

Stellenbosch Socratic Journal

Volume 4, November 2024

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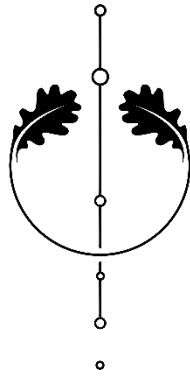
Reid Donson

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STELLENBOSCH SOCRATIC JOURNAL

Volume 4

November 2024

Stellenbosch Socratic Society

Stellenbosch University

Published by the Stellenbosch University Department of Philosophy

www0.sun.ac.za/philosophy

www0.sun.ac.za/philosophy/socratic-society/stellenbosch-socratic-journal

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Editorial board

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Foreword

Tamlyn February

I am deeply honoured to have the opportunity to write this foreword. This is the fourth volume of the Stellenbosch Socratic Journal (SSJ), and the fourth year of its existence. The SSJ has grown tremendously since its inception, and this year, we received a record number of undergraduate and postgraduate submissions. This volume boasts a wide variety of papers ranging from philosophy of mind, critical theory, political philosophy, moral philosophy, and even reflections on why it is rational to fear death (in true philosophical fashion). The variety of papers reflect the philosophical interests, insights, and abilities of the brilliant students at Stellenbosch University's Philosophy Department.

This volume opens on a radical note with “To jettison the mind: consciousness, conceivability, and the mind–body problem” that tackles the age-old philosophical mind–body problem that originates in Cartesian dualism. **Reid Donson** argues that the issue lies not in the capacity of philosophers and scientists to solve the problem but lies with the ‘problem’ itself. Rather, Donson argues that the mind–body problem is a false problem because we do not understand what we mean by ‘mind’ in the first place. For this reason, we ought to jettison the concept of the mind entirely and embrace a kind of physicalism with a narrower conception of consciousness, which excludes the mind.

The next paper, “On slow reading and slow violence: slow reading to recognise and address violence done to nature”, challenges us to engage with slow philosophy. **Robin Bruce** explores the detrimental effects of instrumental reasoning about nature and how we can overcome this. Unlike spectacular or explosive violence, the slow violence that is being done to nature is more difficult to recognise and address due to its effects being spatially and temporally removed from its cause. Bruce argues and demonstrates that slow reading has three aspects that can help us address and recognise slow violence done to nature: openness, understanding, and embodiment.

Turning to political philosophy, “A labour rights-based critique of Nozick’s entitlement theory” provides a critique of Robert Nozick’s libertarian theory of justice as entitlement through the lens of labour rights. **Sasha Söderlund** explains that Nozick’s theory of justice applied to the labour context means that labour agreements that are free from direct coercion are just, and ought to be unregulated to protect individual autonomy and liberty. However, Söderlund argues that Nozick’s emphasis on consent fails to account for the unjust exploitation that arises in an economy of inequality and desperation, such as in the case of exploitative mica mining in India.

The fourth paper in this volume tackles yet another age-old philosophical problem. In “What’s desert got to do with it? Pragmatic theories of responsibility and why we can discard our modern notion of free will”, **Ivan Bock** severs the oft-thought link between classic free will or basic desert, and moral responsibility. Bock argues for a minimalist pragmatist freedom that proves to be more fruitful than the classic free will debates. This pragmatist understanding of free will allows us to have attributability, answerability, and accountability responsibility, which can be practically understood and grounded in both backwards-looking and forward-looking responsibility practices.

The next paper, “In the shadow of performance and repression: the micromanaged child”, applies Herbert Marcuse’s Freudian neo-Marxist critique of capitalist society to the phenomenon of ‘helicopter parents’ or overparenting. **Alissa Welman** explores how the parent-child relationship reproduces what Marcuse terms the ‘surplus repression’ and the ‘performance principle’ of capitalist society. Inspired by Marcuse’s notion of surplus repression, Welman argues that parents are engaging in ‘surplus-parenting’ when they micromanage their children, which demonstrates how the parent-child relationship is inextricably tied to social conditions of oppression.

The penultimate paper in this volume, “Restricted freedoms of menstruating women: a capability approach to period poverty” takes us back to political philosophy. **Hanrié Viljoen** addresses the pressing global issue of period poverty, as the lack of access to, or inability to acquire, access, and perform menstrual health products, facilities, and practices. Drawing upon Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum’s Capability Approach, Viljoen argues that period poverty is a severe barrier to the achievement of capabilities for menstruating women and girls. It bars them from attaining the capabilities of being educated, being healthy, and being socially integrated. Women and girls across the world can only be truly free if period poverty is eradicated.

This volume of the SSJ concludes with **Thomas Russell’s** philosophical meditation on death, titled “Death: a mortal answer”. Russell challenges the Roman philosopher-poet, Lucretius’ argument, who claims that it is irrational to fear death because the nature of death is the same abyss of nothingness that precedes your birth. In contrast to the cessation of being and possibility that is death, being alive has the essence of possibility structurally built into it. Russell argues, in contrast to Lucretius, that it is the very loss of the possibility of having possibilities that humans fear and are rational to fear.

On a final note, I would like to express immense gratitude to all the contributors to this volume. This includes the authors, co-editors, designer, reviewers, the Socratic Society’s departmental advisor, Dr Andrea Palk, and our departmental administrator, Ms Rachel Adams.

Happy reading!

To jettison the mind: consciousness, conceivability, and the mind–body problem

Reid Donson

Abstract

Ever since Descartes first introduced it, the mind–body problem has been the subject of much philosophical debate. I believe, however, that the key concept upon which these arguments hinge, the mind, is a nonsensical term. In this paper, I argue that the mind cannot be conceived of understandably, and that when we speak of the mind, we do not in fact know of what we speak. I begin with a brief description of the origin of the mind in Cartesian dualism, as well as an explanation of the two main opposing sides of the mind–body debate: physicalism and dualism. Thereafter, I explain my argument (inspired by AJ Ayer) as the Inconceivability Argument, which states that the mind is not conceivable in a way that makes an understandable difference in the world, and that we thus do not truly understand the mind. After addressing several potential objections, I explain the consequences that the Inconceivability Argument hold for dualism and physicalism. I conclude that dualism no longer has a place in debates about consciousness and that physicalism must narrow its definition so that it only includes measurable cognitive processes, but not subjective experience. If we wish to understand what we speak, write, and argue about, then it is necessary to jettison the concept of the mind.

About the author

Reid Donson (he/him) is currently completing his Honour's degree in Philosophy at Stellenbosch University. His Honours research can be described as an existentialist approach to psychiatry, in which he attempts to develop an ontological theory of the human self that centres anxiety and depression (as opposed to reason). Next year, he plans on making a switch to journalism, through which he hopes to use his passion for writing to truly make an impact in the world. Personally, he is obsessed with animals and his life revolves around his cat and dog, Pharaoh and Rocket.

1. Introduction

The mind–body problem has long baffled philosophers. Scholars continue to argue over how best to reconcile a seemingly immaterial mind with a material brain. However, it seems to me that the issue does not lie in the capacity of philosophers and scientists to solve the problem, but rather with the ‘problem’ itself. In this paper I will argue that the mind–body problem is a false problem, and that when we speak of the ‘mind’, we do not in fact know (or understand) what we are talking about. For this reason, we should forego the concept of the mind entirely. I will begin with a brief discussion of the origin of the mind–body problem in Cartesian methodological scepticism, and thereafter provide a brief overview of the two major opposing views in philosophy of mind: physicalism and dualism. I will then briefly discuss A. J. Ayer and how my argument draws its inspiration from his critique of metaphysics, but that my method will be different from his, arguing for *understandability* rather than *verifiability*. My discussion will then focus solely on explaining and proving my argument, showing how it hinges on the inconceivability of a mindless world, and revealing the core reason for the incomprehensibility of the mind to be what I will call hard consciousness (a shorthand for the idea posited by David Chalmers (1995)). Finally, I will use my argument to refute dualism and limit the definition of physicalism, concluding with a narrower physicalist account of consciousness which excludes the mind.

2. Descartes and the origin of the mind–body problem

The mind–body problem finds its origins in Cartesian dualism. Considered by many the catalyst of modern western philosophical

thought, René Descartes developed what is known as “*The Cartesian Method*”, an attempt at finding indubitable knowledge (Cottingham, 1986:22, italics in original). This method involved him temporarily doubting *everything* in order to determine, step by step, what he can be certain of (ibid.:29). The first thing Descartes finds he can know with certainty is that he is thinking (as by the sheer act of doubting, he is thinking), and he then infers from thought to existence in his famous phrase “I think, therefore I am” (quoted in Trifu & Trifu, 2024:2).¹ This existing “I” was not for Descartes a physical, material “I”, but rather his “soul” (or, for our purposes, his mind) (Cottingham, 1986:112). This is because Descartes believed that he could not doubt his own existence, but that he could doubt that he had a body, and as such, that which is indubitably existing is not his body (ibid.). Descartes thus believed that there was a distinction (and separation) between the “*res extensa*, literally ‘extended thing’”, and the “*res cogitans* (‘thinking thing’)” (ibid.:84, italics in original). In simple terms, the “extended thing” is the body and the “thinking thing” is the mind (ibid.). This describes “Cartesian dualism” and is the origin of the mind–body problem: the difficulty with reconciling how the mind (an immaterial substance) can affect and cause action in the body (a material substance) (ibid.:19). Descartes believed that the mind and body were able to interact due to the pineal gland: a small gland in the brain which “the mind prevails upon... to change the course of the animal [and human] spirits so as to bring about bodily movements” (McLaughlin, 1993:166). In other words, the mind influences the body through this gland. However, modern medicine proves that Descartes was mistaken about the function of the pineal gland, and even if this were not the case, there would still be the question of

to move from doubt to certainty without making such assumptions, it seems he falters here in his own method.

¹ Such a leap is considered by many to be unwarranted, since he is assuming that thought necessitates there be an “I” to do said thinking (Lawhead, 2018:35). As it was Descartes’ mission

how the immaterial mind interacts with a material pineal gland (Peres *et al.*, 2019:1700).² Descartes thus never established a convincing link between the mind and body, and for this reason few philosophers remain Cartesian dualists, with many subscribing to physicalism instead.

3. Physicalism and functionalism

Physicalism is the view, most popular in the natural/physical sciences today, that the mind and body are not separate but that the mind in fact *is* the body (or specifically, the brain) (Maung, 2019:61). Broadly speaking, there are two different categories that physicalists fall into: “non-reductive physicalists and reductive physicalists” (Kim, 2011:14). For the latter, the mind is identical (or “reducible”) to the brain, such that when we speak of the mind we are necessarily also speaking of the brain, or at least part of the brain (*ibid.*). Such physicalists believe that supposedly mental properties are in fact only “physical properties” (*ibid.*). Non-reductive physicalists, on the other hand, are not doubtful of the existence of mental properties, and challenge the idea that they are simply identical to the physical (i.e., the brain) (*ibid.*:11). Jaegwon Kim explains that an important aspect of non-reductive physicalism is what he calls “*Mind-Body Supervenience*”, which is the idea that mental properties exist but are inextricably linked to (or supervene on) the physical (2011:9, italics in original). According to this theory, certain mental properties necessarily arise from certain physical properties to the extent that if two beings are identical in brain structure, they are necessarily also identical in the structure of their minds; they would be, for all intents and purposes, exact replicas of each other on both a physical and a mental level (*ibid.*:10).³ This view is of course not without its critics.

² It was found that the primary function of the pineal gland is the secretion of melatonin, a hormone which has been used to treat headaches (Peres *et al.*, 2019:1700).

I cannot (and need not) address all the objections to physicalism here, but I would like to mention the one most pertinent to my description of physicalism. Critics have attempted to refute physicalism by arguing that if mental properties are (under the reductionist view) reducible to or (under the non-reductionist view) inextricably linked to “particular brain states”, then that would mean creatures with a different biological makeup to humans could not present with the same mental properties (Schwitzgebel, 2014:670). Kim provides an example, saying that according to such physicalist views, an octopus would not be able to experience pain in the same way a human does because it is not neurologically identical to the human brain (2011:130). This seems obviously incorrect as harmed octopuses exhibit behaviour which clearly indicate they are in a state of pain. In response to this objection, the theory of “functionalism” was developed (*ibid.*:129). Functionalism is the idea that certain brain states function in ways that give rise to certain mental states, and that said mental states are not unique to one specific brain state (*ibid.*:130-131).⁴ As such, an octopus’ brain state and a human’s brain state could both give rise to the same mental state (e.g., pain) (*ibid.*:131). This seemingly solves the problem of wildly different creatures with similar mental states. However, despite the popularity of this theory and physicalism in general, there are still those who advocate for a new kind of dualism instead.

4. Contemporary dualism and the theory of qualia

Whereas Cartesian dualism does not have many serious advocates in academic circles today, there is a contemporary version of mind–body dualism that remains popular. According to this view,

³ By “identical” I am referring to qualitative identity, rather than numerical identity.

⁴ Hilary Putnam called this phenomenon “the multiple realizability of the mental” (Salazar, 2019:16).

there is an important part of human consciousness that physicalism does not account for: the uniqueness and inherent subjectivity of human experience (Jackson, 1982:131). This problem can be best described using a thought experiment developed by philosopher Frank Jackson. Imagine, says Jackson (1982:130), that there is a scientist named Mary who lives inside a room in which everything is black-and-white. Despite having never seen colour before, she is a master in colour-vision and knows everything there is to know about what happens inside a human when they see colour. Now imagine Mary leaves her room and sees a red apple for the first time: does she learn anything new from the experience of seeing colour that she did not already know from her knowledge of the physical processes of colour-vision? For dualists, it seems intuitively clear that Mary *would* learn something new. This experiential quality to consciousness is known as “qualia” (Jackson, 1982:130). Dualists argue that the existence of qualia proves that there is an element to consciousness that cannot be explained through neural processes, and that the mind is thus (at least to some extent) separate from the brain (Robinson, 2023). Naturally, there are those who take issue with this theory.

The biggest problem with a qualia-centred dualism is the difficulty in actually explaining qualia itself. Dualists like to explain qualia in terms of what they are *not* (i.e., neural processes), but struggle to define qualia in terms of what they *are*, beyond describing them as ‘experience’ or what “it is like to *be*” someone or something (Nagel, 1974:436, italics in original). Thus, Shevlin describes qualia as “*ineffable*; that is, they cannot neatly be put into words” (2019:37, italics in original). Robinson calls this ineffability (or dare I say, inexplicability) “the *queerness* of the mental”, and explains that if the mind and qualia are

defined as immaterial, then we need a proper account of their relation to the physical world (2023, italics in original). One should recall that this is the same problem faced by Cartesian dualism (Cottingham, 1986:119). It appears that any dualistic account of the mind and body will need to be able to explain what exactly the mind and qualia are and how they function in an otherwise material world for it to be an acceptable theory.⁵ It is not enough to simply argue for an experiential gap in the physicalist account; that gap itself needs to be properly explained and defined. Having now discussed both physicalism and dualism, it is clear that there is no consensus on which conception of the mind best solves the mind–body problem. This leads me into my primary discussion for this paper: the problem with the ‘mind’ itself as a concept.

5. Ayer and the problem with the mind

Despite the continuous discussion surrounding the mind and how it links to the brain, it is my argument that we do not in fact know of what we speak when we speak of the ‘mind’, and that the term’s usage causes more confusion than anything else. I am here drawing inspiration from the argument made by A. J. Ayer (1934:339) that metaphysical claims are “nonsensical” and “meaningless” due to their inability to be observed and verified. For Ayer, since metaphysics does not deal with reality, but rather with that which (apparently) lies below or beyond reality, it is not possible to confirm whether metaphysical statements are true or false. They are thus neither true nor false: they simply do not assert or mean anything. It is the equivalent of saying “Garbage handbag kill”: it would make no sense to say of such a statement that it is true or that it is false; it is simply nonsensical and thus asserts nothing to which we can attribute truth or falsity (ibid.:345).

⁵ Jackson refers to qualia as “epiphenomenal”, meaning that they are “causally inefficacious” and have no impact on the (physical) world (1982:133). However, this is exactly the issue:

if qualia make no perceivable difference to the world, then how can we know that they exist? How can we even know what they are?

I would like to apply this line of thinking specifically to statements concerning the mind. When we make statements such as “the mind arises from the brain” or “the mind is independent of the brain”, we enter into metaphysical territory (often without even meaning to). While I draw inspiration from Ayer, my argument will not hinge on verifiability.

I have limited the scope of my argument not to what is verifiable, but to what is *conceivable*. My reasoning for this decision is twofold. Firstly, I believe conceivability is the primary issue in discussions of the mind. This should become clear in the process of my argument. Secondly, Ayer’s Verification Principle is highly disputed. Many have argued that he falters in his own logic: his argument hinges on the premise that a statement is meaningful if and only if it can be in principle empirically verified, but this statement itself is not empirically verifiable (Ogan & Ariche, 2018:34). How then do we know that it is meaningful? Whether or not this rebuttal seems convincing, I would rather not base my argument on such a controversial theory. Thus, rather than arguing that statements about the mind are unverifiable and thus meaningless, I am arguing that due to the metaphysical nature of the mind (which, I will argue, is evident even in physicalist accounts), we are unsure of what we speak when we make statements about the mind. I am thus not arguing that such statements are meaningless, but rather that we simply do not know whether they are

meaningful or not.⁶ For this reason, I will not be using the Verification Principle to prove my point but will rather be making use of an adapted version of Brian Cutter’s “*Inconceivability Argument*” (2023:330, italics in original).

6. The argument from inconceivability

My argument against the use of the term ‘mind’ hinges on the idea of inconceivability. In his argument against physicalism, Cutter explains that it is inconceivable that “phenomenal” experiences (of the mind) should arise plainly from the physical properties of the brain (2023:330). Since for Cutter inconceivability is an indicator of factual impossibility, he is of the opinion that the physicalist belief in physical properties underlying all aspects of the mind is unfounded (*ibid.*). It is not of importance to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Cutter’s argument in this paper. I rather wish to draw inspiration from his argument’s logical form. My argument is stated as follows:

(P1) If we cannot conceive of a world in which the non-existence (or non-presence) of the mind makes an *understandable* difference, then we do not truly understand what we mean by the ‘mind’.⁷

(P2) We cannot conceive of a world in which the non-existence (or non-presence) of the mind makes an *understandable* difference.⁸

⁶ This also means that I am not making the radical claim that the mind does not exist. There could very well be something like a mind, and we are simply “cognitively closed” off from ever understanding it, as argued by Colin McGinn (1989:350). Whether something akin to the mind does or does not exist, however, is irrelevant to this paper. As will be clarified below, I am rather arguing that we do not understand what we mean by the mind, and as such should cease all uses of and references to the term.

⁷ It is important to note that I use the word *understandable* rather than *verifiable* or *observable*, so as not to appeal to the Verification Principle. It also seems to me that for the mind to be verifiable, it needs to be, first and foremost,

understandable, otherwise we would have no way of knowing or interpreting what exactly it is that needs verifying. As such, if the mind is not understandable, we need not worry about its verifiability.

⁸ As I will be using the term *understand* often in this paper, and as it is the crux of my argument, I think it best to briefly define exactly what I mean by the term. One can be said to understand something when they are able to comprehend, formulate, and express what makes that thing what it is (i.e., what it consists of and/or how it functions). Thus, when I argue that the mind does not make an *understandable difference* in the world, I am arguing that we are unable to

(C) Therefore, we do not truly understand what we mean by the 'mind'⁹

Whereas premise 2 will need much arguing and elaboration, premise 1 seems self-evidently true. If we cannot understand the difference something's presence in the world makes, then how can we say we actually understand that thing? If I were to say that I understand oxygen but could not explain the difference between a world with oxygen and a world without oxygen, I would be hard-pressed to find someone who actually believed I truly understood oxygen. As such, I take premise 1 to be self-evident.¹⁰ I will thus be dedicating the majority of my efforts to proving the second premise, that a world in which the mind is absent in a way that is understandably different from a world in which the mind is present, is inconceivable. In order to do this, I will need to bring the concept of consciousness into the discussion and differentiate between what Chalmers calls the "hard" and 'easy' problems" of consciousness (1995:200).

6.1. Easy and hard consciousness

My argument aligns somewhat with an argument from Chalmers that it is "the hard problem of consciousness" which causes our confusion about the 'mind' (1995:201). To attempt to define consciousness is to face many (if not all) the same challenges one faces in trying to define the mind. For some, consciousness is just another, more contemporary, term for the mind (Prabhu & Bhat, 2013:182). Others consider consciousness only one aspect of the mind (Earl, 2019:84). Either way,

most understand consciousness as encompassing "many different phenomena" (e.g., qualitative experience, cognition, awareness, rationality, etc.) (Chalmers, 1995:200). Chalmers divides consciousness into those aspects which are easier to understand, verify, and explain, and those aspects which seem to resist explanation (1995:200). The former aspects, which we can call easy consciousness, are those parts of consciousness which can be analysed via scientific investigation, such as the ability to relay experiential information or "react to environmental stimuli" (ibid.). The inexplicable aspects, which we can call hard consciousness, refer to the "subjective" nature of human existence, or "one's ongoing experience" (Chalmers, 1995:200; Earl, 2019:84). It is hard consciousness to which dualists refer when they speak of "qualia" (Chalmers, 1995:201). Whether consciousness is another word for the mind or only a part of the mind, it would seem that the confusion surrounding the mind is caused by hard consciousness (ibid.). As such, it is this aspect, "the subjective aspect of experience", which my argument specifically challenges, and this will become evident as we discuss premise 2 (ibid.).

6.2. Proving the second premise: why we cannot conceive of a mindless world

In order to prove the validity of premise 2, I will make use of a simple thought experiment. Imagine that there are two people named Sarah and Lana who live on two different versions of Earth. Sarah lives on Earth-1 in which everyone, including herself, have minds. Lana lives on Earth-2 in which everyone, including herself, *do not* have

comprehend, formulate, and express how a world-with-mind is different to a world-without-mind.

⁹ I have used (P1) to indicate 'Premise 1' and (P2) to indicate 'Premise 2'. (C) refers to the argument's conclusion.

¹⁰ One may very well point out logic or mathematics as examples of things we are able to understand without needing to understand the difference they make in the world. For example, we can understand that $1 + 1 = 2$ without any real-world reference; we need not think $1 \text{ cow} + 1 \text{ cow} = 2 \text{ cows}$

for it to make sense. However, I would argue that logic and math differ from the mind in that they are thought structures or tools which we use to think, and as such they do not *exist* in a strict sense of the word. The mind, on the other hand, while not considered tangible by dualists, is at the very least believed to exist and is able to actively influence the world. It is thus necessary to understand this effect on the world, to understand what it means to say the mind exists, if we are to say that we understand the mind itself.

minds. In every other way, Earth-1 and Earth-2 are identical. Now I ask the reader: are you able to describe the difference between Sarah and Lana? Is there a conceivable difference between them given that everything about them (including the fact that they have brains that function correctly) is identical, except that one has a mind, and the other does not?

Chalmers would argue that there *is* a conceivable difference between Sarah and Lana, according to his “Conceivability Argument” (2002:249). Chalmers says that it is possible to conceive of “a *zombie*: a system that is physically identical to a conscious being but that lacks consciousness entirely” (ibid., italics in original). In terms of our thought experiment, Lana would be Chalmers’ zombie: she would be in all observable ways identical to Sarah, but she would have no depth to her (i.e., no subjectivity). However, the idea that this is conceivable is not convincing to me. Daniel Dennett agrees, arguing that if a zombie truly is physically identical to a human, then it would be behaviourally identical too, even down to the behaviour of its smallest atoms, since Chalmers describes them as being “molecule-for-molecule identical” with humans (Chalmers, 2002:249; Dennett, 1995:322). Since this is the case, Dennett argues that to say we can conceive of a zombie in a way that understandably differentiates between it and a human is to overestimate our conceptive abilities (ibid.:325). In other words, it makes no sense to say that Lana is identical to Sarah in every way but that there is still something missing (i.e., the mind). This will make more sense after dealing with the first and most obvious objection to this argument.

One may well object that I am overemphasising the metaphysical (even ethereal) quality of the mind and neglecting those aspects of the mind

which are more easily explainable (Chalmers, 1995:200). Such an objector may rightfully call upon those aspects of the mind that we earlier grouped under the category of “easy consciousness”. I concede that it *may* be possible to conceive of a difference between Sarah and Lana in terms of easy consciousness; the former exhibiting such consciousness and the latter not. For example, we can imagine that if Sarah stubs her toe, she would be able to report that the event caused her pain (due to her brain’s ability to connect a particular sensation with its most likely cause) (ibid.:201). It is also possible for us to imagine that if Lana stubs her toe, she would be unable to report that it was the action of stubbing her toe that resulted in the ensuing pain, since she does not have access to easy consciousness (we can imagine that there is a disconnect somewhere in her neural pathways that prevents her from being able to connect an effect with its most plausible cause) (ibid.).¹¹ While such a case is clearly conceivable, I hesitate to accept that it is conceivable in a way that makes an *understandable* difference. While we may be able to claim that we can conceive of some kind of disconnect in Lana’s brain, pinpointing exactly where and what that disconnect is seems more difficult. Chalmers himself acknowledges this when he says that “we do not yet have anything close to a complete explanation of these phenomena” (i.e., phenomena related to easy consciousness) (1995:201). However, it is possible that we simply do not fully understand easy consciousness *now*, but that in the future, with enough developments in science, we will. Therefore, let us assume that the “easy consciousness” objection holds. I would like to show that the biggest proof of premise 2 would nevertheless still apply, as it appeals to *hard* consciousness.

¹¹ Such an example assumes that the mind at the very least arises from the brain and would thus fit into a physicalist’s account of the mind. As such, a strict dualist would not be

able to make such an objection appealing to easy consciousness (as they believe that the mind is separate from the brain).

The core reason that Lana and her fellow mindless humans on Earth-2 cannot be conceived of has to do with the nature of hard consciousness. If Lana is without a mind, she is without hard consciousness, or “subjective...experience” (Chalmers, 1995:201). For Sarah, when she stubs her toe, she not only enters the brain state that correlates with the mental state of pain, but she also *experiences* pain (ibid.). This is the “what it is like” aspect of the mind (Nagel, 1974:438). To quote Thomas Nagel, “there is something it is like to *be*”: something it is like to be you, something it is like to be me, and something it is like to be Sarah (ibid.:436, italics in original). However, this is not the case for Lana. There is nothing it is like to *be* Lana because Lana has no hard consciousness. When Lana stubs her toe, although her neurons fire in the exact same ways as Sarah’s does, and although she enters the brain state that would normally correlate with pain, she experiences no pain. This is the biggest issue with the mind and why I believe premise 2 succeeds: Lana does not seem conceivable. If, as Nagel argues, we cannot even conceive of what it would be like to be a different organism, how can we conceive of what it would be like to have nothing in life be like anything at all (or, put simply, to live as if we were experiencing life but to never actually experience anything) (ibid.:442)? This does not seem plausible. To demonstrate this further, I will deal with one final objection before moving on.

One may object that Lana is clearly conceivable because otherwise I would not have been able to describe her the way I have. They might say that in trying to prove the inconceivability of Lana, I have in fact conceived of her myself. To such an objector I posit the following rebuttal. It is possible to conceive of a man who sticks his hand into a fire and, upon removing it from the flame, finds that his hand has been *frozen* by the heat of the fire. Such a scenario is entirely conceivable. However, it is not conceivable in an understandable way. While I can imagine the

scenario from the perspective of a spectator watching it unfold, I cannot imagine it from inside the event. In other words, I cannot conceive of what it would take for a fire to have a freezing effect on a hand. The inner workings of such a scenario escape me. Importantly, in such a scenario I need not understand the “inside” of the event for me to adequately understand fire (at least from a basic, observer’s perspective), since the main difference between a world in which fire burns and a world in which fire freezes would be the “outside” effect, the observable burning or freezing; however, this does not work the same for the Lana scenario. Since the mind by definition has to do with the inner workings of someone’s experience, to adequately understand the difference between Sarah and Lana, one would need to understand the difference “from the inside”, i.e., from each of their perspectives. The basis of this idea is by no means new. Collingwood posited a similar idea in discussing the difference between the objects of study in science and history. As explained by Van Niekerk,

natural events can be explained only ‘from the outside’, and this involves the kind of procedures set forth in positivist theory. Historical actions (i.e. the achievements of human culture), however, are not ‘mere events’; they have an ‘inside’ or a ‘thought-side’. Their ‘explanation’ requires the discovery of the thought of the agent which the action as a whole expresses (Van Niekerk, 1990:5-6).

While I am not discussing history, the basic idea remains the same: to understand the mind (or even the products of the mind), one must understand its “inside” or “thought-side” (Van Niekerk, 1990:5). Thus, what I have described about Lana shows that I have conceived of her from the ‘outside’, but not from the “inside”, and as such I do not adequately understand the difference between her and Sarah.

6.3. Taking stock

I have now shown, to the best of my ability, that the second premise is true. Premise 1 states that if we cannot conceive of a world in which the non-existence (or non-presence) of the mind makes an understandable difference, then we do not truly understand what we mean by the ‘mind’. I argued that such a premise is intuitively true. Premise 2 states that we cannot conceive of a world in which the non-existence (or non-presence) of the mind makes an understandable difference. I have provided evidence in this regard. Therefore, given that premise 1 and premise 2 are true, it necessarily follows that we do not truly understand what we mean by the ‘mind’. I think it necessary to briefly touch on what this means for dualism and physicalism.

7. The fate of dualism

Dualism naturally falls away as a result of the Inconceivability Argument. As we have discussed, a mind–body dualist believes that there is a distinct difference between the brain and the mind, and qualia (i.e., hard consciousness) is often called upon as evidence of this difference (Jackson, 1982:130). However, we have established that it is in fact hard consciousness which makes the mind incomprehensible and, as such, any theory that speaks of hard consciousness or the mind creates more confusion than clarity. There may of course still be dualists who disagree with my conclusion.

I predict that objectors would most likely draw on findings in contemporary cognitive science to dispute my point. For example, they may call upon Benjamin Libet, a cognitive scientist who claimed to have proven the distinction between the mind and the brain by showing that there is a delay between “brain processes” and their

corresponding “mental events” (Vacariu, 2011:31). In other words, Libet supposedly showed that there is a short period of time between the brain’s decision to perform an action and the individual themselves (i.e., the “mind”) becoming aware of said decision (ibid.). A dualist may thus argue that we *can* conceive of a world in which the absence of the mind makes an understandable difference, namely a world in which there is no such delay between the brain’s decision and the subject’s awareness of that decision. Such an argument would supposedly refute the first premise of my argument and thus refute its conclusion that the mind is not understandable. While I do not deny the conceivability of the world they are proposing, I am not convinced that this refutes my argument.

There are two reasons I believe an argument drawing on Libet’s delay (and those like it) fail to refute my Inconceivability Argument. Firstly, there have been doubts cast on Libet’s findings which, if correct, neutralises the strength of the dualist’s objection (as there would be no proof of Libet’s delay in this world and thus conceiving of a world without such a delay would not necessarily be conceiving of a world different from our own) (Lacalli, 2023).¹² Secondly, and more importantly, even if Libet’s delay exists, it only accounts for easy consciousness, as it is only such consciousness which can be measured and analysed scientifically (Chalmers, 1995:200). This means that even in the conceived world without Libet’s delay, hard consciousness (or the lack thereof) can still not be accounted for in a way that makes an understandable difference. Since I have explained that hard consciousness is the real problem in our understanding of the mind, my argument remains unrefuted by those objectors who attempt to use cognitive science as a rebuttal (since, like Libet’s delay, cognitive science only applies to easy consciousness). Having dealt with

importantly, as I explain after this, the validity of my argument does not rest on the failing of Libet’s delay.

¹² As I am no scientist, I am in no position to discuss the plausibility of the doubts cast on Libet’s findings. If the reader would like to know more, see Neafsey (2021). Most

dualism, we now move on to the consequences of the Inconceivability Argument for physicalism.

8. The fate of physicalism

Now it may be that a reader finds it difficult to distinguish between my view and physicalism.¹³ A reductive physicalist may argue that I am simply repeating what they have been saying: that the mind is simply the brain, and that when we speak of the mind we are actually only speaking of the brain. However, this would be an incorrect interpretation of my argument. The difference is that physicalists are attempting to reconcile the mind and the body/brain by explaining that the former is simply the latter, whereas I would like to jettison the concept of the ‘mind’ entirely (Kim, 2011:14). Even physicalists acknowledge that there are different meanings associated with ‘mind’ and ‘brain’, otherwise they would not need to write papers arguing that the one is the other; it would be obvious. As such, even if a physicalist claiming that “the mind *is* the brain” *thinks* that they are making an identity claim the likes of “a bachelor *is* an unmarried man” (where both the former and the latter have the same denotation), all they are really doing is attempting to reconcile the meanings associated with the mind and those associated with the brain. The problem is that the concept of the mind and the meaning we associate with it will always be linked to its metaphysical roots (i.e., Descartes’ conception of

the mind) no matter how much we try to explain it in terms of the brain. As such, the mind will remain incomprehensible. Considering all this, do we now need to forego physicalism as well?

My answer is no. Rather than completely abandoning physicalism, I argue that what is necessary is a redefining of the theory. In light of what has been discussed, it seems that the only acceptable physicalist position is one which does not argue over issues of hard consciousness at all, but that only applies the term ‘consciousness’ to Chalmers’ easy problems (1995:200). I have shown above why hard consciousness is the core reason that the mind is incomprehensible. It thus follows that if we must talk of consciousness, we can only understandably apply it to easy consciousness, as this would allow for an understanding of consciousness as a measurable functioning of the brain.¹⁴ This is the only application of consciousness that avoids the inconceivability problem.¹⁵ However, as we have established that the concept of the mind is inextricably linked to the idea of hard consciousness, we must leave the mind behind.¹⁶

9. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the problem with the ‘mind’ as a concept, arguing that it leads to false problems, such as the infamous mind–body problem, and that the term should thus be jettisoned. I traced the mind–body problem from

¹³ I will be focusing solely on reductive physicalism, as non-reductive physicalism hinges on the idea that the mind is a different substance to the body, which arises from the brain (Kim, 2011:10). Thus, such a position is naturally ruled out by my argument as not understandable as a result of the incomprehensibility of the mind.

¹⁴ This of course seems to imply that we leave all talk of consciousness to science, which would understandably leave a bad taste in the mouths of many philosophers. I do believe that there is a space in philosophy for talk of *human experience* (i.e., what it is like to exist and be a human being). We see many such writings in the works of existentialist philosophers. However, we have seen that such ‘what it is like’ talk only serves to create confusion in discussions attempting to explain what consciousness is.

¹⁵ Such an understanding of consciousness presupposes that easy consciousness is understandable, which is debatable. See the third paragraph of section 6.2. However, I am conceding that easy consciousness *may* be understandable in the absence of a convincing opposing argument and given “Libet’s ‘delay’ problem” (which I discussed in section 7) (Vacariu, 2011:31). It is, of course, up to the reader to decide whether they accept an easy consciousness physicalism or would rather forego physicalism entirely.

¹⁶ It is important to note that I am not concluding that the mind does not exist. Rather, I am simply saying that we do not understand what we mean by the ‘mind’ and are thus not even capable of understandably arguing that the mind does or does not exist.

its origins in Cartesian dualism to contemporary attempts at solving it, namely physicalism and modern dualism. Laying out my argument, I set out to prove its two premises, the first of which I found self-evidently true, and the second of which I argued for using the idea that a mindless world is inconceivable. Dealing with multiple possible objections to my argument, I finally addressed what it means for dualism and physicalism,

concluding that the former should be dismissed, and the latter should be narrowed, excluding all talk of subjective experience. As I recognise the radicalness of disowning the 'mind', I invite the reader to develop their own objections to my argument. However, they would need to be able to show how a mindless world is conceivable in a way that makes an understandable difference.

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On slow reading and slow violence: slow reading to recognise and address violence done to nature

Robin Bruce

Abstract

Could reading about nature in a different way aid us in recognising and addressing the damage humans are doing to it? In this paper, I argue that Michelle Boulous Walker's theory of slow reading can help us recognise and address climate change, radiological violence, deforestation, and other slow violences done to nature. Reading slowly, and taking one's time to dwell is an open, understanding, and embodied concept, one that values returning, again and again, to uncover anew the wisdom that lies within a text. Slow violence, conceptualised by Rob Nixon, is a pervasive and seemingly uneventful violence, where its effects are temporally and spatially removed from its cause. With slowness being a common factor between these concepts, I argue that one must first slow down to recognise slow violence. I will defend this view by discussing three aspects of slow reading and analysing how those three aspects connect to slow violence and aid in recognising and addressing slow violence. These three aspects of slow reading are openness, understanding, and embodiment. Through these aspects, slow reading not only aids in recognising slow violence, but it also aids in holding space for the other, therefore holding a twofold approach; both recognising and addressing slow violence.

About the author

Robin Bruce (she/her) is currently studying for her Master of Arts degree in Philosophy focusing on feminist and aesthetic philosophy. Her research focuses on the way that feminist depictions of body horror and monstrous feminine identities are disruptive to patriarchal narratives about women and therefore have the potential to be liberating to women. Her interests lie firmly rooted in continental philosophies, aesthetics, and the liberation of marginalised communities. Robin's hobbies mostly revolve around relaxing activities such as art, crocheting, reading, and sewing.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I will be exploring slow reading as a slow, understanding, embodied, and open process that can help recognise and address slow violence done to nature. Slow reading is a theory introduced by Michelle Boulous Walker in her book, *Slow Philosophy: Reading against the Institution* (2017). Her book focuses on feminist writers and their connection to slowness and transformation through their rereading of classic philosophical texts. Slow violence, as Rob Nixon discusses it, is violence that is temporally and spatially removed from its effects. Slow violence is climate change, displacement, and deforestation, to name a few. To combat slow violence, we need a slow approach which is the opposite of the instrumentalised, speed-and-efficiency-obsessed one that placed us in this ecological predicament. Slow reading is in favour of taking a slow, understanding, embodied, and open approach leading me to the conclusion that by changing the way we read and experience nature there can be an opportunity to recognise slow violence done to nature. My findings imply that a more open, understanding, and embodied approach that works with nature instead of exploiting nature is the way forward.

I first discuss slow violence as conceptualised by Rob Nixon. This discussion will take place in the section titled “Slow Violence” where I will systematically lay out what slow violence entails as well as why it is difficult to recognise and address. I will then move on to discuss the aspects of slow reading that I believe will most aid in the recognition of slow violence. This discussion will take place in the section titled “Slow Reading and Slow Violence”. Additionally, I discuss how Aldo Leopold’s writing in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) is an example of a slow reading of nature. Slow reading in this paper extends past the traditional sense of reading; reading expands to observation and experience, therefore going beyond reading as only connected to literature.

2. Slow violence

There has been a slow but steady progression in the destruction of nature. A violence is being done that is unnoticed by many and is not even believed by others. Stretching from climate change to chemical and radiational violence, it is insidious and stretched out over time and space, resulting in its inability to be recognised and addressed by our technologically adjusted attention spans (Nixon, 2011:6). Rob Nixon calls this “slow violence”, which is a “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2011:2). Slow violence is so temporally and spatially removed from its effects that it is not recognised as violence.

Slow violence is overshadowed by a more spectacular kind of violence. Violence is usually categorised as a catastrophic event, one which can be sensationalised and broadcast. As stated by Nixon, violence, “is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility” (2011:2). This spectacular violence is the normative concept of violence that is broadcasted by media outlets, commodifying these acts of violence for monetary gain, inevitably using it as a means to some end.

Within the inability to commodify slow violence lies the difficulty with its recognition: its spatial and temporal removal from its effects gives the media the inability to sensationalise it. This slow violence, therefore, is not able to be recognised or addressed in the ways that spectacular violence is. Nixon draws attention to this kind of slow violence, “a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (2011:2). Moreover, instrumental reasoning, the belief that nature and humans are there to be used, and the rise of the technological age is one of the reasons for the beliefs we have about violence. Our

shortened attention spans and inability to think of others have led to the inability to pay attention long enough to others to recognise the slow violence being done to the environment.

Slow violence has the ability to hide, appearing invisible to the arrogant and inattentive eye which accompanies instrumental reasoning. The inwardly driven nature of slow violence can be seen in chemical and radiological violence done to human, animal, and plant bodies (Nixon, 2011:6). Nixon asserts this nature by stating that:

In an age that venerates instant spectacle, slow violence is deficient in the recognizable special effects that fill movie theaters and boost ratings on TV. Chemical and radiological violence, for example, is driven inward, somatized into cellular dramas of mutation (2011:6).

Here, embodiment and time are factors that need to be considered. Slow violence is “somatized into cells”, causing an embodied suffering that is stretched out over time. The recognition of this slow violence is dependent on our ability to consider the body and its changes over time. The effects of this slow violence can be recognised if there were more attention given, attention that is exclusively being given to spectacular violence.

The attention given to spectacular violence, however, is still fostering a separation between the self and catastrophic events happening. There is a separation between the viewer and the event because there is merely an observation of the event and no embodied experience to accompany it. Within the Western world there is a hierarchy of senses, “a hierarchy that works to position sight alongside the noblest activity of the mind” (Boulous Walker, 2017:104). Michelle Boulous Walker speaks about the hierarchy of the senses. She states that “the ‘wandering glance of attention’ is able to hold numerous things at once in order to relate and compare them. In the process, it remains detached and distanced from the things it surveys” (ibid.:105). In so doing, sight can be fast-moving, taking many things

in at once while the mind sifts through the most important parts (ibid.).

Following this observation, the connection between sight and instrumental reasoning (the belief that things and others are there to be used by the individual) becomes evident. There is not only a picking of which information is the most important but also a separation between the subject and the thing being observed. There is no true embodied experience taking place, but merely a detachment, such as the viewing of spectacular violence. Slow violence on the other hand cannot be viewed in this way, it needs to be experienced to be recognised. One needs to experience the change in weather patterns year after year which is becoming more and more difficult (Renouf, 2021:3). Nevertheless, there is an embodied experience of slow violence that cannot merely be observed; it needs to be recognised through embodiment, beyond sight.

We do not experience nature in an embodied way anymore. The way we think about nature is as separate from us, not something we are in relation with. Jaquelyn Cock holds that for most people “nature” holds a connotation to wilderness, it is associated with the wild and experienced indirectly (2007:1). Therefore, ecological problems, such as climate change, are hardly recognised. Renouf states that we lack a climate “baseline” because most of the world’s population lives in urbanised environments (2021:3). Nature is seen as separate from us, a place we can visit and return from, a place where even when we interact with it, we protect ourselves with sunblock and mosquito repellent (Cock, 2007:1). The problem of this comes in when we see ourselves as separate and therefore superior to or transcending nature and allowed to use nature as we please without thought of the consequences of our actions on nature. There needs to be consideration of our relation to nature.

Nonetheless, even when we think of nature as separate from us it is not something we can completely remove ourselves from. As Cock states, “we live in nature and interact with it every day in the food we eat, the water

we drink and the air we breathe” (2007:1). Nature in this way is understood as that which is naturally occurring outside of the human subject, the elements, plants, and animals. The human connection to nature is not something we can sever. There is an embodied connection to nature through the nourishment we receive from it. Nature keeps the human body alive, without food and water there would be no embodiment (Cock, 2007:1). Even when we believe ourselves alienated from it or superior to it, nature is still needed. Through the merely instrumental mindset, however, it is impossible to consider ourselves within a reciprocal relationship with nature.

In separating ourselves from nature the economic subject (that subject who benefits from using nature as merely a resource) becomes incapable of recognising and addressing slow violence. There is an inability to address slow violence through the normative use of video media. There is a temporal disconnect between the fast-paced visual media and the slow, invisible, complex, and embodied violence. Nixon states that “casualties from slow violence are, moreover, out of sync not only with our narrative and media expectations but also with the swift seasons of electoral change” (2011: 9). How can we then recognise and address slow violence within our sensationalised media age?

Slow violence needs a different medium and narrative structure in which it can be recognised, a slower narrative that is temporally closer to slow violence itself. Instrumental reasoning is also still creating a separation between the self and nature, resulting in the inability to truly recognise the other as having intrinsic worth. Therefore, in order to not only find a correct medium to recognise and address slow violence but also be able to consider others as more than resources, there is a need for a different method with which we can read.

3. Slow reading and slow violence

I, therefore, assert the view that Michelle Boulous Walker’s slow reading as a slow, understanding,

embodied, and open approach provides a better method with which we can recognise and address slow violence done to nature. Nixon (2011:15) asks, “how do we both make slow violence visible yet also challenge the privileging of the visible?”. Slow reading does just that. In this section, I will first outline the more obvious ability that slow reading has to recognise and address slow violence. Slowing down allows us to see more, to sit with and dwell within the problems of the world. With slowing down also comes a more deliberate action, one which has been evaluated as the most effective and far-reaching (Brozyna, Guilfoos & Atlas, 2018:10).

Michelle Boulous Walker refers to Heidegger’s thoughts on being and dwelling within the world as a philosophical method that slow reading emulates. Boulous Walker discusses Heidegger extensively, incorporating him for his discussion of technology and being, within his seminal work, *The Question Concerning Technology and other essays*. Heidegger makes the connection between instrumental reasoning (the belief that nature and others are merely resources to be used) and technology. Botha writes that for Heidegger, “being is an unconcealedness or disclosiveness” (2013:158). Being for Heidegger, and as Boulous Walker sees it, is an openness to be influenced. Therefore, slow reading is an openness and a making known of previously unknown knowledge. Michelle Boulous Walker states that Heidegger “acknowledges that good art and good philosophy urges us to stop, to reconsider, to rethink everything we think we know” (2017:9). Therefore, Heidegger’s being and dwelling is to take one’s time, to slow down and be open to that inspiration or understanding that might come to you. Following this, slow reading possesses three components that can explicitly be connected to the recognition of slow violence. These three components are slowness, understanding, and openness.

Slow reading is firstly an intentional slowing down; it is temporally closer to slow violence than it is to sensationalised violence. Nixon asserted that slower

narratives, such as those in writing, are temporally closer to slow violence and therefore help to recognise slow violence (2011:15). Nixon states that “violence, above all environmental violence, needs to be seen – and deeply considered – as a contest not only over space, or bodies, or labour, or resources, but also over time” (2011:8). There is a need for the recognition that slow violence is a contest over time and attention.

Boulos Walker recognised this contest and aimed to address it with slow reading. She aimed to change the temporal nature of how we interact with reading and information, aiming to fix our attention spans to more fully grasp and sit with complex ideas. Instrumental reasoning has broken our attention spans, constantly interrupted our thoughts, and resulted in meaningless and sporadic efforts to fix ecological problems. Our inability to recognise slow violence is in part because of our degrading attention spans. Nixon states that “it becomes doubly difficult yet increasingly urgent that we focus on the toll exacted, over time, by the slow violence of ecological degradation” (2011:13). Slow reading answers this call for recognition by trying to correct attention spans through taking up the practice of slow reading. Boulos Walker advocates for giving our full attention to reading and returning, again and again, to be newly acquainted with its complexity and nuance (2017:xv). She encourages a reciprocal relationship between the self and others, allowing the reading of others to change the self.

Along with this reciprocal relationship also comes attention. If we only paid enough attention to others and dwelled for a while, there would be an understanding that makes the seemingly invisible, visible. This brings me to the second connection that slow violence necessitates slow reading. By dwelling in a text, making yourself comfortable with the content of the text, and coming to a deeper understanding, you are able to see more clearly what might be invisible to others who merely speed through the text. There is a “disclosiveness” to the text (Botha, 2013:158). One uncovers that which was hidden. Through this

uncovering, that which was once hidden is now made clear.

This brings me to the third connection to recognising slow violence: slow reading and dwelling are to be open to what is found. As stated before, slow reading is not only about dwelling through the text but also about returning. Returning to a text helps one to take one’s time to fully internalise information in order to fully understand (Boulos Walker, 2017:9). Through a returning to and a rethinking, a slowing down to contemplate the information we have just received, we experience more of someone else’s existence, someone else’s thinking process, and beliefs. Slow reading as a returning teaches empathy and understanding (Fisher, 2022:239). It is needed to expand one’s view of the world. Nixon states that:

In an age when the media venerate the spectacular when public policy is shaped primarily around perceived immediate need, a central question is strategic and representational: how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? (2011:3).

The recognition of slow violence can happen through the consideration of others. Reading slowly about nature, returning to the subjects to be inspired by the otherness of nature, the differences between humans and nature can be ethically considered. The need for the recognition of slow violence that is being done, not only to the environment but also to marginalised others, is why slow reading as a methodology is so appealing. Slow reading is not only temporally closer to the natural progression of wild nature itself, which progresses at its own slow pace, but it is also a methodology that is both ethical as it considers the other and is temporally different from merely instrumental reasoning.

In contrast to instrumental reasoning, slow reading aims to understand instead of merely accumulating

knowledge. It is a much-needed approach within the fast-moving, efficiency-driven modern world. It is also stated that slow reading is “an openness to the other that is made possible through an attentive relation that allows us to sink into the world” (Boulous Walker, 2017:178). Slow reading has an element of kinship towards that which one is trying to understand. The economic subject only understands to the point where they can use information, they understand to the point of assimilating the other into their realm of understanding (Irigaray, 2004:5). Slow reading on the other hand is attentiveness to understand the perspective of the other, who is a fully realised agent (Callicott, Parker, Batson, Bell, Brown & Moss, 2011:121). Slow reading is an attentiveness to an other or a problem, in order to realise a meaning outside the realm of the self and contemplate the realm of the other, as an other who has lived a completely different existence to the self. In the application of slow reading to our reading we change the way we think about taking in information and in doing so we are able to break the beliefs of instrumental reasoning.

Through a certain slowness we can cultivate a simpler and more understanding way of life. To fully grasp the complexity of nature and its interwovenness with human lives:

we must find our way to seeing the mineral cycles, the water cycles, air cycles, nutrient cycles as sacramental...the expression of it is simple: feeling gratitude to it all: taking responsibility for your own acts; keeping contact with the sources of energy that flow into your own life (namely dirt, water, flesh) (1995, cited in Cock, 2007:35).

We should recognise our relationship with nature as one of immense importance, and one that has been neglected for some time now. Through Boulous Walker’s slow reading, we are able to slow down and see the interconnectedness of nature. One of these interconnections is our embodied experience of nature.

4. *A Sand County Almanac* as an example of slow reading

In this section, I aim to illustrate, through the works of Aldo Leopold, how the elements of slow reading of nature help to recognise and hold space for others. As I have already shown slow reading’s connection to slow violence, this section merely adds to the argument of slow reading inspiring a relationship between the subject and the other. Aldo Leopold’s conservation ethics and his essays in, *A Sand County Almanac*, are examples of how slow reading holds space for others. He asserts the philosophy towards conservation ethics that we should recognise nature and land as something more than something we own; we should believe it to be an entity of its own which we are in community with. Leopold states that “we abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us” (1949:6). Slow reading, as I have discussed, moves beyond this instrumental thinking of others as mere resources.

Leopold’s writing, as an example of slow reading, also moves beyond the instrumental thinking of others. *A Sand County Almanac* is a series of short essays, which all hold the theme of nature. Leopold, in asserting that nature, or land, is something we need to consider ourselves in community with, brings forth a connection to others. This belief that nature is a community we are a part of is the central idea on which I wish to focus. It is the opposite of the belief that we as humans are detached or far removed from nature. Being in relation to nature is an extension of the discussion of being in relation to the other which is being carried over from Boulous Walker’s writings. Nevertheless, I would like to illustrate how Leopold’s writing holds all of the components of slow reading, and how they interconnect through his writing.

Most evidently, Leopold’s writing is related to slow reading in the sense that it takes a slow and contemplative approach to nature. He writes as nature exists, slowly, unfolding what he perceives with the connection to others in mind. Leopold questions what

the animals and landscape must be experiencing, placing himself within the mind of the other. He follows a skunk, “curious to deduce his state of mind and appetite, and destination if any” (Leopold, 1949:11). This taking up the perspective of the other is done through empathy for what the other experiences, but still holds the objectivity of nature taking its course. This reading releases control in order to experience how the animals deal with hardship as they wait for the flowers to bloom.

Leopold shows a slow and contemplative experience of nature through his writing. The things to be known about nature are learned through experience, year after year. Leopold brings forth those things that might be invisible or insignificant to others as “the trail leads past a meadow mouse (a usually unnoticed being if ever there was one)” (Callicott *et al.*, 2011:120). It takes a long time to come to understand nature deeply. Leopold’s slowness and interest in the animals and landscape are sustained by curiosity, a wonder at the natural world. It comes from a love of nature, not from a need to know everything there is to know. This relates to Bouldous Walker’s main objective, to foster a love of wisdom, above all else. Being in line with nature through the lens of love instead of instrumentalisation is what makes Leopold’s writing slow and contemplative.

In addition to his writing’s slow and contemplative nature, Leopold holds a high regard for the interconnection between humans and nature. Leopold writes about living close to nature and states that “there are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace” (Leopold, 1949:14). The line that “the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery” refers to the detachment people feel when it comes to the food industry. This results in the detachment we have around the discussions of meat production. A slow approach would give us the time to contemplate the best outcomes for all involved not only the best outcome for the economy. Leopold’s

point is that we need to understand that the source is not man-made and that it should not be taken for granted.

Leopold’s writing holds space for the animal other while simultaneously being changed by it. Callicott *et al.* state that they “suggest that the descriptive encounter with animal others provided by Leopold in the *Almanac* serves to redefine and transform the self – the self of the book’s ‘implied author’ and, through the familiar progress of reader identification with the author, this encounter also transforms the self of the reader” (2011:116). Leopold’s writing inspires a self-transformation through a relationship with others. Callicott *et al.* state in line with this transformation that “Leopold’s oblique description of these Others leads not only to his reader’s transformation of their perception of animal Others, but to a transformation of the author’s own subjectivity” (ibid.:124). There is a transformative urge, just as Bouldous Walker talks about the transformative urge that love of wisdom inspires, not to transform others but to be transformed by others.

This transformation of the self also links back to Bouldous Walker’s discussion of embodiment, as we consider the embodiment of the other. Leopold encounters animals as embodied others, not only as mindless automata (ibid.:121). Leopold also emphasises the differences between differently embodied living beings within his writing. An example of this consideration is in an essay titled *Arizona and Mexico*; he considers that for each animal, the call that announces spring means something different, and for each, it is just as important because “to the deer it is a reminder of the way of all flesh, to the pine a forecast of midnight scuffles and of blood upon the snow, to the coyote a promise of gleanings to come, to the cowman a threat of red ink at the bank, to the hunter a challenge of fang against bullet” (Leopold, 1949:115). This reading of nature expands on the idea that differences within nature should be respected. As we engage in a relationship with the other, we should be able to be open to how our perspective is different

from theirs. The same gesture might mean something completely different to them.

Most importantly, however, Leopold's writing is in line with slow reading because it holds community and our relationship with others as important. Leopold states that "when we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect" (1949:6). His discussion also adds to the discussion of love of wisdom as Bouldous Walker discussed it, as a method to understanding. He recognises however that "the land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations" (Leopold, 1949:1). He believes the idea of interconnection to nature to not be a new one, as he states that "individual thinkers since the days of Ezekial and Isaiah have asserted that the despoliation of land is not only inexpedient but wrong. Society, however, has not yet affirmed their belief. I regard the present conservation movement as the embryo of such an affirmation" (Leopold, 1949:1). It is merely that society has not developed its connection to nature fully. We can nevertheless foster this connection to nature with slow readings about nature.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that slow reading, as a method, sets us up to take a slow, understanding, and embodied approach, one that is closer aligned with the temporality of slow violence. Slow reading, therefore, gives us a better means to recognise and address slow violence; specifically, that slow violence that is done to nature. I have showcased this through using an example of writing about nature and how, through slow reading, we can take into consideration nature as an entity, different, but still important to the subject. I have highlighted three aspects of slow reading, slowness, understanding, and embodiment, and considered those as a through line of connection between slow violence and slow reading.

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A labour rights-based critique of Nozick's entitlement theory

Sasha Söderlund

Abstract

Robert Nozick's libertarian theory of justice as entitlement proposes that any transfer of private property, including one's skills, based on voluntary consent is legitimate. Applied to the labour context, Nozick contends that labour agreements free from direct coercion are just and should be unregulated to preserve autonomy and liberty, regardless of potential exploitation. This paper argues that Nozick's understanding of consent neglects the lived realities and socioeconomic inequalities that are evident in, for example, employment in the mica mining industry in India, and thus fails to address the unjust exploitation of workers. Mica mining is characterised by hazardous working conditions, child exploitation, and poor compensation rooted in socioeconomic desperation. This paper aims to highlight the necessity-driven, rather than consensual, participation of vulnerable members of society. Through a detailed analysis of Nozick's libertarian principles and their application to labour in a case study of mica mining, this paper demonstrates that the overemphasis on consent and minimal state intervention integral to this theory fails to protect those most vulnerable. This critique uncovers the limitations of Nozick's theory in addressing socioeconomic injustices and emphasises the need for a more comprehensive approach that considers social context and workers' rights. The conclusion of this paper is that Nozick's entitlement theory is incapable of achieving substantive justice in the context of labour rights.

About the author

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1. Introduction

The theory of justice as entitlement introduced by Robert Nozick asserts that the legitimate transfer of private property is based on the consent of the previous owner given without threat or coercion. However, this theory condones the active exploitation of the most vulnerable members of society trapped in industries of transfer on the basis of consent, such as mica mining in India. The mine workers in this industry have little access to socioeconomic resources and therefore have limited employment choices. Nozick's theory maintains that products of their labour are still legitimately obtained by corporations and should not be interfered with through the imposition of authoritative rules. In this paper, I will argue that Nozick's understanding of consent neglects the lived realities and systematic injustices prevalent in the employment of mica miners and ultimately fails to challenge the unjust exploitation thereof.

Firstly, this paper will provide a brief overview of Nozick's theory of justice as entitlement in terms of his conception of liberty, consent, and the minimal role of the state. Secondly, I will evaluate rights and consent in the workplace from a Nozickian perspective. Thirdly, I will provide a practical application of Nozick's theory through the examination of the mica mining industry in India. Finally, I will draw upon this application to examine the shortcomings in Nozick's consent argument to show how his theory inadequately addresses socioeconomic injustices.

2. Overview of Nozick's theory of justice as entitlement

Nozick's theory of justice as entitlement is firmly rooted in libertarian principles, with the focus of his

political theory being the freedom of individuals. His argument begins with the premise that individuals have innate natural rights to liberty derived from the state of nature.¹ The conclusion leading from this is that a human being cannot be used by another as a resource because no one can own or infringe on another's rights (Wolff, 1991:7). This is because in the libertarian view, social entities are a consequence of individual interactions. Therefore, society fundamentally consists of individual people living individual lives rather than social groups and to use a person for another's benefit amounts to nothing more than disregard for their autonomy and separateness (Farrelly, 2004:61).² Nock (1992:678) claims that the overriding moral imperative demands that individuals are regarded as the final arbitrators in their own decisions and preferences.

Scanlon (1976:20) highlights that Nozick views the right to exercise one's freedom as a natural right in the strong sense. This means that the creation and legitimacy of these rights are not grounded in the state or any other authoritative body, since people possess these natural rights independently of the social institutions in which they live. Therefore, the state must have no moral role since to do so would amount to the state doing for people what they are already entitled to do for themselves (ibid.). Nozick's strict separation between morality and politics is a problematic assumption that he fails to justify sufficiently. Nozick believes that this is an unjustifiable violation of individual liberty and therefore an illegitimate exercise of state power (ibid.). As such, the only state that can be justified is the minimal state, which bears the singular function of enforcing these natural rights and rectifying unjust holdings (Wolff, 1991:73; Nozick, 1974:149).

¹ "State of nature" here refers to the Hobbesian concept introduced in "Chapter XIII: Of the Natural Condition of Mankind, as Concerning Their Felicity and Misery" in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1985, originally published in 1651). The state of nature describes the chaotic and conflict-ridden condition that human beings would devolve into without societal structures and authorities. The assertion that individuals have innate rights derived from this condition means that people inherently possess

the freedom to do whatever is necessary to preserve their own lives and interests.

² The libertarian hyper-individualism is problematic in its oversimplification as it overlooks how individual autonomy can be shaped by social structures and interdependencies and fails to account for the ethical complexities of how individuals' choices can impact collective welfare.

Nozick derives his theory of justice as entitlement from the ownership of private property (Wolff, 1991:9). Therefore, freedom is exercised through legitimate transactions involving private property, giving rise to distributions of wealth and property. Wendt (2011:255) explains that a just Nozickian distribution of property arises from free, voluntary transfers of property acquired legitimately – not from equal distribution, which John Rawls advocates for. This highlights a key distinction between Nozick's theory of justice and Rawls' earlier theory where he argues that justice is fairness and equality (Rawls, 1971:11), whereas Nozick posits that holdings have attached entitlement and cannot be distributed equally. Just holdings constitute entitlements. A holding is unjust if it has been acquired through violence, fraud, slavery, or forcible exclusion of others (Nozick, 1974:152). No one is entitled to interfere with these rights, not even the state. According to Nozick, people are entitled to these legitimately obtained assets because their possession does not violate the entitlement of anyone else to these assets (De Gregori, 1979:20).

Consent consequently plays a vital role in Nozick's theory, according to Wolff (1991:7), since Nozick posits that the only things that can legitimately be done to an individual are those to which one agrees, and a lack of consent constitutes a violation of liberty. This includes anything done to one's property. A person's freedom depends on the extent to which others are unable to exert control over them, and to what extent one consents to this control (Wood, 2016:98). This echoes Nozick's (1974:151) core principle of justice that a distribution of property and wealth is just if people are entitled to their holdings through original acquisition, which is the process of obtaining a piece of property for the first time, or voluntary transfer.

Summarily, Nozick condemns any holding acquired through force or coercion that limits individual freedom. Therefore, consent is the primary basis for evaluation of whether a transaction is just. Nozick's evaluation of human interaction is thus governed by a narrow and specific concept that makes no mention of

the social context or relationships in which a person operates but rather treats people as individuals separated from their environment.

3. Nozick on labour rights

The point of departure for Nozick regarding labour is freely given consent. Labour is a voluntary transaction whereby the employee produces something of value to the employer in exchange for money and other benefits. Where the issue of exploitative labour necessarily arises, Nozick (1974:262) responds that the voluntariness of an individual's action depends on the alternatives available to them, and whether these alternatives are directly limited by another person. However, the concept of exploitation extends beyond the scope of voluntariness alone.

Exploitation is the use of a person's vulnerability to achieve the ends of the exploiter (Wood, 2016:92). It is not necessarily harmful or unjust, and exploitation can occur without an infringement of a person's liberty (ibid.). In the modern labour market, employers possess greater power through control of the means of production, job opportunities, and income, whereas employees are vulnerable because they need these things and must satisfy the conditions of the employer to attain them. This creates a power imbalance wherein Nozick asserts that employees still retain the autonomy to accept or reject these working conditions, but they are simultaneously choosing to dispose of the benefits that would come with employment (ibid.:97). This is not unjust, but a demonstration of autonomy which should be respected (ibid.).

This claim ignores the reality that few people are able to choose their working conditions freely because not working at all will render them unable to afford the

basic necessities needed for survival.³ Additionally, while this scenario may be exploitative, it gives rise to a mutually beneficial agreement wherein the employer gained the services of the employee and the employee was paid, which is better for them than if no transaction had occurred at all (Zwolinski, 2007:705).

Nozick holds that exploitation only becomes problematic when it constitutes coercion, as coercion threatens freedom by removing options from an individual, thereby altering their choice set and limiting their autonomy (Wood, 2016:99). Coercion occurs where, for example, a government directly interferes with a market through the policy implementation such as licensing requirements, trade restrictions, and minimum wage regulations, in order to adjust outcomes and thereby distort conditions utilised in individual decision-making (Lindsay, 2020:445). Lindsay (ibid.:449) argues that an individual facing poverty due to lack of employment opportunities in the labour market cannot be said to have been wronged as the market itself because lacks a clearly identifiable wrongdoer. This is unlike the identifiable state imposing regulations on the market with specific intended outcomes.⁴ To Nozick, this state of poverty is merely an unfortunate matter of chance but not coercive – it arises out of bad luck, not violations of liberty since no entity actively infringes on an individual's liberty. This completely ignores the role of structural violence such as structural racism, ableism, xenophobia, sexism, and heteronormativity in the cycle of poverty. Nozick assumes equality from the outset, which, given the inability of people to choose the lives they are born into, is fundamentally incorrect.

Therefore, Nozick believes that where workers are faced with the choice of working or starving, choosing to work is still voluntary even if the terms are exploitative – as long as the exploitation does not

violate their liberty or directly remove alternatives from their range of decisions (Wolff, 1991:84). It is difficult to reconcile this position with Nozick's prioritisation of liberty. He outright denies that workers taking employment opportunities with harsh working conditions, poor legal protection, and low pay are coerced (Spector, 2006:1127). He justifies this by claiming that the lack of more attractive employment alternatives arises because of other people exercising their rights legitimately and thus cannot be unjust (ibid.).

Worker's choices, even in harsh conditions like mines, are significant because they exercise their autonomy (Zwolinski, 2007:689). Nozick argues that most workers willingly accept their employment conditions, even if their options are limited. Beyond a prohibition on direct coercion, Nozick imposes no moral obligations on employers towards their employees – as it would amount to an unacceptable infringement of an employer's liberty. Nozick's employer is free to set whatever working conditions they see fit, and the worker acts as a free agent in selecting an option they deem most befitting their own preferences – even if it is exploitative. It is important to recognise that such choices are made because the alternatives – such as homelessness, financial instability or starvation – are far less desirable. Removing the most preferred option from someone in dire socioeconomic circumstances through normative rights on the grounds that it is exploitative, ultimately harms the individual it is trying to protect, and imposes an unacceptable limitation on their freedom that Nozick argues is unjustifiable (ibid.:695). Nozick argues that this is also unjustified as it does not involve direct coercion by rather mutually beneficial exploitation, which ultimately provides workers with more options, even if they are limited. (ibid.:701).

³ This observation supports the paper's argument that the Nozickian understanding of labour rights neglects the social and economic realities of workers, particularly in the necessity-driven nature of modern employment. This point that will be expanded on later in the paper.

⁴ This assumes that the market is inherently free when there is very little to indicate that it is. Scholars such as Bernard Harcourt assert that the free market is purely an illusion and is instead a heavily regulated system (Brivot, 2011:2).

Nozick's minimal state would oppose an external entity imposing substantive rules on a free and voluntary marketplace, arguing that people choose jobs based on preferences, such as meaningful work or higher wages. The state has no place to interfere with these choices (Maitland, 1989:952). He does not seem to impose the same scrutiny on workplace policies implemented by companies themselves.⁵ Therefore, establishing a set of moral rights for the workplace infringes on the freedom of the worker to choose the terms and conditions of their employment that they judge best for themselves. However, given the power imbalance inherent to the workplace, it may be impossible for workers to advocate for better conditions. Nevertheless, Nozick argues that establishing workplace rights restricts workers' autonomy by imposing terms they did not directly choose and cannot escape (Maitland, 1989:954). This ignores the fact that labour rights are developed to protect workers against workplace power imbalances and provide benefits and rights that a reasonable person is unlikely to object to and is thus protective of individual liberty.

This section demonstrated that in the consideration of employment rights, Nozick's theory avoids engagement with normative rules and instead emphasises the sanctity of (abstract) consent and liberty. It is these overly idealised concepts, disconnected from real-world conditions, that lead to the paradoxical and impractical conclusion that workplace rights that operate to protect workers are instead harmful. Therefore, by neglecting to evaluate actual working conditions that labour rights are intended to regulate, Nozick's theory is incapable of substantially addressing issues of injustice that may arise beyond the scope of coercive exploitation and

⁵ This is another indication that Nozick's theory ignores the context of the modern labour market, ignoring the significant influence of multinational corporations. It is arguable that such large companies often exercise powers akin to a state and thus should be subject to Nozick's minimal state restrictions. This oversight resonates with Wendy Brown's critique of

simple transactions. The following section will demonstrate this.

4. Practical application of Nozick's theory: mica mining

The practical scenario through which I will evaluate Nozick's theory of justice as entitlement focuses on labour rights issues of mica mining in India. Mica is a valuable crystalline material profited off by major international brands in cosmetics, electronic appliances, and automobile paints (Das & Goel, 2021:1344). The majority of mica on the market comes from Jharkland in India, even though mica mining is illegal there. This has led to this industry operating free from labour regulations, free from the obligation to provide acceptable remuneration, and free from sufficient health and safety protocols to mitigate risks posed by mining mica (ibid.:1345). It is also important to mention that while this is criminalised, the growth of this industry has largely been attributed to ineffective state governance and mismanagement (ibid.:1361).

Mining operations rely on members of communities living in the surrounding Jharkland area. The environment in which these communities live is not conducive to agriculture, and it is also removed from larger cities (ibid.:1347). Therefore, employment opportunities are limited, and people work in mines out of necessity. Furthermore, the people live in abject poverty, with little access to adequate socioeconomic resources and little power to alleviate their situation. Mica mining also poses health hazards to mine workers, with prolonged exposure leading to tuberculosis, cancer, and asthma, while mine collapses cause multiple deaths a year (Das & Goel, 2021:1348). Another dire consequence of this illegal mining operation is the extensive use of child labour, with

neoliberalism, which argues that states increasingly prioritise corporate interests over the welfare of individuals, effectively transforming state power into a mechanism that serves global capital (2015:17). Although it must be considered that this extensive corporate globalisation developed mostly after Nozick published his theory of justice.

children as young as five being removed from school and sent to mines by desperate families (Jain & Singhal, 2022:584). Despite the life-threatening conditions and routine abuse suffered by these children at the hands of their adult employers, children are forced to work long hours for small amounts of money (ibid.:587). The demand in the market that drives this work results in children being deprived of an education and better employment opportunities that could help them escape poverty (Das & Goel, 2022:1345). Therefore, their social mobility is stunted, and mine work becomes a generational necessity, with their future children facing the same circumstances.

Furthermore, the mica mining process consists of a chain of agents along which this valuable product is passed, each one charging a higher price, and the miners that face the worst conditions receive the most meagre payments (ibid.:1352). According to Nozick, each of these steps are just since it involves the voluntary transfer of goods for money. The miners exercise their free will in participating in the employment opportunity, which they then sell to agents from larger corporations. The alternative to this employment is starvation. Nozick's theory of justice claims that the most important aspect of this transaction is that the autonomy of the workers is respected. However, it is difficult to perceive this situation as anything other than harmful and exploitative, especially considering the risks involved.

What is clear is the instrumentalisation of the vulnerability and desperation of these communities to justify child abuse, low pay, and dangerous working conditions. While this employment opportunity temporarily (barely) alleviates the burden of poverty, it ultimately reinforces a vicious, unjust cycle. Nozick's theory of justice interprets this entire transaction as legitimate on the basis of liberty.⁶ However, Nozick's understanding of liberty and respect for autonomy provides no entry point to engage with these injustices

and it is clear that it does nothing to directly address the reality of this human rights crisis, which is the purpose of a theory of justice.

5. Critique of Nozick's theory

This section will critique Nozick's theory in the context of mica mining, as discussed above. Firstly, I will discuss the contradictions of Nozickian liberty. Secondly, I will examine how Nozick's formulation of consent fails to address issues of child labour, and moralised exploitation, and finally, I will discuss the shortcomings of the minimal state.

5.1. On liberty

Liberty is the most important aspect of justice to Nozick. To him, the most prominent threat to liberty is the existence of obligations that no one has consented to (Scanlon, 1976:15). This singularity renders his theory insufficient as it is not the only factor to be considered in questions of justice. He merely asserts that people have an inherent right to be free and act freely without compelling justification for why liberty alone is absolute (ibid.:7). It is insufficient to position liberty as the sole criterion for evaluating powerful institutions, such the labour market, as it overlooks broader aspects of consent and other values beyond an individual's separateness and socioeconomic circumstances (Nock, 1992:678). Scanlon (1976:17) emphasises that even liberty itself contains considerations of power dynamics when evaluating its function in a potentially just system since often the freedom of one person can limit the freedom of another – for example, a landowner's legitimate use of property limits other individuals' rights to use that property as it belongs to the landowner. This reveals a contradiction in Nozick's work as evaluating these power dynamics ensures that freedom is meaningful and not merely theoretical. This omission could allow significant inequalities to undermine meaningful liberty.

⁶ This will be discussed further in section 5.2, especially concerning child labour.

Furthermore, autonomy cannot be properly respected by merely considering the collection of individual preferences at a certain point in time (Scanlon, 1976:18). Individual liberty extends beyond the simplistic framework of consensual obligations and transactions. Nozick's theory, however, does not consider the multifaceted ways in which individuals can exercise their autonomy and assert control over their lives and the institutions in which they exist (ibid.:19). His theory lacks an understanding of the intricate networks of social rights, relationships, and obligations that constitute society and shape personal freedom, thereby reducing the complexity of human agency to a narrow conception of voluntary exchange. Consequently, Nozick's property rights framework is not an adequate account of liberty, specifically economic liberty (ibid.:25).

Furthermore, Nozick treats the preferences realised by consent as substantially the same, requiring only the sufficient exercise of free will within a range of choices. This disregards the origins and content of these preferences, failing to consider how they are influenced by social and economic conditions (ibid.:18). Considering liberty alone risks undermining its realisation, as the exercise of one's freedom is entrenched within a social system comprised of systemic constraints and competing interests (ibid.). This is important because the consequences of these individual choices are impacted by social conditions and the network of rights necessitated by these conditions. This results in the theory falling short of addressing the real complexities of liberty and robs it of its critical power (ibid.).

The importance of such a network of rights is also seen in Fowler's assertion that the Nozickian society requires, at the bare minimum, a moral education (1980:554). Nozick's theory of justice concocts a world wherein people are utterly free to pursue whatever life they choose so long as their choice does not violate the liberty of others. But it would be difficult to achieve this without people at least possessing a rough understanding of what constitutes a violation of

liberty to others. Nozick acknowledges this when he asserts that people's conceptions of utopia are antagonistic (ibid.:551). If this is accurate, then what constitutes a violation of one person's liberty is likely to differ depending on their social context and hence, a moral education is necessary. Furthermore, since liberty is subjective, it cannot be universal as Nozick proposes. The absence of this consideration in Nozick's theory indicates that it neglects the essential role that the morality of the community plays in the function of liberty (ibid.:563).

Nozick therefore fails to address issues of substantive injustice and human rights violations because his theory regarding liberty does not consider the realities of functioning in a complex social world. Nozick's case rests on the free market to such a great extent that there is no consideration for interpersonal relationships and complex interactions outside of the market (De Gregori, 1979:27), which is problematic for a theory of justice since social relationships play a vital role in this discourse. He also fails to consider the true nature of this "free" market. In respect of liberty, it is clear that Nozick does not consider fundamental aspects of what makes (free) humans in society (free) humans *in* society. If his theory is incapable of this, then it is unclear how it could be used to assess prevailing systematic injustices. This highlights the superficiality of Nozick's liberty which paradoxically categorises mica miners, as some of the most oppressed people, as free.

5.2. On consent

The crux of Nozick's approach to labour rights rests on the consent of the worker. However, Nozick fails to offer any persuasive reason as to why an industry like mica mining is consensual. He assumes too much when he asserts that people would accept the productive benefits of his *laissez-faire* capitalist system as adequate compensation for what they might have had to sacrifice in choosing to participate (Nock, 1992:689). A willingness to partake in an exploitative labour system cannot be inferred from mere acceptance of material benefits provided by this

system when the employee was faced with a much harsher alternative (Nock, 1992:689).

Nozick's theory is founded on consent but denies it where it is most important because it neglects to consider its outcomes (Lindsay, 2020:461). To argue that the freedom to contract in a market constitutes evidence of consent is to diminish the meaning of consent. Real consent is derived from choices made through being aware of one's circumstances in life and the potential outcomes and consequences of a particular choice (ibid.). Consent given beyond these parameters is insufficient.

Furthermore, consent, like liberty, cannot stand alone. Nozick's legitimisation of just acquisition of transfer positions such transactions as morally neutral when they are not. How assets are acquired or transferred is necessarily impacted by social conditions, a network of rights, personal values, and political decisions. These are where the moral significance of transactions lies (Lindsay, 2020:460). Nozick fails to account for this. The simple fact that an arrangement is mutually beneficial or that any exploitation present is not coercive is an insufficient justification for the limitation of internationally recognised rights such as dignity, health, and fair remuneration.

Finally, the most egregious aspect of mica mining is the use of child labour. Nozick attaches no further particulars to his theory in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974) regarding children, who possess a diminished capacity to exercise their free will in general. He is, however, opposed to forced labour and, arguably, the exploitative employment of a human being with a diminished capacity to exercise their free will would constitute forced labour, which Nozick does not condone. However, as explored above, Nozick qualifies coercion in strict terms without nuance for situations such as the mica mining example. This constitutes a significant gap in Nozick's theory that is not

adequately addressed and fails to consider lived realities.

Nozick's understanding of consent neglects to consider the social context people live in and how this may inadvertently limit their autonomy. This is seen in the failure to clarify issues of children's consent and advocacy for a moralised conception of exploitation.

5.3. On the minimal state

Nozick's theory posits that one can transcend one's upbringing since people are primarily responsible for their character and treatment of others' liberty. This perspective allows Nozick not to consider social context, implying that people are capable of removing themselves from their circumstances at will (Fowler, 1980:555). This in turn creates a conception of a state that does not have to assist the disadvantaged members of society through mechanisms like welfare schemes, which arguably could restore liberties that Nozick champions (ibid.:560). Poverty arising from imbalanced holdings – even if they are legitimate by Nozick's standards – is seen as an inevitability of life that the state is powerless to rectify, no matter how extreme such a deprivation might be (ibid.). It is easily imaginable how this could result in social unrest or even violence where there are large disparities of wealth creating conditions of abject suffering and blatant injustice.⁷ This consideration certainly contradicts Nozick's notion of a peaceful society where coexists without interference.

The mica mining example also illustrates the importance of state intervention in exploitative working conditions. Local communities and civil society organisations have advocated for the implementation of legislation and state intervention within this industry to combat the established illicit shadow economy that blatantly abuses its most vulnerable workers with poor wages, unsafe conditions, and no job security while simultaneously

⁷ The KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng riots in June 2021 are an example of such unrest. Sparked by the imprisonment of Jacob Zuma, the riots involved widespread unrest, looting, and violence across the two provinces. The riots highlighted deep

socioeconomic inequalities and frustrations and resulted in significant damage to businesses, infrastructure, and the loss of over 300 lives.

evading tax obligations and legal oversight (Das & Goel, 2021:1361). By formalising this sector, illegal labour practices and abuse of vulnerable workers can potentially be reduced, while contributing to national stability through proper regulation. Nozick would oppose this move since he does not believe that the state should hold any moral authority and should be confined to a “night-watchman state”, protecting only the interests of liberty following his principles of justice because freedom is the most important consideration (Nozick, 1974:149). This is ironic considering that this dire situation was exacerbated by poor state governance and the lack of state intervention and regulation (Das & Goel, 2021:1358). Nozick raises an unanswered question of what happens to the most vulnerable members of society who cannot turn to the state for assistance and cannot rebel against their employers because of their dependence on them.

Therefore, Nozick’s conception of the minimal state designed to satisfy the needs of freedom fails to offer any protection to those who may be impoverished by this system and fails to even dignify these people with a comprehensive evaluation of their circumstances, demonstrating again the inadequacy of this theory in addressing social injustices.

6. Conclusion

This paper evaluated the usefulness of Nozick’s theory for worker exploitation in the mica mining industry. After careful evaluation of his theory and the conditions mica miners endure, it must be concluded that Nozick’s theory of justice cannot sufficiently address socioeconomic injustices due to its prioritisation of consent in the realisation of liberty and state intervention. This does not fully encapsulate the lived reality and inequalities many workers face and therefore cannot provide truly just rules for property transfer. Due to this, Nozick’s theory is unable to engage with actual questions of justice on any level beyond prescribing liberty and denying social context, which is a fundamental part of any understanding of justice.

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What's desert got to do with it? Pragmatic theories of responsibility and why we can discard our modern notion of free will

Ivan Bock

Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the belief in free will and basic desert is not necessary to participate in our various responsibility practices. I discuss various concepts related to our responsibility practices, including attributability, answerability, and accountability responsibility, showing how they can be practically understood and grounded in both backwards-looking and forward-looking responsibility practices. By doing so, I show that holding people morally responsible can be justified without referencing classic free will or basic desert. Therefore, I propose that, when it comes to our moral and responsibility practices, we do not need to believe in and can discard our classical understanding of free will and embrace a minimalist pragmatic freedom.

About the author

Ivan Bock is a PhD student currently completing his thesis on virtue ethics and moral psychology. He has a day job as a business analyst working for a software development company. He hopes to complete his PhD and then to continue his philosophy career as a lecturer or a public philosopher. His interests span a large number of topic and fields, including virtue ethics, moral psychology, free will, moral luck, philosophy of religion, pragmatism, scepticism, and epistemology. He has recently grown to love reading philosophical short stories and novels, and when he is not reading or writing for his blog, he spends time rock climbing and mountain biking.

If the choice is yours, why do the thing? If another's, where are you to lay the blame for it? On gods? On atoms? Either would be insanity. All thoughts of blame are out of place. If you can, correct the offender, if not, correct the offence; if that too is impossible, what is the point of recrimination? Nothing is worth doing pointlessly.

– Marcus Aurelius (*Meditations*, Book 8, 17)

1. Introduction

The contemporary debate on free will is as contentious and lively as it has ever been. Although a lot of progress has been made in analysing concepts and advancing ever more precise arguments and thought experiments, the debate itself does not seem any closer to a conclusion than a few decades ago. In this paper, I argue that much of this debate has little impact on our actual ethical practices and that we can justify our practices of holding moral agents responsible even if we discard our modern notion of free will and basic desert. I will support this conclusion by providing an account of our moral practices without relying on notions of freedom, the ability to do otherwise, or moral desert that are not themselves based on practice. I show that our modern metaphysically-loaded notions of free will and basic desert play no role – or if they do, a largely inconsequential role – in our moral practices. We are, therefore, no worse off for believing we do not have ultimate control or responsibility – classically, free will – and can continue to hold each other responsible without believing in free will.

I will start off by providing a brief overview of the contemporary literature and the most important concepts necessary for grasping the traditional presentation and understanding of free will and moral responsibility. I will then turn to our moral practices and discuss how these are, if at all, affected by our views of free will and basic desert. I will then conclude

by discussing what an alternative and practical view of human freedom and responsibility looks like. I defend a pragmatic conception of responsibility and ethics that allows us to discard our classical understanding of free will and basic desert, thereby showing that they are not necessary concepts or beliefs to make sense of and participate in our moral and ethical practices. Rather, a minimal, pragmatic conception of freedom and responsibility is all one needs to believe in¹ to participate in our responsibility practices.

2. Free will, analytic philosophy, and pragmatism

The history of the free will debate stretches from the very beginnings of the Western intellectual tradition until today. Early versions of the types of discussion we have today can be found in Aristotle (2004:1109b29-113b23), for example, who proposed that rational creatures are capable of voluntary action and that we are responsible for our voluntary actions because they are determined by our internal states and dispositions. Soon after Aristotle, both the Stoics and Epicureans forwarded various arguments about the nature of our freedom and its relationship to natural laws and moral responsibility (see Bobzien (1998) for an extensive discussion of the stoic views on freedom and Bobzien (2000) for a discussion of Epicurus' views). Similarly, the contemporary debate on free will centres around the ability to do otherwise and its interaction with determinism and indeterminism. It is thus evident that although we have refined our concepts and improved our various formulations of problems and solutions, we are still having much the same debate. Before turning to a suggested alternative approach, I will next discuss the common concepts and positions classically put forward.

2.1. Classic free will

In order to understand the modern debate and my issue with it, it will be useful to get a basic

justifications an agent needs to appeal to or rely on when participating in our responsibility practices.

¹ Here, "believe in" should be read as being compatible with a number of varying formulations such as "commit to", "hold", "endorse", and "act on". My point is therefore about the beliefs and

understanding of the concepts at play and the main arguments forwarded.

Traditionally, free will is deeply tied to the notion of moral responsibility and the ability to do otherwise (O'Connor & Franklin, 2022). The ability to do otherwise is understood as an agent's capacity to determine their actions such that if they wanted to act differently, they could have or can in the future.² The ability to do otherwise is argued to be the fundamental requirement for being held morally responsible in the basic desert sense. Basic desert is understood as an agent being apt for moral praise or blame purely on the basis that the agent did something right or wrong.³ In other words, we can only blame an agent if it was within their power to both do and not do what they, in fact, did. Conversely, if the agent did not have the ability to do otherwise, then they cannot be blamed *purely* on the basis of what they did.

Given these basic requirements for moral responsibility, philosophers have used a number of factors to cast doubt on our ability to do otherwise. For example, a popular factor or concept is determinism in its many forms (Kane, 2005:5-10). One such form, causal determinism, is the view that every effect is wholly determined by preceding causes. This means that everything that occurs happens the way it does because of the events that precede it. If determinism is true, then it is hard to see how humans are supposed to transcend this causal network in order to be able to freely act as they choose without being determined to act in a particular way by what came before.

² I use this definition only to help introduce the topic at this point. This is only a basic definition of the ability to do otherwise, and there are a number of varying understandings and definitions depending on the nature of the ability (which should become clear as my discussion continues). For a full overview of positions, see O'Connor and Franklin's (2022) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on Free Will, specifically the section 2.2.

³ Most philosophers seem to follow Derk Pereboom's (2014:2) definition: "The desert at issue here is basic in the sense that the agent would deserve to be blamed or praised just because she has performed the action, given an understanding of its moral status, and not, for example, merely by virtue of consequentialist or contractualist considerations."

Libertarians are incompatibilists regarding free will and causal determinism (ibid.:32-33). The libertarian takes the ability to do otherwise to its metaphysical extreme and describes an agent's ability to do otherwise as them having genuine alternative possibilities when acting. An agent has genuine alternative possibilities if they can truly be said to be able to act in a number of different ways in the future regardless of the past. This means that they should, at the moment of making a decision, be able to decide between genuinely available metaphysical alternative decisions/actions without being determined one way or the other.⁴ Hard incompatibilists agree with libertarians that free will and determinism are incompatible because free will requires agents to have genuine alternative possibilities when acting (ibid.:23-31). However, the key difference is that hard incompatibilists believe that determinism is true and, therefore, humans do not possess free will.⁵

The consequence argument was in part made famous by Peter van Inwagen (1983:16) as a defence of hard incompatibilism. The basic argument amounts to arguing that we cannot change the past or the laws of physics, that these are the sufficient and complete causes of what happens in the present, and, therefore, we cannot change what we do in the present. This conclusion is then taken to support the refutation of our ability to do otherwise in the strong sense.

Compatibilists argue that free will is compatible with the existence of determinism (Kane, 2005:12). They do this by providing a variety of responses aimed at undermining the requirements of genuine alternative

⁴ Harry Frankfurt (1969:829) was the first to introduce the "principle of alternate possibilities". However, he understood the principle to be roughly synonymous with having the ability to do otherwise. Robert Kane (1996, 2007) is a well-known contemporary defender of libertarian free will that uses the phrase "genuine alternative possibilities" in this strict metaphysical sense incompatible with determinism. Throughout this paper, I will continue to distinguish between the ability to do otherwise (as merely a general description of our requisite control) and genuine alternative possibilities (as a strict understanding).

⁵ Contemporary defenders include Derk Pereboom (2001, 2014) and Gregg Caruso (2012).

possibilities or by arguing that the ability to do otherwise is not as important as being the source of one's actions, even when those actions are causally determined. Roughly, classical compatibilists accept the requirement of the ability to do otherwise, but they argue that it can be understood in a manner that is compatible with determinism. They reject the understanding of the ability to do otherwise as a person having genuine alternative possibilities. Instead, they usually argue for either an epistemically counterfactual or conditional understanding. This allows them to describe an agent as having the ability to do otherwise if the agent would have acted differently if they wanted to due to having different reasons. In other words, they are not being forced or coerced to do a thing they do not want to. Therefore, if they had different reasons, they would have done something differently than they did (ibid.:13-15).⁶ Generally, classical compatibilism is not as popular as source compatibilism (also known as deep self compatibilism). Source compatibilists usually place much less emphasis on the ability to do otherwise and much more on an agent identifying with and us attributing to them the reasons and decisions that led to an action. Thus, it is not important or problematic if our actions are determined. Rather it is important that agents identify with their reasons/decisions and serve as a sufficient source (usually understood as not being coerced) for their actions (ibid.:93-119). The most plausible versions of this proposal tend to be capacity-type responses, usually reason-responsive views (see Fischer, 2010, 2012) or identification accounts/models (see Frankfurt, 1971; Shoemaker, 2015).⁷

Finally, Revisionism was popularised and supported by Manuel Vargas (2004, 2013) as a sort of compromise and means of advancing the debate. Vargas argues that our general folk understanding of free will is, in fact, incompatibilist, and so we should conclude that

determinism really does threaten this freedom. However, he argues that although our natural understanding of free will is incompatibilist, this does not mean we have to stick to this understanding. We can revise our understanding of free will, and this is a useful endeavour because of how closely our notion of responsibility is tied to free will. Vargas' view is similar to Fischer and Ravizza's (1998) semi-compatibilism, which holds that free will might not be compatible with determinism, but moral responsibility is. The biggest difference is that Vargas is not interested in defending responsibility in the basic desert sense. Semi-compatibilism still holds that agents have a sufficient degree of control in determining their actions such that they can be held morally responsible simply for doing them (see Fischer and Ravizza's (1998) "guidance control"). Vargas has instrumental and forward-looking responsibility in mind (2013:158-198, 234-266). As such, his revisionist project entails adopting our usual language that designates our capacity for meaningful decision-making and being held responsible for it while discarding the ideas of alternative possibilities and basic desert.

Thus, based on all that has been discussed, the classical understanding of free will, and the one at play in the modern debate, is a free will that is meant to serve as a justification for moral praise and blame in the basic desert sense thanks to an agent's ability to do otherwise. A recurring theme is the understanding of the ability to do otherwise to be metaphysical in nature such that causal determinism can, on the face of it, seemingly undermine it (Kane, 2005:5-10). Very little progress has been made, and as John Searle has noted,

The persistence of the free will problem in philosophy seems to me something of a scandal. After all these centuries of writing about free will, it does not seem to me that

⁶ This view is most famously defended by David Lewis (1981) and Kadri Vihvelin (2004, 2013).

⁷ Identification account source compatibilists seem to follow Frankfurt's (1969:838-839) original thoughts more closely when he argues that it matters that someone identifies with what they did

and believes they did what they did because *they* really *wanted to*, as opposed to doing what they did *merely* because they could not have done otherwise. Reason-responsive views often still want to understand the ability to do otherwise in a classically compatibilist manner (see Fischer & Ravizza, 1998).

we have made very much progress (Searle, 2008: 37).

I agree, and it seems like the solution is to realise that the debate is mostly futile.

2.2. A pragmatic critique of classic free will

In the previous section, I gave a rough sketch of the main positions and concepts at play in the contemporary debate. As I hope is clear at this point, the usual debate surrounding free will is deeply metaphysical in nature and relies on a number of somewhat contentious ideas; ideas such as our control needing to be complete or all-encompassing if we are to be responsible and that moral desert can be basic (meaning someone can deserve something without that necessarily entailing any action or recourse). I believe there is another way to approach this topic, and it is one that usually stands in contrast to the traditional way analytic philosophers' approach free will and attempt to defend moral responsibility. My view finds inspiration in the pragmatist school of philosophy which, in this paper, takes the form of asking what, if any, consequences there are for not believing in free will and how our lack of belief in it is meant to affect the ways we live.

There is not much need to go into the details of pragmatist philosophy. For our purposes, the most important aspect is the pragmatic method of William James and the pragmatic maxim that C.S. Pierce expressed:

[T]he tangible fact at the root of all our thought-distinctions, however subtle, is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. (James, 1907:29)

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to

have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (Pierce, 1992:132)

The entire intellectual purport of any symbol consists in the total of all general modes of rational conduct which, conditionally upon all the possible different circumstances and desires, would ensue upon the acceptance of the symbol. (Pierce, 1998:346)

Pragmatism is, in this sense, first and foremost, concerned with practice. More specifically, pragmatism is concerned with how beliefs and concepts inform or effect our actions and practices, and then attempts to limit our understanding of a concept to only those effects. Whereas philosophers in the analytic tradition have long wanted to discuss essences, grounding, and sufficient and necessary causes, pragmatic philosophers want to start with our behaviours, actions, and practices and evaluate the conceptual tools we employ to navigate and guide these behaviours, actions, and practices. I want to do the same for our practices related to our sense of free will, especially moral ones.

For our purposes, a practice is any set or group of activities and actions that humans regularly engage in. As such, responsibility practices include evaluating agents and their moral characters, reflecting on our moral aims, cultivating virtue, and praising and blaming people.

Pierce's maxim is ultimately a maxim about reining in our metaphysical concepts and meanings. What is the point of discussing something if it never makes a difference to our way of living, especially if these concepts are purely principled and without any practical basis? How do we even settle such discussions? Free will, especially as it is used in the classic debate, seems like a concept that is best understood in such a pragmatic way, and that this might help us make progress with the free will problem. This is not to say no philosopher has presented a pragmatic-type theory of free will. But the majority of philosophers tackling the issue of free will

are still concerned with abstract concepts like basic desert and are getting bogged down in explicating the metaphysical nature of our free capacities.⁸

Libertarian free will requires that agents be the ultimate source of their behaviour so that we can ground and justify responsibility and accountability in the basic desert sense. The compatibilist understanding, although happier in a determined world, still wants to assign moral desert purely based on our moral evaluation of the agent's control. But a pragmatic ethic only requires, I argue, that we have some capacities relevant to responsibility practices, such as identifying with and being able to adapt according to our reasons in a way that allows us to engage and communicate with others and cultivate responsible agency. It does not seem like an agent needs to have ultimate responsibility, nor do we need to believe they are ultimately free, only enough to effectively engage in moral practices, including evaluation and cultivation. This is gained by taking our experiences and practices at face value, trying to see what these practices want to accomplish, and figuring out how our concepts and tools should be understood and need to adapt to better navigate our lives. It does not look like believing in libertarian free will grants the agent any better conceptual tools than believing in a sort of pragmatic freedom, since, as I will argue, both can allow us to justifiably engage in our moral practices. I will substantiate this argument in the next section.

Of course, this is not going to satisfy the philosopher concerned with basic moral desert and its relationship to human freedom. But the challenge that a pragmatist understanding of human freedom and responsibility poses is to ask what difference basic desert really makes. If we are able to retain most, if not all, of our

ethical and moral practices without making reference to basic desert and classical free will, then why can we not simply discard the concepts? I turn to justifying the first part of this question next.

3. Moral practices, free will, and basic desert

As I briefly mentioned in the previous section, there have certainly been philosophers who advance a similar pragmatic-type of free will in the way I mean here. These philosophers also discuss what I call our responsibility practices and create taxonomies of types of moral responsibility that are usually concerned with the responsibility type's focus or purpose (or can be framed as such). The most famous of these is P.F. Strawson's (1962) view of reactive attitudes.⁹ Strawson's work has been highly influential and his views are also compatibilist in nature, as he argued that to hold a person responsible is to believe they are apt for certain reactive attitudes, such as resentment or praise, as a result of the quality of their wills regarding us (i.e. their intentions, desires, and good or bad will they have for us), and that determinism has no effect on these sorts of attitudes and practices (Kane, 2005:107-109). These types of discussions and views lead me to believe that we have social, practical, and consequential reasons (all of which are part of or constituted by our moral practices) for holding people responsible that do not require notions of free will or basic desert.

3.1. Responsibility practices and types

Another development in the philosophy of responsibility that I also see as informed by our practices and the ways we go about holding people morally responsible is Susan Wolf's (1990:37-75) influential distinction between responsibility-as-

proposal here yet slightly differs is Jay Wallace's (1996) view that the relevant facts of being morally responsible are dependent on and grounded by our practices of holding people responsible. Although also concerned with responsibility practices, Wallace does not seem to think these themselves serve certain relational and forward-looking aims that allow us to discard the idea of basic desert, as I intend to argue.

⁸ For some notable exceptions, see Wegner (2002), Smilansky (2000), and Strawson (2010), who all argue that there are pragmatic benefits to belief in free will that would otherwise be lost, such as a belief in moral desert and a stronger sense of self-determination.

⁹ Another position that I would also label as forwarding a pragmatic-type of responsibility that seems fairly close to my

attributability and responsibility-as-accountability. More recently, David Shoemaker (2011) has also introduced responsibility-as-answerability. Typically, these different types of responsibility have different conditions for being apt and tend to involve different sorts of judgements about what the responsible agent should do or can be done to; they help us clarify the different notions of responsibility at play. Different philosophers have forwarded different definitions and understandings of this taxonomy, so there is no single agreed-upon classification.¹⁰ What is important for my purposes is that a plausible account of these sorts of responsibility types can be forwarded that makes reference to our practices and aims, since I wish to use them to demonstrate that we can continue with a variety of moral practices, regardless of whether we have free will in the classic sense. With this in mind, I argue for the following understandings:

Attributability responsibility: Our practice of evaluating the cause and origin of good or bad behaviour as being an agent's dispositions, reasons, values, motives, and aims, such that we attribute the good or bad behaviour to the agent.

Answerability responsibility: Our practice of evaluating an agent as capable of meaningfully engaging in ethical and moral behaviour, such that they consciously assent to their dispositions, reasons, values, motives, and aims in a way that allows them to appreciate the ethical and moral dimensions of their behaviour and

participate in ethical discussion and deliberation, especially when it comes to relating to and working together with others. Answerability usually entails the practice of communicating and discussing values and perceived wrongs between the parties involved, if possible and productive.¹¹

Accountability responsibility: Our practice of evaluating an agent as being apt for moral praise and blame, reward and punishment, such that holding them accountable helps restore broken positive relationships or develop virtuous dispositions/agency¹². Holding an agent accountable will usually entail expecting some further behaviour from them, such as recognition of good and bad behaviour, reparations, and further efforts to cultivate virtue.

As I understand them, these types of responsibility capture different aspects and practices we engage in as we hold one another responsible for our actions. They pick out different factors and capacities as their object of focus and evaluation. For the most part, they are related and depend on each other. What is important for now is that we realise that the conditions for responsibility all depend on the capacity of the agents in question to participate in our moral practices, as well as the aims and consequences of these practices, not on our ultimate responsibility or undetermined wills. Also, notice that I do not make mention of basic desert at all, nor need I. All of these types of

¹⁰ As examples, both Pereboom (2014) and Smith (2015) put forward different understandings of answerability than Shoemaker does. Furthermore, some philosophers believe that attributability is the only condition required for being responsible in the accountability sense (see Talbert, 2012; Schlossberger, 2022), while others believe that there are further conditions that need to be met (see Levy, 2011; Shoemaker, 2011).

¹¹ This type of responsibility is closely related to a condition for responsibility usually called "moral competence": an agent's ability to recognise and respond to moral considerations (Wolf, 1988). It is

also similar to Michael McKenna's (2012) conversational approach to responsibility, which argues that an agent's responsibility can be questioned if said agent is deemed to be incapable of acting from a will that does not meet a certain "moral quality", thus not being a valid candidate for moral assessment.

¹² I have in mind here developing our moral character such that we are better people in the future, both in what we consider and how we act. The aim is thus that praise and blame will make us better moral agents.

responsibility depend on practical forward-looking and backwards-looking notions of moral desert and responsibility. To further explain my view of responsibility and praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, I turn to explaining forward-looking and backwards-looking responsibility next.

3.1. Forward-looking vs backwards-looking practices

It is possible to describe the relationship between the three types of responsibility discussed above as sequential. In a way, we move from attributing responsibility to evaluating answerability to holding accountable. Put differently, we evaluate an agent's involvement and moral character and then attribute actions and dispositions/motivations to the agent, then we evaluate their epistemic and moral capacities by determining to what degree they voluntarily did what they did and are able to appreciate reasons and change their behaviour, and finally we determine our and their appropriate responses. As such, some of our responsibility practices seem concerned with backwards-looking responsibility and others more with forward-looking responsibility. The distinction between backwards-looking and forward-looking responsibility is used to distinguish between the different reasons for why moral responsibility is justified. Backwards-looking responsibility holds that an agent is justifiably praiseworthy or blameworthy due to them having done something good or bad. Forward-looking responsibility holds that an agent is justifiably praiseworthy or blameworthy when praising or blaming them would lead to positive consequences, especially regarding the agent's behaviours, such as them being encouraged or deterred to act in the same way they did going forward (Talbert, 2024).

I hope it is clear after our discussion of classical free will that the usual understanding of basic desert is a sort of backwards-looking responsibility. Our requirement that an agent be free when they act in order to hold them responsible is exactly because we care that it was truly them who did what we judge to

be good or bad. On my proposed pragmatic view, moral evaluations are indeed backwards-looking. But this is to set the stage, as it were, for the forward-looking responsibility practices to be justified, especially as being aimed at an appropriate target. The backwards-looking aspect is not concerned with praise and blame or justifying basic desert on my view. Thus, practically speaking, our responsibility is both backwards- and forward-looking.

Returning to our three different types of responsibility, it is again useful to consider them against backwards- and forward-looking responsibility. As I present it, attributability is wholly backwards-looking since it is chiefly concerned with evaluating and attributing behaviours, dispositions, virtues, etc., to agents. I believe answerability has both backwards- and forward-looking aspects. The attributions we make to the agent are certainly involved in judging their moral capacities and qualities, which is an important part of our answerability practices. The same is true of the agent's past and how they came to have the moral character they do. Thus, we are clearly evaluating the way the agent had acted, the motivations they had, and their capacities then and now; it matters why and how they acted. This seems to involve some backwards-looking motivations. At the same time, we are trying to assess whether the agent can meaningfully engage with our responsibility practices, which seem concerned with the present and the future; we care about the capacities they had and those they have now, since these determine to what extent they can meaningfully engage in our responsibility practices and benefit from them. As such, I think answerability is both backwards- and forward-looking. Accountability also seems somewhat concerned with backwards-looking factors, especially since judging an agent as accountable requires that they are attributable and answerable, but for the most part, it is forward-looking. It is concerned with helping restore broken positive relationships or develop virtuous dispositions/agency.

As a final means of explicating my view, let us consider accountability responsibility and forward-looking justifications. Some examples of philosophers who argue for a forward-looking account of responsibility similar to mine are Vargas (2013), Pereboom (2014), and McGeer (2018). Pereboom argues that considerations such as protecting potential victims, reconciling relationships, and moral formation more generally are able to justify many of our responsibility practices, especially punishment (2014:134). Both Vargas and McGeer propose justifications for our responsibility practices by arguing that they are aimed at cultivating better moral agency, with Vargas (2013) calling his proposal the agency cultivation model and McGeer (2018) calling her proposal the scaffolding view due to reactive attitudes assisting in the development and maintenance of our responsible agency. These sorts of views seem highly plausible and pragmatic to me, and I would only add that these forward-looking practices are informed and justified by backwards-looking practices as well.

Throughout these examples of responsibility practices, basic desert only plays the role of justifying pure blame; blame only for the sake of blame – ultimately, in practice, it justifies resentment or scorn purely because we feel like they are appropriate. It advances no cause, produces no good, and is not specifically conducive to flourishing. Why even keep the concept? It looks like our practices and aims are perfectly able to explain and justify our responsibility without it. Additionally, they do so in productive and virtue-conducive ways. As we usually understand it, basic desert requires ultimate control understood as our free will. But neither of these concepts is necessarily required for understanding and justifying our responsibility practices.

4. Pragmatic freedom and responsibility

To be clear, my contention is not that philosophers up to now discussing free will and basic desert have been completely wrong or that their ideas are not relevant to moral responsibility at all. It is intuitively the case, at least in my view, that we usually hold to some kind

of condition that the agent is not being coerced or manipulated, and so some conception of and belief in the ability to do otherwise (or, at least, a concept resembling it closely) is likely to play a role in our ethical beliefs and practices. Similarly, it also seems like it matters if you believe you are the source of your actions, at least in some sense – likely if your actions align with your consciously endorsed values and aims – and so I have a lot of sympathy for the views of many compatibilists. But the point is that these conditions or criteria can be seen as principles employed to help guide our ethical practices so that they remain productive. They do not have to be mere conditions for basic desert or blame for blame's sake.

Importantly, the general conditions of being able to do otherwise and being the source of our actions seem to me to map onto our various responsibility practices. To illustrate the point, consider our responsibility practices as backwards-looking and forward-looking again. Our sense of an action's sourcehood and how it is informed by an agent's values and aims play an integral part in our backwards-looking practices. Depending on the sourcehood and the values and reasons at play, we might be more inclined to attribute certain character traits to an agent. It seems equally clear to me that our ability to do otherwise, that is, our capacity to act according to reasons and that we can or would act differently if we had different reasons, allows for our forward-looking practices to be feasible and successful. As such, sourcehood and freedom are certainly important concepts and factors when it comes to attributability, answerability, and accountability responsibility. The point is that determinism and basic desert play no role in undermining these concepts if they are understood practically; they can be separated from our classic notion of free will. Thus, I am not saying that belief in a sort of freedom is not an essential part of believing we are justified in blaming and praising people, just that free will and basic desert in the classic sense are not and need not be.

Another important factor of pragmatic ethics is the evaluation and adaptation of moral principles and conduct according to their effectiveness.¹³ The same can be done for principles of freedom and responsibility. If we have a principle; an agent can only be blamed if they are the ultimate source of an action – where ultimate means that the reasons and motives of the agent were themselves also due to the agent in some sense – but we see that applying this principle leads to problems, then we can adjust our principle. Maybe we should rather say something like the following: an agent can only be blamed if 1) they were the source of the action such that their capacity for reasoning (especially about their behaviour and actions) combined with their values and aims is a significant enough cause¹⁴ of the action and 2) if doing so has a positive practical effect on the agent's behaviour, reasoning, and motivations such that any positive relationships are restored and the agent potentially cultivates virtuous dispositions. On pragmatism (combined with a sort of eudaimonism – that is, the view that ethics is about flourishing), this move is perfectly fine and only needs to be adjusted if it also leads to issues for our moral practices. It is not necessary to dogmatically stick to only one conception of freedom and moral responsibility. We are free to adjust or shift our beliefs as needed.

With this in mind, here is a preliminary definition of pragmatic freedom informed by our discussion:

A conceptual tool that designates a person's capacity to meaningfully determine their actions via their dispositions, reasons, values, motives, and aims such that they 1) would behave

differently if they had different dispositions, reasons, values, motives, and aims, and 2) they have the capacity to change these dispositions, reasons, values, motives, and aims through our usual relational, conversational, and responsibility practices.

All of this does bring our practical reasoning and moral psychology/phenomenology to the forefront of the debate. Discussing the boundaries of freedom will entail grappling with the ways that we actually experience moral reasoning. Pragmatic freedom will, therefore, exist on a spectrum. Different degrees of volition and freedom will be afforded depending on the psychological state the agent was in. It, therefore, seems coherent to speak of agents having different degrees of freedom.¹⁵ But to simply ask if an agent does or does not have free will, specifically if the answer has to be a simple yes or no, then the answer is going to be no.

We are now in a position to ask, does pragmatism solve the free will debate? I think, at the very least, it dissolves it by refocusing our attention toward developing tools that are meant to help us navigate the practices we find ourselves in rather than a critical evaluation of the grounds and justification of those practices found in essential rules, principles, and properties that are more metaphysical in nature than practical. It shows that belief in free will is not required to justifiably hold people responsible. As is usually the case with pragmatic projects, my view is a deflationary one in that I want to propose a less demanding and implausible conception of our idea of meaningful freedom; one grounded and justified by our responsibility practices.

¹³ This is a theme specifically in the ethics of another pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey. See the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on Dewey's Moral Philosophy, especially section 4.4 (Anderson, 2023).

¹⁴ I mean here something similar to Fischer and Ravizza's (1998:69-85) "moderate" reason-responsiveness since the agent does not need to be wholly or strongly reason-responsive, only moderately reason-responsive such that their reasons do play enough of a role to attribute the behaviour to them and to make them an appropriate target of praise or blame.

¹⁵ Daniel Dennett (2004:162-163) also uses the term "degrees of freedom" and says, "A system has a degree of freedom when there is an ensemble of possibilities of one kind or another, and which of these possibilities is actual at any time depends on whatever function or switch controls this degree of freedom". I have a different usage in mind here focused more on the degree of ability of an agent's psychological capacities to engage in ethical practices.

Dissolving the issue of free will also dissolves the issue of basic desert. The idea that someone can deserve something absent of anyone to hold them accountable is a practicably ridiculous idea. Responsibility is not some property that belongs to a thing in itself in any practically meaningful way. It is a practice between social creatures in relation to one another. Thus, the strong sense of the ability to do otherwise and basic desert, as classically understood, have no support in and no bearing on our moral practices. It does not matter whether we believe or disbelieve we have them.

The above is in opposition to the views of contemporary illusionists, who argue that although our belief in free will is an illusion, this belief nonetheless plays an important and pragmatic role in facilitating and justifying moral responsibility (Wegner, 2002; Smilansky, 2000; Strawson, 2010). Others have also argued that belief in free will has epistemic benefits regardless of whether it is true or false (Tollon, 2023). To be clear, my claim here is not that our usual folk understanding of our responsibility is not tied up with the notion of free will. I suspect it very well may be. Rather, the point is that a belief in free will is not the *only* type of belief that can ground and justify our responsibility practices to an agent. A person only needs to feel associated enough with certain reasons, be able to engage in ethical deliberation and conversation, and believe they and others are able to change. This is only a minimal and pragmatic type of freedom. Of course, this is not to say that those who do believe they have free will are not also able to justify and participate in our responsibility practices. In short, both belief and disbelief in classical free will are sufficient but not necessary for grounding our responsibility practices.

In a sense, the pragmatist is unphased by the many problems classical free will faces and by the prospect that we might not have it. Whether free will exists or not, we can remain responsible and hold each other responsible. We do not need the concept of and belief in free will to make sense of our responsibility practices. Some of these are communicative, some are

restorative, and some are virtue-conducive. All of them only require that an agent be able to participate in certain practices. At the same time, I recognise and agree that our concept of free will is so tied up with notions of absolute freedom and determination along with basic moral desert that I am not hopeful of being able to revise this notion. I think we are better off simply accepting that we do not know whether we have free will or not. Instead, we have a sort of minimal, pragmatic freedom that is perfectly capable of accounting for our practices of moral evaluations and responsibility. To either believe we have free will or not is perfectly permissible, at least when it comes to justifying our responsibility practices.

5. Conclusion

It strikes me as unfortunate that in the process of trying to make sure we are justified in holding people responsible and understanding our own freedom we have gotten stuck on the ability to do otherwise and trying to explain how it is compatible with determinism, rather than focusing on our moral and responsibility practices as constituents of human conduct and our pursuit of a good and happy life while co-existing with and depending on other people. Starting with our practices and evaluating the concepts, principles, and conditions we employ to help us live, leads to a much more fruitful understanding of ethics, responsibility, and praiseworthiness/blameworthiness. It is an understanding that is not susceptible to the threat of determinism and is much more flexible in allowing us to have fruitful and productive engagements. Describing our different responsibility practices as three types of responsibility (attributability, answerability, and accountability) that have both backwards-looking and forward-looking grounds and justifications helps us see that absolute free will and basic desert play a negligible role. Practically speaking, we do not have to believe we have free will to continue with the ethical practices we engage in. It seems about time we accept that we can discard our modern notion

of free will and embrace a more minimalist, deflationary pragmatic freedom.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Fabio Tollon for his insightful comments and our always enjoyable discussions, which added to and improved the clarity of the ideas presented here.

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In the shadow of performance and repression: the micromanaged child

Alissa Welman

Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of overparenting by analysing behaviours associated with overparenting, such as obsessing over a child's achievements or weight, using Marcuse's notions of surplus repression and the performance principle. The literature on the micromanagement of children reveals a pattern, and motivations of overparenting, that can be understood in light of the Freudian concepts of repression and identity. By taking a closer look at the micromanagement of childhoods, parents can be interpreted as producers of surplus repression that concentrate the pressures of capitalism on their child. This paper proposes the term 'surplus-parenting' as a micro manifestation of surplus repression on a societal level as discussed by Marcuse. By using the term surplus-parenting, the author is able to articulate the consequences of surplus repression in the lives of the children and parents on this micro and macro scale. By questioning the motivations of overparenting, the concepts of the performance principle and surplus repression can be seen as manifesting in the parent-child identity.

About the author

Alissa Welman (she/her) is currently a Social Anthropology Honours student. Her research interests encompass a wide range of human interactions found in diverse contexts including parenting, family planning, and when facing death. Alissa intends to pursue her Master's degree in Medical Anthropology in the future, focusing on these dynamics of interaction when facing illness, infertility, and interacting with the healthcare system.

1. Introduction

The seminal work of Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilisation* (1955) provides a lens through which we can analyse and interpret phenomena in modern society. His appreciation of Freudian psychoanalysis and his Neo-Marxist interpretation of repression, as presented by Freud, shines a light on the day-to-day lives of the ordinary. In this paper, I will turn this lens to children, or rather the micromanagement of children. The term ‘micromanagement’ refers to a managerial style in which a person in power controls and interferes with the project for which they are responsible to manage beyond what is perceived as necessary, to the extent that it intervenes with the ability of the project to be completed. A business is ‘managed’, a project is ‘managed’, and a faceless group is ‘managed’, which leaves us with the predicament of how it is possible to ‘manage’ an individual, or a child, without implying control, manipulation, and excessive influence. In this paper, I investigate and situate the concept of repression in raising children and the micromanagement of their being. Using Marcuse’s concepts of the ‘performance principle’ and ‘surplus repression’, an analysis of overprotective and overinvolved parenting styles and the consequences thereof is presented. Reflecting on Marcuse’s perspectives and adaptations of Freudian concepts, his critique of capitalism, and the society it produces, gives us a better understanding of parents who micromanage their children and the childhood that it produces. I argue through this analysis that children are not free from the productivity and development-orientated power of capitalism, and that the system is rather mirrored in their activities, leaking into the most intimate relationships between parents and their children, leading to a premature internalisation of capitalist standards.

2. The performance principle and surplus repression

As part of the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse offered a critical perspective on advanced industrial

society as an oppressive structure that alienates the population that is living under it. Integral to the study of the emancipatory potential of humanity (or lack thereof), the Neo-Marxists called upon the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud to explain not only the lack of a revolution as predicted by Karl Marx, but the general repression experienced in humanity (Farr, 2013:10). However, Marcuse expands on the writings of Freud, highlighting that his theories of repression and the ‘reality principle’ only consider the biological instincts of humanity, which misses the nuance of context throughout history. To account for the socio-historical conditioning of instincts, Marcuse proposes the terms ‘surplus repression’ and the ‘performance principle’ (1955:42). Marcuse uses these terms to account for the repression of instincts that are necessary to work and socialise in a capitalist society – a repression that goes beyond the interest to preserve humanity and civilisation in the face of the scarcity of basic resources. Basic repression, as proposed by Freud, can be understood as the ‘necessary’ repression for human functioning in a society as a biological being. It is the repression of gluttony, greed, lust, or ‘primal drives’, necessitated by the reality principle, which calls for the containment of the excessive in service of reality, allowing for harmony and functioning (Freud, 1915:125; Marcuse, 1955:36). To go beyond Freud’s reality principle as the driving force for the internal/unconscious repression of the biological instincts, Marcuse suggests that the performance principle is the current manifestation of Freud’s reality principle. This performance principle accounts for the “competitive economic performances” that is necessitated by society, and surplus repression is the “social body” of basic repression produced by capitalist society (Marcuse, 1955:47).

Society presents us with moulds or characters that we are meant to play in the theatrics of everyday life. Whether that be a businesswoman, a supportive husband, a teacher, a shop owner or a banker; we are expected to play our part not only in the continuation of humanity, but in the reproduction of capitalism.

In the shadow of performance and repression

The internalised desire for productivity and utilisation is where we face the performance principle, and surplus repression is its associate (Marcuse, 1955:50). We regulate ourselves to be highly functioning machines: show-up, sit-up, and do it with a smile, a life predetermined by work and labour. As highlighted by Marcuse, the effectiveness of the performance principle comes from its absorption into normality and the rationalisation of repressing one's desires (1955:48).

3. The micromanagement of children

The term 'helicopter parent' might be a familiar term and does a phenomenal job of painting a vivid picture of a parental figure hovering over every decision, activity, and milestone in a child's life. The term was first used in 1969 by Dr Haim Ginott, who described the 'baby boomer' generation as overly analytic in the well-being and development of their children (Shaki, Gupta, Yadav & Faisal, 2022:4753). Dr Ginott predicted that this correlated with a general overprotectiveness post-World War II and that this 'trend' is isolated to that particular generation of parenting (ibid.).

However, this over-involved parenting style is now more present than ever, hinting that the basis of this parenting style stretches far beyond the need to protect one's child from the harsh reality of war (Jiao & Segrin, 2023:651). The micromanagement of children or 'overparenting' is defined as the developmentally inappropriate involvement of parents in the lives of their children (ibid.:652). This can be seen in multiple facets of a child's life, from a parent obsessing over their child's eating behaviour to the over-involvement in the success of their child's studies. This type of parenting is seen in the parent that constantly calls the teacher about their child's grades and performance, the parent that enrolls their child in multiple extracurricular activities, or the parent over-contributing to their child's school projects. These acts go beyond what is necessary for the child to learn and grow. Instead, they function to instil a *standard* and *expectation* that the child must uphold and meet. Morin (2014) writes that one of the

first signs of over-parenting is a power struggle between parent and child. This is due to the obsessive control the parent seeks in the life of their child, disregarding the privacy and autonomy of their child, which is something the child innately craves. In their article, Shaki *et al.* (2022:4754) address the two core characteristics of helicopter parenting: (1) persistent information-seeking behaviours about a child's daily schedule and (2) intervening and inserting themselves into all their child's conflicts and activities.

Growing up with a micromanaging parent necessarily affects a child's idea of 'self-efficacy': "an individual's belief about their capacities to successfully achieve their goals and perform across a range of situations" (Jiao & Segrin, 2023:654). In other words, it influences a child's idea of their capacity to perform as an 'individual' outside of the parent-child microsphere. The correlation between this and a child's ability to function as an individual is highlighted by Jiao and Segrin (ibid.) when they introduce the concept of environmental mastery, which correlates with a child's ability to initiate and manage social events that they are confronted with in later life. This disruption in their "formation of instincts" is seen in children and the effect that this lack of autonomy has on them is detrimental to their mental health (ibid.:653). Child anxiety and depression as a result of overparenting mirrors the repression of instincts presented by Freud and later interpreted by Marcuse, which necessarily hinders the expression of instincts in children (1955:40). The performance principle created by our capitalist society encourages the internalisation of productivity and labour and is duplicated in the microsphere of the micromanaging parent and the child. In a Marcusean light, this parent wishes to shape and influence the well-being of the child resulting in an alienation of their own identity and their true place in society.

The interpretation of overparenting, however, is that it is benevolent in nature, as it is done in the name of care and "wanting the best for your child" (Jiao & Segrin, 2023:653). This leaves us to question *why*

parents feel the need to overparent and micromanage, and how these actions fit into wanting the 'best' for their child. It is in the nuances of 'best' that the theory of the Frankfurt School can be connected to this phenomenon, for the parent wants their child to fit into the capitalist system as easily as possible (Farr, 2013:7). It is the same capitalist system which is responsible for the surplus repression and internalised performance principle that the parent also experiences (Marcuse 1955:47). As the capitalist system promises ultimate freedom and fulfilment of all needs, so does the overparenting style promise ultimate success for children who will grow into adults in the capitalist society.

As discussed by Marcuse, the expenditure of energy to conform to the performance expected of you in society diminishes your ability to pursue individual desires (1955:49). I propose that this process has a domino effect: it is because the parent is a victim of the internalised performance principle and surplus repression in society, that they recreate it in the relationship with their child through the micromanagement of their being and alienating them from their true identity. In the case of the helicopter parent, this is seen in their over-analysis of their child's productivity and success. For the parent to function in a society that requires excessive labour, the parent must conform and internalise the dominant structures, utilising the same mindset in the relationship with their child. The parent deflects societal demands onto their child, such as the demands to conform and comply, as well as their experiences of alienation from their place in reality and an inability to be or become who they wish they were. This repression is normalised in society to the extent that it can be rationalised in the relationship between a parent and child, instilling the performance principle within the child *before* their timely confrontation with capitalist society. I propose the term 'surplus-parenting' to describe this consequence of the internal repressive structures within a parent.

Surplus-parenting is exhibited when a child's food is weighed before they eat, when their weight is monitored (outside of medical needs) to fit a physical and metaphorical mould, and when their future is not only chosen for them, but they are also given an automatic roadmap to that future. This internal structure speaks to the micro-manifestation of surplus repression brought about by the capitalist society in which the parent functions. It is seen when parents enforce or encourage a performance from their young children in line with the "competitive economic performances" that they, as parents, have internalised (Marcuse, 1955:47). By echoing the call to conformity raised by the performance principle in raising their children, parents emulate their own internal surplus repression. Surplus-parenting refers to the repression encompassed in the micromanagement of children and overparenting.

4. Conclusion

The seminal work of Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilisation* provides a dynamic lens through which we can analyse and interpret phenomena in modern society. By crossing the paths of Freudian theory and the Neo-Marxist foundation of the Frankfurt School we are able to shine a light on the experiences of parents micromanaging their children. Marcuse's concept of performance principle as an expansion on Freud's reality principle can be underpinned as the basis of human alienation and is exemplified in the over-analytic and controlling nature of overparenting. The introduction of surplus repression, building upon the boundaries of basic repression, as the internalisation of the performance principle, can be seen as an outcome of the current capitalist society dominated by labour and effective bodies. This reimagining of Freud's reality principle can also be exemplified in the relationship between a micromanaging parent and their child. By discussing this micro manifestation of Marcusean concepts, we are able to expand upon our psychoanalytic understanding of parent-child relationships, taking into account the social and economic reality of

modern life. The proposal of surplus-parenting highlights the importance of turning conceptual and theoretical lenses on the lives of children.

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Restricted freedoms of menstruating women: a capability approach to period poverty

Hanrié Viljoen

Abstract

Period poverty can generally be defined as a lack of access to or an inability to acquire, access, and perform menstrual health products, facilities, and practices. It is estimated that around 500 million women worldwide live in period poverty. This is a phenomenon which can incapacitate women from performing basic functions and from participating fully in society. In this paper, I will use the Capability Approach developed by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen to show conclusively that period poverty poses a real restriction to the freedoms of menstruating women and girls. Under the Capability Approach, well-being is measured by the real ability of an individual to have certain capabilities. Specifically, period poverty restricts freedoms by having an adverse effect on education, health, and social functioning. While many of these women and girls have the formal abilities or rights to the restricted spheres, period poverty acts as a hidden barrier to successfully acquiring the capabilities of being educated, being healthy, and being social.

About the author

Hanrié Viljoen will complete her Honours in Philosophy in 2024 and plans to commence her Master's in Philosophy in 2025. Her research is in Political Philosophy and specifically on theories of political emotions. She is interested in what the role of these emotions could be for societies striving towards justice as well as their effects on real political issues such as inequality. Besides philosophy, she enjoys anything creative or in the arts.

1. Introduction

In 1979, the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen delivered a pivotal lecture at Stanford University that changed the way that we look at distribution and well-being throughout the world and specifically in developing countries. In this lecture, and in what later became a substantial body of work on the topic, Sen criticises resource-based or “means-based” measures of justice, specifically Gross Domestic Product, and argues that we should instead focus on the ends of justice (Saito, 2003:18). What emerges from his work and from the work of his colleague, Martha Nussbaum, is known as the Capability Approach (CA).

In this paper, I consider the theory of capabilities and functionings as it applies to menstruating girls and women living in period poverty. In the first section, I will introduce the CA as it has been theorised by Sen and Nussbaum, while also looking at a few critiques. In the second section, I will conceptualise period poverty and introduce the problem of restricting women’s freedoms within the CA.¹ In the final section, I will argue that period poverty limits the capabilities of girls and women through three specific channels namely education, health, and social exclusion. For this section I will draw on case studies from different countries and societies and focus on the specific functionings that are restricted due to period poverty. I will conclude that the persistence of period poverty (its effects and its cyclical nature) impairs girls and women’s performance of certain functions, thereby restricting their freedoms, and thus must be completely eradicated to improve the quality of life of girls and women across the world.

2. The capability approach

The first important factor to keep in mind about the CA as established by Sen, is that it is not a fully-fledged “theory” of a particular kind, but rather a general framework. Scholars may use the CA as a framework

to develop specific capability theories of justice, distribution, or welfare. This is opposed to “thicker” theories of justice which propose specific principles of justice, such as Rawls’s Justice as Fairness. In this paper, I refer to the CA as a framework for how to think about the injustice of period poverty and the well-being of menstruating women and girls. Although this approach offers no specific principles of justice, its uniqueness and significance are derived from the metric of justice that it uses. This metric is capabilities (Robeyns, 2018:4). In what follows, I explore the framework of the CA, its metric of capabilities, and how this is used to reason about justice.

One of the main motivations for the development of the CA is to offer an alternative account to the dominant economic measurements of well-being in societies. Economic metrics, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), do not give an accurate representation of an individual’s current standard of living. These metrics are focused on the means rather than the ends of human well-being. While income and wealth are one of the means by which humans may achieve well-being, it does not give us the full story. The CA aims to address the shortcomings of these economic metrics of well-being (Sen, 2009:226).

In *the Idea of Justice* (2009), Sen explains that no resource-based (e.g. utility, income) measure of justice will give us an accurate representation of the quality of life of the members of a particular society. We value resources, not in themselves but rather because of what they are able to do for us/give us. For example, income may enhance our well-being because we will be able to pay for medical care, buy better quality food, or buy a plane ticket. However, we want medical care and food, not to stockpile it in our homes, but to improve our lives. We want to acquire medical care, so that we can *be healthy*, we want food, so we will *be well-nourished*, and a plane ticket, so that we can travel, visit family, experience different cultures, or go on

¹ While I am aware that many men and non-binary persons can also experience period poverty, this paper will be focused on the experience of menstruating girls and women.

holiday. Thus, to only measure the amount (or average amount) of resources distributed in a society misses the point of what these resources are for – and ultimately, what justice is for in the first place (Sen, 2009:225-227). The reframing of the question of justice is Sen's most important contribution to political philosophy and development economics.

People value things such as being healthy, being well-nourished, travelling, and spending time with their family. In the framework of the CA, the valuable ways of being and the valuable things we can do are called functionings (ibid.:233). If we have the real means of achieving these valuable functionings, then we have capabilities. In other words, one has the capability of being well-fed when you have the real opportunity to achieve this functioning. Broadly, then, the CA want people to have more capabilities, rather than less. We want people to be and do more of the things that they value. While this is important, especially for more basic functionings (such as being well-fed, or being healthy, for example), it is also important that people are free to choose which functionings they *do* value, as this consideration will be diverse in pluralist societies (ibid.).

At this point, we can begin to discuss the importance of freedom for the CA and for its conception of justice. People have reasons to value certain lives: they value lives that go well. Lives that go well will have certain features that may be common to many people. As I have mentioned, most people will value being healthy or being well-fed, and so it is important that they be able to achieve those functionings. However, people will also value unique and quirky functionings that others may not. A person who is healthy and well-fed but works a stifling corporate job while dreaming of becoming a trained opera singer, should be able to pivot meaningfully towards achieving the valued functioning of being an opera-singer instead of being a corporate employee. A society in which people are not able to strive towards achieving valued functionings – where they are not able to expand their capability set – is not a truly free society.

In Nussbaum and Sen's highly influential book, *The Quality of Life* (1993), Sen writes that “people may, however, differ a good deal from each other in the weights they attach to these different functionings – valuable as they may all be – and the assessment of individual and social advantages must be alive to these variations” (1993:31). The sets of capabilities achievable in society thus forms the informational basis for assessing the well-being, and indeed the freedom, of society (ibid.:30). Focusing on the formal rights and liberties that a society has such as those codified in their nation's constitution is not enough to accurately measure freedom and well-being. Many countries, including South Africa, afford citizens certain constitutional rights, such as the right to education, but in reality, many people do not have the real opportunity to achieve this functioning. Thus, capabilities as the measure of well-being allow us to see where people do, or do not, have the real opportunity to achieve certain capabilities and whether there may be certain barriers to achieving them.

Period poverty is one such severe barrier to the achieving of capabilities for menstruating women and girls. Specifically, it bars them from attaining the capabilities of being educated, being healthy, and being socially integrated, as I will argue in the final and main section of this paper. First, however, we must look at some of the critiques to the CA and how the supplementary work of Martha Nussbaum has aided in overcoming these critiques.

One of the critiques levelled against Sen's framework by philosophers such as Thomas Pogge, is that it is too broad or vague, and it does not define the specific capabilities that would positively contribute to a person's development (Brighouse & Robeyns, 2010:82). A level of specificity could be useful to operationalise this approach towards social injustices such as poverty or homelessness. Sen does not propose a “specific formula for policy decisions” but rather a “general approach focussing on information on individual

advantages, judged in terms of opportunity” (Sen, 2009:232).

The question then, is, what are the valuable capabilities, and how should this be decided? Martha Nussbaum expands upon Sen’s original work and comes up with a basic set of capabilities that she believes will exemplify a good life. This basic list is based on an objective measure of well-being.

Nussbaum’s application of the CA highlights the universalistic and objective nature of justice. According to Nussbaum, it is completely possible to recognise the human form of life and human beings across different time periods and in all parts of the world, regardless of specific cultural or societal norms of appearance or behaviour. She makes an argument for essentialism which she defines as “the view that human life has certain central defining features” (Nussbaum, 1992:205). Thus, justice and freedom should also be measured on an objective standard and cannot, and should not, have different definitions or applications in different societies. Some of the capabilities that she adds to her list of basic capabilities include bodily health, bodily integrity, emotion, and practical reason (Robeyns, 2018:13). There are certain objective standards as to the basic well-being of a human life that can be extremely useful in our attempts to eradicate global issues such as hunger, poverty, and period poverty.

This essentialist view has been criticised for paternalism, prescriptivism, and a reliance on metaphysical realism. Nussbaum’s critics claim that we cannot have objective knowledge of what the needs of different communities are because these are subjectively determined and will differ across different societies. While Nussbaum acknowledges the potential dangers and history of metaphysical realism, she contends that to give up the search for our common humanity would be giving up too much. It is true that people in different communities will have different needs and different reasons to value different ways of life. However, if we abstract from the whole course of human history across the world we can still

find “a more or less determinate account of the human being, one that divides its essential from its accidental properties” (Nussbaum, 1992:207). Due to space limitations, it will suffice to say that Nussbaum is not arguing for an imperialist essentialism, rather an Aristotelian or internalist essentialism which recognises the basic form of human existence and the basic capabilities that would constitute a recognisable human life. A human life that does not meet the basic list of capabilities, as provided by Nussbaum, is said to be seriously deprived. A life that exceeds this list is a life of human flourishing which is the life we want all humans to be able to reach regardless of their position in time or location.

3. Period poverty and its detrimental effects on women and girls

Period poverty can generally be defined as a lack of access to or an inability to acquire, access, and perform menstrual health products, facilities, and practices. The definition rests on two parts, namely, (1) the inaccessibility or unaffordability of menstrual products by girls or women in poor communities and, (2) the lack of education or information around the use of products and proper menstrual hygiene practices (Sommer, 2021:1). I would like to add to this definition (3) the cyclical and entrenching nature of period poverty, as it keeps girls and women out of productive spheres of society and the economy, which reinforces structural poverty.

The literature and research on period poverty is scant and the topic has only recently garnered the attention of researchers and policy makers. Despite this, the research still indicates a deep-rooted problem in societies across the world. It is estimated that 500 million women globally are unable to access sufficient menstrual health management products and facilities (Michel, Mettler, Schöenberg & Gunz, 2022:1). While menstruation is a normal biological process that occurs in fertile women, there is a significant amount of social stigma attached to it which causes a delay in action to the problem of period poverty (Somroo,

Sarwar, Balouch, Maryam, Ghafoor & Bibi, 2023:549). This stigmatisation of the topic carries over into the policy sphere which causes a delayed response to an urgent issue. (Casola, Luber, Riley & Medle., 2022:374).

The three main areas in which this plays out is in education, health, and the social networks of communities. Through the lens of the Capability Approach, period poverty acts as a barrier to the real pursuit of certain capabilities, specifically education, health, and being socially integrated. The following sections of the paper will explore these three areas in light of the CA by using various case studies.

3.1. The effects of period poverty on education among adolescent girls

For Sen, education has both intrinsic and instrumental values. Through education you can broaden your capabilities and influence your opportunities to accumulate capital that may later broaden your capability set even further (Saito, 2003:25). Period poverty has a detrimental effect on the education of adolescent schoolgirls, which can have a lasting impact throughout their lives and deter them from achieving higher levels of capability. There is a significant difference in the persistence of period poverty between educated and uneducated women, and there is a positive correlation between levels of education among women and their menstrual hygiene management practices later in life (Roussouw & Ross, 2021:9). Thus, not only does period poverty directly affect the level of education that girls can achieve, but the level of education achieved directly affects the continuation of period poverty in the lives of women.

Many girls living in poverty miss school days while they are menstruating because they are unable to afford the necessary menstrual products to manage their hygiene and comfort during the school day. While it is possible to still go to school without the use of these products – assuming the girl does not suffer from debilitating menstrual cramps or other menstruation related health complications – the fear and embarrassment that comes with leakages of

menstrual blood, as well as its odour, deter girls from even attempting (Michel *et al.*, 2022:2). It is certainly the case that most people, and probably all menstruating women, will agree that it would be highly uncomfortable to attend school or university classes while menstruating without any protection. There are various case studies to support this claim. A 2017 study in Uganda found a positive correlation between the distribution of reusable pads and a reduction in school absenteeism. Qualitative research from a sample of 595 girls in Ethiopia found that 58% of the girls admitted to a worsening of their academic performance since they started menstruating (Oduro & Domfe, 2020:27). However, there are other factors above the provision of menstrual products that deter menstruating girls from attending school.

In 2020, the Ghanaian government instructed a research team to perform a cost-benefit analysis over three years for the free distribution of menstrual products to girls in junior high school. The sample included 30 713 girls between the ages of 15 to 17. Out of the sample almost 7000 of the girls were chronically absent from school due to menstruating, but not necessarily specifically due to the lack of products. Girls face ridicule and embarrassment from classmates while menstruating and have insufficient access to hygienic and safe spaces to properly attend to their menstrual health needs. This includes things such as clean and lockable bathrooms, running water, soap, and bins to dispose of their menstrual products in a hygienic way (Roussouw & Ross, 2021:6-10). These girls have a much higher risk of dropping out and, in Ghana, they are at risk of becoming child brides and becoming pregnant at a very young age (Oduro & Domfe, 2020:31). It is clear to see how these girls' freedom in choosing a valuable life is severely restricted.

Education during adolescent years is crucial for the positive development of children. Not only are these girls missing key formative academic content, but they miss an important part of the childhood experience, which is attending school, making friends, playing,

and learning important life lessons. Due to the high rate of school dropouts caused by chronic absenteeism, many of these girls will not complete secondary education. As mentioned, there are inherent capabilities that are lost when a child misses out on schooling, but it also leads to a decrease in potential future income for these girls.

There have been critiques against the applicability of the CA for children. Sen has a very succinct answer to this critique which is that since children are not yet mature enough to make decisions for themselves the concern should not be the freedoms that a child has now but the freedoms they could have in the future (Saito, 2003:25-27). Missed opportunities due to school absenteeism diminishes the freedoms that girls will have in the future based on factors completely out of their control and sometimes even out of their parents' or caretakers' control.

3.2. The effects of period poverty on women's health

Period poverty can have adverse effects on the physical and mental health of girls and women. Since women living in period poverty cannot access the necessary menstrual products during menstruation they often have to rely on subpar materials. Many women re-use absorbent cloths, rags, menstrual pads, or tampons which carry the risk of infections or even Toxic-Shock Syndrome which is a potentially fatal condition. Multiple studies have found a correlation between period poverty and the prevalence of reproductive health risks such as urinary tract infections and pubic rashes (Somroo *et al.*, 2023:552).

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that women living in period poverty often do not have access to safe and hygienic spaces to manage their menstrual needs. An extensive study from 2021 done in eight low- and middle-income countries delivers staggering statistics about the reality of hygiene and menstrual health for women living in these countries. In Ethiopia, more than half of the women do not have access to clean spaces in which to manage their

menstrual health. In seven out of the eight countries, it is found that these spaces do not have soap and/ or running water, with the highest percentage reported (again) being in Ethiopia at 84% (Rossouw & Ross, 2021:6). Not being able to clean off blood leakages from your genitals, surrounding skin or from your clothing poses a major risk for bacterial growth and infection. Another interesting part of the study is the finding that most of the women reported that the spaces that are available for menstrual health management are not safe and often they are unable to lock the doors. This brings up an additional concern of safety since these are often the countries with a higher prevalence of Gender Based Violence (Ross & Rossouw, 2021:10). I think this is an important point to consider and brings up concerns about the extra burden on these women's mental health.

It is common for many women to have to "improvise" for a short while during menstruation. This can happen when a woman begins to menstruate unexpectedly, perhaps while she is out in public, and she does not have the products she needs on hand. However, for the women living in poverty they find themselves having to improvise every day of their period for each menstrual cycle (Somroo *et al.*, 2023:551). Having to be constantly vigilant and aware of this can take up a lot of mental energy and capacity even for women who have all their basic needs met, but to add this onto the mental load of women already faced with scarcity on all levels of living is extreme. It certainly has detrimental effects on their mental well-being. Another important factor to consider is that given the frequent loss of education due to period poverty and the subsequent reduction of future income, women will most likely be less able to afford medical care as adults.

Being healthy and having the freedom to choose how to manage your health is essential to the consideration of your quality of life. For this reason, it is also one of the basic capabilities included in Nussbaum's list. It is a tragedy for young women to be made prisoners of their own biology because they do not have the means

to free themselves. To be clear, these women are more than just victims of their circumstances and it may be the case that they have sophisticated cultural practices surrounding menstruation. However, it would be an even greater tragedy, and a failure of our humanity, not to bring attention to the cases that are indeed restrictive and not to ask the question: do these women have the freedom to choose?

3.3. The effect of period poverty on the social functioning of girls and women

The social stigma surrounding menstruation is deep-rooted in most societies around the world. Some communities have harsher social norms around the topic than others, but in general, it is still seen as a taboo subject that should only be discussed among women and only when needed. Period poverty is a global issue and affects women in some of the world's wealthiest countries as well. A study done in low-income communities in the United States of America found that more than 60% of the women in their sample were unable to afford traditional menstrual health products and, similar to the women in low-income countries, resorted to discarded items that could be used as absorbents (Sommer & Mason, 2021:1).

A very serious social concern of period poverty is the fate of homeless women with little support systems. Women living in these conditions not only lack the means to buy the necessary products, but also are unlikely to have access to bathrooms or laundry facilities in which to manage their menstrual health properly and hygienically. These women face embarrassment and social exclusion daily, and one can see how it would be difficult to re-integrate into social life with these types of barriers. Even in massive metropolitan cities, such as New York City, the social infrastructure, policies, and funding is inadequate to deal with this problem and help women escape a cycle of social exclusion and avoidance (Sommer & Mason, 2021:1). The lack of attention to addressing these basic needs for women prevents them from living dignified lives with confidence and without the fear of ridicule.

If you were to put yourself in the shoes of a woman living in this type of deprivation you would not consider her to be living a free life. To illustrate, imagine that you are a homeless woman living in a major city today where the cost of living is sky rocketing. Let's say you manage to apply for a job, and you are invited for an interview. Being offered this job would significantly improve your quality of life because you will be able to reach more capabilities than before. However, on your way to the interview you get your period and there is now a blood stain on your only pair of decent slacks. Without having the money to buy pads or tampons and without access to a restroom, most women would choose to not go to the interview due to the social stigma. I do not believe any person would want to go to a job interview with an odorous stain on their clothing. Even if you did manage to "make a plan" (to get new clothes and some products), this will take some time and manoeuvring in which case you might end up missing your interview altogether. This may sound like a trivial example, and one may think there are surely other arrangements that could be made, or one could try to explain the situation to the interviewer, but that would miss the point that women often must take on a very large added responsibility when managing their menstruation that should not have any effect on their social functionings.

This issue is also linked to the effects of period poverty on education. As mentioned, part of the value of attaining an education is not simply the content of the syllabus but also the valuable social skills one learns: skills learnt from being together with peers, and experiencing similar troubles and joys, for example, during puberty; making friends and playing; forming relationships through extracurricular activities; and building a network of relations that could support you socially for the rest of your life and career. It is thus important for researchers to be asking questions about how period poverty impacts the social exclusion or integration of women at various points in their lives.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have shown how the effects of period poverty limit the freedoms of girls and women across the world by placing barriers to them achieving higher capabilities. Period poverty severely affects the schooling and further education of young girls which directly reduces the inherent capabilities of education, but also the future capabilities gained from an increased income and greater career opportunities.

The miseducation and lack of access to menstrual health management products and spaces for girls living in poor communities can lead to adverse consequences for their physical and mental health. Lastly, the social integration of women living in period poverty is disrupted due to harsh social stigma and a constant mental battle. We can thus only conclude that for women to be free to choose the lives they have reasons to value, period poverty must be eradicated.

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Death: a mortal answer¹

Thomas Russell

*omnes denique miseros, qui hac luce careant*²

- Cicero

Abstract

At one time or another every human being will be troubled by death. One may be troubled by the idea of death, or one may be troubled by what death is. Under the idea of death, I include the *prospect* of death for people one cares about and for oneself; but being troubled by what death is, is to be troubled by the *nature* or the *realisation* of death, which is to say what death (being dead) entails for the subject. Of course, those are not two definitively separate concerns. I am interested in something Lucretius is famous for saying about death, that it should not in fact trouble us, and that it only troubles us because we misunderstand something about the nature of death; we think that nonexistence could be bad for us, hence we are right to fear it: all this, says Lucretius, is a mistake arising from misunderstanding death. In this paper I argue that Lucretius is wrong in saying that we should not be troubled by death because (1) the very thing he thinks is irrational to fear *is* rational to fear, and (2) his argument is self-defeating. In short, (1) annihilation, or the absence of the subject's point of view anywhere, is a reasonable thing to fear; (2) Lucretius erroneously relies on a conflation of the stateless nature of annihilation with the present experienceable nature of the human being to sustain his conclusion. I conclude that, *qua* Lucretius's argument, it is the very *loss* of the possibility of having possibilities, which fact is entailed simply by being alive, that humans fear, and are quite rational to fear.

About the author

Thomas Russell completed his Honours in Philosophy this year. He intends to begin his Master's in Philosophy next year. His interests include philosophy, history, the literary canon, and wine.

¹ The reader will appreciate that I am indebted for the derivation of my title from Thomas Nagel's (2015) famous and celebrated collection of essays entitled *Mortal Questions*, the first essay of which has as its subject matter and title "death".

² Quoted in Segal (1990:19), his translation reads: "The misery of death consists in lacking the light of life". Originally from Cicero's *Tuscan Disputations* (1.6.11).

At one time or another every human being will be troubled by death. As I see it there are at least two prominent ways one may be troubled by death. One may be troubled by the idea of death, or one may be troubled by what death is. Under the idea of death, I include the prospect of death for people one cares about and for oneself; but being troubled by what death is, is to be troubled by the nature of death, which is to say what death entails for the subject. Of course, those are not two definitively separate concerns. What one takes death actually to consist in certainly will have a great influence in how the prospect of death affects one. In other words, if there is an afterlife, and one knows (or believes) this, then death is likely to affect one very differently than if one knows (or believes) there is no afterlife. And, of course, knowledge about the nature of ‘what it is like to be dead’, the phenomenological nature of death, is, from our corporeal perspective, an absurdity.¹ I am interested in something Lucretius is famous for saying about death: that it should not in fact trouble us. It only troubles us because we think it is somehow bad for us, but, he argues, death cannot be bad for us because there is no us after death. We misunderstand what death is. In this paper I will reflect on why Lucretius was wrong in believing that we ought not to fear death. I argue that we are right to fear death while we are alive, not because of something that will happen to us after we pass out of existence, but because the prospect of passing out of existence is rational cause for fear to the living.

First, a point of clarification. For the sake of this argument, because it is what Lucretius believed, ‘death’ refers to the annihilation of the experiencing/living subject; as to whether this is the case or not, I take no position in this paper. I merely explore some ground *if* the annihilation hypothesis is

¹ The absurdity is wittily brought out by Van Niekerk (1999:408): “The death of humans has been the object of philosophical reflection since the inception of our tradition in ancient Greece [...]. This might create the impression that philosophers know

true. Let me be clear then, where the word ‘death’ appears in this paper I mean ‘the annihilation of a life’, as that is also what Lucretius meant by it. I do not claim however that this is necessarily the case. I am interested in exploring what follows *if* it is the case. Moreover, I do not expect that this argument necessarily holds true if death = annihilation of a life (I touch on this point again in the conclusion); I do however claim that it holds true regarding Lucretius’s argument. I do not claim too much novelty for my view. Plutarch sketched what is in essence the same thesis (Segal, 1990:14-17), and it is in the main Nagel’s (2015:1-12) view as well, although the argument I present here is different. Nagel’s question was: ‘Is death an evil?’, whereas my question is more specific: ‘Why is Lucretius’s argument unconvincing?’. Perhaps what my paper seeks to add to the debate is to resolve Thomas Nagel’s (2015:8-9) uncertainty in *Mortal Questions* about whether Lucretius’s argument had been adequately answered. I propose that what follows is an adequate answer to Lucretius, and my answer is that Lucretius’s argument fails to justify his conclusion.

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Though very little is known about Lucretius, the little that is known may be said by way of introduction to our interlocutor. He was a Roman philosopher-poet, a contemporary of Caesar, Cicero, and Catullus, and is believed to have died in his early forties (Johnson, 1963:7). He was an Epicurean. It is not my purpose here to explain what being an adherent to Epicurus’s doctrine entailed. Suffice it to say that it has among its prominent features a combination of what might be called a minimalist hedonism and something of the atomism first attributed to Democritus (Taylor, 1911); both suffuse Lucretius’s work. Lucretius venerated Epicurus, in L. L. Johnson’s (1963:7) words, as “the master-mind of all time”. His only poem *De Rerum*

something other mortals sorely lack: knowledge of what death is”. He argues the point of the epistemological impossibility of imagining what it is like to be dead (1999:409).

Natura, or “On the Nature of Things”, remains an influential work.

Lucretius’s argument is bound up with his poetry; roughly, it spans the last division of the third book of the *De Rerum Natura*, some more than 260 lines. I will content myself with two summaries and some adequate quotations. Lucretius (1963:108) concludes: “Nothing to us, then, is death”. He provides what has subsequently been called the ‘Symmetry Argument’ to substantiate this conclusion:

Look back: se’st how the bygone duration of
time the eternal, Ere we were born, was as
nothing to us: this Nature to us holds Up as a
mirror of ages to follow, when are we
departed.

Aught is there, therefore, in this of a horrible
aspect, of gloomy

Mien? Is it not more tranquil than any repose
whatsoever? (Lucretius, 1963:112).

I find the argument very elegantly presented by Thomas Nagel (2015:7): “no one finds it disturbing to contemplate the eternity preceding his own birth, [therefore] it must be irrational to fear death, since death is simply the mirror image of the prior abyss”. Such is the Lucretian argument on the matter.

On the Lucretian view, then, there is being, and the termination of being is annihilation. To be a living thing is for there to be a corresponding way how it is like being that thing. In fact, we could just as easily say the same without including the phrase ‘a living thing’ because that is necessarily implied in the bare statement ‘to be’, as Hamlet discovered to his great consternation. So, Lucretius is quite right about this: there is nothing it is like not to be living, because the

necessary condition of having a ‘how it is like to be a so-and-so’² is to be living. If death is annihilation of the subject, then being dead is not another state in some way analogous to the state of being alive – it is the nullification of the possibility of being in any state whatever, precisely because it is the nullification of the subject.

And that may be what gives cause for human consternation about the matter. Lucretius is right about his proposition that it is irrational to fear death because it is non-being and we have nothing to fear while being in such a state, *because* there is no such state. But just precisely because he is right about that, that there is nothing to fear while ‘being’ in a state of non-being, his inference that we are altogether wrong to fear death is inadequate because it is the very *cessation* of being alive, of having the chance of possessing a state at all, that may justifiably be the object of fear (Nagel, 2015:7-8). To put the point another way, to be alive is to have a perspective on the world, where having a perspective is both a necessary condition and a limiting factor on possibility (Reginster, 2006:84). It is a necessary condition because being alive is a precondition in possessing a set of possibilities; this entails having a perspective on the world, and having a perspective is a limiting factor inasmuch as it determines the set of one’s possibilities. Therefore, to die is to lose that perspective (one’s view on the world), and so to lose a necessary condition of possibility *qua* oneself.

3

Much can be and has been said about the paradoxical notions of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’.³ On the one hand ‘being’ is a state, a stable way of ‘how it is like to be a

²The reader will appreciate this famous Nagelian formulation from the celebrated essay ‘What it is like to be a bat’, which is also to be found in his collection *Mortal Questions* (2015:166).

³Poster (1996:2) situates the distinction as *the* debate among the ancient Greeks: “The central opposition in early Greek thought is not one between sophists and philosophers, but one between schools of being (Xenophanes, Parmenides, Zeno, Gorgias) and becoming (Heraclitus, Protagoras, Cratylus)”. Korsgaard’s (2012:2-5) brief discussion of Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics is a discussion of the problem posed for their systems by the resistance

of ‘being’ (the way matter is) against ‘becoming’ (the way matter should be), and the revolution she speaks of is the change in our conception in what ‘being’ (*as the way matter is*) consists of. See Lloyd (1902:404-415, especially 414) for some paradoxes of ‘being’ drawn out of the Eleatic philosophy, and for a similar line to Korsgaard’s drawn from the problem of ‘becoming’ as posed by Heraclitus. See Bolton (1975:66-67) for a survey of distinctions current at the time between the two concepts in the Platonic tradition.

so-and-so', while on the other hand 'becoming' is a state of flux. Though, of course, 'becoming' is not really a state in the former sense at all because it is not stable; perhaps it is best thought of as the movement from one stable state to another. Since at every moment of a life there is a corresponding state of 'how it is like to be the so-and-so that is alive', it follows that 'becoming' is part and parcel of 'being', and that we are always subject to the possibility of change by virtue of being alive. So, it might be said in the sense just described that 'being' necessarily involves 'becoming': to possess a state is at one and the same time to be open to alteration of that state. Being alive necessarily carries with it the possibility of possibilities. Being dead, however, is the total preclusion of all possibility.⁴

There is no state for me or for you of being dead. If there were such a state, then we would be confronted with absurd questions surrounding 'how it is like to be David that is dead' as compared to 'how it is like to be Jones that is dead', or equally absurdly 'how it is like to be a dead ant' as compared to 'how it is like to be a dead mole'. For if there were such a phenomenological experience it would have to differ across particular instances within kinds and across kinds themselves, just as it does when we are living.⁵ But that is only because we can only know of phenomenology as it pertains to the living. There is no phenomenology of death for the dead, otherwise they would in some way be alive albeit this be a possibility of which we have no knowledge. Death, understood as annihilation, is the absence of a state-of-being, and so the absence of the flux of becoming also: the absence of all possibility.

⁴ Heidegger (1995:294) makes the point on death as the absence of possibility.

⁵ David's experience as human being differs from Jones's experience as human being, and both their experiences differ more substantially from what it is like to be a bat.

⁶ She allows that if living forever entailed (1) a change or preclusion of certain seminal self-forming things (because of the non-limitlessness of resources) and or (2) being alone in being immortal, then one may rationally choose not to live forever

Living beings only fear present and future occurrences because they fear things that will happen *to them* or *to others*. We can imagine King Henry VI saying: "I fear that the battle for France was lost last month", and we understand him perfectly as meaning not that he fears an event in the past having occurred, but the current and future results of such an event that had occurred. To take another example, Hamlet cannot fear the prospect of not being alive before he is alive. To do that he would have to be alive before he is alive (in order for his fear to be prospective) and *that* indeed would be irrational! The point of these examples is to reiterate Nagel's (2015:5-8) point on the direction of time: we experience time as moving forward, never backwards, and our possibilities are always temporally located relative to other possibilities. Simon (2010) proposes that the forward causation of time gives rational credence to 'a gambler's response' to Lucretius's symmetry argument. Here is his argument: if one feared death one could wish to extend the quantity of time one is alive either by being born earlier or dying later. If the former, then one runs the risk of dying sooner because there are a series of new unknown dangers that could bring one's life to an end; if the latter, no such dangers are incurred, and thus one is guaranteed a longer life if that wish is granted. Therefore, on a balance of probabilities, it is rational to want to live longer but not be born earlier and, importantly, the symmetry argument fails, equating time before birth with time after death is a false equation. Indeed, Martha Nussbaum (2013) holds that there is nothing irrational (indeed, it is very rational) to want to live an immortal life, *ceteris paribus*,⁶

(Nussbaum, 2013). This part of the argument is contentious, for the simple reason that we cannot seriously imagine what (1) would be like and so it is difficult to make sense of the constraint, and (2) though sad, does not affect the ability of the immortal individual to have good experiences, i.e., to carry on living. While these are challenges to the immortal view, they are not logical defeaters. My argument is not to do with immortality, however, but only why we are rational to fear death.

because the experiences possible through being alive are good, some she thinks are even inexhaustible.

It would, to return to the reality of forward causation in time, be inappropriate (because impossible!) to project an intentional state into the past T_1 regarding some future T_2 when the time projected from in the past T_1 is also a time where one did not exist (as in the Hamlet example). It would be similarly inappropriate to project an intentional state of 'fearing the potential outcome of some future occurrence' when that (now previously future occurrence) had already occurred (that is the point of the Henry VI example). In other words, any future is a relative concept to present time such that a moment that once was in the future can obviously fall into the past, but fear, being prospective, can only be future directed *from the present*. We can only fear *forward toward* the future, never *before* the present. For Lucretius's argument to work he requires that we *could* fear the past just as we could fear the future, since we do not (and since it would be irrational to) fear the past (before existence), he argues, so we should recognise it is irrational to fear the future (after existence). However, I have shown it is impossible in the present to fear the time before coming into existence, while it remains possible to fear the future from the present.

If we should not be worried by death for the reason that we were not worried before we existed, and in the same way death is the period of time after existence, then we should have no qualms about bringing death upon us – I do not mean we would be positively motivated to die, but I think if Lucretius were correct, we should be indifferent about dying. If there is nothing to worry about when we die, we should not care if we die or live. But we do care very strongly whether we die or live, and I submit that the reason for this is because Lucretius has misdiagnosed the problem. The problem of death as annihilation is a problem of annihilation. Lucretius sought to attack the problem by showing it is impossible to fear being annihilated because there is no you to instance the mental state of being afraid, just as before one's coming to be.

I have argued that while Lucretius is correct in this, he is wrong in jumping to the unwarranted conclusion that we as living beings who can instance the mental state of being afraid, ought not to be afraid of not having any mental states because once we are dead we cannot be afraid any longer, nor experience any unpleasantness – as a consequence of being dead, of course. *He* jumped from a reality of non-being to an injunction on being, and any such jump is incoherent because the total cessation of one's being (*not the prospect of that cessation*) cannot have any influence on one's being (Lucretius is quite right about that) – there is *nothing there* to have an influence on the living subject.

My argument differs from Lucretius's in that I say, 'We are, and we cease to be, and our ceasing to be is cause for fear', while Lucretius says, 'We were not, and we will not be, and as we were not afraid before we existed so ought we not to be afraid about what lies after our existence because it is *nothing*'. I say that the loss of being alive, the prospect of nothingness, is what we are right to fear; Lucretius, I think, contradicts himself when he says that we should not fear death because there is nothing there that can affect us. The problem is many people do at some point fear death, and since there is nothing there that can affect us to cause fear, so too is there nothing there to affect us to allay our fear. That is Lucretius's contradiction. If there is nothing there that can affect us, as he says, then he has no right to use that nothing to affect us out of our fear, for his argument is that we are irrational to let nothing affect us in the first place. 'Nothing' is a useless tool, regardless which side of the argument one is on. Indeed, one can very cogently imagine 'nothing' is so useless a tool because it is no tool at all.

5

In conclusion, my argument has advanced the following claims:

1. What it means to possess a state of 'how it is like to be a so-and-so' is necessarily to be subject to possibility

because being alive has something of the essence of possibility structurally built into it.

2. Death is the absence of being and by virtue of that also becoming, so the preclusion of the possibility of possibility.

3. Lucretius is right, then, that there is nothing it is *like to be dead*, if death is taken to be the annihilation of the phenomenological subject.

4. However, Lucretius is wrong in arguing that this should not worry us, because his argument relies on a conflation of being alive with non-being (being dead), inasmuch as it relies on an influence of non-being in the future upon the phenomenological subject or being of the present. The currently existing subject is supposed to be influenced by the non-influence that non-being carries for the state of being. In other words, the fact that I will cease to be entails that there *will be* no I to care that there is no I. But this claim rests on the assumption

that the future absence of my being, that which is I, will move me *while I am still around* not to worry about my death. But death's troubling, *if* someone considers the annihilation hypothesis to be true, is the troubling of annihilation: the fact that there will be no 'I' is what is troubling to the subject, that is why we are not indifferent to death and would rather be alive.

Therefore, *qua* Lucretius's argument, it is quite rational for human beings to fear death, if death is taken to mean the annihilation of the phenomenological subject, as it has been taken to mean in this paper. This does not necessarily entail that if death = annihilation we must have to fear death; but it does seem to imply that fearing death should be the default position in the absence of any successful arguments to the contrary. If a person does not have cogent reasons *not* to fear death, then they are rational to fear it, and irrational not to fear it. To continue this theme, however, is not my purpose with this paper. That notwithstanding, then, I submit: Lucretius's argument has been answered.

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