the garden of ideas

uw undergraduate philosophy journal

volume 2 // issue 3 // spring 2023

in this issue

02

Editor’s Note

Braeden Giaconi

03

Wor(k/d)play

Andre Ye and Mark Pock

09

Revolution from Kant to Marx

Andrew Shaw

15

Hobbes’ Leviathan and Boyle’s Air Pump

Jiaqi Wang

19

What We’re Reading

The Garden of Ideas Staff

20

Soul Searching

Word Play

Design by Andrew Shaw*

**Due to unforeseen circumstances, this issue was started by the Garden of Ideas staff of 2022-23 and finished by the staff of 2023-24.*

dear reader,

This Spring edition of *The Garden of Ideas* is the last of our second volume, and the sixth edition of the journal which we have published. As always, I am proud to publish the work contained in this edition, and I thank the editors and other journal officers who have made this edition of the journal possible. Of course, I also thank the contributors, who have generously given to all of us their work. I feel that I owe both my fellow *Garden of Ideas* officers, as well as all of those who have made this journal possible, a bit more than my quarterly expressions of gratitude. This is because this is my last quarter as editor-in-chief of this journal, because I graduate at the end of this term. As such, I will take the opportunity to review some of what we at the journal have accomplished over these last two years, and to reflect some on its personal significance to me.

In reviewing the accomplishments of the journal, the person whom I must thank is Jason Lim. Jason was the President and founder of The Philosophy Society, an RSO which organizes philosophy-related talks and events for undergraduates at the UW. I was an officer at The Philosophy Society during the 2020-2021 school year, during which time Jason was President. I enjoyed very much my time as an officer at The Philosophy Society, and it was the first philosophy-related RSO of which I was a part. At the end of that academic year, Jason suggested that we apply for the Husky Seed Fund grant, so that we may start a philosophy journal. I was initially skeptical, because it seemed unlikely that we would succeed. However, Jason convinced me to apply with him, and, after months of evening Zoom meetings and editing Google Docs together, we gave a presentation to the Husky Seed Fund board. I was very happy to learn that we had won the grant, and after that we spent the summer meeting online to plan for the journal's first year. Jason graduated in Spring 2021, but he has continued to give me advice and guidance in managing the journal, as well as The Philosophy Society. For this, and for his initial encouragement to apply for The Husky Seed Fund grant, I am grateful.

I now wish to thank each officer of *The Garden of Ideas* for having made this journal possible over the last two years. Managing this organization is a group effort, and it would not have succeeded without the passion and kindness of others. In particular, I wish to thank Harrison Fitch, who has served as a Public Relations Officer for the last two years, and graduated last quarter. Without Harrison's work, the journal never would have succeeded at publishing on time, at following a schedule, or at doing anything at all. He has defined the Public Relations Officer position, and the journal will be much different without him.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the great personal significance which this journal has had for me. This journal was an ambition that I had, but it was only realized through the contributions of others. I have been grateful to find a community of others who love philosophy, who believe in the project of this journal, and who have infinitely enriched my life through their friendship, humor, and love for philosophy. I feel that I cannot adequately express with words all that I wish to say at this point, so I will leave the topic there. The leadership of the journal will be taken over by two current *Garden of Ideas* editors: Rhea Shinde, and Nate Pedersen, who will serve as co-editors-in-chief next year I could not ask for better people to take over the responsibility of managing the journal than Rhea and Nate, and I am sure that they will not only succeed at continuing this project, but that they will greatly grow and expand it beyond what has been achieved during my time as editor-in-chief.

One last pass at saying what I wish to say. I have had the time of my life leading *The Garden of Ideas*, and, while I feel some sadness at departing from it, I feel that the circumstances are ideal for doing so, and I am optimistic for the future of the journal. I have been thinking, over the last weeks, about one of my favorite novels, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, by Goethe. The novel is about Wilhelm's journey of self-development; it is, of course, the paradigm *Bildungsroman*. At the end of the novel, Wilhelm has received his Certificate of Apprenticeship, signifying his having achieved a certain degree of maturity and development. At the end of the novel, Wilhelm reflects upon the events of his life so far, and perhaps this passage expresses what I wish to say much better than I myself could express it. Friedrich says to Wilhelm "[Y]ou seem to me like Saul, son of Kish, who went in search of his father's asses, and found a kingdom." Wilhem says to him, "I don't know about kingdoms, but I know I have found a treasure which I never deserved. And I would not exchange it for anything in the world."

braeden giaconi
editor-in-chief

wor(k/d)play

andre ye and mark pock

There is something sacred about the sequence of symbols which compose text, the signifying fabric of meaning. Therefore there is something childishly irreverent about the interruption of this purity by *play*: play is adolescent, immature, naive. And at the same time it is academic, pedantic, a/the decadent activity of excess and surplus. It is not even so much sacrilegious as it is banal, played out for too long — a child whose perhaps initially charming antics become ridiculous, obnoxious, utterly stupid. This is the accusation against wordplay: Let us not traverse the shallow space of signifiers but rather the deeper realm of meaning; let us not play with our food, we should consume it, digest it, and move on. Wordplay is the obsession of child-professors. Against this criticism, we can only adopt Slavoj Zizek's strategy of "fully endorsing what one is accused of": wordplay is banal, it is obnoxious, it is shallow. But here we should remember the crucial symbolic-philosophical point — it is the exception which logically precedes the universal as its constitutive element; it is the ridiculous which makes the sensible. Therefore, to dismiss play is to obscure not only that play is a certain form of work but also to collapse what work is itself: ultimately, writing which dismisses play paradoxically becomes the most banal, most childish, most self-engrossed writing there is. In this essay, we argue that wordplay — in all its stupidity and shallow banality — is one of the most accessible and meaningful means of conceptual inquiry and even the form of writing truest to its historicity. In doing so, we demonstrate how critical writers can effectively engage with wordplay in their work.

The grievous objection against wordplay runs long and deep — as far back as Plato, even, with "That yelping bitch, shrieking at her master" (*The Republic*, Book X). Very tongue-in-cheek, on his part — from Book X of *The Republic*, a quoted response by poets against philosophers' derisive slanders. And slanders there were, and slanders there have been: one of the most effective means to render a philosopher's work impotent is to label it as poetry. To play with one's words — the exemplar being Derrida — is to be unserious, childish, banal. To better capture the form of the objection, let us characterize wordplay first as poetry, in the vein of Plato. Wordplay *is* poetry: a weaving dance of morphemes that, so the criticism runs, masquerades as wisdom — a sophist's mocking infiltration of the philosophical pursuit. Wordplay is play with words, the carefully careless construction of infinitely back-referential meaning-seemings, or rather seeming-meanings. The particular objection against the many practices and intentions we have uniformly characterized as 'wordplay' is as such: wordplay, being *mere* poetry, does not even deign to deal with meaning at all — it is self-consciously and arrogantly illegitimate, at once both a crutch for and dismissal against the sacrosanctity of singularly-endlessly pursued meaning. Moreover, this objection is not particular to one school of philosophy — rather, it is the great conceit (at large) of philosophy almost by definition. Inasmuch as, say, Peirce and Husserl may disagree on what meaning is, they both — and many others — are united in unambiguously proclaiming that the poetry of play is *not* meaningful.

Being that much of contemporary philosophy is at least *expressed* in the language of semiotics, we will formulate the discourse of wordplay and meaning in the semiotic terms of sign, signifier, and signified. That precious, ephemeral qua(nt/l)ity of meaning is retroactively constituted as a relationship between a signifier and signified. A proposition gains meaning through its signified, (what/how)ever that might be. Wordplay in our sense must utterly dispense with this conception of meaning to be legitimate (or so it seems) — wordplay is seen as a recur(rent/sive) loop of signifiers with no signified. When propositions are made to stand in (ap)proximate (contra)diction to each other, or a banal emphasis is made of a (pre/in/post)fix via the parenthetical, the two morphemes are constituted in exception to one another — they are now only pretending to signify, 'playing' at the nature of the word. It is sorcerous sophistry, and ultimately-utterly meaningless. The severed, e(mas/ja)culated word acts out the premise of its necessity with all the farcical self-awareness of juvenile high-school theater; it mimes, cuttingly, and in miming gleefully destroys, renders impotent.

In fact (or so goes the objection), if there is one thing wordplay does seriously, the work of wordplay, it is the trivialization of meaning as a whole. Take a theory of language such as Chomsky's with its universal grammar; or take a criterion of meaning like that of the Vienna Circle and their verification principle — wordplay spits in the face of both. To Chomsky, the structure of the acquisition of grammar as a relation between semantic entities is universal across cultures and developmental experience, encoded into genetics itself: thus, wordplay at the height of its excess denies such crude distinctions as that between noun and verb — in this stage play, one character can act as many parts as the director demands — demanding a meaning where none can exist, totally severed from language as a consequence of universal grammar. To the (hypothetical) verificationist (although for that matter critical rationalists as well), wordplay taken seriously is deliberate in demanding meaning from constructions designed to provoke in(deter)minacy. Any attempt at taking wordplay seriously is natively incompatible with any theory of expression and any theory of meaning contingent on a determinate proximity between signifier and signified, on a legitimate gulf between an arbitrary reference and terminal referent. This idea of a meaning-for-the-world, a meaning constituted by reaching out and spanning the vast gulf between our experience and our reality via expression, must seem at first to the opponents of wordplay like the only legitimate (or for that matter, useful) premise for meaning as a general concept.

And yet, in spite of these enormous contentions, we claim that wordplay is not only legitimate but meaningful, an accessible source to/of/for meaning. This requires a new framing of meaning — but we have not the audacity to do so without the aid of two most distinguished and influential theorists. Derrida and Wittgenstein may seem radically different, but their convergence in treatment of language as inconstant, derivative play unites the long trajectories of their respective schools in a blessed new dictum of meaning we borrow from the latter to unashamedly parrot: "Meaning is use." By abandoning the conceit that the gulf between the signifier and the signified must be finite and determinate, we open the door to a whole new world of intentional-incidental-accidental (but no less meaningful) meaning.

Saussure and the tirade against wordplay hold the key tenet: the signifier is empty - always-already empty, even, an eternal vessel for the absence of ephemerality. This is generally taken to be true, independent of the relationship between the form or mode of a given signifier and its supposed signifieds. It is held that the signifier is back-constituted as an empty image, a photograph overlaid in white, and then manipulated relationally, that meaning is created by the proxy actions of signifiers as a back-constitution for the signified dynamics. Rather, though, we are to imagine the signifier's emptiness as primaeval, and its meaning as dynamic-relational in a truly materialist way. There is no apparent difference between an unfilled (white) canvas and filled canvas with a photograph covered in white paint; they look identical, but their histories are different, and once we bring historicity into the picture it is more plain to see that the latter have been posing as the former for very long, but that the two are markedly different. We must affirm all signifiers as originally empty; as once-unfilled canvases.

Imagine a film camera and its little reel of black, rolled up in a neat bundle. Feed the reel into the camera — now the subject poses, the shutter flashes, and behold, we have an image. It is only latent, now — invisible, (im)possible to interact with — so let us go and develop the photo. After many hours of processing, it appears like a (re)flection of the world in the mirror. But *ceci n'est pas un sujet* — it is only a (re)flection, a 'mere' (re)flection, a photo(graph) and not the thing-in-itself. But let us make a change — imagine instead sending the film by mail to a lab to be developed. Regrettably, it gets switched out somewhere in the process, and now this new reel of film is on its way to be developed, posing as the original. Several hours later, an employee removes the film from its various chemical baths. "What a beautiful photograph," he says, "the person who took it must been very skilled." This is the nature of the signifier. It begins empty, and in a great flash, it is exposed to the world, and wrapped in an envelope — it may even be given a name, a signifier for a signifier. And its name may remain the same even while it (still a signifier) changes, morphing in unrecognizable ways until it is developed relationally, acted out. In developing the photo, acting out the signifier, meaning slowly comes to be, full of (mis)takes and (contra)(diction)s.

And make no mistake, we *act* out our signifiers — the world of signs is the world of play, full of substitutions innumerable. Our relationship with meaning is always-already (ir)reverent — we are always switching out the photo in the envelope and all the while proclaiming its inviolability and beauty. In this way, our world is not constituted by our words — instead, our words are constituted by our world, by the raw materiality of our (re)(flex)ive acting. After all, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." Now this play is play in a game; a game in fact which subsumes the many language-games of everyday use. Its rules are those which determine which language-games are permissible, and each language-game is itself a use, a function, an inconstant, derivative mode of play.

So we return to wordplay — playing with our signifiers, cutting them and extending them. It is more plain to see now that wordplay is nothing more than an acknowledgement of the nature of the game, an ultimate comedic irony. There is a gap between the solemnized, (in)violable Word — the Logos, perfect from the moment of its conception — and the stage play where words are acted out. That gap is only ever traversable by irony — through the ironic acknow-ledgement of the (im)possibility of the Logos, the Logos is actualized via inaction. This is to say, the words of wordplay are *not* acted out, even though they can be — its signifiers are still un(de)veloped. Wordplay positions itself as not only derivative but lateral, an (et)ernal struggle for an (in)ternal criticism of hegemony. Wordplay is deliberately critical, but in this lies its beauty and strength. Wordplay is an ironic play, an act at the level of the language-game-game. To be precise, wordplay is a ironic-comedic acting out of the conception of the Logos as perfect and inviolable which produces (materializes, even) a (mal)formed Logos and privileges it as original. In so doing, wordplay reveals to its audience the (im)possibility of the Logos. Wordplay itself is a signifier, slowly being developed through intentional explorations of meaning via ironic play.

Central to this notion of ironic play is the identity of the material self of the Logos — or rather, the relational interplay between selfhoods (authorhoods, rather) which produces the Logos as an (im)materiality. At play (yes, at play) are the writer and reader (rather, the scriptwriter and (aud)ience), of course, but also the Logos-for-itself (as in(de)pendent concept of inviolability, what might be called a social Logos) and the original sign as already-acted-out; the social relations that ground the signifier. The four work together to produce a new, (mal/de/re)formed signifier from their mutual antagonisms, and in some ways disappear in the so doing. We explicate the stage thus — the social Logos and original sign are prior to the writer-author, who sets out from his position within the original sign to produce a new, wholly separate sign which draws on the social Logos. His attempt is impossible, but he acknowledges its impossibility, and through his acknowledgement, the original signifier is (per/con)verted into a radically different re-image, a separate form whole and entire, sacredly profane and profanely sacred in its newborn innocence. The reader is left with the new signifier as unacted Logos, to (trans)form at will. In this way, the moment of wordplay is a ((cata)clysm/trag/iron/comed)ic moment of birth — it might be called an anaclysm, a 'washing away upwards,' a radical moment of transformation.

Inspecting the moment of wordplay as birth-anaclysm gives us more insight into the fates of the *dramatis personae*. The writer-author must efface; in acknowledging the (im)possibility of his critical objective he dies, kenotically pouring his ego into the new signifier — and yet, the signifier is as yet unassociated, nothing more than a blank reel of black film. Thus the author's kenotic removal into the signifier serves to constitute the 'flash' through the id and superego that remain — both the products of the original sign but directed at the vanishing goal of the ego; it is only natural that the id and superego, conspiring behind the ego's back, should serve to pantomime and create in mockery an image of the original sign — a graven idol unto itself. But the graven idol is as yet determinate — after Derrida, we might term it phallic. The new signifier is a herma, with a head and phallus alone surmounting a bare slab of polished stone. As an idol to the Logos, it is patently phallogocentric, as it must be. Yet here is where the crucial motion of wordplay enters, the motion which sets it apart as meaningful and distinct rather than purely replicatory and derivative — a ((d/r)e)(con)stitution as severed, the (in)(s/v)er(t/s)ion of a 'far remove' especially between a thing and its purported negation. This is a moment of castration and emasculation — an Alcibidean (mutil/vandaliz)ation of the herma, an act of ultimate impiety which rejects the Author-God (a la Barthes) (kills the id and superego, even) and decenters the original Logos. Alternatively, we may interpret the moment of severing as a moment of circumcision — it is a creative act, to be sure, one which confirms the new signifier even as a terrible-to-look-upon parody of the original signifier. Yet consider thus — circumcision is the necessary (re)quirement of ontotheological masculinity, a sacrifice of flesh to be confirmed in the sub(miss)ion to God, to the Logos; but the castrato is *always* circumcised, he enters existence as a new creature separate from his prior existence as a young boy. This is our new signifier — a castrato, always-already circumcised (and so ultimately mas-culine) and yet always-already emasculated. The masculine potentiality of the signifier is very much in(vis)ible; the vandalized herma is completely con-scious of its vandalization; the creative (potent)iality of ejaculation stands only in the collective notion. But in this moment of grief, eucatastrophe strikes — the reader-citizen (who must (in)evitably be Other (and thus Woman as Other a la Beauvoir)) comes upon the castrated herma and fills its creative potentiality through adoption into the creative potentiality of the kin group; the castrato regains his masculine potentiality through opposition against femininity. The castrato, in fact, is Osiris, impossible ruler, king of the death-world of the Duat — the castrato has achieved the lateral remove his father sought. His phallus is (im)possibly-magically reconstituted in the deathly, in the imp(a/o)ss(a/i)ble Beyond. A male child has been conceived in the image of his mother; his father has been sacrificed in parts, but castrates the child before death; a wandering traveller comes upon the child — this is the moment of anaclysm, the Hegelian triad that frames all wordplay, a Life, Death, and Resurrection; a Being, Nothing, and Becoming.

This is the s(tr)u(c)turing narrative of wordplay, a Hegelian anaclysm which creates a (trans)(form)-((m)at(e))(ion(ian)) (which is to say, a single charged particulate signifier with a distinct orientation in the world characterized thoroughly by its historicity (its Ionian historicity as derivative of the ironic form stemming from the original Socratic irony) and sexually situated (both in the sense of its production and its narrative trajectory as a transposition from the gap between the sign and the Logos onto the actualization as inaccessible Logos); moreover materially situated in its sexuality as distinctly yet transitorily formed (first actually-phallicly, then impossibly-phallicly, and characterized by the transgender change in positionality)) from Hermes/Thoth as original Wisdom and Logos to Dionysus/Osiris. And as this has been unveiled, let us return to the idea of wordplay as a 'mere' poetry — it is plain to see that poetry it is, inasmuch as this anaclysmic narrative is deeply dramatic-theatrical and internally rife with poetry. But mere poetry is never mere, as we have attempted to show — the act of producing and then subsequently (or sometimes, cotemporaneously) speaking poetry is a kind of play, a being-in-the-world which actualizes the latent signifier and fills it with meaning. Poetry is *poiesis* — making meaning — and so meaning is inseparable from poetry, inasmuch as poetry is inseparable from meaning. All forms of poetry are a kind of meaning, all meanings a kind of poetry. It is through this lens of poetry-as-poiesis that we finally see the role of the dramatic-anaclysmic epic of wordplay as productive of a meaning which transcends meaning, or rather a self-referential meaning which is always-already ironic. Moreover, we finally see work laid bare for what it is — all meaningful work is 'mere' play, play which means by being 'mere' poetry. Work is (in)separable from its poetry, from its signs latent and actualized, from its play. In that way, wordplay is really a kind of wor(k/d)play, and one of the most meaningful acts of all.

But let us demonstrate wor(d/k)play in praxis by beginning with parentheticals: a useful toy to perform surgical operations on words — severing, appending, dismembering. Parentheticals are already commonly used to express a parallel duality, such as between singular and plural or between masculine and feminine. For instance, "Hegel had a (several) lover(s)" can be used to represent a multiplicity of possibilities which cannot be succinctly represented in language: Hegel might have had a lover, or he might have had more, and what the writer wants to capture is both the singular and the multiple. More interestingly, one might write "(wo)man" in lieu of either "man", "woman", or an agendered alternative: this move should not merely be read as listing an array of possibilities — that one can substitute this compound expression with "man" or "woman" and move on. This reading is more suitable for a formulation such as "woman or man", in which the words themselves are left intact but externally modified. Rather, the *internal* surgical appendage — the operation within the body of the symbol rather than outside of it — points towards an internal bleeding, a suturing: an immanent antagonism in which, to paraphrase Zizek, two divides into one. This insight points towards multiple possible formulations: for instance, we might understand it in a Lacanian sense: masculine as universal and feminine as exception; "wo-" is the exception to the universal "man" (in a non-accidental parallel, "fe-" is the exception to the universal "male": we obtain "(fe)male"). We must pay close attention to the way the word reasserts itself even more truly after its suturing; reconstitutes itself in a resurrective motion. We unmistakably and almost inevitably arrive at the revelation of the structural binary, and can never truly evade the phallogocentric as interpreters — we are always Other to the text. Moreover, what those who insist on excising the "man" in "woman" by using the formulation "womxn" miss is that "man" is only possible in "woman": its existence is contingent on woman as constitutive exception. If "woman" is rewritten as "womxn", then "womxn" is more truly expressed as "wo(mxn)": "man" becomes "mxn".

Consider another example: (de//con)struction. English-speaking successors of the intellectual tradition articulated most famously by Derrida notably assert that deconstruction is not the negation or reversal (as possibly implied by the prefix 'de-') of construction, that is destruction. But we must admit this term "deconstruction" is quite a poor choice of expression, an unnecessary obscuring: the proper one is rather "(de//con)struction", in which the immanent tension is not between construction and its negation, but rather twofold — between "de-" and "con-", then between this tension itself and "struction". The tension between "de-" as dismembering (destroy, delineate, derail) and "con-" as bridging (connect, construct, converse) is again one of constitutive exception. This is the first step of Derrida's "double gesture": the inversion of the traditional binary opposition by pairing "de" against "con", a similar move as in "female / male" or "nature / man" (as opposed to the more familiar "male / female" and "man / nature"). The second step — the disruptive emergence of a new concept which is concerned with embodying differ(a/e)nce and unity, is made in the pairing between this negative tension ("de//con", like "-1//+1") and the positive body of the "struct(ion)". The tension is given a certain type of home to perpetually live, die, and relive in. Therefore "(de//con)struction" (and this formulation particularly) already embodies the process (de//con)struction, and more accessibly than mere "deconstruction". Consider how (de//con)struction is already at work as a mode of analysis: rather, (anal)ysis.

Let us repeat it again: (anal)ysis. Here, we should not attempt to neutralize adolescent sexual sociality — dirty jokes about the anal, and so on — but recognize how (anal)ysis is itself already a ridiculous, pleasure-ridden, dirty, masochistic action. The anal is the second stage in Freud's theory of psychosexual development, after the oral: it is the first where pleasure must be repressed, controlled. (Anal)ysis is a process of excrement-production: we ingest, digest, and shit. It is always a dirty process, even if we attempt to cast it as natural and hide it behind locked doors. (Anal)ysis must involve a minimally fecal-sexual intellectual movement, and we should not forget this: there is no clean purity in dissecting systems and generating modeling potentials, whether it is in epidemiology or in the analytic philosophy of mind. (Anal)ysis is always already dirty, let us not pretend it is not: let us accept the play and obscenity which was already there.

Let us conclude by revisiting our discussion of (wo)man in a slightly ridiculous way: (wo(mb))man. We can read this as on the surface as enumerating linguistic permutations: man, woman, wombman. But the surgical slices and appendages are important here — yes, we have cheaply exploited the linguistic similarity between "wo-" and "womb", but we should not be preoccupied with the stupidity of this move (yes, it is stupid — it is hard to deny this) but rather think about what this move is doing. There are many directions to pursue here, but here is one: "wombman" as the figure of the pregnant man in Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild", severed through parentheticals into a molecular structure composited from overlapping atomics of gender and reproduction. Ultimately, parentheticals are combinatory tensors: it should therefore be no surprise that parentheticals are an essential syntactic feature of modern programming languages. Parentheticals compactly open up a world of control, difference, and order, to use Baudrillard's computational language of the postmodern. They compute possibilities by slicing and appending: they make us see particularity in the universality of the signifier, and universality in the particularity of its dismemberment.

Let us now turn our attention to a more blunt toy which has already been previously employed in several instances: slashing. While the closedness of the parenthetical gives it its combinatory power of computation — what opens must be closed, the precision and logic of the surgical — slashing is separation itself, a murderous operation. It can take the form of /, //, ///, \, |, ||, and so on: it is the visual force of interrupting the stream of words which gives it its power. Most obviously, it can be used to create a signifying unit of opposition — Real / Artificial, Light / Dark, True / False. But we should realize that the single slash "/" takes the form of a singular mirror — a reflector, a unifier, a bridger. Indeed "True / False" is the most syntactically efficient way to unify an opposition. Visual variations can be used to demonstrate separation, visceral (rather than reflective) separation — "True /// False" is clearly different from "True / False"; whereas the latter is a symmetry, a reflection, a substitution — there is something untraversable in the former, like the vertical slash in Lacan's barred subject $. To use "//" or "///" over "/" is to create a critical, cold distance between opposing terms — symbolically the closest two unique signifiers can be. A simple negation, reflection, symmetry will bridge the two. But we are forced to read "True /// False" differently because of how we have slashed it, and it is this degree of difference which is valuable. Make no mistake: we should not hold the person who puts the interruption as making an important move (again, it is a quite stupid and childish thing to do, excessive), but rather the person whose interpretation of the interruption leads us towards novel ground. (It is just that often these two are the same people.) But slashing need not be only a tool of separation: we can appropriate the close mirror reflections of "/" into a maze of mirrors / reflectors / refractors / prisms / liquid crystals of meaning. We should not resignedly settle for choosing only one signifier when we mean (and this is always the case, although we may not know it) an open, contingent field of blurred / intermeshed / superimposed symbols, expressed as a reflexive mirror; this is a certain type of poetry — of course not free in that freedom is necessarily asymptotic at best, but a small step towards realizing symbolic liberatory potential.

But we can also play on a more abstract level, outside the playground of philosophical or analytical writing: by appropriating or borrowing (pick your word of choice) terms from other fields of study, we can accumulate partial dimensions of new spaces. Not only do many of the most effective philosophical works employ domain appropriation, we may even assert that domain appropriation is necessary for effective writing in our time: our writing and intellectual work is always situated within social totality, and our social totality is that of Baudrillard's hyperreal circulation of signs. We need an intellectual syncretism of scholarship to keep on doing philosophy. One must not revert to a naive Luddite resistance by pushing against circulation — this is its own form of cold, premodern deterrence — but rather to flow through the bloodstream of the hyperreal body (cadaver?). Take from topology — the Mobius strip, the Klein bottle, unorientable surfaces; from linear algebra — the matrix, the tensor, the eigenvalue; from computer science — the pseudorandom, the reboot, the cybernetic; from biology — epigenetics, the cancerous, the parasitic. To use these terms is not quite to actively appropriate concepts from one context to another in a novel fashion, it is not a pioneering act: this appropriation was always happening, they were already circulating — it is a gesture of recognition, but one which pulls heavy intellectual weight too. Writing which effectively recognizes the abstract circulation between information as an institution begins to read something like 'materialist poetry': it begins to work towards a universality structured by partiality, and this is the only universality that can be. This is what it means to write, to accept our historicity — one contemporaneous with information itself.

The (con)troversy over the playful and the poetic as philosophical work is ever-present: play is discredited as stupid, banal — a false attempt to derive semantic meaning from shallow manipulation of the syntactic surface. However, this purportedly shallow manipulation, the movement of wordplay, is always already entangled with radical reconception of meaning. Through the origina(ry/l) emptiness of the signifier and its development through use, meaning arises in a materialist, organic way. Under this schema, we characterize wordplay as a Hegelian anaclysm — creation by the id and superego, severing by the ego, and encounter by the reader-as-Other. In the final movement, the reader must confront the newly generated signifier from a liminal space — the phallogocentrism of the original signifier is always already reasserting itself. We know that the process of wordplay is really wor(k/d)play: we can engage with wor(k/d)play in praxis through a variety of mechanisms, including parentheticals, slashing, and domain appropriation. While it is easy to accept that one can unknowingly derive pleasurable play from the activity which is supposed to be their work (such is the subversive potential of Freudian psychoanalysis, that everything serious is really 'secretly' perversely dirty), the possibility that one can derive serious work from activity supposed to be just stupid adolescent play has always seemed questionable — but it is precisely this possibility which we must recognize as true: that the id and the superego may conspire through wordplay to produce an expression which the ego only understands several moments later as meaningful, that everything stupid and banal is really 'secretly' perversely revelatory, profound. These banal aleatoric permutations of wordplay, in all their pseudorandom stupid spontaneity, make us *think*, and this is what we should strive for when we write: not to tuck the complexities of the signified under an esoterically false signifier but instead to ejaculatorily erupt consciousness into the signifier through the surgery of the word.

revolution from kant to marx: a defense of the right to rebellion

andrew shaw

I. Introduction

As two giants of modern political philosophy, Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx seem to offer diametrically opposed views on the topic of revolution. For Marx, revolution appeared so necessary in overcoming the harms of capitalism that "the normative question concerning its acceptability did not even bear direct asking."[1] In contrast, Kant categorically prohibits revolution in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, defending the necessity of the state for securing individual freedom. In apparent contradiction with his political philosophy, however, it is also documented that Kant was one of the most ardent supporters of the French Revolution.[2] In her article "On Revolution in Kant and Marx," Lea Ypi reconciles Kant's two stances by arguing that his discussions of political philosophy and the French Revolution should be treated as discussions of two different subjects—that is, reading Kant's defense of the French Revolution as consistent with his political philosophy requires shifting focus from a moral right to revolution to "the historical progress leading to the establishment of rightful political relations."[3] Under this interpretation, Kant's endorsement of the French Revolution suggests that he and Marx may have more in common than initially appears. In Ypi's view, for both Kant and Marx "[r]evolution is defensible as a political event that contributes to a process of political emancipation with a material basis to it."[4]

Given the current state of political division and conflict around the world, the issue of revolution continues to be as relevant for political philosophy as ever. Therefore, I reflect here on how an alternative reading of Kant might inform a revision of the *content* of Kant's political philosophy itself, as laid out in *The Metaphysics of Morals*. I begin by tracing key arguments from Kant's moral and political philosophy to reconstruct Kant's argument against revolution. I then turn to Marx and suggest that his account of capitalist exploitation can be reconciled with Kant if read through a lens of violations of freedom. Such a reading raises the need to reconcile Kant and Marx's opposing views of revolution in pursuit of a coherent Kantian political philosophy. To that end, I argue that Marx's critique reveals that Kant erred in calling for a complete prohibition on revolution. Instead, when certain conditions of injustice are present, revolution becomes permissible as a way to enforce the duty of all to enter into a civil society that protects each person's freedom.

II. Kant's Prohibition on Revolution

To understand Kant's prohibition on revolution, it is first useful to consider the fundamental moral concepts underpinning his practical philosophy. According to Kant, the moral law must be known *a priori*, or independent of contingent facts about the external world, because it governs obligations of moral duty. With respect to moral duty, it is important to distinguish "whether an action in conformity with duty is done from duty or from a self-seeking purpose."[5] Someone who refrains from harming others only when it happens to benefit themselves does not act out of a sense of moral duty, but only occasionally happens to commit acts that appear moral. Morality is thus not a matter of hypothetical imperatives that depend on contingent desires like happiness; it consists of a categorical imperative that applies universally. The content of the moral law, therefore, is a test of the universalizability of maxims, or the combination of one's means and ends of acting: "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."[6]

---

[1] Lea Ypi, "On Revolution in Kant and Marx," *Political Theory* 42, no. 3 (2014): 263, https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591714523138.

[2] Ypi, 265.

[3] Ypi, 268.

[4] Ypi, 277.

[5] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11.

Here, I am most concerned with Kant's philosophy of Right, or justice, in which he directly treats the topics of revolution and the state. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant explains that Right forms the part of his practical philosophy which concerns only the "external and indeed practical relation" between actions, as opposed to internal motives.[7] In consistency with the categorical imperative, the principle of Right cannot be derived from contingent ends like happiness, which cannot serve as the basis of the moral law, but only from truly universal ends like freedom. Kant thus elaborates that Right is concerned not with *matters* of choice but rather with the "*form* in the relation of choice [...] insofar as choice is regarded merely as free."[8] Because internal motives cannot be externally legislated, in other words, Right abstracts from the particular aims of one's actions towards the structure of freely chosen action itself. Hence, Right is simply the "sum of conditions under which the choice of one can be united with the choice of another in accordance with a universal law of freedom," and the universal law of Right demands that one should act such that the "free use of your choice can coexist with the freedom of everyone in accordance with a universal law."[9]

Kant's arguments about the legitimacy of the state naturally follow from the structure of free action, especially with regard to property rights. When one claims an object for one's usage, for example, this claim to property also implicitly places an obligation on all others to refrain from using that object. However, the problem is that such a unilateral restriction on the freedom of others cannot by itself be the basis for a universal law, for there is nothing assuring others that their property rights will also be respected. The solution, then, is that restrictions on freedom can only gain legitimacy once they are governed by "a collective general (common) and powerful will" that places everyone under such an obligation.[10] In light of the possibility of conflicts over freedom, it follows that one has a duty to enter into a civil society with others by restricting the power to make and enforce external laws to a state which embodies the general will.

Moreover, the state uniquely possesses the right to use coercion to secure the freedom of its subjects. The use of coercion to prevent infringements on freedom, which Kant calls a "hindering of a hinderance to freedom," remains consistent with the principle of Right because it secures a greater degree of freedom than would otherwise be possible.[11] A law prohibiting theft, for instance, might constitute one such use of state coercion to secure the free exercise of property rights. The point of the state is to restrict the use of coercion to the general will, such that coercion is only used as a legitimate means of securing freedom through such restrictions. Kant acknowledges, however, that in a state of nature there does not yet exist any state which may legitimately use coercion in such a way. Thus, in the state of nature it becomes permissible to "impel the other by force to leave this state" and enter in a civil society with others.[12] If freedom is to be achieved at all, that is, it must be the case that unilateral coercion is permissible in and *only* in a state of nature for the purpose of creating a shared civil society.

Given the importance of freedom for Kant, it may appear unclear at this point how he arrives at a prohibition on revolution. Once one considers the idea of revolution in connection to universalizability and the idea of the state, however, Kant's conclusion becomes clearer. By definition, the very nature of revolution is that it involves the unilateral coercion of one group of subjects (the existing government) by another (the revolutionaries). Accordingly, for Kant acts of revolution undermine the very point of the state to restrict the use of coercion to the general will. Even under conditions where the existing state is actively oppressing a group of its subjects, Kant argues that revolution merely trades one form of unilateral coercion for another. Since the revolutionaries may equally be mistaken in their administration of the general will, there is no *a priori* reason to believe that "there has been any gain in determining the true general will of the people," as David Cummiskey writes.[13] Thus Kant is famously unequivocal on the issue of rebellion, writing that there is "no right to *sedition* (*seditio*), still less to *rebellion* (*rebellio*), and least of all is there a right against the head of a state."[14] In his view, it is better to reform even an unjust state through non-violent means because doing so at least maintains an appearance of justice that would be lost through revolution.

---

[6] Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* 31.
[7] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 230.
[8] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* 230.
[9] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* 230, 231.
[10] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* 256.
[11] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* 231.
[12] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* 124.
[13] David Cummiskey, "Justice and Revolution in Kant's Political Philosophy," in *Rethinking Kant*, ed. Pablo Muchnik, (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2008), 233.
[14] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* 320.

III. Marx and the Proletariat Revolution

I now turn to Marx's account of worker exploitation under capitalism and his argument for the proletariat revolution. In doing so, I will outline how a Marxist critique of capitalism might be understood in terms of Kantian violations of freedom. Marx begins by explaining the nature of commodities as objects with both a use-value, determined by direct relations between objects and humans, and an exchange-value, determined in relation to other commodities. Capital is the sum of money involved in the buying and selling of commodities: a sum of money is first exchanged for the commodity, which is then exchanged for another sum of money. The goal of the capitalist, then, is to generate profit through this series of exchanges, such that the second sum of money is greater than the first. The capitalist must therefore find some commodity where the use of this commodity creates more value than its cost. The commodity which satisfies these constraints is labor-power, or the ability of humans to perform labor.

It is this drive to profit from others' labor, according to Marx, which creates widespread exploitation of workers under capitalism. Briefly put, the wages received by workers must always be less than the value they produce for the capitalist, because otherwise the cost of labor-power would be too high for the capitalist to profit off this exchange of labor. This phenomenon, for Marx, is fundamentally a form of exploitation because it necessitates that workers always remain uncompensated for some part of the value they produce. Or, to put it in Kantian terms, wage exploitation amounts to an unjust violation of freedom in the same way that theft is an unjust restriction on one's ability to freely set and pursue one's ends. Marx thus writes that the only distinction between societies based on slave-labor and wage-labor is "the form in which this surplus labour is in each case extorted from the immediate producer, the worker."[15]

More generally, Marx's arguments also suggest that capitalist relations inculcate an economic rationality that is broadly antithetical to respecting the freedom of others. The very nature of capital as self-valorizing value is that it "imposes no limit to the working day, no limit to surplus labour."[16] This unyielding pressure of capital manifests, for example, in the drive to constantly increase profit by revolutionizing the means of production. The competitive nature of the market pushes the capitalist to increase productivity or decrease costs of production in a cycle of increasing exploitation, because they can always gain an advantage by selling commodities at lower prices. The consequence is that capitalism unchecked becomes "just as indifferent toward the destruction of the natural foundations of life (through waste runoff and exhaust fumes, through the destruction and poisoning of entire regions) as it is toward the destruction of individual labor-power."[17] Marx's broader critique, then, is that capitalism de-valorizes human agency by treating workers as a mere means to the production of surplus value, putting it at odds with the demands of Kantian morality to respect each person's freedom as an end in itself.

It might be objected here that my interpretation of Marx misses a fundamental inconsistency between his critique of the accumulation of capital and Kant's defense of private property. Because the fundamental principle of capitalism is the free market, one might further object that it cannot really be critiqued in terms of Kantian violations of freedom. To the latter objection, Marx recognizes that capitalism does involve freedom, but only always in a double sense: while it is true that workers must be legally free to sell their labor-power as a commodity, they must also be kept free of property to ensure that they are driven by necessity to sell their labor-power for wages. In effect, the capitalist requires a class of legally free *and* property-free workers if they are to exploit the value of surplus labor, which amounts to an irreciprocal and unilateral restriction on property rights in a Kantian sense. Thus, Marx writes that the so-called "freedom of labour" protected by the law is one and the same as "the freedom of capital to exploit adult labour-power."[18] It is now also clearer that for Marx, the injustice of private property lies in the endless accumulation of capital *for capital's sake*, whereas for Kant private property is merely the condition of appropriating external objects for one's use. In response to the former objection then, Marx's critique of private property is not a critique of Kantian property rights *per se*, because even using objects for their use-value requires a certain degree of freedom from coercion. It therefore remains possible, I believe, to interpret Marx's arguments described here through a lens of Kantian political philosophy.

---

[15] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 1:325.

[16] Marx, *Capital* 1:344.

[17] Martin Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital*, trans. Alexander Locascio (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 117.

[18] Marx, *Capital* 1:391.

This account of capitalist exploitation leads Marx to argue in contrast to Kant that true liberation can only come in the form of a proletariat revolution. As Michael Heinrich notes, the capitalist does not do anything wrong *as a capitalist* in exploiting the surplus value created by workers. That is, the wage received by workers is the exact value of their labor-power, tautologically, because exchange-value is determined precisely by the moment of commodity exchange. Eliminating what Marx critiques as capitalist alienation and exploitation therefore "cannot be accomplished through a reform of the relations of exchange within capitalism, but only through the abolition of capitalism."[19] Marx further departs from Kant here by shifting focus from the metaphysical idea of the state to the "economic structure of society […] on which rises a legal and political superstructure."[20] In other words, the legal and political mechanisms of the state always accommodate the interests of those with economic power at the time, which in the modern era are the capitalist interests of accumulation. Since the economic base overdetermines the politics of the state, working within the state will not produce emancipation from an economic structure. For this reason, Marx concludes that reconciling the fundamental antagonisms between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie must come not from state action, but from a proletariat revolution against the socioeconomic order which includes the state itself.

IV. Justified Coercion Under Injustice

I have argued thus far that Marx's critique of capitalism can be made compatible with Kantian political philosophy if understood through a lens of violations of freedom. Upon my reading, both Kant and Marx ultimately aim for a society which secures the freedom of its members but disagree on the means by which it may be achieved. The question now becomes why Kant and Marx diverge so starkly on the issue of revolution, and whether it may be possible to reconcile these views under a more coherent political philosophy. To this end, in *The German Ideology* Marx highlights a key point of departure from German idealism: criticizing idealist philosophy that "descends from heaven to earth," he instead aims to "ascend from earth to heaven."[21] For this reason, Marx begins his critique of capitalism from a historical materialist approach which takes the life-process of real, active humans as its basis and seeks to "demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process."[22] This active materialism stands in contrast to Kant's transcendental idealism, which seeks to abstract away from empirical particulars in deriving the universal law of Right. As such, the stark differences between Kant and Marx's views on revolution stem from deeper disagreements over the nature of the state as either the product of historical and social processes for Marx, or a more abstract and universal ideal for Kant.

We might thus subject Kant to the same criticism that Marx makes in "Theses on Feuerbach," where he writes that "philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it."[23] In particular, Kant's account of the state largely seems to serve as a mere logical formalism that justifies its existence. Kant's prohibition on revolution implies that (European) society has already left the state of nature; the question for him is thus only how one may work within an existing state towards a system of equal and outer freedom. If one takes a more materialist perspective, however, then it becomes necessary to question whether the existing state meets certain minimum conditions for it to be considered a civil society. That is, Kant's argument against revolution is that legitimate coercion only comes from the general will, but the reverse is clearly not true: merely being subject to state coercion "cannot entail that this power in any way reflects a general will which is mine," as Cummiskey argues.[24] Conversely, since a unilateral will cannot legitimately enforce restrictions of freedom upon others, it must also be illegitimate for a state which does not represent the general will of its subjects to subject them to coercion. In determining the permissibility of revolution, we must therefore first determine whether the existing state at least plausibly reflects the general will, for otherwise it cannot be considered a legitimate state to begin with.

When the state fails to protect its subjects' freedom in this way, then a justification for revolution follows from the unconditional duty to exit the state of nature. Recall that for Kant, the prohibition on revolution arises from the restriction of coercion to the general will to secure freedom from unilateral coercion. However, Marx argues that the capitalist state is *itself* actively involved in unilateral coercion because its laws enable a process of capital accumulation that necessitates exploitation of workers. The Marxist account of capitalist exploitation can thus be understood as a particular instance of a state that does not reflect the general will of its proletariat subjects. In fact, if Marx is correct, Kant's error in this case is that the bourgeois state is not even a proper state at all, but rather constitutes a "'state of nature' where the included are using superior power to oppress and exploit the excluded."[25] The Marxist challenge to Kant, in other words, is whether there is truly no difference between unilateral coercion on the part of the bourgeoisie and unilateral coercion on the part of the revolutionaries. For Marx, whereas capitalist exploitation rests on unjust restrictions of freedom, the goal of the proletariat revolutionaries is the pursuit of freedom. Just as one may permissibly use coercion to leave the state of nature then, it similarly follows that in the absence of a legitimate state, the oppressed must be able to permissibly use force to resist unilateral coercion and bring about a civil society which truly protects their freedom.

---

[19] Heinrich, 97.

[20] Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. N. I. Stone (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1904), 11.

[21] Karl Marx, "The German Ideology: Part I," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 154.

[22] Marx, "The German Ideology" 154.

[23] Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 145.

[24] Cummiskey, 237.

Here we can more concretely consider the example of the Zapatista revolutionaries, who revolted against an increasingly neoliberal Mexican government on the day the North American Free Trade Agreement was to go into effect in 1994. The Zapatistas were responding not only to neoliberal reforms like the evisceration of Article 27 of the Constitution, which had protected traditional communal ownership of lands, but also to abuses of power that had impoverished rural communities.[26] Upon my reading of Kant, the state's systemic corruption and disregard for indigenous and rural communities constituted a concrete instance of unilateral state-sanctioned oppression. The Zapatistas were therefore justified in revolting as a means to secure their freedom in an effective state of nature, especially given that they had unsuccessfully attempted to enforce their rights through legal processes for many years. Importantly, in consistency with their mission of self-determination, the Zapatistas also established democratic structures of self-governance post-revolution which at times gained more legitimacy than the state apparatus in areas they controlled.[27] Their example further suggests that Kant erred in his treatment of revolution by equivocating the two competing claims of coercion made by the state and revolutionaries. For under certain conditions of injustice, the struggle of revolutionaries may indeed prove to be *more* consistent with the principle of Right than the existing state can ever claim to be.

V. Conclusion

I thus believe that Kant was wrong to completely reject a right to revolution in *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Putting Kant and Marx in dialogue with each other reveals that revolution may be required to truly bring about a Kantian state of freedom in cases when the state itself actively supports unilateral coercion. Consequently, Marx's account of capitalism suggests several ways in which the capitalist state engages in unilateral violations of freedom, indefinitely delaying the actualization of Kantian morality. According to Marx, not only does the capitalist exploit the surplus value created by the worker, but more broadly the capital accumulation made possible by the law inculcates an economic rationality that fails to value workers as ends in themselves. Kant thus fails to consider that the state must meet certain empirical conditions of justice to be legitimately counted as a civil society. When such conditions are unmet, the society is not even properly a state in the Kantian sense, but rather a state of nature where unilateral coercion already runs rampant. When the law itself is a tool of oppression, in other words, justice is left without legal recourse. In such cases, if one can hope to achieve justice at all, then it must come from revolutionary activity, outside and against the law.

I also wish to be clear, however, that my proposed interpretation of Kant is not a defense of Marx's political philosophy in its entirety, much less all revolutionary activity. For one, this essay leaves open the question of what kinds of coercion are permissible to carry out in the pursuit of justice. Indeed, I imagine that much remains to be written within modern Kantian political philosophy on the limitations of permissible coercion under injustice, though such a discussion is beyond the scope of this essay. The relevant point of similarity between Kant and Marx on this question, however, is that the ultimate aim of any justified revolution must be the attainment of freedom, whether in the general will for Kant or the liberation of the working class for Marx. It is perhaps for this reason that Cummiskey similarly chooses to highlight the leadership of Nelson Mandela, who "refused to renounce revolutionary actions as a means to ending South African apartheid" despite also being a powerful advocate for nonviolent protest.[28] A revisionary reading of Kant thus also reminds us that the right to revolution is always already connected to a critique of oppression and a spirit of nonviolence. The paradoxical nature of justified violence is such that its purpose is its own negation—that is, true revolution can only exist as a means to bring about a condition in which it is no longer required.

---

[25] Cummiskey, 237.

[26] Richard Stahler-Sholk, "Zapatistas and New Ways of Doing Politics," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 23 May 2019, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1724.

[27] Stahler-Sholk.

Bibliography

Cummiskey, David. "Justice and Revolution in Kant's Political Philosophy." In *Rethinking Kant*, edited by Pablo Muchnik, 219-242. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2008.

Heinrich, Michael. *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital*. Translated by Alexander Locascio. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004.

Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Edited and translated by Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

———. *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Marx, Karl. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by N. I. Stone. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1904.

———. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books, 1976.

———. "The German Ideology: Part I." In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition, edited by Robert C. Tucker, 146-200. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978.

———. "Theses on Feuerbach." In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition, edited by Robert C. Tucker, 143-145. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978.

Stahler-Sholk, Richard. "Zapatistas and New Ways of Doing Politics." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 23 May 2019, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1724.

Ypi, Lea. "On Revolution in Kant and Marx." *Political Theory* 42, no. 3 (2014): 262-287, https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591714523138.

---

[28] Cummiskey, 219-220.

hobbes’s leviathan and boyle’s air pump:

the polity of knowledge and the kingdom of darkness

jiaqi wang

The controversy of Thomas Hobbes vs. Robert Boyle has become a paradigmatic case in the history and philosophy of science. The controversy itself centers on the existence of a vacuum and the viable explanations for the phenomenon observed in Boyle’s air pump. In Leviathan and the Air Pump, Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer have brought this discussion to a social-political and historiographical level as they claim that “justification of proper knowledge were part of the settlement and protection of a certain kind of social order” (p. 342). In their perspective, the victory of Boyle and his following Gresham experimentalist can be primarily attributed to the historical fact of pursuing stability and avoiding conflicts in seventeenth-century Britain. However, in addition to Shapin and Schaffer’s view that social order determines the authority of knowledge, the form of knowledge itself would lead to a certain structure of social order. In this paper, I would first briefly explain the Hobbes/Boyle controversy with interpretations of the philosophical distinction behind their explanations. Then, I would extend Shapin and Schaffer’s argument by arguing that solutions to the problem of social order are also solutions to the problem of knowledge based on the fundamentally different approaches of Hobbesian philosophy and experimentalism.

Boyle/Hobbes's physical explanation of the air pump

In 1660, Boyle published his *New Experiments Physico-Mechanicall: Touching the Air*, in which he described the experiments he performed with a "pneumatical engine" which was later called the air pump. In his work, Boyle proposed the elastic nature of air and the idea that “air either consists of or at least abounds with, parts of such a nature” (Boyle, p. 13), which account for various phenomena in the air pump. After the publication of his work, Boyle’s idea of the “spring of air” achieved unprecedented success and became popular among contemporary scholars, scientists, priests, and clerics. His experimental approach to research was adopted by the Royal Society of London (Shapin & Schaffer, p. 11) and his air pump became a significant emblem (Shapin & Schaffer, p. 30) to the royale society which inevitably put Boyle himself as a central figure in science, history of science, and the controversy itself.

One year later after Boyle published his new experiments, in 1661, Hobbes criticized Boyle’s justification of the air pump and Boyle’s explanation of the nature of air by giving a rationalized (but different from Boyle’s) account of every experimental output in his *Physical Dialogue*. To Hobbes and his politics of plenism within Hobbesian natural philosophy and mechanical philosophy, the world consists of solely matters and motions so there exists no such space of vacuum. In Hobbes’s perspective, once the valve was sealed and the sucker was pulled down, a form of purer air (as air can be divided into infinitely small parts (Shapin & Schaffer, p. 354)) was fiercely sucked into the air pump and conducting violently circular motion which is the actual cause to the sound (p. 355), the swift motion of the steel (p. 357), bubbled water (p. 365), and the death of animals (p. 367).

Hobbesian philosophy vs. experimentalism

On top of that dispute is the discussion between Boyle’s experimental philosophy and Hobbes’s natural philosophy. For Boyle, knowledge is to be generated through systematic experiments with foundations “constituted by experimentally produced matters of fact (Shapin & Schaffer, p. 22)” However, for Hobbes, that was far from considered to be in the enterprise of philosophy and it procedurally fails to explain the cause of nature. In *De Corpore*, Hobbes defines philosophy into two operational approaches in discovering knowledge that "such knowledge of effects or appearances, as we acquire by true ratiocination from the knowledge we have first of their causes or generation: And again, of such causes or generations as may be from knowing first their effects" (Hobbes, p. 3). It is clear that Boyle's experimentalism satisfies neither of Hobbes's definitions of philosophical enterprise as it neither reveals the reason beforehand nor accounts for the cause through the experimental system. To Hobbes, the world is constructed in a way that is more inclusive and sophisticated than what experiments are able to reveal. Therefore, the discovery of knowledge is not a singular and exclusive knowledge-making system as of experimentalism but a multi-dimensional approach through philosophical reasoning that is grounded with geometry which he calls ratiocination.

Meanwhile, Hobbes denies the existence of Boyle's vacuum for his argument on the absurdity of incorporeal substances. In Hobbes's metaphysical view, a vacuum is a space that contains no material existence. Therefore, Hobbes's construction on his argument of vacuum is rather simple: if light can pass through the glass of the air pump and if light requires a certain medium for transmission, then there must be something in the glass, hence it would not be a vacuum. This is fundamentally different from Boyle's view. In Boyle's experimental view, the vacuum created by the air pump does not necessarily consist of absolutely nothing but a less air-condensed space that is empty enough for producing Boyle's experimental outcome. The distinct views of Hobbes and Boyle on vacuum represent two philosophies: [1] logical and axiomatic justification of the non-existence of vacuum via reasoning based on metaphysical presupposition by Hobbes and [2] rationalization of interpretation of experimental phenomenon based on pragmatic and intuitive sense by Boyle.

Exclusivity of the royal society and the issue of authority

One of the key issues criticized by Hobbes and identified by Shapin and Schaffer in *Leviathan and the Air Pump* is the problem of witnessing. Back in the seventeenth century, experiments such as the air pump were exclusively conducted and witnessed by members of the Royal Society of London. The experiments were performed in a special space (Shapin & Schaffer, p. 334) which became the prototype of laboratory, and the experimental natural philosophy was testified by only a small group of scientists, particularly Greshamites, members of the royal society who share the same experimental perspective and scientific convention. However, the knowledge that was acknowledged by these gentlemen through testimony became public truth. Normally, a citizen of seventeenth-century Britain would not have the chance to witness Boyle's experiment, yet Boyle and his colleagues hold authority in claiming scientific truth and knowledge. In contrast, Hobbes believes that the nature of natural philosophy is that natural knowledge does not require a certain space or time to be revealed, therefore, the constraints for Boyle's experiments violate the principle of natural philosophy. Still, Boyle's experimentalism remained prevalent, and there is a reason for that.

In 1660, Britain was shortly after a civil war. The restoration polity seek to establish a new system of authority that would maximize the stability of the monarchy and minimize the risk of initiating another war. Under this social context, as it is shown that "disputed knowledge produced civil strife" (p. 283), Shapin and Schaffer argue that what experimenters and propagandists did, that is to build a "self-evident" system for society in which the form of knowledge was established upon consensus and convention. They call it an ideal society where "dispute could occur safely and where subversive errors were quickly corrected" (Shpin & Schaffer, p. 298). We may or may not know how much this system, in Boyle and other experimentalists' view, depends on the nature of science, that is, according to Campbell and Conant, "the study of those judgements concerning which universal agreement can be obtained" (p. 27) by operating within itself (p. viii). However, it was sufficient to promote social harmony through epistemological consensus. That is, the order is maintained by, instead of one's authority, but the consensus achieved by a group of people who share the same identity and scientific beliefs. They are members of the Royale Society of London, and they are members of science.

Hobbes would endorse the view of social harmony and stability. However, In Hobbesian philosophy, knowledge should be derived from an axiomatic system with a geometric ground, and the order should be maintained in the absolute authority of governing entity. Otherwise, the distribution of authority for claiming objective truth was to promote social chaos. Therefore, those groups similar to the program in the Royal Society of London, like the Church, became Hobbes's enemy. At the age of restoration, certain speech and assemblies were conceived as detrimental to the government and appeared to be a restoration crisis (Shapin & Schaffer, p. 288). Hobbes and his colleagues were restricted from publishing their work and spreading their idea. There is also Hobbesian scholar like Daniel Scargill forced to publicly "recant 'Hobbist' belief" (p. 294).

Hobbes's influence in social assessment and his natural philosophy were weakened. Therefore, Shapin and Schaffer conclude "he who has the most, and the most powerful allies, wins" (p. 342).

Re-structuring the form of knowledge and the form of life

It is undeniably true that those who exert greater power have the intrinsic advantage in advancing and promoting their collective beliefs. However, it does not necessarily mean the authority of social order determines the authority of knowledge and "objective" truth. Instead, the form of knowledge itself may explain the status of social order. In comparing Boyle's explanation and Hobbes's explanation of the phenomenon of the air pump, even though, neither explanation can be conceived as perfectly conforming to the norms we acknowledge (even take for granted) in deriving scientific knowledge, it is still not difficult to understand why Boyle's explanation gain more popularity—it gives the most intuitive justification for the appearance of experimental result. In contrast, Hobbes's philosophical reasoning is much more complicated, even though more rigorous in my opinion. The form of knowledge manifested by these two accounts has an intrinsic difference in obtaining social acknowledgment. Meanwhile, the regime of the program in Royale Society of London adopts that authority of knowledge based upon consensus rather than Hobbesian one-person authority in maintaining social order has an intrinsic advantage in forming alliances. It wouldn't be hard for Boyle to obtain support from the church since both societies aim to claim the authority of a similar form, but it would be inconceivably difficult to find Hobbes's allies since he only endorses the authority of solely the king himself while the king is seeking harmony rather disputes. The collective dissenting voice against Hobbes lead him and his fellows to the opposite side of the authority and monarchy (Shapin & Schaffer, p. 325), and was eventually abandoned by the king. As a result, Boyle's form of knowledge has the intrinsic advantage in interest disputes. In general, Boyle's form of knowledge is a force that evolved and developed from the social structure. Claiming authority within the social system turns out to be its necessary outcome; however, Hobbes's philosophy is naturally in an isolated, detached, and solitary form. "Knowledge is the product of human actions" (Shapin & Schaffer, p. 344) and is also, I would say, its natural and predetermined cause.

The authority of knowledge determines the form of social ordering, and in reverse, such social form leads to the maintenance of a particular epistemological system. Boyle actively looks for allies in the governing, scientific, and religious society due to his consensual foundation of the experimental approach. In contrast, Hobbes claims that "he had developed a complete and self-sufficient system of philosophy" (Shapin & Schaffer, p. 137). Even if Hobbes is right, he would not be able to obtain support from a broad range of allies as Boyle has. That was determined by the nature of the form of knowledge and the nature of the system. A system that establishes authority by consensus is much easier to sustain than a one-person regime, even if the latter can be more philosophically rigorous. In the seventeenth century, Boyle and his powerful allies adopted this social form of knowledge that lay the foundation for the modern scientific world, and this system for scientific research at the same time maintained the authority and reasonability of its intellectual products. It was the system adopted and kept for a long time to maintain social order in an open society and to sustain legitimate and authentic knowledge until World War II. The outbreak of WWII had a significant impact on the authority of Boyle's form of knowledge and form of society. On the social level for the scientific system, "we said to be democratic, but the public cannot call to account what they cannot comprehend" (Shapin & Schaffer, p. 343). Meanwhile, the authority of the system was principally disempowered or at least doubted by the discovery of post-war science. Regarding Boyle and the scientific system it represents, it would be difficult for him to explain the entanglement produced by atoms separated by thousands of miles, and to acknowledge the rationalization of the uncertain nature observed in the microscopic world. When the dominant form loses its competitiveness to attract social authority and claim consensual truth, we may want to turn to another form of life. It is time to take Hobbes into account.

Conclusion

"Solutions to the problem of knowledge are solutions to the problem of social order" (Shapin & Schaffer, p. 332) and VISE VERSA. Hobbes adopts systematic philosophical reasoning in deriving knowledge while Boyle and his colleagues in the Royale Society of London hold that knowledge can be generated from the experimental method of research. In Leviathan and the Air Pump, Shapin and Schaffer contextualize the controversy between Hobbes and Boyle into a historical and sociological dispute in extension to an epistemological and philosophical one. The allies and the power of social ordering of different forms of knowledge have tremendous power in determining the victory of one another. However, I believe, in addition to that, knowledge itself may already determine the social order by the form of such knowledge. The victory is already determined once the form is there. Hobbes wasn't wrong.

Bibliography

Boyle, Robert. *New Experiments Physico-Mechanicall: Touching the Air*; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 1660. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A29007.0001.001.

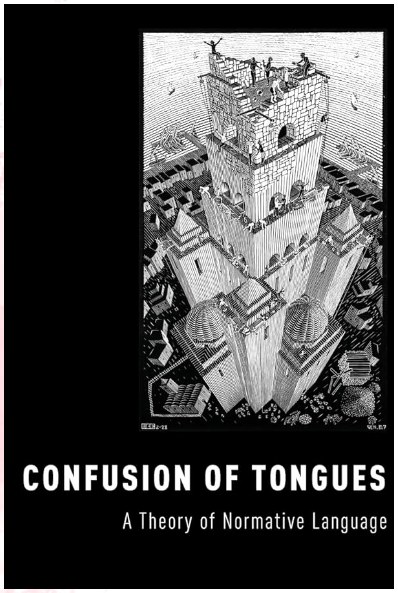
Campbell, Norman. *What is Science?* New York: Dover. 1952.

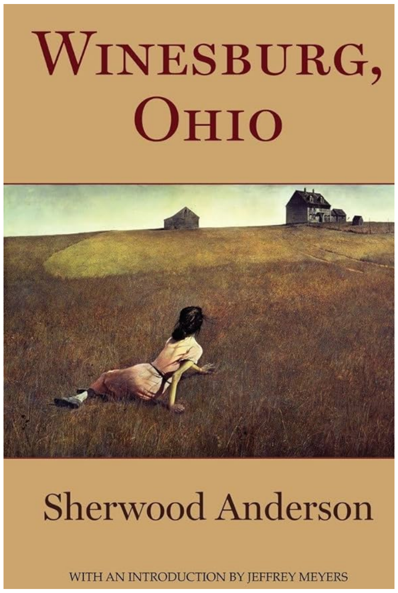
Conant, J. B. *Harvard Case Histories in Experimental Science*. Harvard University. 1970.

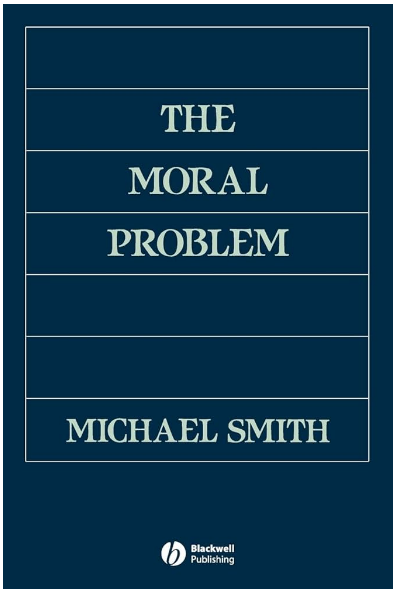
Hobbes, Thomas. *Elements of philosophy, the first section, concerning body*. 1656.

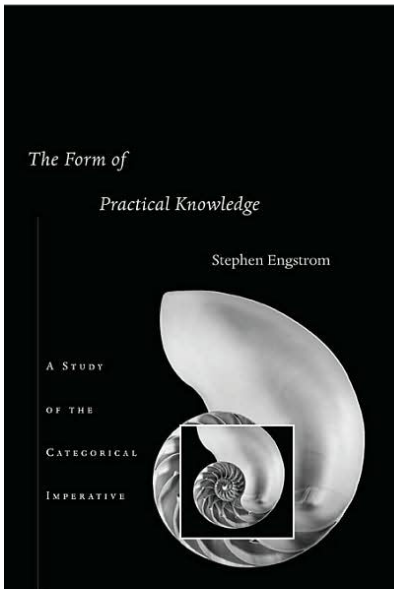
Shapin, S., & Schaffer, S. *Leviathan and the air-pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the experimental life*. Princeton University Press. 2011.

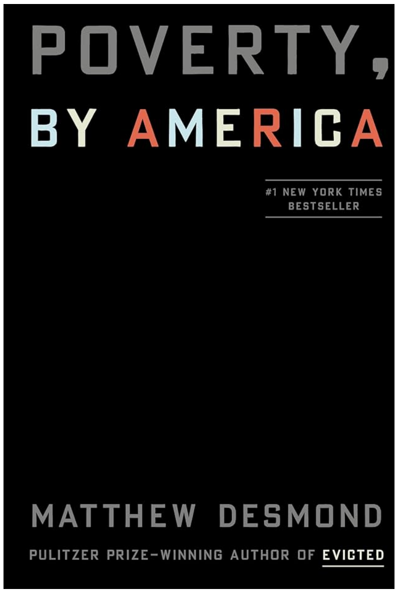
what we're reading


CONFUSION OF TONGUES
A Theory of Normative Language


WINESBURG, OHIO
Sherwood Anderson
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY JEFFREY MEYERS


THE MORAL PROBLEM
MICHAEL SMITH
Blackwell Publishing


The Form of Practical Knowledge
Stephen Engstrom
A Study of the Categorical Imperative


POVERTY, BY AMERICA
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
MATTHEW DESMOND
PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF EVICTED

N	D	Q	R	U	W	A	M	X	O	T	S	P	Y	T	S	F	F	E	H
T	K	B	K	T	A	N	S	E	N	L	L	M	I	I	U	M	N	C	T
W	D	K	Q	T	J	Y	I	G	T	N	C	P	L	A	T	O	C	N	R
A	K	R	U	O	A	W	L	E	O	I	K	H	C	V	L	J	H	E	I
Y	T	J	U	R	S	A	A	F	L	B	I	J	V	P	M	D	W	D	C
V	V	L	X	S	W	K	I	F	O	E	R	Q	B	F	M	C	P	N	T
C	Q	L	F	Z	B	F	T	I	G	Y	H	M	V	Z	A	E	H	E	P
R	E	Z	V	K	O	A	N	M	Y	P	D	F	W	R	Z	E	L	C	C
U	W	I	B	K	H	J	E	G	E	N	F	J	P	W	X	O	Y	S	R
S	W	W	Y	Y	M	Z	T	D	I	T	I	A	N	C	S	T	O	N	B
K	E	L	Q	E	U	A	S	M	P	T	A	K	H	R	A	E	E	A	W
X	M	I	U	A	F	V	I	U	D	Q	I	P	I	I	D	H	U	R	D
H	W	D	B	T	C	I	X	I	R	V	C	D	H	E	R	I	L	T	C
S	O	D	G	M	S	G	E	O	T	F	L	Q	X	Y	H	P	G	W	X
U	G	E	D	S	O	A	N	P	V	A	H	A	T	S	S	Y	O	E	J
L	N	V	K	Q	B	Z	X	C	T	A	Y	X	V	J	F	I	N	P	S
S	U	O	I	C	S	N	O	C	Y	T	L	T	L	J	C	N	C	P	T
V	K	H	X	P	F	E	J	Y	G	X	E	Y	Y	E	Q	O	E	S	V
D	Z	R	S	W	K	J	Z	Z	T	A	P	O	H	F	F	Q	E	G	E
X	U	L	Z	V	E	H	C	W	A	A	U	H	N	H	F	D	R	T	Q

Absurd

Conscious

Existentialism

Metaphysics

Mind

Ontology

Plato

Telos

Transcendence

Zombies

soul searching

gardenofideasuw.com