HISTORY, LITERATURE, AND THE SENSE OF THE REAL

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Abstract: In the past few decades, the fictionality of historical narratives has been fully recognized and even overly emphasized, but literature or mimesis as make-believe has always been an effort to represent what is perceived to be real, and representation of the real may not be limited to the recording of actuality. History and literature, in other words, are not just contentious, but complementary as well. The realist novel of the nineteenth century—the works of Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoy, and others—created a full sense of the real with literary representation no less, if not more, true to historical reality than historical writings at the time. But a sense of the real does not necessarily depend on exhaustive or fully externalized description and narration, for reading literature is always an experience of contemporaneity, an imaginative recreation of what the linguistic signs merely suggest, and in cultures where conventions of economic literary expressions prevail—such as the biblical or the Chinese—even sketchy descriptions may trigger a powerful sense of the real in the reader’s mental concretization. In Chinese tradition, the works of Tang poet Du Fu (712-770) are often called a “history in verse” and praised for their faithful depiction of the historical reality of his time. In that tradition, the relationship between history and literature is never a rigid dichotomy, and there is full recognition of the literary quality of historical narration as well as the sense of historical reality in literary representations. Traditional Chinese novels are often modeled on historical narratives. At the same time, however, the distinction between the two kinds of discourses is always maintained as a sensible borderline between different domains of human activities with different purposes and different values. This distinction is something we need to revisit and attend to as a remedy to some of the excessive postmodern theorizations of history and literary representation.

In writing about the general understanding of what literature meant at the time of the great Realism novels—from the time of Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson to that of Stendhal and Balzac, to Tolstoy, to George Eliot, Dickens, and Trollope, to Mark Twain, Henry James, and William Dean Howells,—“hardly anything could be more central,” says Morris Dickstein, “than the text’s interplay with the ‘real world.’ Literature, especially fiction, was unapologetically about the life we live outside of literature, the social life, the emotional life, the physical life, the specific sense of time and place.” Literature, in other words, creates a simulacrum of life, a vivid sense of reality, and is thought to have the serious purpose of commenting on, and interacting with, the “real world.” As Matthew Arnold declared with confidence and a sense of

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pride, poetry or literature is “...the criticism of life.”² In the last few decades, however, the connection of literature with life or reality underwent a fundamental change, for critics equipped with postmodern theories, as Dickstein puts it, “debunked the human basis of literature, as they deconstructed the human subject itself, the illusion of selfhood.”³ Not only is literature understood to be self-referential and about nothing but its own language, but reality itself is put in question and is thought to be a mental and ideological construct. History, which used to be understood as the record of what actually happened in the past, is radically re-conceptualized as a form of narrative not fundamentally different from literature, particularly narrative fiction.

Hayden White is most influential in calling our attention to the “fictions of factual representation,” “the extent to which the discourse of the historian and that of the imaginative writer overlap, resemble, or correspond with each other.”⁴ He interprets the enterprise of Michel Foucault as an effort to expedite “the death of things in general, and especially the death of the thing called man.” As a discipline about the life of man and the change of human society, history in particular becomes Foucault’s target of critique. He "regards history less as a method or a mode of thought than as a symptom of a peculiarly nineteenth-century malaise which originated in the discovery of the temporality of all things."⁵ Although Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge may read like a history of ideas, White assures us that “Foucault writes ‘history’ in order to destroy it, as a discipline, as a mode of consciousness, and as a mode of (social) existence.”⁶ In the deconstructive climate of postmodern discourse, fictionality is highlighted in both history and literature, while reality as objective presence exterior to discourse is discarded as an outmoded notion in much of the theoretical speculations in Western academia.

I said “Western academia” because elsewhere history and literature may have a very different relationship with reality, and it is much harder to dismiss reality as a mere construct when that reality has a direct and sometimes menacing bearing on the lives of people without their volunteering for it. The postmodern Western society, in Fredric Jameson’s characterization, has discarded history and the past: “In faithful conformity to poststructuralist linguistic theory, the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts.”⁷ That’s America, but the past may have a particularly tenacious grip on people’s minds in places outside the American academia. At the beginning of Milan Kundera’s Book of Laughter and Forgetting, for example, there is an unforgettable account of the bracketing of history, a desperate effacement of the past, but Kundera’s text is solidly

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³Dickstein, A Mirror in the Roadway, p. xi.
⁶Ibid., p. 234.
and resolutely grounded in history and reality, which give a special kind of pungency to his political satire. On a cold snowy day in February 1948, Kundera writes, the Czech communist leader Klement Gottwald was addressing the masses from the balcony of a palace in Prague. His head was uncovered, and his comrade Vladimir Clementis was standing by his side. “Bursting with solicitude,” says Kundera, “Clementis took off his fur hat and set it on Gottwald’s head.”

The photograph taken on the balcony that day permanently caught that precious moment and presented a perfect image of camaraderie and solidarity among the communist leadership. The Party’s propaganda section printed out hundreds of thousands of copies and made that photograph widely known to all the people. “Every child knew that photograph, from seeing it on posters and in schoolbooks and museums.” And yet, the political climate in Czechoslovakia, as that in the Soviet Union, was notoriously unpredictable, and in the quick change of fate that befell political figures at the time, the stability of historical record, in this case a celebrated photograph, became an embarrassment and a liability. Kundera writes matter-of-factly, perhaps with a suppressed laughter:

Four years later, Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The propaganda section immediately made him vanish from history and, of course, from all photographs. Ever since, Gottwald has been alone on the balcony. Where Clementis stood, there is only the bare palace wall. Nothing remains of Clementis but the fur hat on Gottwald’s head.

Reading this, we laugh at the awkward and feeble attempt at effacing the past; we laugh at those gilded butterflies blindly fluttering in the fickle climate of their political lives, but we also sense the brutality of political purge and execution. We laugh because Kundera’s sharp-edged satire exposes such absurdities of a political reality that simply cannot be effaced, and it is here in the narrative fiction, in the memory of what people knew, that the historical past persistently resides. Kundera’s novel is powerful because it remembers the past and helps people to remember, its fiction is mixed with fact and supported by the past as “referent,” which is highlighted by the book’s ironic title, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. In his novel, the propaganda section’s effacement of the past is crude and barbaric, but pathetically ineffective and scornfully laughable. Thus the novel presents a totally different take on the bracketing of history and the effacing of the past, for it is history and reality that lay the ground for the fictional narrative to build on and draw its particular strength. In a way it is the ideological distortion or effacement of the past by the power to be that makes people remember and hold on to their memory more tightly than the kind of indifference to history as Jameson describes of Western postmodernism. The alteration or disappearance of photographs were very common in China during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, when a large number of communist leaders, including top officials of the Party and the state, were condemned

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9Ibid., pp. 3-4.
as “capitalist roaders” whose path had deviated from Chairman Mao’s revolutionary line. Lin Biao, Mao’s hand-picked successor, who had been seen standing by Mao’s side in numerous photos and news reels, was charged with treason and died mysteriously in a plane crash in 1971. After his death—here Kundera’s words fit perfectly—“The propaganda section immediately made him vanish from history and, of course, from all photographs.” History is indeed often manipulated, bracketed, and effaced, but that only makes people more sensitive to the distortion of the past, more alert to the erasure of the difference between fact and fiction. We may say in general that people tend to have a stronger sense of history and the desire to preserve historical reality where history is painful, treacherous, and mischievous—in other words, where history matters.

Even in the West, however, not everyone is cheering for the loss of difference between fact and fiction. Historians feel alarmed at some of the extravagant postmodern overstatements. Roger Chartier insists that “all historical stances must take it into account that experience is not reducible to discourse, and all need to guard against unconstrained use of the category of the ‘text’—a term too often inappropriately applied to practices (ordinary or ritualized) whose tactics and procedures bear no resemblance to discursive strategies.” Eric Hobsbawm fully realizes that history can be used or abused by all kinds of ideologues, for “history is the raw material for nationalist or ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies, as poppies are the raw material for heroin addiction. The past is an essential element, perhaps the essential element, in these ideologies.” For Hobsbawm, however, the ideologically invented or distorted history does not invalidate the business of history as such; on the contrary, it only makes historians more determined to take up their moral responsibility, “a responsibility to historical facts in general, and for criticizing the politico-ideological abuse of history in particular.” He complains about “the current fashion for novelists to base their plots on recorded reality rather than inventing them, thus fudging the border between historical fact and fiction,” and also “the rise of ‘postmodernist’ intellectual fashions in Western universities, particularly in departments of literature and anthropology, which imply that all ‘facts’ claiming objective existence are simply intellectual constructions—in short, that there is no clear difference between fact and fiction.” History is read as literature, and literature as representation is thought to have no relationship with reality. We can certainly choose to read history as literature, and historical narratives may indeed have a rhetorical structure like that of a novel, with a beginning, middle, and an end, which constitute the framework within which the meaning of historical narratives emerges and can be understood. Such a necessarily constructed structure, however, does not render a historical narrative completely fictional. As F. R. Ankersmit remarks, concepts like fact, truth, and reference have not much purchase for literary theory, but

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“obviously this is not the case with historical writing, in which the weaknesses of literary theory as a philosophy of language may become a serious handicap, inviting historical theorists to cut through all the ties between historical narrative and what it is about.”12 Historical writing is always about something outside its narrative; it is always connected discursively with what is outside discourse, i.e., outside the language of description and narration; and its claim to truth is not self-contained within the language of historical narrative itself, but can be proved or disproved in one way or another by facts or evidences outside its language. History, in other words, is always connected with what we may call a metatextual or metahistorical reality.

But not just historians feel wary of collapsing all the differences between fact and fiction. In a recent study of literary realism, Peter Brooks, who considers himself a postmodernist, also notes that much of contemporary criticism and literary theory has discredited the very notion of representation, especially realistic representation. As a result, literary realism fell out of fashion, “the ‘Balzacian novel’ became a kind of whipping boy, an example of blinded and bourgeois novelizing without any sophisticated critical perspective on sign-systems and on the illusions of the bourgeois society and its concepts.”13 Such a critical stance, however, Brooks protests, only shows “a blinded view of Balzac and the realist tradition in general.”14 Long before Brooks, in a study of Mimesis as Make-Believe published in 1990, Kendall Walton already raised questions about the obliteration of differences between reality and fiction: “If reality is less than ‘objective,’ our own invention rather than something ‘out there’ for us to discover, how does it differ from realms of fiction, which we invent also? Could it be that ‘the real world’ is no more than a fancy name for just another fictional one? If so, what becomes of the difference between discourse about it and discourse concerning the worlds of Oz and Anna Karenina?”15 Against critics like Stanley Fish who claim that there is no such difference and that discourse creates “reality,” Walton gives a simple and straightforward answer: “reality is reality and facts are facts, however they are to be understood, and that what is the case obviously does differ from what is not the case, even if the difference is somehow conventional, culturally specific, depending on this or relative to that, or whatever. The insight that facts are not ‘brute,’ if indeed they are not, is a far cry from collapsing the distinction.” Like Hobsbawm quoted earlier, Walton also argues for the moral responsibility of making distinctions between what is and what is not the case, what is right and what is wrong. He reminds us with Nelson Goodman that “Recognition of multiple alternative world-versions betokens no policy of laissez-faire. Standards distinguishing right from wrong versions become, if anything, more rather than less important.”16 Literary scholars and critics are often not willing to erase the difference

14Ibid., p. 7.
between fact and fiction not only because that distinction is prerequisite for literature as representation, but also because literature in its own way lays claims to reality and truth in spite of, or perhaps because of, its overtly fictional representation.

Both Brooks and Walton are concerned with mimesis or representation in arts and literature, and both argue for the power of representation to give us a sense of reality. What Brooks calls the “realist vision” is exemplary of all literature in its effort to satisfy the basic human instinct or desire to master reality through play, to experience a world of one’s own creation by pretending to live in such a world, “a world that can be wholly vivid and ‘real,’ though there can be a coexisting consciousness that it is only pretend.” Walston also argues that all representations are a kind of “make-believe”, like a game or play, which nonetheless can produce a powerful sense of the real. “The reader of Anna Karenina abandons himself to the novel and is convinced, momentarily and partially at least, of Anna’s existence and of the truth of what the novel says about her. Otherwise why would he be moved by her predicament?”

The last sentence reminds us of Hamlet’s famous question: “What’s Hecuba to him and he to Hecuba/ That he should weep for her?” That question expresses the power of fiction, the emotional involvement we have with persons and things represented in a fictional world. Indeed, literature can sometimes give us an even stronger sense of the real than what we ordinarily feel in the banality of daily existence. The aesthetic experience, as Hans-Georg Gadamer argues, is an experience of “contemporaneity” (Gleichzeitigkeit), which makes the particular thing represented in a work of art directly present in our experience. Contemporaneity, says Gadamer, “means that in its presentation this particular thing that presents itself to us achieves full presence, however remote its origin may be.” That explains the way a work of art or literature connects with our own present, and the way it can affect us psychologically, emotionally, and epistemologically.

Following Oscar Wilde, Brooks claims that Balzac invented the nineteenth century, and that many characters in nineteenth-century novels—Emma Bovary and Dorothea Brooke, old Goriot and Nana,—“have taken on an imaginative reality in their cultures” and have become “more significant than the merely real, since they sum up and represent more fully certain choices of ways of being. They offer, in the best possible sense, criticism of life: instances that lend themselves to discussion and debate, that pose important questions about our being in the world.” Literature can reveal to us the truth of life, truth about “our being in the world.” This affirmation of literature’s philosophical significance may remind us of the famous remark Aristotle made about history and poetry that “the former relates things that have happened, the latter things that may happen. For this reason poetry is a more philosophical and more serious thing than history; poetry tends to speak of universals, history of

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17Brooks, Realist Vision, p. 2.
18Walton, Mimesis as Make-Believe, p. 6.
19William Shakespeare, Hamlet, II.ii.559.
21Brooks, Realist Vision, p. 5.
By revealing what transcends the mere actuality of particular things in the phenomenal world, literature gives us a deeper sense of reality than mere historical records. That is often the praise of realist representation, particularly the great nineteenth-century novels. Dickens, Balzac, Tolstoy, and many others are in that sense better historians of their times, and their works valuable for the insights into the nature of the industrial, bourgeois society.

Friedrich Engels, for example, famously claimed that Balzac “gives us in his *La Comédie Humaine* a most wonderfully realistic history of French society,” describing, chronicle fashion, almost year by year from 1816 to 1848, the ever-increasing pressure of the rising bourgeoisie upon the society of nobles.” He went on to declare that Balzac had created such “a complete history of French society” that from those novels he had learned more “than from all the professional historians, economists and statisticians of the period together.” Obviously what Engels thought he had learned from Balzac was not historical facts about the French society as such, but the nature of the French society in that historical period as revealed in literary fiction. The nineteenth century is not only the age of literary realism, however, but also the age of evolution theory and great historical writings, “the age of Jules Michelet and Thomas Carlyle, of Karl Marx and John Ruskin, of Charles Darwin and Hippolyte Taine: that is, an age where history takes on new importance, and learns to be more scientific, and where theories of history come to explain how we got to be how we are, and in particular how we evolved from earlier forms to the present.” In other words, the nineteenth century is the time of historical perspectives, a time in which realist novels and historical writings are not contradictory, but complementary to one another, all trying to provide knowledge of the life and social reality of the time in different ways.

The specific features of literary realism, as Brooks argues, include an obsession with “things” and an emphasis on the “visual.” The realist aims to create a simulacrum of the world so palpably real that one can almost see and feel what is out there in the depicted world. Description with meticulous attention to details thus becomes essential: “The descriptive is typical—sometimes maddeningly so—of these novels,” says Brooks. “And the picture of the whole only emerges—if it does—from the accumulation of things. In fact, to work through the accumulation of things, of details, of particularities, could be considered nearly definitional of the realist novel.” Indeed, descriptive narration has a long tradition in Western literature, the origin of which may be traced back to the elaborate descriptions in the Homeric epics. Erich Auerbach famously made Homer exemplary of the type of fully externalized narrative, which is one of the foundational modes of representation of reality in

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24 Ibid., p. 43.
26 Ibid., p. 16.
Western literature. Homeric epics certainly serve as a model for later narrative fiction, particularly the realist novel. “The basic impulse of the Homeric style,” says Auerbach, is “to represent phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts, and completely fixed in their spatial and temporal relations.”\textsuperscript{27} Such fully externalized or exhaustively described narration aims to create a sense of the real that has parallel examples in other forms of representation, particularly realistic paintings that depict not only the shape and color of things and human figures, but the feel of the material substance, with details so exquisitely executed in three dimensional illusions that one may feel as if it is there for the touch, whether it is soft human flesh or different kinds of fabric, delicate flowers, hard metals or rocks, buildings, piazzas, churches, trees, rivers, or mountains in a landscape in perfect proportion and perfect perspective.

But a sense of the real does not have to depend on such fully externalized description and narration, for reading literature is always an imaginative re-creation of what the linguistic signs merely suggest, and the visual effect or illusion is formed in the reader’s mind rather than actually present on a printed page. The literary text, however detailed in its description—as Roman Ingarden and the Czech Structuralists argued long ago—just provides a schematic structure with many spots of indeterminacy, which are concretized by the reader in the reading experience.\textsuperscript{28} It is the reader’s imagination that turns a printed page into a vivid and visible reality. The Homeric style with its meticulous attention to details and particularities is just one type of literary representation, and there is a different type, a clear contrast to the Homeric, as Auerbach also notes, which has minimal description and has much of the text “left for the reader to visualize,” sketchy, mysterious, and “fraught with background.”\textsuperscript{29} That is of course the biblical style, the other foundational mode of representation of reality in Western literature. It is not, however, just in Western culture that we find such a powerfully suggestive way of expression, for it is also characteristic of classical Chinese literature, in which conventions of economic literary expression prevail. In literary traditions where not everything is fully externalized in detailed description, but much is left for the reader to fulfill and visualize beyond the text, even a few suggestive hints may trigger a powerful sense of the real in the reader’s imagination. The biblical style and the typical expression in classical Chinese literature certainly bear evidence to the power of minimal but evocative expressions. Chinese poetry is mostly short in form and highly suggestive, and it normally does not go into detailed descriptions, but for readers educated in the

\textsuperscript{29}Auerbach, \textit{Mimesis}, pp. 9, 12.
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poetic conventions of that tradition, it has the power to evoke a sense of the real just as intensely as the European realist novel.

A case in point is the great poet Du Fu (712-770) of the Tang dynasty, whose works are often called a “history in verse” and praised for their faithful depiction of contemporary reality. The idea of “history in verse” already started to circulate in Du Fu’s own time or soon after his death in 770, as we read in a late Tang writer’s work that “Du lived through the chaotic years of the An Lushan Rebellion and fled to dwell in Long (Gansu) and Shu (Sichuan). All these he expressed in poetry that reveals everything to the most hidden details, with nothing left unexposed, and so is known among his contemporaries as a ‘history in verse’.” An Lushan, a general of Turkish origin stationed in an outpost of the Tang Empire, led a rebellion (An Lushan Rebellion) around 755 that created havoc in the land and precipitated the decline of the Tang Dynasty. Many poems Du Fu wrote gave voice to the miseries and suffering of the people at the time, but they are not at all exhaustively descriptive. His works contain some of the most exquisite poetic lines in classical Chinese with skillful use of rhyme, parallelism, and complicated metrical forms, but they may seem rather sketchy when compared with poetry in most European languages, even though they enjoy the name of “history in verse” and are said to reveal “everything to the most hidden details, with nothing left unexposed.” A reader familiar with the Homeric style or the nineteenth-century realist novel may find such a characterization of Du Fu’s poetry grossly exaggerated, but that only proves that our reading habits and conventions are trained or educated in a particular literary tradition. A reader familiar with classical Chinese poetry—or for that matter, biblical poetry—may indeed find Du Fu’s works richly suggestive and depicting the reality of his time with vivid images and powerful emotions.

Let us take a look at one of Du Fu’s more descriptive poems, “The Official of Shi Hao,” which presents a sad picture of conscription during the time of the An Lushan rebellion. The speaker in the poem was a traveler, perhaps the poet himself fleeing from the war-torn regions, and he arrived in the village of Shi Hao. He stayed as a guest in the house of a poor old couple for the night, but was woken up by the local official who came to round up all male villagers as conscript soldiers. The old man of the house climbed over the wall and fled, while the old woman went to meet the official at the gate. The poet heard the abusive official yelling at the old woman, and reported what the old woman said in tears and with mournful notes:

My three sons are soldiers at Ye Cheng.
One of them just sent a letter home
To report the death of his two brothers.
We who are alive manage to live day by day,
But the dead are gone forever just like that.
No one is now left in this house,


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Save my grandson, a small baby.  
His mother is still here, but without 
Decent clothing to move in and out.  
Old as I am and with no strength, 
I beg to follow you, sir, tonight 
To the battlefield north of the River,  
So I may yet prepare the morning meals.

The poem ends, matter-of-factly, with these two simple lines: “At daybreak I resumed my journey, / And bade farewell to the old man alone.” The description in this poem is kept to the minimum, but the emotional appeal is tremendous. The old woman’s plea for joining the army herself saved her husband from facing the sure death as her sons did, but we wonder about her own fate, about how the old man was going to live, if at all. Though the old couple in the poem remains nameless, and no object in their house is described, not even the baby and his mother, the brutality of war and the miseries that befell the villagers at the time made a deep impression on us. It is poems like this and their accumulated effect that convey a sense of history, a sense of the decline of the Tang empire, the devastation created by ambitious and treacherous generals and warlords, the cruelty of the officials, the suffering of the poor and unprivileged, and the horrible inequality of the corrupt times when, as Du Fu famously wrote, “Within the red doors wine and meat go bad and smell, / Whereas bodies frozen to death lie on the roads outside.” It is poems like this that constitute a “history in verse,” a history that reveals the nature of the times in poetic representation, rather than the actuality of the times in fully externalized descriptions.

“History in verse” is history in poetic formulation; it is also poetry informed and inspired by historical reality. In the Chinese tradition, history and literature never form a rigid dichotomy, and there is full recognition of the literary quality of historical writings as well as the sense of history in literary representation. One of the functions of poetry, as Confucius put it, is “to observe” (guan) social conditions and changes. Poems are often read as signs of the times, so to speak, and as commentaries on and reflections of the social condition, but that does not mean that there is no demarcation line between historical and literary writings in the Chinese tradition, nor that Chinese poetry is all historical in nature without a trace of imaginary fictionality. Mencius (371?-289? B. C. E.), an important thinker in the Confucian tradition, made it very clear that different strategies and criteria apply in

32Du Fu, “Five Hundred Words in Releasing My Feelings on Route from the Capital to Fengxian County,” Ibid., 1:270.
reading poetry from reading history. *The Book of Documents*, supposedly a historical record, has an inflated description of a battle scene, in which the bloodshed in the war is said to be able to keep wooden clubs afloat in its steady flow like a river. “If one believed everything in the *Book of History*,” says Mencius in dismissing such an obviously exaggerated description, “it would have been better for the Book not to have existed at all.”34 Obviously, he thought of history as reliable and credible narration, which has no place for such exaggerated descriptions. And yet, in an important passage commenting on how to read poetry, he allowed poetic license and rejected rigid literalism in understanding poetic hyperboles. The interpreter of a poem “should not allow the words to obscure the sentence, nor the sentence to obscure the intended meaning,” says Mencius. “The right way is to meet the intention of the poet with sympathetic understanding.” A poem in the *Book of Poetry* has these lines: “Of the remaining populace of Zhou / Not one single man survived.” Mencius points out that this is an exaggeration, but the poet’s intention is to emphasize how devastating a severe drought had been in the land of Zhou. “If this is taken as literal truth,” he warns the literal-minded reader, “it would mean that not a single Zhou subject survived.”35 Instead of demanding the *Book of Poetry* be discarded for overstatements, Mencius calls the reader’s attention to metaphors and rhetorical devices that operate beyond the literal sense of the text, and he advocates a kind of historical sympathy that restores the text in its original context and understands a poem in accordance with the author’s intention and his times. The different attitudes Mencius has toward the *Book of Documents* and the *Book of Poetry* clearly indicate that the generic distinction between history and poetry is fully recognized, and that strict plausibility is required of historical narratives but poetry is exempt from such a requirement. In the Chinese cultural tradition, therefore, the distinction between the historical and literary discourses is always maintained as a sensible borderline between different domains of human activities with different purposes and values. Given the excessive postmodern theorizations of history and literary representation, the reckless disregard for the effacement of history in the Western academia, that sensible distinction is perhaps something we need to revisit in order to achieve a balanced view of history, reality, and literary representation.

PERSONS, CAUSES AND FREE WILL: LIBET’S TOPSY-TURVY IDEA OF THE ORDER OF CAUSES AND “FORGETFULNESS OF THE PERSON”

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Abstract: Libet’s attempt to explain positive free acts (which he denies) in terms of physiological brain causes fails: Efficient causality has an inherent relation to persons; personal wills are primary/superior forms of efficient causes and the only efficient causes properly speaking instead of mere transmitters of causality; personal causation stands at the beginning of non-personal efficient causes; it is conscious; immediately experienced, known with evidence. Libet’s recognition of free veto power logically entails recognition of positive free will; Libet overlooks the natural connection between efficient and final causality and personal causes irreducible to efficient and final causes. Supposing his theory: the causes of knowledge would degenerate into irrational contents of consciousness caused by efficient causes in the brain deprived of rational justification; free actions intentionally directed at, and motivated by, the importance of states of affairs to be realized would be impossible. Libet’s test results and interpretations in no way prove the truth of the conclusion of his attempted “disproof of positive free will” but, when freed from his inadequate philosophy of persons and other equivocations and mistakes in the design of the tests confirm it. Libet’s is a topsy-turvy reversal of the true order and hierarchy of causes.

I. Subject and Purpose of This Paper

One of the biggest challenges to the ordinary man’s belief that he possesses free will came from a famous brain scientist, and paradoxically from one who had started out with the intention of defending the common sense view of free will, namely that we do indeed possess it: Benjamin Libet.1 The conviction that we do possess free will, and therefore are responsible for our actions, corresponds to the deepest human experience and underlies all our morality, penal law and many other spheres of human life. This deep-seated experience and conviction of free will and responsibility which all awakened human persons capable of thinking and acting share, regardless of their theoretical beliefs, had been defended forcefully by Libet’s mentor, Nobel Laureate and pioneering brain researcher Sir John Eccles.

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Building on Kornhuber and others’ research, Libet studied the relationship between free will and the so-called Readiness Potential (RP): a series of markedly different and more intense electrical and chemical brain activity that stands in clear relation to voluntary movement. Examining their temporal sequence, he found that the RP comes first, the decision to move second. Therefore, he concluded that what comes later cannot be the cause of what comes earlier and therefore the feeling to possess positive free will must be an illusion. According to Libet, the assumption of “positive free will” to act contradicts what empirical brain science has proven. He espouses, with respect to “positive free will,” a purely determinist view, thinking that mere brain events cause these decisions which we mistakenly believe and feel to be free.

Nonetheless, Libet holds, or is at least inclined to believe, that the assumption of the existence of the freedom to “say no” (to veto acts) does not contradict the hard facts established by science. Thus he does not defend a complete determinism and even believes that negative Veto-freedom is more or less firmly established by a series of empirical tests he has designed, administered and interpreted for many years.

Of course, to confirm or refute free will cannot be a mere matter of empirical science but requires philosophical reflections. That his views on free will are not due to pure empirical tests, but rather result from his philosophical interpretation of these, which I will show to be gravely deficient, is suggested already by the fact that his interpretations of his test results differ greatly from those of other distinguished scientists such as the Nobel laureate Sir John Eccles, who interpreted the same test-results, in the monumental work 1977/1981 that he has co-authored with Karl Popper and in other works, (far more convincingly, I believe) as evidence of positive free will as well as of veto power.

Libet, who passed a few years under Eccles’s guidance in the latter’s first rate research laboratory in Australia, wanted to test Eccles’ hypothesis that the conscious decision to act (carry out a voluntary move) must precede not only the voluntary movement but also the formation of the RP. It was then that he found the temporal antecedence of the formation of the RP and the delay of the conscious decision to move that seemed to him incompatible with “positive free will.” Eccles and Popper, however, continued to interpret these same test results as evidences in favor of free will, even without having presented, and thereafter applied to new

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2For a detailed autobiographical account of Libet’s work with Eccles and the history of the experiments see: “Benjamin Libet,” in: L. A. Squire 1996 pp. 433 ff. Libet also describes elsewhere a lot of the discussions and differences he had with Eccles. See for example B. Libet 2006, 322–326. In this article Libet remarks that Eccles advances body-mind theories and theories about the interaction between brain and soul that are not empirically testable, without noticing that his own (Libet’s theory which is philosophical in nature) is not more “testable” and that questions about consciousness, free will, soul, etc. are never purely empirical scientific questions the answers to which can be tested empirically but rely on another and higher intelligibility accessible to philosophical insights, or – when we deal with mysterious questions such as the exact way of mind-brain contact – allow only speculations that can be more or less consistent with empirical facts but neither empirical testing nor philosophical intuitions. See also Karl R. Popper/ John C. Eccles 1977/1981, pp. 364, 257-362.
empirical tests, a detailed study of the many other conscious and free acts that antedate the kind of “last decision to act,” the only conscious act besides voluntarily moving itself taken into account by Libet. Such a philosophical study would have corroborated their interpretation and entirely removed Libet’s difficulty of temporal sequence because even if the last decision to act is preceded by RP (a claim that has been called into question by more subtle tests done by Trevena et al. 2002), there are plenty of other free acts that clearly precede the formation of RP in time and thus could easily cause the latter.3

Prescinding for the moment from the manifold criticisms put forward against Libet’s claims against positive free will, one has to appreciate Libet’s recognition that his experimental results provide a clear proof or rather a clear empirical confirmation of a prior experiential evidence open to philosophical insights: that we possess free will, at least the kind of free will Libet admits and calls free veto power. To confirm this universal experience of free “No’s” by his tests, and to admit unambiguously the freedom to say “no”, Libet had to break out of the general philosophical framework of most brain scientists and to open his mind to facts which clearly contradict the deterministic neurophilosophy and general philosophy of causality so widespread and virtually universally accepted by his colleagues.

This general framework of the philosophy of causality implicit in much of brain science, from which Libet dared to distance himself – taking, however, unlike Eccles who broke with it entirely, only a few baby-steps away from it – is that causality exists only in physical nature, such that mental events and realities are effects of physical causes, brain causes and others that took, if we trace them back to their first beginnings, their start in some purely physical event of the alleged “big Bang” and developed consecutively in evolutionary processes, after many refinements, into the development of organisms and a human brain which then causes all human actions and decisions which we experience as being free. Viewed from this materialist and

3See Josef Seifert 2012 argues that Wegner’s critique of Eccles’s enthusiastic reaction to these experiments as an empirical “verification of the power of the will over the brain” are quite unfounded and not justified by the history of these experiments. See D.M. Wegner 2002, pp. 52 ff. The same response applies even more to the objections which Honderich raises against Eccles’ claims of an empirical confirmation of free will. See T. Honderich 1988/2007, pp. 301-304. His critique basically amounts to nothing than to a mere assertion made without any intelligible reason whatsoever that the fact that neither in the environment nor in preceding brain activity, nor in the strict dependence of the RP on free decisions there is no “conflict whatever between the Correlation Hypothesis and what is said to be true of electrical activity in the cortex.” Honderich’s objections are based on 3 determinist and materialist hypotheses (the “hypothesis of psychoneural nomic correlation”: ibid., pp. 106 ff.), which is an unclear version and mixture of a brain/mind/identity/theory and a Spinozean parallelism), the “hypothesis on the causation of psychoneural pairs” (ibid., pp. 163 ff.), and the “hypothesis on the causation of actions” (ibid., pp. 244), and a unitary theory of the mind in relation to neural events, which he regards as an improved successor-theory to mind-brain identity theories. See Honderich, ibid., pp. 89 ff. On other critics of Libet’s, Wegner’s, Honderich’s and other determinists’ conclusions see W. Sinnott-Armstrong and Nadel, L., (Ed.) 2011.
evolutionist perspective, brain processes, i.e., purely physical causes of the most complex kind we know, would have produced and keep producing what we call “persons” and mental events that happen in human consciousness.

As is well known, Libet deviates from this dogmatic and yet widely reigning neurophilosophy, if we may call it so, by holding, at least hypothetically, that free veto power exists. Hence he is one of the very few neuroscientists who grant some existence to human free will (against what most neurologists, brain- and other scientists hold).

Nevertheless, as mentioned already, he moves away only very little from the generally deterministic philosophy held by many brain scientists, still keeping the faith, to put it so, to his and the large majority of his colleagues’ deterministic creed. According to him therefore, if freedom exists at all in a causally completely or well-nigh completely closed physical universe, it can do so only in a tiny corner of the universe, and in a restricted, almost unnoticeable, secondary and purely “negative” way. None of our voluntary movements and actions can be free, according to Libet, but only our not acting, our vetoing movements and other actions.

There are many lines along which one can attack this position and I have developed several of them in a series of different papers. One possible way to criticize Libet’s challenge to free will is to show that it contains what I would call a topsyturvy philosophy of causality, a complete reversal of the true order of causality, and that it suffers from a “forgetfulness of the person” and of her primary rank in the order of causes. To develop this route of criticism of his partially determinist view is the purpose of the present paper.

But before criticizing Libet’s philosophical interpretation of his experiments, I wish to expound briefly the very different interpretation Sir John Eccles made of these same experiments. Eccles, following his master and Nobel Laureate in Physiology or Medicine (1932), Lord Charles Scott Sherrington, not only rejected mind-brain identity theories but went on to reject also any form of epiphenomenalism, supervenience theory of the mind or parallelism that, while acknowledging the distinction between brain and consciousness, considers consciousness as an immaterial effect of matter. Thus Eccles rejects the view that the “soul”, at least our free acts, in contrast to, for example, purely physiologically caused pain such as tooth-ache that does in fact causally depend on the body, stands in a totally passive relationship to the brain, without being able to exert any active influence on brain events.

\(^4\) We left it up to other papers to show that Libet commits many other mistakes, for example studying of the rich and manifold realm of free acts that precede the voluntary movements only the last one, the decision to perform a voluntary movement at a certain point in time. Had he taken into account the multitude of other volitional acts that precede voluntary movement, he had encountered a great number of potential candidates for being the cause of the RP that occurs before the decision to act. But this particular paper is dedicated to a critique of Libet’s reversal of the true order of causes.

\(^5\) Sherrington inspired and preceded Sir John Eccles in the energetic defense of the irreducibility of the human soul to the brain. See C. S. Sherrington 1941.

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Eccles proceeds from our immediate experience that we can influence and in fact engender our bodily action through our conscious activity, for example when we speak or when we perform other voluntary bodily activities. Upon acting voluntarily – and msec. before voluntary action and before the person is aware of his conscious intention to move – are built up observable and completely new modular brain-patterns of excitation and motion, “which proceed slowly from the so-called “readiness potential.” ⁶ When these motion patterns reach a certain measure of coordination and neural excitation, the bodily motion actually takes place. Now, even the most careful screening of the brain of persons who allowed such experiments to be conducted could not discover any preceding modular patterns of motion and excitation which could have explained the modular “readiness potential” and especially those excitatory patterns which preceded and accompanied voluntary bodily movements. Thus all empirical evidences appeared to Eccles to corroborate the opinion that these modular patterns of motion occur in form of a sudden appearance, quite independently of any preceding brain-state and precisely, only if, and exactly when the person on whom the experiment is performed wants to become active. If the person chooses freely not to move, this RP and the voluntary movement do not take place. The findings of Libet that a person can always veto and interrupt voluntary movements, upon which veto a complete cessation of RP follows, confirms this view. In other words, these experiments confirm, Eccles sees, in a fascinating manner that on the level of the brain exactly that happens which we should expect from the experience and philosophical understanding of conscious life: namely that on the occasion of each volitional motion an objectively existing and also experientially noticeable „breaking in“ of the order of the mind and volition into the world of the body takes place and that the source of such bodily and physical-physiological changes does not lie in the brain itself but in the will of the person, in the spontaneous innervation of the free center of the person. Similar evidences were presented when persons were observed when they spoke or when they solved mathematical or chess problems. Further evidences for this can be obtained from experiments with active memory-retrieval or “playing the brain”, an expression for the quasi-instrumental role of the brain suggested before by Henri Bergson. ⁸

Such an “irruption” of the power and freedom of the mind into the world of the brain is not present, for example, in the case of experiencing pain because of having one’s finger cut and other experiences that are mere consequences of preceding nerve- and brain events.

Thus the truth of our inner experience of really initiating bodily movements, and thereby the truth of “causality through freedom”, can be verified or at least


⁸See H. Bergson 1896. On the newest state of scientific research and theory, regarding the problem of memory, see Eccles 1979, pp. 176ff.
corroborated through empirical brain research. With Eccles and Popper we have then to assume that, as they express themselves, there exists a fundamental openness of WORLD 1 (matter, brain) for WORLD 2 (mind, soul). The brain is open with respect to receiving input and influences from the mind and thereby the matter of the brain is open to communicate with a reality that is distinct from the brain. This reconfirms the words Socrates spoke in Plato’s *Phaedo* about the reasons why his limbs and nerves (and brain) remained in jail: because of his knowledge and free decision not to commit any injustice and therefore to remain in prison and to accept death, although unjustly condemned, and not for physiological causes (*Phaedo*, 98b ff.).

This whole concept of the soul or the “conscious mind,” as Eccles puts it, having a causal effect on the body, is obviously only revolutionary if you see it in the light of modern science and its deterministic philosophical foundation. For Plato, Augustine, and many others this concept evidently corresponds to the truth and is therefore accepted by them and the long tradition until and including René Descartes and G. W. Leibniz.

Eccles stands in the same line and addresses some more modern objections to free will in the cosmos. With Popper and Wigner, a Nobel-laureate of physics, he faced the potential objection taken from the law of the preservation of energy that troubled Hans Jonas considerably, by calling for a new and simultaneously classical

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9 Of course, such a “verification” always presupposes certain philosophical insights and cannot be gained entirely without their help, for example not without various insights which refer to the essence of freedom, of causality, of their mutual relationship and of the subject of freedom.

10See Augustine, 1961, V, 9 ff.

11See for example, René Descartes 1973, pp. 235-236: PRINCIPLE XLI. How the freedom of the will may be reconciled with Divine pre-ordination. Instead of this, we shall have no trouble at all at all if we recollect that our thought is finite, and that the omnipotence of God, whereby He has not only known from all eternity that which is or can be, but also willed and pre-ordained it, is infinite. In this way we may have intelligence enough to come clearly and distinctly to know that this power is in God, but not enough to comprehend how He leaves the free action of man indeterminate; and, on the other hand, we are so conscious of the liberty and indifference which exist in us, that there is nothing that we comprehend more clearly and perfectly. For it would be absurd to doubt that of which we inwardly experience and perceive as existing within ourselves, just because we do not comprehend a matter which from its nature we know to be incomprehensible.

PRINCIPLE XLII. How, although we do not will to err, we yet err by our will. But inasmuch as we how that all our errors depend on our will, and as no one desires to deceive himself we may wonder that we err at all. We must, however, observe that there is a great deal of difference between willing to be deceived and willing to give one’s assent to opinions in which error is sometimes found. For although there is no one who expressly desires to err, there is hardly one who is not willing to give his assent to things in which unsuspected error is to be found. And it will frequently happen that it is the very desire for bowing the truth which causes those who are not fully aware of the order in which it should be sought for, to give judgment on things of which they have no real knowledge and thereby to fall into error.

12See Hans Jonas 1981; see also a critique of this interpretation of this law in Josef Seifert 1989 b, ch. 3.
physics (which recognizes objective empirical and also a priori evident laws of „pure physics” regarding time, motion, space, etc.) that does not contradict the laws of physics but recognizes that these laws strictly and in their full extent refer only to the limited sphere of the material (non-living) universe inasmuch as it is closed off from life (with its anti-entropic structure and dynamism) and from persons. If the order of a closed network of purely physical causes and laws is already reversed by the anti-entropy of any living organism, this must be much more so in the case of free agency.\textsuperscript{13} Thus Eccles points out that the empirical findings on RP refute the idea of a deterministically closed material universe in which any causal influence, force or energy from a source distinct from the material world would be excluded.

Eccles also sees some possibilities to use the concept of randomness and chance in modern microphysics in order to cope with those who object to free will, which he so strongly defends. The apparent “openness” of the material universe according to the modern conception of physics, however, according to which all natural laws are only statistic laws and allow the possibility of chance and exception, is in no way a sufficient correction of earlier “deterministic physics” with its rigid and exception less laws, or rather (since strict Newtonian laws of physics have nothing to do with determinism) with the deterministic philosophy of nature espoused by many scientists. For the “openness” of the material universe of the brain to chance events is completely different from the “openness” of matter to reason and free will of persons. This openness that is decisive for the existence of free will in the world does not find any real support in the mere fact that the laws of the micro-physical world are only statistical and not absolutely exception less. For a statistical gambling with chances is no less far removed from free will and from the openness of matter with respect to mind in freedom than a strictly deterministically closed material universe.

Thus many great classical, medieval, and modern thinkers as well as Eccles and Popper gained the important insight that those parts of the brain that are open to receiving input from free persons and their free wills are not themselves the primary causes of human actions or voluntary movements but are physiological and brain causes that are themselves effects caused by the will, such that they stand only in the service of free agents and merely transmit a causality that has its origin in human free volitions. The privileged place and significance personal wills within the order of efficient causes is most obvious when we think of morality and the entirety of culture and history, rather than nature: moral acts, artistic creation, legal systems and activities, historical events, scientific research and experiments, the writing of philosophical works, educating the young, etc., all of these and innumerable more things are effects of free and rational agents and their decisions. A vision of man that counts free wills among the most important efficient causes in the universe contrasts radically with Libet’s conception of causality and of the order of causes.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13}See Erwin Schrödinger 1944; see also Josef Seifert 1997, ch. 1.
\textsuperscript{14}Also Kant recognizes this fact of a “causality through freedom” in the thesis of the third antinomy in the Critique of Pure Reason and elsewhere. In Kant, however, we find the recognition of this fact only as something lying beyond the experience and beyond any objectivizing thinking, in the alleged sphere of purely intelligible objects and things in

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to the classical view (defended in new ways, based on brain science, by Eccles with the support of Popper), *neither any one of the physical and physiological efficient causes* which are caused by preceding causes, nor the totality of a potentially infinite sequence of such causes can be explained from inside such causes. An infinite series of such causes would be absurd because none of them would constitute the beginning any series of causes requires. Neither any single member of such a series nor the series as a whole can be explained without there being at some point a cause that acts without being determined by a previous cause to act. In other words, as any cause that acts only because it is acted upon by a preceding cause fails to explain its own operation, there must at some point enter a primary efficient cause from which efficient causes take their beginning: and while also life, particularly animal life, causes more than it is acted upon, only the agency of free will proper to a person is a real beginning of a series of causes regarding which we can no longer ask who caused the free agent to act in a certain way; his will and spontaneous initiating a series of causes gives the answer. Thus all unfree causes are in the last analysis only *transmitters of causality*, rather than being themselves causes properly speaking; they can neither singly nor in their entirety, provide an *ultimate explanation* of their causal power, as Augustine states more clearly than any other philosopher. This means that, metaphysically speaking and in the last analysis, impersonal efficient causes can only do what the primary efficient causes, namely persons – human, angelic, or divine free wills – do with them or order them to do.

Now let us return from such a glimpse at the ultimate metaphysical relation between persons and causes to the down to earth level of reflection on this topic called for by Libet: while Libet concurs with some free power over the brain in his admitting the existence of the freedom to veto voluntary movements, he does not understand the primacy of free causes over all determined causes nor does he draw from his test-results the obvious logical conclusion drawn by Eccles: that this freedom of veto proves that the brain processes of the RP cannot cause positive will as its necessary effect. For how could I impede and freely veto a voluntary movement if that movement and the will to move were a necessary effect of preceding brain events of the RP? In contrast to this philosophical insight and logical reasoning in the interpretation of Libet’s experiments offered by Eccles, who recognizes the strict logical connection between acknowledging free veto power and admitting positive free will, Libet denies that we would be capable of what he calls positive free voluntary acts. Free will could solely exist in the form of ‘negative free will’ that themselves in which alone Kant assumes a freedom and causality through freedom to be possible and seeks to save their reality, because he mistakenly regards a realist interpretation of causality through freedom contradictory. See for a critique of this view Josef Seifert 2001.

Augustine 1961, 9 ff.

Holding this view, Libet seems to imply an incompatibilist or libertarian view of freedom which, as I believe to be evident, defends a notion of free will that is quite incompatible with any theory that believes that psychological, moral and legal free will can be upheld even in a body-mind identity theory that believes that all conscious acts are effects and emerging events
vetoes voluntary movements. Positive volitional acts would have efficient causes in the brain that would determine these acts. Libet believes that he has disproven positive free will experimentally:

I have taken an experimental approach to the question of whether we have free will. Freely voluntary acts are preceded by a specific electrical change in the brain (the ‘readiness potential’, RP) that begins 550 msec. before the act. Human subjects became aware of intention to act 350–400 msec. after RP starts, but 200 msec. before the motor act. The volitional process is therefore initiated unconsciously. But the conscious function could still control the outcome; it can veto the act. Free will is therefore not excluded.17

In spite of his ‘experimental approach’ to the question, Libet’s theses are primarily philosophical in nature: the notion of free will itself, the distinction of causal effects through ‘positive voluntary actions’ from the effects of a vetoing or controlling power of free will, and many others cannot be known by empirical tests per se but only by philosophical reflection on their outcome and by properly philosophical methods of knowledge.18

Given their fundamentally philosophical character, there are many ways in which philosophy can tackle and critique the claims Libet raises in his denial that we possess positive free will and in his philosophy of mind in general.

I will in the following develop one of these ways that consists in showing the extremely limited and fundamentally wrong conception Libet has of the relationship between persons and causes. I will address in this paper specifically Libet’s regarding virtually all conscious acts (besides acts of “vetoing”), such as knowledge and volitions, as mere effects of efficient causes in the brain.19 What I want to show is that this theory entirely misconstrues the real relation between persons, brains, and causes and on top of this is self-contradictory.20

In order to expound this issue, I will first present a broad analysis of the relationship between persons and causes that cannot take its starting point in Libet’s meager remarks on this theme but will rather be developed from the riches of human experience of causes and persons and from the classical Aristotelian philosophy of causes, forgetting as it were Libet’s arguments, in order to return to them at the end and show them seriously flawed. In the history of a philosophy of causality Aristotle has enlarged the concept of causality, showing that all thinkers that preceded him referred only to one or two, not to the entirety of four quite distinct causes that account for the being and becoming of things. Aristotle gives an equally simple and beautiful illustration of these four different causes, of which Libet, like most

18See on this Hildebrand 1991; Seifert 2009.
19See Libet, 1985; 1996.
20The same holds for many philosophical works, for example O’Connor 2002.
scientists, considers solely the third one. Think of a sculptor who creates a statue: the artist (a) uses a certain matter, for example bronze; (b) he gives it a certain form, for example that of Apollo as Homer describes him; (c) the sculptor engages in activities through which the form is given to matter, using all kinds of tools for this purpose, while his free will and actions remain the principal cause; (d) he pursues an end, has a purpose in mind for the sake of which he makes the statue (for example to stand on the Agora or in a temple, or he creates it simply for the sake of its aesthetic beauty or to delight its spectators).

In order to confront Libet’s implicit philosophy of causality, shared with him by most scientists, we have not only to learn from the much broader Aristotelian theory of the relation between causality and persons, but must also show that even the far vaster Aristotelian account of causality is incomplete and needs to be substantially improved on in order to do far more justice to the overwhelming role of persons in the order of causes. An adequate critique of Libet’s and countless other brain scientist’s more radical claims against free will requires therefore not only to criticize Libet’s interpretation of his test results but also to rethink and substantially expand the classical conception of the relations between persons and causes, because the Aristotelian distinction of the four causes and his elaborations of a theory of efficient causality based on these four causes, profound as they are, are quite insufficient when it comes to the explanation of causality in the world of persons. Appropriating in our own minds and seeing what Aristotle has seen, but also developing it further in relation to persons as causes, will show the kind of radical reversal of the order of causes and of the relationship between physiological causes and personal free agents in Libet and other scientists who, because brain activity is a condition of all empirically given mental activity, confuse this tremendous role of the brain for conscious life with that of a cause, a confusion so clearly seen and overcome in Plato’s Phaedo, particularly but not only in the above mentioned passage.

The Aristotelian concept of four fundamentally different sorts of causes of being and becoming is far more extensive than the modern one, which Libet and most scientists use and which tends to reduce the complexity of causes and conditions to efficient causality alone and to a small part thereof. As Libet, however, considers solely the third of the four Aristotelian causes, I will not unfold in this paper a personalist critical examination of all four causes Aristotle distinguishes, leaving such a more extended investigation to another paper. Instead, I will here attempt to show initially the essential connection of the efficient cause to persons, taking into account, however, another one of the four causes neglected by Libet, but without which efficient cause cannot be understood at all: final cause.

Above and beyond this, I intend to show in a second part of this paper that in the world of human consciousness and of volitional acts there are a variety of other causes that cannot be reduced to the four and least of all to efficient causality exerted by brain events, in terms of which Libet interprets the question of the causes of

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21See Reale 1976: 23 ff., where one finds a brief but important summary presentation of this theme in Aristotelian metaphysics.
positive volitions. To spell out these two goals of the paper a bit more, let me say a few more words to explain these two goals and the two parts of the present paper:

1) Libet, instead of overcoming the insufficiency of Aristotle’s realization of the essential connections between efficient causality and persons, like most other scientists, quasi completely loses the classical and medieval philosophical understanding of the will of persons as an important and primary cause of events in the physical world and above all fails to see the complete inexplicability of efficient causality in the universe without recognizing the close relation between persons and causes. In particular human agency can so little be explained as causal effect of different causes in the brain that, on the contrary, the whole order of efficient causality in nature, in the RP, and in human affairs can solely be appropriately understood if we recognize that the primary source and form of all efficient causality lies in personal agency, and therefore cannot be understood without understanding the various relationships of efficient causality to, and ultimate dependence on, persons.

2) Libet’s explanation of volitional acts in terms of cerebral efficient causality is mistaken on the further ground that specifically personal acts, in particular free actions, cannot only not be explained through cerebral physical causes because personal efficient causality in free acts is superior, primary, and wholly different from mere psycho-physical causal relations between brain events and conscious acts, but also because on the level of persons we find many other and fundamentally different kinds of causes which are totally irreducible to efficient causality, let alone to the fraction of efficient causality to which Libet wants to reduce them. Demonstrating this discloses a number of further philosophical errors that lie in Libet’s and any other attempt at a reduction of the causes of specifically personal voluntary acts to efficient causes in the brain. To explain these new kinds of causes of personal acts, causes that are not only higher forms of efficient causality but are entirely irreducible to efficient causality, will also reveal that Libet’s theory of cognition in general and of scientific knowledge in terms of mere efficient brain causes is self-defeating because neither Libet’s scientific knowledge nor his logical reasoning can be defended on this assumption and would sink down to an irrational product of physiological causes that have nothing to do with the nature of the things he wants to explain and pretends to know, etc., and therefore are quite unable to explain what “causes” knowledge. All of Libet’s rational claims will be seen to collapse on the assumption that his understanding of brain causality is correct. Moreover, neither the free veto he recognizes, nor the positive free will which he overlooks (though it is clearly logically implied by the free veto power he admits), can be explained in terms of mere efficient causality, and least of all in terms of efficient causes in the brain.

Let us explain and substantiate these claims of the paper that have just been sketched in the following two main sections of the paper:

II. Efficient Causes and Persons

A) Efficient Causes, the Principle of Causality, and Final Causes
Aristotle distinguishes for the first time clearly the efficient cause, through the power and efficacy of which something happens, from the formal, final, and the material causes. With this, he has certainly discovered a central and originary kind of causality (the only one recognized by most authors today including Libet). He also gives one of the first and perhaps the clearest formulation of the so-called ‘principle of causality,’ formulating it simultaneously in relation to efficient, formal and material causes: ‘Everything that comes to be, comes to be through something, from (out of) something, and as a certain something’. (Metaphysics VII 7, 1032a). Only the first and third one of these three propositions contained in Aristotle’s formulation of the principle of causality have universal validity and express part of the ‘eternal truth’ of the principle of causality that also underlies all natural sciences (besides being the ground of many other explanations of human, moral, spiritual, or any other contingent things, events, and states of affairs): ‘Everything that comes to be, comes to be through something;’ and; ‘Everything that comes to be, comes to be … as a certain something.’

While Aristotle admits at times the absolute efficient causality of free agents and even assigns to it a primary paradigmatic character, Aristotle attempts frequently to reduce the efficient cause to the material world and thereby is not innocent of what will turn out to be an immense error about efficient causality in relation to persons, an error which deeply shapes Libet’s entire interpretation of his tests.

At this point, we cannot entirely pass over in silence another type of cause which Aristotle discovered and which is both necessary for meaningful efficient causality and irreducible to it. It is this cause, the fourth Aristotelian one (final causality), without which human freedom cannot be understood at all and which Libet’s tests entirely leave out of consideration to the detriment of both his empirical tests and his

23The second proposition, “Everything that comes to be, comes to be … from (out of) something” relates only to the causation of material things. For only these are made out of something by a (human or divine) agent, namely out of some material. If Aristotle’s phrase were understood still more narrowly, the formulation of the principle of causality, as formulated by Aristotle, would solely be true of the production of things through finite agents who can never create anything ‘from nothing’ – which would be the most radical form of efficient causality –, who cannot create spiritual substances at all, and can make material things only “out of preexisting matter”, as the sculptor or craftsman have to use wood, stone, or bronze, etc. for their works.

24Aristotle Eudemian Ethics, 2.6.8-9; 1223 a 3 ff., describes free will powerfully, attributing to it that we are lords over the being or non-being of our acts: “Therefore it is clear that all the actions of which a man is the first principle and controller may either happen or not happen, and that it depends on himself for them to happen or not, as he is lord over their being and of their non-being.” Aristotle, Eudemian Ethics, 2.6.8–9; 1223a3 ff. (transl. mine). In other texts Aristotle calls free will also ‘the first principle’, ‘the cause’ and ‘the lord of action’. See Aristotle, Magna Moralia, 87 b 31 ff., especially 89 b 6 ff.; Nichomachean Ethics, III; and Magna Moralia, 87 b 31 ff., especially 89 b 6 ff. The moments of self-dominion, self-governance, and self-determination have also been investigated in fine analyses by K. Wojtyla 1979.
interpretation of their results. The final cause is defined by Aristotle as the end of a thing or of an action, as that for the sake of which something is or happens. This end, which Libet wholly leaves out of consideration in his experiments which study wholly unmotivated and sense-less, purely arbitrary movements, is closely connected with the good and is the ultimately moving and most important cause in the universe and in human actions. In living things, which are an en-tel-echy, a being that has its end in itself as the form it is called to actualize and does actualize in a dynamic development that is the fruit of the nature, tendencies, drives and ordinations of living beings, the final cause plays a decisive role, but still more in personal action, where “finality” assumes an essentially different form that exists solely in relation to rational human actions.25

B) PERSONS AS PRINCIPLES OF EXPLANATION OF EFFICIENT AND FINAL CAUSALITY

Particularly efficient and final causes can be understood in their ultimate specificity and efficacy only if metaphysics is not limited to being merely a metaphysics of substance and nature, but also is, or becomes, comprehended as a metaphysics of the person qua person.

To show this with respect to efficient and final causality will reveal some shortcomings of Aristotle’s and major shortcomings of Libet’s theory:

a) Efficient causality, which Libet analyses almost exclusively in relation to physical and physiological causality, can in reality only be understood through seeing personal agency as primary form of it

This can be seen through the following reasons:26

(1) We find the most authentic embodiment of efficient causality exclusively in personal free will. Every other efficient cause, as Augustine states in De Civitate Dei27, receives its efficacy from without, and operates only to the extent to which it itself is the effect of other causes (actions, processes or events). Therefore only persons who act freely can be properly speaking efficient causes because they act more than being acted upon.

Even plants and animals, despite their spontaneity and activity of their own, cannot properly be considered as authentic efficient causes because their being causes is not wholly but largely determined by preceding causes of their instincts and nature, and by extrinsic causes to which they react. Therefore, such causes that are determined by other causes and consequently rather are mere “transmitters” of the force of other causes than being causes in their own right clearly never suffice to explain human action.

Free will alone can be considered an efficient cause that is essentially more efficient cause than a causally produced effect, because only free will as the “principle par excellence” embodies the ratio of the efficient cause in the fullest sense, being truly the origin of that which happens through it. Free will alone can in

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26In the following 2 or 3 pages I will be using, with only few changes, a text I have included in another paper submitted to a professional philosophical journal.
27Augustine, De Civitate Dei, V.
an authentic sense be that through which something is, insofar as the origin of its efficacy lies in the free agent himself, wherefore it is not by chance that Aristotle chooses a free agent, the sculptor and his activities, to illustrate efficient causality. Free will is the only cause in the fullest sense of efficient causality, since it alone truly originates and exerts efficient causality rather than merely passing it on. The free act constitutes either an absolute beginning (in divine freedom) or (in human persons) ‘acts more than it is acted upon’ and thereby constitutes a true, and in a limited sense as well an “absolute” beginning of efficient causality that is not caused from outside the free agent. Therefore, as Augustine says in sharpest contrast to the discussion of causality in most of contemporary brain science and philosophy, non-personal beings and impersonal things and events cannot even properly be considered as efficient causes at all; the existence of such causes that are themselves determined by other causes can therefore never be the whole story about efficient causality because, in the last analysis, they do only what free wills do with them.28

Thus the primary efficient cause is the person; in fact, she alone is properly speaking a cause rather than being a mere transmitter of the causal impact of other causes through which she would be determined like other beings.

(2) We touch thereby a second moment. All other efficient causality, with the exception of causality in and through free will, leads us back to a principle of its efficacy distinct from itself. Solely the free and simple initiating and setting into motion of a chain of causes is a true beginning of a chain of efficient causes.

In fact, without free agents there would be an infinite chain of causes none of which would explain itself or any other one, but in the realm of causality there cannot be an infinite chain of causes none of which is an original cause not dependent on other causes. Only free will, as Kant has pointed out in the proofs of the thesis of the third antinomy of pure reason, is such a cause. Therefore, only free will is the ultimate and first principle of explanation of a chain of efficient causes each of which depends on a previous cause that determines it. Only in a free will the unsatisfactory type of

28 The necessarily limited sphere of their operation, which always begins in causality through freedom, does not contradict free actions but on the contrary, these presuppose the – limited realm and dominion of – “determined causes” under laws of nature, which is never the principal cause of human actions but is used by them. See R. Ingarden 1970. D. von Wachter 2011 argues that necessary and universal laws of nature do not exist at all and that never one event follows upon another event according to a (necessary) rule. He argues for this position, although it seems at first sight to contradict the tremendous network of universal laws of nature and their kind of “necessity” and clear dominion over all things and events that fall under them. But at closer examination of his stance, Wachter seems to hold this position (which interprets laws of nature as mere “tendencies”), for two good reasons: because on the one hand, personal free agents can interfere at any time with the occurrence of what would happen without their intervention according to the laws of nature. On the other hand, he argues for his position in view of the possibility that always events determined by other natural causes can interfere with the given outcome of a preceding cause or event.28 Even if one does not agree with his reduction to laws of nature to tendencies, his two main points that entail a keen consciousness of the non-closedness of the physical world to free agents and of the contingency of the laws of nature are no doubt correct.

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other-dependent causes stops and meets with a true beginning, as we find it in any free human act. But as the described inexplicability through itself characterizes all unfree efficient causality in the contingent world, most of which does not find a halt and beginning in human free acts, and as free human agents themselves do neither exist necessarily nor by themselves, nor therefore can be the ultimate beginning of efficient causes, there must exist a superior and more absolute kind of beginning of the series of caused causes, and a first cause of the contingently existing human persons endowed with freedom. Therefore, the universe and the entire series of causes in it, whose existence and dependence on other causes require a first efficient cause, which is not solely the first cause of unfree causes but also of free contingent human agents, a cause that is mysteriously both causing the being and freedom of will of finite persons and powerful enough to bestowed free will on them, which implies that the first cause of human free persons does not determine their wills.\(^{29}\) If this absolute beginning of all chains of efficient causes were not free but were produced by a preceding cause, it could not be a beginning, first cause and ultimate origin of the contingent world and of all chains of efficient causes in the contingent world which cannot have a cause which operates by necessity; otherwise the world would have to exist necessarily and eternally as well, as Parmenides stated. Without such a first personal and free cause the infinite chain of causes determined by other causes would lead to an absurd and impossible regress. Therefore not only the first efficient cause of all chains of causes initiated by free human agents, but also the absolute beginning of all causal chains in the universe can only be a free cause.\(^{30}\)

(3) We can thirdly ascertain that free will is not only the most authentic embodiment and the only true beginning of efficient causality. Rather, in the personal form of efficient causality there lies a radically other and higher type of efficient causality than that which is thinkable within the sphere of apersonal beings. What are these new elements efficient causality takes on solely in free will?

(a) In free self-determination and in free acting lies a unique form of efficient causality for the reason that we are dealing here with a conscious causality, in which the effect proceeds from a conscious act such that the consciousness is a mode of personal free agency and causation, which we therefore do not call just causing but acting or making (creating). Because a personal being, broadly speaking, possesses his being in a fully new sense in comparison to impersonal beings, because he is conscious of himself and consciously enacts his own being, he therefore also possesses himself in a unique manner through free auto-determination and through the free and creative production and constitution of things and states of affairs in making and acting.

\(^{29}\)Augustine expresses this calling the first cause, God, “dator omnium potestatum, non omnium voluntatum.” See Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, V, 9.

\(^{30}\)Plato has understood this far more clearly, particularly in his *Timaios*. Also Kant, if we prescind from his skeptical and subjectivist understanding of freedom as postulate, has seen this much more clearly – for example, in the *Third Antinomy* in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. See Kant 1968. See also Seifert 2001.
(b) To free causality not only belongs consciousness but also the specifically personal and rational consciousness as a moment inseparable from it, without which this form of causality would be completely impossible; only the spontaneity of an irrational animal could exist. In personal acting and making, however, new states of affairs are not simply engendered or changed in an unconscious, mechanistic manner and not even just in an instinctual, or in the less irrational and in some sense conscious way in which a dog may save his master’s life, but still without possessing rational knowledge of his life’s value. Instead, in the intentional, object-directed acts of making and acting the person directs herself consciously and meaningfully to that which he or she realizes, aims at the realization of things or of states of affairs, deliberates about them and calls them freely into being, all of which elements are lacking in the animal’s behavior. This relation of the person to that which is real outside of herself includes thus wholly distinct forms of relation and of efficient causality that are found only on the level of the person. The words acting, making (prattein and poiein) and creating express these uniquely personal and rational modes of causing something. To comprehend them is necessary in order to complete the philosophical grasp of efficient causality. Also for this reason, efficient causality can be properly understood only on the basis of a personalist philosophy. Libet’s tests reduce voluntary movements that are part of meaningful human actions to mere urges or, if they are free intentions based on nothing but suddenly felt urges to move, to totally irrational, arbitrary, senseless causations of movements which lack almost entirely the described new rational structure of causation through persons except for the element of “wanting to obey Libet’s orders to carry out arbitrary movements when I feel an urge,” which still requires a rational person as subject, wherefore Libet could not do his tests with animals.

(4) Free will as an immediate experience of efficient causality: Moreover, as we carry out the conscious act of causation, of engendering our own acts, or of realizing states of affairs through acting or things through making them, the causal power is itself immediately and consciously given in this free causality. We are ourselves identical with the subject of this power; we experience the flowing out of effects from the cause, at least in the engendering of free acts as such, which exist as soon as we will them and only because we will them, and which would not be if we did not want them. This being the lord over the being and non-being of our acts, of which Aristotle speaks in a most powerful statement on free will, is an immediately given, experienced and amazing form of efficient causality. “For he [man] is lord over their (his actions’) being and non-being”31 Aristotle could hardly have expressed free will more powerfully than in this text but calls free will in other passages also “the first principle (cause),” “the cause” and “the lord of action.”32 In a less strong sense than in engendering the act of willing itself, we experience efficient causality also immediately in doing and making things through mental acts and bodily actions, which have many intrinsic and extrinsic conditions in the agent and in the world. For

31Aristotle, Eudemian Ethics, II.vi.8-9: 1223 a 3 ff.: “hoon ge kurios esti tou einai kai tou mee einai.”
whereas we possess perfect power over our willing itself, we have no perfect control
over the objects of our will in the world. In these acts, most of all in the engendering
of free acts, we do not just understand or infer that causal relations must exist, but
experience them most intimately and immediately.

(5) Indubitable evidence of efficacy and efficient causality in engendering
(causing) free acts: The causal influence and efficacy proper to free will of bringing
into existence acting, research, and in particular willing itself, also represent the
classic instances in which efficient causality is given with evidence in the immediate
experience of causing acts from our own will which would not exist if we did not
want them. With Augustine we add that the causation of a voluntary act through the
person herself is, in a certain sense, even more evident than our existence because
even if we could, per impossible, be in doubt whether we truly exist or merely think
so erroneously, we would still know that we do not want to be in error. Such an
indubitable evidence is absent in efficient causality in nature and in the whole
physical world, as well as in our causing changes in the world. Therefore theories
according to which all there is evident regarding causality in nature is a temporal
succession and according to which we believe in causal relations in nature only in
virtue of habits of observing similar temporal sequences all the time, as Hume thought,
or the theory that some invisible divine agency causes all physical changes because
the human mind cannot have power over physical things, as occasionalists, and
Leibniz with his ingenious theory of pre-established harmony, thought, are not
entirely refutable through experience or immediate evidence. While we find such
theories ingenious and understandable but believe they do unreasonable violence to
our experience and are, compared with the sobriety and trustworthiness of our
experience artificial and far-fetched and while they obviously contradict sound
commonsense, they cannot be rejected or refuted through an immediate indubitable
evidence but only through a very complex and profound metaphysical speculative
reflection on the origin and explanation of our experience of being free agents in the
world.

In contrast to the lack of absolute evidence regarding efficient causal relations in
nature, we possess immediate and indubitable evidence regarding personal causation
through free will. This applies also, though more weakly, to the causality found in
bodily action that is mediated by all kinds of unconscious physiological processes, but
it applies absolutely to the mode in which persons cause and engender their own free
acts since nothing lies so much in their power of causation as willing itself. And
nothing could be more evidently given in knowledge. For even if we could doubt our
very being, believing that we might be deceived in this, we could not doubt our free
will of not wanting to be deceived. And indeed we know of our freedom with the
same type of immediate and reflective evidence with which we know of our own
existence.\footnote{Investigating this matter more closely, we could distinguish between the evident givenness of freedom on different levels, a) in the immediate inner conscious living of our acts, b) in what Karol Wojtyla calls “reflective consciousness” (which precedes the fully conscious self-knowledge), and c) in explicit reflection and self-knowledge properly speaking in which we}
that it cannot be deception – is part of the evidence of the Cogito as unfolded by Augustine. And the existence of free will in us is so evident that its evidence in a certain sense is more primary and indubitable than that of all other evident truths given in the *Cogito*. For even if we could be in error about all things, which is impossible, as Augustine sees, it would still remain true that we do not want to be in error and of this free will we can have certain knowledge:

Likewise if someone were to say, “I do not will to err”, will it not be true that whether he errs or does not err, yet he does not will to err? Would it not be the height of impudence of anyone to say to this man, ‘Perhaps you are deceived’, since no matter in what he may be deceived, he is certainly not deceived in not willing to be deceived? And if he says that he knows this, he adds as many known things as he pleases, and perceives it to be an infinite number. For he who says, “I do not will to be deceived, and I know that I do not will this, and I know that I know this”, can also continue from here towards an infinite number, however awkward this manner of expressing it may be.

On the other hand who would doubt that he ... wills...? For even if he doubts, he ... wills to be certain; ... Whoever then doubts about anything else ought never to doubt about all of these; for if they were not, he would be unable to doubt about anything at all.

The evidence of this knowledge cannot even be refuted by any and all possible forms of doubts and cases of self-deception because these imply or presuppose already the evidence of free will, for example the will to be certain, the will to avoid deception and error, the will not to believe too uncritically, etc. And in this indubitable evidence of free will also the causality in *engendering free acts* is given.

make our personal freedom the explicit object of reflection, d) in the insight into the nature of freedom, an insight which grasps the necessary and intelligible essence of personhood, which is realized in each and every person, and e) in the clear and indubitable recognition of our personal individual freedom, an evident knowledge which depends, on the one hand, on the immediate and reflective experience of our being and freedom, and, on the other hand, on the essential insight into the eternal and evident truth of the connection between freedom and personhood.

35 Of course, this priority is not to be understood absolutely, for without the evidence of our existence and thinking activity also our freedom and will could not be given.
36 McKenna translates the *infinitum numerum* (wrongly, I believe) by ‘indefinite number’.
38 Augustine, *De Trinitate*, X, 10, 14. See also, Augustine, *Contra Academicos*, II, xiii, 29, *ibid.*, III, 23; *De Vera Religione*, XXXIX, 73, 205-7; *De Trinitate XIV*, vi, 8; *ibid.*, XV, xii, 21; *De Civitate Dei*, XI, xxvi.
39 The indubitable knowledge we can gain regarding our freedom refutes also the theory of Hume (of the non-givenness of causality), which considers almost exclusively forms of causality given within the material, sensible world, being also wrong about them. Cf. Hildebrand 1994: 2-27. Seifert 1987: ch. 4-5.
With the free causality of our engendering our own free acts and causing them, with the causality of free will, also another dimension of efficient causality, linked to free will itself, becomes accessible to us: namely the way in which we freely perform bodily actions and through them cause changes in the world, i.e., the causality of realizing states of affairs (through acting) or things (through making) in the external world through our free initiative. Thus with this absolutely evident givenness of our engendering our free acts themselves, also a less absolute (as mentioned above in the comments about Occasionalism and Leibniz), but still very clear, evidence of us being efficient causes of works, books, buildings and other objects and events is accessible to us. Therefore, besides the ‘causality of free will itself’ also ‘causality through free will’, mediated through the brain and body, the freedom to act and to change the world by our actions, is unambiguously given to us, though it is not given with equally indubitable certainty as the causing of our willing itself.\footnote{Therefore the positions of occasionalism or of a pre-established harmony between our will and external bodily actions (Geulincx and Leibniz), according to which our bodies are moved “on the occasion” of our wills and harmony with them, is not a senseless, although a wrong theory.}

We find in the ability freely to intervene in the world, and thereby to realize things and states of affairs outside of the person, the three aforementioned specifically personal and originary types of causality, namely (in the order of the depth of their causal power) acting, making, and creating. In acting, the person realizes states of affairs in relation to already existing things. In making and creating, the person brings some things into existence, in various degrees that range from producing mere toys, tools, or technical products to creating intellectual or artistic works of the highest meaning and value, to divine creation from nothing that likewise is a personal act, which even the atheist can recognize by merely reflecting on the “idea” or “essence” of creating.

In all these cases, the person also realizes acts in herself and determines herself, whether through the unique and direct causality by which she calls her free acts into existence, or through the human and moral effects of these acts on herself as person. And this allows us to see a sixth way in which efficient causality requires the understanding of personal beings in order to be properly understood.

(6) The free subject as a self-determining efficient cause: We see in the light of the preceding reflections that the person herself, and thereby a spiritual being, i.e., the human person as such in her spiritual aspects, is and can be an efficient cause and agent of free interior acts as well as an object of efficient causality, in that the exercise of free will, with essential necessity, does not merely bring into existence external objects and processes, but also inner acts. Indeed free will has, above and beyond acts performed by the person and directed to things outside her, the person herself as primary object: even though normally turning in the first intention to other persons and values outside the person, free will acts at the same time upon the person of the free agent himself in a peculiar form of reflexivity which is inseparable from the exercise of free will.\footnote{See on this Wojtyla 1979.} This unique case of auto-determination and auto-causation...
of free agents does not happen only in the obvious manner, such as in free decisions, for example, or in the free act of calling into existence thinking itself, or research, and other acts and activities, but also in the sense in which the person, on the basis of that which she does in her conscious actions and of that at which she aims, also determines herself in a far deeper and farther-reaching sense than the one in which the person can change any material being or animal, let alone the one in which animals can cause changes in the material world or the world of plants and animals.

Self-determination is an effect of the use of free will, and thereby an absolutely unique form of causality, in which, as the philosophers Kierkegaard and Wojtyła profoundly explain⁴², not only objects and states of affairs outside of the person are the objects of action, but the person herself, who in her free acting gets hold of her own self, becomes good or evil, and determines herself in a completely unique manner. In the self-determination of the free subject himself lies therefore a unique form of causality, which is unthinkable within the sphere of impersonal being and even in the outward-directed efficient causality of the person.

The actualization of the deepest potentialities of the person cannot happen without the free will of the person. The distance, which metaphysically speaking separates the good person from the evil one, also gives witness to the efficacy of free will upon its own proper subject, and this effectively contradicts any limitation of efficient causality to the sensible-material or physiological world of brain processes investigated by Libet. In fact, it becomes clear that efficient causality is not only also possible with spiritual substances, but lies rather – in its fullest sense – exclusively in their sphere.

When we think of the unique form of causality found in personal acting, through which events, processes, states of affairs and causes (which for their part involve further ends of acting) outside of the person or at least outside of the free acts themselves, are freely intended and realized by the subject, we understand that if these acts either were a mere outflow of our nature, or products of brain events, they would precisely not be what they are, namely free. Nor would they possess the nature of human causation and acting which they obviously do possess and by which they precisely differ from activities which are caused by brain events, like headaches caused by brain tumors, or which follow from the organic or instinctual nature of an animal. Thus it becomes clear in this case of free external action that free will as efficient cause is essentially distinct from all effects and states of affairs that are realized simply through our having a given nature or as effects of some brain events. The same holds for the free creation or making of artifacts, and above all of works of art, scientific or philosophical works, etc.

Even those effects within the moral sphere in our own person, such as the goodness or wickedness of the person herself, effects that are far more intimately linked with free acts than the objects produced by us, are distinct from the cause which brings them into existence. This is shown clearly from the fact that the acts and the actions through which someone becomes good or evil have long passed away or can at least lie in the past, while their effects continue to remain in the person. In

⁴²See S. Kierkegaard 1983; Wojtyła 1979: Part I, ch. ii; Part II, ch. iii.
addition to this, the permanent personal characteristics of evilness or goodness possess an ontic character wholly different from the individual acts or actions, from which virtues or vices, goodness or evilness of the person, and their effects of guilt or merit arise.

Without a personalist understanding of final causality positive free will and veto power cannot be understood: A critique of Libet’s consideration of free will as pure efficient cause isolated from ends. In the case of the final cause it is even more immediately evident and more easily seen than in the case of efficient causality that a final cause “for the sake of which” something is or is made must remain entirely impossible without the relation to persons that is essential to final causality. Therefore finality in nature, although so evident that no single step in biology and zoology can be taken without recognizing it, is thoroughly incomprehensible for atheists and therefore frequently rejected by them if it is not explained naturalistically in wholly inadequate ways by such principles of the theory of evolution as “survival of the fittest” or “adaptation” to the surroundings, which, if they have anything to do with finality, already presuppose its existence; instead of explaining it; also in the human world of culture and art as well as in technology final causality obviously exists and here its relation to persons who make and do things for certain ends is obvious. Again, we can find at least two reasons for this dependency of all operation of final causality on personal beings,

(a) If the end must in the first place be identified with a good (even though the two notions are distinct and human persons can have evil purposes for their actions), it becomes evident that the final cause cannot at all be a cause in itself, since the goodness and value of a being are not of themselves capable of bringing anything extrinsic to them, such as acts of persons, into existence, or of being per se the explanatory principles of a thing or becoming. The value is itself a “consequential property” of things, as Ross says, and this makes it impossible to classify it among

43 The most astounding text of Kierkegaard on this matter is the following: ... The greatest good, after all, which can be done for a being, greater than anything else that one can do for it, is to make it free. In order to do just that, omnipotence is required. This seems strange, since it is precisely omnipotence that supposedly would make [a being] dependent. But if one will reflect on omnipotence, he will see that it also must contain the unique qualification of being able to withdraw itself again in a manifestation of omnipotence in such a way that precisely for this reason that which has been originated through omnipotence can be independent. ... Only omnipotence can withdraw itself at the same time it gives itself away, and this relationship is the very independence of the receiver. God's omnipotence is therefore his goodness. For goodness is to give oneself away completely, but in such a way that by omnipotently taking oneself back one makes the recipient independent. All finite power makes [a being] dependent; only omnipotence can make [a being] independent, can form from nothing something which has its continuity in itself through the continual withdrawing of omnipotence. ... It is incomprehensible that omnipotence is not only able to create the most impressive of all things-the whole visible world—but is able to create the most fragile of all things—a being independent of that very omnipotence. Omnipotence, which can handle the world so toughly and with such a heavy hand, can also make itself so light that what it has brought into existence receives independence. Only a wretched and mundane conception of the dialectic of power holds that it...
the efficient causes. Rather, the only manner in which the good and values can work as causes and have effects on things, is by the mediation of knowledge and personal acting. Only through the sphere of conscious personal knowledge and of the free acts motivated by this knowledge can the good become a cause.

Therefore, it is also no linguistic accident that the end and similar concepts can be used for both the objective finality which we find in nature or technology as well as for the goal of personal acts. To speak of the purpose of events in lifeless nature, such as of the obviously existing finality of organs in organisms, means always to assume an efficacy of meaning and of the good which, as becomes evident through deeper reflection, can only happen through the mediation of personal knowledge and freedom. And therefore an atheistic metaphysics has no justification in admitting finality and meaning in nature, wherefore atheists like Richard Dawkins and others fight so fiercely against any admission of a purpose and plan and final causality in nature, though few things could be more evident than the presence of final causality in nature and no biologist could possibly understand the function of any organ without recognizing its purpose and function for the organism. 44

is greater and greater in proportion to its ability to compel and to make dependent. No, Socrates had a sounder understanding; he knew that the art of power lies precisely in making another free. But in the relationship between man and man this can never be done, even though it needs to be emphasized again and again that this is the highest; only omnipotence can truly succeed in this. Therefore if man had the slightest independent existence over against God (with regard to materia), then God could not make him free. Creation out of nothing is once again the Almighty's expression for being able to make [a being] independent. He to whom I owe absolutely everything, although he still absolutely controls everything, has in fact made me independent. If in creating man God himself lost a little of his power, then precisely what he could not do would be to make man independent. (VII A 181, 184.) See also the German translation by Ross 1960, pp. 49-50. "Das Höchste, das überhaupt für ein Wesen getan werden kann, das Höchste, wozu es gebracht werden kann, ist, es frei zu machen. Ebendazu gehört Allmacht, um das tun zu können. Dies scheint sonderbar, da gerade Allmacht abhängig zu machen scheint. Aber wenn man Allmacht denken will, wird man sehen, daß gerade in ihr die Bestimmung liegt, sich selber in der Außerung der Allmacht wieder so zurücknehmen zu können, daß gerade dadurch das durch die Allmacht Gewordene unabhängig wird. ... alle endliche Macht macht abhängig; nur die Allmacht kann unabhängig machen, aus Nichts hervorbringen, was in sich Bestand hat dadurch, daß die Allmacht sich immerfort 'selbst zurücknimmt' ... ohne doch das Mindeste ihrer Macht aufzugeben ... Dies ist das Unbegreifliche, daß die Allmacht nicht bloß das Imposanteste von allem hervorbringen kann, der Welt sichtbare Totalität, sondern das Gebrechlichste von allem erzeugen kann, ein gegenüber der Allmacht unabhängiges Wesen. Daß also die Allmacht, die mit ihrer gewaltigen Hand so schwer auf der Welt liegen kann, sich zugleich so leicht machen kann, daß das Gewordene Unabhängigkeit erhält. Es ist nur eine erbärmliche und weltliche Vorstellung von der ... Macht, daß sie desto größer wird, desto mehr sie unterjochen und abhängig machen kann. " See also ibid., 280 ff.

44See on this Spaemann and Löw 1981.
To remain within human experience, we not only know from experience of making things and seeing others make them that the purpose or value for the sake of which they are made is preceded by a person’s understanding and acting for an end, but we also immediately recognize when we find a work of art or other beautiful man-made things or artifacts, or a machine, none of which occur in nature, that a personal agent has been at work and has acted as efficient cause for the sake of an end.

Of course, also in non-personal beings certain things can objectively be means, and others ends. There is no essential necessity whatsoever that would forbid that final causality, a relation in which one thing serves another and exists “for the sake of the other”, actually exists in impersonal machines, natural objects or irrational living beings. On the contrary, in nature and in machines we obviously find countless means-ends relations, which, however, precisely must be designed by an intelligent person because neither water nor stars, neither a plant nor an animal possess any intelligence of their own, nor does man possess sufficient intelligence to understand or explain the countless forms of meaning and finality in his body and mind. Therefore the extremely intelligent order found in them allows us to infer that they have an intelligent maker. The operation towards ends, be it in nature, in technology, in science, history or in art, can only be explained by an intelligent and free efficient cause, a person endowed with intellect who orders the means towards values and ends, or who makes certain things for the sake of their intrinsic value or for achieving other ends or goods.

(b) But personal beings not only are causes and conditions necessary for the operation of any final causality in nature or in artifacts; they also embody final causality in an entirely new and higher form which is far more intimately connected with, and inseparable from, personhood. For we find in the personal realization of a goal itself, in personal acting which is related to a final telos, the most perfect and a principally different form of final causality, which is radically distinct from the finality that is instilled by a person upon a machine or exists in an organism. The ends we find in the sphere of persons have a fundamentally different meaning. This is particularly evident in the sphere of ethics, where the essential distinction within finality, between the free desire to realize an end in actions through which the person becomes good or evil, and mere natural causality and objective finality, which as such could never ground moral values, is obvious.

Within the sphere of personal finality, we must further distinguish the objective finis operis, the essential goal inscribed in a certain kind of action such as life-saving or murder, from the subjective finis operantis, the extrinsic purpose, goal or motive of accomplishing an act. Both objective essential ends and subjective purposes of acting are specifically personal forms of finality that are by this very fact radically distinct from any finality possible in nature or art. We can ponder the ethical relevance of both the essentially objective personal end of an act and of the subjective end of the acting subject. This distinction regards fundamentally distinct forms of specifically personal goal-directedness and finality. Only a philosophy of causality in relation to persons sees the dependence of final causality on persons and recognizes at the same time the fully new way in which finality is realized in the various forms of a free and conscious turning of the person to various ends. The personal value of this turning

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towards these ends can never be measured morally speaking only in relation to consequences of acts, which to do is the grave error of ethical consequentialism. Inasmuch as our reflections on the specific personal forms of final and of efficient causality showed us the entirely new elements they are characterized by compared with efficient and final causality as it exists in nature or in the brain, new elements that are closely interwoven with the essence of the person and personal consciousness, these reflections lead us already up to the second important topic of our reflections: the entirely new kinds of causes which we find on the level of persons and their irreducibility to efficient and final causality. These causes are not only, as in the case of final and efficient causality, entirely new forms of two of the causes Aristotle investigated and which exist also outside of persons, but they are entirely irreducible to any one of them and require an even more substantial rethinking of the classical theory of causality than did our personalist understanding of efficient and final causes. It is in turning to these specifically and exclusively personal forms of causes that we will recognize the complete untenability of Libet’s claim that volitional acts are causal effects of brain events that could be efficient causes of free acts.

III. The irreducibility of the Explanatory Principles of Reality to the Four Causes, the Specifically Personal Causes, and Libet’s Untenable Reduction of Them to Efficient Brain-causality

I now wish to investigate more profoundly and more in detail the mentioned question of whether a transcending of the whole level of the discussion of free will in Libet is necessary for another reason, namely that on the level of the spirit and of the person we encounter entirely new types of causes which do not exist in nature and which cannot be reduced to efficient or final causality at all. Personal causal relations, at least most of them, presuppose, with absolute necessity, consciousness in its specifically personal rational form. This is also true of the specifically personal and new forms of efficient and final causality we have just studied. However, now we will turn to what are not only higher personal and essentially conscious forms of a type of causes that can exist also in impersonal nature (such as efficient and final causes) but to entirely new types of causes which, already as type of causes, cannot exist in any being besides persons. That these personal causal relations are not at all conceivable within the mere material or the physiological world of brain events, while efficient and final causes can be realized in non-personal nature, is sufficient to show that the causal ground of human acts is of a nature sui generis, and that the causes and reasons of human acts do not allow their

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46With regard to the reduction of all aitiai and cause to the four distinguished by Aristotle, see his Metaphysics, A 3, 983 a 25 ff. See also Reale 1967: 25. See also Schwengler 1960, in particular vol. II: 26.
being reduced to efficient causality, let alone to mere physical efficient causality, along the lines of which Libet attempts to explain them\(^47\).

**A) THE INTENTIONAL SUBJECT-OBJECT RELATION AS A RELATION IRREDUCIBLE TO EFFICIENT CAUSALITY AND AS ANOTHER REASON WHY LIBET’S AND OTHER BRAIN SCIENTISTS’ EXPLANATION OF VOLUNTARY ACTS IN TERMS OF EFFICIENT CAUSES IN THE BRAIN IS UNTENABLE**

We must first of all take into consideration that relation and that dependence which we find between object and subject in intentional acts discovered and explored, after the scholastics, by Franz Brentano, Edmund Husserl and many phenomenologists.\(^48\) This relation, which is further differentiated into still more specific relations which nevertheless all share the common moment of a subject consciously directing himself to an object, is already insofar fully sui generis as it is necessarily conscious. Moreover, it is impossible to characterize the object of an intentional act or the dependence which an intentional act can have on its object, through which it is to a certain extent ‘formed’, as a case of efficient causality. The decisive point lies precisely in that the personal subject reaches out beyond his own act and takes spiritual possession of the object of consciousness which is not part of the act but stands, in an immaterial, mental form in front of it. Perhaps it is better not to treat of this fundamental intentional relation in the abstract, but rather to treat of it as it is modified in the concrete forms of dependence between intentional objects and various intentional acts. Such an investigation will better illuminate the fact that also generally speaking, the dependence between intentional object and intentional act is of a fully unique character, and is neither reducible to efficient nor to final causality.

**B) THE IRREDUCIBLE TRANSCENDENT RELATION AND THE METAPHYSICAL RELATIONSHIP OF DEPENDENCE BETWEEN THE ACT OF COGNITION AND THE OBJECT OF COGNITION**

Let us first think of the cognitive relation. When a spiritual subject knows that a particular state of affairs in fact obtains, we find necessarily in this cognitive relation a transcendent conscious reaching of something, for example of the state of affairs that the circumference of a circle is \(2\pi\). This state of affairs is not an immanent content of the cognitive act in the subject. Rather, the knowing subject really and intentionally reaches beyond himself and grasps that state of affairs that is wholly different from the cognizing subject as that which it is. Libet no doubt presupposes this. When he holds that Eccles’ theory of the body-mind-relation is not scientific because it cannot be demonstrated by empirical tests and experiments, he presupposes that he understands what science is, what are its admissible methods, what is the theory of Eccles, what an empirical test and what the foundation of its cognitive value are, etc. All of these things are wholly different entities from the acts of Libet’s understanding them.

\(^{47}\)In the *Phaedo*, precisely in the context of a metaphysics of the person, Plato has clearly pointed to the distinction between efficient causes and conditions, a distinction which is of fundamental importance for the discussion of the body-soul problem, as has been demonstrated in other works. See Plato, *Phaedo*, 99 b. See also 1973, 1989 b: 143 ff.

\(^{48}\)See F. Brentano 1955; 1973.; see also Edmund Husserl 1900/1901; 1975,1984; 1970; V.
It is necessary to stress that in this relation there also lies a real relation of dependence, in which the personal subject, or his really existing act, really depends on the being that is known. Since Libet does not try to explain this dependence in terms of formal causality, as the Aristotelian-scholastic philosophy did, I leave it up to another work to show the untenability of this assumption and turn instead to another “Libetian” attempt of reductionist explanation of this dependence. One could be tempted to consider this relation as a case of efficient causality. But this is in no way satisfactory. On the contrary, if the act of knowledge were merely the effect of the object known, let alone of brain events as Libet believes, which would have the role of efficient causes of knowledge, then the specific cognitional relation as such would thereby be dissolved. In fact, if the act of knowledge is merely determined by an object through which it is causally evoked, then knowledge as such is in no way explained. This is even more clearly if not the object but brain processes were the efficient cause of Libet’s knowledge. Indeed, if the act of knowledge is causally produced by an object, by a material thing for example, through material processes in the body which then have this act as a result of their efficient causal force, then the subject could never know whether this purely natural causal chain in fact results in a content of consciousness which corresponds or does not correspond to the real nature of things. “Knowing” would then lose its cognitive character and its object would be just an immanent content of consciousness which has an external cause in the material world. Moreover, its content would not be dependent on the nature of the things that are the object of knowledge but on blind chemical and physical causes which as such have nothing to do with the nature of the objects known, such as a chain of chemical causes in the body bear no resemblance to the headache they cause. A dependence of “knowledge” on a pure series of physiological or physical natural causes could not explain knowledge at all. Just as a computer hardware and software or archive does not allow the computer the slightest knowledge of whether the product of the physical causes that produce its output, corresponds to reality or not, it would be with all human cognition; there would not exist any act of knowledge whatsoever. (Besides, the meaning of the computer output does not consist in the physical signs but in their conceptual meaning which is not produced by physical causes at all). In this way, by a materialist causal theory of brain causation of knowledge – instead of assigning to brain events a decisive but subordinate and merely mediating and serving role for knowledge – knowledge would not be explained, but abolished, and Libet’s theory, not only when he seeks to explain free actions but also when he seeks to explain his own knowledge by mere physical causes, would destroy the entire basis of his own rational scientific knowledge which, instead of knowledge, would be nothing but an accidental by-product of physical causes which could not ground any correspondence or adequacy in relation to reality.49

The authentic cognitive relation and its unique form of dependence on the object of cognition presuppose that the reality cognized discloses itself to the knowing spirit in a manner that is not a mere case of efficient causality, but rather a real-intentional participation in the being itself as it is. For example, Libet presupposes to understand

logical laws, epistemological and scientific requirements, the thoughts expressed by Eccles, the reason for their unscientific nature, etc. None of these objects of his knowledge, which form the content of his knowledge, but are entirely independent of his brain and mind, can be explained as effect of efficient brain causes. Moreover, the knowledge-causing role of the object of cognition can also not be interpreted as a case of efficient causality between object and act of knowledge. Rather, the logical or mathematical, the anthropological, epistemological, or ontological states of affairs, by being received by his mind in the intentional cognitive act, are not only the reason why he thinks the way he does and not otherwise, but cause the content of knowledge precisely by being understood, by being known, and not as efficient causes. This spiritual act is certainly really dependent on its object, but in a specifically transcendent kind of relation and spiritual participation, which precisely constitutes the cognitive relation as such and excludes that cognition can ever be a mere effect of the object known, but rather is a real-intentional participation in, and an intentional being-determined-by, the object. Brain causes and changes in our sense organs and nerves can play no other role than a subservient and mediating one.\(^{50}\)

That this relation cannot be one of efficient causality already follows from the fact that many objects of knowledge are not material entities at all, are indeed often not at all real beings, but either abstract universal essences or purely ideal images and relations, or even consist merely in a lack or privation of being, as in the case of the knowledge of the different meanings of the term “nothing” or of certain kinds of negative states of affairs and evils that are mere privations of being such as total ignorance, which obviously could not be the efficient causes of real acts such as those of knowing.\(^{51}\) We can add that also really obtaining states of affairs, which are a chief object of knowledge, never are efficient causes because states of affairs do not at all have the character of things or events which would make them capable of being efficient causes and exert causal operations.\(^{52}\)

We find then in the way in which the act of knowledge is determined by its object a wholly unique relation, which includes a clear metaphysical dependency of the act on its object and which therefore must be taken into account, if the metaphysician wishes to investigate all the forms of causes of real acts, but which cannot be classified as efficient or as final cause of the cognitive act.\(^{53}\)

C) Motivation as a specifically personal ground of explanation sui generis of volitional acts and the

\(^{50}\)In the difference between physiological causes of mental events and this mediating role see J. Seifert 1979.
\(^{51}\)See Millán-Puelles 1990/1996.
\(^{52}\)See Adolf Reinach 1989 d.
\(^{53}\)Despite any relationships of finality which may obtain between the object and the act of cognition, we cannot conclude that the fundamental nature of the cognitive relation and of the form in which a real being, namely the act of cognition, is dependent on another ideal, real, or any other kind of object, is a relation of finality. It would certainly never seriously enter into anyone’s mind to assert for instance that mathematical knowledge is a means to the realization of mathematical laws (something which is excluded already by their eternity and necessity), or to analogously interpret the cognitive relation as a relation of finality.
Untenability of Interpreting it in Terms of Efficient Causality.

Something similar also holds for the relation of motivation to motivated volitional acts, which brings us back to Libet’s claims that positive voluntary acts would be mere causal effects of brain events. In the sphere of motivation, a real being, namely a free act, is in a certain way called into existence by something else, namely, the motivating object or its value and other forms of importance, but our acts are not only not caused by brain events that have nothing to do with the motivating objects but they are also not caused by these motivating objects alone but as well by the will of the subject who has to allow something – that in virtue of its value or attraction appeals to him, invites him, obliges him, or tends to seduce him – to become motive of his free act. The specific uniqueness of this relation lies in the fact that the object known does not from itself engender the intentional act related to it, as may to some extent (i.e., inasmuch as not also in knowledge moral attitudes and free acts play a crucial role) happen in the case of knowledge. Rather in a motivated free act the act is engendered both through the motivating object and through the mediation of the free spontaneity and self-determination of the subject. In fact, the motive becomes motive and co-cause of the free act only if the subject freely opens himself to the motivating power of the object. Moreover, besides the object, the free person herself remains a decisive cause of the act.

It is one of the reductionist tendencies in ethics and in philosophical anthropology, and a reductionist trap into which countless psychologists and brain scientists fall, to interpret the relation of motivation to voluntary acts in the light of efficient causality and in terms of the different motives being forces in a parallelogram of forces. Thus, it is maintained that the motivating object brings the motivated act causally into existence, via mere efficient cerebral or psychological causes. Such causal determinism does not do justice to any of the specifically personal causes: neither to the datum and cause of knowledge, nor to motivation, nor to the evident datum of free will, nor to any one of many others.

On the other hand, those philosophers and scientists who reject determinism cede easily to the opposite temptation and try to explain the free act purely in terms of an unmotivated arbitrary and senseless “pure spontaneity” of the subject. This is also the only (and an extremely impoverished) notion of free will I can detect in Libet, who studies purely arbitrary and unmotivated voluntary acts in which neither a motivating object, nor its importance have any foundational influence on the subject or provide reasons for his act. Libet’s “tests with free will” and his demand that his test persons perform entirely unplanned, unmotivated, spontaneous and hence entirely irrational movements and actions is no doubt based on a notion of free will that is divorced from any purpose, end, motive, etc. Thus, apparently Libet believes that any planning, and any motivating role of an object chosen for its meaning or value, would not be compatible with a truly free act. The whole design and order of his tests suggest that he recognizes as free only wholly unmotivated, unplanned, arbitrary, senseless and

54On the role of free will for knowledge and intellectual or value-blindness see Dietrich von Hildebrand 1982; see also Paola Premoli De Marchi 2002; see likewise Ciril Rütsche 2011.
purposeless volitional acts, the real existence of which (except in the case of the negative free will of vetoing) he denies. Libet investigates in his famous “empirical tests of free will” only this kind of acts, besides urges that have nothing to do with free acts, confusing wholly arbitrary free acts with the feeling an urge to move, which the persons in his tests are told to observe and thereupon to move. He thus combines with this caricature of a free act that he investigates the position of a determinism that traces human actions back to their alleged purely physiological causes. On an incomparably higher intellectual level also Kant assumes in his ethics, in order to avoid determinism and eudemonism, that the free act must not in any way be motivated by the object, because he interprets any motivating object outside the person as if it were a cause of human actions extrinsic to the free will and therefore incompatible with free will. He acknowledge, however, a decisive source of the meaning of human free acts which Libet wholly ignores: moral duty, the categorical imperative which in at least one of its formulations recognizes implicitly the high value and dignity of the person and thus, whatever one thinks of Kant’s separating the categorical imperative from any content and value, differs definitely and radically from the totally arbitrary free acts Libet investigates.

In reality, however, the motivating object or its motivating importance is certainly a decisive ground that brings about our acts, but those things that motivate our free acts cannot in any way on their own force alone be the cause of a free act. They can perhaps become causes and reasons of our intentional affective experiences by their own power, motivating these emotions of joy or of mourning in a way we cannot resist and that does not stand within our own power. But objects that motivate free acts can become causes or reasons for our free acts’ existence exclusively...


56See especially the ne of thfourth oe following eight versions of the „categorical imperative“ in Kant 1968b, II:

1. “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a moral law” (1. Form).
2. “Act as though the maxim of your action were by your will to become a universal law of nature” (2. Form., ibid., p. 45)
3. In the third formulation of the principle, Kant expresses the idea of “the will of every rational being as a will giving universal law” (ibid., p. 57); “Handle so, daß die Maxime deines Willens Grundlage jederzeit zugleich als Prinzip einer allgemeinen Gesetzgebung gelten könne.” Kant, 1968 a, § 7.
4. Formulation: “Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in another, always as an end and never as means only” (Foundation, cit., p. 54).
5. “The principle of every human will as giving universal laws in all its maxims” (ibid., 57)
6. “Act with reference to every rational being (whether yourself or another) so that it is an end in itself in your maxim” (ibid, p. 64)
7. “Act by a maxim which involves its own universal validity for every rational being” (ibid., p. 64).
through the mediation of the spontaneity of the free subject who can choose to let himself be motivated by entirely different kinds of potential motives: by objective goods that call upon him to do the good or to commit heroic deeds, or by subjective pleasures that seduce him to commit evil deeds, by the promise of harmless amusements or by highest goods in virtue of their sublime intrinsic value. Even less can the volitional act be explained, with Libet, through pure physiological efficient causes but must be instead take into account objects that possess some kind of attraction or promise pleasure, or by objective goods endowed with values that call for an appropriate value response. Thus, the motivating object is in an entirely new sense the cause or reason to act, which does not contradict, but presuppose freedom of the will. On the other hand, examining a free act entirely divorced from any reasons or motivating objects does not examine properly free will but sheer arbitrariness.

Only an understanding of the irreducibly new phenomenon of motivation can overcome these two opposite errors which have the same root: a complete misunderstanding of the kind of specifically personal form of reason and cause a motive is for human actions. The completely new relationship of the motivating object being the reason for a free act, a relation that defies any interpretation in terms of efficient causality, is possible only on the level of the person, because the object does not bring the act into existence by its own power alone but only through its being known and additionally only through the free acceptance and cooperation of the free spontaneity of the subject with the potentially motivating power of the object in its importance and value, to which the person has to speak an inner free “yes” in order that the potential motive be allowed to become an actual one and to co-cause her free act.

By investigating only arbitrary voluntary movements – carried out on the basis of feeling an undoubtedly brain-caused “urge” – Libet in the first place does not investigate properly speaking free acts and secondly entirely fails to understand the way in which a motivating object co-causes a free act and why this kind of reason for a free act is totally irreducible to, and incompatible with, brain causes producing the act. On these two grounds alone not only his interpretations of his tests turn out to be false, but these tests themselves turn out to be entirely inadequate to the scientific task they should perform, namely to study free acts in relation to brain events.

One could name many other relations, reasons and causes which play a role solely in the sphere of the person and are irreducible to efficient causes, and especially to efficient causes in the brain, but what has been said on the topic is enough for our purposes.

57 Compare the extraordinary analysis of three categories of importance, three fundamentally different points of view or “goods” which can motivate the Human will in Dietrich von Hildebrand 1978, ch.1=3; 17=18.

58 Among the other causal relationships which are not reducible to the four causes we find also the specifically personal relation of dependence and foundation which lies in reflection, where the act which is reflected upon and its dependence on its subject and its rational nature are the explanatory grounds for the possibility of reflection. There are many further specifically personal causes, not only causes of personal acts but also causality exerted by them. Think for
Conclusion

In the light of the preceding analyses we can comprehend the whole philosophical misery of Libet’s attempt to explain, or better to “explain away,” positive free acts in terms of mere physiological efficient causes in the brain. This attempt fails for many reasons:

1. Efficient causality cannot be properly understood without seeing its inherent relation to persons.
   
   1. Personal wills are a primary and superior form of efficient causes which entails the insight that they are essentially and not merely by degrees higher efficient causes than those encountered in nature or in the brain and therefore cannot be explained in terms of them.
   
   2. Only efficient causality exerted by the will of persons is properly speaking efficient causality instead of being a mere transmitter of causal efficacy derived from a preceding cause. Also for this reason it is efficient cause in a primary sense and to believe it caused by brain events caused by preceding ones reverses the actual order and hierarchy of causes.
   
   3. Persons as agents and as efficient causes are also necessarily presupposed and stand at the beginning of all non-personal efficient causes in the world of human science, culture, history etc. Other causes of art or culture or history, etc., besides persons, are only intermediary and go back to the free decisions, actions, and creativity of persons as their principal causes.
   
   4. Also in nature the innumerable efficient impersonal causes always relate us to preceding causes and thus form a series of causes that cannot go back infinitely, by way of an infinite regress, into an absurd and utterly inexplicably chain of non-personal and non-self-explicable efficient causes, but presuppose a beginning in a first cause that must be free: if that first cause did not act freely, the world would exist necessarily, which it does not; if it were to depend on a prior efficient cause, it would require the same ulterior explanation which a contingent world of causes requires and therefore not be the absolute beginning of efficient causality.
   
   5. Personal agency viz. free efficient causality alone is an inherently conscious form of causation.
   
   6. It alone is immediately experienced in its causal role.
   
   7. It alone can be known with indubitable evidence.
   
   8. By studying mere arbitrary voluntary movements, and these only inasmuch as they follow upon the sensation of urges to act, Libet ignores entirely the essential connection between efficient and final causality and the manifold connections between ends and persons as well as the uniquely personal forms of acting for the example of the specifically personal causal relations, in virtue of which the inner structure and logic of acts such as that of promising, brings into existence other beings, such as obligations and rights which proceed from promises. See Reinach 1953; 1989c; see also the English translation and commentary on this book in Reinach 1983: xxxiii-xxv; 1-142. See also Adolf Reinach 2012. Or think of the complex kinds of constitution of purely intentional objects and aspects in literary works of art, explored by R. Ingarden 1973.

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sake of ends without which human action and free will cannot be understood at all. Thus he studies a construct or shadow of free acts and not authentic free actions aimed at goods and ends.

9. Besides, his convincing defense of freely vetoing acts, as Eccles and Popper have clearly seen, logically entails positive free will and hence implicates Libet’s theory in a flagrant contradiction.

In the second part of this essay we explained why any such reductionist misunderstanding of rational knowledge and (according to Libet merely apparent) positive free will as mere effects of causes in the brain entirely fails to understand the essentially new causes and reasons which we encounter when confronted with the conscious and rational life of knowledge and will, or with the higher spiritual forms of human affectivity.

1. These causes and reasons of rational human acts that are situated within the realm of conscious intentional acts turned out to be entirely inexplicable in terms of efficient causes, and especially in terms of efficient causes in the brain. None of them admits being explained just in terms of those kinds of causes which we also encounter in nature (efficient and final, material and formal ones). They all are based on a meaningful conscious relation to intentional objects over against our conscious life and acts.

2. To explain the receptively transcendent cognitive acts, instead of recognizing their dependence on the reality and nature of the object known that is the intentional object of knowledge and engenders the content of knowledge, in terms of mere efficient causality constitutes a complete failure of understanding them; they would degenerate into irrational contents of consciousness caused by efficient causes in the brain that could not provide any explanation of their rationality and justification.

3. Therefore, Libet’s attempt to explain all human consciousness as effects of brain events destroys the whole basis of his own scientific pretentions to knowledge and to truth, claims which would be entirely invalidated if the results of his scientific investigations were nothing but effects of brain causes. In that case he could not know more than a computer whether the information fed into it and the software installed on it possessed any objective correspondence to reality, which alone, even if present, would in no way explain knowledge.

4. Free volitions, being intentionally directed at, and motivated by, the importance of states of affairs to be realized, are wholly different from urges to move which certainly allow being caused by some brain events.

5. Arbitrary volitions based on observing urges to act are deprived not only of ends and final causes but also lack meaningful motivation by objects which possess some kind of importance and value. These motivating objects are again causes of free acts in an entirely different manner, addressing themselves to the person and becoming motives and reasons for free acts only upon being freely accepted by the will. To explain them in terms of brain causes falsifies entirely the nature of this kind of exclusively personal causes and reasons.

6. The same holds true for many other specifically personal forms of causality.

Hence both Libet’s test results and interpretations of them and his tests themselves, which are not even based on a minimal understanding of what free will is,
how it differs from urges, how motivated free acts differ from arbitrary ones, how many free acts precede voluntary movement besides the only one of them considered by Libet, the decision to act, in no way prove the truth of the conclusion of his attempted but failing “disproof of positive free will,” which, quite apart from failing in the achievement Libet designed it for, reveals a profound misunderstanding and topsy-turvy conception of the order of causes and of the place causality exerted by persons occupies in it.

It would be a further task to explain the immense consequences which the result of this investigation possesses for ethics, philosophy of the person, penal law, religion etc. To have shown that Libet in no way has disproven that human persons can indeed act freely and, in so acting, truly initiate a chain of causal processes that are not caused by preceding brain events, allows us to face and to overcome fully the huge challenge Libet poses to free will: the results of his experiments do not disprove free will or justify only the free will of vetoing, but instead both his own test results, when interpreted in the light of logic and a more adequate philosophy of persons and causes, and their liberation from the many philosophical equivocations, limitations, and errors he associates with their interpretation confirm that we are endowed with free will and that any determinist theory that denies free will, whether compatibilist or incompatibilist, soft or hard, is wrong.

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THE DIVINE ORDINARY: WHAT THE WEST CAN LEARN FROM CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

J. Randall Groves*  

This paper is a work of what I call “critical comparativism.” I compare civilizations and try to use the results to suggest more critical ways of thinking about our own society. One of the benefits of comparativism is that it allows us to be critical of a society by referring to actual examples of alternative ways of doing or thinking found in other societies. It undercuts the charge of utopianism often laid on proponents of change in a given society. If we can point to actual, living examples of alternative practice, it is therefore uncontestable that it can be done, and that it is at least possible that it will turn out over time to be a good decision. One of the most distressing aspects of, for example, the health care debate in the U.S. has been the near absence of a comparative perspective. While Canada’s system was sometimes cited, generally inaccurately, in the debate, the public discussion was carried on as if no other society had ever tried to build or reform their health care system. It was this lack of comparativism that led to the relatively trite level of discussion and far from optimal result.

Along the same lines, I will suggest that Chinese philosophy can be of use to Westerners. Chinese philosophy can be of use because it can fill the gaps left by Western philosophy and religion. The gap in Western philosophy and religion is most likely a result of its transcendental character, which focuses on what Nietzsche called the “otherworldly.” Chinese religion and philosophy is more concerned with “this-worldliness” in the sense that it concerns itself more with the problems of dealing with this life. While Western religion tends to one’s fate in the afterlife, Chinese religion deals primarily with living ordinary life.

The problem with transcendence is as follows. While the West has engaged in many immensely fruitful investigations into transcendent metaphysical matters, the quest for the ultimacy tends to undermine concern for day to day living, the ordinary. But most of our time is spent on ordinary, mundane matters, and so a transcendent philosophy neglects much of life.

The transcendence that is so much a part of Western philosophy and religion is less of a concern to Chinese philosophy. Some believe transcendence is not present at all in Chinese philosophy.1 Both Confucianism and Daoism, with qualifications, offer non-transcendent philosophies of life. Buddhism, with its Indian origin, is a more transcendent philosophy and religion, but even Buddhism offers an approach that attends to some ordinary aspects of life. Buddhism, of course, recommends the elimination of the self, but it too is centered on living in the world. It addresses the cultivation of people in this world, even though its recommendation is non-attachment.

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1Hall, David, and Ames, Roger, Thinking from the Han, SUNY Press, 1998.

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But I will not discuss Buddhism further, both because of its Indian origins and because its philosophy is ambiguous with regard to immanence and transcendence. Common to Confucianism and Daoism, however, is a core concern with self-cultivation, which is a decidedly non-transcendental activity.

While there is great overlap between the immanence and transcendence distinctions and the ordinary and extraordinary, the overlap is not total. One could derive a philosophy of ordinary life from transcendental premises, but the orientation would always be otherworldly. The ultimate purpose would be a transcendental one even though the advice would be this-worldly. More likely, and what I see from Western philosophy and religion, is a “mundane” ordinary unrelated in any deep sense to the key premises of Western religion and philosophy. The ordinary would simply be mundane and practical, a matter of mere prudence. What I would like to explore is a different kind of “ordinary,” a “divine ordinary.” By “divine” ordinary I do not mean anything having to do with a divinity, a god or transcendent being, but a recognition of an orientation to the world that is deeply meaningful without any reference to a transcendent being or purpose. In my view, this is precisely what we can discern in both Confucianism and Daoism.

The first impression a Westerner has in reading Confucian philosophy and Chinese history is that of ceremoniousness. And Confucians are in fact well known for being very ceremonial. So we read in the Analects such advice as “In festive ceremonies it is better to be sparing than extravagant.” Ceremoniousness often regulates important occasions, but it also a matter of tending to “the simple things.” Things as simple and mundane as serving tea or arranging flowers can be elevated to an art. Ceremony makes simple things important and can even turn them into art forms. Even staying at a Ryokan in Japan gives the Westerner a sense of the art and ceremony of Confucian etiquette. To the Westerner this sounds like mere etiquette, and makes Confucians sound like “Miss Manners.” But Confucians simply do not make the distinction between etiquette and ethics. For Confucians, ethics begin with etiquette.

The Confucian elevation of etiquette to ethics often puzzles the Western student of Chinese philosophy. Confucians often seem to be concerned with mundane matters of life rather than the transcendent. Confucius writes, “On the day the Master wept he did not sing.” Or “He did not instruct while eating, nor did he continue to converse once he retired to bed.” Confucianism tells you how to live your home life, your aesthetic existence, your professional life and your public life in some detail while neglecting the transcendent matters of ultimate meaning. In the Analects it is written that the Master “did not discuss prodigies, feats of strength, disorderly conduct or the supernatural.” One cannot address the transcendent without discussing the

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supernatural, so Confucius is ruling out of court precisely what the Westerner thinks is so important.

Confucian etiquette is often derided as an unfortunate addendum to an otherwise sophisticated ethical philosophy. While some criticism is warranted, it is not always noticed that there is some sense in linking ethics and etiquette. Ethical conflicts sometimes arise precisely when etiquette breaks down. A breach of etiquette is often interpreted as a betrayal or a show of disrespect. Both betrayal and disrespect are immoral because they fail to give a person their due. They are ultimately matters of unfairness and certainly a breach of personal solidarity. Thus etiquette and morality become indelibly linked.

Etiquette is central to the Confucian ideal of “the Gentleman.” The Confucian ideal of the Gentleman is very “this-worldly.” While there are Western counterparts to the Confucian code of Gentlemanliness, such as in Victorian England, they do not play the constitutive role in their culture that Ren plays in Chinese culture. For Chinese philosophy, Gentlemanliness is absolutely central to living the good life and indeed, the cosmic order. For Confucius, any breach in etiquette can have social and cosmic consequences. If the emperor or even an ordinary person fails to live up to his duty then war, economic ruin, floods or earthquakes may result. Now it may be thought that the connection to the cosmic order signals a transcendent connection between Gentlemanliness and another world, but this would be to misunderstand Confucianism. For Confucianism, the cosmic order is intimately connected to the social and personal orders. The term “connected” may be misleading in this context. Just as yin and yang are not clearly distinct, but rather two intermingling sides of one reality, so the personal, social and cosmic orders are not really distinct from each other.

It is precisely this deep connection between the cosmic order and ordinary life that the Westerner finds inadequate. The reason the Westerner finds this inadequate is that the Westerner feels the Confucians have just not moved to the next level of religiosity, the transcendent. The Westerner feels that Confucians must not be very deep. This, of course, is a mistake. Confucianism is a very deep philosophy; it is simply a more immanent teaching. Being in the world is therefore the center of Confucianism. Being in the world requires attention to one’s relationships to others, hence the Confucian focus on the five relationships.

Confucius’ belief in the need to respect authority, both within the family and within the state is not foreign to the West, but it is something a reading of Confucius may help us to remember. I will focus on three areas, respect for parents, respect for academic authorities and respect for public officials. In each of these areas we see problems in the West, particularly the U.S., which could be alleviated by utilizing elements of Confucianism. However, I set aside some of the standard relationships such as husband-wife, elder and younger brother, and respect for elders. The reason I set these aside is that each of these relationships is different in the West than in traditional China such that Confucianism would not be able to get a good foothold. The women’s movement has radically altered our understanding of male-female relations in profound ways. In fact, the whole edifice of what forms relationships can take has been changed and is still “under construction.” We no longer assume a mix
of male and female. We no longer assume two to a relationship. We no longer assume monogamy. All these are negotiated, all of these are chosen. Beyond this realization is the realization that all structural relationships are processes rather than endpoints. We can never say “this is how the lesbian relationship should be conducted,” or “this is how a traditional male-female monogamous marriage must work.” So the West will never agree to formalize any of these relationships such that they can stand as something we can recommend adherence to. So how could Confucianism contribute anything here? Confucianism is probably of little help in this area where so much is in flux and a matter of preference.

It is interesting that even though China lived most of its history under Confucianism with its attendance to the elder and younger brother relationship, being brothers in the royal family, or any powerful family, was rather dangerous. That is no longer the case however, in either China or the West, so Confucian ideals here could be useful, but they are not that important to the social order. Sibling relationships are not as central to the functioning of a society as the other relationships.

Respect for elders, while helpful to the functioning of a civil society, is also not as central as the other relationships I discuss. It is prudent for a young person to respect adults because their greater number of years endows them with a wisdom the young have not had the opportunity to acquire. But this is a temporary deference, and probably should be. A forty year old should not automatically assume a fifty year old is wiser generally, and should certainly not assume the fifty year old is smarter on a particular subject. This assumes that what we want to respect is knowledge, and we shall see that respect for academic authority will provide most of what we want from respect for elders. Nevertheless, it still seems appropriate for wide differences in age to count for something.

Respect for leaders is very different in a democracy than in an Imperial order. First of all, public officials are regarded as public servants. Servants do not typically get deferred to. But here we may distinguish deference and respect. If one has a servant or subordinate of any kind, then while deference is not owed, we do say that the subordinate deserves respect. And it is here that the U.S. is failing and can learn from Confucianism. Confucianism argues for respect and deference to public officials. But public officials are held in very low esteem according to opinion polls, and we see public officials enduring character assassination on a daily basis. On the other hand, we must acknowledge that many public servants behave in despicable ways. How are we to maintain respect for a group of people who have so severely disappointed us? I believe we must try to show respect whenever possible, and to create a political system in which worthy people are encouraged to behave in an upstanding manner. The main reason Americans do not respect politicians is because so many times their decisions seem to be made for other than rational and moral reasons. But unless we think that this moment in history is characterized by a set of politicians who just happen to be morally deficient in some way, then there must be systematic reasons they fail. My own analysis of this phenomenon is that the quality of politicians in the U.S. is a function of the role of money in the electoral and legislative process. If the U.S. did more to insulate politicians from the influence of money the U.S. would probably have a different quality of politician. But if the U.S.
did manage to create a system in which rational and moral reasons would have more power in the deliberative process, then there would be good reasons to show politicians respect. I am not naïve about the prospects for this kind of reform, but it would provide us with a chance to add respect for our leaders to the other social glues that make society work.

But there is another aspect to this problem. The people need to realize that just because a politician disagrees with you, it does not mean they are corrupt. They may have what they consider to be good reasons for their positions. And personal failings, particularly in the area of personal relationships, should be differentiated from political corruption. Given the changes in our ideas of the possible romantic arrangements and the truth that the U.S. is undergoing a set of transformations in its understandings of these things, we should remove personal questions from the political process altogether.

Even more worrisome is the recent undermining of the authority of the academic world. In the West, and in the U.S. in particular, there is a concerted effort to question academic authority, primarily from the political right. A large part of the cause of this disrespect comes from the populace hearing academics argue points anathema to conservative outlooks. Evolution, global warming, anti-religious sentiment and so on leave the conservative antagonistic to academic authority. But this is a very dangerous attitude to take since the academic world (as a whole, not individual academics) is the only good arbiter of theoretical disputes. The academic world contains a system for rewarding good opinions and punishing bad ones that would be hard to replace if it were completely discredited. One should acknowledge the authorities in any field. This is a highly rational policy, and one that is under political attack in the U.S. The far right is active in undermining the authority of academics, scientists, government bureaucrats, elected leaders.

This is just one part of the coarsening of U.S. culture. Popular culture in the West is a cultural wasteland. Although some very good art gets produced now and then, the general trend is toward aesthetic degradation. Popular culture adheres to no aesthetic standards because there is no real connection between the two. Popular culture has a primarily economic function. It produces what people will buy. What people buy has little to do with aesthetics. This is because people have very little interest in aesthetic standards. Yes, there are groups of people who are very concerned with aesthetics, but these people are a small minority. Thus popular culture is a wasteland because people are largely uncultured. People are uncultured because there is no emphasis on self-cultivation.

And here we have another aspect of Confucianism from which the West could benefit. In fact, most of the Confucian approach to the ordinary is to be found in his doctrine of self-cultivation. The Confucian concept of self-cultivation is well-known to scholars of Chinese philosophy, but it is a notion that Americans have yet to really appreciate. Americans do, however, have a sense that Asians tend to me more academically oriented. This academic orientation is rooted in Confucian self-cultivation as well as centuries of focus on an examination system based on Confucian principles. Further, East Asian academic success in the West can be attributed directly to the Confucian emphasis on self-cultivation.
Attention to self-cultivation is the key Confucian notion that would enhance the
lives of Westerners. The Analects begin with “Is it not pleasant to learn with a
constant perseverance and application?” The Confucian gentleman is expected to
engage in self-improvement, particularly in the realm of cultural sophistication. The
gentleman is expected to educate themselves, but this self-education goes beyond the
acquisition of knowledge, it is a matter of changing one’s character for the better.
This self-education is the most important task of the gentleman after that of
maintaining proper relationships. It also something quite foreign to Westerners.
Westerners train for a job, a specialty. There is little sense of the need for well-
roundedness. Confucius said,” If you one day renovate yourself, do so from day to
day. Yea, let there be daily renovation.” For Westerners, self-cultivation is
something almost completely associated with educational institutions. The one
exception to the emphasis on specialization is therefore the undergraduate college
curriculum, but even there it is a constant battle to maintain a non-trivial core of
general education against those who would continually shrink until it is so small as to
be dispensable.

The emphasis on self-cultivation pretty much ends with a student’s
undergraduate education. Students are expected to take classes outside their own field
while undergraduates, but there is no cultural expectation that people should continue
self-cultivation once their college years are over. People may retrain or gain new
specialties, but there is no cultural injunction to continue to learn outside one’s own
field for the purpose of becoming a better person.

In the West we have the interesting but saddening phenomenon of people of
extreme sophistication in one specific field of knowledge showing incredible
ignorance in others. This is particularly troubling since these sorts of people tend to
believe that their expertise in their specialty gives them a special insight into all fields
of knowledge. One of the worst examples is that of businessmen who believe that
knowledge of business practices is the ideal training for any other sort of knowledge.
In fact, “the business model” tends to colonize all fields of study. How many times
have we heard that the best way to do something is to “run it like a business”? We see
this most often in politics, but it occurs in many fields. My own university became
enamored of the business practice of “downsizing” in order to increase efficiency
even though the net effect was simply to lose students for years. All this is able to
persist because of people’s pitiful knowledge and skill outside their single specialty.

Citizenship is another area where the lack of self-cultivation is detrimental. People in
democracies are asked to vote on all kinds of issues, but rarely do they take the time
to acquire any depth on what they are voting. What happens then is that perceived
self-interest becomes the sole guide to voting. I say “perceived self-interest” since
people often vote against their real self interests. Indeed, without self-cultivation and
the critical abilities that come with it people are easily deceived about their self-

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interests. This lack of sophistication also makes them easy prey for commercial and ideological interests to brainwash them to believe corporate or other special interests are really their own. In my view, that is precisely what happened with the recent Tea Party movement in the U.S.

Nor is there any understanding that self-cultivation is in any way beneficial to society. In fact, people who are cultivated are often derided for being elitist. There is no sense that we can all gain by the cultural enrichment of individuals. But at the same time we worry about the increasing coarsening of our culture. Should we be surprised that popular culture becomes ever more silly and crude when the people it is addressed to never get told that it is their duty to resist this kind of culture? Because Americans have no theory of self-cultivation American business tends to de-skill much of its labor. Because Americans understand this de-skilling they take little pride in their work. Nor do they enjoy it. Something like ninety percent of Americans hate their jobs. And they certainly are not very good at them. For Confucius, “the superior man in everything uses his utmost endeavors.” While this might be true for a certain percentage of Americans, it is certainly not true of the majority. Most workers are content to learn the basics of their jobs and leave it at that. The person waiting on a customer at Walmart is unlikely to know their store or the products in it any better than the customer.

Americans could also use rather more sophistication in the area of food. Confucius said, “There is no body but that eats and drinks. But there are few who can distinguish flavors.” The obesity epidemic in the U.S. is at least partly caused by the lack of self-cultivation in the area of food consumption. Americans want quick, high calorie, fat-filled and otherwise unhealthy foods. The whole concept of fast food is an affront to self-cultivation.

Why is there so little emphasis of self-cultivation in the West? In my view, it comes down to an over-emphasis on one of the two parts of ethics. Morality can be divided between the ethics of justice and the ethics of self-realization. The West has typically emphasized the ethics of justice while the East is more concerned with self-realization. Both cultures deal with justice and self-realization, but in much different degrees and at different times.

Just as important than the connection to justice is the simple claim that ordinary behavior should be ordered. Whether or not it tends to decrease the opportunities for unethical encounters between people, it may be the case that it is worthwhile to order one’s day to day activities. It may be beneficial to do mundane things in the same way every day to the point that they are almost unthinking. It saves one’s thoughts for more important matters. And if one doesn’t want to think at all, then one can just ride the pattern of one’s day with almost no effort.

There is some dispute over how we are to think about the Dao in Daoism. Some regard the Dao as a transcendental notion, while others think this is a misunderstanding of the Dao and that the Daoist Dao is immanent, a part of the world.

8Ibid.
rather than a separate entity. While there is much to be said for the transcendent interpretation, my own view is that the Dao is immanent. The key, however, for the purposes of this paper, is that the Dao is not “otherworldly.” The Dao is not thought of as something that is beyond ordinary life; rather, the Dao is immanent in it. Even though it may be impossible to describe, as the Dao de Qing indicates, that does not mean it is distinct from it. Daoism is an anti-transcendental mysticism. But whatever the proper interpretation of the Daoist Dao, Daoism does address living in this world, and it is this aspect that I will be exploring. In fact, I will only be considering a single passage from the Chuang Tzu, and I will be giving it a decidedly unmystical interpretation in order to make it useful to the Western mind.

Cook Ting:
Cook Ting was cutting up an ox for Lord Wen-hui. At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee - zip! zoop! He slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Ching-shou music.

"Ah, this is marvelous!" said Lord Wen-hui. "Imagine skill reaching such heights!"

Cook Ting laid down his knife and replied, "What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now - now I go at it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint.

"A good cook changes his knife once a year-because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month-because he hacks. I've had this knife of mine for nineteen years and I've cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there's plenty of room - more than enough for the blade to play about it. That's why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone.

"However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I'm doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until - flop! the whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there holding the knife and look all around me, completely satisfied and reluctant to move on, and then I wipe off the knife and put it away."

"Excellent!" said Lord Wen-hui. "I have heard the words of Cook Ting and learned how to care for life!"

This passage is one that can go a long way toward helping us live lives of both efficiency and aesthetic quality. It also shows us another way to live in accordance with the Dao that goes beyond living in correspondence with an already existing

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11[http://www.terebess.hu/english/chuangtzu.html#3](http://www.terebess.hu/english/chuangtzu.html#3)

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pattern of life. Instead, we can create a Dao through proper care and practice of everyday activities. I will be giving this passage a pragmatist interpretation that takes it out of the typically mystical Daoist context. This may be doing an interpretive injustice, but it will be a beneficial interpretive injustice since Americans and Europeans are unlikely to be interested in the more mystical aspects of the Dao. On the other hand, they may be open to the benefits of a secular pragmatist doctrine of mundane behavior that really does not conflict with the theological biases of Westerners.

Notice first that Cook Ting employed both knowledge and repetition to achieve his proper caring for life. He used knowledge of anatomy to guide his hand in the beginning, but after a long period of repetition was able to internalize this knowledge to the point that it almost did not even count as knowledge anymore. A comparable case would be the jazz musician, who begins by learning the theory of music and then repetitiously applies this knowledge until it becomes second nature. In fact, the term “second nature” is very appropriate, for the musician and Cook Ting are both creating another “nature” to which they then adhere. I take this as a major contribution of Chuang Tzu, namely, that the Dao we should attempt to be harmony with may be a harmony that we create rather than find already present in the world. Both Daoists and jazz musicians are often heard exhorting people to “stop thinking.” In my view, the best way to interpret this is to say it means we should get beyond thinking rather than merely stop thinking. I’ve always found the mystical and anti-intellectual tendencies of Daoism unpalatable anyway, and this way of interpreting the Cook Ting passage gives us want we need from Daoism without having to accept what we do not need, namely more mysticism.

In any case, this pattern is applicable to most behaviors. Most activities in life can be brought into this framework with great benefit. Many of the problems I listed earlier in this paper can be alleviated by simple adherence to this method, and life can become much easier and better with the application of the method. First of all, we could all become better at the things we do, both the ordinary things as well as the extraordinary.

Ordinary activities can become less burdensome and boring with adherence to the Cook Ting method. If we pattern those parts of our lives to maximize efficiency and then practice them to the point of effortlessness we make ordinary activities highly accurate and even aesthetically pleasing. One’s morning patterns can become a thing of beauty as implausible as that sounds. With set patterns one is less likely to forget things. And remembering almost does not come into the picture since if the pattern is internalized there is simply nothing to remember.

Westerners appreciate skill primarily in professional matters. We admire the professional athlete, but not the waitress who manages to handle several tables at the same time. We admire the Corporate CEO, but not the middle level manager who quickly overcomes each managerial problem that arises. There is little pride taken in the efficient and aesthetic operation of one’s duties unless one is engaged in a role that explicitly calls for high-level skill. In fact, there is almost the opposite attitude toward ordinary jobs. There is almost a cult of the “slacker.” But we all lose when we accept the cult of the slacker. Everything is more complicated. Everything takes
longer. And it is no surprise that slackers are not the happiest people in the world. In fact, I would argue that they, in a sense, are not in the world at all. They simply flail at the margins, complain and snicker. They end up accomplishing nothing for themselves, and they create more work and aggravation for the rest of us.

Although this paper is concerned primarily with the ordinary, the extraordinary things are equally amenable to the Cook Ting method. It is sometimes said that it takes 10,000 hours to acquire mastery of anything, and there is some truth to it. The musician who practices three hours a day for ten years will probably become a master if they utilize the available knowledge in the process. The athlete who does the same will also be successful.

Key conceptual relationships become clear with this method, namely, the relationship between creativity, knowledge and repetition. It is sometimes thought that creativity arises from some sort of mystical ability, that it comes out of nothing, ex nihilo. But this is a serious mistake that has plagued artists and musicians for years. Real creativity arises out of knowledge and repetition. The audience hears the jazz musician create sophisticated improvisations on the spot and comes to believe these are the result of some special genius. What they do not understand is that this performance is the result of thousands of hours of serious practice, and that this practice involved significant study and repetition. It is true, of course, that some skills come more quickly to some, but this does not mean that significant effort was not made in getting to the point of genius, or that significant study was not involved.

Some may find this pragmatist interpretation of the Dao unacceptable. It almost turns the Dao into a concept of optimality and therefore takes away the magic of the Dao. I plead guilty. In my view, optimality and the Dao are complementary. Whereas the Dao is typically understood in opposition to the logic of maximization, it may actually be quite compatible with it. The reason Daoism says to seek the low spot is that one encounters less strife there. But if we can lessen strife or contention by setting up a maximized process that encompasses all of society, not just those in the low spot, then we are all better off.

This way of interpreting the Cook Ting passage also makes Daoism less incompatible with Confucianism. Confucianism was the philosophy of the bureaucracy in East Asia for hundreds of years, and all the while it was opposed by Daoists who rebelled against the restrictions of bureaucracy. But if we take the Cook Ting passage to its logical conclusion, then this opposition could be mitigated. The bureaucrat does the little things that need to be done for the proper functioning of the state, and if they are done well we are all better off. This is another point the West would do well to learn. There is a deep distrust of bureaucracy in the developed countries of the West, particularly in the US. But it is simply realism to realize that bureaucracies are indispensable to a modern nation. Once we make that realization we can turn to streamlining and optimizing it. In a democracy this is difficult because of different fundamental values among the citizenry. This means one person’s optimization may not be another’s. But if we move down to mundane levels we may find more opportunity for agreement. If we are going to provide social security, then we should provide it in the most efficient way possible, and in a way that is sustainable. Let’s set that up for the long run and then leave it alone unless someone
has a plan to increase efficiency in a significant way. Separating the mundane from the contested is necessary to the rational operation of the state. Such a method will not eliminate political disagreement, but it may decrease the amount of irrationality that comes with political disagreement.

These, then, are the lessons from the East. Tend to our relationships, cultivate ourselves and create and follow the Dao. These three simple lessons would help the West solve many of its problems.
SIMILARITIES BEYOND DIFFERENCES: MILL’S UTILITARIANISM AND THE CONSEQUENTIALISM OF THE BHAGAVAD GITA

Rajesh C. Shukla

Abstract: It is often argued that the Gītā espouses the ideal of nishkām karma i.e. a disinterested performance of one’s moral obligations and is inherently incompatible with all kinds of consequentialism. In this paper, I challenge the above interpretation of the Gītā. I argue that even though nishkām karma plays an important role in the assessment of moral motivations in the Gītā, it is certainly not the only factor. On numerous occasions in the Gītā, we see lord Krishna paying serious attention to the worldly consequences and using them to convince Arjuna to fight an eminent war. I use Krishna’s insistence on consequences to support my claim that there is an alternative theory of moral motivations in the Gītā, and that this theory is much more sympathetic to utilitarian consequentialism. Accordingly, I conclude that both the Gītā and J. S. Mill have a sophisticated notion of moral agency and that their consequentialism is a mirror image of the same.

To begin with it seems extremely problematic to attribute any kind of consequentialism to the Bhagavad Gītā.¹ The Gītā is usually associated with the doctrine of nishkām karma which enunciates a non-attached performance of one’s moral obligations (Easwaran, 1985/2007, p. 54).² I intend to discuss the implications of nishkām karma in a moment but for now let me note its two most traditionally

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²In this paper I will be using Eknath Easwaran’s translation of the Bhagavad Gītā (Easwaran, 2007/1985). Henceforth as a matter of practice I shall keep the use of italics to minimum and not italicize the frequently used Hindi or Sanskrit terms in this paper.

Indeed the Gītā has been interpreted differently by different scholars – and to different effects. I wish to note two distinct yet often intermixed streams of thought in this context: spiritual, and political. On the one hand, some scholars (S. Radhakrishnan in particular) have emphasized the spiritual and philosophical intimacy of the Gītā with the Upanishads and compared it with the Kantian notion of duty, arguing that the Gītā is superior to Kant in that it does not simply provide freedom to its moral agent in the noumenal realm – as Kant does, but also in the phenomenal realm (Bayly, 2010, p. 289). On the other hand, many have also argued that the spiritual message of the Gītā cannot be construed in an abstract religious and metaphysical sense, and that it must be translated in the real life of an individual, including her political experiences. This politicized conception of the Gītā came to the front and center of the Indian National Movement in the nineteenth and twentieth century, and was, in its pure form, a source of much inspiration and strength to Mahatma Gandhi; however, opinions differ on its application in the writings of Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Shri Aurobindo (Chakrabarty and Majumdar, 2010, pp. 338-342). Both these interpretations shrug off the value of practical consequences in human affairs. This paper is a modest response to the above omission.
accepted outcomes. First, it is said that the doctrine of nishkām karma unequivocally upholds the sanctity of an individual’s intentions and requires her to perform her duties diligently without thinking about the phala or fruits of her actions (Radhakrishnan, 1948/2010, p. 151); and so by implication nishkām karma appears to reject the idea of all kinds of profits, rewards and consequences as the motivational ground for an individual’s conduct. Secondly, it is also held that the Gītā under the influence of the Sānkhaya, Yoga and Upanishadic traditions of Indian philosophical and religious thoughts takes a metaphysical view of ethical actions and views its moral agent as an individuated soul – or purusha, engaged in the process of samsāra or worldly attachments, and yet at the same time seeking her spiritual and moral perfection or moksha as well (Mackenzie, 2001, pp. 147-48). Thus in the above sense, the doctrine of nishkām karma – at least on its ‘traditional reading’ becomes synonymous with an individual’s spiritual transcendence of her temporal being.

Now I am not aware if Mill ever directly responded to the doctrine of nishkām karma as developed in the Bhagavad Gītā. However in his writings, Utilitarianism in particular, Mill appears to associate the traditional interpretation of nishkām karma that the consequences of an action are immaterial to its moral worth with Immanuel Kant and chides him for the same. Taking note of one aspect of Kant’s moral thought, which requires universalizability of all moral principles, Mill writes that “[Kant] fails, almost grotesquely, to show that there would be any contradiction, any logical (not to say physical) impossibility, in the adoption by all rational beings of the most outrageous immoral rules of conduct. All he shows is that the consequences of their universal adoption would be such as no one would choose to incur” (Mill, 1861/2002, p. 263). It is not surprising then that Mill believes that the moral worth of an action can only be measured in terms of produced consequences (Donner & Fumerton, 2009, pp. 15-16). As far as the Gītā’s metaphysical underpinning of ethics is concerned, it may be difficult again to gather Mill’s proper response. But it is obvious that Mill was an empiricist and that he was not terribly fond of unfounded metaphysical speculations. So it should be explicit by now that any comparison of Mill’s utilitarianism and consequentialism of the Bhagavad Gītā would require us to engage in fresh theoretical construction and insight. In what follows, I intend to argue that the differences between Mill’s thought and the Gītā are all too obvious in terms of their epistemological and methodological convictions and conclusions, but beneath their differences resides a possibility of convergence of their views. I shall employ three kinds of arguments to carry my conclusions. I wish to show in the first place that the traditional reading of nishkām karma captures only one aspect of the Gītā and leaves out some other equally important aspects, and that those aspects take consequences a

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1 I use the expression ‘traditional reading’ in a generic sense, placing under its rubric all interpretations that maintain that the Gītā demands an absolute detachment in a moral action. This reading can be associated in varying degree with various interpreters. In its most ideal form it is manifest in the writings of S. Radhakrishnan (Bayly, 2010, pp. 291-292), Eknath Easwaran and Mahatma Gandhi (Chakrabarty and Majumdar, 2010, pp. 351-352). Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Aurobindo Gosh are said to carry a somewhat problematic instances of the same reading (Chakrabarty and Majumdar, 2010, pp. 338-342).
lot more seriously and are largely in agreement with Mill’s consequentialism. Secondly, following some eminent Mill scholars such as Wendy Donner, Roger Crisp, and Fred Berger, I shall argue that Mill’s concept of self and moral action is much more profound than ordinarily admitted. Indeed I shall show that Mill’s conception of self provides adequately for the finer possibilities of social actions that the Gitā seeks out to establish. Finally, I shall use my findings to support my view that though Mill and the Gitā differ substantially on some fundamental issues, they also share significantly a common conception of human good.

I. The Concept of Self and Moral Action in the Gitā

Let me note some key suppositions that the Gitā uses time and again to win over its readers. In the first place, the Gitā believes that all realities can be divided into two types: the phenomenal and the transcendental (Gitā 7: 3-7). The phenomenal reality, according to the Gitā, is constituted by an amalgamation of the three guṇas (elements) and is conditioned māyā or pure ignorance (Gitā 14: 5-8). The transcendental reality on the other hand consists of the pure spirit or Brahman and exists on its own without any external or material support (Gitā 7: 12 & 24-26). Furthermore, the Gitā also subdivides the phenomenal reality broadly into two types: the conscious and the unconscious, the para and the aparā, and appears to place all living beings, especially humans, in the first category, and the rest of material existence in the second (Gitā 7: 6-9; Radhakrishnan, 2010, p. 461). And finally, the Gitā makes an effort to bridge the gap between the phenomenal and transcendental reality by holding that the conscious parts of phenomenal reality or the jivas carry with them an elemental approximation of the transcendental reality such that they are capable of realizing Brahman by removing the veil of māyā and breaking the yoke of three guṇas (Gitā 8: 3-4). Indeed the above realization of Brahman or the supreme spiritual reality appears to constitute the ultimate goal of all moral actions in the Gitā.

Thus understood the moral agent of the Gitā turns out to be a composite entity, possessing three guṇas/elements (Easwaran, 1985/2007, p. 222). These elements are: sattva, rajas, and tamas (Gitā 14: 5). It is indeed debatable if these elements can be adequately rendered into English, but we should not be far too off in our characterization if we describe them respectively as purity or pure thought, energy or action, and inertia or total indifference. Each of these elements signifies a particular kind of life and lifestyle and is compatible with a specific kind of moral personality. Moreover though all these elements are found simultaneously in each human being, they cannot operate in equality. That is to say, in order to express itself, an element must overcome the other two. When sattva dominates rajas and tamas, an individual acts in thoughtful manner in accordance with the principles of dharma, follows scriptures and respects rīta or the moral order. And when the rajas supersedes sattva and tamas, one acts in an energetic and passionate way; but such actions may or may not be good depending upon the objects of their pursuit. Unlike a sattvic person, a rajasic person does not always strive for moral and spiritual goodness – well sometimes she does and sometimes she does not. However, unlike a tāmasic person, a rajasic person is never morally sluggish, idle and indifferent. Note that even though
the three *gunas* are radically different from each other in their nature and character, taken together they constitute the overall existential fiber of human beings (Gitā 14: 5-8). Interestingly the Gitā also maintains that the three *gunas* dominate separately not only in three different kinds of people but sometimes in the same person on different occasions. In other words, it is possible that an individual acts in a *sattvic* manner on one occasion, *rajasic* on another and *tamasic* on the third. Eknath Easwaran remarks: “The same individual will have times when he is bursting with energy and times when inertia descends and paralyzes his will, times when he is thoughtful and other times when he is moving so fast that he never notices those around him. The person is the same; he is simply experiencing the play of gunas” (Easwaran, 1985/2007, p. 46).

Accordingly, the Gitā recognizes that different human beings exhibit different moral and spiritual properties on different occasions and that a reasonable evaluation of their conduct must require an adequate appreciation of their mental and emotional states, the difficulties that they face in life and the circumstances that shape their responses (Gitā 14: 11-15). To state it in another way, we have it on the doctrine of gunas that our ethical considerations must not simply insist on a perfect moral rule such as the strength of character, which is undoubtedly required by dharma, but also account for the weaknesses that arise out of human nature itself due to the play of gunas. And in this sense, the Gitā shows tremendous compassion and care for its moral agents, encouraging them to pursue their perfections and remaining forgiving even when they fail to respond. In the Gitā, we see on numerous occasions that Arjuna remains skeptical and unconvinced by Krishna’s suggestions but he is hardly ever chastised for his weaknesses. Krishna recognizes the depth and dilemma of Arjuna’s soul and seeks out to remove his worries and confusions in a sympathetic way (Gitā 6: 40). He reminds Arjuna of their previous associations and friendships, and encourages him again and again to grasp the true nature of his soul and being. Eknath Easwaran captures the above sympathetic aspect of human perfection in the Gitā thus: “The gunas form the basis of the most compassionate account of human nature I have come across in any philosophy or psychology, East or West. They not only explain differences in character; they describe the basic forces of personality and allow the possibility of reshaping ourselves after a higher ideal” (Easwaran, 1985/2007, p. 46).

The higher ideal that Eknath Easwaran is alluding to is explained in the Gitā as the uncovering of true nature of individual self and its relation with the Ultimate spiritual reality or Brahman. But how is it done? Or more precisely how does Arjuna realize his true nature or self and his relation with Brahman? It is precisely in this context that the doctrine of nishkām karma unfolds. Krishna tells Arjuna: “You have a right to work, but never to the fruit of work. You should never engage in action for the sake of reward, nor should you long for inaction. Perform work in this world, Arjuna, as a man established within himself – without selfish attachments, and alike in success and defeat. For yoga is perfect evenness of mind” (Gitā 2: 47-48).

The traditional interpretations of the above passage have taken it to mean as an exhortation of a non-attached performance of one’s duties, which it surely implies in some ways. In addition to this, the traditional interpreters have also conflated their

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reading as the only authentic representation of the Gitā. This has occurred in two main ways: historical, and allegorical. On an historical level, the detached actions performed by an individual are said to have no negative consequences for his karmic cycle. As early as June 15, 1897, Tilak used this justification to make sense of Shivaji’s actions in association with Afzal Khan. He argued that the detached Shivaji could not be blamed for his actions because “he murdered Afzal Khan for the good of others…” (Chakrabarty and Majumdar, 2010, p. 340). On an allegorical level, the Gitā found its strongest champion in Gandhi. Against the historicity of all moral theaters, Gandhi argued that the primary fight between good and evil, violence and non-violence, has to be waged at the level of the inner self (Sinha, 2010, pp. 310-311). The reasoning behind the historical as well as allegorical position seems to be quite straightforward. They insist that there are two main ways to perform one’s duties: an attached way, where an individual wants to do something for the sake of some outcome/reward or moha, and an unattached way, when an individual does her duties for the sake of duties alone and not for any selfish interest (Radhakrishnan, 1923/2008, p. 487). The Gitā, traditional interpreters claim, approves only an unattached performance of one’s duties. On the face of it, we cannot deny that the traditional interpretation looks attractive in more than one way.

First, the traditional reading employs nishkām karma to transcend the barriers imposed by world and its other phenomenal derivatives. The world is a corollary of three gunas. The gunas themselves are the manifestations of prakriti (material causation) which is the fundamental force behind creation. As a matter of fact, the Gitā, much like the Sāmkhya school of Indian philosophy, maintains that prakriti starts the process of worldly creation by inducing purusha (spiritual agent) and luring it under the string of gunas. In this metaphysical sense, the gunas are said to constitute the genesis of soul’s individuation in the form of an ego as well as a mortal being: “The gunas constitute the triple cord of bondage. So long as we are subject to them we have to wonder in the circuit of existence. Freedom is deliverance from the gunas” (Radhakrishnan, 1923/2008, p. 451). The nishkām karma is essentially meant to help us break this cycle of gunas.

An individual’s attachment to the consequences, according to the Gitā, is another name for her attachment to the gunas. More clearly, the things that we desire in life, the goals that we want to achieve, the projects that are so dear to our hearts are all a subtle and sophisticated form of three gunas, and that by themselves they have no existential or moral standing. Now the gunas, we have noted earlier, spring from prakriti while she (prakriti) attracts the purusha or pure individual soul and starts the process of creation. But neither the gunas nor prakriti is truly real, they both are a shadow-image of Brahman. Likewise the captivated purusha or soul lacks true reality and certitude. For its existential import, purusha too finally depends upon the Brahman. Indeed Krishna raises the stakes in the Gitā: “whosoever realizes the true nature of Purusha, Prakriti, and the Gunas, whatever path he or she may follow, is not born again” (Gitā 13: 23). A withdrawal or nivritti from the worldly attachments and also from the consequences of one’s actions is a necessary first step towards the realization of the Brahman (Radhakrishnan, 1923/2008, pp. 487-489).
Next, the Gitā’s call for a non-attached performance of one’s duties by overcoming the consequentialist considerations appears to gravitate around its unconditional theism. The Gitā believes in the existence of a loving god, but unlike some other theistic conceptions of god, the god that the Gitā champions is an integral part of the material world – not in the sense of an actual participant but in the sense of a witness (Gitā 7: 12-15). Moreover, the Gitā depicts a truly human god with magnificent divine characteristics (Gitā 7: 8-9). Krishna approaches Arjuna as a sakha or friend, literally (Gitā 2: 10-13 & 11: 41-42). It may be puzzling to many how the creator of the universe can be friends with us mortals in any real and potent sense; but this is not so for the Gitā (Gitā 11: 41-42). The Atman and Brahman, the self and God, according to the Advait Vedantins are the two sides of the same reality and their difference is caused by māyā. The Gitā represents the same Advaitic spirituality and philosophy. Radhakrishnan writes: “A man bound up with gunas is a jivatma, or individual soul; when freed from them, he is paramātma, or supreme soul” (Radhakrishnan, 1923/2008, p. 470).

In order to realize the parmātmāhood or one’s true spiritual nature a jiva must realize the limits of phenomenal world (Gitā 2: 14-15). In other words, as an individual I must understand that even though I am born with capacities to work, I have no ultimate control over the consequences (Gitā 3: 10-12). More often than not this lack of control over consequences causes problems in the utilitarian ethics. But in the Gitā, under the law of karma, lord Krishna himself assumes the responsibility of determining the outcomes of an individual’s actions. He categorically states that if an individual follows her dharma and acts according to her svabhāva (nature), she will descend to heaven and realize a pure communion with Brahman (Gitā 2: 31-33, 3: 35), or moksha. Indeed the traditional interpreters of the Gitā take the above ideal seriously and view all moral actions in the same spiritual context. However their reading of the Gitā can be challenged. D. C. Mathur writes:

…It is to be recognized that viewing every moral action in the context of the ultimate end of Moksha undermines the autonomy of moral action and subordinates it to a metaphysical precommitment. In such a case concrete situations cannot be evaluated and assessed in terms of the problems they arise but are lifted out of their concrete contexts into the haze of metaphysical doctrines. This can be used to justify all kinds of status quo and obscurantist actions (Mathur, 1974, p. 35).

To some extent, I share Mathur’s concerns. He is right in suggesting that too much preoccupation with metaphysical precommitments can easily undermine the autonomy of an individual’s moral actions. Furthermore, it is equally true that such precommitments can sometimes be used to justify oppressing social structures that have no proper justification on rational grounds. In this context, we are easily reminded of the degeneration of the Gitā’s ideal of svabhāva (acting according to one’s nature) and svadharma (acting according to one’s station in society) into a corrupt caste system in Indian society. It is my thinking, however, that the Gitā forwards a series of metaphysical principles, which can help us grapple with the dynamic nature of the world that we live in and the realities that surround us. To state

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this more clearly, metaphysical precommitments cannot detain an individual beyond a certain point unless she turns them into personal prejudices. So I think that it should be possible to challenge the traditional reading of nishkām karma without raising issues with the sanctity of moksha or diminishing one’s trust in a loving god. I wish to note two arguments to the same effect.

In the chapter two of the Gitā, just before laying down the doctrine of nishkām karma, Krishna offers a strong consequentialist argument to convince Arjuna to follow his dharma as a warrior and to fight the good fight if he wants to avoid the consequences that would ensue due to his failure to do his duty. He says: “The story of your dishonor will be repeated endlessly: and for a man of honor, dishonor is worse than death. These brave warriors will think you have withdrawn from battle out of fear, and those who formerly esteem you will treat you with disrespect. Your enemies will ridicule your strength and say things that should not be said. What could be more painful than this?” (Gitā 2: 34-36). In addition Krishna also reminds Arjuna of a potentially win-win situation if he fights the war: “Death means the attainment of heaven; victory means the enjoyment of the earth. Therefore, rise up, Arjuna, resolved to fight!” (Gitā 2: 37). These passages show that Krishna is not shy of employing consequentialist considerations if they can help him motivate Arjuna to assume his moral and religious responsibilities.

Another argument which has a significant consequentialistic overtones and which runs through entire Gitā is expressed in the form of a continuous emphasis on the welfare of all beings. Or to put this thought in the utilitarian terminology the greatest happiness of the greatest number of sentient beings appears to be the stated ideal of the Gitā – both on the empirical as well as transcendental level. Additionally, the Gitā goes a step further than the utilitarians and removes the possibility of any real clash of interests between two good people by pointing out that all such clashes emerge out of a selfish consciousness and that they have no place in an individual’s refined ethical conduct: “They live in wisdom who see themselves in all and all in themselves, who have renounced every selfish desire and sense craving tormenting the heart” (Gitā 2: 55). Thus according to the Gitā, an individual’s selfish attachments diminish her soul and place it the spell of māyā and three gunas. Finally, such attachments constitute a serious obstacle to an individual’s pursuit of moksha.

If my interpretation of the Gitā is plausible then it would follow that the Gitā does not ignore the value of consequences in ethical considerations. Instead it puts them on a firmer foundation by guarding against the attachments that often frustrate the practice of an individual’s moral principles: “Throughout the 16th – 19th centuries,…Indian philosophers continued to engage with the Gitā. What is certainly very clear is that, notwithstanding the popular notion of the Gitā as a text that above all embodies the idea of nishkām karma, it was well understood that the Gitā lent itself to more complex interpretations”. And so it may no longer be persuasive to say that the doctrine of nishkām karma relieves us completely of all consequential considerations – indeed that would be a thin characterization of both karma yoga and consequentialism. A nishkām karma yogi is bound to be concerned with the outcomes

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of her actions as long as she occupies a physical body and goes through the process of human life. But she approaches these consequences in the spirit of peace, equanimity, fellowship and grace. Consequences matter to her, like they matter to others, but they do not bother her, the way they bother others. D. C. Mathur rightly observes: “Therefore a more sensible and fruitful interpretation of nishkām karma would be to hold that while we should be firmly committed to achieve the goal after a rational assessment of the situation, we should not be so egoistically involved in the issue as to calculate what, in terms of pleasure or pain, prosperity or otherwise, will be its likely effect on our personal fortunes” (Mathur, 1974, p. 38).

II. Mill and His Utilitarian Morality

In the previous section, I argued that though the three gunas give an expression to an individual’s natural propensities, they fail to capture her spiritual and moral being. According to the Gitā, the highest spiritual and moral perfections can only be obtained by transcending the barriers of the natural sphere (Gitā 13: 22-23). Unlike the Gitā, Mill does not draw any such distinctions between an individual’s natural and moral ends (Mill, 1861/2002, p. 234). He believes that all such distinctions make an arbitrary division between an individual’s happiness and her moral pursuits, and leave us with a one-sided view human nature and personality (Mill, 1861/2002, pp. 235-236). Moreover by removing the consequences from the realm of our ethical considerations, they make our actions empty – lacking in rational justification and emotional fulfillment. As a moral agent, I am not allowed to calculate the possible outcomes of my actions, no matter how hard I strive for a good moral conduct. I must prioritize the normative aspects of my being over all natural considerations. Mill questions this call for prioritization of one aspect over the other and contends that upon examination the so called moral ends turn out to be nothing more than a disguised form of our natural ends. Accordingly, for Mill, the pursuit of happiness alone constitutes the crucial vista of utilitarian self and morality:

The creed which accepts the foundation of morals ‘utility’ or the ‘greatest happiness principle’ holds that actions are right in portion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to promote the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure” (Mill, 1861/2002, p. 239).

Mill is laying down two most fundamental requirements of the utilitarian morality. First, Mill recognizes that human beings have an inherent propensity for happiness and an inherent aversion for pain. That is to say, they like the experiences which are pleasurable and dislike the experiences which are painful. Mill also believes that pleasure is intrinsically good and pain intrinsically bad and that our moral principles ought to confirm to this truth. Secondly, even though Mill appears to emphasize pleasure and pain as two moral categories, he is not a straight forward hedonist. It is almost a settled fact in Mill scholarship that Mill’s insistence on pleasure and pain is much more refined than the known shades of hedonism (Crisp, 1997/2006, pp. 26-28). Unlike a total hedonist, Mill is not overly preoccupied with an individual’s personal
gratifications of pleasure and avoidance of pain. He holds that on moral grounds an individual must be able to rise above her personal considerations of pleasure and pain and act in favor of the maximization of overall utility (Mill, 1861/2002, pp. 244-245). But this moral obligation to the maximization of utility raises additional questions: Why should I desire happiness and not some other moral good? And why should I act in favor of the greater utility and not my own interests? Or why should I sacrifice my happiness for the happiness of others? Mill has no satisfactory answer to the above questions within the framework of utilitarianism – never mind his most extravagant argument that since we desire happiness, it becomes desirable (Moore, 1903/2005, pp. 67-69). This gap in argumentation has caused much difficulty to Mill’s interpreters, and some have even gone on to suggest that “Mill is after all an intuitionist” (Crisp, 1997/2006, p. 82) and that “the debate between him and his opponents was ultimately about not intuitionism itself but which intuitions we should accept” (Crisp, 1997/2006, p. 83).

Other attempts have also been made to bridge the distance between Mill’s idea of general human welfare and an individual’s selfish pursuits, which utilitarian moral theory appears to entail at first glance. It has been suggested, for instance, that Mill’s theoretical-moral framework has effective ethical mechanisms to deal with such selfish deviations. Indeed in his Utilitarianism as well as other works, Mill puts an extraordinary weight on the social elements of human life (Mill, 1861/2002, p. 287). He argues that these elements are found in virtually every human being who is brought up under right conditions and that they can be developed through one’s associations with other human beings. These elements include an individual’s sense of fellowship and sympathy with other fellow beings, her strength of character and integrity, and finally her commitment to virtues and common good. He remarks: “Genuine private affections and a sincere interest in the public good are possible, even though in unequal degrees, to every rightly brought up human being. In a world in which there is so much to interest, so much to enjoy, and so much also to correct and improve, everyone who has this moderate amount of moral and intellectual requisites is capable of an existence which may be called enviable” (Mill, 1861/2002, p. 43). In short, Mill seems convinced that it is possible to cultivate the qualities that are required to synch the difference between an individual’s public and private welfare.

In her book The Liberal Self: John Stuart Mill’s Moral and Political Philosophy, Wendy Donner has argued that there are three aspects to Mill’s idea of human development and that their proper understanding and appreciation is essential to resolving the difference between an individual’s personal welfare and her commitment to overall social good. These aspects are: affective, intellectual and moral. Affective development is the most fundamental kind of development. It deals with the development of an individual’s feelings, emotions and other psychological qualities. Affective development starts taking shape very early on in one’s life and matures with time. Moreover, affective development helps us acquire the capacities that render an experience pleasant or unpleasant, and desirable or undesirable, on the most fundamental lever of her existence, without any explicit cognitive or moral intervention. Donner writes: “Affective development enlarges the feelings and
generally teaches students to respond emotionally to appropriate objects” (Donner, 1991, p. 97).

Intellectual development is primarily concerned with the improvement of mental capacities of an individual. It sharpens her cognitive capacities for abstract thinking and enhances her understanding of theoretically complex matters requiring serious reasoning and deliberation. On a more accessible level, intellectual development provides us with complex cognitive tools that are required in the differentiation of various kinds of pleasures, or more specifically in the separation of qualitative pleasures form quantitative pleasures. Roger Crisp elucidates this issue thus: “Mill’s utilitarianism is intended partly as a guide to how to live. Living involves making choices, often between one individual instance of a kind of pleasure and an instance of another kind” (Crisp, 1997/2006, p. 39). Moreover, the two kinds of pleasures are often laced together and hard to distinguish. Hence, one must possess higher intellectual orientations to determine the precise content of each possibility and experience in life.

Moral development teaches us to take pleasure in the good and well-being of others (Donner, 1991, p. 112). A morally cultivated individual looks at her desires and pursuits form an educated standpoint and in the totality of their social context. She reflects a spontaneous inclination to contribute to the welfare of other beings and is always ready to help those who need her help. In addition, she also exhibits genuine propensities for fellowship and nobility, such that her conduct remains in agreement with social virtues and inspires confidence among others, by motivating them to act in a like manner. Fred Berger sums up this aspect of Mill’s thought succinctly: “Mill held that it is a part of human nature that we sympathize with others – take pleasure in their pleasure and feel pain at the thought of their pain” (Berger, 1984, p. 19).

If Fred Berger’s characterization of Mill’s thought is correct – and I think that it is, then Mill reaches very close to the concept of moral action propounded in the Gitā and some other Hindu texts as well. The Gitā explicitly holds that an individual who works for the welfare of other beings demonstrates the qualities of a sattvic moral agent and is dear to God (Gitā 3: 19-20). In the next section, I will argue that Mill’s consequentialism must be understood in the light of his overall moral thought and that his idea of moral agency constitutes the core of his consequentialism.

III. Consequentialism in Mill and the Gitā

Consequentialism, as a theory of moral evaluation of an individual’s conduct, maintains that the normative properties that make an action morally right or wrong, desirable or undesirable, are the functions of the consequences that the performed action accrues. That is to say, if the consequences of an action are good, the action is right, and if the consequences are bad, the action is held wrong. In the Western moral tradition, consequentialism has often been contrasted with deontology, which claims that the normative properties which make an action desirable or undesirable, right or wrong depend exclusively upon the intentional state of the moral agent (Kant, 2001, 3:393, 4:401, and 4:414). Accordingly, deontology claims that if the motivation leading to the performance of an action is good, the action is right; and if the
motivation is questionable, the action is wrong. Mill is a consequentialist in the above sense of the term.

However in recent years, we have seen that the Mill scholars are extremely divided on the proper characterization of Mill’s consequentialism. Specifically, they draw a distinction between two kinds of consequentialism, act-consequentialism and rule-consequentialism, and differ on Mill’s theoretical position on the above issue. I shall use Wendy Donner’s characterization of the act and rule utilitarianism to advance my argument in this context. In her recently co-authored work *Mill* she writes:

Act-utilitarians claim that we decide what is morally right or wrong by examining the consequences of performing a particular act in a particular situation or set of circumstances. This employs a case-by-case methodology to determine right action and moral obligation….Rule-utilitarians claim that moral agents perform or fulfill their obligations by following general moral rules, and these rules are themselves justified moral rules (Donner & Fumerton, 2009, pp. 45-46).

The act-utilitarian interpretations of Mill rely substantially on his unqualified emphasis on the principle of utility. The principle of utility, they contend, is the only legitimate guide of moral action in Mill’s thought and that if a moral agent wants to stay true to Mill’s original vision then she must always perform her actions in such a way that they lead to the best possible maximization of general happiness. Note that the act-utilitarians are not necessarily opposed to all moral rules under all circumstances. On the contrary, they agree that sometimes following a moral rule can be the safest way to maximize general happiness and that on all such occasions the moral rules should be followed, they maintain. Indeed the act-utilitarians are very cognizant of Mill approval of the secondary principles of moral conduct, along with his principle of utility. So their opposition to the moral rules has to be seen not as a total rejection of all moral rules but the *inviolable sanctity* of such rules only. Simply put, an act utilitarian is happy to follow a moral rule if it serves her moral purpose, that is, maximization of utility, and equally happy to abandon such rules if they do not serve her moral goal. Richard Fumerton associates Mill with the act-utilitarians in the following manner: “[Mill] doesn’t think rightness and wrongness are defined by rules. Rather he thinks that rightness and wrongness are a function of long-term consequences of individual acts in particular settings” (Donner & Fumerton, 2009, p. 190).

The rule-utilitarians are critical of the case-by-case approach moral deliberation adopted by the act-utilitarians and argue that such deliberations will in the long run undermine, not increase, the prospects of utility. They contend that in absence of established moral rules or conventions, a moral agent will face an uphill deliberative task while making her decisions. She will have no moral reference point that she can internalize in her day to day life. Moreover, the act-utilitarians do not help the situation by saying that such an agent can follow moral rules as long as they do not compromise the maximization of utility. On the one hand, such prescriptions intensify an individual’s deliberative confusions; and on the other hand, they also weaken her
trust in the moral rules she is supposed to follow. In addition, the rule-utilitarians also remind us that such prescriptions regarding ad-hoc rule following are not in the spirit of Mill’s moral theory. They insert that Mill maintains that our social and moral principles do not arise in vacuum. Such principles have a context. They emerge after years of toil and experimentation, trial and error, and as such they deserve to be respected. Mill writes in Blakey’s *History of Moral Science*:

> The real character of any man’s ethical system depends not on his first and fundamental principle, which is of necessity so general as to be rarely susceptible of an immediate application to practice, but upon the nature of those secondary and intermediate maxims, *vera illa media axiomata*, in which, as Bacon observes, real wisdom resides” (Mill cited in Crisp, 1997/2006, p. 10).

Some commentators have also tried to bolster the rule-utilitarian interpretations of Mill by alluding to Mill’s discussion of the arts of life (Donner & Fumerton, 2009, pp. 36-45). They argue that there are three aspects to Mill’s arts of life, namely, Morality, Prudence or Policy, and Aesthetics. Each of these aspects reflects a different kind of priority in life and should not be allowed to meddle with other. It is also suggested that Mill draws clear limits to moral actions and considerations and that the act-utilitarians are guilty of violating those limits by requiring their moral agents to always promote utility, no matter what the circumstances. For instance, it is held that the aesthetic experience of watching a beautiful painting has some uniqueness attached to it and that the act-utilitarians are wrong in insisting on the possible conversion of all such experiences in the realm of morality. However, the difficulty with this interpretation is that it takes Mill’s distinct characterization of three domains of arts of life, turns them into separate domains, and treats each of them as sacred in itself such that no exchange is allowed among them. And Mill is partly to be blamed for this interpretive confusion. On one occasion he appears to expound the distinct autonomous nature of these domains; but on another occasion he appears to quickly reinforce the overall supremacy of the utilitarian principle. And on both occasions he fails to draw a clear line of difference in his respective positions and to explain why that is so. This omission has caused tension in Mill’s interpretation. Roger Crisp remarks:

> Mill believes that the only valuable thing in the world is happiness or pleasure (this is part of the point of chapter 4 of *Utilitarianism*), and he is thus forced to conclude that practical disputes in the department of ‘Aesthetics’ are ultimately to be resolved in terms of human happiness, rather than purely aesthetic values such as beauty. This reductive welfarism also results in his distinctions between departments in the ‘Arts of Life’ appearing somewhat vague and artificial (Crisp, 1997/2006, p. 122).

Both the act-utilitarian and rule-utilitarian interpretations of Mill, I think, capture two different aspects of his moral thought. Neither of them provides us with a satisfactory account of his views nor his position on consequentialism. To be sure, Mill’s moral
thought appears to have affinities with the act as well as the rule utilitarianism, without being susceptible to their shortcomings. Unlike the act-utilitarians, Mill does not seem easily ready to dispense with the established moral rules or social sanctity associated with them. Against the rule-utilitarians, Mill holds that the secondary principles of morality are just that, secondary, and that they must not be conflated to another level.

It seems to me that we cannot quite resolve the questions concerning the precise nature of Mill’s consequentialism without fully accounting for the conception of his moral agent or appropriator of the consequences. Recall that I have argued earlier, along with Wendy Donner and Fred Berger, that Mill develops a rich and profound conception of a moral agent. His moral agent truly recognizes the value and sanctity of human life and remains committed to promoting the welfare of all sentient beings (Mill, 1861/2002, p. 245). This promotion of the welfare others and a sense of sympathy/empathy with others is critical to Mill’s theory of moral development. By implication then Mill’s moral agent has some conventional moral rules deposited in her heart – including, thou shall not kill or lie; and yet it can be said on legitimate grounds that she should be able to rise to the occasion when faced with horrific consequences (Mill, 1861/2002, pp. 253-259). In other words, Mill’s moral agent is neither completely rule oriented nor has a rigid case-by-case approach to her decision making. She understands the implications of both the approaches, remains open to other possibilities too, and thereby adopts a very prudential approach in her decision-making. Hence, my suggestion that we categorize Mill’s moral theory not as an act consequentialism or rule consequentialism but as a form of prudential consequentialism.

Keeping Mill’s prudential consequentialism in mind, we can now proceed with our enquiry regarding the Bhagavad Gītā’s consequentialistic implications. In the first chapter of the Gītā, Arjuna makes a series of arguments to avoid the looming war. He tells lord Krishna, among other things, that “the sons of Dhritarashtra are related to us; therefore, we should not kill them. How can we gain happiness by killing members of own family?” (Gītā 1: 37). In the verse 42 of the same chapter, we also find Arjuna proclaiming that the war will lead to social chaos. Indeed Arjuna is convinced that war will cause a destruction of family values and disruption in the spiritual evolution of the society; and so he wants to avoid it. Both these arguments have an explicit consequentialistic tenor: Arjuna does not want to fight the war because he wants to avoid the unpleasant consequences that would follow from his hostile engagement. Also bear in mind that I have shown earlier that Krishna himself opens the second chapter of the Gītā by offering some purely consequentialistic arguments to sway Arjuna in favor of fighting the war. Thus we see that the Gītā and Mill agree on the role of consequences in our moral considerations in a variety of way.

In closing, I wish to bring out the two main implications of the above agreement between the Gītā and Mill. First, the Gītā as well Mill require an absolute impartiality from their moral agent, and they both contend that a moral agent must not be impeded by her narrow personal interests, attachments and belongings. Utility requires the maximization of the general happiness or public welfare and this goal can only be achieved by overcoming one’s personal inclinations and interests (Mill, 1861/2002, p.
Similarly lord Krishna implores Arjuna that the whole world is imprisoned in the selfish action, but he must act selflessly, without any thought of personal profit (Gitā 3: 9). Krishna asks Arjuna to overcome his emotional ripples and become a witness of his actions. In other words, the Gitā and Mill reach similar conclusions from different standpoints. Needless to say, that the Gitā has an inbuilt ontological opposition to the natural world and so its call for the suspension of selfish attachments or gunas is theoretically inspired. On the contrary, Mill originally defends his theory of utility on experiential and psychological grounds. Later on he also exhorts his moral agent to transcend experiential conditions through refined self-development, and fellowship with others, and this might be the reason why some interpreters, including Roger Crisp, have called him “an intuitionist” (Crisp, 1997/2006, p. 82).

Secondly, the Gitā and Mill share a common conception of moral good. They both agree that different individuals can partake in a shared ideal moral good and develop their consequentialism accordingly. The Gitā believes that the protection of dharma and realization of moksha constitute the ultimate moral good and that every human person can engage in the pursuit of these goods; and in the case of Mill this moral good is constituted largely by utility. Despite the above spiritual and epistemological differences, they both expound a genuine possibility of cooperation with other fellow beings, and make room for the construction of mutual moral and social projects. Their conception of moral good can be contrasted with deontology which upholds that each moral agent must individually construct her moral good without any social support.

Conclusion

In this paper I have reconstructed the areas of possible moral convergence between the Gitā and Mill. I have argued that both of them expound a sophisticated version of consequentialism, i.e. prudential consequentialism. That is to say even though they pay serious attention to the involved consequences, they do not overlook other important social goods and considerations. Next, I contend that the idea of moral agency is crucial to understanding the moral thought of Mill and the Gitā as well. Finally, I have also shown that, like Mill, the Gitā takes seriously the experiential world and the consequences associated with human conduct, but reminds us at the same time that we are capable of transcending them and that we must do so as well.

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References


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I AND THE OTHER: A HERMENNEUTICAL STUDY OF THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL MODELS AVAILABLE IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: The quickest of our actions presupposes and involves some minimal ontological conception of the object towards which our actions may be directed. Even our reflexive actions can only be understood in terms of some minimal subconscious understanding of the object that it may be aimed at. Thus all our actions deliberate or reflexive are in a certain sense influenced by how we view the Other at the receiving end of that action. This would further mean that problem of understanding actions has a hermeneutical side to it. Once this hermeneutical link between our notion of the Other and its epistemic influence on our actions is admitted, it would have inevitable bearing upon our conceptions of collectivities as well. In terms of its importance for our study of different societies and polities in the world, it may present to us new interesting predicaments. In the following presentation I attempt to survey some of the epistemological approaches suggested by different schools of Indian philosophy to make sense of an entity as such and examine them for their rigidity or flexibility vis-à-vis questions regarding individuality and collectivity. In the light of these findings I try to assess which of these philosophies should be considered better suited for the social milieu of the contemporary multicultural societies of the world than certain others.

“Either one understands self-understanding as a sort of understanding of the other, or one understands understanding of other as a sort of self-understanding.”

J. N. Mohanty.

The notion of the Other is implicit in any non-reflexive notion of action. Even self-aware reflexive actions require objectification of one’s own self in a certain way. Actions are constituted, shaped and guided by our understanding of the other. This is especially true of Indian philosophy where there is a conspicuous interconnection between the epistemology and the stereological programs proposed by different schools. Broadly divided there are orthodox realist schools in Indian philosophy on the one hand including Mīmāṃsa and Nyāya and radical empiricist schools on the other mainly amongst them Buddhism. According to realist school of Nyāya one

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could believe that the Other exists in the same plain of time and space as oneself with different co-ordinates. Viewed in terms of time one becomes the subject of understanding of the Other. Viewed in terms of space one becomes an incarnate Other, amenable to and available for understanding. In Advaita system of Uttar Mimamsa School the one and the Other become just two different dimensions of the self-identical object named Brahman. Such systems of thought involve a reductionism of sorts where individual contingencies are bracketed out in favor of more universalistic modes of understanding. As opposed to this there could be different view of the Other where the individual uniqueness of the Other is radically emphasized to the extent that an unbridgeable chasm is created between the self and the Other. Yet another approach to understand the Other could be to consider the Other as both an invitation and a challenge to the self to share a space where the self is aware of the limits of one’s own understanding of the Other in the present moment but does not consider the present moment as the final one. In such a view both the self and the Other are considered along with their individual historicity with a certain openness towards each other.

In the following presentation I attempt to survey each of these approaches especially in some of the schools of Indian philosophy and examine them for their ethical implications. In the light of these findings I try to assess which of these philosophies should be considered better suited for the social milieu of the contemporary multicultural societies of the world than others. One of the presuppositions that I am working with in this paper is that when we deal with the notion of the Other, then apart from dealing with notions regarding identity formation, the notion of the self and so on, we need to most primarily look at the notion of entity per se in that particular system. The epistemological status accorded to an object in a particular thought system needs to be studied for its implications with regard to morality, ethics, society, polity and so on. How we act towards an object is guided in various ways by how we conceive of that object in the first place. This link between epistemology and ethics is specially emphasized in Indian philosophy because of their pronounced stereological orientation.

Foremost among these epistemological models, I want to discuss theories of meaning proposed by two main realist schools in Indian philosophy namely Nyaya and Mimamsa. The Nyaya school maintains that an object presents itself along with its universally recognizable nature, its particularity and its matrix of relationships with its own different parts and to other objects in the world. On this view an object has both a Universal (sambhava) and a Particular (visha) residing in it. This is explained with the help of a classical example. If somebody finds a piece of banyan leaf lying on the ground, she immediately recognizes it as a piece of banyan leaf. If an object were to be characterized by its particularity alone then the part would have given no
indication of the whole that it belongs to. Thus the Universal bears its stamp on the entire particular object in such a way that none of its parts remain un-participated in it. A modern day example of the same could be a hologram which results from piecing together several small images each of which contains a micro image of the overall picture that hologram represents. Further under Nyāya scheme of things a part bears a special relationship to its whole named samavāya which means inherence. The core feature of this special type of relationship is that it is characterized by the inseparability (ayutasiddha) of the relata under consideration. A subtle but very important fall out of this view is that if the relationship between an object and its parts is that of inseparability, an object can never evolve to be something other than what it already is. For example as we grow almost all the cells of our body are changed after a period of time. We would require some strong notion of parts being viewed as independent and at the same time continuants of the whole in some way to explain the sameness of the entity in question in such cases. Also under this scheme of things, all possibilities of equivocation about the object are foreclosed and precluded since the object is supposed to have a definite structure which is completely conceptualisable. Nyāya being an orthodox realist school, their view of the Other exemplifies a perfect blend of orthodoxy in their brand of realism. But this is only one side of the story. Whereas an object bears a relationship of inherence with its own parts it has another type of relationship with regard to other wholes which is named as Samyog. Whereas there is no room for contingencies in the samavāya type of relationship, samyog has enough scope for them. Samyog literally translated would mean chance-happening. As the meaning suggests, on Nyāya account one’s relationship with the other whole objects is a mere contingent chance-happening where coming together is seen merely in terms of spatiality. Under this relationship when the either one of the two or more relata are parted, there is no change as a whole in either one of them in terms of their identity. Thus what could be concluded from the above is that in consonance with the overall orthodoxy of the system Nyāya considers the Other either as an unalterable part of the whole or an unalterable well defined whole which may in turn become a part of an aggregate (sāmagri) which is necessary and sufficient to give birth to a new entity. Thus under Nyāya scheme of things the object of understanding or the Other is unequivocally categorisable and our behavior towards that Other is guided and vindicated in terms of our unmistaken, non-erroneous cognition, definite of it. On this account, an object has a well and pre-defined structure and has to be cognized by the subject in terms of that structure alone.

Buddhist epistemology on the other hand goes to the other extreme and views the conceptualization of the originally given raw sense data by the mind as an element alienable to the actual nature of the object. Perceptual knowledge of the object
accordingly defined as devoid of any imaginative or conceptual attribution to the object concerned (pratyakṣamkalpanāpodham). Object on this account of things is essentially a unique particular (svalakšana) or a unique Other. Thus its alterity cannot be bridged by projection of one’s own conceptual schemes or for that matter any conceptual scheme whatsoever. If at all this alterity can only be bridged by extinguishing one’s own ways of understanding things.

Thus we observe that Nyāya and Buddhist epistemologies represent different ways of understanding the object. Subsequently there could be two different kinds of moral evaluation of the Other forthcoming. Whereas Nyāya epistemology would emphasize upon subject’s capability to use right categories in her effort to understand the Other to make a justifiable moral evaluation of the same, Buddhists would view the alterity of the Other as inviolable. The Other is in this sense - to borrow a term from Derrida – ‘the wholly other’. It makes no effort to reach out or to make itself available for understanding; it does not come along with what Gadamer would call certain “pre-givenness or self-representation". As a manner of speaking it does not participate in the understanding of itself by the subject. The object under this scheme of things has an absolute, non-negotiable demand in an epistemological situation which is that the one who understands extinguishes herself completely. In Nyāya scheme of things on the other hand the object is termed as ‘yathārtha’ meaning ‘the one presented as it is’. On this account, object comes along with a ‘representation-for’ and the onus falls upon the understanding subject to unhinder her mind from unwarranted prejudices and arrive at the essence or the right cognition of the thing by applying only those concepts to the object that are warranted in that particular knowing situation. Right cognition (yathārthajñānam) thus achieved would further give us cues regarding how to act with respect to the object of cognition.

Yet another approach towards the Other is proposed by one of the later Indian grammarians named Bhartrhari. Bhartrhari in a certain sense denies the alterity of the Other altogether. He points out that as understanding subjects we are all imbued with the same linguisticality (śabdanā) of being which he terms as Pratibhā. Pratibhā is a sort of inner capability to understand the linguistic codes and also refers to perceptivity or receptivity of the subjects towards those codes. So all of us in a certain way carry a blueprint of all the possible thoughts in language and for making the communication of certain thought possible we only need to send an appropriate trigger of sorts which hits upon or invokes the intended thought in the other. Thus the

1PramāṇaSammuchaya 1.3c.
content of thought becomes self-referential and self-autonomous in a certain way under this scheme of things. The role of the Other as an interpreter or as an assessor or evaluator is completely taken away. If the subjectivity of the Other were to be defined in terms of her unique historicity of being and the prejudices and biases imbibed therefrom, then such subjectivity is denied to the Other under Bhartrhari’s model. Thus in this model the Other is always secretly familiar. Language on this account is not something at our disposal as an instrument to use for giving palpability to our individual thoughts. Rather, language is viewed as a blueprint of pure timeless tradition which is the storehouse of all possible understanding and also an inalienable guide to our action. According to Bhartrhari, “It is recorded through an uncut continuity – of learning that is called to mind, by those who have learned it well and hand it down.”. Thus as a part of language user community we are all guided by the uninterrupted inherent flow of this river that Bhartrhari calls as tradition (vyavasthā) and as a part of this flow, we lose our alterity as the Other.

Bhartrhari says: Whether words be eternal or otherwise, their beginning is not known. As in the case of living beings, there is what is called continuity of tradition (vyavasthā-nityatā). But due to influences of time (kāla), the purity of tradition is gradually lost. It is then the task of the grammarians to suggest ways to restore the purity of traditional understanding. Bhartrhari comments on this: Grammar is a discipline whose aim is knowledge, clarified from errors of mistaken use. Passed down through a succession that remains unbroken, the intent remembered is reconstituted, over and over again. But that itself remains unchanged because of its continuing causality, it is called ‘akśara’ or ‘that which does not change’.

For an orthodox grammarian, knowledge of grammar of tradition purged of corrupting influences of time is tantamount to restoration of our subjectivity. For a hermeneuticist on the other hand, it would amount to loss of subjectivity to something other than and outside the subject and it is also a loss of subject’s alterity as the Other.

Thus what I want to arrive from the above is that Indian philosophical tradition is by and large orthodox. Buddhists though enumerated amongst heterodox schools also look infested with a different strain of orthodoxy. This is especially true from a hermeneutical perspective in so far as the subjective projection in the process of understanding is viewed in this model as corruption of actual understanding of the object. Though differing in their methodologies Naiyāyikas and Buddhists arrive at consequences not very different in nature. Whereas in the epistemological models

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4Sādhutvajñānavasiśayasaśavyākaranasmrtih1.141 Vākyapadīya.
5nityatvekṛtakavēśamādirnavidyate /prāṇināmivasācyāvyavasthānityatocyate // 1.28 Vākyapadīya.
6smṛtahhīarthahparamparya/tavicchedenapunahpunah nibandhyate.1.141 vṛtti, Vākyapadīya.
7tatcākšaranimittatvātakšaramitūcyate. 1.1 vṛtti, Vākyapadīya.
offered by Nyāya, world starts looking like fixated under a matrix of categories, in the
Buddhist scheme of things the Other is not amenable to these categories at all.
Whereas on Nyāya account there are fixed ways of how a subject has a dialogue with
the other which finishes as soon as the Other is rightly categorized and conceptualized,
on Buddhist account the Other is not amenable to a dialogue at all. On Buddhist
account understanding of the Other is tantamount to silencing oneself, in the sense of
suspending one’s prejudices and biases altogether. In either case the dynamicity in the
process of understanding is conspicuously lost.

Thus the overall point that I want to bring home here is that among most of the
Indian schools of philosophy the notion of the Other or rather the ways of
understanding the Other are such that a certain gap between the object and the subject
which constitutes the alterity of the Other is missing. This gap is either collapsed by
offering fixated notions of right and wrong understanding of the object influenced by
the overall stereological demands of the system or by denigrating human capacity to
phenomenologically constitute the object of understanding as tantamount to
corrupting influences upon the direct understanding of the object.

From here I further argue that with the changed socio-political predicaments in
India and abroad the epistemological models available in a local cultural milieu of
any given geographical unit need to be revived which support those conceptions of
the Other which are more in consonance with the ideas of multiculturalism and
interculturality. In a country like India where much of our ethical and social
paradigms are borrowed from ancient literature and philosophy, it should be of
special interest to analyze how we have looked upon the meaning of the text. In this
regard Indian schools of philosophy have mainly relied upon the infallibility of the
text as the source of its scriptural authority. In Indian philosophy authority of the
scripture is supported either with the assumption of the authorlessness of the text as in
Mīmāṁsā philosophy or by assuming God as the author of Vedas as supposed by
Naiyāyikas. But interestingly whereas in the west the authorlessness of the text is
viewed as the end of any ascribed ownership of meaning, in Mīmāṁsā school of
Indian philosophy authorlessness (apauruṣeṇa) of the text is given as an argument for
its infallibility. Authorlessness is presented as an argument for the impeccability and
absolute authority of the scripture. Mīmāṁsakas argue that a text that has an author
would get infested with same contingencies that put limits upon realm of possibilities
for human beings. Thus absence of the author is considered as tantamount to
suprahuman absolute authority beyond any contingencies. Deeper implications of the
argument from authorlessness of the text has underlying structuralist overtones.
Vedas’ being authorless texts should basically mean that they represent primeval
structures and ways of thinking that are prior to any authorial text and thus penetrate
and manifest themselves in the authorial intention even if there were to be any. Thus

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the structures of language and the lifeworld are encoded and embedded in the grammar (vyākarana) and since the study or methodological analysis of this grammar presupposes that very grammar, therefore Mīmāṃsaka’s plea is to accept this very grammar as an absolute given. The main intellectual enterprise that a philosopher is left with in such circumstances is not the critique but only philology and metaphysics. Subsequently most of the Indian orthodox schools of philosophy are engaged in either of these two pursuits. Needless to say that such models of linguistic understanding do not have much scope for fluidity in our conception of the Other. On this account, the mode of being of the Other is pre-given in the grammar and linguisticality of our being. The task of a philosophy under this paradigm is to discover the a priori structures of language in grammar and suggest ways to refine our present modes of linguistic understanding back to its pre-authorial original shape. Much along the same line, the early hermeneutical theory which would include Ast, Schleirmarcher and Ranke among others fulcrums the meaning of the text in the originary spirit that runs through the text. On this account the particularities of the text which come into play because of the temporal distance are viewed as anomalies, which need to succumb to the demands of a single overall unitary narrative in the text. This view rests on an important pre-supposition that the object of understanding is a non-fragmentary, self-complete Other which has its own spirit (geist) running through the entire text. The subject needs to submit herself before this spirit in order to understand the text at all. As opposed to this the Other in the hermeneutic scheme of things is not a monolithic, self-complete object. Rather, it is a fragmentary Other. It is a whole composed of implicit and explicit epistemic spaces. Some of these implicit epistemic spaces may be more accessible to the Other than to the locus where they belong.

Thus the thrust of my discussion here is that human imagination and its creative urges are suspect in orthodox Indian schools of thought. An essential part of the notion of orthodoxy is fixed ways of looking at things involving hypostatization and frozenness of meaning, obfuscating the distinction between plain text and scripture. This is especially true for the schools of philology where meaning gleaning process from the text is influenced by the overall exegetical demand of the soteriology proposed by the system. Thus hermeneutical models hinging upon availability of the text free of authorial ownership and its unrestricted play with human individual imagination are by and large not available in Indian philosophy. Further as I have pointed out earlier even supposedly unorthodox philosophy of Buddhism has orthodox tendencies in disguise. Buddhist idea of knowledge as devoid of imagination is based on the pre-supposition that there is an actual something out there. Therefore as human individuals endowed with our capacities to reason and imagine, we can only have corrupting influences on the knowledge possibilities of the Other if at all. This allegation is based upon Buddhist skepticism regarding capability of human
imagination to truly capture the essence of the actual object out there which is of the nature of svalakśana or unique particular. In either case the dialogical models of understanding which allow due space to the ‘Otherness’ of the reader are missing. Orthodox epistemological models provided by Nyāya and Mimāmsa thinkers are monological from the vantage-point of the knower, the Buddhist epistemological model is monological from the point of view of the object. Thus whereas the Mimāmsa theory of aupauroṣeya (authorlessness) is homologous to death of the author celebrated in the postmodernist literary theory, Buddhist epistemological model is analogous to orthodox tradition to which it is opposed only in structure and methodology, not in terms of consequences. Thus overall point that I wish to make in this section is that by and large in Indian philosophy, understanding of the individual human knower is never viewed as something productive of understanding. It is either viewed at the level of surface expressions which need to be refined and perfected to classical forms of understanding or viewed as a kind of veil between the knower and the Other which needs to be lifted up if there has to be any contact at all between the two. One should also note here that from ontological point of view being of the Other is considered to have primacy over our being-in-the-world because the Other was already there before I came into existence. Thus the historicity of the Other also informs my historical consciousness and fore-understanding of things. This fore-understanding embedded in the linguisticality of our being in the world is either fossilized as the absolute given by the Indian realist or has to be suspended to allow the understanding of the actual object to unfold fully to us (who?) or this fore-understanding has to be refined and perfected to match up to the actual nature (what?) of being of the object as demanded by the Indian Grammarian. In either case our being in the world along with our individual historical consciousness is denigrated in favor of supposed actual essential modes of existence or being-in-the-world.

As opposed above discussed epistemological models later developments in hermeneutics emphatically deny that understanding truly takes place only when the reader’s or the subject’s grasp of meaning is same as it is intended by the author or in Nyāya terminology, when it is same as the real structure of the object along with the matrix of relationships that connects it to the overall structure of the universe. Indian theories of realism on the other hand as pointed out earlier stress precisely upon the sameness between the structure of language, understanding and the actual world out there or ‘the Other’. Nyāya theory for instance does acknowledge that understanding is not directly intuitive as it is always mediated by the manas. Manas, generally translated as internal organ, acts as a messenger between the sense organs and the soul (atman) which is the actual seat or locus of understanding. Interestingly on Nyāya account manas has a simple atomic structure. It is atomic in the sense that it is so minute that it cannot connect to more than one sense organ at a time. Thus all the
sense organs may be working in a given instance of understanding but if all the sense data is inevitably delivered to the soul then it could result in an actual ‘brainstorm’. So only that part of the sense data is delivered to the soul which has its channel in touch with the soul. Now the question that comes up here is – if manas only selectively delivers the sense data to the subject, then how is this selection made. Naiyāyikas do not seem to be willing to say much on this issue. But it stands to reason that either this selection should depend on the context created by the situatedness of the experiencing subject or should depend on the degree of immediacy of the incoming sense-data from the five possible channels. This selection cannot be arbitrary as evidenced from our well arranged judgments. The possibility of manas making the selection is precluded from the fact that it is atomic in nature. Thus overall Nyāya account comes down to this. Though the decision regarding which object to focus upon out of an array of choices is taken by the subject’s soul, it does not have the freedom to think of X as something other than X. The subject thus may be contextualized and situated, the onus always lies with it not to let those contexts cause ‘misconstruing’ or ‘misunderstanding’ of the object. On this account thus the Other is presented before the subject as it actually is or essentially is. The subject at times owing to the defect in the aggregate of conscious and unconscious conditions sufficient and necessary for an event to occur (bodhābodha-sāmagri) may result in misunderstanding. The interpretative role of the subject on this account is limited to ‘discernment’ of judgment, such that the judgment about the Other correctly represents it. One may ask at this point – what criterion should we follow to find out the validity of cognition? The criterion offered by Nyāya is to send the trigger to the object to behave in a way that is most characteristic of it. Thus for Naiyayikas not only objects have a specific character with respect to its whole and its parts along with its specific relationships with the others around it but in virtue of those structures it also has a specific behavior in response to particular stimuli. Thus the characteristic property of water for example is to quench thirst and that of fire to burn. Conversely, water that does not quench thirst is not actually water and the fire that does not burn is only a virtual appearance of it. The word offered by Naiyayikas for this litmus test is ‘arthkriyākāritva’ which means that the object of cognition should effectively function in the way that characterizes it. Thus the reality of an object is decided in terms of a certain set of essential characteristics including behavioral characteristics. Needless to say that such conception of deciding the identity of the object delimits the mode of existing of the Other in certain essential ways subsequently opening up and widening up the space for aberrations. Manhood for example may be defined in terms
of machismo alone would keep emotional men outside the realm of essential modes of existence for men.⁹

*Mīmāsakas* go even a step further in this regard. According to them a criterion for deciding the validity of an instance of understanding is not even required. *Mīmāmsakas* maintain that all judgments come along with self-certitude. This means to say that all judgments are valid in their first instance itself. Yet another way of stating the same could be that all judgments are valid as they already exist. Needless to say that any such theory would be based on radical form of orthodoxy and scholasticism. When asked for reasons for such a view, *Mīmāsakas* only offer an argument based on indirect proof. They point out that if any judgment relies upon a further criterion for its certification then the question of validity (*pramāṇyata*) is only shifted one step further up to the supposed criterion itself. Thus proposing any criterion for validity of a judgment would only postpone the question of validity for a moment but would never give a conclusive solution to the problem. This conspicuously relativistic argument is used as an indirect proof by *Mīmāsakas*. They argue that since extraneous validity criterion is never conclusive, therefore knowledge-judgments are all intrinsically valid or self-valid (*svatahpramāṇya*). One can clearly see here that socio-political implications of such a view could be horrific. If whatever already exists has self-valid intrinsic reasons to exist then it sounds the cul-de-sac of critical philosophical enterprise and defends the *status quo*. Notwithstanding it should not require much effort to observe that the self-validity argument stands more to reason than experience. There is a lot of empirical evidence from our daily life-experiences that we often have erroneous cognitions. Illusions and dream-experiences are certainly neither valid nor true. This puts an insurmountable difficulty before the *Mīmāsakas* because to even give an explanation for unreality of instances of illusions and dream experiences one needs to acknowledge that there can be non-valid knowledge-claims or cognitions. But doing this is obviously not compliant with their self-validity theory. *Mīmāsaka*’s claim that all cognitions are self-valid in virtue of lack of foolproof self-reliant ascertaining criterion precludes the possibility of any explanation of error. Nonetheless *Mīmāsakas* have a queer take on this issue. They point out that all cases of erroneous cognition are cases of failure to

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⁹It may also be interesting to note here that the term ‘*Jati*’ used by *Naiyayikas* to denote the category of an object is also the word for caste in India. This evidences the fact that social ramifications of certain epistemologies are their inevitable outcomes. Caste system is characterized by recognizing certain group of people in terms of their profession alone. Conversely in virtue of their being essentially belonging to a particular group a person cannot but take that particular profession only. Thus a carpenter on this account is a carpenter in virtue of belonging to that class which in a certain way pervades her whole being and passes on that class character to her offspring as well.

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have the right cognition. It can be further construed as – all cases of erroneous cognition are cases where the subject makes an omission to differentiate right cognition from the wrong one. But cases of omission do not necessarily commit the subject of cognition to any philosophical position. An act of omission is tantamount to not-doing something. It cannot be equated with error which is a positive case of wrongful cognition. Thus Mīmāśakas instead of explaining the cases of misapprehension, explain them away.

This kind of epistemological position could have interesting politico-legal implications. This epistemological position translated in terms of our socio-political outlook towards the Other would make it excessively loaded in terms of political Rights alone. Indian constitution for example lists a number of fundamental rights to which all Indian citizens are entitled irrespective of cast and creed. Violation of any of these fundamental rights is one of the most serious cognizable offences. The constitution also has a similar list of duties. But the omission to perform those duties is not considered a cognizable offence. I believe the psychology behind this is same as Mīmāśakas’. Failure to perform one’s duties is simply a case of omission to do something and not-doing cannot be equated with violation of something. This can be better understood with the help of an example – if somebody is drowning right before my eyes and I know how to swim, it is my duty to save the person, but omission to perform this duty cannot be challenged in the court of law. Though if the person in question knows swimming and starts pelting stones at the person who is drowning making her unable to swim, would be a cognizable crime. If we view this example in terms of consequences, both cases are equal in status. In both cases the consequence is the possible death of the person which could have been prevented in first case by doing something and in second case by omission of an act. Further, on Svaśaḥpramāṇavāda account of things, all that is cognized by us is self-attested and no further attestation is required for a given judgment. Behind this kind of view is Mīmāśaka’s attempt to defend the authority of the Vedas. Vedas on their account are self-valid because any validating criterion is always in need of defense for its own validation in turn. But this account presents a strong case for maintaining the status quo. If all cognitions are self-valid, then whatever is prevalent is already fine. This is some kind of Utopian vision where all is already well by default.

Needless to say that these epistemological models are not conducive to or are not in consonance with the demand for more flexible epistemological postures proposed by new developments in literary theory and social sciences like Multiculturalism and Postmodernism. Any talk of interculturality requires that we understand the presuppositions of interculturality. The notion of interculturality hinges upon the notion of the difference of historicities. To truly understand the demands of interculturality we need to have an understanding of what this difference is
constituted in. It also demands recognition of the differences in the culturality of our beings and a dialogical understanding among them. The term culturality here refers to the historicity of our consciousness or the historical influences upon the categories of understanding that are linguistically *a priori*. But what is actually of consequence in a socio-political setup is the kind of philosophical consideration we have towards the historicity or culturality of our being. One of these possible philosophical consideration is to equivocate this linguistic *a priori* with Kantian synthetic *a priori* and consider them as transcendental and inevitable structures of knowing. The attitudinal demand in such an epistemological model would be to match up to the epistemic-grammatical demands of such supposed *a priori* structures. Another approach to the same could be to look at historicities of our consciousness as mere constructions which only appear as anomalies in the understanding process. This approach as radical in nature as the previous one emphasizes upon removal of or suppression of the prejudices and biases imbibed from the historicity of being of both *I* and the *Other*. But both these approaches would further reify hypostatization of either the Other or the self. In doing this both these approaches keep at bay the interactivity and dynamicity that actually characterizes both *I* and the Other in the process of understanding.

In western hermeneutical tradition there are mainly two radical positions. In medieval text-centered hermeneutics the meaning is supposed to lie in the ownership of the author. The author has some original thought that she attempts to convey to the reader or the audience. The onus is supposed to lie with the reader to extinguish her own pre-understanding and thus focus completely on the original intended meaning of the author. The author-centered approach advocated by Schleirmarcher and Ranke is put under scanner by Heidegger and Gadamer in the twentieth century. Heidegger argues against the demand to suspend one’s own historicity of being in order to make room for the original intention of the author. He points out that once a text like an artwork has been completed, it has an independent existence of its own. Whereas for Ranke an artwork depends on its author for its meaning, for Heidegger and Gadamer an artwork is fully capable to speak for itself. It engages the reader and draws her into a meaning-generating game through its initial pre-given meaning which is not yet complete. The incompleteness of the meaning or its ambiguity is precisely what challenges the pre-understanding of the reader and draws her into the game. In a certain sense it is the ambiguity of meaning and incompleteness which keeps the understanding of the *Other* alive. The initial given-ness of the object prods the pre-understanding of the subject to collect itself once again in an act of its own imagination and project it on to the object. Now since there is no original understanding imbued in the text, there is no conclusive right or wrong in the process of hermeneutical understanding. The initial given-ness of the object and pre-
understanding of the subject engage in a dialogue or interplay for a meaning to emerge at all. Epistemological models conducive to such dialogical models of understanding are by and large not available in Indian philosophy.

Thus to sum up my attempts in this paper so far has been to assess different epistemological models available in Indian philosophy in terms of the index of hermeneutical space they would allow for the understanding of the Other such that neither co-ordinates of the knowing situation are characterized as the absolute nor is the space between the two rendered so readily and completely bridgeable that both the co-ordinates of a knowing situation collapse such that the 'otherness' as the quotient of individuality of the either co-ordinate is lost. My contention in this regard is that Syādavāda of Jainas is the only theory of knowledge which preserves this gap. Syādavāda is an epistemological offshoot of Jaina's core ethical concern of nonviolence. Jainas do not advocate nonviolence resulting from a deliberate control over our impulses and a strict discipline based on self-restraint. Our actions are most of the times deliberate and based on peculiar ways of thinking influenced by our peculiar belief-systems. Thus to make nonviolence a part of our general dispositional behavior, we need to have an appropriate corresponding epistemological attitude or set of beliefs which is most conducive to such dispositional behavior. Jainas point out to the fact that all our knowledge-claims signify our various takes on a particular object at hand and as such they should be recognized as knowledge-claims, not knowledge-instances per se. We generally put forth our knowledge-claims in such a way that we tend to forget their propositional nature and state them forth as matters of fact. Stating it as a matter of fact at a very subtle sub-conscious level infringes upon the hermeneutical space of the other in surreptitious ways. In this way it works as an invasion of sorts and draws the Other into a defensive mode. As a result, the Other instead of opening up to or becoming receptive to the hermeneutical call of the Other becomes self-oriented and gets busy with the assessment of the implication of views of the Other on her own system of beliefs, values etc. This is an epistemological attitude which is more conducive to preclusion of a dialogue rather than initiation of it.

The epistemological model proposed by Jainas is instigated by their ethical and social concern of ahimsā or nonviolence. Much like a medical practitioner Jainas view violence as an anomaly in human behavior and trace the genesis of violence in the general unreflective ways of human thinking. Jaina theory of Syādavāda makes a plea for re-considering the epistemological gap between a knowledge-claim and knowledge-instances per se. On Jainas account our past karmas or the historicities of our being bind us to particular perspectives. Thus all efforts directed at knowing the Other are perspectival in nature. Due to the lack of reflective awareness we put forward our knowledge-claims as knowledge instantiations per se. Jainas allege that the Other has infinite aspects to present before the self but due to limitations of our

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perspectives shaped by our karmic baggage we are able to see only a few of them. Thus the possibilities that the Other presents us with are innumerable in number and it is our lapse not to be able to connect with the Other with full awareness of all of them. When we put forth our perspectively limited judgments as knowledge occurrences then in a very subtle way it is denial of Other’s hermeneutical space. Jaina’s suggestion as a remedy to this is that when we present our claims about the state of affairs in the world, we present them as the probable ones not as the final ones. Such epistemological attitude I argue is more conducive to a dialogical situation. This immediately throws into relief to the Other the space for her perspectival claim. An individual awareness of non-finality of historically limited individualistic judgment is the foremost and most essential requirements to connect with the Other. It is the best hermeneutical call to the Other to participate in a dialogue not only for a proper understanding of the Other but also for a proper critique of one’s own belief-system. This is also the most conducive epistemological attitude from the point of view of a democratic consensus. Somewhat along the same line Mohanty writes: “I have found no way of expelling the other from within my own world. The ‘foreign’, then, is that which I do not understand. But understanding and failure to understand, the familiar and the strange have their place within every world. It is not simply one-sidedly knowing the other, but ‘mutual’ communication which removes ‘strangeness’. The idea of one world for all is constituted through such communication and may serve as a norm for critiquing one’s home-world.”

Thus by and large none of the schools of Indian philosophy excepting to a certain extent Jainas would allow any hermeneutical dialogical space to the Other. Also excepting Jainas none of schools recognize historicity of consciousness and biases and prejudices imbibed therefrom as constitutive and informative of a knowledge-claim. Historicity and perspective that invariably and ineluctably inform all knowledge-claims are always viewed as something alien to the actual instances of knowledge. Unless it is accepted that there is no way to suspend our biases and prejudices to find out the fact behind the appearance and that so called ‘knowledge’ is a term for consensus and that dialogue is the only way of arriving at it, any epistemology would remain incurably orthodox in its core. Larger implications of saying this, is that such orthodox epistemologies could never be supportive of collectivities based on democratic principles of consensus and dialogue. Indian systems of though like Grammarians and Mīmāṁsā who show remarkable consideration towards tradition as constitutive of the knowledge-claims on the other hand view tradition as a self-enclosed system not amenable to rational scrutiny.

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Commenting upon such tendencies among Indian orthodox schools of thinking, J. N. Mohanty writes: “…one should distinguish between two levels of philosophizing. There is a kind of philosophizing which is intra-cultural. At this level, philosophy thinks within the parameters and presuppositions of the culture within which it comes into being. In the Indian tradition, such thinking does not question the validity of Vedas, but proceeds to introduce new interpretation-principles to be able to achieve its goal of legitimization (theoretical justification). The darśanas first develop as intra-cultural. Amongst themselves, they do not raise the issue of the authority of the Vedic texts. But no culture, in its totality, is a seamless whole.”

Thus altogether Indian schools of thought have two dominant strands of epistemology. Either there is a plea for unmistakable, unambiguous, undisputable ways of knowing, cleansed of anything external to the knowledge situation even at phenomenological level or there is an account of tradition juxtaposing it with the rational such that the possibility of a dialogue on certain shared principles of rationality becomes impossible.

My further submission in this paper is that ancient Indian thought is marked by dominant orthodox strands perhaps with an exception of Jainas. Language is viewed as having fixed designations by most of the orthodox schools. Thus one could even say that Post-Heideggerian hermeneutical turn in western European philosophy does not have any counterpart in Indian thought. There are fixed ways of knowing the Other whether as an object or as a person such that the Other has a fixed unalterable status in the matrix of collectivity. Dominant trends in Indian philosophy allow internal pluralism but do not give an adequate and balanced account of dynamism, growth and mobility, which are essential indices of liveliness of things. Much like some of the early Greek ideas, Indian ancient thought either shows a one sided emphasis on uniqueness of things making it unamenable to any way of conceptual categorization at all, or there are fixed ways of epistemological access to an object.

Another important point that emerges here is that from the point of view of identity politics, there can be two types of identities as many philosophers including Bilgrami maintains. There is on the one hand models of objective identity where objective identity refers to fixed structures of meaning that are projected upon the

9Ibid. p.136.
10I believe that this trend is unfailing even upto Gandhi who though influenced by Jaina philosophy of non-violence was a strict adherent of varna-ashrama system. B.R. Ambedkar realized that unless this orthodoxy in Hindu way of life is given up, it does not have any space for consensus and dialogue which are the true hallmarks of any democratic setup.
identity of a person in virtue of her caste, creed nationality and other affiliations. These structures are often unmoving and un-negotiable. Orthodox schools of Indian philosophies have tenets which are conducive to and supportive of such objective identity attributions. Subjective identities on the other hand are those which may have their origins in either the life-world or subjective inclinations or whatever but what makes them a case of subjective identity is that these identities have the approval of the subject to be reflexively attached to it. But what I want to point out in this regard is that subjective approval of any identity irrespective of its locus of formation requires a hermeneutical model where subject is recognized as a self along with all its historicity. This idea of self obviously has to be in stark contrast with Cartesian model of self where everything except the reflexivity of the self is contingent and therefore not considered as constitutive of it. Considering that there is a lack of epistemological models conducive to or supportive of such conceptions of entities in any of the orthodox schools of Indian philosophy, there seems little possibility of any hermeneutically flexible epistemological models to emerge within orthodox Indian schools of thought.

References

BOOK REVIEWS


Despite its tacky title, *How to Live, or, A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* is not one of those popular middlebrow manuals that enlist literary masters to solve the problems of board room or bedroom—curing insomnia the Proustian way, Kafka’s guide to successful litigation, staying fit with Charles Bukowski. Michel de Montaigne’s fundamental and most famous belief, that “the only thing certain is nothing is certain,” discourages practical application. One does not read “Of Cannibals” for culinary advice. Nor was the life of Montaigne (1533–92) edifying, except in subtle ways. The wily essayist who wrote that “I have never seen a greater monster or miracle in the world than myself” has much to teach us, but only if we learn to read his special script. In her aptly unconventional biography of an unconventional sage, Sarah Bakewell offers an invigorating guide to Montaigne’s life, as well as the reader’s own.

Without omitting any important details of what transpired from cradle to grave and beyond (Montaigne survives in the work of Denis Diderot, Laurence Sterne, Friedrich Nietzsche, Virginia Woolf, and contemporary bloggers, among many others), Bakewell organizes her book topically rather than chronologically. Though Socrates defined philosophy as learning how to die, how to live was the crucial question for Montaigne, who described himself as “an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher” and whose writings are too personal to please most academic philosophers today. Bakewell broods over the question of how to live by examining how Montaigne addressed it through topics such as travel, friendship, cruelty, temperance, and reading. The father of what is now quaintly called “creative nonfiction,” he was a master of the sinuous but purposeful digression, and Bakewell rejects the formulas of traditional biography in favor of following her subject’s meandering reflections.

Like Montaigne himself, she anchors his ideas in elements of his life and times. Service as an adviser to kings and as mayor of Bordeaux quickened his thinking about civic responsibility. France’s devastating wars of religion in the sixteenth century instigated thoughts about moderation and tolerance. The sudden, unexpected death of Etienne de la Boétie concentrated his mind on what we value in a friend. A loveless, arranged marriage and a hankering for other women conditioned Montaigne’s views on love and sexuality. Travel in foreign lands taught him not to confuse prejudice with principle: “Everyone calls barbarity what he is not accustomed to,” he wrote. Recurrent bouts of rheumatism, gout, and kidney stones made him into a connoisseur of health and an analyst of mortality.

Montaigne was born into wealth and privilege, but his father, intent on producing a son with broad social sympathies, sent the infant to live with peasants for his first year. On the large, productive estate that Montaigne inherited, he liked to retreat into
a tower in order to think and write. He was a gregarious recluse who sought entertainment and enlightenment in the human comedy yet also cherished solitude. Though drawn willy-nilly into the violent politics of his time, he preferred a stance of Stoical detachment. A Renaissance slacker who possessed what he called “an indolent and sluggish disposition,” he was nevertheless an astonishingly productive amateur. In addition to 107 essays, a makeshift genre he pioneered and defined (from the French essayer, "to attempt"), he left behind a travel journal that Bakewell values highly. Though his work has been banned, bowdlerized, and belittled, it has also inspired affection.

Bakewell’s wry style echoes that of her subject when, for example, she reports that the venerable Italian city that Montaigne found in shambles in 1581 resembled ancient Rome “to about the extent that a scrambled egg puts one in mind of a freshly laid whole one.” Her book is a labor of love, about a writer-scholar-courtier-mayor-seignior-vintner who, for all his flaws, remains convivial 400 years after a quinsy silenced his mortal voice. “Que sais-je?” asked Montaigne—What do I know? His implicit answer—not a hell of a lot—is both anxiously postmodern and disingenuous. Bakewell knows Montaigne and reminds us that the old French essayist still has much to teach. “Every man bears the whole stamp of the human condition,” he wrote. In this virtuoso biography of that man, the stamp is indelible.

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The issue of inequality and justice in the world can be approached from various angles and disciplines. If poverty has often been the favourite ground of economic sciences up until the last two decades, other disciplines such as philosophy started having their say on it. This turn can only be positively appreciated since the complexity of such topic requires a solid interdisciplinarity. In *Creating Capabilities* Nussbaum rightly argues for an interdisciplinary approach and against various kinds of separations between disciplines, between theory and practice, between older and younger, and among regions and nations (189).

Martha Nussbaum, for whom the practical usefulness of philosophy is no novelty—think of her works on education, democracy, and justice—proposes to reflect on poverty and inequality with a theoretical and ground-breaking paradigm which is known as the “human development” or “Capability Approach” or also “Capabilities Approach”. In *Creating Capabilities*, Nussbaum’s first agenda is to fill a gap by producing a “more accessible book” (xi) on the topic about poverty and human development.

Chapter 1 starts with a diagnosis that points at a discrepancy between what leaders of countries achieve by focusing only on national economic growth, and the realities lived by real people. The need for a change of paradigm in development economics is enounced. Instead of focusing on numbers and figures, Nussbaum uses the normal life of a concrete human being, Vasan— a small woman in her early thirties living in Ahmedabad, in India (2) and struggling with poverty—to prepare the ground for her theory of social justice, the Capabilities Approach. Chapter 2 expounds on the central capabilities which are cornerstones to the Capabilities Approach which rests on three main principles: it takes each person as an end; it focuses on choice and freedom; and it is concerned with entrenched social injustice and inequality. The need for a new approach is evoked in Chapter 3 with the evocation of the failure of classical and questionable approaches within development economics: GDP, utilitarian approaches, etc. In Chapter 4 Nussbaum’s approach is elaborated further against the background of significant ethical concepts and political theories. Since the Capabilities Approach is meant to apply to all nations, Chapter 5 is an attempt to meet the challenges of diversity brought about by the globalised world. In Chapter 6, Nussbaum brings the approach from a national to a global level with the idea that the implementation of justice needs a broader perspective. The origins, influences, and inspirations of the Capabilities Approach, ranging from Aristotle and the Stoics to John Stuart Mill are laid down in Chapter 7, whereas its relevance to contemporary
issues such as gender, environment, education, are tackled in Chapter 8. The book contains two appendixes on James Heckman’s work on Capabilities and Amartya Sen’s on well-being and agency.

Even if she does not use the following terms, Martha Nussbaum is up to breaking the ground between real economics and financial economics. The Capabilities Approach she proposes has to “begin close to the ground, looking at life stories and the human meaning of policy changes for real people” (14). In Nussbaum’s mind, one cannot solely talk about figures and charts; it’s through stories of concrete normal individuals such as Vasanti that the problems can be approached and sustainable and efficient solutions be found. Sophisticated and figure-laden talks about GDP per capita do not reach the normal people, nor do they help alleviate their situation of poverty. The paradigm has, therefore, to be close to realities of concrete lives lived by concrete individuals whose stories yield the most significant elements to understand poverty and inequality. The Capabilities Approach understands itself clearly as an alternative approach that can be assessed against its rivals.

GDP approaches have failed because, so Nussbaum, they can “give marks to nations that contain enormous inequalities, suggesting that such nations are on the right track” (49). Martha Nussbaum gives the example of South Africa under Apartheid, which, although scoring well on the GDP scheme, contained tremendously horrendous inequalities that are serious threats for the well-being of the society at large. This rightly suggests that alleviating poverty requires an uncompromised understanding of the principle of justice which demands equality. The failure of the GDP approach rests also in its oversight of the group of poor people suffering from huge inequalities.

Martha Nussbaum defines the Capabilities Approach as “an approach to comparative quality-of-life assessment and to theorizing about basic social justice. It holds that the key question to ask, when comparing societies and assessing them for their basic decency or justice, is, “What is each person able to do and to be?” In other words, the approach takes each person as an end, asking not just about the total or average well-being but about the opportunities available to each person” (18). This approach promotes a conception of the human person as a being that is not only inherently talented, but also substantially valuable—as having a human dignity. In contradistinction to theories that objectify or “mechanize” the human person and reduces her to a mere “human resource”, Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach proposes to return to the basics of human life to explore the ways in which human flourishing would be possible.

Nussbaum is not alone in this approach. She teams often with another defender of the Capabilities Approach, Amartya Sen. Nussbaum’s analysis of the problem of poverty takes on an important aspect with the crucial distinction she makes—
borrowing it from Sen—between a person who is starving and a person who is fasting (25). She shows that human agency as well as human choice are keys to understand the phenomenon of poverty. For it goes without saying that, although those two persons have the same type of functioning where nutrition is concerned, they do not have the same capability. The one fasting has freely decided to do so and can end this state wherever he wants, whereas the starving person has no choice and needs the help of the others to change his state. What this example also shows is that poverty is no destiny. The fatality of poverty can be overcome when its victims are given the conditions which enable them to express their talents and capabilities. Again Nussbaum starts from the presupposition that all people are endowed with capabilities the usage of which can guarantee a dignified life. This helps bring to the fore an innovative and appropriate conception of poverty which Nussbaum shares also with Sen, namely as a “capability failure, not just as shortage of commodities or even of income and wealth” (143).

Martha Nussbaum has an interesting understanding of human dignity. She does not conceive of it as merely a theoretical concept, but rather as a criterion to be fulfilled by humans to be able to live a genuine human life. Dignity, if only theorized, is unable to serve humans. It has to be filled up with a substantial content and translated into real life of concrete human beings. A life worthy of human dignity would, then, require many things which Nussbaum identifies as the “ten central capabilities” which are; life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses (imagination and thought), emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play, control over one’s environment (33-34). The Capabilities Approach tries to meet the demands of some, if not all these ten central capabilities. And any policy that aims at putting an end to poverty, injustice, and inequalities must fulfil the requirements of these ten central capabilities.

The Capabilities Approach is not based on mere intentions. It seeks the implementation of the ten capabilities in all societies, mostly in those poverty-stricken and non-democratic nations. And since the dignity of the people represents a forceful reminder in a true approach of justice, the Capabilities Approach will not avoid intervention in the home which is justified “whenever the rights of its members are violated” (66-67). Talking about intervention—or interventionism—is enough to raise the suspicion of imperialism (by the way, imperialism is understood here as a “Western imperialism”). Nussbaum defends her theory against this criticism first by arguing that the human rights approach is not exclusively Western—the Capabilities Approach has its primary origin in India—and then by emphasizing that “military and economic sanctions are justified only in certain grave circumstances involving traditionally recognized crimes against humanity, such as genocide” (111-112).
Nussbaum is very cautious about intervention—especially military intervention—because of the damages it can cause both at the conceptual and practical levels.

In order to provide solid foundations to her Capabilities Approach, Martha Nussbaum needs to work out a firm and compelling conception of human dignity. That is, from a descriptive approach that points at the vulnerability of humans or the fragility of human dignity, it is crucial to move to a normative approach that makes of human dignity a value. In order to make this idea clearer, it would have been good to take the notion of dignity further through a broader analysis of the phenomenon, an undertaking which, unfortunately, is absent in the book. It is, nevertheless, a huge merit of the Capabilities Approach to go back to the ultimate datum of the human person—her dignity—and concrete individual lives and seek therein incentives, rationales, and especially overwhelming reasons and arguments to fight for justice, equality, and human flourishing. This book is by all means a ground-breaking piece of work that should inspire not only philosophers working on issues about social justice and political systems, but also economists working on international development who so often tend to downplay, if not completely overlook, the anthropological and ethical sources of human life.

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