako.

Larong binibigay ng larong nagbibigay ang ako. Batay sa pagkapartikular ng pagka-ako, may balangkas ng pagmemeron ang tao. Binabalangkas ng larong nagbibigay kung ano ang nararapat na pagpapatupad ng kanyang pagkatao nang manatiling buo. Ang larong nagbibigay ang bukal ng sabay dinamismo at katatagan ng larong pagka-ako. At ito rin ang batayan ng hiwaga ng pagmemeron ng tao. Wala ngang *nucleus* na nagtatakda ng pagka-ako subalit may larong nagbabalangkas ng papepresensiya nito. Laro ang aking pagka-ako na tinutupad ayon sa nararapat. Subalit binabalangkas ang nararapat ng dinamikong laro at hindi ng takdang esensiya.

Mahalaga ang kontribusyon ng teorya ng *différance* ni Derrida dahil nakapagbibigay ito ng sagot sa puna ni Hume sa ideya ng maypagkabagay na sarili. Totoong walang takdang ako. At totoo din na nararanasan natin ang sarili bilang isang nanatili sa panahon na tumatanggap sa karanasan at pinoproceso ito. Subalit hindi lang makinang nakakaranas at nagpoproseso ng datos ng karanasan ang sarili kundi isa ring ako na malay sa sarili bilang isang kabuoang kailangang isabuhay ayon sa nararapat o sa paraang angkop. Subalit ang ang katatagan ng larong nagbibigay ang batayan ng naaangkop sa ako. Larong pagka-ako ang akong binibigay ng laro ng *différance*. Laro ang pagpepresensiya nito at binabalangkas ng laro ang katatagan ng sarili. Kaya, hindi kailan man nakatakda na ang sarili ng tao kundi isang katatagang dinamiko na sumasabay sa walang hanggang laro na nagbibigay dito. Hindi pabago-bago ang ako dahil may batayan ang katatagan nito. Subalit hindi rin ito statiko dahil habang nagbabago ang timpla ng larong nagbibigay dito, mahalagang sabayan ang timpla dahil dito nababatay ang balangkas ng pagpepresensiya ng sarili. Sa panghabang-buhay ng taong nagpapakatao,

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mahalaga ang patuloy na pangigilatis dahil bagaman ikaw pa rin ang ama ng iyong anak noong siya'y bata pa, may ibang timpla ang iyong pagiging ama ng parehong anak na 34 na taong gulang na.

Kapag nauunawaan natin ang sarili bilang binibigay ng laro ng *différance*, mas madaling makita na meron ngang sarili: isang sariling mahiwaga, at bunga ng walang hanggang larong humuhubog sa sariling pagka-ako. Mas mauunawaan na rin natin kung bakit mahalaga na maging tapat sa larong pagka-ako dahil may katatagan ang pagbibigay ng larong nagbibigay.

Ang Larong Pagka-Ako at Ang Karanasan ng Loob

Higit na mapapalalim ang ating pag-unawa sa sarili kung pagmumuni-munihan ang karanasan ng loob ayon kay Albert Alejo,²⁰ Katrin de Guia,²¹ at Virgilio Enriquez.²² Ayon kay Alejo, maaaring nakaugat sa ating karanasan ng loob ang karanasan ng sarili.²³ Interesante ang pagsusuri sa karanasan ng sarili bilang karanasan ng loob dahil, tulad ng ipinakita sa naunang bahagi, mas madalas iniisip ang sarili bilang ubod. Tila karanasan ng kalawakan itong loob, i.e., bilang lugar o larangan. Subalit, ipapakita natin dito na ang karanasan ng loob ay maaaring magpalalim ng pag-unawa sa sarili bilang larong pagka-ako.

Kung tutuusin, hindi naman nalalayo ang karanasan ng loob sa kanluraning pag-unawa na may "*interiority*" ang sarili.²⁴ May kaugnayan din ang *interiority* sa pinakamalalim na karanasan ng sarili at may aspekto ng espasyo. Subalit kung susuriin ang karanasan ng *interiority*, tulad ng *interiority* ni San Anselmo, ito ang lugar sa buod ng tao kung saan nakakaatras ang tao mula sa mundo at maaaring panandaliang manahan sa presensiya ng Diyos.²⁵ Maganda ring halimbawa ng kanluraning *interiority* ang karanasan ng modernong tao na kinakatawan ni Descartes noong ginawa

²⁰ Albert Alejo, S.J., "Loob ng Tao," in *Social Transformations Journal of the Global South*, 6 (May 2018) at Albert Alejo, S.J., *Tao Po! Tuloy!* (Quezon City: Office of Research and Publications, Ateneo de Manila University, 1990).

²¹ Katrin de Guia, *Kapwa: The Self in The Other* (Pasig City: Anvil Press, 2005).

²² Virgilio G. Enriquez, *From Colonial to Liberation Psychology: The Philippine Experience* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1992), 49-57.

²³ Alejo, "Loob ng Tao," 6ff.

²⁴ May mahalagang pagtatalakay dito si Jaques Maritain sa *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: New American Library, 1953), 80ff.

²⁵ Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion and Proslogion with the Replies from Gaunilo and Anselm*, trans. by Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1995), 97. "'Enter into the chamber' (Matthew 6:6) of your mind, shut out everything but God and whatever helps you to seek him, and seek him 'behind closed doors' (Matthew 6:6)."

niya ang mga *Mga Meditasyon Hinggil sa Unang Pilosopiya*.²⁶ Sa obrang ito, sistematiko niyang tinalikuran ang mundo. Sistematiko siyang umatras mula sa mundong kinasasangkutan, kahit ag pagsasakatawan, hanggang marating ang kamalayang hiwalay sa anumang pagpepresensiya ng mundo.²⁷ Hindi ganito ang karanasan ng Pilipino sa *loob*. Wala tayong *loob* na mahihiwalay sa mundo. Magsimula tayo sa pagtalakay sa pagkakaiba ng loob sa *interiority* para linawin ang karanasan ng mga Pilipinong ginagamit ang salitang loob para sa sarili.

Kung lihim na kuwerto (tinutukoy dito ang silid ng mga modernong tahanan na masasara upang makapagsarili hiwalay sa ibang tao sa bahay o komunidad) ang *interior* ng sariling kanluranin, bahay kubo ang loob ng tao.²⁸ Makikita sa loob ng tradisyonal na bahay ang hugis ng loob sa karaniwang karanasan ng mga tradisyonal na Pilipino. Lugar na hiwalay sa labas tulad ng karaniwang bahay ang loob ng bahay kubo. May dingding, sahig, at bubong ito na hinihiwalay ang loob sa labas. Subalit, kahit isara ang mga bintana at pintuan, ang loob ng kubo'y pinapasukan pa rin ng liwanag ng araw, ng samu't saring tunog mula sa labas, at ng simoy ng hangin na nagdadala ng ginhawa. Kahit nasa loob ka at nakasara ang lahat, sangkot ka pa rin sa labas. Lalo na't kapag nakabukas ang mga bintana at ang pinto (na madalas hindi sinasara kung walang panganib), higit pang nakasangkot ang loob sa labas. Kaya ang taong nasa loob ay laging kasangkot ang labas. Masasabing hindi taguan mula sa labas ang loob kundi lugar ng pagbubukas at pagtatanggap dito.

Ganito rin ang karanasan natin sa loob ng tao. May likas na oryentasyon sa labas bilang tagatanggap ng karanasan ang loob ng tao. Subalit itong pagtanggap ng karanasan ay hindi lamang isang pagpoproseso para umunawa. Sa halip, pagtanggap ang pagbukas. Nagbubukas ang loob sa labas para tanggapin ito. Parang sa pagtanggap ng bisita, tinatanggap ang nakikitagpong ka-iba, o yung hindi akong nauuwi sa sarili pag-unawa o pangangailangan, upang matugunan ang pagpepresensiya nito ayon sa nararapat. Masasabi natin na isinasaloob o tinatanggap sa loob ng ako ang nagpepresensiyang mundo upang iangkop ang ating loob sa nakikitagpo. Tinatanggap ng loob ang nagpepresensiya mula sa labas upang maiangkop ang loob sa nagpepresensiyang ito. Tila kabalintunaan ito dahil madalas nagbubukas ang loob sa nakakatagpo upang ito'y maiuwi sa kaayusan ng loob. Halimbawa sa pag-uwi ng katagpo sa sarili ang pagkain ng isang

²⁶ Rene Descartes, *Mga Meditasyon Hinggil sa Unang Pilosopiya*, trans. by Emmanuel C. de Leon (Maynila: Aklat ng Bayan, 2023).

²⁷ Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies*, trans. by Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²⁸ Alejo, "Loob ng Tao," 1-2.

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hayop. Subalit, kapwa ang loob. Hindi ito larangan ng pagkonsumo kundi sisidlan ng sarili at tanggapan ng presensiya ng iba.

Kaya masasabi na hindi lihim na kuwarta ang loob. Sisidlan ang loob, lugar kung saan tinatanggap ang lahat upang mapayaman ang laro ng sarili sa mundong kinalalagyan. Hindi kuwarta kung saan tinatago ang ubod ng sarili ang loob, kundi sisidlan kung saan nagaganap ang laro ng pagbibigay na binibigay ang sarili. Ito para sa akin ang halaga ng karanasan ng loob sa pag-unawa sa larong pagka-ako. Hindi marahil ang sarili ang loob subalit sa loob tinatanggap o isinasalob ang mga elemento ng laro ng sarili at sa loob din nagaganap ang laro ng sarili. At mula sa loob, kung saan nabubuo ang larong pagka-ako, nagmumula ang malikhaing kilos ng sarili sa katalagahan.

Nagmumula sa loob ang kilos ng tao sa katalagahan o ang kanyang pagpapatupad ng sarili. Sa loob nanggagaling ang lakas (lakas ng loob), katatagan, paninindigan, at pagsisikap kumilos sa mundo para maisatupad ang sarili.²⁹ Kapag sinasabi natin na iniipon natin ang sarili sa loob, binubuo natin ang binibigay ng laro sa isang tiyak na pagdirito sa mundo. Pag-iipon ng sarili sa tiyak na pagdirito ang pagpepresensiya ng sarili sa katalagahan sa paraang tapat sa pagkabinigay nito. At ayon sa kanyang pagkabinigay, isinasalob niya ang mula sa labas at inaangkop ang pagpepresensiya bilang tugon dito. Ang aking pagka-ako ay nagaganap sa loob na sisidlan ng laro. Hindi buod ng ako ang nasa loob. Laro ng loob ang nagaganap sa loob at mula sa loob ipinapatupad ang sarili sa labas.

Tunay lang nabubuo ang loob kapag ito'y may pagkakaisa sa labas. Sa pagkakaisang ito nagmumula ang karanasan ng kaginhawahan. May malinaw na paglalarawan ang bandang Asin sa kalagayan ng kaginhawahan sa kanilang kantang "Ang Mahalaga:"

Payapa, di lang tahimik
Panatag, di lang kalmante
Bawat umaga may pag-asa.

Ito ang karanasan ng tao sa kalagayan ng kaginhawahan. Siya'y payapa, panatag, at may pag-asa. Hindi lang siya nasa mabuting emosyonal at pisikal na kalagayan. Siya'y nasa mas mataas na uri ng pagkabuo, ang pagkabuo ng sarili. Ito ang kabuoang dala ng pagiging iisa sa mundong kinalalagyan. Maginhawa ang sarili bunga mapagbuong pakikisangkot sa mundong kinalalagyan.

²⁹ Leonardo Mercado, "Soul and Spirit in Filipino Thought," in *Philippine Studies*, 39 (1991), 287-302.

Nagkaroon ng kaginhawahan kapag ang pinakapundamental na pangangailangan ng tao'y nakakamit. Meron siyang pagkain kapag nagugutom, "lupa na mabubungkal/At pagtatamnan ng mga pangarap," "tahanan, hindi lang bahay / Pamilya na nagkakaisa / Magkakasama sa hirap at ginhawa."³⁰ Kung papansinin, ang pundamental na pangangailangan ng tao'y magkaroon ng malikhaing pagsangkot sa katalagahan nang maipahayag ang sariling pagkamalikhain. At nagiging malikhain ang gawain ng tao kapag nakikisangkot siya sa katalagahan nang tapat sa akong binibigay ng laro sabay sa pagiging tapat sa mundong binibigay din ng laro. Ito ang dahilan kung bakit may oryentasyong palabas ang loob.

Nabubuo lang ang sarili kapag may malikhain itong kaugnayan sa labas. Bahagi ng pagkatao ang pagiging kapwa: kapwa sa kapwa tao at kapwa sa katalagahan. Tinutukoy nitong pagiging kapwa ang kalagayan ng pagkakaisa sa mga nagmemeron. Hindi nito sinasabi na walang kasarinlan o sariling pagmemeron ang bawat nagpepresensiya. Subalit, bagaman may kasarinlan at hiwalay na pagmemeron, magkaugnay ang bawat umiiral dahil may pundamental silang pagkakasangkot. Tulad ng naipakita sa nakaraang talata, sangkot ang pagkabuo ng loob sa pagiging tapat sa nagpepresensiya ng kapwa meron. Hindi mabubuo ang loob kung hindi nito ginagalang ang nagpepresensiya ng kapwa. Ito'y dahil kasangkot ang bawat isa sa laro na nagbibigay. Kaya hindi nabubuo ang ako kung hindi nito ginagalang ang kapwa meron na kabahagi niya sa larong nagbibigay sa isa't isa. Napapanatag o nabubuo lang ang loob kapag tinutupad nito ang pagiging kapwa sa kapwang nagpepresensiya sa kanya. Bilang kapwa nakikilala niya na ang bawat isa'y kasing halaga niya, at bahagi rin ng malikhaing laro na nagbibigay sa bawat isa.³¹ Dahil dito, nararanasan ng bawat ako na may malalim na kaugnayan siya sa bawat kapwa meron. Ito ang dahilan kung bakit ang ating mga ninuno'y naniwala na may mga hindi nakikitang persona sa kalikasan. May diwang nag-aalaga ng bundok, ilog, halamanan, at hayop. At hinihingi ng mga ito ang paggalang sa kanilang sarili at sa kanilang inaalaan. Hinihingi ng mga espiritu ang pakikibahagi ng mga tao sa isang kaayusan ng mga kapwang nananagutan at nagpapayaman sa pag-iral ng bawat isa. Tayo'y sangkot sa isang laro ng kapwa pananagutan dahil sangkot ang bawat isa sa laro ng pagbibigay sa bawat isa.³² May mas malalim pa itong kahulugan para sa kapwa tao.

Higit sa pagiging kapwa sa laro ng pagbibigay, nararanasan natin ang kapwa tao bilang kapwa loob. Hindi siya ibang tao sa akin dahil tumatalab siya sa loob ko at ganoon din ako sa kanya. Dahil sa pagiging

³⁰ Asin, "Ang Mahalaga," *Pag-ibig, Pagbabago, Pagpapatuloy* (Vicor Music, SDC-070: 2002).

³¹ de Guia, *Kapwa*, 9.

³² Grace Nono, *Song of the Babaylan* (Quezon City: Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2013), 62ff.

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kapwa loob, nabubuo ang isang nibel ng pagkakaisa kung saan masasabing hindi iba sa akin ang aking kapwa tao. Sa malalim na pagtagos sa isa't isa, nahahanap ko ang aking sarili sa kapwa. Nagiging akin ang kanyang pagdurusa. Ang kanyang pagkabigo'y akin din. Ganoon din ang kanyang kaligayahan at kaginhawahan. May malalim na pagtagos ang mga kapwa tao sa isa't isa sa punto na nakukutuban ng mga loob ang kalagayan ng bawat isa at nakasalalay ang aking pagkabuo sa pagkakaisang ito. Hindi ito dahil wala kaming kasarinlan o pagka-ako. Ako'y ako ayon sa aking bukod tanging pagkabinigay ng laro. Ganoon din siya. Subalit, pinagkakaisa kami ng aming loob. At sa pagkaisa na ito, nararanasan kong sangkot siya ang aking pagkabuo. Hind mapapalagay ang loob hangga't nasa masamang kalagayan ang loob ng aking kapwa dahil nakabuklod sa kanya ang pagkabuo ko.

Dala ng malalim na pagtatalaban ng loob, nararanasan ng mga kapwa tao ang isang metapisikal o mistikal na kaugnayan. Bagaman may kasarinlan ang bawat ako, iisa ito sa kapwa sa paraan na may magkakabuklod sila loob sa loob. Tiyak na nauunawaan natin ang ating kapwa gamit ang ating mga pandama at konsepto, subalit sa mga magkabuklod na loob, nararamdaman nito bilang kutob na mismong nagmumula sa ugnayan ng mga loob sa isa't isa.³³ Ito'y pagbubuklod hindi lamang ng kaugnayan subalit mismong sa pagkakaisa ng mga loob. May direktang kutob sa loob ng kapwa na walang namamagitan. Ang bawat loob na malay sa sarili bilang loob at bukas sa pakikipagkapwa loob ay nakakaramdam ng diretsong kutob sa loob ng kapwa. Bagaman hiwalay ang mga kapwa sa isa't isa, dahil sila'y kapwa loob, nararamdaman at nauunawaan nila ang isa't isa mula sa loob. Makakatulong dito ang talinhaga ni Alejo.

Para kay Alejo, parang kapuluan ang pagiging kapwa ng mga tao. Mukhang magkakahiwalay ang bawat isla subalit kung sisisirin ang kalaliman ng dagat, makikita na nagkakaisa ang mga ito, dahil iisang lupa lang ang pinagmumulan o kinatatayuan nila. Iisang meron ang bukal ng kanilang loob. Kaya may kakayahan ang bawat isang maunawaan ang ligaya, dalamhati, at pagdurusa ng kapwa mula sa loob. Bilang bahagi ng iisang laro ng pagbibigay ng isa't isa, may malalim na palagayan at pagkakaisa ang loob.³⁴

Makikita sa karanasan ng ako bilang loob ang lawak at yaman ng larong pagka-ako. Nakasalalay sa kanyang pagiging tapat sa kapwa ang pagkabuo nitong masalimuot na larong pagka-ako na binibigay ng larong nagbibigay. Hindi basta ipinapatupad ang pagiging ako ayon sa arbitrayong pagnanais ng sarili. Sa halip, kailangan niyang isaloob ang labas at maging

³³ de Guia, *Kapwa*, 8.

³⁴ Alejo, "Loob ng Tao," 15ff.

tapat sa laro ng pagpepresensiya ng kapwa meron. Nakasangkot ang aking pagka-ako sa pagpapatupad ng sariling pag-iral sa paraang tapat sa mga kapwang kasapi sa laro. Ito ang batayan ng katatagan ng sariling pagmemeron.

Pagwawakas

Sa pagmumuni-muning ito, hinarap natin ang kritisismo ni Hume sa ideya ng pagka-ako. Malinaw na para sa kanya, walang batayan ang pagsisikap ng taong ipatupad ang kanyang sarili dahil walang malinaw na batayan ang ating pagka-ako. Subalit, dahil hindi maikakaila na may malalim na kamalayan ang tao sa kanyang bukod tanging pagka-ako na may katuturan ang pag-iral. Mahalagang hanapin ang ugat ng karanasan ng pagiging ako ng tao habang kinikilala ang halaga ng kritisismo ni Hume. Ang pagmumuni-muni sa sarili bilang larong pagka-ako na binibigay ng laro ng katalagahan ang nagpapaliwanag na ang ako ay hindi makinang tagaproseso ng datos ng pandama, at hindi rin ito isang takdang pagka-ako na isinasatupad ayon sa esensiyang itinakda. Mas maipapaliwanag ang dinamismo ng sarili kung pag-uusapan ito bilang laro na may katatagan at dinamismo. Kapag nakilala ng tao ang tensyong ito sa pagsasabuhay ng sarili, naisasatupad niya ang pagkamalikhain ng kanyang pagpapatupad ng sarili sa mundo kasama ng kapwa nagmemeron.

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Article

Postulating Political Truth Procedure and Ethics in B.R. Ambedkar

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Abstract: Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism was certainly a political event, as it stood in stark contrast to the prevailing political climate. This subjectivity was also formalized through the organizations that followed after the conversion. The question that concerns this paper is the following: can there be an ethics derived from the Ambedkarite truth process? This paper tries to assert the universality of Ambedkar's ethics that stem from a political truth process, one that cannot be named as traditional Buddhist ethics or pragmatism. In this sense, Ambedkar's singular ethical position emerges in a situation as an exception to the situation, forming a subjectivity. There are consequences of Ambedkar's political interventions. However, the truth of these interventions must be seen as truth processes that are infinite. This paper asserts Ambedkar's political events as what Badiou calls, truth processes. It examines Ambedkar's texts and political interventions through the four determinations of truths, the 'ethic of truths' and philosophical virtues proposed by Alain Badiou, such as unnameability and moderation. Through the conversion to Buddhism, a liturgy of Dalit Buddhism emerges as a possible mode of existence. This insistence on ethical principles is due to Ambedkar's singular political truths that are at once collective and universal.

Keywords: Ambedkar, Badiou, Dalit Buddhism, political truth

Truths as subjective processes/Difference between Knowledge and Truths

Truths are exceptional in the situation precisely because they escape the realm of the known. This is Badiou's subtractive notion of truth and philosophy. "To say that philosophy has to 'subtract Truth from the labyrinth of meaning' means that it must insist on the distinction between the truth and meaning, truth and sense, truth and opinion, and, first and

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foremost, between truth and knowledge.”¹ According to Badiou, truth is subtracted from the situation—from the realm of the known and the countable—through the modalities of undecidability, indiscernibility, genericity, and unnameability. His notion of truth is process-oriented. As the ‘unnamable’ modality of the subtractive notion of truth declares, if the process of truth and its point of origination is named, it ends in a disaster. This is the reality of the failure of the Soviet Union when Marxist History and economics were objectified and named dialectical materialism; it ended in disaster. Therefore, Badiou proposes two important characteristics of philosophy, unnameability and moderation, as virtues of philosophy.² In order to defend philosophy against the relativism of the sophists, philosophy forces a name onto the process of truth. Naming totalizes the beginning and the process of truths. He maintains that truths are constructed in specific domains such as art, politics, science, and love. These domains are strictly processes. The nature of truth is such that it is always already existent in situations and appears as an inconsistency of the situation. The knot of the sacredness of names, the terror of substances, and the ecstasy of the place of truths result in disaster.³ That is, when truth is objectified—turned into a method or made sacred as the only truth—the erasure of all other truths can lead to catastrophe, as seen in Stalinist Marxism and National Socialism of Germany.⁴ This is why it is the virtue of the subtractive notion of truths that the truth be rendered unnamable.

Another virtue of philosophy is moderation. By moderation, Badiou means that philosophy should never assume that truths are generated inside the domain of philosophy. Philosophy, in itself, as a discipline, is always empty or void. It relies on the events in the domains of arts, politics, science, and love. The task of philosophy is to affirm and construct the consequences of events that emerge in these domains. The moment when philosophy claims to contain truths within itself, instead of embracing the void at its core, it opens the path to disaster. The virtue of moderation means that there is always a multiplicity of truths, and philosophy itself is never the abode of truths. Its sole task is to affirm, reaffirm in contingent situations, and construct truths that emerge as a consequence of various truth processes.

¹ Frank Ruda, “Subtraction—Undecidable, Indiscernable, Generic, Unnameable,” in *Badiou Dictionary*, ed. by Steven Corcoran (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 330.

² Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. by Norman Madarasz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 130.

³ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

Politics as a Truth Procedure

The event, truth, and the subject are central concepts of Badiou's philosophy. These concepts are interlinked, and one concept follows the other. An unprecedented event—an inconsistency within a situation—can unleash a process of truths. Truths that emerge in any of these domains are infinite processes. These processes are carried out by a faithful subject of an event. While describing the process of political truths, Badiou outlines three conditions specific to the political event and the truth procedure that follows from it. Under these three conditions, an event is political, and the ensuing process is one of political truth. These three characteristics are “the material of the event, its relation to the state of the situation, and the numericality of the procedure.”⁵

- 1) Material of the event: For Badiou, the material of a political event is strictly collective. That is to say that a political event is something that pertains to ‘all’. It is not a matter of the number of persons involved in the event or the process; it means that a political declaration is inherently ascribed to all. A political truth located in a situation is at once universal. A political statement is truth only if it ascribes to all humans. This is a quality inherent and unique to political truths. In other truth procedures, such as mathematics, only one other mathematician is required to recognize the truth; in the truth process of love, only the two involved in the process need to recognize the truth of their love; for an artist, the work of art itself is the material of the truth process. These three truth procedures are aristocratic truth processes for Badiou.⁶ Unlike art, love, and mathematics, the political process is inherently a thought for all the elements of the collective. The regime of political thought is collective:

Politics is impossible without the statement that people, taken indistinctly, are capable of the thought that constitutes the post-event political subject. This statement claims that a political thought is topologically collective, meaning that it cannot exist otherwise than as the thought of all.⁷

- 2) The political truth process is the one that has an intrinsic relation to the state of the situation. The state of the situation is that which counts its elements or holds power over it. The state is also the form of government

⁵ Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. by Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005), 141.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁷ *Ibid.*

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that governs the situation. Political events occur as exceptions to the 'state' of the situation, and the political truth procedure takes the form of an insurgency. According to Badiou, the political event denies the superpower of the state that governs or 'counts' all elements of the political situation. More precisely, the political process organizes the power of the collective to measure the power of the state. It exhibits the inadequacy of the state by distancing from the state and measuring its power from a distance. The political process relates to the state of the situation in that it overcomes the superpower of the state; this is why it is precisely 'freedom' that measures and negates the dominating power of counting.

- 3) Lastly, the political process essentially considers the infinity of situations that under it in—past, present, and future. Political situations are infinitely open to possibilities. Infinity is the first term for politics. "Every politics of emancipation rejects finitude, rejects 'being towards death'. Since a politics includes in the situation the thought of all, it is engaged in rendering explicit the subjective infinity of situations."⁸

Ethics of Truths

Ethical principles are a way to ensure that abstract political truths manifest in action. For Badiou, ethics is what helps a truth persist.⁹ Political truth requires an ethic of truth. He defines the ethic of truth in the following way: "In general, the 'ethic of a truth' is the principle that enables the continuation of a truth process or to be more precise and complex, that which lends consistency to the presence of some-one in the composition of the subject induced by the process of this truth."¹⁰ By 'some-one,' Badiou means either a body of truth or a human being seized by the truth of the event, and this 'some-one' exhibits fidelity to the event of truth. However, the nature of events is ephemeral without the subject. Thus, mere fidelity to the event of truth does not lead to the truth process; one must also persist or persevere in the process. This is the fidelity of a fidelity, to be faithful to the fidelity to an event of truth. This is what Badiou means by consistency. Borrowing from Jacques Lacan, Badiou argues that the maxim of consistency in pursuing a truth process is "Not to give up one's desire" and "keep going."¹¹ Apart from Lacan, there is surely a Kantian overtone to Badiou's ethics. However, his

⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁹ *Ibid.*, XVI.

¹⁰ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. by Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 44.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

ethics is strictly immanent and derived from the situation through the subjects of the situation, unlike Kantian ethics that is transcendental.

Badiou differentiates between two kinds of interests: a personal interest (that is, to persevere for one's own needs and wishes) and the other a 'disinterested interest.' As mentioned in the definition of the ethic of truth, a subject becomes a part of the process of the composition of a truth that has seized the subject. The truth is not the truth of an individual but rather exceeds the individual. This is where the subject loses himself/herself (his personal interests, desires, identity) and partakes in a process that exceeds him. The maxim, 'do not give up on your desire,' is to partake in that part of oneself that one does not know. It is to abandon the realm of what we know of ourselves and to enter into a composition of the unknown that has seized and exceeded us. To simply persevere is to pursue one's own interests; to partake in a truth process is to cultivate a disinterested interest. That is, to persevere in the truth process in the event of rupture— one that has broken the structure of the predicates that we have ascribed to ourselves. "Do all that you can to persevere in that which exceeds your perseverance. Persevere in the interruption. Seize in your being that which has seized and broken you."¹² This means that once the subject has become a part of the composition of the truth, it abandons the pursuit of its own interests. One is undoubtedly drawn to connect this idea of disinterested interest to a certain idea of asceticism. For Badiou, asceticism is a possibility to persevere in the truth process. But it is also a possibility to betray and exit the process of truth. It could be a form of cowardice, to renounce and to run away from the real horror of truth or castration. For Badiou, renunciation is, to a certain extent, giving up on one's personal interests. But in the process of truth emerging from a situation, one must invent a way to traverse the treacherous path and not hide behind a path that is already paved.

Four Determinations of the Political Truth

Alain Badiou, in his book *Logics of Worlds*, declares four determinations or characteristics of an emancipatory political truth. According to him, every emancipatory political truth has four determinations, namely, "will (against socioeconomic necessity), equality (against the established hierarchies of power or wealth), confidence (against anti-popular suspicion or the fear of the masses), and authority or terror (against the 'natural' free play of competition)."¹³ These determinations can be understood as consequences of an event of truth in politics. That is, they

¹² *Ibid.*, 47.

¹³ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), 27.

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are retrospectively inscribed after examination of any emancipatory political event. These determinations are correlative to the characteristics ascribed to the subject of psychoanalysis by Badiou (anxiety, superego, courage, and justice).

In the years 1935-36, Ambedkar took a subjective decision that shook the society. He made a courageous declaration at a conference in Yeola that would manifest after twenty years of duration of thinking at the time of his conversion to Buddhism. Ambedkar stated, "I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an Untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power."¹⁴ This declaration exhibits three characteristics of truths outlined by Badiou: it denies the 'Being towards death' and asserts a new life within this life. As we shall see, Ambedkar devised a version of Buddhism that provides ethics for this truth process.

In an earlier work, *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou uses the term 'courage' synonymously with confidence, which emerges after anxiety due to vacillation. Once the subject has moved from indecisive anxiety to a courageous decision, the subject begins the process of justice. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) can be read through the lens of these four determinations of political truth. He displays an anti-popular will to 'annihilate' the caste order—a will to dismantle the Hindu social order and assert an egalitarian social order. Throughout, Ambedkar persistently emphasizes the notion of courage to overcome the caste order.¹⁵ Last but not least, Ambedkar, a Dalit scholar, authoritatively denounces the caste order and brings out the hypocrisies pertinent to the nature of Hindu political leaders that are due to interpretations of caste hierarchies. This claim unsettled the majority to the extent that they did not let Ambedkar speak nor publish his immaculate *Annihilation of Caste*, which he ultimately published himself. Will, courage, equality, and authority/terror are the four characteristics or determinations of a political truth that can be found in Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*. Ambedkar's will for the egalitarian maxim is a formally authoritarian exercise of confidence in the political capacity of the untouchables rather than the Hindu majority.

Political Truth in Ambedkar

Ambedkar's immediate concerns, situated in local struggles and contexts, did not encompass the philosophical elaboration or description of the notion of truth. His viewpoint on philosophical concepts does not align

¹⁴ Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2013), 147-156.

¹⁵ B.R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste," in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 1*, ed. by Vasant Moon (Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 1987), 21-94.

with the ideas prevalent during his time—such as relativism, positivism, and nihilism—though he occasionally acknowledged these currents. However, there is certainly an undying fidelity towards asserting certain notions—such as equality and individual liberty—as truths. That is to say, Ambedkar’s overall disposition toward the notion of truths was moderate: to assert and affirm truths, but not as ultimate or complete truths. He would believe that truths, too, are subject to modification and failure, and are essentially dependent on the situations in which they appear. Ambedkar’s notion of truth can be understood primarily as the discernment of truth from untruth, and of Good from Evil. A later edition of *Annihilation of Caste* starts with Buddha’s words: “Know Truth as Truth and Untruth as Untruth.” Of course, Ambedkar neither defines truth nor attempts to name it, and he does not regard any truth as sacred. In fact, Ambedkar’s earlier philosophical works, such as *Philosophy of Hinduism*, were written inspired by Nietzsche, primarily to annihilate notions such as ‘whole truth,’ truths related to or resulting from God, or truths that did not relate to the individual’s life on earth. He even equated Platonism as a form of Brahminism. However, Ambedkar does not stop at mere annihilating; as mentioned, he also creates and affirms certain truths with virtues of moderation and unnameability as prescribed by Alain Badiou.

Two important works—partly philosophical and otherwise—have consolidated the notion of truth in Ambedkar: *Ambedkar and Other Immortals: An Untouchable Research Programme* and *Radical Equality: Ambedkar, Gandhi and the Risk of Democracy*. These texts highlight the radical universality and equality as an axiomatic truth of Ambedkar’s thought. By asserting certain declarations, affirmations and acts as events, a truth process certainly unleashes as the consequence. Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism was an event as it was an exception to the political situation. This subjectivity was also formalized through the organization or the *Sangha* that followed after the conversion. The form or the organization itself is a truth process for the subject. The question that concerns this paper is the following: can there be an ethics derived from the Ambedkarite truth process? This question will be answered with an emphatic affirmation, pointing to Buddhism and/or pragmatism as the foundation of Ambedkar’s ethical discourse. This paper seeks to assert the universality of Ambedkar’s ethics that stem from a political truth process that cannot be reduced to simply Buddhism or pragmatism. In this sense, Ambedkar’s singular ethical position emerges within a situation as an exception to it, forming a subjectivity oriented toward an egalitarian organization.

In *Ambedkar and Other Immortals: An Untouchable Research Programme*, Shoumyabrata Choudhury examines Ambedkar’s political interventions as political events. The event of the Mahad conference asserts the norm or the

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truth of equality. What makes this event a political event is Ambedkar's analogy between the 'Chavdar Lake' incident and the French Revolution. In both cases, the political truth of equality is affirmed, making the events comparable in their shared assertion of equality as a norm. However, it is not only in the statement of equality as a norm that the universality of this event lies. Rather, it is the "power of the political truth that anyone who utters it can enjoy."¹⁶ These two events are equal and incomparable at the same time since they have in common the overthrowing of the old regime and thinking of a new possibility. Choudhary explains that the event of untouchables drinking water from the common lake is not the ritualistic act that instantly purifies the society of its disease of untouchability. The event lies in declaring the norm of equality as generic. This declaration is not "a modern political breach of the traditional continuum of Hindu history, a conception that would make the Mahad an event that is simply putting into practice/vicariously living/imitative of a modern revolutionary politics that has already been inaugurated somewhere else."¹⁷ Political truth, as Alain Badiou explains, is a decisive assertion that emerges from the event. Political truth has an invariable historical dimension. Overthrowing the old regime and asserting an unprecedented decision is the relation between history and the event. This relation can be named continuity and breach. Yet, this unprecedented breach cannot be produced from its own continuity; it is a supplement in the form of a break or a rupture from the continuity. A truth is constructed by the subject through fidelity to an event. In Ambedkar's case, "Although empirically it is Ambedkar's declaration that creates the event, conceptually, it is Ambedkar who gets instituted as a subject of the event of declaration."¹⁸

The second political event was the conversion to Navayana Buddhism, in which several hundred thousand people left the Hindu religion and accepted Navayana Buddhism. Ambedkar's own conversion to Buddhism, undertaken after 20 years of thinking and labour, was a breach and a rupture in several continuities. It was not a mere conversion from one religion to another. He drafted and modified a new version of Buddhism for the modern subject, as a consequence of this conversion. He shaped Buddhism according to his notion of egalitarian truth, which is now called Navayana Buddhism or Dalit Buddhism. Ambedkar, in his *Buddha and His Dhamma* (the gospel of Buddhism), denies the first two Aryan truths among four and alters the story of Buddha's *Parivrajya* (exit/exile) to a more real and

¹⁶ Shoumyabrata Choudhary, *Ambedkar and Other Immortals: An Untouchable Research Programme* (Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2018), 174.

¹⁷ Drishadwati Bargi, "Ambedkar and Other Immortals: An Untouchable Research Programme by Soumyabrata Choudhary," in *Cultural Critique*, 114:1 (2022), 200-227.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.

political story rather than a metaphysical or even emotional story of Buddha encountering old age, death, sickness, etc. This conversion is not only a breach of the continuity of the Hindu tradition but also the Buddhist tradition and in the political realm of the untouchables. Through the event of conversion, Ambedkar affirms the truth of an egalitarian Buddhism that is comparable to and is an answer to the failures of Marx's communism. Before his Buddhism, this compossibility of Buddhist and Communist goals was not a part of any knowledge discourse, yet after understanding the hypothesis, one is forced to admit the truth of Ambedkar's political act.

Choudhary argues that Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism was both a religious and a hermeneutic tool. The political event of conversion was not only a decision on religion but an assertion of a new name for the collective subjectivity of the marginalized population. He argues that the event of conversion does not have a name, but it is the case of forcing a known name into the unknown realm of truths. This name, according to Choudhary, disassociates the subject of the event from the earlier name—'the untouchable', which, according to Ambedkar, "stinks" and institutes a new name, a new identity that was naturally anonymous or unknown. "A neo-name is not an unknown new name one invents; it is the unknown in the known names, the new in the historical roster of names one extracts as a generic particular 'neo-name'."¹⁹ Ambedkar, during the speech in Agra, advised Dalits to dissociate from any category reminiscent of untouchability.²⁰ Through the conversion of Dalits, he insinuated a militancy, as Badiou says in his book *Metapolitics*, by creating "a subjective determination without identity, or without concept."²¹ By dissociating from cultural identity, he demands an equal status for humanity. in accordance with universal ideas of justice and equality. This conversion marks a rupture in the continuity of oppressive history and challenges the ancient Hindu regime with a new name through the event of conversion. Ambedkar's appeal for a separate electorate prior to the Poona Pact, as well as his conversion to Buddhism, are moments in history that attempt to bring into existence those who are not counted in the political process. They are excluded; Ambedkar deliberately breaks the relation between identity and culture or caste through conversion, bringing into light the excluded parts of society. It is not only an assertion of the new name but a new life, as it was written in the pledge: "I believe I am entering the new life."²² Ambedkar uses Buddhism as a tool to

¹⁹ Shoumyabrata Choudhary, *Ambedkar and Other Immortals*, 106.

²⁰ Nicolas Jaoul, "Politics of Navayana Buddhism: Reinterpreting Ambedkar's Turn to Religion," in *Radical in Ambedkar: Critical Reflections*, ed. by Suraj Yengde et al. (India: Penguin Books, 2018), 286.

²¹ Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. by Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005), 142.

²² B.R. Ambedkar, "The Buddha Dhamma will be the savior of the World," in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 17, Part 3 (New Delhi, Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 1987), 532.

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assert the norm of equality. By exiting the Hindu fold, the Neo Buddhists got rid of their identity as low caste and became political subjects asserting the idea of equality.

Force of Truth in Ambedkar

Ambedkar relied heavily on the notion of force for manifesting the ideals of political actions. Scott Stroud, in his book *The Evolution of Pragmatism in India*, traces Ambedkar's notion of pragmatism starting from his student years in America to establishing the new school of Buddhism. He analyses how it differs from John Dewey's and others' notions of pragmatism, as well as the similarities it shares with them. Ambedkar argues that the notion of force is necessary to achieve the desired ends: "It must be remembered by those who are opposed to a force that without the use of it, all ideals will remain empty just as without some ideal or purpose (conscious or otherwise) all activity will be no more than mere fruitless fooling."²³ Ambedkar uses Dewey's distinction between force as violence and force as energy. The notion of force has a necessarily violent connotation; it implies that some ends can be achieved only by coercive force, such as the state implementing its laws. Ambedkar's idea of force is inclined towards force as 'an operation' — one that is exercised when there is a clear understanding of both means and ends. In Ambedkar's pragmatism, ends and means are not separate binaries; rather, each contributes to the other. As Stroud frames it,

... Ambedkar making a move integral to the sort of pragmatism he would develop in the coming decades through his activism: ends and means are not binary or separate, but instead they are closely connected and fall into different shades of synthesis. They imbue each other with meaning, and their value is interlinked.²⁴

This means that for Ambedkar, ends and means are not separate milestones to be achieved. Rather, in a more Buddhist way, the path is also the end that leads to a multitude of possible outcomes. We can say that ends, ideals, or truths are, in turn, truth procedures. Therefore, it means that the process of truth is merely an 'operation' of force. The void at the heart of any situation that allows being or the event to appear is the "operational void of

²³ B.R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste," 485.

²⁴ Scott R. Stroud, *The Evolution of Pragmatism in India* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2023), 86.

truth.”²⁵ That is to say, it is a possibility of truth that philosophy operates using a certain force; this force could be logical, persuasive, or axiomatic. In other words, the lack of truths is attempted to be filled with the compossibility of truths, that is, different or multiple ends, through appropriate, thoughtful means or processes. As Ambedkar suggests, the article attached to end “the” (the end) is wrong, as the end cannot be pre-emptively announced to be the only end. It is the operation of force and truth that allows a compossibility of truths. “The challenge lies in avoiding the violent use of force that implicates a rush toward an end that undoes other desired results or ends.”²⁶ Thus, force for Ambedkar is the effective means of operation. Let’s consider an example of a social organization. We can imagine that the organization consists of an artist, an engineer, a militant, a mathematician, and a scientist. Let us assume that all these members of an organization believe in a certain incomplete and unsayable truth. We can say that they laboriously conduct themselves with the discipline demanded by their own respective truth procedures. The task of a philosopher is not to prioritize one process over the other, not to undermine some processes, subsuming others. Rather, it is to find a possible space for these truths to exist. That is, in a sense, to force a space where these truths coexist. As Alain Badiou says: “I call a ‘truth procedure’ or a ‘truth’ an ongoing organization, in a given situation (or world), of the consequences of an event.”²⁷ This could be what Dewey meant by the intelligent use of force.

Dewey leaves open the possibility of the intelligent use of force. Indeed, in his lectures, he enunciates the unstable middle path of “coercive force,” a certain energy that we find emergent in organized groups. This sort of force, according to Dewey’s account, involves the coordination of individual energies and forces that produce the organization evident as custom and culture within a group. This gives, according to Dewey’s exposition, “a certain total collective force which is not coercive but simply identical with the fact of social organization.”²⁸

Kumar’s interpretation of force in Ambedkar is largely derived from Nietzsche’s notion of force that is

with a decidedly insurrectionary, even anarchic, theory of justice. A theory that would, in turn, institute, in Ambedkar’s thought and rhetoric alike, force as the seed

²⁵ Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. by Norman Madarasz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 124.

²⁶ Stroud, *The Evolution of Pragmatism in India*, 91.

²⁷ Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. by David Macey and Steven Corcoran (London: Verso, 2010), 244.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

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of emancipation, incorruptible by the apparatuses and injunctions of the moral law. And this force is the strongest, most just, most positive, argues Ambedkar, when it is in the hands of the republic's weakest, wielded by its "spent and sacrificed people" alone.²⁹

Kumar argues that this notion of force is a form of force that allows the weakest of the society to ascertain their emancipation from the moral code of conduct. Ambedkar differentiates between the force applied by institutions such as the state and another force that is applied by society (moral policing). This latter force, applied by society and organizations, is much more effective because it is reinforced by religious and moral institutions. The Nietzschean force allows an individual to break free from this moral policing as an act of freedom, as a radical annihilation of restraining moral laws. Kumar brings out a salient feature of Ambedkar's notion of force, which is the distinction between 'just force' and 'brute force'.³⁰ Just force is when the principle of equality is presupposed in an act of insurgency performed by the weakest section of society. Here, equality is neither a goal nor an end; it just exists, and thus the force is justified. This force is generated through an acute awareness of vulnerability and a commitment to resist the wrong by institutions that claim to be egalitarian in spirit. Kumar defines three shifts in Ambedkar's theory of force: first, the force of annihilation that demands equality or *Samata*; second, the force of general mobilization; and third, the force of impermanence that is *Shunyata*.

Alain Badiou defines force as follows: "Forcing is the point at which a truth, although incomplete, authorizes anticipations of knowledge concerning not what is but what will have been if truth attains completion."³¹ For Badiou, as mentioned, truth is subtracted from the known. Truth is not in what is already known in the situation. Therefore, truth is incomplete and unsayable. Truth, when applied with force or the forcing of truth, is precisely, anticipation of knowledge. That is to say, forcing implies an operation that what is declared as true today will have become a part of knowledge. Choudhary argues that in the case of Ambedkar—specifically during the Mahad Satyagraha at Chavdar Lake—he prescribed the militant notion of truth by stating: "I am certain that no one who thinks of this meeting in this light will doubt that it is unprecedented."³² That is, after this event, whoever

²⁹ Aishwary Kumar, *Radical Equality: Ambedkar, Gandhi, and The Risk of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 230.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 231.

³¹ Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. by Ray Brassier & Alberto Toscano (London: Bloomsbury Publication, 2015), 151.

³² Choudhary, *Ambedkar and Other Immortals*, 168.

declares that they are equal—as some people had declared the truth of equality at the Chavdar Lake in 1927— will be equal as no one will be unequal. That is to force the truth of equality into the infinite future.

Why Religion? / Ambedkar's Idea of Religion

One of the major points of contention between the Indian Marxists and Ambedkar's thought is the question of religion. Ambedkar fully accepted the goals and certain truths of communism (equality, abolition of private property, alienation, misery of existence) but differed in the means of achieving the same goals. Ambedkar even goes to the extent of accepting the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'; however, he asks: how long can this dictatorship last? If it is to last till the 'withering away of the states,' what will follow after the state has withered away, anarchy? Ambedkar argues that when the violent force of the dictatorship of the proletariat is withdrawn, something else must take place to sustain the revolution— or an altogether different type of force is required to generate a social revolution. This force for Ambedkar was religion. He writes:

The only thing which could sustain it after force is withdrawn is Religion. But to the Communists, Religion is anathema. Their hatred of Religion is so deep-seated that they will not even discriminate between religions which are helpful to Communism and religions which are not. The Communists have carried their hatred of Christianity to Buddhism without waiting to examine the difference between the two.³³

For Ambedkar, religion was not only a concept but also there were religions as different forms of organizations—a social reality that can be evaluated, criticized, and meliorated. For him, some religions were worth more than some other religions. After evaluating some of the most significant religions in the world, Ambedkar chooses Buddhism as the model for an egalitarian society. Through his critique of Hinduism and his scholarship in Buddhism, he carved a new ideal of religion, namely, Navayana Buddhism. However, Ambedkar differentiates his notion of religion from natural theology and revealed religions. He does not fully agree with the liberal notion of religion, nor does he ascribe to the utilitarian notion of religion. For Ambedkar, the idea of religion is insistently rationalist, this-worldly, and primarily social rather than metaphysical. According to Ambedkar, the task

³³ B.R. Ambedkar, "Buddha and Karl Marx," in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* Vol. 3 (Delhi: Ambedkar Foundation, 1987), 460.

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of religion is not to answer questions regarding the origin of the world or life after death, but it is to reconstruct the world for the betterment of human life on earth. His notion of religion can be extracted from how he distinguishes it from religion of rules and religion of principles, from the distinction between religion and philosophy, from his distinction between *Dhamma* and religion, and from the disposition vis-à-vis truth and knowledge.

Ambedkar's distinction between rules and principles

Ambedkar's texts, such as *Philosophy of Hinduism*, *Annihilation of Castes*, *Buddha or Karl Marx*, and *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, mark the trajectory of scholarship on religion that developed over time. On the one hand, he is facing an encounter with modern politics in terms of democracy, economic transformation, and modern social structures. On the other hand, he is dealing with the question of religion in modern democratic times. By dealing with the question of religion in terms of faith and justice, he attempted to formulate an ideology to support the foundations of democratic nations. As a modern scholar and political leader, Ambedkar laid the foundation of a new form of Buddhism. *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is a culmination of all his speeches and scholarly work between 1936 and 1956. In *Annihilation of Caste*, he is anticipating the advent of democracy in India and evaluating Indian social conditions in the light of democracy. The discontinuation from religious domination to modern scientific society was a challenge rather than a simple transformation. "When I urge that these ancient rules of life be annulled, I am anxious that their place shall be taken by a religion of principles, which alone can lay claim to being a true religion."³⁴ Through this insightful statement, we can see that Ambedkar believed that the place of God in any religion must be replaced by moral principles. He has further argued that Buddhism is an atheistic religion that has certain principles as its foundation, rather than other-worldly metaphysics or gods.

Ambedkar converges his different thoughts to claim that Buddhism, unlike Hinduism, is a religion based on principles, not rules. In *Annihilation of Caste*, he differentiated the religion of rules from the religion of principles. He says,

Rules are practical; they are habitual ways of doing things according to prescription. But principles are intellectual; they are useful methods of judging things. Rules seek to tell an agent just what course of action to

³⁴ Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste," 76.

pursue. Principles do not prescribe a specific course of action.³⁵

For Ambedkar, the nature of following rules is mechanical, whereas principles—even if they are wrong—result in conscious, responsible acts. When one adheres to a principle as a justification for the act, the agent is solely responsible for the consequences of the action. By contrast, when one merely abides by rules, the agent can deny responsibility and put the onus of actions onto something else, such as God, priest or destiny. This distinction between rules and principles reflects the distinction between Hinduism and Buddhism. Throughout his work, we see Ambedkar relying on the notion of principles and religion of principles where the place of God is taken by certain principles, which could be summarized as ethical principles. To follow rules, one requires a force of external laws and norms; to believe in principles, one needs faith in and fidelity to one's own intelligence.

Dhamma as Religion without Religion

Ambedkar regarded *Dhamma* as different from other religions and different from the notion of religion itself. In one of his best philosophical works, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1956), Ambedkar redefined *Dhamma*. He gave it a new meaning not only in Buddhist tradition but also in redefining *Dhamma* by differentiating it from religion as a concept and arguing how *Dhamma* is not religion in the conceptual sense. First, Ambedkar argues that *Dhamma* is essentially social. Religion, it is understood, is a matter of one's personal beliefs, culture, habits, etc. But *Dhamma*, by definition, cannot be personal. "*Dhamma* is social. It is fundamentally and essentially so."³⁶ Ambedkar says that society needs *Dhamma*, and the relationship between man and man is a primary concern for *Dhamma*. *Dhamma* ensures liberty for all, whereas religion does not propose to do so. Religion is occupied with explaining the beginning of the world and how things came to be as a revelation; *Dhamma* is not concerned with the revelation of the origin of the world. The purpose of religion, according to Ambedkar, is to explain the origin of the world, whereas the purpose of *Dhamma* is to 'reconstruct the world.' Ambedkar further argues that there is no place for morality in religion, whereas "*morality is Dhamma and Dhamma is morality.*"³⁷ Morality or moral principles are the essence of *Dhamma*. *Dhamma* cannot be explained without moral principles. It is not to please God that *Dhamma* has to be moral; rather, it is for man's own good that *Dhamma* teaches compassion toward

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁶ Ambedkar, "The Buddha and His Dhamma," 179.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

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others. Religion is centered around God, the soul, prayers, worship, rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices. *Dhamma* does not demand humans to do rituals to please Gods or to ask for redemption. *Dhamma* teaches Love (*Karuna*) and understanding (*Prajna*) for man's own well-being in this life. However, as Ambedkar clarifies, this should not be misunderstood as the idea that morality guarantees the fulfillment of one's own personal interests. It is not the case that thieves lack morals, or businessmen are not moral, or that there is no morality within fellow members of the same caste; they, too, need morality. However, this morality is in favor of their personal interests or their group's interests. As Ambedkar argues, this morality is "marked by isolation and exclusiveness."³⁸ This morality is to protect and sustain the interests of their particular group within society, and therefore, this morality is anti-social. According to Ambedkar, if a society has different models and standards of morality for different groups of people, then that society will eventually lead to conflict. Therefore, at the center of any community there are common morals and ethics that are sacred for all. That is why morality must be essentially universal. This undoubtedly resonates with certain Kantian notions of universal morality. Kantian morality also promotes a certain subjective universal ethics of acts and duties. Yet the Kantian notion of ethics is *a priori* and transcendental. That is to say, the norms or the principles that the Kantian subject follows are transcendental and *a priori*, and the subject of will assumes them to be universal. For Ambedkar, one could say that morality—*Dhamma*—appears in situations when there are a relation and a conflict between man and man. Ambedkar's singular conception of *Dhamma* appears in situations where there is conflict—whether between one religion and another or between one nation against the other. In such situations of conflict, Ambedkar's *Dhamma*, which is not a religion, manifests as a universal morality grounded in brotherhood.

Conclusion

Ambedkar's notion of philosophy, as he has expressed in *Philosophy of Hinduism*, follows the following logic: Revolutions are the guiding light for philosophy. Philosophy must be dynamic like religion; it must not remain static but must change. It must not be content merely with knowing the truth, but also with loving it—that is, with inventing a path or a way of life. It must not be merely transcendental metaphysics; it should be immanent. Religion, in turn, is politics that is a 'Working Ethic.'³⁹ The analysis of Ambedkar's political truth process results in the ethics of a singular subjectivity that is

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ B.R. Ambedkar, "Philosophy of Hinduism," in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 3*, 87.

inscribed in what can be called 'Dalit Buddhism.' What I have tried to do in this paper is to assert Ambedkar's political process through philosophical virtues proposed by Alain Badiou, such as unnameability and moderation. This exercise provides a new set of concepts to understand Ambedkar's exceptional and unnamable ethical discourse. I have tried to show that Ambedkar, in his insights in *Annihilation of Caste*, exhibits the four determinations of truths—will, equality, courage, and authority—which are the foundations of his singular ethics. Through an analysis of Choudhary's work, we find that Ambedkar's Mahad conference and later his conversion to Buddhism were political events imbuing subjectivity in anyone and everyone who attests to the event as an event. Through Kumar and Stroud's work, I have analyzed that Ambedkar's notion of truth—coupled with his explanation of means and ends—results in rendering Ambedkar's idea of truth as operational; that is, truth is asserted as an operation on the void of the situation. Consequently, Ambedkar's notion of ethics has emerged as an exception to the situation as a singularity. In such a world situation, Ambedkar chooses Buddhism as a religion without God. Ethical principles must be based on these atheistic foundations. In such ethics, he suggests that the subject must be educated under the light of Buddhist principles. That is, it must fundamentally have faith in the equality of intelligence. Ambedkar attempts to think of religion under the paradigm of modernity: the death of God.

For Ambedkar, ethics is the question of Good and Evil, the event of conversion results in singularly ethical principles that emerge as an exception to the world/situation. Through this conversion, a liturgy of Dalit Buddhism emerges as a possible mode of existence. This insistence on ethical principles is due to Ambedkar's singular political truths that are at once collective and universal. The conversion of approximately 500,000 Dalits toward a newly embraced existence in Buddhism represented a significant political event in Ambedkar's life. This political event reveals the systemic injustices inflicted upon the untouchables, who have now resolved to align themselves with the emergent principles of justice and equality. This political event initiates the affirmation and delineation of the truth concerning the collective subject, which is embodied in the Buddhist *Sangha* as an organizational entity. It is not the individual *Bhikkhu* who relinquishes private property, but rather the *Sangha* that espouses the abolition of private property as a mechanism to achieve social equality. An ethical tenet of the *Sangha* is to educate the subjects through a commitment to Buddhist principles:

The liturgy of the emancipated sangha is also a service of thought of principles embodied in a world of reciprocal and egalitarian dispositions. 'Education' is the name of an

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intellectual liturgy on behalf of the intellect itself, insofar as the latter is not a measurable individual attribute but a universal world of dispositions.⁴⁰

Education here does not mean institutional education; rather, as Badiou puts it, political education means 'getting schooled by an event,'⁴¹ which means constructing ideas based on real political events by studying and analyzing them. With these measures, the goal is to 'educate the masses by themselves, (or after the event, through the event). This education, according to great leaders like Mao, will lead people to discern between just and unjust, true and untrue and good and evil. It is not just Mao, but Saint Just, The Buddha, Saint Kabeer, or Babasaheb Ambedkar who teaches the principle of 'be your own light.' This is the capacity to think, to discern between just and unjust. To think as equals and not under any monopoly of thought or violence.

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⁴⁰ Shoumybrata Choudhary, "Comparative Liturgy: A Study of New Congregations," in *Liberation Theology and Dalit Buddhism, Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 12 (Winter 2025), 45.

⁴¹ Bruno Bosteels, "Translators Introduction," in *Can Politics be Thought?* trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Duke University Press, 2018), 11.

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Article

Confronting the Alienating Gaze towards the Ageing Individual

Paula Nicole C. Eugenio

Abstract: In this paper, I explore how ageing people experience a dehumanizing gaze that transforms them into objects of sympathy or uselessness or helplessness, which impacts their self-image, emotional state, and social connections. I do this through Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of the gaze and Simone Weil's concept of attention vis-à-vis the alienating experiences of older adults. From Sartre, I show how the gaze functions as a source of social exclusion for elderly people, while Weil's concept of attention presents an opposing way to handle the objectifying gaze. I establish a dialogue between the two philosophers to demonstrate our ethical duty when interacting with older adults through attention as a validation of the natural dignity of ageing people while understanding their pain as a demand for justice, love, and compassion. The dialogue operates through dialectical means because Sartre's phenomenology shows how objectification risks occur through the closed gaze, and Weil's ethics of attention reveals the opposing practice of open gaze, yet these two do not produce a unified solution. This paper contributes to ageing studies through the development of a phenomenological and ethical framework to understand the ageing body while advocating for improved ways to interact with elderly people.

Keywords: Sartre, Weil, ageing, alienation

Old age¹ represents a natural universal process that humans need to experience during their developmental life cycle. The main changes people experience during this stage primarily affect their physical

¹ The paper uses "the elderly," "older adults," "older population," and "ageing individuals" interchangeably to describe people who reach their life cycle's later stages. I will explore the deeper conceptual issue of alienation that ageing individuals experience. The confrontation between ageing individuals and their sense of estrangement emerges from analyzing physical changes alongside social attitudes and institutional frameworks which lead to self-disconnection and social isolation. The paper's central argument about ageing as an existential and relational disconnection receives direct attention through its title focus on "alienation."

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<https://doi.org/10.25138/19.2.a3>

https://www.kritike.org/journal/issue_37/eugenio_september2025.pdf

ISSN 1908-7330



appearance while also reducing their strength and autonomy.² Physical transformations during ageing become the most noticeable indicators of ageing, because they influence both how the elderly view themselves and how society treats them.

Modern cultural practices toward elderly people reveal the dominant social views about ageing in today's society. The norm in numerous Western nations consists of institutionalized elderly care through nursing facilities. The Philippines has begun adopting this approach through the establishment of some aged residential facilities in its urban areas. These facilities provide a practical solution for adult children who lack the ability to personally care for their ageing parents, yet they create significant emotional and financial challenges. The modern approach represents a complete break from traditional Filipino cultural norms based on family responsibility. The definition of modern cultural practices does not create a straightforward distinction between Western and Philippine cultures. The ageing experiences of Filipinos occur in a mixed environment because Western-style institutional eldercare exists alongside traditional family-based caregiving practices. The interpretive framework presented in this work does not create a binary opposition between Western and Filipino cultures but shows how global ageist marginalization patterns transform local caregiving standards. The analysis of the Sartre–Weil dialectic within this hybrid context reveals the ethical conflicts that occur when family-based eldercare traditions encounter institutional and neoliberal elderly care systems. The traditional approach also comes with various challenges despite its advantages. The dependent relationship between ageing parents and their children through caregiving maintains a basis in care but leads to feelings of social isolation. The reduction of elderly people to economically dependent and physically fragile individuals results in their treatment as burdens instead of dignified persons with agency.³ Through this process, older adults experience a silent marginalization that prevents them from participating actively in society.

In this paper, I examine the current social exclusion and marginalization that affect elderly people at present. I will use Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of the gaze to study the methods through which ageing individuals become objectified by other people.⁴ I maintain that the way people look at others diminishes their being and reduces their emotional strength. I will use Simone Weil's ethical concept of attention to develop an

² Thomas R. Cole, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Ageing in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 2.

³ Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 12-15.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), 340.

alternative method for observing and connecting with others. This framework uses Sartre and Weil as central interlocutors instead of other thinkers who have studied ageing and perception because their work best explains the alienating effect of being seen. The phenomenological approach of Sartre's *le regard* theory specifically reveals how ageing makes individuals vulnerable to being transformed from subjects into objects. Sartre specifically reveals how ageing makes subjects vulnerable to the gaze of others through his work, although Simone de Beauvoir studied ageing as cultural exile and Maurice Merleau-Ponty focused on embodied reciprocity. The vulnerability of subjectivity under the other's gaze becomes more pronounced during the ageing process according to Sartre. Sartre fails to provide any direction about ethical responses to such alienation. The framework then requires Weil's essential contribution. Through her concept of attention, Weil establishes a practice of perception which depends on humility, love, and receptive openness. Weil presents a non-possessive openness which enables others to appear without appropriation, while Emmanuel Levinas describes the face as a command for responsibility, and Iris Murdoch defines the just and loving gaze. The ethical vision presented by Weil directly addresses the common experiences of invisibility and infantilization that older adults face. The framework of Sartre and Weil presents a dialectical system where Sartre identifies objectification risks and Weil develops a method of attention that restores dignity. The dialectical approach I describe does not follow Hegelian synthesis but creates a tension between Sartre's analysis of alienating gaze and Weil's ethics of attention, which enhance each other. The distinction between the closed and open gaze emerges as a dialectical pair because the closed gaze reveals how ageing individuals become objectified, yet the open gaze shows how ethical attention can prevent this reduction.

The Ageing Process and Its Challenges

Life naturally includes ageing as a fundamental element. People who live into their older years experience both the accumulation of wisdom, reflective abilities, the decline of their capacities, and the loss of important aspects of life. In developmental psychology, scholars study old age as the concluding life period, which brings distinct responsibilities and profound existential obstacles. According to Erik Erikson, integrity and despair form the psychosocial conflict during this stage, while Robert Havighurst lists declining health and retirement and changing social roles as developmental tasks.⁵ These theoretical frameworks show that ageing exists beyond

⁵ Erik H. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed* (New York: Norton, 1982); See Robert J. Havighurst, "Developmental Tasks and Education," in *Journal of Education*, 96 (1973), 5.

biological changes because it involves personal aspects and social interactions.

In this paper, I examine ageing through social and philosophical perspectives while excluding biological, psychological, and economic aspects. The exclusion of biological, psychological, and economic factors from ageing does not imply their irrelevance to the process. Pascal Massie and Mitchell Staude explain that ageing unites biological elements with personal aspects and social dimensions. The reduction of ageing or the selection of one aspect over others fails in understanding the complete phenomenon. The ageing process creates an unresolvable complex nature.⁶ The selection of philosophical aspects in my research stems from a focus on scope rather than purposeful exclusion. This paper aims to establish dialogue between existential-ethical analysis and ageing studies, which lacks sufficient philosophical investigation. The research incorporates biological and psychological findings when they support the main philosophical inquiry about how different ways of observing older adults affect their dignity, agency, and their visibility. Horace Kallen correctly explained that ageing describes the complete span from birth to death which modern society uses to describe an advanced period of life after reaching adulthood.⁷ According to his observations, ageing represents more than temporal progression because it evolves into a social and cultural phenomenon that gains importance during the later stages of life. Social gerontology establishes its claim upon the shift from bodily perspectives to self-perception within social frameworks, as this field evaluates how older adults are treated by society.⁸

Through social gerontology, the field transforms the physical aspects of ageing into an examination of how society views elderly individuals, their social positions, and social exclusion. Social status refers to the elderly population's material well-being, along with their treatment and perception by society.⁹ The physical changes that accompany ageing including declining mobility and appearance alterations along with diminished productivity result in social detachment from others. Instead of experiencing old age as a period of rest and reflection for fulfillment, many elderly people suffer from emotional states of loss and desolation. Later life dignity erodes primarily because of feeling unimportant instead of physical limitations. The

⁶ See Pascal Massie and Mitchell Staude, "Ageing-in-the-World," in *Continental Philosophy Review*, 57 (2024).

⁷ See Horace Kallen, "Philosophy, Ageing, and the Aged," in *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 6 (1972), 4.

⁸ Harry R. Moody and Jennifer R. Sasser, *Ageing: Concepts and Controversies*, 9th ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2017), 64.

⁹ See Chris Gillead and Paul Higgs, "Gerontology versus Geriatrics: Different Ways of Understanding Ageing and Old Age," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Philosophy of Ageing*, ed. by Geoffrey Scarre (UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 38.

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unfavorable ageing experiences emerge from social frameworks which people develop through their collective reactions and interactions. The elderly population becomes invisible in modern society. The term “modern society” describes cultural environments from late modernity which base their values on consumerism and neoliberalism while emphasizing youthfulness, productivity, and independence. The sociological meaning of invisibility refers to social exclusion and silenced voices instead of actual disappearance. Older adults continue to appear in family settings and cultural media, but their viewpoints remain ignored while their roles become minimized, and their existence is mainly seen as requiring care. The social structures of today create widespread yet incomplete invisibility for ageing individuals. People evaluate the worth of elders through their economic value and their ability to fit in the societal norms of youthful energy. Jean Améry argues that society tends to view elderly people as nothing.¹⁰ Using postcolonial theory, the concept of the subaltern developed by Gayatri Spivak emphasizes how the elderly face similar marginalization as colonized peoples by losing their ability to self-represent.¹¹ They exist without being heard because their voices remain disregarded. The public sphere silences them so their pain becomes inaudible, and their personal identity disappears. The described social situation exists worldwide beyond the Philippines. The Filipino population displays global patterns of elderly marginalization through disregard as well as tokenistic treatment and institutional placement. The elderly face frequent treatment as nuisances instead of receiving recognition for their life experiences and remaining abilities.

Academic research about ageing exists in a state of underdevelopment across various fields. Philosophy shows a distinct absence of attention to this topic. The fundamental existential concepts of death, freedom, and embodiment receive more attention in philosophical discourse than ageing does. The field of ageing has received substantial philosophical attention.¹² On another note, the Philippines limits gerontological studies to psychology and sociology which creates a theoretical void that this research

¹⁰ See Jean Améry, *On Ageing, Revolt and Resignation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1968), 68.

¹¹ Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 276.

¹² *The Coming of Age* by Simone de Beauvoir stands as a fundamental work, while Margaret Gullette, Hanne Laceulle, and *The Palgrave Handbook of the Philosophy of Ageing* showcase the gradual growth of this field. The phenomenological study by Pascal Massie and Mitchell Staude titled “Ageing-in-the-World” follows this direction of research. The number of philosophical works about ageing remains significantly lower than the extensive body of literature on death, freedom, and embodiment in existential philosophy. The philosophy of ageing exists as an underdeveloped field which requires additional systematic research rather than being considered a complete void. The current paper aims to contribute through this approach.

paper aims to fill.¹³ The complete comprehension of ageing as a human experience requires philosophical examination to study social alienation and visibility issues that older adults encounter because of ageist discrimination. The philosophical approach functions as a methodological bracketing which enables the existential-ethical aspects of ageing to become more apparent. The psychological frameworks (e.g., Havighurst) and feminist phenomenology (e.g., Young) enhance the philosophical analysis instead of replacing it.

The complete understanding of older adult marginalization requires us to shift from sociological descriptions and psychological diagnoses toward phenomenological and existential analysis. The framework receives its phenomenological designation because it studies how elderly people experience ageing through their self-perception when others observe them. The concept of existentialism reveals how ageing creates freedom, alienation, and embodiment as fundamental human conditions that face a crisis. The ontological signals demonstrate that the ageing subject transforms from being a subject into an object through the social relation of the gaze. The ethical framework extends beyond description because it establishes a responsibility model for our interactions with others. The analysis includes analytical elements because it separates open from closed gaze to reveal the differences between various observation methods. I establish its methodological foundation through these combined terms. The elderly experience invisibility and muted subjectivity not primarily because of physical changes or altered social roles, but because others fail to recognize them as subjects—persons with histories, agency, and dignity—rather than as mere embodiments of decline.¹⁴ The process of being observed and evaluated by others becomes essential for understanding the internal feelings of alienation that occur during ageing. The process of losing personal control over identity while others start to objectify older people represents a fundamental ontological issue. The existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre provides valuable insights at this point. Through Sartre's concept of the look (*le regard*), "we can understand how elderly people become objects in society because they

¹³ The majority of Philippine gerontological scholarship exists within psychology and sociology because researchers focus on demographic changes and family caregiving systems and psychosocial adjustments. The UP Population Institute published Grace T. Cruz's *Ageing in the Philippines: Issues and Challenges* in 2019, while Adrian N.S. Badana and Ross Andel wrote "Aging in the Philippines" for *The Gerontologist* in 2018. The existing research provides important insights but fail to examine the philosophical and ethical aspects of ageing. The present research addresses two main issues: the general lack of attention to ageing in philosophical studies and the specific need for Philippine philosophical examination of ageing as a systematic problem.

¹⁴ I used the term "true form" to refer to the understanding of older adults as narrative beings who create their own meaning rather than being defined by biological deterioration or economic need. In *Ageing and Self-Realization: Cultural Narratives About Later Life* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2018), Hanne Laceulle shows how ageing persons should be viewed independently of deficit-based cultural scripts.

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experience fixation and marginalization while losing their complete subjectivity in a culture that values youth and utility and seeks visibility.”¹⁵ Sartre’s philosophical ideas about the look are complemented by Simone Weil, who developed a Christian mystical approach to ethical attention. The theological context of Weil’s work does not prevent her from defining attention as the rarest and purest form of generosity which stands in opposition to Sartre’s phenomenological study of the look. Weil presents an opposing method of observation which avoids objectification while preserving the dignity of others through generous attention.

Sartre’s Notion of the Look

The study of older adults’ internal suffering and marginalization requires moving past sociological descriptions to perform a phenomenological investigation which explores how others affect subjective experiences. The concept of the look (*le regard*) developed by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* provides this analytical framework. According to Sartre, we are not isolated consciousnesses. Our existence exists within the social world because we exist as objects for others. Through the Other’s look, we become visible, but this visibility comes at a cost: it objectifies us.¹⁶

The experience of being looked at by another person reveals to me that I exist both as an active subject and an observed object. The awareness of being observed leads me to recognize that others judge and interpret me. The Other’s gaze transforms me into a being who exists for the Other beyond my self-perceived identity.¹⁷ The encounter changes my status from a self-creating consciousness to an object that exists within the perspective of another person. The look establishes intersubjective relations yet creates alienation because my identity becomes defined by external perspectives rather than my own self-authorship. This process creates negative effects that often produce anxiety and shame and cause people to accept restrictive stories.

Sartre’s framework becomes particularly important when applied to the study of ageing. Older adults face continuous social scrutiny that carries cultural stereotypes about ageing that link it to physical deterioration, cognitive decline, uselessness, and dependency. These gazes persist beyond

¹⁵ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 282-285. In particular, the keyhole voyeur vignette illustrating how the gaze of the Other transforms subjectivity into objecthood. See Luna Dolezal, “Shame, Vulnerability and Belonging: Reconsidering Sartre’s Account of Shame,” in *Human Studies*, 40 (2017), which situates Sartre’s gaze within broader phenomenological and ethical frameworks.

¹⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 340.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 345.

casual observation because they exist as institutionalized forms of perception throughout media, healthcare, and everyday social interactions.¹⁸ The elderly become trapped by these forced identities that Kathleen Woodward describes as “the mirror of age.”¹⁹

The experience of objectification exists beyond philosophical ontology²⁰ because it directly affects how people perceive themselves in their everyday lives. The gaze performs more than observation because it penetrates through skin layers to affect psychological states which determine self-perception. The way society views ageing bodies creates psychological distress which leads to feelings of self-worth decline and social exclusion and emotional detachment. The experiences described by Sartre demonstrate affective alienation which results in both lost agency and declining vitality because the world no longer validates one’s worth. Objectification transforms from a philosophical concept into a fundamental existential and bodily experience. The weight of existence that many ageing people carry includes both their frail bodies and their self-image that external observers have reshaped. The ageist gaze makes this situation worse because it turns elderly people into functional problems to be managed instead of seeing them as persons with agency, histories, relationships, and dignity that continue beyond decline.²¹ The gaze fails to recognize elderly individuals as narrative beings who possess memories, experiences, and exercise agency. The focus of this gaze rests on decline indicators such as tremors, forgetfulness, and wrinkles which lead to silent conclusions of inadequacy. Sartre warns about the complete power of the Other’s gaze which removes the subject’s freedom and potential.²² In *The Coming of Age*, Simone de Beauvoir shares similar concerns about how society handles older adults by stating that society actively removes them from meaningful human existence instead of just ignoring them. She maintains that the aged receive treatment as if they belong to a different species which results in their symbolic and existential removal

¹⁸ See T. Storm Heter, “Sartre and the Gaze: From Shame to Liberation,” in *Sartre Studies International*, 9 (2003), 53.

¹⁹ Kathleen Woodward, *Statistical Panic: Cultural Politics and Poetics of the Emotions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 195.

²⁰ I used the phrase *beyond ontology* to mean that the concept of objectification extends past philosophical ontology because it represents a lived experience which produces concrete psychological and social effects. In this sense, Sartre uses the concept of the gaze in *Being and Nothingness* to transition from an ontological explanation of intersubjectivity toward an existential and phenomenological analysis of alienation in real-life experiences.

²¹ The concept of “full personhood” refers to the acknowledgment of older adults as beings who possess experiences and meaning while maintaining their agency and dignity instead of being viewed as dependent bodies. This concept aligns with the “true form” I previously described which represents the actual lived experience of the ageing self. Laceulle explores this concept in *Ageing and Self-Realization: Cultural Narratives About Later Life*.

²² See Gail Linsenbard, *Starting with Sartre* (London: Continuum, 2008), 98.

from the common structures that organize daily life.²³ The elderly exist outside the productive, desirable, and progressive social time framework which defines normal temporal structures. The elderly experience denial of both visibility and temporality because society views them as past remnants instead of present participants or future contributors. She maintains that old age transforms into a social state of non-existence which creates a transitional phase where people lose their human status in the eyes of others. Ageing functions as both a biological transition and a social punishment that removes individuals from meaningful existence. The dehumanizing removal of elderly people from social interactions occurs through institutional rules and cultural beliefs as well as through the way we observe them. The way we perceive others and the permission we give them to be perceived establishes their position within the current moral and social structure.

The way people observe does not exist as a single uniform practice. In my reading of Sartre, there are two distinct forms of observation: the open gaze and the closed gaze. A note on terminology: I use multiple contrastive pairs which include alienation vs. connection, sympathy vs. dignity, and visibility vs. invisibility. I use these terms to describe different aspects of a single dialectical framework rather than presenting them as separate conceptual systems. The core distinction exists between the closed and open gaze. The open gaze functions to validate and dignify while creating connections between people, but the closed gaze performs objectification, exclusion, and infantilization. The other paired terms should be interpreted as different aspects or effects of this fundamental dialectic instead of functioning as separate binary oppositions.

Going back to the open gaze, it functions as an ethical perception method because it refrains from making judgments while creating opportunities for disclosure and maintaining space for others to present themselves naturally. The open gaze functions similarly to Levinas's "face-to-face" encounter because it resists converting the other into a category.²⁴ Levinas describes the face as more than physical appearance because it reveals the absolute uniqueness of the other person. True recognition of the other occurs through their disruptive presence which forces us into responsibility. Through open observation, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in support of Sartre, argues that we experience perception reversibility which reveals that seeing another person means being seen by them, and this mutual

²³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. by Patrick O'Brian (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 284.

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 194.

visibility produces an ethical bond.²⁵ The space of mutual visibility creates a field where the ageing body moves from being an inanimate viewing object to an active perceptive entity. The reversibility breaks down the observer–observed hierarchy which enables a more reciprocal mutual mode of being-together. The elderly possess both perception and expression abilities despite their physical weakness because they remain active subjects who can see and respond. The open gaze seeks to identify unfinished human elements in the ageing subject while avoiding their deficit-based perceptions, such as wrinkles and forgetfulness. The gaze of the open eye rejects the “arrogant eye” approach which Iris Marion Young describes as viewing others from a place of dominance or observation or emotional detachment.²⁶ Through this vision, she identifies embodied vision as a type of perception which combines situated partial perception with attentive awareness of the lived experience of others. When working with elderly people, it becomes essential to understand their unique nature through focused attention because their experiences cannot be reduced to abstract concepts or common traits.

Through the open gaze, people establish a connection with others instead of simply perceiving them. With this, the elderly gain permission to show themselves without undergoing any form of correction or pity, or infantilization. The process of disclosure happens beyond words because it emerges through body movements, quietness, and deliberate pacing as well as emotional connection. To perceive these expressions correctly, the observer needs to develop Simone Weil’s concept of attention, which she explains as the most exceptional and purest form of generosity.²⁷ In this context, attention represents a moral approach which means being available to others. A person needs to clear their mind of preconceived notions so that the genuine nature of the other person can emerge. When looking at elderly people we should view them as persons who maintain their capacity to experience joy, along with obtaining valuable insights and establishing meaningful relationships.

The ethical way of looking at people includes political effects. A society that bases its visibility systems on usefulness and productivity faces resistance through the practice of extending open observation to elderly individuals. The open gaze breaks the dominant cultural belief that ageing makes people irrelevant, creating space for new narratives about caregiving relationships, spiritual development, and creative expression during older adulthood. Hanne Laceulle maintains that we require an ethics of ageing that

²⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 133.

²⁶ Iris Marion Young, *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 123.

²⁷ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. by Emma Craufurd (New York: Perennial, 2001), 64.

uses narrative approaches to surpass biological and economic evaluation by listening to life stories of becoming.²⁸ The open gaze establishes the condition for this listening to occur. Through the open gaze, we must reconsider both our views on ageing people and our understanding of the nature of time. The closed gaze supports the concept of *chrononormativity* which Barbara Adam describes as a strict temporal system that measures life through developmental events and economic productivity.²⁹ The open gaze fights against the strict timeline by establishing that time during old age remains valuable and meaningful. Such time holds ethical worth. A society needs the open gaze to uphold human dignity from birth until death because it is essential for any community that wants to maintain dignity throughout all life stages. This transformation of care into a moral interaction occurs through the open gaze. Through frailty, a person continues to be a meaning-making subject. This method restores in elderly individuals the face that ageist culture habitually removes from them. The distinction between open and closed gazes exists as a dynamic system rather than a fixed typology. The open gaze gains its ethical importance through the threats which the closed gaze presents, yet the closed gaze requires the open gaze to demonstrate its complete meaning. The ethical significance of our visual interactions with ageing people emerges from their dialectical relationship.

The closed gaze, on the other hand, functions as an oppressive form of practice. It assumes, defines, and imposes. The ageing body receives interpretation through a restricted viewpoint which focuses on perceived losses while ignoring ongoing developments. Modern societies display a widespread closed gaze because they both worship youth while fearing the process of ageing. According to Margaret Gullette's "decline narratives" theory, cultural training programs teach people to view ageing as a complete loss of beauty along with competence, energy, and relevance.³⁰ Such narratives create heavy burdens that transform good intentions into paternalistic or patronizing behavior. Family members start to replace the elderly person's voice with their own instead of engaging in dialogue, while institutions focus on safety measures that strip away the elderly person's autonomy. The loss of autonomy emerges directly from the closed gaze because it makes assumptions about ageing people's identities, capabilities, and their acceptable life choices. Annette Baier identifies a moral deficiency in intergenerational ethics by showing how elderly people receive treatment

²⁸ Laceulle, *Ageing and Self-Realization: Cultural Narratives About Later Life*, 129.

²⁹ Barbara Adam, *Timewatch: The Social Analysis of Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 102.

³⁰ Gullette, *Aged by Culture*, 25.

as if their preferences lose validity when their youth ends.³¹ The closed gaze functions as both a method of observation and an instrument of epistemic injustice because it treats elderly individuals as objects of concern while denying them the status of knowledge producers or meaning makers.

The closed gaze exists because neoliberal values emphasize productivity alongside independence. Societies that measure worth through output create subtle social exclusion for people who appear unproductive. The closed gaze portrays ageing as a moral deficiency because it displays dependency and decay which ultimately lead to death. Cultural theorist Susan Sontag examines how illness and ageing become symbolic representations of weakness and waste through language which actively contributes to the marginalization of ageing bodies.³² Through its dual nature, the closed gaze operates as both an ethical framework and an aesthetic perspective. The closed gaze observes elderly people but fails to penetrate their inner selves, as it detects deterioration instead of life experience and uselessness instead of inner strength. The transformation of our ageing, relational, and responsibility perspectives requires more than criticism because it needs a complete shift in how we envision these concepts. The open form of the gaze needs development because it requires us to suspend judgment while enabling dialogue and recognizing the complete personhood of ageing subjects beyond their biological limitations and societal fears.

The ethical significance of our observation methods toward others, particularly the elderly population, reaches its peak level. Sartre's phenomenology demonstrates that observation always carries an unneutral quality. Our observation practices either restrict or free people while simultaneously creating alienation or affirmation. We need to determine methods of observation that prevent reduction of others. A gaze that enables elderly people to show their complete being rather than viewing them as historical remnants while maintaining their current dignity and upcoming possibilities.

Sartre shows how observation affects human existence through his work which demonstrates how perception functions as both a liberating and imprisoning force that leads to alienation or affirmation. Observation of elderly people needs to evolve beyond its current passive or diagnostic nature into a moral response. A new form of observation should exist which prevents the reduction of others to their physical weaknesses while avoiding the fixation of their identity to past times.

³¹ Annette C. Baier, *Reflections on How We Live* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 82.

³² See Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador, 2001), 90.

Simone Weil's Attention

The essential contribution of Simone Weil emerges at this point. Weil argues that attention represents a state of being present which surpasses basic observation because it actively resists the urge to control or define others. The open gaze risks establishing dominance, but Weil's attention starts with silent humility and the readiness to hear the other person through their presence, even if they do not speak. Through Weil, we transition from an ethics of vision to an ethics of receptivity which enables us to see without consuming but instead through listening.

The essential question—*What kind of response does seeing the elderly suffer demand of us?*—emerges when elderly people experience alienation because it demands our response to their suffering. Simone Weil provides the most profound yet challenging answer about how to respond to an ageing person's suffering, through the practice of attention. The world's dominant structures of distraction and individualism, together with instrumentalized care, require a complete shift in perception which Weil calls ethics of attention. Weil restores attention to its ethical nature by defining it as an intentional unselfing practice which reveals the other person in their complete singularity.³³ The need for this specific kind of attention becomes most critical during the ageing process. Older adults receive treatment as problems to be managed alongside pity-based responses which fail to acknowledge their complete personhood. Weil's definition of attention for the elderly means being fully present to them without any judgment or agenda while dropping protective filters that reduce authentic moral connections. The importance of attention in ageing becomes evident when we examine Frits de Lange's concept of "existential gravity of ageing." According to de Lange, suffering from old age includes illness, fragility, and exclusion but suffering in old age refers to the existential burden of dependency and loss and the approaching end of life.³⁴ Weil argues that understanding attention stays with suffering without dismissing or fixing it while acknowledging the actual condition of the afflicted person. The elderly need this form of generosity because they experience silent and invisible suffering which goes beyond medical treatment. Through her ethical framework, Weil converts ageing from a marginalized state into a place where human dignity remains visible during periods of decline. Iris Murdoch supports Weil's discussion on attention and maintains that it means directing

³³ See Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology: The Theology of Yesterday for Help Today* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1997), 132.

³⁴ Frits de Lange, "Suffering from or in Old Age? The Existential Gravity of Ageing," in *Journal of Population Ageing*, 14 (2021), 357.

a just and loving gaze toward individual realities.³⁵ The perception of others requires looking beyond their usefulness in society or productivity to see them through the perspectives of love and justice.

Weil maintains that developing this ethical form of attention serves both personal virtues, social and moral responsibilities. She maintains that modern society, which emphasizes ambition, ego, and speed, destroys our ability to focus on others, particularly those who need our attention most.³⁶ The elderly face the highest risk of losing their capacity for attention because society views them through negative lenses. Weil demands that people practice “active passivity” which means waiting instead of seeking and listening instead of imposing.³⁷ The practice of ageing requires us to fight against speaking on behalf of elderly people so they can express themselves freely.

The highest expression of attention merges with the essence of love. Weil explains that intellectual attention requires the addition of acceptance, consent, and love, which form a higher level of attention.³⁸ Weil defines love as a moral openness which grants reality to the other person. Emmanuel Gabellieri argues that Weil believes attention brings the other into existence by giving them moral weight, value, and existence in the moral universe.³⁹ Through attention we actively bring the other person into existence.

The divine presence that flows from others should be recognized as the true nature of such love instead of viewing it as selfless giving. Weil maintains that love, which starts with consent, differs from desire-driven love because it represents openness toward loving without seeking possession or results.⁴⁰ The Christian ethical *caritas* finds expression in this kind of love which develops from justice alongside humility and respect for human nature. Weil presents a form of neighborly love which opposes utilitarian ethics because it reveals suffering persons as sacred rather than moral objects. The importance of this concept becomes particularly evident when observing how society handles ageing individuals. In Weil’s ethical framework, we must develop a new way of seeing that brings back dignity to people whom society treats as invisible burdens or disposable objects. Loving the elderly other involves more than functional care because it establishes their status as

³⁵ See Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), 34.

³⁶ See Weil, *Waiting for God*, 65-66.

³⁷ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. by Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge, 2002), 117.

³⁸ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 66.

³⁹ Emmanuel Gabellieri, “Simone Weil: Attention and the Gaze,” in *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, ed. by Athanasios Moulakis (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 98.

⁴⁰ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 108.

individuals who experience both physical and emotional states and hold sacred inner depths.

Weil rejects any religious practice that transforms neighborly love into a way for personal spiritual advancement. According to Weil, true love exists independently of our actions “for God” since it flows through us as God loves the afflicted through our willingness to consent.⁴¹ In this view, we are not the origin of compassion; we are its conduits. Weil’s ethics prove challenging yet essential because they demand our personal diminishment to enable the other person’s growth.

Through our attentiveness, we provide more than care because we actively participate in just actions. Attention establishes a connection which unites separate individuals and hidden people with their rightful place in the world. This kind of moral vision serves as a survival tool for elderly people because their suffering exists as an internal, subtle, and often silenced experience. Through attention we give back to people not only visibility but also meaningfulness.

Towards an Ethical Framework of Ageing from Sartre and Weil

The philosophical perspectives of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone Weil derive from distinct intellectual backgrounds of existential phenomenology and Christian mysticism, yet they develop a productive combination when analyzing the topic of ageing. The concept of the gaze from Sartre’s philosophy precisely illustrates the way human subjects become defenseless when confronted with observing individuals, while their identity gets distorted through others’ objectifying perception. The way others observe elderly people leads to their social estrangement because they face either condescending or dismissive, or paternalistic evaluations which diminish their independence and dignity. As bodies under decline, they lose their status as agents along with their ability to think or bear meaningful content.

Alienation exists as an existential, social, and structural experience. These social norms demonstrate the core values of modernity because they value productivity together with youth status, independence, and new ideas. Modern society views elderly individuals as temporal anomalies which exist outside the framework of “chrononormativity” according to Barbara Adam’s definition of time norms based on work efficiency and contribution. Simone de Beauvoir describes elderly individuals as “exiled from the human condition” because they exist in a timeless state between their past memories and their becoming irrelevant. According to Sartre, exile results from how others perceive age as well as from the effects of ageing itself.

⁴¹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 120-121.

Sartre stops at describing the problem but does not explain how to solve it. Sartre provides a method for analyzing the experience of being observed, yet he fails to establish a set of rules for ethical observation. Simone Weil provides essential guidance because she developed the concept of attention which functions as a moral practice that transforms how people perceive things. According to Weil, active passivity refers to a state of readiness that accepts the full uniqueness of others without any form of intervention or judgment, or appropriation. Through this form of attention, one resists the tendency to own or to form assumptions or to establish definitions. Sartre and Weil present an ethical system that consists of recognizing dangerous observations and acquiring responsible observational skills.

The analysis demonstrates that the relative position between open and closed gazes operates as a dialectical framework. The categories exist in a dynamic relationship because Sartre reveals the alienating power of the closed gaze and Weil presents attention as the practice that defines the open gaze. The ethical framework for dealing with ageing emerges from their interactive relationship. The ethical framework presented by Sartre and Weil functions dialectically to show the risks of looking according to Sartre and the method of responsible looking as taught by Weil. This framework can be articulated through the distinction between the closed gaze and the open gaze. The ageing person faces a reduction to a specific role or function or deficit when people view them through a closed perspective according to both Sartre's and Weil's assessments. The body gets treated as an icon of what is lost instead of being seen as a life-giving container. The silence of elderly people results primarily from the failure to hear them rather than any intention to harm. Such behavior results in both infantilization and neglect while also causing overwhelming inappropriate care.

The open gaze represents more than passive observation since it establishes a moral attitude. The open gaze incorporates Sartre's knowledge of mutual human exposure while following Weil's guidance for *unpossessive* love. The open gaze waits *and* listens. The gaze resists taking over silence through superficial answers or incorrect consolation. The open gaze enables elderly people to communicate their personal experiences and maintain control over their expression of self while preventing others from reducing them to their age or their needs. A person maintains complete ontological dignity regardless of their physical condition or social isolation.

The unified framework provides essential guidance to structure both institutional arrangements and interpersonal bonds. Caregivers display their commitment to elderly care through their choice to view their patients either as care partners or as a completion of tasks. The manner of speaking between adult children and their ageing parents depends on this perspective. Public

discussions about ageing will either present it as a crisis or as a valuable stage of life when people explore its deep spiritual, philosophical, and emotional aspects. The framework presents the opportunity to review our time-related interactions. Weil's ethical framework based on attention functions at a pace that opposes the fast-moving approaches of consumerism and medicalized ageing practices. Some essential truths about vulnerability, along with finitude and grace, become accessible only through periods of stillness and patience. Through this approach, attention serves both as an ethical response toward elderly people and as a spiritual way to fight the dehumanizing fast pace of contemporary existence.

This synthesis between Sartre and Weil establishes a fresh approach to ageing philosophy which accepts dependence, slowness, and death as chances for profound moral relationships. The philosophical perspective understands ageing as an initiation point which leads to different methods of observation and forms of existence and affection.

The act of observing older people with complete attention means we are present in this moment. Our existence counts. Our life continues in its development.

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Article

Rethinking the Neoliberal University through Byung-Chul Han (First of Two Parts)

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Abstract: In this paper, I engage the neoliberalization of universities using insights from Byung-Chul Han. Specifically, I criticize the neoliberal university's absolute prioritization of what Han calls the *vita activa* (active life) over the *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life). I argue that the emphasis the neoliberal university places on activity or work is crippling its own capacity to think. I begin by expositing Han's insight that thinking and knowledge flourishes during moments of inactivity or leisure, i.e., the *vita contemplativa*. Next, I present a brief sketch of the neoliberal university and, using Han's language, emphasize how work and performance have become its central categories, eventually diminishing the role of inactivity or leisure within its walls. Afterwards, I show that the absolutization of the *vita activa* has crippled thinking within the confines of the university. This atrophy of thought is manifested in various areas, such as the informatization of teaching, the inability to criticize the status quo, the production of superficial and inferior research publications, and the fading of the spirit of community. Finally, this paper ends with an appraisal of the *vita contemplativa* as a counterbalance to the neoliberal strictures on thinking within the university.

Keywords: Han, achievement society, neoliberal university, *vita contemplativa*

With a few exceptions, universities across the globalized parts of the world have become neoliberal institutions. Accordingly, corporate-inspired schemes—such as managerialism, audit, transparency, commercialization, standardization, league tables, and metrics—that drive the ceaseless demand for production, optimization,

efficiency, competition, and so on, now define their day-to-day operations.¹ It is not surprising then that the culture and everyday work in universities now closely resemble the ethos of hyperactivity and optimization so prevalent in today's corporate world. Correlatively, across many neoliberal universities spaces and time to do nothing particularly productive are becoming less and less common.² Indeed, the corporate ethic of busyness, hyperactivity, and productivity has seemingly become the accepted way of doing things.

This paper attempts to problematize the neoliberal university's apparent fetishization of activity and busyness using the philosophical framework of Byung-Chul Han. Specifically, my analysis will center on Han's insight that thinking and contemplation—the *vita contemplativa*—primarily emerge during moments of inactivity.³ Inactivity in the Hanian sense is a type of doing that has no end; an act that is free from purpose or usefulness, like forms of leisure.⁴ The problem, however, is that, from the viewpoint of the performance-driven neoliberal regime—where one's worth is defined by one's productivity—this type of purposeless doing is treated, Han says, “as a deficiency that must be overcome as quickly as possible.”⁵ In applying Han's insights to the neoliberal university, my argument is twofold. First, the paper argues that the neoliberal university's overemphasis on activity or work has crippled thinking within its walls. Shoving the cult of productivity and efficiency down the gullets of academics and students reduces them to mere machines that cannot pause and think but must simply execute, to a certain degree mindlessly, one task after another. Hence, as I will show later, what is common in universities today is the production of uninspiring and unoriginal research papers, the erosion of pedagogical techniques that demand thinking, the general disability to connect the dots between disparate pieces of information, and the erosion of the spirit of community. And second, that to ameliorate its capacity to think, the university must rehabilitate its ability to be inactive. This entails that the university must, to a certain extent, insulate itself from the logic of neoliberalism. Educating for economic growth has its own

¹ See, for example, Igea Troiani and Claudia Dutson, “The Neoliberal University as a Space to Learn/Think/Work in Higher Education,” in *Architecture and Culture*, 9:1 (2021), 12; Daniel Saunders, “The Impact of Neoliberalism on College Students,” in *Journal of College and Character*, 8:5 (2007), 2; and Gina Anderson, “Carving out time and space in the managerial university,” in *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 19:5 (2006), 579.

² For this discussion, see Troiani and Dutson, “The Neoliberal University as a Space to Learn/Think/Work in Higher Education,” 5-23.

³ For this discussion, see Byung-Chul Han, *Vita Contemplativa: In Praise of Inactivity*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge and Hoboken: Polity Press, 2024), EPUB, chap. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

advantages. However, as I will explain below, pathologies emerge when the university becomes too hospitable to the neoliberal logic. Warding off the active-driven neoliberal logic engenders pockets of inactivity within the university, spaces where it can breathe and think.

While a great multitude of studies on the neoliberal university and its pernicious impacts on the faculty and students already exists, what remains underrepresented in the vast body of literature is a sustained exploration of neoliberalism's ruinous impact on thinking. Meanwhile, many of the few studies that have explored the precarious relationship between the neoliberal university and the act of thinking have merely done so in passing, oftentimes neglecting to provide a nuanced and profound description of thinking,⁶ as if the act of thinking is something that requires no further elaboration. This is where my paper becomes relevant. It will address the gaps in the literature by, firstly, presenting through Han a nuanced and substantial understanding of thinking and, secondly, by highlighting how this is crippled by the neoliberal principles many universities today embrace. Arming myself with a more refined view of the act of thinking enables me to present a more thorough analysis of how it is affected, often negatively, by the neoliberal principles that have become commonplace in many universities.

To develop my arguments, this paper will be split into two parts, with each part comprising two sections. In part I, I will firstly provide an exposition of Byung-Chul Han's analysis of neoliberal society, with emphasis given on his framing of the neoliberal regime as an active society or a society dominated by the *vita activa*. It will then show that for Han this neoliberal emphasis on the *vita activa* has crippled society's general capacity to think because the ceaseless demand for work and performance efface moments of inactivity where thought can enter the contemplative mode. Secondly, I will present a general sketch of the neoliberal university to portray it as an institution blanketed by the *vita activa*. I will explain how, overtime, the neoliberal emphasis on the *vita activa* penetrated the walls of universities and has now become its dominant logic, turning it into an active university. Part II will firstly discuss, using Han's conceptual tool box as a heuristic lens, how thinking in the neoliberal university has been crippled because of the *vita activa*'s dominance. Here, I will highlight the various areas in the university where thought has clearly atrophied due to its embrace of neoliberal principles. Part II will end by providing an appraisal of inactivity as a possible antidote to crippled thinking in neoliberal

⁶ See, for instance, Troiani and Dutson, "The Neoliberal University as a Space to Learn/Think/Work in Higher Education," 5-23. See also Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

universities. It will also anticipate possible objections and provide responses to them.

Han's Critique of the Neoliberal Regime: Achievement, Transparency, and the Erosion of the *Vita Contemplativa*

Almost all of Byung-Chul Han's numerous books are held together by an opposition against a common enemy: neoliberalism. He is often severe, even ruthless, in his criticisms of the neoliberal regime. This scathing indictment can be gleaned in what many consider as his most popular work, his 2015 publication *The Burnout Society* (originally published in German in 2010), in which he announced, owing to the various techniques of the neoliberal regime, that the 21st century has transformed into an achievement society.⁷ In Han's eyes, this society is fundamentally different from the disciplinary society of the 20th century, the society which Michel Foucault skilfully dissected throughout his works. While Foucault's disciplinary society was dominated by negativity—by prohibitions, punishments, commandments, borders, and the like—Han observes that the contemporary achievement society is dominated by positivity, that is, by “the inability to say no.”⁸ The individuals who populate such a society—achievement subjects as he calls it—are seduced by the neoliberal regime into pursuing innumerable projects and achievements without end, constituting them as individuals who are expected to be able to do everything optimally.⁹

Han discerns that one fundamental effect of this achievement-based society is the heightening of individual competition and, by extension, the prevention of the formation of a community. A community, as Han suggests in the book *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, denotes a stable “we” that displays concern for society as a whole.¹⁰ The neoliberal regime, however, sees that a society of atomized egos freely competing against one another inevitably drives up production. Thus, in one of his latest books, *Vita Contemplativa: In Praise of Inactivity*, he wrote that “[t]he neoliberal regime increases productivity by isolating people and forcing them to compete. It transforms life into a battle for survival, into a hell of unbridled competition.”¹¹ When we take a cursory glance at the state of contemporary

⁷ Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. by Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Byung-Chul Han, *In The Swarm: Digital Prospects*, trans. by Erik Butler (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2017), 7.

¹¹ Han, *Vita Contemplativa*, chap. 4.

society today, it is not difficult to agree with Han's thoughts here. Truly, a spirit of individual achievement and competition seems to hang in the air of contemporary societies, as multiple studies corroborate.¹²

A dialectical movement unmistakably animates Han's analysis here. This is obvious when we read his 2017 book *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. Neoliberalism, he says, proves to be highly efficient and intelligent when, instead of dominating through discipline, it controls society by exploiting freedom.¹³ He notes that when individuals are forced to obey and produce against their will, as is the case in a disciplinary society, the returns are scant.¹⁴ Hence, to heighten production, domination switched from discipline to the individual freedom to achieve because, to invoke Han's words in *The Burnout Society*, "the achievement-subject is faster and more productive than the obedience-subject."¹⁵ Yet, as Jason Bartles clarifies, for Han, "it is not that subjugation and coercion no longer exist but rather that the achievement subject feels free in their obedience to capitalism."¹⁶ This occurs because instead of ruling with an iron fist, capitalism now cloaks itself in the garb of friendliness. To prove Han's point, Bartles mentions the gamification of labor in contemporary offices which conditions the workers to be emotionally invested in the pursuit of achievement and efficiency by creating the illusion that work is now play, that it should be enjoyed instead of being shunned like the plague.¹⁷ The upshot here, of course, is that the more invested and excited workers become for work, the more they aid in the accumulation of capital.

Han further nuances his analysis of the performance-obsessed neoliberal regime in his 2015 book *The Transparency Society* (originally published in German in 2012). "Transparency is a state in which all not-knowing is eliminated," he writes in its closing pages.¹⁸ What Han here has

¹² See, for instance, Emily Sohn, "Perfectionism and the high-stakes culture of success: The hidden toll on kids and parents," in *American Psychological Association* (1 October 2024), <<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2024/10/antidote-achievement-culture>>; Thomas Curran and Andrew P. Hill, "Perfectionism is Increasing, and That's Not Good News," in *Harvard Business Review* (27 January 2018), <<https://hbr.org/2018/01/perfectionism-is-increasing-and-thats-not-good-news>>; and Will Coldwell, "The rise of perfectionism—and the harm it's doing us all," in *The Guardian* (4 June 2023), <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/jun/04/the-rise-of-perfectionism-and-the-harm-its-doing-us-all>>.

¹³ Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. by Erik Butler (London & New York: Verso, 2017), 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Han, *The Burnout Society*, 9.

¹⁶ Jason A. Bartles, "Byung-Chul Han's Negativity; or, Restoring Beauty and Rage in Excessively Positive Times," in *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 21:3 (2021), 59.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans by Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 47-48.

in mind is the various techniques the neoliberal regime deploys to surreptitiously manipulate individuals to willingly render everything about them visible or quantifiable. Social media, for instance, has encouraged individuals to shamelessly, even pornographically, display all facets of their existence. Meanwhile, the rise of metrics has led to the emergence of individuals and institutions that cannot help but quantify their performance, essentially translating their existence and identities to measurable data points. Worryingly, while contemporary society seems to valorize transparency, Han sees it as an apparatus of dictatorial control. This is because it is through transparency that capital is able to colonize all spheres of existence to operationalize and accelerate them.¹⁹ It therefore makes sense why contemporary offices have quotas for their workers. It makes sense why individuals today are encouraged to obsess about numbers and data—such as their caloric intake, hours of sleep, steps taken, sales made, funds collected, and so on. It makes sense why, as Jerry Muller showed, a metric fixation has engulfed contemporary societies.²⁰ By rendering everything visible or flattening everything into a number, the apparatus of transparency tyrannizes individuals and institutions to incessantly compel themselves to improve their performance vis-à-vis the gathered data. At the end of the day, this amounts to one thing: the self-optimization of individuals and institutions augments the expansion and accumulation of capital.

In Han's mind, this neoliberal regime of achievement and transparency ultimately absolutizes the *vita activa* or a life dominated by work and performance. This type of life, according to Jason Morgan's interpretation of Han, entails that "the self must always be in the middle of self-production, in obeisance to the dictates of capital."²¹ More vividly, Han wrote in a language akin to the early Marx:

Thus, a society of work emerges in which *everyone* is a slave to work, i.e. a society of working people. Everything has to be a kind of work, and there is no time that is not dedicated to work. The dispositif of work makes *time itself do work*. Work makes use of all activities and forces for itself; it presents itself as *one universal* activity. Because all energy is fully absorbed by work, the only thing that can fill the time outside of work is a

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

²⁰ See Jerry Z. Muller, *The Tyranny of Metrics* (Princeton and Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2018).

²¹ Jason Morgan, "Ritual and Otherness in Human Relations: The Human-Person Philosophy of Byung-Chul Han," in *Studia Gilsoniana*, 12:2 (April-June 2023), 315.

passive entertainment or recreation that serves only to make the worker able to work again with his full strength.²²

But while Marx's proletariat was exploited and coerced by an external domineering force—the capitalist—Han's achievement subjects voluntarily and excitedly submit themselves to the cult of work all in the name of maximizing achievement.²³ As a consequence, there is no master or greedy capitalist to blame when they face the destructive effects of overworking. They have no one to blame but themselves. This is the context for Han's most popular conclusion: this active-driven society ultimately leads to the subject's burnout and depression. The achievement subject, he wrote in *The Disappearance of Rituals*, "exploits itself voluntarily and passionately until it breaks down. It optimizes itself to death. Its failing is called depression or burnout."²⁴ In the estimations of Alphin and Debrix, this is one of Han's most novel arguments for it discloses the sad reality that burnout and depression, and the other psychic maladies of achievement society, are not caused by a vicious other but are painful experiences that are self-inflicted.²⁵ But aside from the psychic maladies it engenders, Han points out that incessant activity also leads to the demise of thinking. This is now where my exposition will turn to.

In his 2017 book (originally published in German in 2009) *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Linger*, Han speculated that the active-driven neoliberal regime may have crippled thinking and lessened the number of thinkers today precisely because it has pushed aside the *vita contemplativa* in favor of the *vita activa*. Let me state his case in verbatim:

It may be a particular characteristic of the present that thinkers, anyhow a small number at any time, have become even fewer. Thinking might have suffered from the fact that the *vita contemplativa* has been pushed aside in favour of the *vita activa*; it is possible that the hyperactive restlessness, the frantiness and unrest of today, does not do any good to thinking, and that

²² Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Linger*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge and Medford: Polity Press, 2017), EPUB, chap. 12.

²³ Han, *Psychopolitics*, 2-5.

²⁴ Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge and Medford: Polity Press, 2020), 14.

²⁵ Caroline Alphin and François Debrix, "Biopolitics in the 'Psychic Realm': Han, Foucault and neoliberal psychopolitics," in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 49:4 (2021), 6.

thinking just reproduces always the same because of increasing time pressures.²⁶

Han here highlights the inextricable link between thinking and the *vita contemplativa*. Thinking “is a contemplative activity. It is a manifestation of the *vita contemplativa*,” he wrote in the same text.²⁷

The *vita contemplativa* is a concept that Han has developed throughout his number of writings. In *The Burnout Society*, he characterized it as a state whose basic mood is, in his own words, “marveling at *the way things are* ... which has nothing to do with practicality or processuality.”²⁸ More than a decade after writing these words, Han developed this further in the book *Vita Contemplativa* in which he primarily uses the term “inactivity” to refer to *vita contemplativa*. Inactivity, as he defined in that book, is a form of “free time,” time that interrupts the order of work and production.²⁹ Hence, it has nothing to do with work, performance, practicality, or processuality. Work and performance belong to the order of survival, according to Han.³⁰ Individuals work in order to procure the things that they need. By contrast, as free time, inactive moments reflect the useless and the purposeless: “This ‘to-no-end’, this freedom from purpose and usefulness, is the essential core of inactivity,” Han adds.³¹ Han’s commentator Steven Knepper gives us a couple of relatable examples of the *vita contemplativa*. For him, observing wildlife, painting, and reading a book on a bench at a busy bus stop—assuming, of course, that they are not done for the sake of achievement—are all forms of inactivity.³² They are forms of inactivity because they are forms of interruptions from the imperative of work and performance. In Han’s language, they are pursuits that have no practical use or purpose in capital’s quest for endless accumulation.

For Han, it is during these moments of inactivity or leisure—where there is no coercion or necessitation, toil or care—that thought is free to venture deep and far.³³ Work, by contrast, is the absence of freedom. In work, the mind and body is completely taken over by the necessity to fill a lack, reach a goal, or the need to survive that the individual becomes incapable of contemplative inactivity.³⁴ This is why the life of Han’s thinker

²⁶ Han, *The Scent of Time*, chap. 12.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Han, *The Burnout Society*, 14.

²⁹ Han, *Vita Contemplativa*, chap. 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Steven Knepper, Ethan Stoneman, and Robert Wyllie, *Byung-Chul Han: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge and Hoboken: Polity Press, 2024), 134.

³³ Han, *The Scent of Time*, chap. 12.

³⁴ Han, *Vita Contemplativa*, chap. 1.

is anything but work.³⁵ The point is that, for Han, deep contemplative thinking, such as philosophizing, flourishes only when work stops.

There is perhaps a temptation here of reading Han as espousing a privileged lifestyle entirely freed from the demands of work, leaving one with all the time in the world for intellectual and creative pursuits. But Han does not fall into such extremes. While he does unfailingly endorse the revitalization of the *vita contemplativa*, he also does not give it absolute priority. Instead, he says that the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* must be woven together for thinking to be constituted. In a Kantian play of words, he wrote in *The Scent of Time*: “A *vita contemplativa* without acting is blind, a *vita activa* without contemplation is empty.”³⁶ Activity and inactivity are two sides of the same coin. He reiterates this point more forcefully in *Vita Contemplativa* in which he coined the term *vita composita* to denote the symbiosis between activity and inactivity.³⁷ Indeed, their necessary relationship, according to Han, is like that of light and shadow: “The shadow gives the light its form, its contours. Shadow and light condition each other. Similarly, activity and inactivity can be understood as two different states or modes of thinking, even of spirit. Thinking weaves itself out of light and shadow.”³⁸ In other words, for Han, action must culminate in contemplation; meanwhile, contemplation must guide action. The problem, as I will explain further below, is that the balance and tension between the two have been upended, leading to a society that is almost bereft of contemplative elements. The issue is that the very nature of thinking/contemplation, as Han understood it, is antithetical to the principles of the neoliberal regime.

Throughout the years, Han has been incredibly consistent in depicting thinking as constituted by the principles of slowness and inefficiency. Thinking, “often moves in roundabout ways,” he says in *The Scent of Time*.³⁹ He discusses this in greater detail in *Psychopolitics*. There, he talked about how knowledge, which is derived from the act of thinking, is not a simple collection of pieces of information or data. Rather, it entails the weaving together of disparate elements into a meaningful narrative or, as he puts it, “a unity that makes sense.”⁴⁰ He mentions concepts, syllogisms, and theories as examples of these narratives. This is why thinking, for Han, is time-consuming and inefficient. Knowledge or being, as he asserts, “has a

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Han, *The Scent of Time*, chap. 12.

³⁷ Han, *Vita Contemplativa*, chap. 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, chap. 3.

³⁹ Han, *The Scent of Time*, chap. 12.

⁴⁰ Han, *Psychopolitics*, 69-71.

temporal aspect. It grows slowly and gradually.”⁴¹ A time for maturation is needed to form a narrative.

More importantly, Han claims that it is not the mind that actively dictates what things should be linked into a coherent whole. Rather, thinking for him is a correspondence: “it corresponds to what ‘appeals to us as the voice of being’ by letting itself be *de-terminated* ... by that voice. To think means to ‘open our ears,’ that is, to listen, to lend an ear,” he wrote in *Vita Contemplativa*.⁴² Thus, a thinker for him does not dictate what a thing is. Rather, as Han disclosed in a rare interview, a thinker like himself receives thoughts: “... I don’t try to write, no. I receive thoughts ... The ones in the books aren’t mine. I receive the ones that visit me and I copy them. I don’t claim authorship of my books: that’s why the words in them are wiser than I am.”⁴³ In this manner, Han’s thinker is also a listener. It is through listening that being or the Other reveals itself to the thinker who is simply the medium or receptacle. For this reason, Han is staunchly critical of what he categorizes as “Western thinking.” This type of thinking, as he outlined in one of his earliest books, *Absence: On the Culture and Philosophy of the Far East* (originally published in German in 2007), is aggressive and forceful because it views the world as a form of “a resistance that has to be broken through determined actions.”⁴⁴ This type of thinking entails forcing the world to reveal its secrets. However, it often nosedives into the destructive act of forcing reality to fit into one’s preconceived categories. It is, therefore, deaf to the voice of the Other. It does not listen. Thus, it is violent.

But listening is not violent. Rather, to use one of Han’s favorite terms, it is “friendly.” This is why he often uses the term friendliness to characterize listening and thinking. For instance, in *Absence* he says that Far Eastern thinking is friendly because it does not foist set axioms and principles onto the world.⁴⁵ Rather, it lets the world be. Han’s commentator Robert Wyllie clarifies this further when he says that friendly thinking does not forcefully penetrate the world of appearances and phenomena.⁴⁶ It does not twist and force reality into preconceived rigid categories. Rather, Wyllie continues, it is a form of thinking that allows things and others to be what

⁴¹ Han, *Vita Contemplativa*, chap. 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, chap. 3.

⁴³ The narrative account of the interview can be seen here: Joseba Elola, “Byung-Chul Han, the philosopher who lives life backwards: ‘We believe we’re free, but we’re the sexual organs of capital,’” in *EL PAIS* (8 October 2023), <<https://english.elpais.com/culture/2023-10-08/byung-chul-han-the-philosopher-who-lives-life-backwards-we-believe-were-free-but-were-the-sexual-organs-of-capital.html>>.

⁴⁴ Byung-Chul Han, *Absence: On the Culture and Philosophy of the Far East*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge and Hoboken: Polity Press, 2023), 56.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

⁴⁶ Knepper, Stoneman, and Wylie, *Byung-Chul Han: A Critical Introduction*, 38.

they are. In this way, a thinker-listener for Han is in a mood of friendliness. It is friendly to the voice of being.

Han's preoccupation with the concept of friendliness can be traced as far back as his earliest published book *The Philosophy of Zen Buddhism*. Friendliness, he suggests, is derived from the Zen Buddhist notion of emptiness, that is, the denial of "the substance-like insistence on oneself."⁴⁷ Only with this denial of oneself, or ego-death as some would call it, does the world or the Other appear in their otherness. Without emptiness, individuals risk morphing into the narcissistic subjects that Han vividly depicts in *The Agony of Eros*:

Today, we live in an increasingly narcissistic society. Libido is primarily invested in one's own subjectivity...The world appears only as adumbrations of the narcissist's self, which is incapable of recognizing the Other in his or her otherness—much less acknowledging this otherness for what it is. Meaning can exist for the narcissistic self only when it somehow catches sight of itself. It wallows in its own shadow everywhere until it drowns—in itself.⁴⁸

The narcissistic subject, the individual that is full of himself so to speak, is incapable of listening or friendly thinking. Consumed by his own pursuit of self-optimization and self-perfection, the narcissist reduces the Other into a mere instrument for its projected ambitions.⁴⁹ In this respect, instead of experiencing the otherness of the Other, the narcissistic neoliberal subject painfully twists and turns the Other into a mere mirror that serves to validate the self's self-importance and achievements.

More forcefully, Han in *The Agony of Eros* begins using the term eros or love to characterize thinking. Eros, he wrote, "concerns the Other in the strong sense, namely, what cannot be encompassed by the regime of the ego."⁵⁰ It is based on a recognition that the other is an atopolis or incommensurable.⁵¹ Thus, to experience the atopic other presupposes one's openness or friendliness to the voice of the Other. Again, Han here insists that thinking is not a sole act of a thinker trying to forcefully penetrate the surface of reality. Rather, thinking as eros connotes the mind's

⁴⁷ Byung-Chul Han, *The Philosophy of Zen Buddhism*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Hoboken and Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 84.

⁴⁸ Byung-Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros*, trans. by Erik Butler (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2017), 2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 3. See also, Alphin and Debrix, "Biopolitics in the 'Psychic Realm'," 8.

⁵⁰ Han, *The Agony of Eros*, 1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, See also John Picchione, "Byung-Chul Han: Digital Technologies, Social Exhaustion, and the Decline of Democracy," in *New Explorations*, 3:2 (2023).

powerlessness as it is led and seduced “down untrodden paths, through the atopic Other.”⁵² We again here encounter the notion of emptiness so prevalent in Han’s early works. Indeed, without emptiness, eros cannot appear:

Eros is a relationship to the Other situated beyond achievement, performance, and ability. *Being able not to be able* (Nicht-Können-Können) represents its negative counterpart ... Absolutizing ability is precisely what annihilates the Other. A successful relationship with the Other finds expression as a kind of *failure*. Only by way of *being able not to be able* does the Other appear.⁵³

Thinking, then, as emptiness, friendship, listening, and eros is a kind of failure, a form of refusal to actively impose one’s rigid biases and prejudices to the world. As a refusal to act, as a mode of emptying the self, thinking opens up a space for silence and stillness so that the Other begins to speak, so that the Other is heard.

This implies that thinking cannot be accelerated at will. Acceleration, Han argues in *The Scent of Time*, robs beings of the time and space for maturation they need to emit their unique scent, that is, their otherness.⁵⁴ Hence, time and again, Han insists that instead of looking at waiting, delaying, tarrying, and so on pejoratively, we must consider them as mental attitudes of a thinker. For example, in *Absence*, he praises Far Eastern thinking for its slow and friendly pace.⁵⁵ In *Psychopolitics*, he expresses his approval for the gesture of closing one’s eyes as an act of contemplation, as an act of resistance from crowding and crippling stimuli.⁵⁶ In *The Burnout Society*, he commends the act of taking a pause from constant activity in order to think back and reflect, in order to contemplate.⁵⁷ All these points align with Han’s broader conviction that not all negativity is destructive. Indeed, as he pointed out in *Topology of Violence*, “not infrequently, forms of negativity such as hesitation, pausing, boredom, waiting, or rage prove constructive, though they are threatened with disappearance in the course of society’s increasing positivization.”⁵⁸ In this way, the forms of negativity mentioned above—such as slowness, closing

⁵² Han, *The Agony of Eros*, 52.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁴ Han, *The Scent of Time*, chap. 1.

⁵⁵ Han, *Absence*, 69–70.

⁵⁶ Han, *Psychopolitics*, 71.

⁵⁷ Han, *The Burnout Society*, 22–24.

⁵⁸ Byung-Chul Han, *Topology of Violence*, trans. by Amanda Demarco (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2018), 117.

one's eyes, pausing, delaying, and so on—though not always good, can be seen as constructive particularly in the way they create the time and space for thinking to commence and flourish in a world that is always on the go. Interestingly, others seem to corroborate Han's appraisal of taking a break (or negativity) to think. For example, the great 19th century neuroscientist Santiago Ramón y Cajal, in his classic book *Advice for a Young Investigator*, extols the value of delaying in producing important scientific breakthroughs. As a case in point, this was the advice he gave to aspiring young scientists: "if a solution fails to appear after all of this [thinking], and yet we feel success is just around the corner, try resting for a while. Several weeks of relaxation and quiet in the countryside brings calmness and clarity to the mind."⁵⁹ Ramón y Cajal here displays the attitude of Han's thinker. He does not force the narrative. He waits for things to settle down, for the mind to slowly draw connections until finally, "bursting forth at last is the flower of truth, whose calyx usually opens after a long and profound sleep at dawn."⁶⁰ With this in mind, thinking in the Hanian sense is patience: the patience to allow things to emit their scent, the patience to allow the truth or being to slowly present itself.

The problem in today's neoliberal regime is that the *vita contemplativa* is pushed aside in favor of the *vita activa*. In the effort to maximize production and consumption, moments of leisure and inactivity have become scarcer and shorter. As Han wrote:

Inactivity is time-consuming. It requires a *long whiling*, an intense, contemplative lingering. In an era of rushing, in which everything is short term, short of breath and short-sighted, it is rare. Today, the consumerist form of life prevails everywhere. In this form of life, every need must be satisfied *at once*. We are *impatient* if we are told to *wait* for something to slowly *ripen*. All that matter are short-term effects and quick gains.⁶¹

The general restlessness of the neoliberal regime prevents individuals from resting in contemplative inactivity.⁶² Thus, consumed by

⁵⁹ Santiago Ramón y Cajal, *Advice for a Young Investigator*, trans. by Neely Swanson and Larry W. Swanson (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1999), 35.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Han, *Vita Contemplativa*, chap. 1.

⁶² This is not to say that achievement subjects do not rest. In fact, according to Han, achievement subjects have today perfected the art of resting. They take power naps, meditate, meticulously track their sleep, and so on. But Han fully understands that these forms of "rest" are most of the time integrated into the work process. They are done for the sake of regeneration so that the individual is again fully available for the pursuit of productivity and

constant activity, neoliberal subjects cannot access reality which is revealed only in contemplative attention.⁶³ Indeed, as John Picchione underscores, “for Han, a society driven by the hysteria of ‘achievement’ and by the neurotic obsession of hyperactivity has lost its possibility of contemplation, a spiritual relationship with the world through the calm and slow gaze on things and on others.”⁶⁴ To put it differently, the whizzing away of time, the general time-pressures of the neoliberal regime, the need to be in constant productive mode blinds the mind to truth.

Neoliberalism’s impatience with everything inefficient and slow allows calculating to eclipse thinking. Thinking, as we know from the discussion above, is slow and irregular. In contradistinction, calculating, or the collection of information and data, is linear. Calculating, according to Han, can be accelerated at will since it does not look around: “For it, a detour or a step back do not make sense. They only delay the step in the calculation, which is purely a step of the work process.”⁶⁵ A mind that calculates does not tarry or linger on a piece of information to draw narrative connections. Rather, it consumes the information and immediately jumps to a new one, Han claims.⁶⁶ But without narrative strings that bind all these pieces of information into a unity that makes sense, they cannot be considered knowledge from Han’s viewpoint; only a hodgepodge of data. This is why, as he argued in *The Burnout Society*, computers are stupid despite their enormous capacity for calculation precisely because they lack the ability to delay.⁶⁷ The computer is not a thinker because it only calculates. It only gathers information without thinking back and reflecting on these pieces of information. Thus, as Han strongly opines in *Vita Contemplativa*, “[i]nformation represents the highest point of being’s atrophy.”⁶⁸ This atrophy of thought, as I will show in the proceeding sections, is exactly what is happening today in universities that have neoliberalized.

optimization. Hence, for him, they are not counterbalances to work. They are not forms of inactivities or negativities where contemplation can flourish. This only goes to show that, for Han, while negativity can be totalized by the positive-driven neoliberal regime, it also loses its very negativity in the process. Truly, for Han, forms of negativities, such as slowing down, always stands as an incommensurable counterpart to the positivity of the neoliberal regime. For Han’s discussion of this issue, see *The Scent of Time*, chap. 12.

⁶³ Han, *Vita Contemplativa*, chap. 1.

⁶⁴ Picchione, “Byung-Chul Han,” n.p.

⁶⁵ Han, *The Scent of Time*, chap. 12.

⁶⁶ Han, *Vita Contemplativa*, chap. 4.

⁶⁷ Han, *The Burnout Society*, 22.

⁶⁸ Han, *Vita Contemplativa*, chap. 4.

The Neoliberal University and the *Vita Activa*

Since their inception, universities have long enjoyed a degree of autonomy from the logic of the market. However, this independence was slowly undone during the Industrial Revolution when the pressure to industrialize for national economic growth initiated the slow transmutation of the university as *bildungsroman* (as a site for the cultivation of the Greek youth) into a training ground for the self-made man of capitalism.⁶⁹ This siege reached a critical point in the 1970s. At that time, the Fordist-Keynesian socioeconomic model had exhausted its possibilities, giving impetus for key neoliberal figures—such as F.A. Hayek, Milton Friedman, Margaret Thatcher, and Ronald Reagan, among others—to successfully reorganize society according to the view that the attainment of a better life can only be done by liberating the market from the fetters of the State.⁷⁰ Consequently, key social institutions gradually lost State financial support. Among them was the educational sector which, since then, has been chronically underfunded throughout most neoliberal societies.⁷¹ To compensate for the lack of public funding, the immediate solution for many universities was to emulate the strategies of consumer industries to fund their operations.⁷² The distinction between a university and a private business has become fuzzy since then.

⁶⁹ Walter Rüegg, “A Conversation about the Humanities,” in *The Western University on Trial*, ed. by John W. Chapman (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1983), 122.

⁷⁰ For a discussion of neoliberalism’s emergence, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1-2.

⁷¹ The Philippines, for example, allocate on average a measly 4% of its GDP on education as opposed to the UNESCO recommended figure of 6%. For a more thorough discussion of neoliberalism’s impact on the educational sector of the Philippines, see Rohaiba B. Radiamoda, “The Impact of Neoliberalism on Philippine Public Education and the Aid of the Special Education Fund,” in *Lukad: An Online Journal of Pedagogy*, 1:1 (June 2021), 20-32.

⁷² In the Philippines, various roadmaps have been deployed by the government, such as the Roadmap for Public Higher Education Reform, that aims to achieve two things. First is to justify the defunding of public colleges and universities. And second is their transformation into financially self-reliant entities by encouraging partnerships with private businesses and the use of idle lands and resources. For a more thorough discussion of the transformation of state colleges and universities in the Philippines into business-like entities, see David Michael M. San Juan, “Neoliberal Restructuring of Education in the Philippines: Dependency, Labor, Privatization, Critical Pedagogy, and the K to 12 System,” in *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, 16:1 (2016), 80-110. For a general discussion of the university’s embrace of business strategies, see Wesley Shumar, “Caught between Commodification and Audit: Concluding Thoughts on the Contradictions in U.S. Higher Education,” in *The Experience of Neoliberal Education*, ed. by Bonnie Urciuoli (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2018), 218. See also Saunders, “The Impact of Neoliberalism on College Students” and Paul E. Bylsma, “The Teleological Effect of Neoliberalism on American Higher Education [Special Section],” in *College Student Affairs Leadership*, 2:2 (2015).

Slowly but surely, the university shed its otherness. Its purported impracticality—a favorite target by capitalists—was undone and redirected to serve the most practical of pursuits: capital.⁷³ Under the diktats of neoliberalism, Henry Giroux rightly observes, “higher education matters only to the extent that it promotes national prosperity and drives economic growth, innovation, and transformation.”⁷⁴ This is why big businesses have forayed into the educational sector.⁷⁵ When we think of the role universities play in the growth and expansion of businesses, it is not hard to understand why. Indeed, as is well known, universities today supply the vast army of technically trained laborers that serve as the battery of political economy. Some universities are more overt. Like any capitalistic enterprise, for-profit universities operate solely for the sake of making a profit. Looking at this from Han’s viewpoint, this state of affairs typifies the transparency of neoliberal universities. As Han mentioned in the *Transparency Society*, “matters prove transparent when they shed all negativity, when they are smoothed out and leveled, when they do not resist being integrated into smooth streams of capital, communication, and information.”⁷⁶ The university has indeed been integrated into the smooth functioning of the capitalist system. It has lost its capacity to govern itself according to its atopic rules by willingly bending the knee to its neoliberal masters, turning itself into a mere appendage in capitalism’s quest for endless accumulation.

Under the dictatorship of transparency, the neoliberal university has become obsessed with datafication and metrics. As we know, to attract funds in the form of student enrollees, the university has to build itself into an appealing brand for consumption.⁷⁷ For this reason, it has to be heavily audited and managed. External auditors collect certain kinds of information—faculty productivity, efficiency in the use of State funds,

⁷³ One of the dominant rhetorics against the university forwarded by neoliberal ideologues is the notion that academics are not relevant in the real world, lazy, waste their time dawdling in contemplation, biased, and entitled. Hence, education and their practitioners were pressured to focus on more practical concerns, such as the creation of vocational courses, commercialization and marketization of teaching and research that should align with the principles of industry and business. For this discussion, see Troiani and Dutson, “The Neoliberal University as a Space to Learn/Think/Work in Higher Education,” 6.

⁷⁴ Henry A. Giroux, *Neoliberalism’s War on Higher Education* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 58.

⁷⁵ This is especially true in the Philippines where a great number of its biggest educational institutions are owned by business moguls, such as Lucio Tan, the Sy family, the Phinma Group, just to name a few. For a more thorough enumeration, see Mary Ann LL. Reyes, “Big business in education,” in *PhilStar Global* (3 March 2024), <<https://www.philstar.com/business/2024/03/03/2337585/big-business-education>>.

⁷⁶ Han, *The Transparency Society*, 1.

⁷⁷ Alpesh Maisuria and Svenja Helmes, *Life for the Academic in the Neoliberal University* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 15.

graduation rates, salaries of recent graduates, research grants, and so on—to monitor and assess the performance of the university at all levels.⁷⁸ The data is then used to grade and rank universities in various ways to “confirm” their quality, a step that is essential in their marketing efforts.⁷⁹

Academics and students are caught in the vortex of this culture of transparency. Lecturers are expected to share their rubrics, the breakdown of their exams, their grading sheets, their consultation periods, and so on. They, along with the students, are enjoined to fill out all kinds of forms that measure all levels of the university’s operations. Both are also relentlessly evaluated to quantify their quality. For Han, transparency flattens a thing into its mere price, thereby eliminating its depth and otherness.⁸⁰ In much the same way, academics and students are flattened into a mere number—in their evaluation results, grades, and quantity of output. This, I contend, creates a strong pressure to achieve, to self-optimize, so that individuals reach the threshold of “excellence” or “very satisfactory.” In point of fact, many academics today are forced to overdo their teaching to increase the likelihood of receiving a generous evaluation score from their evaluators: their students.⁸¹ Others attend trainings, seminars, and conferences as often as possible to collect precious certificates that are not without impact on the advancement of their careers. Students, meanwhile, have seemingly become hyperactive and restless in their quest to accumulate as much merit as possible. They are subjected to a demanding excellence framework that largely conditions their value as students and thus their future income stream. This system, mostly internalized by the students themselves, impels them into a whirlwind of activities, such as excelling in performance tasks, institutional and national level exams, academic competitions, and the organization of and active participation in extra-curricular activities. It is no wonder then that the burnout rates among university students have skyrocketed in recent decades.⁸² Such scenario expresses what Han thinks is the seductive pull of the neoliberal regime. Individuals freely push themselves to the brink of a soul-crushing exhaustion, even to the point of

⁷⁸ Troiani and Dutson, “The Neoliberal University as a Space to Learn/Think/Work in Higher Education,” 16. See also Lawrence Busch, *Knowledge for Sale: The Neoliberal Takeover of Higher Education* (Cambridge & London: The MIT Press, 2017), 36.

⁷⁹ Maisuria and Helmes, *Life for the Academic*, 15.

⁸⁰ Byung-Chul Han, *Capitalism and the Death Drive*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge and Medford: Polity Press, 2021), 33.

⁸¹ Claudine Grisard, “Time, Workload Model and The Entrepreneurial Construction of the Neoliberal Academic,” in *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 96 (2023), 13.

⁸² See, for instance, Trine Østergaard Wulf-Andersen and Lene Larsen, “Students, psychosocial problems and shame in neoliberal higher education,” in *Journal of Psycho-Social Studies*, 13:3 (2020), 303-317.

death, because they are rewarded, internally and externally, for doing so.⁸³ In the context of the neoliberal university, hyperactivity leads to academic recognition, awards, incentives, and promotion. The trade-off, if we listen to Han, is burnout and depression.

The neoliberal university has also discovered that operation costs dramatically decrease if its faculty is largely comprised of non-tenured, part-time, or adjunct instructors. The hiring of adjunct instructors as a money-saving policy began in the 1970s, coinciding with the neoliberal takeover over higher education.⁸⁴ In many neoliberal universities today, adjuncts constitute the majority of the teaching staff. They are usually poorly paid and overworked, making them, as one description puts it, “a slave class of teachers who must teach vast numbers of students at a time in order to scrape by with wages and benefits one might find in the fast-food industry.”⁸⁵ Lacking benefits and financial stability, many of these academic precariats are forced to work more than one job, further intensifying the dominance of the *vita activa* in their lives.

Tenureship, while it hands them a degree of stability, does not release academics entirely off the clutches of the *vita activa* since their fate and capacity to rise through the academic ranks depend mostly on their productivity. No area in the neoliberal university typifies this the most than research.⁸⁶ In the neoliberal university, the research output of academics is rigorously counted and ranked, and the data collected contributes to university rankings. Active scholars who publish frequently are rewarded in the form of tenureship, promotion, recognition, economic incentives, and the like. In a spin of transparency, the excellence of academic thinkers has been reduced to the frequency of their publications and the number of their citations. Meanwhile, refusal to abide may lead to disciplinary actions, even unemployment, as suggested by some cases in American and English universities.⁸⁷

This state of affairs highlights a major implication: forms of inactivity—such as leisure—are gradually disappearing in universities that

⁸³ For Han’s more thorough discussion of this, see Han, *Psychopolitics*, 1-15.

⁸⁴ Frank Donoghue, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 24.

⁸⁵ Zena Hitz, *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020), 200.

⁸⁶ The frantiness of the “publish or perish” culture is perfectly captured by this advice written in what is considered a primer for young and aspiring academics: “You cannot wait to be brilliant. You need to make yourself known as soon as possible ... You must be ambitious; you must aim to publish early and often ... Without publication ... your career will truly perish.” See Emily Toth, *Ms. Mentor’s Impeccable Advice for Women in Academia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), EPUB.

⁸⁷ Maisuria and Helmes, *Life for the Academic*, 27.

have neoliberalized. With this in mind, Raniel S.M. Reyes laments, also drawing from Han's ideas, that neoliberal academia has morphed into a kind of wilderness where individuals are consumed by the simple concern for survival.⁸⁸ Consequently, he adds, "it is no longer a fecund site for higher leisure and deep contemplation."⁸⁹ In this wilderness we call the neoliberal university, waiting, delaying, and tarrying are considered negative attitudes that would cost an academic's career or a student's future income potential. In most cases, neoliberal universities give little, or none at all, space and time for students and academics to engage in activities other than work. Truly, in all appearances, the neoliberal university has become an active university, a space blanketed by the *vita activa*. This, as I will show in the second part of this paper, has damaging effects to the state of thinking within its walls.

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⁸⁸ Raniel S.M. Reyes, "A Genealogy of the Contemporary Undead Life Through Byung-Chul Han," in *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy*, 26:2 (June 2025), 240.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

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Book Review

Chibber, Vivek, *The Class Matrix: Social Theory after the Cultural Turn*¹

Roland Theuas DS. Pada

The difficult problem that any Marxist social theorist must contend with is how to theorize the fall of capitalism through its inherent contradictions. The persistence of capitalism seems to cast a shadow of doubt on the viability of theory. Hence, various philosophers have sought reasonable justifications for why the revolutionary rapture has yet to occur. The common approach was through the causal depiction of ideology impeding the working-class consciousness. In Adorno, we see this in the instrumentalization of ideology in the form of the culture industry. In Marcuse, we find this in the psychosocial conditioning of the subjects of the welfare state, where the pursuit of needs and wants occupies the consciousness of the citizen, leaving no room for dissent and critique.

If the revolutionary rapture has absconded, is it the fault of the masses for falling prey to the allure of false consciousness? Or is the prophecy of the theory defective? Vivek Chibber, in *The Class Matrix*, thinks the latter is true. The main thrust of his critique is against cultural Marxists' assumptions. He argues that there is a failure of the development of theory from Marx when the cultural Marxists became fixated with the role of ideology. Chibber attributes this to the domestication of the 'organised left' that occurred after the fall of the Soviet bloc,² where the intelligentsia tried filling in the theoretical gap created by the eschatological failure of Marxism. The failure of the working class to organise meant that something was interrupting the inevitable downfall of capitalism, which has been seen as a matter of 'false consciousness' of the worker driven by the powerful force of manufactured ideologies or cultures.³

Chibber's critique of cultural Marxism hinges on an elaborate rehearsal of Marx's materialism and historical development of capitalism. To

¹ London: Harvard University Press, 2022, 192pp.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ Chibber notes that this is an interchangeable concept in this work.

begin with, he argues that culture or ideology merely reflects class structure and does not significantly influence changing class structures. This is because class structures in capitalistic societies are sources of material stability. Class structures provide the heuristic approach of optimizing economic stability for both institutions and individuals, while culture is subordinated to material structures that constrain and limit subjects' motives. That is why popular genres are reproduced rapidly in the music industry compared to obscure genres like sea shanties played on a theremin. Class structures are supported by material resources; the more stable they are, the more they are preferred over other alternatives. The consequence of this preference for material stability means that culture follows the structure, not the other way around. In the context of capitalism, we are motivated to follow structural constraints because they provide the necessary material stability. Hence, there is a strong material force in incentivizing individual economic action over organized class action. Class action is difficult; it requires consolidating individual interests into an attractive and reasonable proposal towards the employers. As opposed to individual economic action, class action requires specific individual interests to be disregarded in the service of the class. Likewise, the scrutiny inherent in a contemporary surveillance society will discourage the organization of class action and will foster informal, individual economic activity.

The crux of this conundrum leads us to the problem of how capitalism persists despite its internal contradictions. The problem, as Chibber notes, is sourced from the belief that capitalism is self-annulling. My take on the matter is that, perhaps, there is also a widespread belief that capitalism is an ideology, as opposed to the fact that it is a material condition. Chibber seems convinced that the latter is true as opposed to the former. The condition of capitalism caters to our desire to be materially secure in a constantly insecure world, resulting in conformity to institutions. Ironically, it creates a condition where the desire for material security creates the conditions of furthering the goals of institutionalizing material insecurity.⁴ This desire to seek material stability is the constant scaffolding that supports the structures of capitalism—not merely because it incentivizes the concentration of profit among individuals, but also because it holds the very possibility of subsistence hostage for both individuals and institutions. But does this mean that individual agency is lost in pursuing material stability? Chibber thinks otherwise; in fact, he argues that this very condition makes capitalism diverse by necessity.

Diversity, in this sense, is not a limitless condition of various identities; it is subject to material structures that constrain possibilities. This

⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

is why unpopular genres of music exist, despite the general interest of the public towards K-pop. Genres like thrash metal can exist so long as there are willing listeners. Music producers, like employers, also seek stability; hence, they make calculated efforts to make their enterprise profitable. This relationship between laborers and employers is asymmetric. Employers always have the leverage in negotiations between profitability and labour, while workers are beholden to this condition because of their constant insecurity.

Prudence over valor is often the logical choice for workers—not because they lack agency or are simply drawn in by the ideologies of capitalism, but because of the material constraints of labour. The worker, for Chibber, is always in this disadvantaged position where the demands of employers constantly pressure them to conform to the demands of the employer. This structure is what allows capitalism to persist; it guarantees the stability of class structures through their continual reproduction. This material condition, however, does not mean that workers have no agency and that the outcomes are generally predictable in the relationship between these classes. The contrary is true for Chibber, despite the usual association of structuralism with deterministic outcomes. The idea that actors in capitalism have agency is reflected by their choices and the reproduction of capitalism. Workers have ways of navigating the labour market, which is why some achieve greater success than others, resulting in variations in their material compensation and career trajectories. This is also why a neurosurgeon earns a higher salary than a municipal solid waste and recyclable materials recovery specialist.⁵ The difference in the specialization of work here also reflects variations in strategies, which may prove either successful or ineffective. Chibber's proposal in this materialist and structuralist reading of Marxism is the reformulation of class action as a genuine, grounded, and feasible call for action by laborers. While he does not pitch utopian visions for revolutions, Chibber prioritizes the structural possibility of a sustainable and structurally stable form of transforming the material conditions of the working class.

The Class Matrix follows an intricate and interwoven set of chapters. Chapter 1 argues why culture or ideology plays a secondary role in the economic practices of actors in capitalism. Chibber argues that while social relations are subject to culture, they are not entirely subordinate to culture or ideology. He argues that culture “does not independently shape the outcomes so much as it is shaped by the antecedent cause.”⁶ Economic actors react to culture depending on their contexts and the viability of maintaining

⁵ Also known as a ‘garbage collector.’

⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

a stable homeostasis. Culture, therefore, is prevalent only when it is viable under certain economic conditions. This is why we do not see municipal solid waste and recyclable materials recovery specialists taking up golf as a hobby or sailing around the Pacific in a carbon-neutral yacht to avoid creating further emissions that would harm the environment. Those activities are usually beyond the means of this laborer, in the same manner that there are more nursing students than paleontology students in the Philippines. Culture is subordinate to economics: while it can influence economics to some degree, economics remains the structure that undergirds the reproduction of culture.

In Chapter 2, Chibber argues that the formation of classes under the structure of capitalism is merely a contingent possibility and not a necessity, as cultural Marxists claim it to be. He argues that the belief in the Marxist teleology that capitalism will meet its demise through internal contradictions is flawed. Since the relationship between the employer and the employee always remains asymmetric, class action remains constrained since it disrupts the stability of workers' material security. This creates a condition of incentivizing individual economic action as opposed to collective action, as the latter is hindered by constant surveillance of employers and the inherent asymmetry between employee and employer. Individual action is therefore preferred, since workers' vulnerability to material insecurity constrains their ability to pursue greater compensation and stability—outcomes that would, in turn, also benefit the employer. Moreover, the issue of consolidating every worker's interests is more complicated than negotiating with individual workers' interests. The diversity of skills, interests, and leverage makes it difficult for organized collective action to aggregate workers' interests and agreement. Collective action also fails to see success since it requires workers to subordinate their goals to the larger agenda. One can imagine a company demanding an increase in output from its employees. An individual can offer to do that for increased compensation using a highly specialized skill, knowledge, innovation, or connections. This translates to longer hours, extra work, and additional training, which compromises an employer's desired stable outcome. A third impediment that Chibber notes is the tendency of laborers to merely 'free-ride' towards the attempts of other laborers to seek collective action. The backlash from an employee actively disrupting the homeostasis of an employer's enterprise is a risk that includes jeopardizing an employee's material security. While a free-rider's interest might align with the advancement of their material interest, there is a greater interest in maintaining the stability of their economic security. This material tendency often leads to using informal networks to maneuver individually through economic interests. For Chibber, it takes a special kind of consideration from individuals to collectively organize by individually considering the effects of

their actions towards their peers.⁷ Hence, he advocates that collective action should begin as a matter of self-exhortation.⁸

Chapter 3 is Chibber's response to the eschatological belief towards the demise of capitalism's inevitable downfall. He argues that the ageing question of capitalism's demise is rooted in the belief that the failure of class action comes from the working class's false consciousness. Through the belief in a failed theory, the special pleading towards the assumptions of ideology influencing class action⁹ has impeded the proper understanding of why capitalism persists today. Capitalism survives because it strives to organize the economy and distribute wealth. In other words, capitalism is the structure that holds society together to the point that we freely consent because it promises material security. Otherwise, we are compelled to engage in capitalism's coercion because of our need for stability. This is not a matter of false consciousness, as Chibber argues in Chapter 1. It is a condition that applies to both employee and employer, as both pursue material stability. However, as Chibber indicates in Chapter 2, it is a lopsided arrangement due to the employer's leverage over employees.

In Chibber's view, ideology reflects the material stability of structures,¹⁰ a feature which can be observed in any context of capitalism. For example, the stability of people in academia earning a stable source of material security in their pursuit of criticizing the inherent contradictions of capitalism; they thrive because they are incentivized by structural stability. In this sense, workers consent to the conditions of labour, not as a matter of ideological inclination, but as a matter of knowing their structural entanglements better than anyone else. This direction in *The Class Matrix* articulates Chibber's dissatisfaction with how the intelligentsia and academia treat the so-called 'ignorant masses.' By merely looking at workers from the ideology perspective, we ignore the actual material conditions that have shaped their individual strategies and practices as economic actors.

Chapter 4 further explores the problem of consent within structural materialism. Returning to the argument that ideology merely reflects stable structures, Chibber revisits the role of agency through the lens of structuralism. He intends to demonstrate that structuralism maintains agency and contingency of consciousness, as opposed to the belief that culture or ideology shapes the class consciousness. Drawing on Sewell and Althusser, Chibber argues that structuralism does not deny agency; it merely constrains a worker's options for economic actions. This does not deny the fact that actors can still intervene in the world through reason. Structures and classes

⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

likewise make certain courses of action attractive, as they tend to lead actors towards material stability.¹¹

Through the constant support of the actors incentivized by the system to engage in labour, the system gains homeostasis. Wages are paid, profits are met, and the cycle continues to sustain workers and employers despite their asymmetrical relationship. The class structure continues to reproduce itself, and it does this because the parties involved have agency over their economic actions. Chibber argues that if it were otherwise, the outcome would be catastrophic.¹² If stability were not the motive of these classes and economic actors—if they were purely automatons of ideology—the reproduction of a stable system would cease, and the possibility of overthrowing capitalism might become a reality. Consent and agency are the reasons why capitalism persists; it sustains material stability.

Chapter 5 of *Class Matrix* consolidates the concepts that Chibber advances to understand the restructured condition of class formation over the past century. The organization of collective actions and labour unions after the Second World War marked the progressive growth of the left and the organized labor movements. In the past, this was possible due to the shared solidarity of classes; people were huddled in communities where they shared similar classes, interests, and material needs. However, this growth began to decline as structural conditions changed. The rapid industrialization of labor increased the asymmetrical relations between employers and laborers. The pursuit of profitability meant that service-oriented tasks were outsourced to other locations. Automation also replaced workers, thus decreasing the leverage that a worker has in negotiating their compensation. This increasing asymmetry atomized the class structure of workers, who resorted to informal networks that enabled individual economic action. The other alternative for workers was to resign themselves to erosion of their security of labour and supplement their material stability with additional informal work by joining the 'gig-economy.' Wage continued to stagnate while wealth became more concentrated among the employers. What Chibber worries about is the further atomization of the working class. Labour unions and political parties have become increasingly scarce due to increased surveillance, worker competition, and greater material insecurity. Class structures have become harder to unify due to conflicting interests and a lack of solidarity. Chibber observes that this development is the shift from industrialization in the 1920s to deindustrialization in the 2020s,¹³ accompanied by the decrease in the growth of services that led to the decline in the profitability of employment.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹² *Ibid.*, 124.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 171.

At this point in *The Class Matrix*, it becomes clear that Chibber embodies the Marxist concern with workers' material insecurity. It also highlights his plea to the growing social atomism workers experience today. For Chibber, reviving class organization requires a better understanding of the conditions of labour and capitalism—an understanding he laments has been overtaken by upper- and middle-class intelligentsia that is ignorant and indifferent to the workers' experience.

One of the compelling reasons to read this work is that it holds the reader in suspense as to whether Chibber follows the agenda of Marxism or is inclined towards abandoning Marxism. The reason for this suspense is Chibber's fair assessment and treatment of capitalism and Marxism. A careful handling of both sides of the argument depicts him as a neutral party to the debate. The discourse of theoretical and empirical conditions of labour and capitalism creates an inviting atmosphere for readers to move forward in the quagmire of capitalism and labour. Chibber does not fall into the tragic tone of pessimism, nor does he come off as Pollyannish in pursuing solutions and remedies to the situation.

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Bolaños, Paolo A., *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition: Essays on Critical Theory*¹

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Perhaps a shared experience among philosophy students—most especially at the undergraduate level—is the once-in-a-while joke about the “uselessness” of a philosophy degree in the real world.² While a lighthearted comment meant to cope with the stress of going through dense readings written in obscure jargon (that is, if students today still bother to go through the readings), the joke is symptomatic of society’s relationship with philosophy and its allied disciplines in the arts and humanities. Recently, the Department of Education (DepEd) stirred controversy and strong opposition from various sectors when it proposed to remove Ethics and a host of other general education (GE) courses from the tertiary level to streamline college education.³ For our current educational administrators today, especially those in national government agencies, philosophy is nothing but an additional burden affecting the efficiency of the education system to produce employment-ready individuals.

The neoliberal onslaught faced by higher education today continues as these institutions are affected by market-oriented policies. It is within this context that Paolo Bolaños’ latest book, *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition: Essays on Critical Theory*, intervenes, reminding us of the possibility of a better world. Spread across eight chapters with an Afterword, the author shows us that philosophy, far from simply being reflections on abstract ideas, is important in allowing us to grasp our bearings in a world that constantly confuses metrics with morals, quantity with quality, and reality with the laws of the market. Undergirding this is Bolaños’ emphasis of philosophy’s materialist

¹ (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2025), 146pp.

² Jeffry Ocaj further highlights this misconception of philosophy and elaborates its origins from the speculative and theoretical aspects of philosophy. Jeffry Ocaj, “Foreword,” in Bolaños, *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition*, xi.

³ See Bella Carias, “DepEd proposal to remove Ethics from curriculum bucked,” *Philstar.com* (5 June 2025), <<https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/06/05/2448347/dep-ed-proposal-remove-ethics-curriculum-bucked>>.

self-critique. His book, of course, is marked by a critical approach to philosophizing made possible by his reading of the works of the Frankfurt School. The main thrust of this book, as I see it, is making philosophy self-aware of its own aporias for it to critically engage with the social reality in which it is entangled.

The first chapter lays the groundwork for how the book presents its arguments. The core of this chapter is the author's elaboration of critical theory based on three normative claims. These claims—namely, the anthropological turn, the emancipation from slavery and the abolition of social injustice, and the decentralization of the proletariat—are derived from Bolaños' engagement with Max Horkheimer's essay "Traditional and Critical Theory." The strength of this chapter is its ability to go beyond the historical context of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* and speak of the relevance of critical theory for philosophy in the Philippines. Critical theory, as the author argues, could be an "appropriate theoretico-diagnostic tool in appraising social pathologies in the Philippines."⁴ The theme of appropriation is to be further elaborated in the later chapters of the book.

Chapters two, three, and four, meanwhile deal with Adorno's musings on ethics and aesthetics. I think it is fitting to unofficially regard this as the "Adorno section" of the work under review. In chapter two, Bolaños presents the ethical character of Adorno's thinking in the face of a damaged life and the wrong state of things. The author maintains that Adorno's philosophical engagement is "far from being a pessimistic stance," but rather "an emphatic rethinking of the role of philosophy in a life that is seemingly devoid of hope."⁵ Adorno's philosophy cannot be reduced to philosophical pessimism. What the author successfully does is to turn our gaze to the utopian character of Adorno's thought founded on his ethical turn to the historical and the material. Bolaños reinforces Adorno's utopian vision vis-à-vis Ernst Bloch's notion of anticipatory consciousness and the "not yet."⁶ The chapter underscores the "vague notion of the good life" which inspires the utopian imagination of the Frankfurt School, especially Adorno.⁷ Ultimately, Bolaños' reading of Adorno in this chapter reminds us of something similar in Marx's letter to Arnold Ruge:

If we have no business with the construction of the future
or with organizing it for all time there can still be no doubt
about the task confronting us at present: *the ruthless
criticism of the existing order*, ruthless in that it will shrink

⁴ Bolaños, *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition*, 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

neither from its own discoveries nor from conflict with the powers that be.⁸

Rather than providing concrete images of utopia, what philosophy can do is criticize and always believe that life could always be otherwise, that is, different from the status quo. Meanwhile, chapter three deals with Adorno's aesthetic theory. In true Hegelian fashion, this chapter highlights the contradictory, and therefore, dialectical nature of art. On one hand, art can become an instrument of the wrong state of things by being commodified and standardized by the culture industry.⁹ On the other, art has the capability to conjure utopian possibilities. For Bolaños, art must be "consistent with Adorno's negative dialectics" if it is to act as a "counter-pressure to society."¹⁰ "Art," as the author writes, "creates a dimension of imagined freedom."¹¹ Through its negative relation to society, art allows the imagination to a future different from the present dystopia.

Still dealing with aesthetics, the book's fourth chapter puts Adorno in dialogue with another post-War thinker, Emmanuel Levinas. For any individual who managed to encounter both Adorno and Levinas, one may be amazed with the similarities between their ideas, which unfortunately was a result of the trauma of Auschwitz. Yet, despite the similarity between the two, there was never a direct confrontation between them. This, I opine, is the strength of this chapter as it adds to the Adorno-Levinas dialogue. As the author highlights, Levinas' insights on art are "ambivalent."¹² On this note, I strongly agree with Bolaños' observation, especially if one takes the time to go through and compare Levinas' opinions in *Existence and Existents* and "Reality and its Shadow."¹³ In solving this ambivalence, the chapter turns to Adorno's aesthetics. For Bolaños, art is able to propound an "ethics of thinking," which we may think of as a form of receptivity to the non-identical. He points out the parallels of Adorno and Levinasian ethics as a form of receptivity and responsibility to the totally Other.¹⁴ Beginning with the challenge of ethics in chapter two, followed by the utopian possibility in art

⁸ Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 207.

⁹ Bolaños, *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition*, 33.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 40.

¹³ In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas argues that art makes objects "stand-out" and "extracts them [the object] from this belongingness to a subject." Meanwhile, in "Reality and its Shadow," Levinas talks about art turning the subject "passive," incapable of responding to the Other's plea. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 52 and Emmanuel Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. by Sean Hand (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 132.

¹⁴ Bolaños, *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition*, 44.

in chapter three, chapter four fittingly ends the Adorno section of the book (although, even in the other sections Adorno is still a strong undercurrent for the various discussions at hand) by looking at the ethical import of art.

Following the chapters which focus on Adorno are those which highlight Honneth's work on recognition and the idea of justice. Just as there is an Adorno section, it also appears appropriate to regard chapters five to eight as the "Honneth section." The section begins with Bolaños introducing Honneth's recognition theory and "materialist" philosophical anthropology. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of this chapter is how it introduces readers to Honneth. While mentioning the Frankfurt School, the author critically examines what he considers a "social deficit" in our local philosophical tradition. This, of course, he relates to the history of colonialism and the predominance of Church-influenced Scholastic metaphysics. These factors, as Bolaños sees it, led to essentialist and abstract ways of talking about the human person.¹⁵ Contra these essentialist readings of the human person, the author emphasizes how Honneth's philosophical anthropology grounds subjectivity on "socially or materially constituted reality."¹⁶ He follows this up with an elaboration of Honneth's theorization of the three spheres/patterns of intersubjective recognition: care, rights, and esteem. The author's method of introducing Honneth via a critique of the Philippine philosophical tradition is unconventional, yet effective. This effectivity lies in demonstrating how local scholarship can flourish through a dialectical interaction with history and the material world.

The sixth chapter grounds critical theory's conception of social justice on the idea of freedom. To put it differently, social justice, as a normative claim of critical theory, finds itself in the "potentiality of persons to create and recreate themselves" rooted in the idea of freedom.¹⁷ In this chapter, Bolaños emphasizes the descriptive and normative assumptions of critical theory, something which Joel Anderson notes in Honneth's *Struggle for Recognition*.¹⁸ As a social ontology, critical theory becomes a tool in explaining society. The important point that the author raises to the reader is a reminder that while critical theory has descriptive aims, its "normative goal" must not be overlooked.¹⁹ Bolaños' puts further emphasis on this with reiterating his reading of Honneth and the idea of the moral grammar of a struggle for recognition, arguing that "This moral grammar ... refers to something more cardinal, that is, human dignity grounded in the ability to develop and

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁸ Joel Anderson, "Translator's Preface," in Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), x.

¹⁹ See Bolaños, *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition*, 66.

maintain individual and cultural identity.”²⁰ Perhaps something not explicit in this chapter is its rootedness in Marx’s description of communist society in *The German Ideology*, wherein emancipation entails the freedom to explore identities and interests.²¹

Chapter seven leads the reader to another encounter between the German and French traditions, this time with Honneth meeting Paul Ricoeur. Described as an “overture,” the author looks at the perspectives on recognition provided by the two philosophers. The author sheds light on Ricoeur’s criticism of Honneth’s theory of recognition. As the author elaborates, Ricoeur is hesitant to accept the Hegelian notion of “struggle” in the act of recognition. The reason for this is the possibility of an unresolvable struggle which may simply generate an endless stream of unhappy consciousnesses.²² In other words, the problem of a Hegelian-inspired struggle for recognition is the possibility of unsatisfiable demands from those groups seeking recognition. The chapter proceeds to highlight the alternative presented by Ricoeur, primarily through the “economy of the gift” as an “invitation to engage within dialogue” or a “continuous and generous interaction.”²³ The move Ricoeur makes is regarded by Bolaños as a “depoliticization” of recognition. At the end, while the author acknowledges the merits of Ricoeur’s ideas on recognition, he asserts that it “misses the point” of the goal of the struggle for recognition and the moral grammar which motivates it. Chapter seven invites us to read Honneth carefully, as his recognition theory presents nuances that we may easily dismiss or overlook.

In an interview with Gonçalo Marcelo, Honneth responds to Ricoeur’s criticism, stating that struggles for recognition will always have a “normative surplus ... that we will never really be able to fully realize.”²⁴ Here, Honneth admits what Ricoeur fears in the struggle for recognition, namely, the possibility of leaving space for further demands. However, Honneth does not take this as something negative. Rather, he considers this to be important as it allows us to “demand to make things better.”²⁵ These insights—provided by Honneth himself—further substantiates Bolaños’ remarks on Ricoeur’s depoliticization of recognition, and furthermore, presents a line of continuity between Honneth and Adorno’s utopian thinking.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

²¹ See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 52.

²² Bolaños, *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition*, 72.

²³ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁴ Gonçalo Marcelo, “Recognition and Critical Theory: An Interview with Axel Honneth,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 39:2 (2013), 217.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

The eighth and final chapter presents a creative reading Honneth's recognition theory in conjunction with thinkers such as C. Douglas Lummis, Jürgen Habermas, and Chantal Mouffe. This chapter is Bolaños' own contribution to the growing local discourse and appropriation of radical democracy in the Philippines. Following Lummis, the author emphasizes that democracy is in itself radical, and the term "radical democracy" is only a way to "intensify" its meaning.²⁶ He presents Honneth's "dialectics of social freedom" as a distinct model from Habermas' deliberative discourse and Mouffe's agonistic discourse.²⁷ The author underscores how Honneth conceptualizes justice "in the context of freedom."²⁸ This demonstrates the intertwined nature of these two ideas, and how our understanding of one is incomplete without the other. Bolaños points out that, in "Honneth's theory of democracy ... democracy is legitimate" when it is able to account for the spheres of personal relations and the economy.²⁹ The insights presented here remind us that struggles for justice and freedom are never one-dimensional. Thus, democracy, as an idea, should never simply be reduced to the economy or proceduralist/deliberative models. The novelty of this chapter is, surprisingly, its ability to rearticulate an established critical and emancipatory tradition rooted in Marx.³⁰ By holistically understanding democracy, Bolaños shows the reader that democracy would remain a hollow concept, and more importantly, lose its radical nature, if it forgets to incorporate themes of justice and freedom in its different societal articulations.

The book ends with an afterword titled "Education as an Ethics of Thinking." True to his Adornoian background, the author challenges us to reevaluate the role of education, especially in light of "the obsession with standardized metrics of quality assurance."³¹ Bolaños elucidates the goal of education for Adorno, which educates citizens to prepare them for democratic and social life. Education also arouses the individual's "capacity to think ethically" and act autonomously and "defy tyranny."³² What could be picked up from Bolaños' reading of Adorno is the stress on education's role in realizing the possibility of a "good life." This, however, can only be possible if, like critical theory, we constantly advocate social justice and engage in emancipatory thinking. Circling back to the initial point of the uselessness of philosophy, we may boldly claim that philosophy is indeed

²⁶ Bolaños, *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition*, 94.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*,

³² *Ibid.*, 116.

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useless—that is, it is useless for a society that glorifies efficiency over values and a life devoid of reflection.

Overall, the book offers readers a sobering reminder of society's direction. The question for us now is whether or not we allow ourselves to head straight towards the abyss.

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