

# EX NIHILO

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SEX IS ABOUT POWER:  
*Dissecting Pornography's Role in the Sexual Language Game*

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I offer a pragmatic and philosophical critique of Rae Langton and Caroline West's *Scorekeeping in a Pornographic Language Game*. I begin the paper by developing Langton and West's argument that pornography is a speech act that can be understood as partly continuous with other speech, yet different to the ways of political argument. Pornography, they argue, subordinates and silences women. I offer a pragmatic critique in identifying the divergence of the pornographic language game and the [general] sexual language game. Then, I offer a philosophical critique that undermines pornography's status as an exercitive speech act. Langton and West, while sufficiently ascribing pornography to continuous speech, failed to contest MacKinnon's selective definition of pornography and failed to appeal to the power-based analysis of gender that attributes authority to pornographers.

I DEVELOPMENT OF PORNOGRAPHY AS A SPEECH ACT

Langton and West begin in presenting two strongly contrasting views of pornography and its status as a speech act, both of which bear heavily on an important political question: is a ban on pornography (or at least violent pornography) justifiable? The first view is that of Ronald Dworkin: the rational argument. According to Dworkin, pornography is political speech that aims to persuade its listeners of the truth of certain ideas about women. When pornography delivers the "message" that women are submissive, or enjoy being dominated, it is likened to speech advocating that women occupy inferior roles. This form of speech, as defined by Dworkin, is protected under the First Amendment. The second view is that of Catharine MacKinnon: the reductive argument. According to MacKinnon, pornographic speech is the result of psychological



conditioning that associates violence and misogynistic views with sexual stimuli. In this view, pornography is not political speech, but a non-rational stimulus; thus, a ban on violent pornography can be supported. Langton and West claim both views are extremes and not wholly plausible; they propose a moderate thought that qualifies pornography as speech that produces effects on beliefs, desires, and behavior.

Langton and West are exploring two important feminist claims: pornography *subordinates* and *silences* women. They proceed on the assumption that pornography is speech. Referencing MacKinnon, they argue that pornography as speech has a certain content and acts in a certain way. Said by an authoritative speaker, the speech has an illocutionary doing that legitimizes attitudes and behaviors. In the case of pornography, pornography signifies women are inferior and sexual violence is normal and legitimate.

The purpose of this paper is to broadly support MacKinnon's claims: pornography is not protected by the First Amendment. First, there is the question of what pornography says: Does pornography really say that women are inferior, or that sexual violence is normal and legitimate? Langton and West find two reasons of doubt: (1) pornography does not say these things explicitly and (2) pornography purports to be fiction. Langton and West dispel the first doubt in referencing David Lewis's *Scorekeeping in a Language Game*: there is a distinction between explicit speech and presupposed, implied, and suggested speech. Lewis discusses the rule-governed language game. In a speech situation, "saying" is more than an utterance of strings of words, it is to make a *move* in the language game. The components of the score are set-theoretic constructs, such as sets of presuppositions. The score of the game is based off the acceptability value of the sentences. It is important to note that scorekeeping evolves over time, what is taboo in one generation, is acceptable in another.

Langton and West narrow in on the Rule of Accommodation: speech requires components of conversational score to be a certain way. Illocutionary moves are permissions and prohibitions that may be explicit *or* implicit. To illustrate the rule, they refer to a master's prohibition that a slave crosses a white line. The master could explicitly prohibit the slave, or say something that *presupposed* the slave was not allowed to cross the white line. The master could say, "I hereby prohibit you to cross this white line." which is an explicit move of prohibition to cross the line. The master could also say, "The punishment for leaving the grounds is death." which is an implicit move of prohibition to cross the line. Pornography's claims that women are inferior or that sexual violence is normal can be *presupposed*, rather than explicitly stated. For example,

a favorable gang rape depiction presupposes “gang rape is enjoyable for men.” They conclude pornography can say such things even if it does not *explicitly* say them.

Second, there is the question of whether pornography speaks with authority. The conclusion about pornography’s power to subordinate and silence women requires the premise about pornography’s authority. To answer the question of *subordination*, Langton and West once more refer to the slave and the master. The master’s ability to subordinate the slave, using words, depends on his authority. The master’s words have power *because* he is the master. Pornography, they argue, has the authority to legitimize sexual violence and thus subordinate women. To answer the question of *silence*, the rules of accommodation prevent certain intended moves in a language game. Women are comparatively powerless in sexual language games; women cannot, or do not, challenge pornography’s score in the language game.

Finally, pornography purports to be fiction. According to Langton and West, fictional stories are played out on a background of fact. Pornographers are liars, or background liars that make fictional propositions [about what women enjoy], or background blurrers – they fail to indicate the line between fiction and background. Langton and West conclude that pornography changes the conversational score in life, making it continuous enough with other speech.

## II CONFLATION OF PORNOGRAPHIC LANGUAGE WITH SEXUAL LANGUAGE

In this section I want to raise the question: How much of a role does pornography have to play in the sexual language game? To begin, I want to highlight Catharine MacKinnon’s definition of pornography: ‘the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women in pictures or words that also includes women dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities; enjoying pain or humiliation or rape; being tied up, cut up, mutilated, bruised, or physically hurt; in postures of sexual submission or servility or display; reduced to body parts, penetrated by objects or animals, or presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture; shown as filthy or inferior; bleeding, bruised or hurt in a context which makes these conditions sexual.’ According to MacKinnon, pornography does not just cause harm to women, pornography *is* harm to women.

As by MacKinnon’s definition, pornography is the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or in words. The mark of the pornographic for MacKinnon is that it *celebrates*, *eroticizes* or *legitimizes* the sexual

subordination of women. On this view, pornography does not just depict the sexual subordination of women: it endorses the sexual subordination of women and by legitimating women's subordination, pornography subordinates. MacKinnon wants to argue that pornography conditions its consumers to be sexually aroused by the degradation, humiliation, brutalization, and objectification of women.

This definition obviously excludes material that would otherwise count as pornographic, such as gay pornography. I want to argue that MacKinnon's definition (as it is also appropriated by Langton and West) is disparate with social and legal definitions of pornography. As such, it hinders the effective advocacy of equalizing the sexual language game. Socially, pornography refers to material dealing with sex designed to arouse its readers or viewers. Legally, there are two types of pornography that receive no First Amendment protection — obscenity and child pornography. The social and legal definitions operate in tandem.

The legality of pornography has been traditionally determined by implementing the Miller Test. The test dictates that the opinion of the local community on a pornographic piece is most important in determining its legality. The basic guideline for obscenity is as follows: (a) whether 'the average person, applying contemporary community standards' would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest. . . (b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and (c) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value." Legality is of concern in assessing MacKinnon, and later Langton and West, as they over-archingly call for the censorship of pornography that subordinates women. There is an important component to the social definition of pornography: "sexually explicit." There are multiple mediums that *subordinate* and *silence* women that are outside the social and legal definition of pornography. I briefly cover four such mediums.

### 1. Advertisement

In November, 2015, Bloomingdales, the upscale department store, published a new holiday catalog. A woman is laughing, head tossed back, focused on something over her right shoulder. A man stares at her, unsmiling. The caption reads: *Spike your best friend's eggnog when they're not looking.* The ad sends the message that it is ok to have sex with people who are incapable of consent. In April, 2015, Bud Light published a new label: "The perfect beer for removing 'no' from your vocabulary for the night." Both Bloomingdales and Bud Light faced accusations of promoting rape.

## 2. Music

In Robin Thicke's hit single "Blurred Lines," he sings "I know you want it" eighteen times. In the song "U.O.E.N.O.," Rick Ross raps, "Put Molly all in her champagne, she ain't even know it; I took her home and I enjoyed that, she ain't even know it;" Both popular songs have pro-date rape messages, removing the sense of agency in women.

## 3. Video Games

The video game "RapeLay" is a rape simulator. The agent in the game methodically rapes his way through a family of three women. The game features a series of screens informing the player of how they can stalk the women. The virtual women scream and cry; the player is able to force them into a variety of positions. The game features disturbing graphics like blood upon raping the young virgin girls, and the ability to invite your friends to assist in a gang rape.

## 4. Novels

As of June, 2015, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the best-selling book, had sold over 125 million copies world-wide. The book features sexual practices involving bondage, dominance/submission, and sadism/masochism (BDSM). The problem is that *Fifty Shades* casually associates hot sex with violence, but without any of the consent. Sometimes, Ana, the main character, says yes to sex she's uncomfortable with because she's too shy to speak her mind, or because she's afraid of losing Christian, her business magnate boyfriend; she gives consent when he wants to inflict pain, yet that doesn't prevent her from being harmed.

There is strong cultural evidence of the language game that provides men with rules of accommodation and silences women. However, the conflation of the *pornographic* language game with the inherently unequal *sexual* language game produces untenable differences in the social and legal definition of pornography and MacKinnon's definition of pornography. While the *hard-core* pornography that mutilates women may be considered obscene and thus censored, what of the *soft-core* pornography or implicit messages on the subconscious that perpetuate the subordination of women and normalization of sexual violence across multiple mediums? MacKinnon's definition is deliberate. She wants to ban pornography on the grounds it reduces women to second-class citizens. Pornography, as the speech act that Langton and West argue, is

an act of gender discrimination and hence illegal. They write, “Whatever the reason, pornography affects the pre-suppositional score in the sexual language game.” The pornographic language game is *not* equivalent to the sexual language game, it is merely one component. There exists media that adheres to MacKinnon’s definition of pornography, but not the social and legal definitions of pornography. As a result, we have a philosophical stalemate concerning the status of speech and its potential subjection to censorship.

### III PORNOGRAPHY IS NOT A STANDARD EXERCITIVE

To briefly critique pornography’s status as speech that subordinates and silences women, I will refer to a paper by Mary McGowan, *On Pragmatics, Exercitive Speech Acts and Pornography*. First, standard exercitives express the content of the permissibility of facts enacted. For example, if a parent tells a child, “no television until your homework is complete,” they express the content of the permissibility. Langton and West do not sufficiently describe how pornography enacts permissibility facts without expressing the content of those facts. Second, exercitives express both the illocutionary and the locutionary speaker intentions. The producers, distributors, and purveyors of pornography do not intend to be enacting permissibility conditions of any kind. Langton and West would agree: “pornography is designed to generate, not conclusions, but orgasms.” Such illocutionary intention would generate political speech, as Dworkin suggests. The speaker’s intention is an important part of how exercitive speech acts work. Even if the speech acts do not constitute a necessary condition of exercitive force, the conditions are important evidence that a particular speech act *has* such force – or that pornography *has* the authority to subordinate and silence women.

Third, the hearers, or those exposed to pornography, cannot recognize intentions that are non-existent. Recognition of intentions is an important epistemic criterion of standard exercitive force. Forth, the authority to enact permissibility of pornographers is questionable. Langton and West did not appeal to structural or power-based analysis of gender, nor the power of media, nor the power of mass-distribution of large corporations. Langton and West failed to establish and provide evidence for the authority of pornographers. They do not want to concede that pornography acts on a level of unconsciousness through the form of psychological conditioning; pornography would not be a speech act if that were the case. However, Langton and West failed to account for pornography’s function at the conscious level of communicated intentions. This objection undermines the speech act approach to

pornography. Referring to the ideas in Section II, Langton and West's conception of pornography fails to enact permissibility facts by triggering the rules operative in a system of gender oppression.

### CONCLUSION

In this paper, I developed Langton and West's theory of pornography as a speech act. I offered a pragmatic rejection against the conflation of the pornographic language game and sexual language game that is inherently gender-unequal. I offered a philosophical rejection that undermines pornography's status as an exercitive speech act. Oscar Wilde is known to have said, "Everything in the world is about sex, except sex. Sex is about power." If we account for the power-based analysis of gender, we can understand a more robust intersection of speech and feminism.

“POINT-AND-PROCLAIM”:  
*A Possible Response to the Grounding Problem*

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ABSTRACT

The two-thinger holds that distinct objects can be spatiotemporally coincident, but when two things are colocated, one must wonder how they can share some properties without sharing all. If objects match in primitive properties, what grounds their so-called “higher order” differences? I consider why someone might want to be a two-thinger, despite this problem. I then evaluate the primitivist solution proposed by Karen Bennett, and explore an alternative that she rejects: the “point-and-proclaim” model. Bennett’s primary objection to point-and-proclaim is that it requires a namer to name one among a “bazillion” indistinguishable objects. In response, I develop a new model for the naming of indistinguishables. Rather than pointing to an object, the namer merely tags the first unnamed object that rises to the surface of an infinite well of indistinguishable objects. “Point-and-proclaim” is shown to be a misnomer, one that might draw undue disparagement for a potentially appealing response to the grounding problem.

I THE GROUNDING PROBLEM

The two-thinger holds that distinct objects can be spatiotemporally coincident. When a lump of clay, Lumpl, is shaped into a statue, Goliath, the two things will seem to share all properties, including spacetime location. But what is in a name? Though Goliath and Lumpl match primitively and look exactly the same, significant differences emerge. Lumpl, as a lump of clay, survives being kicked across the room, whereas Goliath, the statue, is destroyed. Goliath, however, will do better than Lumpl at an art auction. In virtue of what do Lumpl and Goliath diverge in these “higher order”

properties? This paper considers why someone might want to be a two-thinger, despite this grounding problem. It then evaluates the primitivist solution provided by Karen Bennett, and explores an alternative she quickly rejects: the “point-and-proclaim” model. To help with this task, I develop a new model for the naming of indistinguishable objects.

The two-thinger’s position is best justified by explanation of the difficulties facing the one-thinger. According to Leibniz’s law, objects with different properties are distinct. So if a region of spacetime contains coincident objects exhibiting different properties, then plural distinct objects live there, vindicating the two-thinger. To remain a one-thinger, one must either deny Leibniz’s law (some do so readily--but I will not enter that fray), deny that Lump and Goliath differ in properties, or deny that they are colocated. Lump and Goliath occupy the exact same spatiotemporal location; Lump, after all, is the *stuff* of which Goliath is made. Lump and Goliath certainly seem to exhibit different properties. At least two groups of properties seem to differ between Lump and Goliath:

1. Goliath could survive a chipped nose, while Lump could not. The two objects have different *persistence conditions*.
2. Goliath is a statue, while Lump is not. Lump is a piece of clay, while Goliath is not. These categorical differences register as different *sortal* properties.

Taken together, these *sortalish* properties (Bennett’s language) create problems for the one-thinger. Despite being colocated and similar in many primitive ways, if one keeps faith with Leibniz, Lump and Goliath are distinct. There are certainly paths forward for the one-thinger (including denial of Leibniz’s law), but the strongest defense is a fierce offense. The two-thinger also faces a tremendous problem, says that one-thinger, a problem that makes Lump and Goliath more trouble than they are worth. Bennett puts the grounding problem like this:

“[I]n light of the fact that spatio-temporally coincident things have all of their *other* properties in common, in virtue of what do they have the *sortalish* properties they do?”



In other words, if Lump and Goliath look the same, occupy the same slice in spacetime, smell the same, feel texturally the same, etc., then why do they live and die by different principles—why do they sell for different prices—why are they, simply, different *kinds* of things? Bennett proposes three ways for the two-thinger to respond to the grounding problem: first by maintaining that things have sortalish properties in virtue of their non-sortalish ones; second by delegating responsibility for properties onto our concepts and attitudes; third by claiming that sortalish properties, are, in fact, primitive, thus evading the brunt of the grounding problem. The first response (supervenience of non-sortals) I leave to Bennett to handle; the second (conceptualism) I explore with the point-and-proclaim model; and the third (primitivism) I will now critically evaluate.

## II PRIMITIVISM

Primitivism holds that all the sortalish properties held essentially by an object are also held primitively. For instance, one might suppose that Goliath has the properties “essentially a statue,” “essentially man-shaped,” and “essentially made of clay.” For the primitivist, these essential, sortalish properties are primitive. They are had by Goliath in virtue of nothing else. By claiming such sortalish properties as primitive, Bennett avoids the difficulty of explaining what grounds them. However, Bennett must still respond to a problem of distribution. Goliath essentially has the sortalish property of “survives a chipped nose,” but lacks the property “survives being smashed against the ground.” Why? Not how, but *why*? This question does not rehash the grounding problem; it asks for explanation of why certain primitive sortals go with various objects.

Bennett employs a theory of plenitude. She says that the multi-thinger, when faced with the grounding problem, should claim that for any spacetime region containing an object, *all* possible sortal properties are instantiated. There exists, near Goliath, a thing that isn’t exactly Goliath, but instead a Goliath-like thing that survives being smashed. It isn’t Goliath because has this extra property. We use naming to group out certain sortals. The thing we term “Goliath” has essentially the primitive property of failing to survive smashing, but nothing grounds this property.

According to Bennett, this position ought to be palatable to the multi-thinger because: (A) the multi-thinger already defends two colocated objects; why not a *bazillion*? and (B) there exists no appealing alternative. But bazillion-thingerdom has hidden costs. For one, it requires extreme ontological commitment. Now every region of spacetime, insofar as it is occupied by anything, is occupied by everything. Goliath

and Lumpl are joined by all the infinite near-Goliath and near-Lumpl neighbors, expressing properties like “survives being sawed in half,” “would not make the cut at Sotheby’s,” “looks better from a certain angle,” and so on. There is no end to the sortalish properties one could think up for this region of spacetime. This ontological commitment probably doesn’t trouble the two-thinger overmuch, but it is still worth considering.

Among a bazillion things, one can still describe Goliath and list some of its sortal properties. But one wonders what Bennett’s bazillion-thinger model *adds*. It adds vagueness--who knows what object among this muddle of similar objects the name “Goliath” should pick out? And although bazillion-thingerdom doesn’t imply that the namer instantiates Goliath’s properties through the power of speech, it bears resemblance. The namer must pick Goliath’s properties out of an infinite list. The advantage of the plenitude theory is that it deems properties as already being present, whereas under the point-and-proclaim theory properties owe their existence to the namer’s instantiation.

Primitivism also produces weak generalizable principles for grounding sortalish properties. Let us switch from Goliath to the statue that represents the Western ideal of male beauty: Michelangelo’s David. For Bennett, the property of David being “essentially handsome” has no grounding principle; it is primitive. The property of David being handsome could very well be grounded in David’s facial symmetry, his lithe and youthful form, or his attire. But isn’t it easier to say David is handsome in virtue of being essentially handsome? Bazillion-thingerdom opens this unfortunate door to grounding non-essential sortals in essential sortals every time. Say that one also finds Goliath to be a handsome statue. One would like to find points of comparison between Goliath and David; both are strapping young men with bulging muscles. But primitivism would ground David’s handsomeness in his essential handsomeness, not in traits he might share with Goliath. One *could* ground Goliath’s handsomeness in his physique, but just as easily one could claim that Goliath has essentially the property of being handsome, and that this property grounds his more mundane features (including muscles). This illustrates an almost Euthyphroean dilemma for the bazillion-thinger: is Goliath handsome because of his shape and attributes, or is he shaped that way because he is essentially handsome?

Given plenitude, there is no clear answer to this question. This deficit, which others have also noticed, makes primitivism uniquely unappealing. What use are sortal properties if they have nothing in common over their instantiation in several distinct

objects? In a sense, they no longer sort. Goliath is handsome. David is handsome. But both might be handsome primitively, or in virtue of entirely different primitives. Handsomeness, grounded in nothing else, gets particularized to each statue. Nothing necessarily ties David and Goliath together. No shared non-sortals ground their good looks. So they are not really of the same kind. As a consequence, we lose any explanatory power for how we, as humans, categorize objects.

I do not pretend that these arguments are conclusive, but I hope they disturb the primitivist bazillion-thinger enough to encourage them to continue looking for other responses to the grounding problem. Now, I will explore a response Bennett dismisses as “just unacceptable”: point-and-proclaim.

### III “POINT-AND-PROCLAIM” AND THE NAMING OF INDISTINGUISHABLES

Point-and-proclaim falls under the umbrella of conceptualism, which holds that an object’s sortal properties are grounded by “human attitudes, concepts, and conventions.” Some properties clearly come about this way. The property of “being handsome” (whether applied to statue or human) is one of them. Insofar as handsomeness is grounded, what, other than human preference, could ground it? Bennett supplies the example of “being hip,” a property whose grounds are cultural. The shag carpet once covered every hip apartment’s floor; now hardwood and concrete are more appealing.

To pose conceptualism as an answer to the grounding problem, one must make similar claims for all sortalish properties. But I don’t think this requirement is outlandish. The very word “sortal” implies sorting, an action done more by humans than by the universe. The property “Goliath survives a chipped nose” can be conceived of as conceptual in this way: we name Goliath with a description in mind, selecting the clay-matter that makes up the statue in a way that aligns with preconceived concepts. An art historian, imagining Goliath as a statue of a man, may think, *A man survives losing a nose; therefore, man-shaped statues survive the same treatment*; and for the Goliath he points to, this is so. Meanwhile, the sculptor of Goliath may look at his chipped creation and think, *My statue is destroyed!* The art historian and the sculptor refer to different objects in naming Goliath, choosing different persistence conditions to apply to different objects sharing one name. Neither the art historian nor the sculptor is wrong in their naming or in their statements about persistence.

To an outside observer, the art historian and the sculptor appear to be pointing at the same spacetime region and speaking about distinct objects. According to the point-and-proclaim model, that is, in fact, what they are doing. The pointer-and-proclaimer gestures to Goliath and says that it survives a chipped nose. Another person points to Lumpl (or another Goliath), an indistinguishable object occupying the same spatiotemporal location, and says that it *doesn't* survive a chipped nose. Before the proclamation, we have two indistinct objects (all properties in common); after the proclamation, the objects have different properties. This is the sticking point for Bennett: the coaxing of different properties out of indistinguishable objects.

Bennett's particular issue is that point-and-proclaim requires us to point to a particular object, even when there is nothing distinguishing that object from its colocated neighbors. When we proclaim Goliath to be handsome, we need to first find Goliath among all the indistinguishable Goliath-like statues occupying the same spacetime. In response, I would like to develop a new model for the naming of indistinguishables that relies on this simple principle: because the colocated Goliaths are indistinguishable, sharing all properties but the haecceity, there is no wrong choice. Spacetime locations, on this model, are like wells filled with infinite, indistinguishable fish. Grab one out, and still--an infinite number of fish remain swimming in the well. One doesn't need a guiding rule or principle to pick out the first fish; just stick your hand in and a fish will latch on. Name one Goliath among the multitudinous Goliaths, assign it the designation "G<sub>1</sub>," and worry not about why that particular fish came to you; they are all the same. You can then proclaim G<sub>1</sub>, the named Goliath, as surviving a chipped nose. The next Goliath to swim to the top gets the property of not surviving. This model avoids Bennett's concern about picking out a particular object among indistinguishable objects.

Bennett could renew her concern in this way. After proclaiming G<sub>1</sub>, one also wants to name a Goliath that doesn't survive a chipped nose. Call it G<sub>2</sub>. One might worry about picking a "fish" that has already been accounted for. The namer has proclaimed G<sub>1</sub> and wants to proclaim a distinct G<sub>2</sub>. If the fish are all indistinguishable, what's to stop them from mistakenly assigning two names and two sets of properties to the same one? But recall that G<sub>1</sub> has already been proclaimed. It has new properties: those of having the name G<sub>1</sub>, and of surviving a chipped nose. It isn't one of the multitudinous indistinguishables anymore. The fish is out of the well, and the proclaimer can safely name G<sub>2</sub> as one of the infinite colocated Goliaths left unnamed in the space-time location.

Insofar as this principle of naming leads to semantic confusion, vagueness, and indecision, it is no more at fault than Bennett's plenitude model. Both models speak to possibly bazillions of colocated objects. But point-and-proclaim has two added benefits. First, it preserves a grounding principle that is generalizable. The point-and-proclaimer speaks from an experience that is somewhat individual, but also somewhat shared: the sculptor and art historian work in related disciplines and hold in common certain cultural values. Second, it avoids vagueness better. Although initially the vagueness is absolute—all the many fish are the same—it is dispelled in the proclaiming step of point-and-proclaim.  $G_1$  survives a chipped nose, whereas  $G_2$ , the next fish in the well, can be proclaimed to not survive a chipped nose. Outside observers may not notice the distinction between the two Goliaths at first glance, but the art historian and the sculptor can explain their views on the matter (“*my* Goliath” ... “but *my* Goliath...”). A vision of colocated objects with different, distinguishing, pointed-and-proclaimed properties emerges. And this, of course, is how sorting (mostly) works in the real world: we argue and debate about what sort of things objects are and how they ought to be grouped.

A certain degree of vagueness is inevitable for the two-thinger. It is hard to point to one of two colocated objects. But the point-and-proclaim model gives us a workable mechanism for how this can occur, where sortalish properties come from, and methods for avoiding semantic uncertainty. This model may require a more thorough explanation, but I believe that it deserves such a defense as well, rather than a cursory dismissal.

CHOOSING EUDAEMONIC EMOTIONS:  
*Aristotle and the Proto-Stoic Theory of Emotions*

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Aristotle wants us to feel the proper emotions: “having these feelings at the right times...is proper to virtue” (NE 2.6.1106b). By claiming that feeling the right emotions is proper to virtue, Aristotle is ultimately suggesting that we are responsible to feel emotions that are central to a life lived well. This moral responsibility implies that we can choose to experience these emotions, but Aristotle thinks we can’t control which emotions we feel, asserting that often “we are angry and afraid without decision” (NE 2.5.1106a). How is it possible to choose the appropriate emotions when we can’t control our emotions?<sup>1</sup>

To resolve this tension, we need to see if Aristotle’s conception of what emotions *are* can explain how these claims actually don’t contradict each other. Aristotle, as many perplexed commentators note<sup>2</sup>, doesn’t provide us with a precise and systematic account of emotions anywhere in his ethical works, leaving open the question of what exactly his conception is. Martha Nussbaum argues that emotions for Aristotle are judgments that attach value to the things at which they are directed<sup>3</sup>. In this paper, I defend Nussbaum’s reading by arguing that her account helps explain why Aristotle demands we choose the proper emotions while maintaining that we can’t control our emotions.

First, I contend that the right emotions for Aristotle are value judgments that are *elements* of a life lived well. Specifically, I claim that emotions determine that the things at which they are directed are meaningful to us in some way and that it is integral to “living well” than an agent ascribes meaning through the proper emotions. We can

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<sup>1</sup> L.A. Kosman points this out in *Being Properly Affected* (106).

<sup>2</sup> See John Cooper’s *An Aristotelian Theory of Emotion* and Stephen Leighton’s *Aristotle and the Emotions*.

<sup>3</sup> See Martha Nussbaum’s *Aristotle on Emotions and Rational Persuasion* (303-04).

choose the correct emotions, then, by revising and turning the meanings our emotions ascribe into meanings that constitute other emotions and a life being lived well. With this argument in place, I suggest our emotions may strike us as outside of our control but that Aristotle thinks we *are* capable of reformulating these emotions.

## I

Emotions have a central role in Aristotelian ethics. Delineating the moral relevancy of feeling emotions, Aristotle writes, “if he [*he who*] stands firm against terrifying situations and enjoys it...he is brave; if he finds it painful, he is cowardly”(NE 3.1104a.5). According to this claim, a person can carry out brave actions like fighting in a battle, but if he isn’t also feeling specific emotions—perhaps joy at facing the enemy—then he isn’t really brave. Thus certain actions (such as brave actions) need to be accompanied by specific emotions because they are incomplete (not really brave) without the emotions. The significance of this claim is that feeling emotions, for Aristotle, is *just* as important as doing actions: “virtues are concerned with actions *and* emotions” (NE 2.3.1104b.14).

The sense in which emotions are important goes beyond emotions accompanying actions. In other words, Aristotle doesn’t think that emotions are simply handmaidens to our actions; he thinks that it is essential to feel certain emotions in their own right, regardless of if they accompany or are followed by action. Returning to bravery: imagine being diagnosed with a terminal illness. In this terrifying situation, you are expected to be brave, for “the brave person will find death and wounds painful...but he will endure them” (NE 3.9.117b.10-15). Yet even if actions may be involved, such as doing things you couldn’t do before the diagnosis, you aren’t brave for doing them. Intuitively, we know your bravery is solely your emotional response: you endure by *not* feeling dread and anguish but feeling, in their stead, contentment with regards to your fate.

The emotions Aristotle wants us to feel in their own right, i.e., the correct emotions, are emotions felt for the sake of a life lived well. Aristotle says that feeling “certain emotions...for the right end...is proper to virtue (NE 2.6.1106b.11). For Aristotle, the right end, of course, is a life lived well. But, surely, many of our emotions aren’t means to an end. I don’t, for example, love my best friend in order to get something out of him; I love him because I am attached *to him*. And Aristotle recognizes this facet of our emotions. He writes, “good people...[are] friends to each other because of the other

person himself” (NE 8.4.1157a.19). According to this passage, the right love (i.e., love felt for a life lived well) is when a lover loves for love’s sake and not for an end apart from the beloved, which implies that Aristotle doesn’t think emotions have instrumental value.

Instead, feeling emotions for the sake of a life lived well means feeling emotions that are *constitutive parts* of this kind of life. Aristotle claims, “the excellent person labors for his friends...and will die for them” and that the “one who dies for others...choose[s] something great and fine for himself [i.e., a life lived well]” (NE 9.8.1169a.20-23). Since you can’t live well if you are dead<sup>4</sup>, these passages can’t be suggesting that someone’s dying for another person purchases a life being lived well. Rather, the passages must be suggesting that a person lives well if he is *willing* to die for his friends. And since intuitively it seems absurd to imagine that someone cares enough about someone to die for her while also seeing her as a mere means, the agent’s willingness to die must be a *part* of his living well, further explaining why Aristotle thinks proper love is for the sake of the beloved: the lover’s passionate love for the beloved’s own sake--a love that makes him willing to die for that person if need be—helps make up his living well. So, as Aristotle’s account of love just demonstrated, emotions have intrinsic value; he thinks we should feel emotions that are part and parcel of living well.

Specifically, which emotions does Aristotle have in mind? To answer this question, we first need a precise understanding of what he thinks emotions are and what he thinks they do. This understanding will help us determine *why* Aristotle thinks certain emotions (like love) constitute our living well and, in turn, which emotions fulfill that purpose.

## II

On Aristotle’s account, emotions have at least two central features<sup>5</sup>. Firstly, he thinks emotions have intentionality, that is, they aim at specific object(s). We know this because he says emotions are directed towards “the right things, [and] towards the right people” (NE 2.6.1106b.23). We will discuss what he means by the “right things” later. Secondly, Aristotle thinks emotions are representational in that they cannot be

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<sup>4</sup> Even Aristotle says this in his discussion on the value of the good life for the dead (NE 1.10-11).

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle certainly thinks emotions have a third central feature: they involve sensations. In other words, each emotion “implies pleasure and pain” (NE 2.1105b20). However, this aspect of emotions isn’t relevant to my argument; refer to Jamie Dow’s *Aristotle’s Theory of the Emotions: Emotions as Pleasures and Pains* for an in depth discussion on this affective side of emotions.



separated from judgments about what their objects are like<sup>6</sup>. For example, I am envious of my friend getting a high-paying job. My envy involves painfully judging his job to be something he shouldn't have since I don't have it. Without this judgment, there would be no envy. Aristotle, in line with my example, thinks envy is “a certain kind of distress at apparent success on the part of one's peers...not that someone [the envier] may get anything for himself but because of those who have it” (*Rhetoric*, 10.1387b.1). Here, Aristotle defines envy in terms of the judgment that envy's object—a peer's success—is something that the peer shouldn't have. But what precisely is the relationship between emotions and judgments?

Emotions *are* evaluative judgments. Aristotle claims, “one loves not what is good for him, but what appears good for him...since [what appears good for him] will be what appears loveable” (NE 8.2.1155b). Straightforwardly, the claim here is that we don't love a thing on the basis of it having loveable qualities in-itself. Rather, we love a thing by judging it to have loveable qualities. Aristotle also says, “friends *whose love accords with the worth* of their friends are enduring friends” (NE 8.8.1159b2). This statement suggests that our love corresponds to the value of an object of love. But, since love doesn't recognize things to have loveable qualities in-themselves, the nature of this correspondence can't be that our love recognizes the value something has independent of our loving it. So the nature of this correspondence must be that love *itself* is the judgment that its object is valuable, which is why Aristotle says we love something by judging it to be loveable. This understanding of love is proof for Martha Nussbaum's claim that “beliefs [for Aristotle] must be regarded as constituent parts of what the emotion is” and that these beliefs are “ascription[s] of significant worth to items in the world” (*Aristotle on Emotions and Rational Persuasion*, 309; 312).

Aristotle understands our emotions to be thick value judgments: they ascribe meanings to the objects at which they aim in terms of what the objects mean to *us*. To put it differently, we find certain things meaningful, by which I mean mattering to us in *any* way, and various emotions ascribe those meanings. Returning to love, Aristotle thinks that love determines that the object of love has features that, on account of which, we consider the object a vital part of our life. I love and consider my mother the most important person in my life because she, among an inexhaustible list of other features, selflessly cares for me: “this sort of friendship...embraces in itself all *the features*

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<sup>6</sup> In *Aristotle and the Cognitive Component of Emotions* (166-77), Giles Pearson has a comprehensive summary of the scholarly debate on what exactly Aristotle's conception of emotions is. In it, he indicates that the different sides to the debate agree that Aristotle ascribes these two features to emotions. Nussbaum also has an account of these two features in *Emotions and Rational Persuasion*.

that friends must have” (NE 8.3.1156b.7); “In loving their friend they love what is good for themselves” (NE 8.5.1157b.5). Besides love, there is, as you will see below, textual evidence that Aristotle finds other emotions to be judgments that make their objects meaningful in some way.

Consider this list. Envy, which was glossed earlier, is the judgment that something (my friend getting a job) shouldn’t exist because I didn’t get it. Anger, being a “desire...for conspicuous retaliation for a conspicuous slight” (*Rhetoric*, 2.1337b), is the judgment that something (cheating lover) has wronged me and needs to pay for it. Fear is the judgment that something (this rabid dog) is threatening my well-being: “Fear... [is an] agitation derived from the imagination of a future destructive or painful evil” [*Rhetoric* 2.5.1382a.1]. Indignation, since it is “pain at unmerited good fortune” (*Rhetoric*, 2.1386b), judges some thing’s success (Ayn Rand’s fame) to be unbearable insofar as it is unwarranted. Though this is a limited list of emotions, these examples highlight a pattern in the way Aristotle defines emotions; clearly, he has a cognitivist understanding of emotions.

Aristotle thinks the role of emotions is to ascribe different meanings to things. So the reason why emotions constitute a life lived well must be connected to this role. In order to fully explain that connection, we now need an account of the relationship between ascribing meaning to things and someone’s living well.

### III

Aristotle thinks that part of an agent’s living well is that he finds certain things meaningful. Aristotle writes, “happiness [a life lived well] ...needs external goods to be added” (NE 1.1099a). An external good is some external thing (i.e., person and thing outside the agent, in the world, which the agent can’t fully control) that is a good: “having friends [for example] seems to be the greatest external good” (NE 10.1169b). And Aristotle is suggesting that we need external goods because they are constitutive parts of a life lived well<sup>7</sup>. But to pursue and procure such goods, we have to first consider some external thing and, by implication, anything related to it meaningful in some way. For example, I consider my parents being pleased a good because I consider their pleasure valuable. Due to this judgment, I find doing whatever I can to please

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<sup>7</sup> For a very comprehensive discussion on external goods in Aristotle’s conception of a life lived well, see Nussbaum’s *Fragility of Goodness* (xv-xvii; 6-8; 318-19; 343-54).

them necessary and their dying utterly horrible insofar as it forever cuts away chances of their being pleased. So if procuring external goods helps constitute a life being well-lived, determining certain things in the world (and everything connected to them) meaningful in some way is also part and parcel of such a life.

The reason why giving meaning to certain things in the world is a component of living well comes down to Aristotle's view of human nature. Aristotle thinks we have certain innate human capabilities and that we, by actualizing them, function in the way we are meant to function. According to Aristotle, this optimal functioning constitutes a life being lived well: "the good...for whatever has a function [i.e., innate capabilities] ...depends on its function" (NE 1.7.1097b). One such innate human capability is the need to engage with things in the world. This is why Aristotle thinks that someone living well can't live "an isolated life" (NE 1.1097b.8-10), i.e., a life without external goods, and that "a human being...*by nature* [tends] to live together with others" (NE 10.9.1169b). So an agent's finding people and other external things meaningful in some way is a part of his living well, for he, by finding them meaningful, actualizes the innate capability of engaging with external things.

We now know why the right emotions are constitutive parts of a life lived well; they ascribe meanings that help constitute such a life. We saw that emotions for Aristotle are value judgments that aim at specific things. Turning back to this conception, it is clear that our emotions, as demonstrated by the emotions we covered earlier, ascribe meanings to people and things in the world; love, for example, determines another person or object in the world to be indispensable. Even self-directed emotions, such as self-pity, are in light of the agent ascribing meanings to certain external things<sup>8</sup>: a 19 year old with no friends pities himself insofar as he doesn't have certain external things—important relationships with other people—that he *esteems*. So Aristotle, by writing that the right emotions aim at "the right things...[and] people" (NE 2.6.1106b.23), is suggesting that the right emotions are the ones that ascribe the kind of meanings someone gives to certain external things as part of his life being lived well.

The question of which emotions constitute a life being well-lived, then, becomes the question of which meanings and external things constitute such a life. And Aristotle doesn't specify what those things and meanings are. To be sure, he thinks there are

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Solomon makes this point when he says: "In fact, many, if not all, of our emotions *essentially* include other people, not only as their objects but as a contributing source of their value and as shared subjects in what is called *intersubjectivity*" (*The Passions*, 20).

certain things and meanings that constitute such a life, which is why he specifically says we need to love our friends: insofar as we are “naturally political animals” (NE 1.1097b), he thinks we all need such intimate social relationships. But beyond a few specifications, Aristotle doesn’t get into which external things we should find meaningful and the ways in which we should find them meaningful. Instead, he asserts, “the excellent person judges each sort of thing correctly...[he is] a sort of standard and measure” (NE 3.113a). Explaining how a person living well is a standard and measure, Heda Segvic says, “there is an element of irreducible subjectivity in Aristotle’s account ...a human being does not do well in life unless he lives in accordance with *his own* conception of what doing well in life consists in” (*Deliberation and Choice in Aristotle*, 180-81). Thus determining which external things and judgments about them—by extension which emotions—constitute a life lived well is a matter of preference; we each pick what uniquely composes our living well<sup>9</sup>.

#### IV

The question of how we can choose to feel the right emotions is difficult to answer. For emotions seem to strike us outside of our control. When a friend dies, it feels like a nebula of despair besieges you. Describing his love, Tolstoy’s Levin proclaims, “It is not my feeling but some external power that has seized me” (*Anna Karenina*, 36). Indeed, emotions seem like afflictions that act on us, without our having any decision over which emotions to feel and when to feel them<sup>10</sup>. And Aristotle is sympathetic to this experience of emotions, which is why he (as mentioned in the introduction) claims that we can’t control which emotions we feel.

However, we *are* capable of altering the emotions that afflict us. Like all other beliefs, the judgments that compose our emotions are alterable. With the exception of

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<sup>9</sup> These preferences aren’t arbitrary or in a vacuum. Aristotle says, “actions in life...are the subject and premises of our arguments” (NE 1.1095a), which means our “disorganized bundle of likes and dislikes based on habit and experience...will be rich enough to provide an adequate basis for worthwhile ethical reflection” (*Aristotle’s Ethics*, SEP). In other words, Aristotle thinks an agent’s “desires...dispositions of evaluation...personal loyalties, and various projects...[and] commitments” (*Internal and External Reasons*, 105) inform his conception of his good life. For example, someone with a family may have the desire to be a caring father and husband. He would, as a result, consider pleasing his family—perhaps by occasional road trips and gift giving—necessary to his living well.

<sup>10</sup> In fact, some commentators argue that Aristotle’s conception of emotions is a view in which emotions are akin to afflictions: they impress on us outside of our control, representing the object at which they aim in a particular way. See Gisela Striker’s *Emotions In Context* (296-99) for a defense of this view and Jaime Dow’s concise summary of this view in *Emotions and Appearances in Aristotle* (145).

emotions that don't respond to our rational judgments (like phobias and other irrational anxieties)<sup>11</sup>, we can modify our emotions by altering the judgments that constitute them. I can, for example, destroy my envy at my friend's job by ceasing to see his job as something he didn't deserve. Furthermore, I can turn this envy into contentment—an emotion that judges its object to be satisfactory<sup>12</sup>--by determining that he, since he is more skilled than me, deserves the job while I really don't. So, through revising the judgments that compose our emotions, we can either stop feeling certain emotions or can transform our emotions into other emotions.

This ability to transform our emotions into other emotions explains how we can choose to feel the right emotions. To choose an emotion, the agent has to first unveil what meanings particular emotions of his ascribe. And if the agent thinks for whatever reason that these meanings don't constitute his living well, he can swap them with meanings that form other emotions and are fitting for such a life: "a prudent person...deliberate[s] finely...about what sort of things promote living well" (NE 6.1140a). Thus, even though we can't control when emotions strike us, we can feel the right emotions by transforming the ones that strike us.

To see an example of this process, let us visit Iris Murdoch's famous M—D scenario. In it, M "feels hostility [i.e., contempt] to her daughter-in-law" (*Sovereignty of Good*, 16). But M was also animated by a "sense of justice" (*Sovereignty of Good*, 17), which we, by editing the scenario with Aristotelian terms, can pretend means wanting to live well. And M, for whatever reason, thought her contempt was a roadblock to her living well. So she ventured to change that emotion to one fitting for her good life, aiming to love D by trying "to see her...lovingly" (*Sovereignty of Good*, 23). Changing the judgments that formed her contempt, M no longer judged D as "vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful" (*Sovereignty of Good*, 17). In short, M chose to transform her hostile judgments into judgments associated with affection, thereby transforming her contempt into another emotion: love.

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<sup>11</sup> See Dow's *Emotions and Appearances in Aristotle* (144-47) and *Feeling Fantastic Again* (246-48) discuss Aristotle's take on recalcitrant emotions.

<sup>12</sup> See Solomon on contentment (*The Passions*, 235-36).

AFFIRMING NEO-ARISTOTELIAN TELEOLOGY  
*And its Applications in Normative Medical Ethics*

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to assert a realist position of teleology, the study of ends and purposes in things, I argue that even popular naturalistic or non-supernatural metaphysical frameworks have fundamentally teleological commitments. After all, the Neo-Aristotelians and the Neo-Kantians insisted that this realist position was integral to any full understanding of the observable universe. In modern science, teleological language is used frequently, and rather than assuming that this is an oversimplification of the facts, it seems more probable that our purpose-oriented language suggests that there exist really purpose-oriented things. The plausibility of real purposes in things, what these purposes might be like, and how they can shape human action are examined in a case study of medical ethics: diagnosing identity disorders.

I INTRODUCTION

Teleological language is used all the time: “I called you today to see how you are doing” or “Your food is for eating, not for playing!” What is implied here is that particulars (a phone call or food) can intrinsically have purpose (for showing care or for consumption). However, for many people this kind of language is uncomfortable. Is there real, intrinsic purpose in real things, or is a thing’s “purpose” extrinsically imposed by conscious agents? To put it another way, when someone says, “The nucleus is the control center of the cell,” there is a significant underlying assumption being made: that the nucleus just by virtue of being a nucleus has a purpose, namely to control the happenings within the cell. Is this purpose or *telos* a real metaphysical reality or is it just creative, descriptive language used by biologists? If *telos* is real, do all individuals have a real, intrinsic *telos*? If not, why do we use this type of language in both everyday and technical language? While a realist position was ubiquitous during the ancient and

medieval periods, the ubiquity of materialism has swayed the general consensus towards an anti-realist position. This curious transition from teleology as a universal necessity to a position that is almost laughable to hold is quite dramatic, and it is the point of this paper to argue that this transition is unjustified.

Proving the validity of realist or Neo-Aristotelian teleology would be well beyond an undergraduate's capability as well as beyond the scope of this small paper. Instead, I will focus on two common misconceptions that have altered the world's perception of teleology and show that the teleological framework offers an insightful interpretive lens for normative ethics. The first misconception is that teleology necessarily requires some supernatural purpose-giver or that teleology necessarily presupposes creationism. The logical jump is perhaps exacerbated by the high profile given to science-religion debates, the politics of creationism in the classroom, and intelligent design in the media. While creationism does strongly imply teleology, I will argue that the reverse is not necessarily the case, and that non-supernatural metaphysics must suppose inherent *telos* in things as well. The second misconception is that teleologically-oriented ethics is necessarily consequentialist. Consequentialism is a normative ethical theory that determines between courses of action by analyzing their consequences. To coin a phrase, the ends justify the means. The temptation then is to assume that teleological ethics, because of teleology's focus on final ends, would be consequentialist in nature. In contrast, it seems to me that a teleological perspective is wholly separate, and can even compensate for many shortcomings in consequentialist ethics.

## II THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON TELEOLOGY

Famously, Aristotle writes in his *Physics* that to understand anything, one must understand its causes including formal, material, efficient, and final causes. Though the word "teleology" would not be coined until more than a millennium later, Aristotle's final cause is teleological: an acorn's final cause is to be an oak tree, a hammer's is to drive nails, and an airborne rock's is to fall to earth. Any natural being in Aristotle's system had to be understood according to his four causes, and necessarily by extension, a final cause.

Regardless of Aristotle's considerations about the divine, the idea of *telos* was never explicitly linked to a *telos*-giver. It was a fundamental fact of the natural order. To quote his *Physics*:

"The best illustration is a doctor doctoring himself: nature is like that. It is plain then that nature is a cause, a cause that operates for a purpose."

Admittedly, without context, this quote is hardly convincing. Preceding this quote is an entire passage dedicated to examples of natural occurrences that have ends: incisors are always in the front of the mouth, roots always grow towards the soil, and nests are built for the use of the family. Aristotle argues from this that coincidence cannot be an accurate description of natural processes. After all, one would be very surprised if their molars were growing in the front of the mouth, if roots sprang up from a tree into the air, or nests were built and unused. If these cannot be characterized by coincidence, they must be purposeful. In other words, such things have inherent *telos*. There are no mentions of a purpose-giver to inspire front-of-mouthness in incisors or references to intention and cognition on the part of the incisors themselves. Their purpose is not some secondary trait to their existence. Rather, their purpose and function informs their existence.

Even for the religious medieval, teleology was a natural assumption about the state of the world, and did not rely on supernatural causes:

“But a natural thing, through the form by which it is perfected in its species, has an inclination to its proper operations and to its proper end, which it achieves by operations, ‘for as everything is so does it operate,’ and it tends to what is fitting for itself. Hence, also, from an intelligible form there must follow in one who understands an inclination to his proper operations and his proper end.”

In this excerpt from his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas differentiates between intellect-driven purpose and natural purpose. Certainly, there is a kind of “purpose” or “end” that is intentional, but this is wholly separate and distinct from the natural purpose of individuals to pursue their perfect ends. An “inclination” he calls it. Teleology is this inherent end in all things. Even in his teleological argument for the existence of God, the argument is not “If God, then teleology,” but rather “if teleology, then God”:

“The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. We see that things which lack knowledge, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that they achieve their end, not fortuitously, but designedly. Now whatever lacks knowledge cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is directed by the archer. Therefore, some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.”



Purpose and *telos* in individuals is an assumption of the first premise. A general commitment to realist teleology is anticipated at the outset, upon which the argument stands. Regardless of whether or not the argument is convincing, it seems to me that for Aquinas, teleology was an apparent metaphysical truth not just for the Christian, but for the non-Christian as well.

Contemporary allergies to espousing a teleological metaphysics was probably inspired by philosophers of science like Descartes, Galileo, Bacon, and Newton. The argument goes that if the physical universe can be described in terms of mathematics and physical laws, then no divine hand was needed to keep the clockwork moving, and no intrinsic “purpose” was needed to explain the motion of things. Teleological language was too *metaphysical* in the pejorative sense, too non-physical. Physical things were inert quantities of matter, and any talk of purpose that seemed to imply intentionality fit more into the “mental” category. Descartes’s mind-body dualism helped to drive home this distinction. Causality happened not because objects tend towards certain ends, but merely because matter operates according to some pattern or repetition of occurrences. Thereby teleology would join the ranks of astrology and alchemy as a pseudoscience. At best, teleology was just a helpful heuristic for explaining things macroscopically and at worst, a theory that failed to get at the real workings of things.

Despite these accusations, the fact that teleological language is still widely used, even in academic circles, seems to me to be a strong indicator that teleology might have more meat to it than many give it credit for. Take for example a stomach. A stomach is the organ that breaks down food, fulfilling a specific role within the digestive tract. It is not enough to say that a stomach is some organ containing acid (there are plenty of those), or merely some part of the gastrointestinal system (there are plenty of those as well). It seems that the definition of a stomach, the organ that breaks down food for digestion, is inextricably tied to its function. Even deeper biological entities at the subcellular level, the names of many enzymes, proteins, and organelles, betray that they are understood by their function: receptors, inhibitors, promoters, transcriptase, etc. The body cannot be fully understood apart from how its parts work together. The very idea of an organism necessarily includes teleological explanations.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century Neo-Kantians built off of this idea. Heinrich Rickert acknowledged that biology as a whole is the study of teleological unities, or systems of interrelated functions. Organisms, body systems, cell cycles, intermolecular processes - these are all concepts that, in order to fully understand them, require reference to

multiple processes working together. Again, this is teleological. Now it is true that many cite evolution as a process which does away with teleology. There is no intrinsic purpose, merely happenstance mutations that end up being beneficial for those that survive. In this view, evolution is fundamental, and teleology is derived. Georg Toepfer argues for the opposite: one needs teleology to explain the evolution. Evolution is a population's change for better fitness and reproduction. But the very idea that some population changes over time is a little baffling philosophically. If we want to say organism population X changes or evolves, how can we still call it organism population X? Would it not be organism population Y now? This is a variation on the classic ship of Theseus problem. Replace one plank on a ship, and it seems valid to call it the same ship. Replace every plank and nail, get new sails, and a new flag, and now can it be still called the same ship? For Georg Toepfer, teleology and function is that which persists through the change:

“...[D]espite the changes in its matter and form, an organism may remain the same individual. What defines the starting and end point of its existence is not the coherence of a certain amount of matter or the maintenance of a certain form but the cyclical causal structure of the system, i.e. the duration of the interaction of its components and activities.”

Again, I must stress that I have not in any way proved that metaphysical teleology is valid. Rather, I have argued from the testimony of philosophers throughout history that teleology is an important part in our understanding of the world around us. Therefore, the burden of proof seems to me to be on the teleological “deniers” to account for why teleology is so important for understanding and talking about the world around us, and yet is somehow neither fundamental nor real.

### III DIFFERENTIATING CONSEQUENTIALIST AND TELEOLOGICAL ETHICS

At this point in the essay, I will turn to addressing the second misconception. Teleological considerations, as they apply to normative ethics, oftentimes are misinterpreted as consequentialist in nature. A generalized overview of the argument might appear something like this:

1. Consequentialist ethics states that to determine best course of action, one must evaluate the action's end result
2. An action is a kind of particular of the nature  $p \rightarrow q$ ,  $p$  being the cause, and  $q$  being the end

3. In consequentialist ethics, q is the subject of interest
4. Teleology is the study of ends, and q's are ends
5. Therefore, teleological ethics is consequentialist

It seems to me that the problem with this reasoning lies in Statement 4. Statement 4 assumes that focusing on the end of an action is at least similar to focusing on its final end. Recall first that St. Aquinas differentiated between intended ends and natural ends. I think it would be prudent to apply this distinction here, if we are to take teleological distinctions seriously.

The consequentialist cares for neither intended nor natural ends; his focus is on the actual (or potentially actual) result of the action being taken. Murder is wrong because a death occurs. She should get a traffic ticket because she was speeding. The consequences of murder are wrong, and therefore murder is wrong. Breaking the law has bad societal consequences, and therefore it is wrong. However, in a teleological framework, the difference between an intended end and the natural end as a separate issue is vitally important. Murder is wrong not only because it leads to death, but also because of a person's role in society. Like an organism, society has parts that function together, and the person about to commit murder is a part of that society. Notice that the considerations are different: for the consequentialist, it is merely what happens next that is of utmost importance, whereas for the teleological perspective, it is important to consider how the person fulfills or does not fulfill their *telos*. To put it another way, in a utilitarian view, there is one right course of action: that which results in the most aggregate amount of happiness. In a teleological perspective, there are many possible courses of actions that fulfill one's natural *telos*, and one must be wary of those that do not.

To illustrate these objections, I employ the classic trolley problem. Suppose a train is speeding towards a junction of which only you have control. Should it be allowed to continue on its course, the train will run over four civilians who have been chained to the track. Should you pull a certain lever, the train will commence onto a second track on which is tied only one civilian. Do you pull the lever and save the four, or do nothing and save the one? Now, another iteration of the trolley problem is the surgeon's problem. Suppose you are the only surgeon in town, and there are four patients that are missing four different organs. All will die soon without the necessary transplants. A stranger walks into town with a set of fully functional organs. Do you kill the one and harvest the organs in order to save the four patients? Or do you let the four patients die?

My point here is not to propose an answer to these hypothetical situations, but to illustrate a point. For the consequentialist, the answer should be the same in all iterations of the problem because the results end up being essentially the same: either one person dies, or four people die. Curiously, though many people are often willing to pull the lever to change the train's course thereby saving the four on the tracks, many are hesitant to kill the one and harvest the organs to save the four on the operating table. This fits a teleological framework very well. The addition of *telos* points will add complexity to the situation. A doctor harvesting organs for patients? Surely this is perverse because a doctor is not meant to take advantage of a person! Their purpose is the preservation of their patients! Sometimes the trolley problem is rephrased by adding that the one person about to be run over is your family member, and the other four are wanted criminals. The *telos* to care for family brings tension to this situation, and perhaps the oftentimes perceived *telos* of society's role to punish criminals.

It is my suspicion that the consequentialist must abstract himself from the situation. In abstracting himself, he trivializes the complexity of the problem. And in trivializing the problem, he misdiagnoses a solution. A teleological approach would be qualitatively different. It is important to note that consequentialist ethics and teleological ethics are not wholly distinct from each other. In fact, the consequentialist can most definitely apply a teleological framework to their moral calculations. What is being noted here is that teleological ethics is different than merely consequentialist ethics, and that many ethical frameworks could benefit from an analysis of purpose in things.

#### IV THE PROBLEM OF DIAGNOSING IDENTITY DISORDERS

Let us examine the case of Amber "Jewel" Shuping. She claimed that she always felt like she was a blind person in a normal person's body, and wanted so badly to be blind that she asked doctors to assist her. After her requests were rejected, she took matters into her own hands and blinded herself with a drain cleaner. She was subsequently diagnosed with a mental disorder called body integrity identity disorder (BIID), and acknowledged this diagnosis. Body integrity identity disorder is an umbrella term for any number of similar situations in which a patient has an otherwise normally functioning body, yet desires the amputation of or loss of function in any number of body faculties. What interests me are the differences between the popular responses to BIID and gender identity disorder (GID). It has become more commonplace that doctors who have patients with GID oblige their patients, assisting them with hormone

altering medications, providing surgery, and even changing the terminology from disorder to dysphoria. The same cannot be said generally for patients with BIID. Interestingly, a lot of the same justifications are used for both groups: a sense of “being born in the wrong body,” a desire for bodily alterations that often require drastic chemical or physical changes, and emotional scarring as a result of social anxiety and shame.

Again, it seems to me to be the case that in this situation the consequentialist has no way of differentiating between the two cases. In both cases, the patient feels a lack of correspondence between who they feel they should be and how they actually are. In both cases, doctors and medical practitioners have the skills and expertise to alleviate the patient of this stress, and the patient desires this. If the consequentialist argues for a particular solution in one instance, they must also invariably offer the same solution in the other case, assuming the situations are similar. Now, it should be noted that I am not equating the two conditions, nor am I saying that they are the same kind of biochemical phenomenon. Rather, what I am suggesting is that the consequentialist cannot differentiate between the two cases; replace BIID or GID with any other similarly justified position and the question remains unchanged.

This is problematic, as the consequentialist position seems to lead to the conclusion that doctors have a moral obligation to fulfill the desires of a patient. If a patient feels discomfort, dysphoria, or even suicidal thoughts, what is the difference consequentially? A utilitarian might offer that injury or harm depletes the general happiness, and that those conditions that ultimately harm or end the life of a patient would be ill advised. But what if injury would bring them happiness and non-injury would bring them pain? Take this hypothetical situation: a patient comes from a suicidal family. Not just their immediate family, but their aunts, uncles, cousins, and in-laws are all partial to the idea that life should be ended as soon as possible. Here is a case where death would increase happiness. Would it be right for the doctor to oblige the patient if the patient came in asking for assistance in suicide? Though this situation is quite farfetched, I think it shows something important: an increase in total happiness cannot be the whole story. And so from the wide spectrum of “no harm to the patient” to “ending a patient’s life,” there does not seem to be a difference for the consequentialist. How then does teleology sort through the problem of diagnosing mental disorders? If it is not dependent upon the patient’s opinion or the opinions of the society around them, how can one understand these things? It should be first noted that the idea of “disorders” depends on a teleological framework. The idea of “normal” functions,

especially the normal functioning of the internal systems of an organism, is by definition teleological. “Disorder” would then imply a deviation from the normal, and therefore dependent upon a teleological framework.

Let us return to our example of BIID. If a patient comes and wants their legs amputated, not because they have any specific defect, but because the patient feels like they should be amputated, what are we to make of that situation? A teleological framework would need to consider whether or not amputation would help that individual fulfill his or her *telos*. The primary hesitation of a doctor would be that amputation would be debilitating for a healthy person as it removes the power of locomotion. I think this correlates very well with the function of the legs: to amputate would certainly be to inhibit a person’s ability to fulfill their *telos*, which seems contrary to a doctor’s *telos* of promoting health in an individual. After all, doctors typically remedy abnormal functions: invading diseases, chemical imbalances, or broken limbs.

Now, this is not necessarily a justification for never amputating an individual. There are certainly cases in which amputation is necessary. For example, the more a person is unable to function because of their condition, the more consideration a doctor might give to acquiescing the request. This is akin to the natural response of “it would be better to give her what she wants and help her re-enter a healthy relationship with society than to leave her wallowing in daily torment.” If she was so bent on the amputation such that she was harming or inhibiting herself in more dangerous ways, it would be wiser to go through with the amputation. This is I think the advantage the teleological framework has over one that is merely consequentialist. The teleological framework takes morally grey areas seriously, rather than oversimplifying them, and also has the tools to sort through such situations.

## V. LAYING OUT THE TELEOLOGICAL ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

What can be considered a *telos*? It seems so far that the intrinsic purposes I have brought up are arbitrarily decided. While certainly more philosophical rigor can and should be applied to such a question, for the sake of brevity I will consider one important aspect of any *telos*: context. There is virtually nothing distinctive about a son-patient relationship, and that can be alternatively described as son-patient lacking any real *telos* points. The son-father relationship, however, is full of ethical obligations - obligations that seem to me to be derived from the *telos* of a father to his son, and a son to his father. The son must consider the advice of his father, respect him, and do what he says (to a certain extent!). Those “son” obligations apply in the father-son context,

the only context that gives “son” its meaning. “Son” has no meaning in a son-patient context. If the son and the patient were friends, perhaps moral obligations would then arise from their friend-friend relationship. Tied to that relationship is a wholly different set of moral obligations that arise from their *telos* as a friend to another friend. When deciding whether or not to treat a patient with identity disorder, it seems to me that the doctor has a specific *telos* that is relevant to the situation. In a doctor-patient relationship, surely there are many moral considerations there!

Let us say that the *telos* of a doctor in the doctor-patient relationship is to promote the patient’s health. This has significant ramifications on issues like cosmetic plastic surgery, abortions, transgender operations, etc. Now, it might be tempting to say that promoting a patient’s health would necessarily exclude these kinds of situations from ever being helped by a doctor. When will plastic surgery for beauty purposes promote health? Teleology has room in these cases, I think. Ideas of “health” involve more than just physical functionality, but societal health, a healthy vision of oneself, and personal health. Perhaps this is not the proper situation for a doctor to act. Perhaps the *telos* of a psychiatrist or a therapist is more suited to the case. The consequentialist ignores these considerations; it does not matter the role of the doctor. If it generates the most happiness, it must be done. So why treat the patient? Why refrain from treating patient? The consequentialist can only resort to: which action will generate the most benefits, happiness, etc.? I think that the teleological position more properly gets at what the actual issue is and opens the door to a wider window of possible solutions.

In the consequentialist framework, not only does a doctor need to consider factors that are irrelevant to the situation, but the doctor does not even need to be a doctor. Every person has to make the same moral judgments, regardless of who they are. It does not matter if it is a doctor treating a patient or an artist treating the patient. They must go through the exact same moral considerations, and they have the same moral obligation to do whatever action comes out to produce the most good. I think a fundamentally teleological understanding of the world therefore is necessary even for the consequentialist, if at a minimum, just to parse out what the relevant factors are for their ethical calculus.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have attempted to affirm the viability of realist teleology by debunking two misconceptions: that teleology necessarily implies creationism and that teleological ethics is merely another form of consequentialism. It seems to me that the

ancients almost ubiquitously assumed a teleological framework because understanding nature required it. Organisms, evolution, and even basic physical concepts require reference to processes with ends. To deny a realist teleological framework would be to banish much of our understanding of ourselves and the world around us to the realm of the imaginary. Adding in a teleological framework can provide great clarity, as I believe many scientists and philosophers have been doing by using teleological language, not only in daily life, but also to describe the processes going on, from the basic physical laws to the rational minds within ourselves. Ethics, specifically normative ethics, can benefit greatly from a confident espousal of teleology, helping people delineate between very difficult choices.

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