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# THE GARDEN OF IDEAS

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# Editor's Note

Dear Reader,

This issue of *The Garden of Ideas* comes at an especially difficult time for higher education, our own philosophy community included. At a time when freedom of thought in higher education finds itself in an increasingly precarious position, the need for the ability to engage in constructive yet uncomfortable dialogue with others—what is perhaps the most fundamental skill of philosophy—remains more important than ever. It is in this same spirit of dialogue that we have approached the latest issue of this journal. We received submissions from a record number of undergraduate institutions across the nation, on topics ranging from gender equality to philosophy of video games, and in mediums from essays to sculptural art. From these submissions, we have put together an issue filled with philosophical insights as broad as they are deep, in hopes of inspiring dialogue on what remain deeply relevant philosophical issues of our time.

It is also for this reason that we have curated our latest issue with an eye towards putting different pieces in dialogue with each other. One—though certainly not the only—way to read this dialogue is in the order of the pieces as they appear in this issue. Our issue begins with a phenomenological exploration of the eeriness of liminal spaces in video games by Shea Hale, who creatively draws philosophical insights from *The Stanley Parable* to prescribe how we might grapple with a sense of existential angst in our modern condition. Hale's essay is followed by Natalie DeLaat's short story "Back to the Garden," which narrates a different sort of liminality in the empty garden of a church. In this setting haunted by the absence of religious norms, DeLaat turns our attention to the love and desire that can flourish in liminal spaces free from the judgement of others. Molly Banks extends these same themes from day into night with their poem "Two Oceans," pondering the vastness of desire and its potential to reshape the contours of the self. In contrast, Emma Van Steertegem's essay "Denying Duality: A Reconstruction and Refutation of Scanlonian Desire" provides a more analytical treatment of the scope of desire, leading readers through a nuanced and rigorous examination of desire's relationship to reason and action.

Our issue continues with several essays concerning justice and equality. In her essay, Jordynn Hays challenges liberal approaches to gender equality

that seek to attain sameness under the law. Instead, Hays defends "A Radical Approach to Gender Equality" that seeks to recognize and undo gender inequality inherent in the law itself, bringing feminist legal philosophy to bear on timely issues like abortion rights. Violeta López Molina next synthesizes Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation with Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytical account of the colonized subject to trace the mechanisms by which colonialism and racism are reproduced at the interpersonal level. Although these essays both explicate ways that systems of oppression can unfold along different axes of identity, they also identify an open texture of oppressive social systems that can create gaps for change and resistance. Likewise, these same tensions between identity and fluidity are given striking physical form by Jenikka Cruz in her sculptural artwork "The Axis of Your Being," and equally beautifully explored by Zichang Wang in his poem "The Shape of Becoming."

This issue concludes with an interview with Dr. Nancy Jecker, a professor of Bioethics and Humanities at the University of Washington, on her recently published book with Oxford University Press: *What is a Person? Untapped Insights from Africa*. Dr. Jecker brings global philosophical traditions in dialogue with each other, touching on fascinating and timely topics such as personhood for artificial intelligence, autonomy in bioethics, and tensions between individuality and community in African philosophy. We are excited that readers of this issue can also receive a discount on Dr. Jecker's new book by using the code found on page 55. In addition, building on the success of our last philosophy cartoon contest, we are delighted to publish the winning entry from our new philosophy puzzle contest as bonus content for our readers, in collaboration with the Philosophy Club at the University of Washington. These collaborations are just a few of the many reasons we remain grateful for the continued wealth of knowledge, expertise, and support from the University of Washington philosophy community.

Finally, just as dialogue cannot occur alone, this issue of the journal would not be possible without the dedicated efforts of our team of staff, including Jason Cappelloni, Ainsley Davis, Molly Banks, Zhenya Shapiro, Ilwad Mahamoud, and Joey Lieng. As I look back on my time as editor-in-chief, I am filled with gratitude for the endless patience, dedication, and friendship of each and every member of our team. This issue of *The Garden of Ideas* reflects both the quality of undergraduate philosophical thought at the University of Washington (and beyond) as well as the immense effort of each member of *The Garden of Ideas* staff. It is for this reason that I am confident

that a bright future lays ahead of *The Garden of Ideas* despite the challenging times we face, and I hope our readership enjoys reading this issue as much as we have putting it together.

Andrew Shaw
Editor-in-Chief

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# The Eeriness of Liminal Spaces in *The Stanley Parable*

Shea Hale

A spectre is haunting aesthetics—the spectre of liminal spaces. Liminal spaces are an increasingly popular aesthetic online depicting eerily empty spaces[1] that are "hauntingly beautiful" and "surreal."[2] The Backrooms—one particularly famous liminal space—is a fictional place characterized by endless hallways with yellow wallpaper, outdated carpet, buzzing fluorescent lights, and no windows or exits.[3] Images of liminal spaces typically evoke simultaneous reactions of unease and fascination; their popularity alone speaks to the aesthetic's attractiveness, but there are also common phenomenological feelings of anxiety, fear, sadness, and nostalgia.[4] Liminal spaces are also not just limited to images online. *The Stanley Parable* (*TSP*), a 2013 video game by Galactic Café that sold over one million copies in a year,[5] is built on the aesthetics of liminality, with many locations sharing remarkable similarity to the Backrooms.

In *The Weird and the Eerie*, literary and film critic Marx Fisher describes *the eerie* as "a failure of presence" or "a failure of absence"—the sensation of eeriness arises when something is absent when it is expected to be present, or when something is present when it is expected to be absent.[6] Unsurprisingly, a few commenters have already explicitly connected liminality to the eerie.[7] After all, liminal spaces are prime examples of failures of presence. Phenomenologists have likewise recognized the polarizing experience of simultaneous attraction and repulsion to the eerie,[8] but this analysis has yet to be applied to the particularity of liminal spaces themselves. This paper will first provide an overview of *TSP* and illustrate the overarching themes surrounding the main character, Stanley, and his free will (or lack thereof). After

[1] Heft, "Betwixt and Between."
[2] "Liminal space (aesthetic)."
[3] Simms, "Backrooms Honor Horror's Yellow History."
[4] "Liminal space (aesthetic)."
[5] Hillier, "*The Stanley Parable*."
[6] Fisher, *Weird and the Eerie*, 61.
[7] @Cute_Noumena, "Non-Space."
[8] Cattien and Stopford, "Eerie."

reconstructing *TSP*'s liminal aesthetics, I will accordingly relate them to *the eerie*. The liminal space aesthetics that comprise *TSP* provide an eerie sense of Stanley's lack of agency in his life; this is simultaneously fascinating and repulsing for being an aesthetic representation of the little power we have over our own lives.

## The Stanley Parable

In *TSP*, the player acts as Stanley in a first-person perspective. Upon entering the game, the Narrator explains that Stanley is employee 427 in a corporation's office building, where his job is to monitor data sent to his computer screen and press the required buttons on his keyboard. The player begins the game after Stanley has suddenly ceased receiving data. The player walks around the office building and discovers it completely empty—the Narrator comments that Stanley has no idea why this would be happening. The player is only able to walk around and interact with the occasional object, such as a door or button. Walking through the abandoned workplace, Stanley enters a drearily yellow room with two doors leading to their respective hallways, and the story splits depending on the player's choice. The Narrator comments that Stanley "entered the door on his left" before the player has even decided—the player is made to decide between either following the Narrator's directions or performing the opposing action. The game continues with these binary choices, and the player will eventually lead Stanley to various endings in the game depending on the combination of choices they have made. After reaching an ending, the player is sent back to Stanley's office at the beginning of the game, and they restart.

*TSP* has been thoroughly examined as a metacommentary on free will, meaningful choices, and the nature of video games themselves. While most video games guide players to certain goals by presenting them choices, *TSP* stands out because, among other reasons, its "hand holding is deliberately un-subtle."[9] *TSP* deliberately makes plain that the Narrator is guiding the player on a specific path, which encourages disobedience. "Winning" the game (referred to as the *Freedom Ending*) requires the player to follow all the Narrator's directions. By doing so, Stanley reveals a large door leading to a lush countryside. The Narrator then exclaims, "This was exactly the way,

[9] Canino, "To See You Made Humble," 115.

right now, that things were meant to happen."[10] The player is aware that something feels off-putting with the Freedom Ending—none of the questions raised at the beginning of *TSP* were answered and the player had merely mindlessly followed the Narrator's orders. Not only is the player aware of the programming behind the expected choice, but also the programming behind the opposing option.[11] Many players are left wondering, is it possible to still make meaningful choices, even when both options have been deliberately programmed? The player frantically has Stanley try every door, button, and path assuming that *something* will lead to a way out. They feel a sort of panic and existential dread as they realize the Narrator is able to take away their agency at any point in the game.

I will be borrowing Janet Murray's definition of 'agency,' described as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices."[12] A player of *TSP* initially assumes they have the power to make choices that are meaningful, not simply interacting with a door because someone told them to. As such, their lack of agency throughout the game directly evokes a sense of *existential dread*, both within the game and in the real world. Heidegger's concept of *Angst* (often translated as "dread" or "anxiety") is helpful for understanding this phenomenon. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues in moments of *Angst*, the typical meaningfulness we assume in our engagement with the world is confronted by the Nothingness—revealing the insignificance of entities within-the-world.[13] Because human existence is fundamentally Being-in-the-world, people are, from the very outset, embedded in a worldly context and act out of related assumptions and goals.[14] A player of *TSP* begins in a familiar game world and, based on past video game and life experiences, expects clear objectives. However, these expectations are proven false as the player realizes the absence of agency and lack of meaningful choice in *TSP*. Seeing themselves in the protagonist, players are further prompted to question the power (or lack thereof) they have over their own lives. Just as existential dread for Heidegger refers to the feelings of fear and unease that arise when people become aware of being thrown into the world with no clear purpose, a player of *TSP* experiences existential

[10] "Freedom Ending."
[11] Canino, "To See You Made Humble," 116.
[12] Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 126.
[13] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 231 (§40).
[14] Heidegger, 78 (§12).

dread as they are thrown into a game that mocks the entire concept of meaningful choice.

## Liminal Spaces

Some people have gone so far as to deem *TSP* a horror game, not because of jump scares, gore, survival aspects, or monsters, but because of the feelings of panic, fear, and anxiety the player feels when they realize their lack of true agency. One Reddit user commented that there is "something about the game's atmosphere that's just so unnerving," the game "makes my hair stand on end whenever I boot it up," and "What is it about the environmental design that just puts the world right in that uncanny valley that makes me want to run away?"[15] While *TSP* is not a horror game, there is an eerie sense that gives it the feel of one—and according to this commenter, it is not merely about the game mechanics but the aesthetics as well. *TSP* represents a dreary and generic office straight out of the 1990s. It is drably packed with older technology, a horrific combination of grays and yellows, old yellow carpet, tight nipped cubicles, a labyrinth of computer monitors, cluttered papers, and entangled wires. Every cubicle is the same, making the player believe each office employee is simply another number—this is also reinforced with the monitor room assigning each employee's desk a number rather than a name.

*TSP*'s office is the perfect example of a liminal space. As previously mentioned, a liminal space is an empty or abandoned place with an eerie and surreal feel. While the office feels like it's been used, the lack of people and explanation for their disappearance gives it an eerie air. Paste Magazine's Phoenix Simms wrote that the Backrooms and games like *TSP* are "tied to a long tradition of the liminal and horror," using the color yellow as a signal of existential dread. The Backrooms is a "fungal, sickly yellow" where a person can easily lose themselves.[16] The yellow carpet of the Backrooms is almost the exact same as the carpet in *TSP*—just as one might imagine themselves lost in the Backrooms, a player of *TSP* is left wandering the office for hours, encountering the same yellow carpet and endless maze of corridors, and faces an existential crisis for not having found a true way out or made a single meaningful choice. Both Stanley and the player alike start to lose themselves.

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[15] "Why is this game so creepy?"
[16] Simms, "Backrooms Honor Horror's Yellow History."

Multiple endings for *TSP* finish with the player driving Stanley to commit suicide, sometimes against desperate pleas from the Narrator not to. Stanley can seemingly never be free of this liminal space of an office. Even in the Freedom Ending, Stanley exits one type of liminal space only to enter an eerily artificial outside world—and after a few moments, he returns right back to his office. Whenever the player reaches an ending, they receive the message "the end is never the end is never the end…," and Stanely returns back to his original liminal space. Wandering the building and never finding a true way out, the player feels trapped, limited, and faced with existential horror for their lack of agency. The aesthetics of the game are therefore directly interconnected with the mechanics.

## The Eerie

Mark Fisher similarly discusses the links between aesthetics and existential phenomenology in *The Weird and the Eerie*. He argues that the experience of eeriness is marked by a failure of presence or a failure of absence—we feel a sensation of eeriness when nothing is present when there should presumably be something there or when something is present when there should presumably be nothing there.[17] Liminal spaces are ideal examples of the eerie, although phenomenologists have yet to discuss their merit as such. Liminal spaces are frequently found in schools, restaurants, hospitals, businesses, indoor playgrounds, etc. These are large spaces typically bustling with people, so it feels eerie when there are no people in them. Filled with many examples of liminal spaces, *TSP* is therefore eerie due to its failure of presence. What should be a busy office with hundreds of workers is completely empty, and for seemingly unknown reasons. When Stanley finds his boss's office, it is likewise eerily empty. This eerie sense coupled with the unsettling aesthetics of the liminal space make the game feel closer to the horror genre than it actually is.

Mark Fisher argues that the primary source of uneasiness with the eerie is the issue of agency. When there is a failure of presence, we generally understand that there used to be an agent there, or perhaps there still is one working from the shadows, and the largest concern is what sort of agent it is.[18] Are we being watched? What caused the disappearance of something that

[17] Fisher, *Weird and the Eerie*, 61.
[18] Fisher, 11.

should've been here? In *TSP*, there are many unanswered questions such as these. What, or who, might've caused the disappearance of Stanley's coworkers? Does the Narrator play a role in this disappearance? Who operates the mind control facility, and why? Is someone still there in the office, and would they do something to Stanley like they did to his coworkers? An agent seems to be at large, working from the shadows, but the building appears empty. The player is unsatisfied with the Freedom Ending because they have yet to answer these burning questions. How can people claim they have agency if they don't know what agent is at large? If they are not in control and someone or something else is working from the shadows?

There is also a sense in which determinism itself is eerie. As Fisher argues, "fate is weird in that it implies twisted forms of time and causality that are alien to ordinary perception, but it is also eerie in that it raises questions about agency: who or what is the entity that has woven fate?"[19] If the player is unable to have any agency in the game, then who, or what, causes this? The game's creators? The nature of games itself? Something larger? The player feels uncomfortable and often repulsed by the idea that they are not in control of their own destiny. When a player sees themselves in Stanley, they also become a character being driven by a determined destiny—and while it may be more obvious for Stanley, the player has little to no sense of what agent is controlling them. There are, therefore, many repulsing feelings that arise from playing *TSP*: existential dread, eeriness, anxiety, and terror. Why, then, do people enjoy it?

## Repulsion & Fascination

There is a contradictory sense to *TSP*: it is both fascinating and repulsing. While it is not part of the horror genre, it is comparable to horror's ability to simultaneously frighten and draw people in. Jana Cattien and Richard Stopford discuss a similarly conflicted phenomenology with the eerie itself, describing it as both repulsive and attractive. When objects exhibit eeriness, they are repulsing for disrupting our perception of the phenomenological world—that the object-world hangs onto the subject.[20] However, they argue that the eerie is attractive for the exact same reason: the subject is able to

[19] Fisher, 12.
[20] Cattien and Stopford, "Eerie," 116.

explore its own de-formations through the de-formations of the object.[21] While their phenomenological analysis is important, I will be understanding *TSP* as eerie through a different, more specific lens.

The repulsion to *TSP*'s aesthetics seems to come from a significantly more obvious source: the sense of a loss of agency and freedom. Most people who play *TSP* believe in the existence of free will and their ability to make meaningful choices. Upon entering the game, it seems like a normal choice-based video game. The player quickly realizes, however, that this is merely an illusion of free will, and they feel a horrifying mix of anxiety and existential dread as the dreary yellow carpet never ends. The emptiness of each room makes the player terrified of what could be around the corner or behind the next door. As already discussed, the liminal space aesthetics increase the player's sense of their lack of agency. They feel transcendent of current time while trapped in the 1990s-style workplace, and there is an overbearing suspense surrounding the unknown. Due to the Narrator's confusing motivations and actions, the player does not know what ending they might stumble into or if their choice options will be different from the previous time. Without anyone around, besides the narrator, the player feels alone and insignificant compared to the enormity of the liminal space.

The aspects of clear control in *TSP*—the panopticon-esc monitor room, the mind-control facility, the overwhelming number of clocks and timers—likely add to these feelings of repulsion, but they can also invoke a different feeling. These items are clearly demonstrative of Stanley's (and by extension, the player's) lack of agency, but they are also fascinating as a visual representation of the extent to which people are controlled. Liminal spaces often represent places that are familiar to people from their childhoods, such as older schools and workplaces. Notably, liminal spaces are also often found in locations of control: schools, hospitals, and workplaces. Common themes of liminal spaces, including isolation, loneliness, disorientation, loss of identity, and the de-formation of the object, often resonate with people who experience similar feelings in their day-to-day lives. People can easily relate to Stanley, especially those who work in similar workplaces. Each day feels like a repetition of the last, where no true meaningful choices are made. While most people still believe in the existence of free will, feelings of existential dread are not uncommon. *TSP* is therefore fascinating to some for acknowledging these phenomenological experiences.

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[21] Cattien and Stopford, 117.

As such, a comforting message can be drawn from *TSP*, and thus liminal spaces and the eerie more broadly: meaning in people's lives can be found from recognizing the extent to which we are controlled rather than in the face of it. Liminal spaces and *TSP* captivate audiences because they confirm a fundamental truth discussed earlier with Heidegger's concept of *Angst*: true meaning only emerges when people confront the Nothingness hidden beneath assumed realities. Empty hallways and abandoned offices strip away any illusions of structure and purpose, leaving players of *TSP* to confront this Nothingness. They are forced to acknowledge their lack of agency and ability to make authentic decisions, mirroring Heidegger's notion that *Angst* is not of fear of something *in* the world, but a confrontation with Being itself. By encountering the eerie, players are forced to similarly encounter their lack of agency, and in doing so, are offered a chance to create authentic meaning rather than assume they already have it.

## Conclusion

As I stated at the beginning of this essay, a spectre is haunting aesthetics—the spectre of liminal spaces. The word 'haunting' tends to have two associations: the first is its association with aspects of horror, particularly ghosts and notions of the past, and the second is something persistently and repulsively being present in something. Jacques Derrida used both associations to drive his concept of "hauntology," that the past is haunting the present and preventing positive changes for the future,[22] when explaining Marx and Engel's original quote that "A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism." Mark Fisher uses this concept to argue that we are creating "lost futures" because of how haunted we are by the past.[23]

When people have described liminal spaces as "hauntingly beautiful,"[24] it seems to carry a similar meaning to Derrida's concept of hauntology. Liminal spaces often evoke feelings of nostalgia because they are found in places people frequently used to go to as kids—arcades, schools, old businesses—or are generally from the past, like Stanley's office building out of the 1990s. Regardless of where they are from, liminal spaces represent something

[22] Derrida, Specters of Marx, 2; I'm using Mark Fisher's interpretation of this work that can be found in "What is Hauntology?"
[23] Fisher, "What is Hauntology?," 16.
[24] For one such example, see this Reddit thread on liminal spaces: https://www.reddit.com/r/LiminalSpace/comments/1cvhoxu/a_theory_on_why_liminal_spaces_are_scary_and/.

familiar to the viewer. In these places, people often saw themselves as free agents of their own destinies, particularly in cases where viewers were children or young adults; when people see images of liminal spaces, memories from the past of this feeling of freedom are thus easily evoked. With liminal spaces, the past is haunting the present: when players of *TSP* sense these feelings of freedom being evoked from past memories, they want to believe they are free once again, but they are immediately horrified when *TSP*'s eerie aesthetics make them realize their lack of agency. "Lost futures" occur in *TSP* when players are focused more on nostalgia from the past than they are on how their lives are currently controlled, and this helps explain the horrific nature of *TSP*. Despite this repulsing aspect of liminal spaces, there is a clear path out of this horror genre: the recognition of our lack of agency. It is through encountering *Angst* or existential dread that we can overcome it—only then will we not be haunted by the aesthetics of liminal spaces.

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# Back to the Garden

Natalie DeLaat

The gates of my hometown parish hadn't changed a bit from the days of my youth. As I pulled into the parking lot, my partner leaned forward in their seat to get a better glimpse of the sandy walls and stained glass gleaming in the sunlight.

"This isn't what I had pictured."

"Oh yeah?"

"It's like… normal church looking."

I laughed. As the only church that I'd known for the past 16 years worth of Sundays, I couldn't agree more with the assertion of its normalcy. There was nothing more normal to me than the feeling of traversing the parking lot, walking up the uneven steps and among the flowers planted perfectly in the landscaping strips along the sidewalk.

Except for that I was here with my partner's hand in mine.

I could feel myself tense with a familiar feeling of preparation as treading onto the sidewalk of the church usually meant an imposition of eyes – mostly ones that I couldn't see. But even if I couldn't see them, I could feel their gaze in the way my cheeks get hot and my hands clammy. I could feel it in a beat of silence in the homily. I could feel eyes bearing down on the clergy, as if they were specks of dust illuminated by the skylights over our heads.

There was no one here today though. The parking lot hosted a spattering of sedans in addition to the loyal blue of my Volvo, but our path to the prayer labyrinth was completely clear. The grotto hosting the Virgin Mary atrium that I was lucky to visit on special occasions was glowing in the distance, probably lit by her ever-present smile.

"The labyrinth is this way." I said, pulling my partner gently past the stairs, the entryway, and the chapel. We strode in silence for a while, arm in arm, watching the grass blowing gently in the breeze that brushed my hair past my ear.

Passing the grotto of the Virgin, I led them to a small congregation of trees where the stations of the cross had been intermittently erected in the soft soil. Our feet clodded side by side up the hill, and towards a cove in the

trees where the labyrinth rested. Reaching the clearing, we passed through a wooden gazebo lined with the vines of beautiful white and blue flowers.

They squeezed my hand as we passed under the bridge and finally reached the path of stone carved in the ground before us.

"This is really beautiful," they sighed.

I couldn't agree more. Flowering bushes in full bloom surrounded the small cove housing the labyrinth. Sunlight filtered through the boughs of the cedars standing guard around the circle, and the sound of robins singing echoed from pockets in the greenery.

"It really, *really* is," I concurred.

They didn't say anything more for a moment.

Then, they let go of my hand and released their arm from the crux where it sat interwoven with mine. I watched as they approached the entrance to the labyrinth's path, reached down to pluck up a small flower that had been shed from the bushes surrounding us, and began to walk.

One foot after the other, they strode through the labyrinth rhythmically, weaving towards its core. There was something effortless and regal about their journey.

And then there was that feeling of being watched again.

It arose in the fluttering of the leaves around me, until I couldn't differentiate what truly was the breeze and what was the angels observing my partner's movement towards a truth, towards a prayer once they reached the core. That was the purpose of this garden – wasn't it?

Maybe I should be worrying a little less about returning to a church fully out, hand in hand with a partner whom I love all the way down to their center, and start worrying about what I was in this grotto to accomplish.

To the tune of their footsteps on stone, I paced around the edge of the labyrinth, trying to find an object sacred enough for a plunge into meditation.

I started by picking up a stone, and I turned it in my hand. After deciding it was just really optimal for skipping, but ultimately not good enough for an offering, I placed it back down.

Next I examined a pretty flower, but some of the edges of the petals were turning brown, so I gave it a sniff and kept searching.

What about this stick? Or a pinecone?

As I scanned the scene, my partner circled into view. There was a wink, then a crooked smile as they circled round and our eyes caught for just a moment.

The next object I touched was perfect.

I made my way to the labyrinth's entrance, gripping my tree branch to gather my strength, and breathing deeply to distract myself from the rattling in my ribcage.

I outstretched a single foot into the path, and then I was off in search of an answer. As I let one foot fall in front of me, and then another, I tried to listen more than I thought. I needed to know the reason why I felt so whole here, even with the parts of me that I had hid from the clergy down to the clothes that I wore. To the words that I chose. To the prayers I prayed.

Everytime my partner and I crossed paths, I couldn't resist sneaking a glimpse of their face. I hoped that a small glance at their beauty wouldn't distract me from the answers that I sought.

At first, all I could focus on was the feeling of my feet thudding against the stone. The rock didn't give underfoot the way that grass might. It didn't welcome me in or make me wonder about slipping right through it. It wanted me exactly where I was— aware of my body. Aware that I was walking and thinking, perceivable to everyone who was passing by the cove.

My mind wandered to memories of being here at the labyrinth, when the trees seemed so much taller and the circumference of the circle felt so much larger. Back then, everything seemed to be moving much faster as I raced towards the center, running from the bees in the flowers and from my brother's hand stretched out behind me. The labyrinth had felt like a game – a race – where I might face a beast with great horns at the core.

Now however, I couldn't find a sense of urgency even if I tried. Only a sense of curiosity persisted as we swung around the maze like hands on a clock. Would the clock have the answers once time itself ceased? Would I?

As I circled, my eyes caught on a bench at the edge of the circle again and again. I found myself focusing on the bench while I walked, particularly the inward swirling of the columns holding the seat up. It was tempting for just a moment to stroll through the bounds of the labyrinth's walls and take a moment to sit on the bench. To feel the warm stone on my hands and forget all about this uncomfortable sense of unity with a place I had grown accustomed to fearing.

I couldn't do that though. I had committed.

Turning away from the bench, I glanced upwards. There was only one great star visible above my head, nonoptimal for charting my course. But perfectly optimal for reminding me of the ever-present eye watching my journey.

For years on end, every time I watched that great star disappear beyond the horizon, I was *certain* that a God must exist.

What I wasn't certain of however, is whether or not this God was the same that churned the cauldron of guilt in my stomach with tales of sin. The same God that clergy members whispered to me about, warned me of, seemed to fear with their lives. The same God who noticed if the straps of my shirt were too low, or the hem of my skirt too high. The same God who heard the poetry I murmured to the Basque gods of my ancestors, regarding it as though spoken with a forked tongue. The same God who was there when stories of priests hiding taloned hands and horns behind chasubles and birettas reached me, and I swore off the power of the institution.

Was it the same God that knew how I longed to lean in and kiss this beautiful friend of mine when they made my chest glow with happiness? The one who waited in the corner when I finally mustered the courage to do it?

It seemed unlikely. So much so that I felt tears welling up behind my eyes as the feeling of peace persisted, and the sun continued to warm my skin. As the birds continued to sing, and the angels squatted in the trees overhead, their wings rustling alongside the boughs.

Before I knew it, I nearly bumped into my partner in front of me. They were standing very still, at the center of the circle, the sun casting a glow upon their floppy hair.

As I stood in the center of the circle, the surrounding noise subdued even further. If there was ever a time and place for me to work through my conflict, it was here with my knees against the stone. I grazed my forehead with my fingertips, then moved them to my chest. I crossed my left shoulder, then my right, and sat.

What a shock to find that the sunlight on the leaves above me, around me, and even on the trees in the distance that I had glanced at from the backseat of a car for years, completely matched the eyes of the love of my life in their emerald brilliance. Even more staggering to remember that maybe a part of me had always known this from the moment I had first laid my eyes on trees to begin with.

And what a relief to realize that there was something holy that persisted through these feelings of doubt, these two Gods that had sat on my shoulders. Something tenacious as I sought out truth, one thing that remained consistent with the right thing to do.

Something that had been present the whole time. Even when I had originally ran this path, looked at these trees, dipped my hand in the fountain to

watch the ripples cascade around the pool again and again, much to the dismay of my parents. As my brother and I pointed to the word 'ass' in the scriptures and giggled as loud as the deathly silence of the chapel would allow without disrupting the godly radiation of the altar or the elderly couple in front of us.

It was present when I wove through a library, when I wove through fabric, when I wove pieces of my partner's hair behind their ears and spotted the small freckles on their lobes. When I enveloped a stranger in my arms, felt a worm inching along my skin, I screamed into the roar of a waterfall, and danced so fast I couldn't feel the blisters forming on my heels.

When I dreamt about what I hoped to do for the rest of my life.

The closest form of complete truth that I have ever experienced was sitting in this circle, with someone I loved more than anything else, and remembering how love completely held the power to guide me back out. I stood, took my partner's hand in mine, and walked out of the circle more sure than I had ever been before.

# Two Oceans

Molly Banks

Will my edges ever soften?
Unlikely.

They are so good at being edges after all
Carving out and away
giving me Shape
giving me a Name

This morning I knew my Shape
I knew my Name

I watched, untickled
As you surged up against my pristine borders
Just around noon

Though…. I guess I must have blinked
When your golden edges
Feathered effortlessly
into that eastern barrier

And now
As you move next to me
your rhythms notice mine
They do not shift
But they are subtly persuaded
As I am

Your inconsistent crashing
Adds interest to my rhythm

You seem to think mine are the inconsistency
Thats funny

Now I'm not sure why I'm laughing
Or why in the moonlight
it's so much harder to identify

Where my ripples end and yours begin

Dusk seems to have melted something in me
or between us

With the skies matching both our blues
I seem
to have lost track
of my Shape

And without a way to find our Difference
I might
just for tonight
be disinterested in my Name

But you haven't asked all day

# Denying Duality: A Reconstruction and Refutation of Scanlonian Desire

Emma Van Steertegem

## Introduction

In *What We Owe to Each Other*, T.M. Scanlon reviews and refutes an understanding of desires posited by David Hume and extended by philosophers Carl Hempel and Donald Davison. This understanding, heretofore called the "standard view," posits that actions are motivated by the desire of the agent and justified by the agent's taking of the satisfaction of those desires as a reason in favor of the action. Two arguments are standardly offered in support of these claims: the first, for the motivational efficacy of "pro-attitude desires," and the second, for the dependence of reasons on desires. Scanlon rejects these arguments and their conclusions, instead asserting that desires are neither motivationally efficacious nor normatively significant. He delivers this rejection through two sets of cases, the first of which disproves that actions are motivated by either "broad" or "narrow" desires, and the second of which disproves that the justification for actions is grounded in their ability to satisfy desires. As will be demonstrated, the first of these sets undermines the normative significance of desires and, therefore, the feasibility of the claim against which the second set argues. Regardless, through consideration of the second set, Scanlon refines his argument for the normative significance of reasons and introduces the notion of subjective conditions of agents. Thus, on the standard view, desires are both motivationally efficacious and normatively significant, a claim which Scanlon seeks to reject by arguing for actions as motivated by reasons which are not desires. I will focus on these conditions—particularly, as they relate to enjoyment—as raising difficulties for Scanlon's account of the separability of reasons from desire, before examining the limited ways in which those difficulties might be overcome.

## I. Scanlon's Reconstruction of the Standard View

Scanlon ascribes two claims to the standard philosophical understanding of desires: first, that desires are motivationally efficacious, and second, that they are normatively significant. Put otherwise, desires, on this standard view, both motivate action and ground reasons to act.[1] For example, whereas the desire to satiate hunger motivates one's eating, the reason for eating is grounded in one's belief that doing so will satiate his hunger. In the first instance, desire provides a reason to act; in the second, it justifies the action as the means understood by the agent to satisfy that desire. And, to claim these roles, Scanlon thinks that desire must be understood as a state independent from "seeing something as a reason."[2] That is, desire must be able to motivate and assign normative significance to actions without containing evaluations of reasons for those actions.

These claims, further, rely upon a notion of reasons taken in the standard normative sense[3] and applied to a so-called Humean framework.[4] Such reasons are understood, specifically, not in the normative sense of those which one had or could have had, but in the alternative sense of those which generally support the thing in question. Within the Humean framework, which states that an agent has a reason to perform an action insofar as doing so advances one of his desires, it is the second kind of normative reasons which characterize reasons for actions. That is, the framework is not concerned with whether hunger figured or could have figured in the decision of some agent to eat, but with the basis on which hunger is a reason in favor of eating. And, in keeping with the standard story drawn above, the framework holds that these reasons follow from desire: the action is motivated by the desire of the agent and justified by the agent's taking of the satisfaction of those desires as a reason in favor of the action. Reasons follow from desire, and desire motivates and informs reasons for action through the force of brute inclination.

Scanlon reviews two accounts that are commonly invoked to support the standard claims. Respectively, these accounts concern "pro-attitude desires"[5] and the notion that "different reasons for actions [held by different people] because their desires are different."[6] Taking these accounts in turn, the first

[1] Scanlon, "Reasons," 37.
[2] Scanlon, 18.
[3] Scanlon, 19.
[4] Scanlon, 20.
[5] Scanlon, 37.
[6] Scanlon, 41.

defines the class of desires as broadly consisting in any attitude which favors some action or outcome. Insofar as these attitudes—such as duty, pride, or pleasure-seeking—motivate action, and insofar as they appear to do so alone, this account views them as motivationally efficacious. The second demonstrates that the normatively significant role of desires follows from two intuitively obvious facts: first, that people have reasons which depend on their desires, and second, that different desires yield different reasons for action. On this standard view, therefore, agents have a reason to do an action if it would satisfy some desire of theirs; the desires grant the reasons and are independent from them. They are, correspondingly, normatively significant.

## II. Scanlon's Refutation of the Standard View

Scanlon disagrees with the conception of desire posited by the first of these accounts and contests the normative significance ascribed to desire by the second. Scanlon argues that desires are neither motivationally efficacious nor normatively significant. Put succinctly, they neither motivate nor justify action. To prove the first of these claims, Scanlon identifies and deconstructs two cases in which actions are said to be motivated by desires, demonstrating that they both fail to provide a motivating force which is legitimately a desire and to provide a desire which legitimately motivates actions. To prove the second claim, he similarly provides and refutes cases in which actions are treated as justified because of their ability to satisfy desires.

Taking these proofs in turn, the former entitles the subjects of its two cases as the "broad" and "narrow" senses of desire.[7] The first of these cases, which concerns the "pro-attitude desires" described above, is treated as successfully motivating reason but not as legitimately definable as desire. That is, Scanlon admits that pro-attitude desires can be motivationally efficacious, yet still maintains that some of them fail the commonsense view of desires as themselves motivating action. Of these non-efficacious desires, he describes that they reverse the motivational relation, emerging as the "motivational consequence of something else" rather than as the thing which actions are consequences of.[8] The "pro-attitude" towards satiating the hunger of your family, for example, could be conceived of as a consequence of your sense of duty towards your family, rather than as the thing from which the satiation

[7] Scanlon, 37.
[8] Scanlon, 37.

of the hunger of your family follows. In this way, your desire would emerge from a prior belief about which reasons are sufficient to motivate your action, and your action would not be emergent from desire itself. Thus, on Scanlon's view, pro-attitude desires do not prove that desires motivate actions.

In search of such a proof, Scanlon turns to his second case of "narrow" desires. Insofar as these desires possess a motivational force which is truly independent of other things, they are legitimately definable as desires. Considering such a desire reveals, however, that it is not itself motivationally efficacious.[9] In the example of satiation of your hunger, the combination of the unpleasant sensation of hunger, the belief that this unpleasantness could be alleviated through satiating yourself, and the acceptance of this belief as a reason to actually satiate yourself together explain your action. Though it is your disposition which is here independent of other things, it is not your desire which itself motivates his satiation of your hunger. That is, your disposition—both towards hunger and towards believing that your hunger could be alleviated through satiating yourself—premises and describes the direction of your attention towards factors in favor of satiating yourself, but does not itself move you to action. The sufficient condition for action is instead the third listed item: the acceptance of his belief as a reason for action. Through this picture, Scanlon first establishes his concept of attention-directed desires—that is, desires that are predicated upon the insistent direction of one's attention towards factors which favor one's satisfaction of it—,[10] and second proves that such desires do not themselves motivate actions. Whereas, recall, the standard understanding treated desire as motivating action independently of reasons and through non-cognitive force, the revised understanding treats desires as motivating action only insofar as they facilitate the cognitive act of taking something to be a reason for action.

In the final move in his account of desires as motivationally non-efficacious, Scanlon defeats an objection to his account of attention-directed desires. This objection defends the motivational efficacy of desires by including "bare urges" in the before described picture of desire and action. By this inclusion, the sensation, the belief regarding some action in relation to that sensation, and the acceptance of this belief as a reason for action are attended to by a fourth condition: the simple urge of eating, as in the previous example. And, to the objector, it is this urge which the desire to satiate hunger consists

[9] Scanlon, 38.
[10] Scanlon, 39.

in. Scanlon replies to this concern by examining the incoherence of an example which separates urges from attention-directed desires: a man who compulsively turns on radios in the seeming absence of reasons to. To Scanlon, insofar as this man lacks reasons for his action through which he might see "something good or desirable" about turning on radios, he cannot be said to have a desire to perform this action; an affirmation of Scanlon's point.[11] Hence, Scanlon has argued that directed-attention desires approximate the common notion of desire, but not the commonly understood role of desire as motivationally efficacious. Insofar as such desires do figure within action, it is only through providing for conditions within which a reason for action can be taken.

Turning to the latter proof, Scanlon, recall, seeks to undermine the normative significance commonly attributed to desires. To do so, he must disprove that the reason for an action is grounded in the belief that the action will satisfy a desire. Insofar as the previous account has demonstrated, however, that actions are motivated by reasons and that these reasons are not desires, it has already been established that desires themselves lack normative significance. And, speaking more broadly, insofar as Scanlon treats normativity—thinking that one has a reason—as itself buried within motivations for action, he closes the gap which traditionally differentiates the motivation for and justification of an action. Put otherwise, the reason for which Scanlon's agent acts is also that which favors the doing of the action; the justificatory reason is visible through the motivating reason. In contrast, insofar as the standard view treats normativity as uniquely belonging to the justificatory domain, it widens the space between the reasons for which one acts and the justification that one would provide for their action. The reason for which the standard agent acts, correspondingly, does not necessarily overlap with the reason that would be given as favoring the action.

## III. Scanlon's View of the Efficacy and Significance of Reasons

Nonetheless, through considering and objecting to the cases in which reasons for action are said to be grounded in their ability to satisfy a desire, Scanlon brings his own position into sharper view. Scanlon begins by raising the

[11] Scanlon, 38.

standard argument mentioned in section II: "different reasons for actions [are held by different people] because their desires are different." On this view, those who want to satiate their family have reason to purchase food for multiple people, while those who only want to satiate themselves have reason to purchase food for one person. From these examples, the standard view concludes that the fact and quality of reasons for action are based on desires to which those reasons correspond. Scanlon responds by affirming the dependent role of such reasons for action upon desires, while also reiterating that this dependence does not entail that desires give rise to reasons for action. He does so through an example which, when applied to the case of an agents' desire to satiate themselves, proves that desires lack reason-giving force.[12] The example supposes that agents' attention is persistently drawn to considerations in favor of eating: hunger, boredom, the particular quality of the to-be-eaten food, and so forth. Nonetheless, this state of directed attention is not sufficient for the agents to endorse the satiation towards which their desire tends. The endorsement, specifically, requires that agents accept their considerations as favoring a reason for action. If they satiate their hunger, the desire for satiation to which that action corresponds is a product, not a source, of their reasons for the action; it is the explanandum and not the explanans.

Still, as Scanlon notes, one may respond that the standard view is supported by the grounding of reasons for actions in their ability to provide pleasure. That is, insofar as reasons for action are sourced in the pleasure to be derived from the action, reasons for action are sourced in their ability to satisfy desire. Scanlon, however, is able to accept the former while rejecting the latter: the pleasure attendant to an action may be reason for it even though the desire which that action would satisfy is not, a fact which Scanlon attributes to reasons being "provided by some future enjoyment."[13] That is, desire may premise and emerge from reasons for action, but insofar as the former relates to the present agent and the latter to the future agent, they may not be grouped within the same category. This example, through which Scanlon displays the coherence of his argument with the tendency of agents to seek pleasure, can be further extended to demonstrate the compatibility of Scanlon's account with the variability of reasons for action. As the reason for an action is informed by the pleasure which it will yield to an agent, so too is

[12] Scanlon, 44.
[13] Scanlon, 45.

it informed by all kinds of subjective conditions. Differences in reasons for action are, in other words, dependent upon differences in the qualities and features of the person. This does not entail that different reasons for action follow from different desires; rather, it demonstrates that the reasons from which actions follow are frequently informed by subjective conditions.[14] Accordingly, through his deconstruction of the standard view of the normative significance of desires, Scanlon reinforces his argument for the normative significance of reasons to actions. Central to such reinforcement is his demonstration of the compatibility of reason-based actions with the variety of subjective conditions of agents.

## IV. My Objection to Scanlon

Though Scanlon's refutation of the normative significance of desire further clarifies his position, it also contains his weakest argument: namely, that subjective conditions are simultaneously sources of reasons for action—as in the case of enjoyment—and confirmatory of his argument that desires do not ground reasons to act. Recalling, Scanlon suggests that the pleasure, or enjoyment, entailed by an action can provide reason for its doing, whereas the desire which that action would satisfy cannot; on this tack, he suggests that pleasure and desire are separable. This separability is further attested to by Scanlon's circumscription of enjoyment within the future—the period over which the action is performed—and of desire within the present—the period before that in which the action is performed. Each of these grounds of separability are objectionable, however.

First, it is difficult to conceive of Scanlon's reasons for which an agent would enjoy an action as existing apart from desire. Scanlon is, at once, committed to some reasons for action as grounded in the pleasurable states which acting would induce,[15] but also unwilling to connect these states to desire. Forming a so-grounded reason for action, however, presupposes basic orientations towards certain kinds of sensations. That is, agents may take the pleasure of satiating their hunger as a reason for that action, but their reason for forming that reason is a non-cognitive orientation towards that satiation as pleasurable. If such an orientation did not exist, then neither would the premise for taking pleasure as a reason for action.

[14] Scanlon, 49.
[15] Scanlon, 44.

Second, it is not defensible that desire and pleasure are temporally separated in the so-described manner. On the one hand, the act of desiring may itself be pleasurable insofar as it allows for states like anticipation of the satisfaction of the desire; an agent could find pleasure in—even desire—desire itself. On the other, the experience of pleasure is presupposed by and concurrent with that of the desire for it. That is, desire does not stop where pleasure starts; rather, it is continuous with and characteristic of that pleasure. So, granting that the future enjoyment is eating and that the present desire is to be satiated, it is true both that the prospect of eating could render the present desire to be satiated itself enjoyable, and that the present desire of satiating oneself could render the future eating enjoyable. In either case, the matter of future enjoyment and present desire are seen, much less than being mutually exclusive, to substantially bear upon each other. And, insofar as these objections succeed, they undermine either the plausible claim that pleasure is a reason for doing an action, or Scanlon's thesis that desires do not ground reasons to act.

To refute this objection, Scanlon might clarify that desires do, in fact, inform the things which agents find pleasurable, but that this informing does not itself provide a reason for doing the pleasurable action. To maintain this claim, he would refer to the temporal circumscription described above. This circumscription, recall, suggests that insofar as reasons for action pertain to a future state of affairs, they do not include the present state of desire for the action. A desire might be concurrent with the future state of affairs—and in fact, justify the reasons for which that state is enjoyable—but nonetheless, this desire would be different from the one had during the period in which the reasons for the affairs were formed. Scanlon might, further, seek to understand the desire attendant to enjoyment as one consistent with the directed-attention account. On this account, agents might count the desire as a consideration in favor of continuing the enjoyable action.

Both approaches, however, suggest a struggle to address the second half of the objection: that the future state of affairs and the present desires mutually inform each other. This objection might require a more fundamental reorientation of Scanlon's thesis, insofar as it suggests that desire could themselves bear over experiences beyond those in which a pleasant experience is currently had. In summary, though Scanlon would admit that desire mediates enjoyable experiences, he would maintain the temporal boundaries before mentioned. In doing so, he would fail to address the concern that states of

future enjoyment and present desire are continuous with and influential over each other.

## Conclusion

Recollecting, the standard view assigns two roles to desires: motivational efficacy and normative significance. Scanlon, conversely, attributes neither of these roles to desires, instead establishing that actions are motivated by the reasons which an agent takes in favor of its performance. Scanlon argues for this claim through cases, the first category of which demonstrates that both "broad" and "narrow" desires do not motivate action, and the second of which reaffirms—and clarifies the bearing of pleasure upon—Scanlon's thesis. My objection proposes that insofar as Scanlon argues that satisfaction of pleasure may be a reason for action whereas satisfaction of desire may not be, he unduly separates pleasure from desire; a concern which Scanlon could partly, but not fully, overcome while maintaining his basic thesis. This, in turn, lends credence to the efficacy and significance assigned to desires by the standard view.

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# A Radical Approach to Gender Equality

Jordynn Hays

Gender-based inequality is a prominent topic within the legal field given its long history. From discrimination in employment and education to gender-based violence, the question of how to achieve justice is significant in the eyes of legal scholars. Some liberal feminist legal scholars, like Kathleen Sullivan, argue that gender justice can be achieved through liberal legal tools such as the Constitution and legal rights. In contrast, more radical feminist scholars like Catharine MacKinnon see the legal system as too deeply entrenched in inequality for it to provide a meaningful pathway for justice. In this paper, I will argue that MacKinnon's radical feminist jurisprudence approach to achieving gender justice is superior to Sullivan's liberal feminist approach because MacKinnon actively works to subvert oppressive systems whereas Sullivan works within the same systems that contribute to gender inequality. By using the same tools that built the sexist system to try to break it down, Sullivan fails to interrogate sexist structures embedded within the law, allowing patriarchal legal norms to continue unabated

Sullivan defends a liberal sameness feminism which holds that women and men are essentially the same. On this view, the goal of the law should be to treat men and women the same, and emphasizing the difference between genders hinders equality. In the article "Constitutionalizing Women's Equality," for instance, Sullivan seeks to use the Constitution to bring about gender equality. She explains that the equality American women have gained lies in state and federal constitutional and statutory provisions. In addition, the rhetoric of broad constitutional guarantees can help cement specific statutory and regulatory protections.[1] Sullivan also mentions the importance of interpretation—she explains that efficacy in advancing equality is largely dependent on who is interpreting the constitutional texts. She writes, "[t]here can be little doubt that the world would look different if half the seats of power had women sitting in them," highlighting her view that more women need to be

[1] Sullivan, "Constitutionalizing Women's Equality," 763.

present in government and in the room when interpreting legal texts.[2] Essentially, Sullivan sees the law as a tool and seeks to work within the existing American legal and political structures to achieve progress. She has little interest in tearing down current structures; she simply wants to redirect them to give freedom and equality to women.

MacKinnon, on the other hand, takes on a dominance feminism perspective, where the difference between men and women arises solely due to men's domination of women. What sameness feminism fails to recognize, then, is that women's unifying feature is the fact that they are subordinated by men. In "Towards a Feminist Jurisprudence," MacKinnon notes that in liberal regimes that emphasize individual rights and formal equality, the law is a marker of legitimacy and a site of force. In male supremacist societies, which are practically all societies, the male viewpoint dominates civil society in the form of an objective standard.[3] From here, this male viewpoint becomes dominant and does not function as a viewpoint at all; it becomes the reality. The state then uses this viewpoint to make law, which legitimates it and makes social dominance invisible. Liberal legalism thus allows for male dominance to become legitimate and invisible by adopting this male point of view in law at the same time as it enforces this view on society.[4] With this, dominance looks ontological, making it seem like the difference between men and women is naturally produced. As a result, in the liberal state, the law institutionalizes the power of men over women.[5]

For this reason, MacKinnon argues that it is practically impossible to achieve gender justice by working within the current legal structures. She explains that gender inequality and male domination are intertwined in the roots of the law. Lines of precedent that were fully developed before women were allowed to vote, read, or write and are still considered valid in the present day for defeating unprecedented interpretations of law from women's point of view.[6] For example, in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, the Supreme Court explicitly indexed the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of liberty to past social perspectives that were heavily colored by sexism and patriarchy. The Court claimed that at the time the Fourteenth Amendment was enacted, many states outlawed abortion, ultimately holding that

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[2] Sullivan, 763.
[3] MacKinnon, "Towards a Feminist Jurisprudence," 237.
[4] MacKinnon, 237.
[5] MacKinnon, 238.
[6] MacKinnon, 238.

the right to abortion was not a fundamental right as relates to the Due Process Clause.[7] The law has never been neutral and cannot be looked at as neutral unless one wishes to cement men's domination over women. MacKinnon's approach is superior to Sullivan's approach because MacKinnon recognizes the inherent inequality present in the creation of the law, whereas Sullivan sees the law as a neutral tool, and working within the boundaries of an oppressive system is overwhelmingly unlikely to create long-lasting change that effectively challenges sexual domination.

In achieving gender equality, it makes little sense to try to work within the current legal and political structures that have been built on sexist and misogynistic ideals. It is like trying to build a house with rotted wood. It may exist for a short period of time, but ultimately it will need to be torn down and rebuilt. MacKinnon recognizes this, and Sullivan does not. To this end, MacKinnon explains the importance of consciousness raising so people can learn of the ontological dominance that is present in the legal system.[8] She writes, "[w]hen seemingly ontological conditions are challenged from the collective standpoint of a dissident reality, they become visible as epistemological."[9] From here, dominance begins to lose its power. Gender difference has been made to seem natural when it is truly learned; being able to recognize that difference has been constructed is what allows progress to be made. By choosing instead to focus on the idea that men and women should be treated *the same*, Sullivan's approach fails to recognize that it is first necessary to unlearn the social processes that have constructed male domination if men and women are to be treated *equally*.

MacKinnon continues and writes that in order to make any sort of progress, women's concrete reality needs to be claimed. With this, sex inequality needs to be recognized as a social and political institution.[10] Next, she highlights the importance of recognizing that male forms of power over women are expressed as individual rights—meaning that when men lose power, they are often losing rights.[11] Sex inequality is steeped in the formation of laws and provides steps to unlearn the inequality that is made to seem natural. Sullivan, on the other hand, simply suggests working toward creating new laws and putting more women in positions of power without critically

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[7] Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, 142 S. Ct. 2228 (2022).
[8] MacKinnon, "Towards a Feminist Jurisprudence," 240.
[9] MacKinnon, 240.
[10] MacKinnon, 244.
[11] MacKinnon, 244.

interrogating existing legal structures.

A liberal feminist might object to MacKinnon's radical approach by arguing that wanting to completely overturn the current legal structures seems impossible, or something that will take an extremely long time. They might continue that by taking a liberal feminist approach, one is granted more opportunities and greater possibilities for change as they are working within the existing structures. For them, incremental progress is key to achieving gender justice, which can best be done by changing certain unjust laws, not tearing down the entire system. Attempting to overturn or completely change the legal system leads to chaos. This process would take much too long—it is better to take gradual, reliable steps toward achieving gender justice.

Consider, for example, the Supreme Court's decision in *United States v. Virginia*, in which the Court held that the exclusion of women from the Virginia Military Institute was a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause.[12] A liberal feminist would say that this is a step toward achieving equality: women are being seen as equal to men, and the sex-based classifications are dissolving. They might acknowledge that this is not the end of the road, but using the courts allowed progress to be made, progress that might not have been made if one was attempting to overturn the entire system. Working within the boundaries of the existing legal system provided women with more opportunities and gave them a seat in a position of power. Therefore, a rights-based approach is a dependable way to achieve gender equality.

In contrast, MacKinnon would respond that using a purely rights-based approach may be easier, but it does not guarantee gender equality in the long run. Sexism, racism, and overall exploitation are allowed to remain powerful when a legal and political system relies on laws that were built on racist and misogynistic roots. Liberal feminism is attempting to achieve liberation without changing the structure of society, which is not practical. MacKinnon writes, "[e]quality will require change, not reflection—a new jurisprudence, a new relation between life and law."[13] She argues that a liberal feminist approach takes on the wrong focus, as equality cannot be achieved by examining the specific places in law where women are treated differently than men. A liberal feminist approach simply lifts women up to the position of men, where they have the same capacity to contribute to an oppressive system.

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[12] United States v. Virginia, 518 U.S. 515 (1996).
[13] MacKinnon, "Towards a Feminist Jurisprudence," 249.

With *United States v. Virginia*, MacKinnon would argue that these women were just moved from being dominated to being the dominator. Women being allowed to attend the school does not actually solve gender inequality—all it does is allow women to be subjected to aggressive, military-style schooling. This case does not solve the problem of why this style of training is seen as prestigious or the abuse that occurs within this aggressive-style schooling. Under this, toxic masculinity is awarded and promoted, which simply contributes to the patriarchy and male domination. Furthermore, women in power have the ability to oppress as well, they are not protected or forgiven simply because they are women. This case highlights that a liberalist approach merely grants women, and usually only certain women, the ability to contribute to oppression and male domination.

In conclusion, the question about which approach to use for achieving gender equality will continue to be a pressing one. Yet, a radical feminist approach remains superior as it attempts to break down the sexist systems in place, which establishes gender equality in the long run. A liberal approach does not recognize the inherent racism, sexism, and exploitation that the legal system is built on, allowing the patriarchal male perspective to remain dominant. *Dobbs* is an example of the dangers of a liberal approach. With this case, the Supreme Court ruled that states now have the power to regulate abortions and it is not a fundamentally guaranteed right. When focusing only on fighting for rights within existing legal frameworks, freedom is subject to the whims of those in power. Laws can grant freedom just as easily as they can take it away. Relying on the Constitution to provide gender equality is therefore dangerous, as it is clear how it can be easily interpreted to take away access to abortion. By more fundamentally challenging the sociopolitical structures which construct the male perspective as objective through the law, a radical approach has the capacity to press for long-lasting gender equality, but a liberal one does not.

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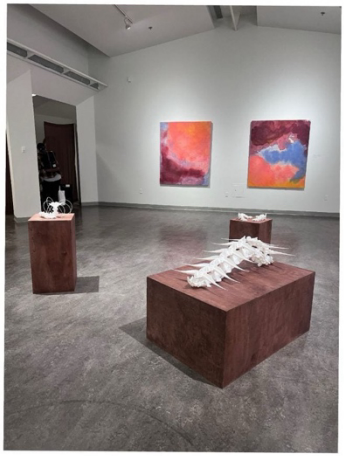
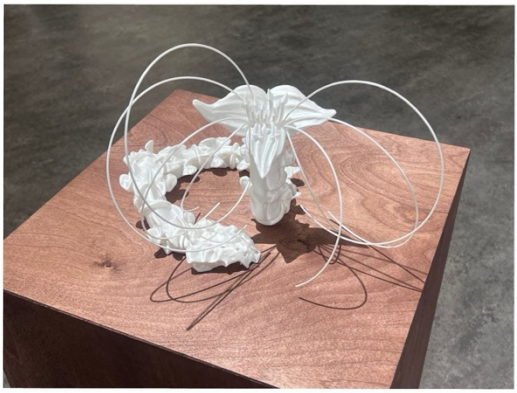
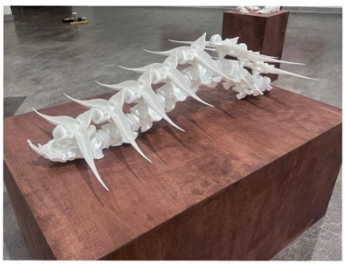
# The Axis of Your Being

Jenikka Cruz







The Axis of Your Being
3D-printed PLA
(bottom left)

Artifact 01
3D-printed PLA
(top right)

Artifact 02
3D-printed PLA
(bottom right)

Artwork Featured in: Exhibition in Studio Arts
Exhibition Run: March 13, 2025 - April 11, 2025
Location: Vachon Gallery, Seattle University

Jenikka Cruz creates 3D-printed sculptures that mirror the fleeting nature of time and existence. Drawing inspiration from the human body and exotic flowers, she gives a second life to decaying objects. Bones are the remnants, the last evidence of life. Yet, the source of stability and strength. Flowers are beautiful, arresting, fragile and impermanent, their beauty fading quickly. The two elements paired together symbolizes the transient nature of life and reveals how both are affected by the passage of time. Using digital modeling and 3D printing, Cruz transforms these delicate structures into lasting sculptures, preserving what time would naturally erase. The sculptures not only freeze these objects in time but also offer a new, more permanent version. A version that challenges the natural cycle of decay. Cruz reimagines and extends the life of these forms, turning temporary beauty into a lasting artifact, inviting reflection on the cycles of life, growth, and inevitable change.

# Interpellation in the Colonial Context: Louis Althusser's Theory of Ideology and Frantz Fanon's Account of the Race-Marked Colonial Person

Violeta López Molina

Althusser's materialist approach to ideology explains how ideology ensures the reproduction of the conditions of production—that is, how social institutions and practices secure the continuation of the existing economic system by shaping individuals into subjects that uphold it. In this paper, his theory of interpellation is brought into conversation with Fanon's description of the black man's lived experience to illustrate how the race-marked colonial person is constituted as a subject in the colonial context. Situating this analysis primarily in the context of Western colonialism and its transnational afterlives across the African diaspora, I argue that the black man is not subjectivized as a universal subject like the (white) human, but as a race-marked subject already overdetermined by his skin color. Interpellation under white supremacism is both reproduced and dialectically constituted by the ruling ideology of the colonizer, which denies black people recognition as free subjects. Considering that the default category of the subject in the colonial context is the white subject, the colonized person is ontologically excluded from a universal form of interpellation. This paper aims to integrate Althusser and Fanon—two theorists who developed interrelated concepts yet did not theorize them in direct relation—to show that interpellation for the black person is lived particularly (as a race-marked subject), whereas for the white person it is lived universally (as a subject).

The main difference between Marx's definition of ideology and Althusser's is that, for the latter, there is no outside of ideology; ideology isn't an illusory representation of our real conditions or an abstract force external to reality, but of material existence. For Marx, ideology primarily functions as a set of false ideas imposed by the ruling class to obscure the real economic conditions and relations of exploitation. In contrast, in saying that "men

represent their real conditions of existence to themselves in an imaginary form."[1] Althusser suggests that we behave alienated from the fact that we act according to ideology all the time in the real world. Ideology is 'imaginary' because it is a unifying mythical story we tell ourselves to make sense of a contradictory world and have a sense of stability; it is the masked norms one internalizes and embodies in order to operate in daily life. It is 'material' precisely because ideas that make up ideology exist and manifest themselves through material practices or rituals,[2] such as going to school from Monday to Friday or praying once a day. In a way, ideology is our way out of one's inability to engage with our real conditions directly. It is the representation of one's relation to the world, which manifests itself through the material ways we engage with our contextual surroundings daily.

Interpellation is a guiding term for a universal and structural understanding of the operation of ideology and the way the latter transforms us from *individuals* to (cultural) *subjects*. The relationship between subject and ideology is dialectical: the category of the subject is constitutive of ideology insofar as ideology functions by constituting individuals as subjects (ibid, 28). Althusser argues that being a human being fundamentally involves being a subject interpellated under the ruling ideology: "ideology interpellates individuals as subjects."[3] Interpellation, also called hailing, happens the moment an individual is recognized or addressed by another. The simple act of hailing "Hey, you there" by anyone who makes one turn around is an ideological operation for Althusser.[4] This is interpellation: the process that makes us stand out from inanimate objects and turns us from being individuals into subjects.

Interpellation isn't sequential in the sense that it happens without succession; the existence of ideology and hailing are almost like two sides of the same coin. The idea that we are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects or that "individuals are always-already subjects" suggests that we are born under an ideological sociocultural structure that recognizes us as subjects even before we are born and can recognize ourselves as such.[5] It occurs through the material, everyday, ideological rituals that are present even before one's birth,[6] eventually manifesting in the name, gender, parents, household,

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[1] Althusser, *Ideology*, 23.
[2] Althusser, 24.
[3] Althusser, 28.
[4] Althusser, 30.
[5] Althusser, 30.
[6] Althusser, 31.

and school one is assigned. Although interpellation might appear as obvious, it is an operation dialectically and simultaneously reproduced and made possible by the ruling ideology and its respective, context-specific category of the subject.

The 'obviousness' of interpellation diminishes for the colonized subject living under the colonizer's ruling ideology. Fanon criticizes the presupposition of a symmetrical subject-subject relation by voicing how the black subject is interpellated as a *race-marked* subject in the colonial context. The example where Fanon hears a kid telling his mom "Look, a Negro!"[7] on the train illustrates a radically different experience from Althusser's direct, general address, "Hey, you there." The kid does not address the black man directly, but indirectly; he refers to him through his mom. The addressive subject-subject relation happens between two colonists; the race-marked subject is constitutively excluded from reciprocal face-to-face recognition despite its clear presence. The fact that the most basic act of hailing that Althusser describes isn't lived as a universal human experience for the black man in this scenario shows the dialectical relationship between ideology and interpellation in a white supremacist world. The colonial person isn't interpellated just as a subject but as a race-marked subject that stands out; it has its recognition refused for being subjected to the story or the Lacanian imaginary of the colonizer's ideology. The Lacanian imaginary refers to the way people form their sense of self by identifying with external images; in a colonial context, this means the colonized subject is forced to see themselves through the distorted and dominant images created by the colonizer.

In a sense, both "Hey, you there" and "Look, a Negro" respond to acts guided by the same colonialist ideology and the fact that white in this context is the predominant, abstract, and universal category of the subject. The universal, presupposed category of the subject is fundamentally white, whereas black-skinned persons are particularized and epidermically "overdetermined from without."[8] But paradoxically, white supremacy is an 'abstract' type of universality because it isn't inherently universal; it is particular in the material world, since not everyone is white in actuality. However, it conceives itself as universal and permeates the rest in its terms. If it were objectively universal, it would not heterogenize subjects by dividing them according to their skin color. Humans live under the misconception that ideology is an illusion

[7] Fanon, *Black Skin*, 111.
[8] Fanon, 116.

despite the fact that their actions are based on ideological terms and racial biases, such as when a white person gets alarmed when they see a black pedestrian. Under this ruling ideology, whiteness is internalized and treated as the rational and civilized in contrast to the black person who is conceived and treated as violent, inadequate, and "made of the irrational."[9]

Althusser's universal structural description of what it is to be a human being is experienced in a form of *particularity* by the colonized person, who is not a (universal) subject but a race-marked subject. The particularity assigned to the colonized subject is evident in how it is always defined in relation to the white man and "dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes."[10] The sociocultural unconscious is designed on the assumption of the superiority of white over black. Although Althusser's example of interpellation ("Hey, you there!") could be thought of as non-ideological on first impression, Fanon's lived experience on the train as a person whose adequate interpellation is negated, pronounces the omnipresence of ideology as something fundamentally material.

The constitutive character of the ruling ideology explains why black persons cannot easily escape being interpellated as race-marked subjects and self-identify as universal, free subjects in the colonial context. Fanon's experience goes back to Althusser's claim that what seems to happen *outside* ideology (in this case, on the train) actually happens *in* ideology. The colonized subject cannot escape ideology, its ontological exclusion is reinforced by material circumstances where the supremacy of white values "imposes a dichotomy upon the whole people" without room for choice.[11] Similar to the unconscious, ideology is constitutive because it shapes our everyday practices and is so ingrained that it is hard to see.

Even after slavery was constitutionally—but thus abstractly—abolished by the French, the colonial race-marked person could not assert himself as a free self-consciousness. Since the Negro was set free by his master and did not fight for this freedom,[12] the situation is not substantially better than during slavery. That the white master one day recognized the negro slave without conflict[13] means that the race-marked person is still interpellated based on

[9] Fanon, 123.
[10] Fanon, 116.
[11] Fanon, 45.
[12] Fanon, 219.
[13] Fanon, 217.

values that were not created by his actions.[14] The values of justice and liberty are white justice and white liberty rather than real, nondiscriminatory, or truly universal human values. Insofar as the slave hasn't made himself recognized through struggle, the normative category of the subject remains white.

Therefore, considering how ideology operates dialectically with the category of the subject, it would require an entire transformation of this category for interpellation to be one undifferentiated process of subjectivization for every human being regardless of race.[15] As emancipation from ideology is impossible, a new and more humane type of interpellation would require a new world; one that has undergone a full ideological deconstruction along with an objectively universal, non-racist category of the subject. Even if the race-marked subject engages in rebellion, he does not escape interpellation altogether but may be re-interpellated through a new set of values shaped by resistance. Yet as long as ideology persists, so does interpellation—just under a different framework.

All in all, interpellation is twofold in the colonial context where the world is cut in two: colonizers and colonized, or settler and native. In a way, Althusser's "Hey, you there" represents the ideal condition of the colonized person, someone who is recognized directly as any other subject and not overdetermined as a race-marked subject–assuming they are not being approached or overwritten due to their skin color in this case. If Althusser explains how the conditions of production are able to be reproduced, Fanon offers a specific example of how these conditions concretize under the specific context of colonialism while also critiquing the dehumanizing and unjust component of interpellation in a racialized social world. Fanon teaches us that colonization isn't just the extirpation of land but also the recategorization of the category of the subject (constituted by the settler) that Althusser discusses.

Although this goes beyond the scope of this paper, it would be insightful to explore the possibilities of living in a world where humans act guided by a more humanist ideology. Further questions include why humans have built a Lacanian imaginary (understood as the field of psychic activity that operates in the presumption that the world makes sense despite being contradictory) that tries to cope with uncertainty by living through an inhumane ideology.

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[14] Fanon, 220.

[15] Fanon argues that only decolonization would be able to unify people and break this dichotomy.

Althusser might argue that being subjected to the ruling ideology is easier than confronting the fact that we cannot have direct access to our real conditions or assert ourselves as subjects without ideology. Fanon would add to this by exposing the systematic injustice that has been reproduced as a result of a failure to recognize the awfulness of confronting the ways white supremacy has created an underclass. In acknowledging that ideology is essential in the turning of individuals into subjects, maybe the question could be how an ideological world with a recategorized subject would look like; a society without a group of 'inadequate' subjects.

## Bibliography

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# The Shape of Becoming

Zichang Wang

Some days stall,
some times crash through.
Have you heard the echoes of the same hour?

The sky was woven from tears,
soft as falling snow.

An eternal glimmer pierced the darkness in that moment,
like a note not yet fallen,
hovering above the ruins,
sinking softly into the heart.

Did you hear it?
It was not a bell—
but the soul echoing into the void,
redrawing its own outline
in every act of breaking.

In the storm and fire,
truth melted upon my tongue,
leaving no answer,
only the ember of fire.

Then came the fracture,
soft as a dying chord,
where silence turned inward,
and every brightness fell without sound.

Still, somewhere,
a breath remains.
Not yet word,
not yet song—
but the shape of something becoming.

# Interview with Dr. Nancy Jecker: What is a Person?

Andrew Shaw, Jason Cappelloni, and Ilwad Mahamoud

*Dr. Nancy Jecker is a Professor of Bioethics and Humanities at the University of Washington School of Medicine, and a leading bioethics scholar with expertise in sub-Saharan African philosophy. She recently published a new book with Dr. Caesar Atuire, entitled* What is a Person? Untapped Insights from Africa (Oxford, 2025). The Garden of Ideas *was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to interview Dr. Jecker about her new book and global perspectives on personhood. The interview below has been edited for print.*

**Ilwad:** Thank you for taking this interview! To start off, cultures across Africa hold a wide and colorful range of philosophical concepts and perspectives. Given this cultural diversity, what do you mean when you refer to African philosophy and African personhood in your book? Is there meaningful solidarity between African nations in their moral beliefs, despite this diversity? Or do you believe that this moniker results from a Western homogenization of Africa?

**Dr. Jecker**: I'm glad we started there. Let me just begin by clarifying that I do not intend to essentialize African or Western views, or to represent these nuanced traditions as univocal. Instead, our aim is to characterize views that are widely held among people in these regions. We don't mean to imply that all or only people in those regions hold the views in question. People outside the region hold them too. We don't mean to say that they are pure—that is, untouched by any outside influences. Admittedly, we gloss over nuances and exceptions that a more granular analysis would provide. The goal is to give a general characterization.

When we use the term "African," we use it as shorthand for the region of Africa located south of the Sahara. When we talk about African philosophy, we are referring to ideas that are prominent among Black peoples who are indigenous to that region, as these views are captured in the work of academic philosophers. That's important because for most of its history, until

the last 100 years or so, African philosophy has been an oral tradition. It's frequently expressed in pithy aphorisms.

**Jason:** You write that Western philosophy generally views personhood as an inherent quality of individual entities, whereas African philosophy traditionally views it as a quality that is gained and maintained through interactions with others. What entities have the capacity for personhood, and what quality gives them that capacity according to African philosophy?

**Dr. Jecker**: A standard answer that's given in contemporary African philosophy is that personhood is fundamentally relational. By that, I mean what makes a person a person is their interconnection with others and with a community, rather than some standalone quality that an individual possesses independent of that. As I mentioned, African philosophy has characteristically been an oral tradition, so this idea of relationality often gets expressed in sayings like "a person is a person through other persons," or "I am because we are." These sayings convey that persons become persons through participating in certain social roles and relationships.

On some accounts, personhood is something that humans achieve through relating to others in morally excellent ways—prosocial ways. For others, it's the *capacity* for that relating in morally excellent ways that matters, whether it's exercised or not. Underpinning these diverse relational views of personhood is a metaphysical picture that portrays personhood as fundamentally a social relational process.

Given this account, what would qualify as a person? It doesn't necessarily require being human. Animals could be persons. AI agents could be persons. Even objects in nature that are not living such as the sea could be a person, because they stand in a pro-social relationship with humans. Now, it doesn't follow that every sea would be a person or every animal would be a person, or even that every human would be a person. It requires performing in prosocial ways or having the capacity to do that.

**Andrew:** In your book, you introduce a third conception of personhood, emergent personhood, that differs from African and Western traditions. Can you explain why you believe that we need a new conception of personhood at this present moment? And what are the shortcomings of African and Western personhood that emergent personhood might help address?

**Dr. Jecker**: I'd like to turn that question on its head, because the way we arrive at emergent personhood is to focus on the advantages and bring together insights from each tradition—to develop a view that's less bound by any single tradition, that brings together the advantages of more than one tradition. Advantages of African views of personhood are that they include relational features, that these features in turn lend support to social duties with others with whom we are related, and that they allow personhood for nonliving things that we relate to, like nature. We consider it an advantage of Western approaches to personhood that they regard moral worth as independent of others' appraisal and regard personhood as mostly stable across the lifespan. Finally, it's an advantage of Western personhood that all who qualify as persons are equally persons.

We call our approach 'emergent personhood' because it draws on the important notion of emergence. Emergence is the idea that an object might have properties as a whole that aren't present in the properties that make it up. Think about a painting or an image on a computer screen. A painting is more than the brush strokes that make it up. A screen image is more than the individual pixels. It's going to have qualities not present in brush strokes or pixels. Perhaps it is somber or joyful. Perhaps it abstracts. Or perhaps it represents something: a landscape, a vase of flowers. It might be tranquil; it might be disturbing. Those qualities aren't present in the brushstrokes and pixels—they're emergent qualities. When philosophers today characterize phenomena as emergent, what they usually mean is that those phenomena display some or or all of a family of features. They're irreducible in the way that I just described. They're somewhat unpredictable or unexplainable. They're holistic, and they require novel concepts.

We draw on many of these features. Emergent personhood suggests that being a person is novel. Human relationships, on our view, are generative. They give rise to exceptional moral worth that didn't exist prior to the relationship coming together in this way. This outstanding moral worth that we associate with being a person emerges through human-human relationships and through some nonhuman-human relationships. It's holistic in the sense that it's more than the sum of the parts—more than those beings or creatures outside of the relationship. There is this outstanding moral worth, and it's irreducible. It can't be analyzed fully in terms of other moral notions—[we] can't boil it down to autonomy, rights, or dignity.

Let me just clarify one more thing about emergent personhood, because a lot of people get this wrong. When we say that personhood emerges from relationships with human beings, which is a central claim of the book, we're stating that this is a *sufficient* condition for personhood; it's not a *necessary* condition. So we do not give, in fact, a definition of personhood, in the strict sense of a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. We give a sufficient condition for personhood, and there might be other sufficient conditions for personhood.

**Jason:** Thank you for that answer! Speaking of relationships, I want to clarify a little bit more on that front. Western conceptions of personhood have often been used to justify human superiority over other beings, such as non-human animals. What suggestions might African and emerging conceptions of personhood have for interaction with entities that are not persons or do not have the capacity for personhood?

**Dr. Jecker**: We certainly don't make the claim that humans are superior to other beings, such as nonhuman animals. We call our philosophy humble anthropocentrism. We don't exclude the possibility that persons might emerge from relationships that do not involve humans. Yet what we know about such relationships is limited. While we focus on human relationships, we do that not out of a sense of arrogance that [humans] have some superior quality that other beings lack. It's that what we can understand about relationships that don't involve human beings is partial and limited. We remain agnostic.

With respect to the specific question about what African and emergent views of persons say about non-persons, we don't focus much on non-persons. From an African tradition, it's fair to say persons ought to try to engage with humans and non-humans to support their personhood. Persons ought to commune.

**Jason:** That makes sense, thank you. Another non-human entity that might or might not have the capacity for personhood is artificial intelligence. Since artificial intelligence is now developing rapidly to replicate many "human qualities," do you believe that AI currently has the capacity for personhood? And if not, what do you believe it's missing?

**Dr. Jecker**: That's a great example, not only because it's so timely, but also because there are such striking differences between contemporary Western

and African views on this. Many leading Western views hold that what AI would need to qualify as a person is consciousness or some higher-level cognitive properties.

One problem with that is we don't really know what we mean by consciousness. There are so many different types of consciousness. But let's just take phenomenal consciousness, this notion of there being something it's like to be a robot or to be some other kind of AI agent [such as] a large language model. An African view would hold that if we design AI agents with capabilities for pro-social relating, and they stand in pro-social relationships with us or have the capacity to do so, they could qualify as persons.

To be pro-social means to consistently exhibit certain virtues toward others, to interact with others in the community in ways that are beneficial. So, personhood for a non-human would be contingent on being prosocial in a way that it wouldn't be for humans.

**Jason:** Thank you! Those answers really helped elucidate your views on how this theory interacts with non-human entities.

**Ilwad:** Moving on from non-human personhood, in addition to your work in African philosophy, you're also well known for your expertise in bioethics. Autonomy is often a point of contention in bioethics, for example, in debates over whether an older person with impaired cognitive capacity should make sole decisions regarding their health. How does African, or even emergent, personhood challenge commonly held notions of respecting autonomy in Western healthcare?

**Dr. Jecker**: That's a really interesting question. Let me preface my remarks by saying that it's not just African ethics—-many ethical traditions outside the West don't share leading Western accounts of autonomy. In general, I think it's fair to say that in African ethics, the value of autonomy is qualified. Autonomy is not intrinsically valuable; it's valuable only when it is used in relation to a community and the good of the community.

I think it's helpful to have an example. Consider hastening death. The backdrop for this question is a different conception of disease. From a traditional Sub-Saharan African view, the root causes of disease could be human moral or social failure, like fractured relationships, or natural biological conditions, such as cancer or an accident. If the basis of the disease is social or moral, then healing requires community engagement and restoring relational

harmony, perhaps drawing on traditional healers to mend those relationships. If the basis of the disease is biological, the situation differs. If the patient, in a particular case, can no longer join relationships and contribute to the community, then hastening death might be ethically permitted on the grounds that a life that is detached from helping others is not a meaningful human life. The human being has already ceased in important ways to be a person in the moral sense. If hastening death is ethically justified, African ethics hold that it would be wrong for the patient to end their life alone; hence, there are many taboos against suicide. Suicide would be wrong because it would be tantamount to others' abandonment. Instead, the health professional should be present for the patient. Active euthanasia, which is generally taboo here in the U.S., is much more likely to be ethically supportable.

Interestingly, in certain areas of Europe, one finds a similar sentiment. For example, Dutch societies are far more solidaristic than U.S. societies. The Netherlands was one of the first to make voluntary active euthanasia legal, under certain conditions. They didn't, at that time, make what is sometimes called assisted suicide, or self-administered death, legally permissible. This value of solidarity, which is relatively foreign to us in the U.S., plays a larger role in African ethics and ethics in parts of Europe.

**Ilwad:** Thank you for that answer. It's really interesting to hear about the differences in what is considered health care in African and non-Western philosophies. On a related note, implicit bias has been shown to be amongst physicians and in medicine as a whole, as it greatly affects the quality of treatment and resource allocation. Given that African and emergent personhood emphasize relationality with others, how might it surface new ways of addressing implicit bias within healthcare systems?

**Dr. Jecker:** There would be a duty to be prosocial with all members of a community and to leave no one behind. So the focus on community in African culture is distinct from the focus on the community, say, when one talks about utilitarianism. For utilitarians, the community is just an aggregation of individual utilities. Utilitarianism is consistent with egregious wrongs to individuals, provided the aggregate good is realized. In African ethics, the focus is more on solidarity and helping those who are vulnerable or marginal or sidelined within a community. So there's this duty to bring others in—and that really means everyone in a community—as well as bringing people outside the community into the community. It's very much not just a relational

ethic but, you could almost say, a pro-relational ethic. There's this sense of a duty to be prosocial.

**Ilwad:** We've talked a lot about African ethics in relation to healthcare thus far. To return to your book, does emergent personhood differ from African personhood with respect to these healthcare issues?

**Dr. Jecker:** Well, we didn't talk about the disadvantages of African philosophy or the disadvantages of Western philosophy, so this might be a good time to talk about them. Disadvantages of African philosophies of personhood [are that] because they're relational, some versions exclude individuals who do not stand in relationships. Now, not all views in the African traditions would do that. I mentioned views that hold that it's the capacity to relate prosocially, not actual performance, and I also mentioned this emphasis in many African philosophers on leaving no one behind.

But another potential disadvantage of African personhood is that personhood is earned. It depends to some extent on another's appraisal. So it does exclude individuals who habitually misbehave, who are considered not reformable. It's also scalar, so it permits a lot of inequalities between human beings. Someone can be more or less of a person. Also it's not stable, it allows personhood to be lost or diminished and some humans, as I mentioned, are more or less of a person. It makes personhood in some ways contingent on being incorporated in the community. So if you have someone who's really an outlier, on some interpretations, that individual could be considered a non-person if they're invited in and they live a fully solitary life.

Disadvantages of Western personhood are that it doesn't pay enough attention to relational features as a source of moral worth, and it doesn't provide much basis for duties toward others. We have social duties, but they would generally derive from consent or self-interest. Also, personhood is binary, which precludes a more nuanced assessment, especially of non-humans and nature. It's a disadvantage that Western approaches to personhood that they disassociate being a person from belonging to human communities. That links to the fact that personhood is intrinsic. From an African standpoint, Western views might be criticized as not establishing personhood as an aspirational purpose or goal of life.

Emergent personhood avoids many of these concerns. It does this by distinguishing human and non-human personhood. Our account of *non-human* personhood is more African-like in the sense that it's scalar, it's a matter

of degrees, it's relational, and it's earned. Our account of *human* personhood is more mixed. We argue that, unlike non-humans, human personhood is binary from birth to death. All humans are people. That's really different from what we say about non-humans. Human personhood is mostly stable, not changing, which again diverges from the African tradition. Yet we consider human personhood to be relational—that is, more African.

**Andrew:** We wanted to close the interview by asking a few questions about personhood in relation to political philosophy. In Western philosophy, personhood is not only an important moral designation, but also an important political one. For example, personhood is often the basic unit of analysis for political rights and duties in many Western liberal societies. I'm going to ask about African and emergent personhood, but feel free to focus more on one or the other. I want to start off first with a broad question: what unique insights might African and emergent personhood offer for issues in political philosophy?

**Dr. Jecker**: That's a tough question. I have to give it some thought, but it's pretty far from the topics that we try to cover in the book. We do some applied ethics, but we really don't look a whole lot at political philosophy.

What I could say is that from an African standpoint, one is born into a society, and that immediately plunges one into a moral community. It's not a matter of individual consent or choice or autonomous decision making. Belonging to a civil society, and more broadly human community, is inherent. There's no one who really stands outside of it. We're all born from parents, right? At least, for now. So for our purposes, it's fair to say that the basis of political philosophy would be a family, and that extension of that to a broader community. When one looks at political philosophy from, say, the social contract tradition or the leading views in the West, we're born in the state of nature where we're not a part of anything. It pictures individuals as free and unencumbered, having rights, and then making a choice about being part of a civil society. I think those are very different starting points and the philosophies that result are markedly different.

I also want to mention that we've focused on the contemporary scene in Africa and the West. But, as we point out in the book, if one crosses the borders not just of geography, but of time, there was in the past much more convergence between Western and African philosophy. If you go back to very early Greece, the notion of person comes from *persona*: to be a person is

to donne a mask; personhood is something performed before others. In the West, the notion has changed dramatically over time, especially during the rise of the Christian era, with the notion of persons as having a soul. Ideas of personhood evolve, and will continue to evolve. In the Middle Ages, philosophers worried about whether angels were people. We don't worry about that anymore, but we worry about robots and we worry about AI agents. We debate it, and we write articles and books about it. The concept evolves as we confront new cases and questions. We don't claim to put forward the final word. Instead, we try to make sense of personhood today. We try to move beyond the insularity of a single tradition. Ideally, we'd consider many philosophical traditions, but I think, at the very least, it's a good idea to consider at least one tradition outside one's own.

**Andrew:** That historical perspective is really interesting and important for contextualizing the issues you talk about. As a last question, I wanted to circle back to something that you brought up when you were discussing the disadvantages of African personhood a couple questions prior. One criticism that has been leveled against African personhood is, like you mentioned, that it might legitimize the mistreatment of individuals that go against the prevailing social norms of their community. A lot of criticisms argue that there is not enough importance placed on individual rights in the African tradition. To what extent does this criticism hold against more relational conceptions of personhood, including emergent personhood?

**Dr. Jecker**: Suppose someone dissents from their society's customary views or practices by violating them, or speaking out against them. What does African personhood say? What does Emergent Personhood say? Let's start with African views. It might at first glance be thought that dissenters are disqualified from the ranks of persons in the African sense and that African thought enforces conformity. I think that claim is wrong. I've argued in writing that conscientious dissenters, as opposed to mere trouble makers, have a vital place in African thought and figure as persons in a strong sense. If someone is dissenting to make their society better and do what they think is morally right, they qualify as moral heroes of the first order: courageous, taking personal risks to create a better life for others. That might involve changing the treatment of girls and women in patriarchal customs, or it might involve changing ritual practices that cause animals suffering. So the notion that to dissent from your society is to be a non-person is misleading. Even if a

dissenter is *called* a non-person, even if they are in fact banished, we can always ask if that was wrong and if the banished individual was a strong person. There's a critical role for moral dissent that African personhood recognizes and even celebrates.

What about emergent personhood? Does it tolerate dissent? Emergent Personhood tells us that all human beings, from birth to death, are persons, because each human stands in a family-like relationship with every other. It's not a matter of performing well or undergoing certain rites. Instead, we recognize someone is a person by seeing in them all humanity. We recognize a morally salient connection to them, qua human being. This relationship of human-to-human holds regardless of whether someone dissents or conforms. This connection is morally special and like no other.

I hope that answers your question. I've enjoyed speaking with each of you! Thank you, Andrew and Ilwad and Jason, for taking the time to have this conversation.

**Andrew:** Thank you, Dr. Jecker—a very timely note to end the interview on!

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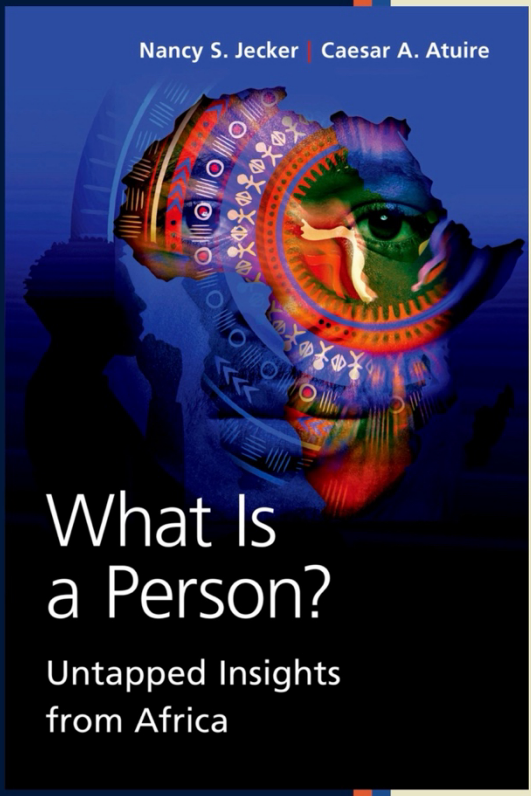


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# Sisyphean Maze

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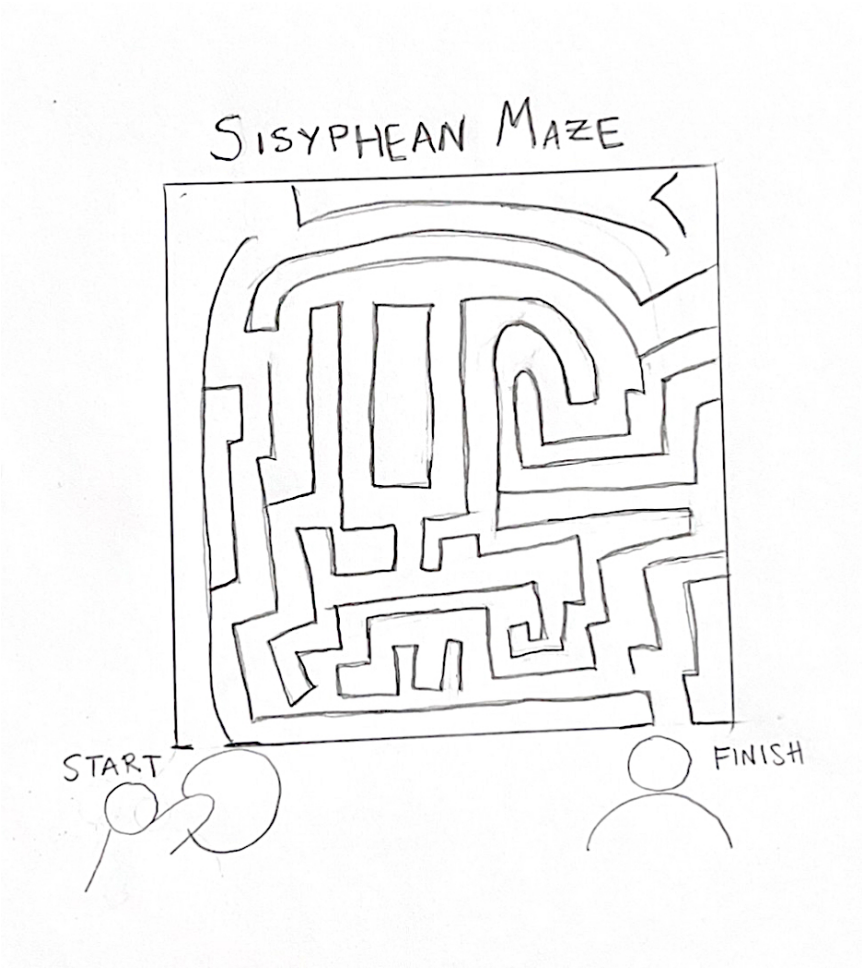


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*enter this maze to get a taste of the 'absurd.'*

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