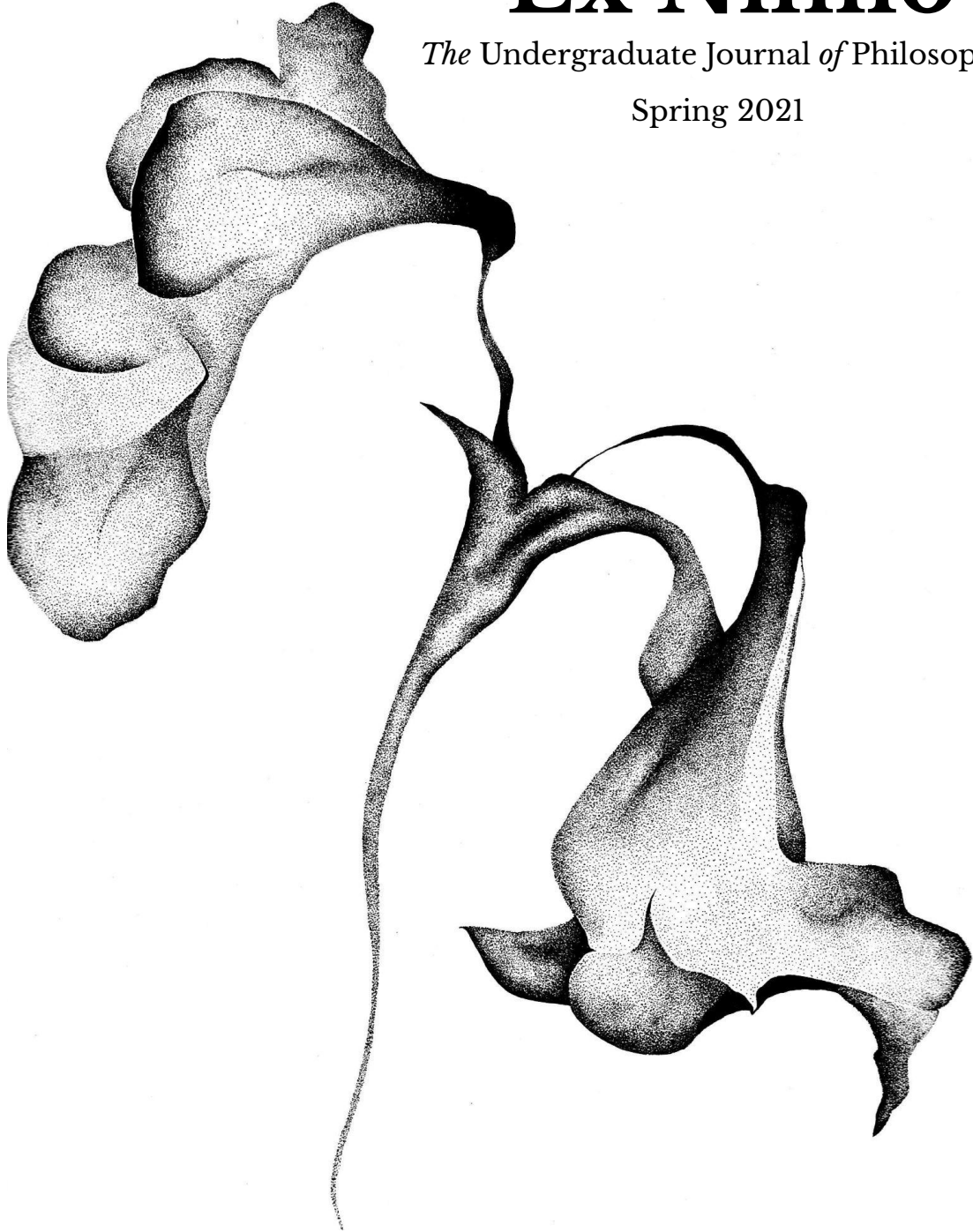


Ex Nihilo

The Undergraduate Journal of Philosophy

Spring 2021



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The University of Texas at Austin

Ex Nihilo

The Undergraduate Journal of Philosophy

Spring 2021

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Grim Reapers and Grounding Finitism

Ethan Walker

Introduction

In this paper, the Grim Reaper paradox, a variant of one of Jose Benardete's "new-zenonian" paradoxes, will be resolved by proposing a metaphysical law that prevents its set-up. Suppose that there is a person named Fred who is alive at midnight. For each time $1/2^n$ minutes after midnight a Grim Reaper is waiting to kill Fred if he is alive by then. So Fred is not dead at midnight, but cannot live to any time past midnight. For this paradox to be possible, one must suppose that some facts can be metaphysically dependent upon, or "grounded" by, infinitely many other facts. After describing how this assumption allows for the paradoxical set-up to be possible, I will put forward a hypothesis about the metaphysical structure of reality, presented as the finitist claim that some specific types of facts can only be metaphysically dependent upon finitely many other facts. This finitist principle resolves the Grim Reaper paradox and has no obvious counterexamples, and thus should be adopted in the absence of any competing solutions to the Grim Reaper paradox¹.

¹Of course there are competing solutions to the paradox. Showing that the hypothesized structure presented in this paper is superior to the other solutions on offer is a project too long to fit inside this paper.

The Grim Reaper Paradox

Logical paradoxes arise when one accepts two or more plausible premises which nonetheless lead to a logically inconsistent conclusion. Paradoxes are a serious matter; one's theoretical commitments should avoid inconsistency at all cost. The Grim Reaper Paradox, originally proposed by Jose Benardete² as the assassin paradox, is one such logical paradox. It is also a variant of one of Zeno's famous paradoxes of motion. The paradox goes as follows: Fred has a death warrant placed on him. He is alive at midnight, and is locked in a safe sterile room with nothing that could kill him. If he lives to 12:01, Grim Reaper₀ will appear in the room and kill him. However, if Fred is alive 30 seconds after midnight, Grim Reaper₁ will kill him. Yet Grim Reaper₂ awaits to kill Fred if he lives 15 seconds past midnight. In fact, the death warrant states that for any n , at time $1/2^n$ minutes after midnight there will be a Grim Reaper _{n} who will kill Fred instantaneously. If a Grim Reaper kills Fred, then all the successive Grim Reapers will do nothing, for Fred would already be dead.

To make the paradox more explicit, consider the following:³

Claim: Fred can only be killed by a Grim Reaper.

P1: If Fred lives 1 minute past midnight, GR₀ will kill him.

P2: If Fred lives 30 seconds past midnight, GR₁ will kill him

² Jose Benardete, *Infinity: an Essay in Metaphysics*, (Oxford: OUP, 1964).

³This formulation is inspired by John Hawthorne's rendition of another one of Benardete's paradoxes (John Hawthorne, "Before-Effect and Zeno Causality", *Nous* 34, (2000): 622-633).

P3: If Fred lives 15 seconds past midnight, GR_2 will kill him

Pn: For any n , if Fred lives to $1/2^n$ minutes past midnight, then Fred will not live past $1/2^n$ minutes, because GR_n will kill him.

In order for Fred to live to 1 minute past midnight, the following must be true:

Q0: GR_0 will kill Fred

Q1: If Fred is killed by GR_0 , then Fred encountered GR_1 and was not killed by him.

Q2: If Fred is killed by GR_1 , then Fred encountered GR_2 and was not killed by him.

Qn: For any n , if Fred lives $1/2^n$ minutes past midnight, then Fred encountered GR_{n+1} at $1/2^{n+1}$ minutes past midnight and was not killed by him.

From this, one can derive **Rn**:

Rn: For any n , Fred cannot live $1/2^n$ minutes past midnight.

If **Rn** was not true, then there would be a contradiction between **Pn** and **Qn**, and thus **Rn** must be true. This is an inconsistent set of propositions. Any finite set of Grim Reapers trying to kill Fred is consistent, as whoever the first member in that set is will kill Fred. However, when an infinite number of Grim Reapers are collected into a non-well ordered set, we get an inconsistency.⁴ From **Rn** and **Claim**, a contradiction ensues. Assuming Fred is alive at midnight and only a Grim

⁴A non-well ordered set is an infinite set with at least one subset which possesses no first member. Think of it as a set that never begins, but may have an ending (for example the set of negative integers counting down to 0). The inconsistency here only arises if the set is non-well ordered. If the set was well-ordered, then there would be a first member in that set, and the first member would be Fred's murderer.

Reaper can kill Fred after midnight, then there is nothing that kills Fred, although he cannot live past midnight, and thus he dies without a cause.⁵

I believe, though will not argue, that when paradoxes arise, they represent portions of metaphysical reality's structure being violated. The logical inconsistency which follows comes from one or more of the premises being impossible given the actual structure of metaphysical reality. Thus, the general prescription for resolving paradoxes is to find the weakest premise, and reject it via reference to metaphysical structure. In order for the Grim Reaper set-up (i.e. having infinitely many Grim Reapers arranged in a non-well ordered set within a finite spatiotemporal location) to be possible, it is seemingly required that some fact (or collection of facts) of the relevant sort could be metaphysically dependent upon infinitely many facts.⁶ This metaphysical dependency is what has been called "metaphysical grounding".⁷ In the next section I will explain what metaphysical grounding is, and will show how the assumption above is required

⁵ One can support **Claim** by running a subtraction argument on all other things that could possibly (nomologically speaking) kill Fred at or before midnight. Consider the following argument:

1. There is a possible world w containing the Grim Reaper set-up and w has Fred die at or before midnight by some cause x .

2. There is another possible world w' where w' is an exact duplicate of w , except w' lacks x . 3. (conclusion)

Thus there is a possible world in which there is no x that causes Fred to be dead at or before midnight.

Assume that in w there are n many things that could kill Fred (nomologically speaking) at or before midnight. By applying premise 2 n many times to w , we would create another possible world w' where w' is the exact same as w , except it lacks all things that could nomologically possibly kill Fred at or before midnight.

⁶ A qualification should be added. One could reject this claim by accepting a certain form of Jonathan Schaffer's priority Monism (see Jonathan Schaffer, "Monism: the Priority of the Whole", *Philosophical Review* 119, (2010): 31-76). On one particular version of priority monism, the universe grounds all existing facts about concreta by the fact that it possesses a distributional property of "tracing such-and-such a curve through physical configuration space" (Schaffer, "Monism": 60). I discuss this issue later on in this paper, as it poses a strong objection to my argument (see page 20-21).

⁷ See Kit Fine, "Guide to Ground", in *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality*, ed. Fabrice Correia and Benjamin Schnieder, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), and Jonathan Schaffer, "On What Grounds What", *Metametaphysics: new essays on the foundations of ontology*, ed. D.J. Chalmers, D. Manley, and R. Wasserman, (Oxford: OUP, 2009). Grounding is thought to establish a metaphysical hierarchy.

for the paradox to arise. Later on in the paper, I will provide a reason for believing that this assumption is the weakest premise, the one to be rejected to resolve the paradox.

Grounding the Paradox

Metaphysical grounding, or just grounding, is a constitutive relation which holds between facts, where one fact [P]’s being “grounded” in another fact [Q] means that [P] is constituted by [Q].⁸ In other words, [P] is nothing over and above [Q]. For example, the fact that there are particles arranged tablewise grounds the fact that there is a table. There being a table is nothing over and above there being particles arranged tablewise.⁹ Following Kit Fine, I take grounding, or “full grounding”, to be a primitive notion. It is used to define the notion of partial ground. [P] partially grounds [Q] if [P] either fully grounds [Q] or if [P] along with some other facts fully ground [Q].

To see the difference between the two, consider the following. All of the particles composing a table taken together fully ground the table’s existence. However, any one of those particles, taken in isolation or with some proper subset of particles composing the table, only partially ground the table. They are not enough to give us the table; something more (namely, the rest of the particles)

⁸I use [F is a] to indicate the fact that F is a.

⁹Shamik Dasgupta, “Constitutive Explanation”, *Philosophical Issues* 27: 75-76.

must be added in for the table to exist. Grounding is also a necessity.¹⁰ If [Q] grounds [P], then necessarily if [Q], then [P].¹¹ Finally, grounding is a strict partial order, meaning it is transitive (If [P] grounds [Q] and [Q] grounds [R], then [P] grounds [R]), irreflexive (no fact [P] grounds itself), and asymmetric (if [P] grounds [Q], then it is not the case that [Q] even partially grounds [P]).

In the Grim Reaper paradox, it is a fact that [there are infinitely many Grim Reapers waiting to kill Fred after midnight]. This fact is grounded in the infinite number of facts about each Grim Reaper's spatiotemporal (from here on ST) location and their intentions about when they will kill Fred. Because each Grim Reaper is a distinct entity with distinct intentions, there should be infinitely many such facts. Further, each of the grounds for those facts should also be distinct, for the same reasons above. Hence, each fact of the form [Grim Reaper_n intends to kill Fred at 1/2ⁿ minutes after midnight] will be grounded in distinct facts about the position of particles and whatever other facts ground intentions. This is the assumption of grounding infinitism:

Grounding Infinitism (GI): It is possible for some fact [F] (or plurality of facts [FF]) to be grounded by an infinite plurality of facts [GG].

By combining **GI** with a plausible theory of modal plenitude one can derive the

¹⁰

¹⁰ Alexander Skiles has put forward a couple arguments which I find rather convincing for the fact that grounds does not *always* necessitate the grounded (Alexander Skiles, "Against Grounding Necessitarianism", *Erkenn*, (2015):717-751). For ease of explication, however, I shall be assuming that grounding is a necessitation relation. I do not think anything significant in my argument is changed if one accepts Skiles' form of grounding contingentism.

¹¹ Grounding is not just a necessitation relation, however. It establishes a direction of priority. So, saying that the existence of Socrates grounds the existence of his singleton set {Socrates} is not the same as saying Socrates necessitates his singleton set {Socrates}. This latter claim is symmetric, for {Socrates} also necessitates Socrates, but the former claim is not. There is a direction to grounding, but no direction to necessitation.

possibility of the Grim Reaper paradox.

One of the most systematic methods for answering questions about what is possible comes from the Principle of Recombination (from here on PR).¹² This principle was created by David Lewis as a theory of plenitude from which one can derive every logically possible world (size and shape permitting). His principle is simply stated as follows: any duplicate d of any object x can coexist with any other duplicate d' of any object y , given they occupy distinct ST locations, size and shape permitting. The size and shape permitting proviso is made so as to prevent there from being a possible world which has more objects than could “fit together within some possible size and shape of spacetime”.¹³ I shall take Lewis’ formulation of the PR as a satisfactory one.¹⁴

What does Lewis mean by a duplicate? One way to conceive of duplication is that an object x is a duplicate of some object y iff x and y do not differ in their intrinsic properties. Lewis himself says “an intrinsic property is one that can never differ between two duplicates.”¹⁵ Lewis, however, prefers a more detailed account of the truth conditions for two things to be duplicates: “(1) they have exactly the same perfectly natural properties, and (2) their parts can be put into correspondence in such a way that corresponding parts have exactly the same perfectly natural properties, and stand in the same perfectly natural relations.”¹⁶

¹² David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, (Blackwell: Oxford, 1986): 88.

¹³ *Ibid*: 89-90.

¹⁴ George Darby and Duncan Watson offer a more precise version of the PR which evades all use of modal language. However, that will be irrelevant for my purposes. For those interested see Darby and Watson, “Lewis’ Principle of Recombination: Reply to Efirid and Stoneham”, *Dialectica* 64, (2010): 435-445.

¹⁵ Lewis, *Worlds*: 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid*: 61.

Lewis explains perfectly natural properties by looking into the distinction between abundant and sparse properties. For Lewis, abundant properties are typically extrinsic properties that are arbitrarily made (either through gerrymandering, being randomly disjunctive, etc.). These properties are not considered to be natural properties, and having them adds nothing meaningful to an object's existence.¹⁷ Lewis states that there are as many abundant properties as there are sets. On the other hand, there are sparse properties, which are rather few in number, capable of characterizing "things completely and without redundancy", are intrinsic, and "carve at the joints".¹⁸ Because of the way abundant properties are constructed, we could say that there is an abundant property for each of the sparse properties, and thus that the sparse properties could be considered a small subset of the abundant properties. Lewis states that any property belonging to the subset of sparse properties are the perfectly natural properties. For Lewis, they are the fundamental properties that can fully account for the essential features of our world, are intrinsic, and ground all other properties.¹⁹ Thus for some thing x to be a duplicate of some y is for x and y to share exactly the same perfectly natural properties.

With all of this it can now be shown that the Grim Reaper set-up is

¹⁷Ibid: 59.

¹⁸ ¹⁸ Ibid: 60. For another characterization of the perfectly natural properties, see Ted Sider, *Writing the Book of the World*, (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 2011): ch.1-2. Sider defines intrinsicity in terms of perfectly natural properties. The perfectly natural properties and relations are those that are indispensable in our best scientific theories (Sider, *Book of the World*: 14).

¹⁹I say "fully account for", however I wish to remain neutral on the question of whether properties account for things being the way they are, or whether things being the way they are account for the properties they have. Further, I also state that the perfectly natural properties are the "fundamental" properties. This is Lewis' definition of fundamentality, and is used to accurately represent his views. As will be seen later on, I present a different formulation of what being "fundamental" means. However, this definition of "fundamental" is used with reference to facts, whereas Lewis' definition of fundamental is used with reference to properties. Thus it is possible for someone to accept both definitions.

possible.²⁰ First, we must state that a single Grim Reaper is possible.

Possible Grim Reaper (PGR): There is a possible world W such that there exists an x that is a Grim Reaper, x occupies a finite ST region R of arbitrary size, and x has the power to kill some specific being y within any specific finite ST interval, given that y is not already dead by the specified ST interval.²¹

This definition allows for the Grim Reaper being assigned any natural number n and being tasked with killing y within the time interval $(1/2^n, 1/2^{n-1}]$ iff y lives to $1/2^n$ minutes past midnight on a specified day.

Why believe a single Grim Reaper is possible? We know that there possibly exists a being with the intention to kill some x . We also know that there exist beings who have the power to kill some x (we humans exert that power all the time). Whenever some x kills some y , it always occurs within a specific time interval. Thus we know that it is possible for some being to kill within a specific time interval. Lastly, it is conceivable that some x intends and has the power to kill some y at any specific time interval. While us humans cannot purposefully kill someone at a highly specified time (such as within $1/164$ of a second after midnight) due to human limitations, there does not seem to be any deep metaphysical reason preventing this from being possible. Therefore it is

²⁰The following is inspired by Robert Koons, "Grim Reaper Kalam Argument: From Temporal and Causal Finitism to God", in *The Kalam Cosmological Argument, vol 1.: Philosophical Arguments for the Finitude of the Past*, ed. Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019): ch. 16.

²¹This is following Laraudogoitia's version of the Grim Reaper paradox. See Jon Peréz Laraudogoitia, "A variant of Benardete's Paradox," *Analysis* 63, (2003): 124-131.

(defeasibly) possible that there could exist a Grim Reaper as described above.

Second, we must assume that the Grim Reaper's power to kill y is intrinsic to the Grim Reaper, and thus perfectly natural. This way each duplicate of the Grim Reaper will retain that power, a prerequisite if the paradox is to hold.²² Finally, it must be made explicit what was implicit in the formulation of the PR: the non-empty sequence of n objects that can be duplicated ranges over all the natural numbers n .²³ Thus we can apply the PR infinitely many times or to infinitely many objects. If we accept GI, then this is possible, for the plurality of facts about each Grim Reaper would be grounded in infinitely many facts about for instance, the position of particles.

The argument for the possibility of the Grim Reaper Paradox is as follows:

1. Grounding infinitism is true.
2. It is possible that there exists a Grim Reaper (PGR) 3.
3. There is a possible world in which there exists infinitely many Grim Reapers within a finite spatiotemporal region, and who have the intention and ability to kill some x at some time t given that x is alive at t (from 1, 2, and Principle of Recombination).

²² Consider the following set-up: there are infinitely many Grim Reapers arranged as per the paradox, however infinitely many of them lack the power to kill Fred. Obviously such a situation might not be paradoxical, for if every Grim Reaper except, say, Grim Reaper₂ lacked the power to kill Fred, then Fred would just die at the hands of Grim Reaper₂.

²³ This can be supported by Joshua Rasmussen's principle of continuity (see Joshua Rasmussen, "Continuity as a Guide to Possibility", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 92 (2014): 525-538). Here Rasmussen argues that in general, the following "modal continuity" principle (M) holds: if any two propositions P and Q differ by a mere quantity, then if one of the propositions is possibly true, then so is the other. Of course, this principle does not always hold, as Rasmussen acknowledges. However, the situations in which this principle does not hold, and so more precisification is required, are irrelevant to our purposes here.

4. Give each Grim Reaper a number n , starting with 0.
5. There is a possible world where infinitely Grim Reapers each have a distinct number n , and the intention and ability to kill x at $1/2^n$ minutes after midnight (from 3 and 4).
6. There exists a person Fred that can be killed.
7. Fred is alive at some midnight.
8. 8. There is a possible world where Fred coexists with infinitely many Grim Reapers who each have a distinct number n , and the intention and ability to kill him at each time $1/2^n$ minutes after midnight, and Fred is alive at midnight (5, 6, 7).

Thus the Grim Reaper paradox is possible. However, we know that the Grim Reaper paradox is logically inconsistent, given **Claim** (see page 2). Each premise is logically consistent and independently plausible, however the conclusion is inconsistent. Hence, one of the premises must be false.

Grounding Finitism

The Principle

By accepting **GI**, one allows for a possible world where infinitely many Grim Reapers are arranged such that their intentions to kill Fred at some time t compose a non-well ordered infinite set located within a finite ST region. I contend that this is the most problematic premise, and should be rejected to avoid logical inconsistency.²⁴ First, **GI** is a metaphysical law, detailing

²⁴This is following Nicholas Rescher's "generic and uniform approach" to resolving paradoxes. He says "In principle, paradox management is thus a straightforward process: to appraise the comparative plausibility of what

what is metaphysically possible from the structure it entails. If such a structure leads to logical inconsistencies given otherwise plausible premises, then that structure should be suspect. Further, there is strong intuitive support for the possibility of there being a Grim Reaper (see above), as well as the possibility of **Claim** holding (see fn. 5). The only other assumption is PR, which is by no means an obvious truth. However, since a full defense of PR cannot be given due to lack of space, I shall continue to assume it is true.

Because **GI** is required for the Grim Reaper paradox to be possible, the cleanest route to its resolution is to accept **GI**'s inverse: grounding finitism. Many people would balk at the idea of rejecting **GI**, for there are obvious examples of infinitely long and infinitely wide grounding chains. Some might believe that out of all the assumptions made for the Grim Reaper paradox (**GI**, PR, **Claim**, PGR), **GI** is the most plausible, not the least. In what follows, I will discuss the examples of infinitely long and wide grounding chains with regards to possible candidate principles of grounding finitism, and conclude that there is a grounding finitist principle that accommodates these grounding chains. The benefit of grounding finitism over **GI** would then become apparent, because it can allow for the same kinds of infinite grounding chains as **GI**, while also ruling out the Grim Reaper paradox, unlike **GI**.

A first pass at Grounding Finitism is as follows:

Grounding Finitism (GF): Any fact [F] or plurality of facts [FF] must be grounded only in a finite plurality of facts [GG].

we accept and restore consistency by making what is less plausible give way to what is more so.” [Nicholas Rescher, *Paradoxes: their roots, range, and resolution*, (Chicago: Open Court, 2001): 10].

This principle wholly rejects **GI**. On **GF**, it is not possible for there to be any facts that are grounded by infinitely many facts. Hence, the fact that there are infinitely many Grim Reapers waiting to kill Fred after midnight cannot hold, since it would necessarily be grounded in infinitely many facts about each Grim Reaper. Thus we avoid the paradox.

GF is a nice principle. It is clear, succinct, but sadly, false. Consider the following, infinitely long fact $[P \wedge (P \wedge P) \wedge (P \wedge P \wedge P) \wedge (P \wedge P \wedge P \wedge P) \wedge \dots]$. Such a fact exists, as it is formed through applying the conjunction operator to the same fact infinitely many times. So if there exists at least one fact, then there exists an infinitely long conjunction of that fact.²⁵ Though this fact is ultimately grounded in $[P]$, in that each of its conjuncts will be grounded in $[P]$, it is immediately grounded in infinitely many facts. Every conjunctive fact is immediately grounded in each of its conjuncts, and so this fact will be grounded in $[P]$, $[P \wedge P]$, $[P \wedge P \wedge P]$, $[P \wedge P \wedge P \wedge P]$, ...²⁶ Because each of these facts are distinct, this shows that **GF** is false. There are facts that are grounded in infinite pluralities of facts.

Let's then rework **GF**. What was shown above is that there are possible facts that are grounded immediately in infinitely many facts. We can still get a

²⁵Paul Audi would disagree (See Paul Audi, "A clarification and Defense of the notion of Grounding", in *Metaphysical Grounding*: 101-121). Audi accepts what is known as a worldly conception of facts, where facts are differentiated via their constituents and how they are combined with properties/relations. Because of this view of facts, there is no conjunctive fact distinct from the facts which compose the conjunction or disjunction. Thus $[P \wedge (P \wedge P) \wedge (P \wedge P \wedge P) \wedge (P \wedge P \wedge P \wedge P) \wedge \dots]$ is no different from $[P]$. However, there are other facts, amenable to the worldly conception of facts, that are grounded in infinitely many facts. This will be discussed below, when considering the second version of **GF**. For the remainder of the paper, however, I shall assume that the worldly conception of facts is false.

²⁶This comes from Kit Fine's distinction between mediate and immediate grounds (see Fine, "Guide to Ground": 50). Here he says that a fact $[A]$ is immediately grounded by a fact $[B]$ given that $[B]$ need not be seen as grounding $[A]$ through any mediating steps. An example is the fact $[A \vee B]$ is immediately grounded in $[A]$. A conjunctive fact like $[A \wedge (A \wedge B)]$ will be immediately grounded in each of its conjuncts, which are $[A]$, $[(A \wedge B)]$. $[(A \wedge B)]$ is itself grounded in $[A]$, $[B]$. Hence $[B]$ is a mediate ground of $[A \wedge (A \wedge B)]$.

form of grounding finitism while avoiding these counterexamples as follows:

GF₂: Any fact [F] or plurality of facts [FF] will be grounded only in terminating grounding chains.

GF₂ is a form of grounding foundationalism, one that was promoted by Jonathan Schaffer.²⁷ However, **GF₂**, like **GF**, is false. Numerous authors in recent years have proposed counterexamples to the claim that all grounding chains terminate.²⁸ I shall only focus on one such example, for sake of space.²⁹ Take the following fact [x weighs between 0 and 2 pounds]. This fact is grounded in [x weighs between 0.5 and 1.5 pounds], which is grounded in [x weighs between 0.75 pounds and 1.25 pounds], which is grounded in... All of these facts are themselves grounded in [x weighs 1 pound], but that is besides the point. The fact [x weighs between 0 and 2 pounds] has a grounding chain that does not terminate, providing a counterexample to **GF₂**. Even if one could subvert such infinitely descending grounding chains, **GF₂** does not prevent the paradoxical set-up. For the fact [There are infinitely many Grim Reapers waiting to kill Fred] is not grounded in an infinitely long chain of facts, but instead is grounded immediately in the infinity of facts about each Grim Reaper and their intentions. Furthermore, these facts are not grounded in an infinitely long chain of facts, but instead by facts about the position of particles and what-not. Thus **GF₂** fails to do the work set-out for a

²⁷See Schaffer, “Monism”: 37. Here he promotes the idea that there are no endless grounding chains.

²⁸ See Scott T. Dixon, “What is the Well-Foundedness of Grounding?”, *Mind* 125, (2016): 439-468, Gabriel Oak Rabin and Brian Rabern, “Well Founding Grounding Grounding.” *Journal of philosophical logic* 45, (2015): 349–379, and Jon Litland, “An Infinitely Descending Chain of Ground Without a Lower Bound.” *Philosophical studies* 173, (2016): 1361–1369.

²⁹My example comes from Dixon, “What is the Well-Foundedness”: 449-451.

theory of grounding finitism: it fails to rule out the paradoxical set-ups.

As stated above, \mathbf{GF}_2 is a version of the well-foundedness of grounding. In light of the above example, taken from Scott Dixon, as well as other examples not discussed here, Dixon proposes a different theory of grounding's well-foundedness. To Dixon, the well-foundedness of grounding is just the principle that "every non-fundamental fact x is fully grounded by some fundamental facts $\diamond\diamond$."³⁰ A fact [P] is fundamental given that it is ungrounded, or that nothing partially grounds [P].³¹ Gabriel Rabin and Brian Rabern offer a similar definition for well-foundedness, stating that well-foundedness consists in the world's grounding structure having a "foundation".³² What it means for a grounding structure to have a foundation is for there to be a plurality of facts [GG] such that 1.) the [GG]s are fundamental (i.e. ungrounded), and 2.) the [GG]s are complete with regards to derivative facts in the grounding structure.³³ For the [GG]s to be complete with regards to the derivative facts in a grounding structure is for the [GG]s to fully ground each of the derivative facts.

While these principles don't count as grounding finitist principles, they can be employed as one to evade the problem above. Thus we can get the following:

\mathbf{GF}_3 : Any fact [F] or plurality of facts [FF] have a finite foundation.

³⁰ Ibid: 446.

³¹ ³¹ See Schaffer, "On What Grounds What": 373, Scott T. Dixon, "What is the Well-Foundedness": 442, and Karen Bennett, *Making Things Up*, (Oxford: OUP, 2017):104-107. One example of a fundamental fact/plurality of facts is as follows. Say that the smallest building blocks of the universe are fundamental particles (as science understands the term "fundamental"). The fact that there is a laptop in front of me is grounded in there being fundamental particles that are arranged laptop-wise in front of me. This is grounded in the individual facts about the position of the particles themselves. Those facts are fundamental. Saying these facts are fundamental, however, does not rule out these facts having a causal history, or these particles not being causally fundamental. Surely there are facts that explain how the particles got where they are, but those are causal type facts, not grounding type facts.

³² Rabin and Rabern, "Well Founding Grounding Grounding": 363.

³³ Ibid.

We should modify this principle slightly to be more precise by adding in a minimality clause. Thus GF_3 would read “Any fact [F] or plurality of facts [FF] have a minimal finite foundation.” A plurality of fundamental facts [GG] minimally ground some fact [F] given that there is no proper sub-plurality of the [GG]s that fully ground [F].³⁴ The minimality clause is added in because it gets to the heart of grounding finitism. Since we are concerned with a finite plurality of fundamental facts, there will necessarily be a minimal plurality. There might not be a uniquely minimal one, as there could be multiple distinct pluralities that minimally ground [F] or [FF], but there will still be a minimal one. Hence the inclusion of the minimality clause should be unobjectionable, and though not necessary, is a useful precisification tool. We should focus on the smallest plurality (or pluralities) of fundamental facts that fully ground some other fact [F] for simplicity’s sake.

GF_3 avoids the problem of infinitely descending chains brought against GF_2 , since each fact is fully grounded in [x weighs 1 pound]. It also allows for the infinitely long conjunction $[P \wedge (P \wedge P) \wedge (P \wedge P \wedge P) \wedge (P \wedge P \wedge P \wedge P) \wedge \dots]$, because each conjunctive fact is grounded in the fact [P]. Through transitivity, [P] grounds $[P \wedge (P \wedge P) \wedge (P \wedge P \wedge P) \wedge (P \wedge P \wedge P \wedge P) \wedge \dots]$, satisfying GF_3 . However, GF_3 is still false, for it rules out infinitely long conjunctions containing distinct atomic facts. Suppose that numbers exist. There will be fundamental facts about each number, say facts like

³⁴ This definition is inspired by Karen Bennett’s definition of a minimally complete set. See Bennett, *Making Things Up*: 109. While the GGs minimally ground F, they do not uniquely ground F. This is because of the possibility of overdetermination cases. I do not see any reason to rule impossible there being some other finite plurality of fundamental facts, HH, such that HH has at least one member not in GG, and HH fully grounds F. The HHs would contain all and only facts relevant to the grounding of F, satisfying the minimality of grounding. See Paul Audi, “Grounding: Toward a Theory of the *In-Virtue-Of* Relation”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 109, (2012): 699.

[n is the successor of $n-1$] where n can stand for any number. The conjunction of all these facts will be grounded by each of these facts, and thus will have an infinite number of fundamental grounds, in violation of \mathbf{GF}_3 . Or suppose that spatial points compose spatial regions. For each fact about a spatial region R , there will be infinitely many fundamental facts about spatial points that ground the fact about R .³⁵ Thus \mathbf{GF}_3 fails to be a satisfactory grounding finitist principle.

Part of the problem with the finitist solutions proposed so far is that they are blanket principles covering all facts. If, however, we restrict what facts our grounding finitist principle ranges over, then we might be able to avoid these counterexamples. Because the principles are motivated to block the Grim Reaper paradox, it would be beneficial to look at its structure and the type of facts employed by it. This paradox makes use of facts about Grim Reapers that exist in a finite ST region. Thus any grounding finitist principle that is to be supported by these paradoxes must restrict itself accordingly. We thus get two restrictions: 1.) to ST located facts, and 2.) to facts located in a finite ST region. A fact is said to be ST located when it is about some things which exist in some ST region. For a fact to be located in a finite ST region is just for it to be about some things that occupy a finite ST region.

For the paradox's set-up to be possible, all that is needed is a principle that allows for infinitely many fundamental grounds for facts in a finite ST region. To see this, consider that for there to be infinitely many Grim Reapers in a finite ST location would require there to be infinitely many fundamental facts grounding the facts about the Grim Reapers and their intentions, such as facts about the

³⁵This is taken from Rabin and Rabern, "Well Founding Grounding Grounding": 361.

location of particles. Thus for grounding finitism to rule out the paradoxical set-up, all that is required is the rejection of there being infinitely many fundamental ST located facts in a finite ST region. If grounding finitism was expanded to include any ST region, finite or infinite, then such a principle would be unwarranted from the “data” and hardly believable (by “data” I mean the paradox and its structure. This is because the paradox occurs only within a finite temporal interval. Given Minkowski spacetime, a finite temporal interval over which events could causally interact must be a finite ST interval). Likewise if it were to range over all facts. This inclusion would be unwarranted from the data. With these considerations in mind, we come to a grounding finitist principle which I think avoids obvious counterexamples and deals satisfactorily with the Grim Reaper paradox. GF_4 : Any non-fundamental ST fact [F] or plurality of non-fundamental ST facts [FF] located in a finite ST region has a minimal finite foundation.³⁶ From GF_4 , the [GG]s are minimally complete with regards to the [FF]s.

GF_4 is the culmination of what the previous grounding finitist principles did right and the lessons drawn from what they did wrong. It allows for the existence of the conjunctive fact $[P \wedge (P \wedge P) \wedge (P \wedge P \wedge P) \wedge (P \wedge P \wedge P \wedge P) \wedge \dots]$ because each conjunct is grounded in [P]. Through transitivity, the conjunction is thus grounded by [P], and so it has a finite foundation, namely [P]. GF_4 is also compatible with Dixon’s infinite regress, for each of the facts [x weighs between 0 and 2 pounds], [x weighs between 0.5 and 1.5 pounds], etc. is grounded in the

³⁶I owe a great deal of this formulation to discussion with Rob Koons (who initially gave me the idea of grounding finitism) and Jon Litland (who helped sharpen the idea to something close to its current state).

single fundamental fact [x weighs 1 pound] (or whatever fundamental facts ground the fact [x weighs 1 pound]). Finally, \mathbf{GF}_4 does not rule out the infinitely long conjunctions of atomic facts that \mathbf{GF}_3 rules out. The conjunction of facts about numbers is not a ST located fact, and so is out of the purview of \mathbf{GF}_4 . The case of facts about spatial regions being grounded in facts about spatial points is likewise out of the purview of \mathbf{GF}_4 , for those facts are not considered ST located facts, per my definition. Since we are only concerned with facts about objects existing *inside* of a spatial region, not the spatial regions themselves, facts about spatial regions being grounded in infinitely many facts about spatial points is perfectly compatible with \mathbf{GF}_4 , as I've presented it.

The Principle in Practice

I have already mentioned before how the grounding finitist principles are supposed to rule out the Grim Reaper paradox, but it is worth going back through again. In the Grim Reaper paradox, it is a fact that [there are infinitely many Grim Reapers waiting to kill Fred after midnight]. This fact is grounded in the infinite number of facts about each Grim Reaper's ST location and their intentions about when they will kill Fred. Because each Grim Reaper is a distinct entity with distinct intentions, there should be infinitely many such facts. Further, each of the grounds for those facts should also be distinct, for the same reasons above. Hence, each fact of the form [Grim Reaper_n intends to kill Fred at $1/2^n$ minutes after midnight] will be grounded in distinct facts about the position of particles and whatever other facts ground intentions. These are the

fundamental facts. Since there must be distinct facts like these for each fact about a specific Grim Reaper, there will be infinitely many such facts. Further, because each of the facts about the Grim Reapers will be located within the ST region spanning from midnight to 1 minute after midnight, there will be infinitely many ST located facts in a finite ST region. We therefore have a violation of \mathbf{GF}_4 , and so is ruled out. It is impossible for there to be infinitely many Grim Reapers with the intentions to kill Fred in the interval (12:00, 12:01].

Theoretical Implications

\mathbf{GF}_4 entails that if the universe is finite, then there is a minimal plurality of fundamental facts [GG] that are complete with regards to all of the ST facts. What is meant by this is that any ST located fact is either identical to a member of [GG] (given that the fact is a fundamental ST located fact) or is fully grounded in [GG]. To see this, consider the plurality containing all ST located facts. Suppose, for sake of argument, that there are infinitely many such facts. These facts would all be located in a finite ST region, due to the universe's finitude. However, to adhere with \mathbf{GF}_4 , such an infinitely large plurality must be accounted for by a finite plurality of fundamental facts. Because of the minimality clause, there will be a smallest finite set of fundamental facts that are complete with regards to the ST facts.

If one further assumes that all members of [GG] must themselves be ST located, then one gets a uniquely minimal plurality of fundamental facts, given the

finitude of the universe.³⁷This uniquely minimal plurality [GG] will include all and only the fundamental ST located facts. If it did not include all of the fundamental ST facts, then there would be some un-grounded ST located facts [HH] that are not a part of [GG]. From \mathbf{GF}_4 , the GGs are complete with regards to ST facts, and so the [HH]s must be grounded by the [GG]s. But the [HH]s are un-grounded, and so are not grounded by the [GG]s. This is a violation of \mathbf{GF}_4 . Hence the plurality of facts [GG] would both be finite in number and include all fundamental facts, given that the fundamental facts must be ST located. The [GG]s will also include only the fundamental facts, by definition in \mathbf{GF}_4 . Thus in a finite universe, given \mathbf{GF}_4 , and assuming that the fundamental facts which are complete with regards to the ST facts are themselves ST located, there will be only finitely many fundamental ST located facts. The [GG]s will consist of all fundamental ST located facts, and since there are only finitely many [GG]s, so too will there be only finitely many ST located facts.

If, on the other hand, one did not assume that these fundamental facts need to be ST located, then nothing entails that there must be a uniquely minimal plurality. It is (epistemically) possible that there could be infinitely many distinct pluralities of fundamental, non-ST located facts, that possess the same number of members as [GG], and also fully ground all ST located facts.³⁸ This is because the [GG]s are complete *only* with regards to the ST facts, not all facts. The argument in the last paragraph for the [GG]s consisting in all and only the fundamental facts

³⁷A uniquely minimal plurality of facts that are complete with regards to the ST facts is a plurality that is not only minimal, but is the only minimal plurality. There is no other plurality that has the same number of members as the GGs, differs from the GGs in at least one member, and is also complete with regards to the ST facts.

³⁸I do not know if it is metaphysically possible that this be the case, but I see no *prima facie* reason to rule it out as a possibility.

could not be applied here, because to do so would require the [GG]s to be complete with regards to every fact. Without this assumption, there could be numerous distinct pluralities of fundamental, non-ST facts that are complete with regards to the ST facts.³⁹

If the universe is not finite, then \mathbf{GF}_4 does not entail that there are only finitely many fundamental facts grounding all ST located facts. There could be infinitely many pluralities of finitely many fundamental facts that ground all of the ST located facts within any arbitrarily large finite ST region. Or there could only be finitely many such pluralities. \mathbf{GF}_4 leaves open either possibility given the infinitude of the universe.

\mathbf{GF}_4 has two other theoretical implications. The first is that it entails that material pointillism, the view that all things are composed of fundamental material points, is false.⁴⁰ This is because if material points are fundamental, then facts about them are fundamental facts. Thus facts about any finite object composed by material points will be grounded in the infinity of facts about the material points (given that composition is a form of grounding), violating \mathbf{GF}_4 . The second is that, if the general line of argument in section 3.2 is correct, then all supertasks are ruled out by \mathbf{GF}_4 . Any supertask would consist in infinitely many distinct things trying to perform a task within a finite ST region. Thus, for the supertask to be successful there must be infinitely many fundamental facts about each part, facts that are located in a finite ST region. This is in violation of \mathbf{GF}_4 , and

³⁹Should we allow fundamental non-ST located facts to be ground ST located facts? I think so. It is possible that God exists, and if He does exist in the traditional theistic sense (outside space and time), then any facts about Him or His actions would necessarily be non-ST. Such facts, however, could still be said to ground ST located facts. The fact that God created the world grounds the fact that the world exists.

⁴⁰See Rob Koons and Timothy Pickavance, *The Atlas of Reality*, (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2017): 390.

so all supertasks are ruled out by GF_4 .

Objections

Someone might retort that they may very well accept GF_4 while also accepting the possibility of the Grim Reaper paradox. One way to do this is to state that if God exists, then possibly He could create all of the Grim Reapers. Thus each of the facts about the Grim Reapers would be grounded in the fact [God exists] and [God acts in such a way as to bring it about that infinitely many Grim Reapers exist]. This only works if one does not believe that the fact [God acts in such a way as to bring it about that infinitely many Grim Reapers exist] is not itself grounded in an infinite plurality of facts about God's actions, i.e. so long as one believes the fact [God acts in such a way as to bring it about that infinitely many Grim Reapers exist] is fundamental. Unless one assumed that God, through one single creation act, created infinitely many Grim Reapers, then this response fails. If God could create infinitely many things through a single act of creation, however, then that would provide a finite base for the infinite Grim Reapers, thus satisfying GF_4 . On the other hand, if the fact [God acts in such a way as to bring it about that infinitely many Grim Reapers exist] is grounded in infinitely many facts about God's actions, then we have a violation of GF_4 . That infinite plurality of facts would be the fundamental grounding facts for the facts about the Grim Reapers, and hence would violate GF_4 . To be honest, I do not see any good argument to support this possibility. However I also do not see any good argument to support the possibility that God could create infinitely many things through one action. In my opinion the case comes down to intuition. I find more intuitive appeal in the idea that

generally, there is a one-to-one correspondence between creative acts and created things than its rejection.⁴¹⁴²

Another way of subverting the argument from \mathbf{GF}_4 to the impossibility of the Grim Reaper paradox is that given a certain type of priority Monism, \mathbf{GF}_4 and the Grim Reaper paradox could be compossible. In his 2010 paper, Jonathan Schaffer argues for priority Monism, the view that the cosmos is a unified whole, and is fundamental, i.e. prior to all of its parts.⁴³ Thus every fact about particular objects in the universe is at least partially grounded in the universe as a whole. However, Schaffer believes that the universe alone cannot account for the vast number of different and diverse objects existing (the heterogeneity of the universe).⁴⁴ Only when paired with facts about the properties the universe instantiates can the monistic cosmos fully ground all facts about its heterogeneity. Schaffer gives three different ways one could account for heterogeneity: state that the universe instantiates a distributional property of *being heterogeneous*, state that the universe

⁴¹Of course I would accept there to be exceptions, possible cases in which a single creative act brings about more than one created thing (such as chemical reactions in which one combines molecules to create a new molecule, with some byproduct. One might wonder, though, if the byproduct is truly considered to be something made through the action, or if the action of combining the chemicals should be considered only one action. I see appeal to the thought that what is happening is many smaller acts of creation, which are all grouped together as one act for convenience). But allowing there to be a small number of finite exceptions does nothing to motivate the claim that there could be infinitely many things created by one creative task.

⁴²If one believes in Divine Simplicity, then my argument won't work. This is because the Divine Simplicity theorist believes that it is possible for God to create infinitely many things through a single action. Thus the fact [God exists] could ground infinitely many ST located facts. It is also plausible that [God exists] grounds all ST-located facts, and thus none of them are fundamental. To get around this, one may propose another grounding finitist principle, \mathbf{GF}_5 : "any fact [F] or plurality of facts [FF] that are located in a finite ST region are grounded in some finite plurality of ST-fundamental facts [GG]", where to be an ST-fundamental fact is to be an ST-fact not grounded in any other ST fact. Thus, [God exists] could only ground an infinite plurality of facts [FF] located in a finite ST region given that there is a finite plurality of ST-fundamental facts [GG] that also ground [FF]. In the Grim Reaper case, there won't be such a plurality. If \mathbf{GF}_4 could rule out the paradox in the case where [God exists] does not ground any ST facts, then \mathbf{GF}_5 can likewise rule out the paradox in the case where [God exists] does ground all ST located facts. The grounding structures in the two cases are the same, except \mathbf{GF}_5 allows God to ground all ST located facts. \mathbf{GF}_5 thus resolves the Grim Reaper paradox, and does not fall to any of the counterexamples for $\mathbf{GF}-\mathbf{GF}_3$ (I will leave it up to the interested reader to see how this is so).

⁴³Jonathan Schaffer, "Monism": 31-76.

⁴⁴Ibid: 59

instantiates regionalized properties like *bearing relation R to ST location x*, or state that the universe has regionalized instantiation, where the universe *instantiates-at-ST-location-x property P*.⁴⁵

Of the three solutions to the heterogeneity problem, only one poses a problem for my argument: and it's the one Schaffer endorses. Schaffer states that he prefers the first view, the distributional properties account of the cosmos' heterogeneity. On this account, the infinite number of facts about each Grim Reaper and their intentions will be grounded in only one fundamental fact: the fact that the cosmos instantiates a distributional property such that there are infinitely many Grim Reapers existing with the intentions they have. This satisfies \mathbf{GF}_4 and allows the Grim Reaper set-up to be possible. However, one could avoid this problem by instead adopting either of the two other solutions to the heterogeneity problem. On the regionalized properties view, the facts about each Grim Reaper and their intentions will be grounded in infinitely many fundamental facts of the form [the cosmos instantiates the property of having Grim Reaper_n existing at ST location *x*]. On the regionalized instantiation view, the fundamental facts will be of the form [The cosmos is at-ST-location-x Grim Reaper_n-ish]. Therefore, there are viable versions of monism available to the proponent of \mathbf{GF}_4 that rule out the Grim Reaper paradox.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Ibid: 59-60.

⁴⁶If one is not satisfied with the two options given, perhaps due to their lack of simplicity, then one could either reject monism or modify grounding finitism even further. There are some good reasons in the literature to reject monism. For interested readers I will point to Tuomas Tahko's in-depth discussion of Schaffer's argument from quantum entanglement to the fundamentality of the universe (Tuomas Tahko, "Disentangling Nature's Joints", in *Neo-Aristotelian Perspectives on Contemporary Science*, ed. William Simpson, Robert Koons, and Nicholas Teh, (New York: Routledge, 2018): 147-166). For arguments against the "downward grounding" of the cosmos instantiating a certain property to ground why it is a certain way, see Scott Dixon, "Upward Grounding", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 97, (2018): 48-78. If one wishes instead to modify grounding finitism, then I propose the following principle: \mathbf{GF}_6 "any fact [F] or plurality of facts [FF] that are located in a finite ST region are grounded in some finite plurality of ST-fundamental facts [GG], and the [GG]s are bounded in some ST region R"

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented the Grim Reaper paradox and shown that if one assumes grounding infinitism, then the paradox is possible (using the Principle of Recombination as a way of modeling possibility). I then considered four different grounding finitist principles with the aim of blocking the paradox. Three of these four suffered from insurmountable counterexamples, with one of them failing to provide a way of blocking the paradox. The fourth principle, \mathbf{GF}_4 I believe satisfactorily blocks the paradoxical set-up, evades the counterexamples to the other three principles, and does not have any devastating objections. There aren't any good, independent reasons to accept \mathbf{GI} over \mathbf{GF}_4 . While there are cases of infinite grounding that would warrant \mathbf{GI} over other grounding finitist principles, \mathbf{GF}_4 can accommodate those cases just as well as \mathbf{GI} can. Further, \mathbf{GF}_4 avoids paradoxical set-ups like the Grim Reaper paradox and other supertasks, and so has more support than \mathbf{GI} does. Thus, without any other competing solution to the Grim Reaper paradox, we should accept \mathbf{GF}_4 as a metaphysical law that describes a portion of the structure of metaphysical reality.

(this was proposed to me by Rob Koons). \mathbf{GF}_6 resolves the paradox just like \mathbf{GF}_5 does (see fn. 43), and it rules out the cosmic whole from being the fundamental grounds required, as the cosmic whole is not bounded in spacetime.

Neonatal Euthanasia and Morality:

What ought we to do with the sick child?

Roslyn Valdespino

Abstract

Scientific breakthroughs have greatly expanded the range in which medical professionals can respond to patients. Although the medical field largely celebrates these advances, some have begun to question the underlying ethics of their implementation. In this paper, I respond to a prominent and ongoing bioethical debate, deconstruct the arguments on both sides, and ultimately demonstrate the moral impermissibility of the discussed practice. Specifically, I assess the ethical considerations at play in a subtype of euthanasia: the voluntary euthanasia of *non-terminal* newborns with life-altering conditions. Such a neonatal euthanasia protocol is typically reserved for newborns who would survive infancy if treated for their conditions, but at the cost of enduring “unbearable”, lifelong suffering as a result. Drawing from some of the most influential perspectives in this debate--ranging from persons with disabilities, bioethicists, philosophers, and medical professionals--I discuss the moral inconsistencies in the implementation of this protocol. Additionally, I examine the risk this protocol poses to

unintentionally increasing marginalization among adults who are currently affected by the same conditions which motivate this type of euthanasia in newborns. Finally, I consider the problem of subjectivity in suffering. Aside from reiterating that moral assessments ought to keep pace with scientific breakthroughs, this paper concludes that any determination to terminate extrauterine life ought not to be made by anyone other than the affected individual. This conclusion creates room for future assessments regarding the permissibility of euthanasia in infants, the ethics involved in physician-assisted suicide, and the morality of other similar end-of-life cases.

Introduction

Infanticide refers to the intentional killing of a newborn or very young child. Currently, there is ongoing debate as to whether or not there are certain contexts that morally warrant this kind of action. In order to address this debate, I will respond to what I believe to be one of the most compelling arguments in support of infanticide. This argument is known as “neonatal euthanasia”, and it appeals to the principle of beneficence. Proponents claim that infanticide is morally permissible only when performed in this context: with the intention of sparing a newborn from a life of unbearable pain. In such a case, it is viewed as an act of mercy towards an extremely sick or disabled newborn.

Broadly, euthanasia refers to either an act *or* an omission that intentionally brings about the death of another person for that person’s sake.⁴⁷ In the context of newborns, I shall point out that there is a difference between limiting or

⁴⁷ Davis, Alison. “A Disabled Person's Perspective on Euthanasia.” *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2004.

withdrawing medical interventions for those with whom (an inevitable) death is merely being delayed and doing so with newborns for whom survival is almost otherwise guaranteed. Certain systems (such as the Dutch Groningen Protocol), however, have been put into place specifically in order to focus on the latter group--on those newborns who *would* survive if treated.⁴⁸ It is the fate of this group of newborns that will be the focus of my paper, for these are the newborns whose predicted quality of life has been judged by *others* as being worse than death.

Throughout this paper, I will discuss the legalized protocol for euthanasia in non-terminal newborns. I will discuss moral inconsistencies in its implementation, such as the violation of nonmaleficence and the disregard for the newborn's potential autonomy. The societal consequences for the disabled will then be presented. In the final portion of this paper, I discuss why a life of disease or disability is *not* one that should be judged by others as worse than and in need of death. Moreover, based on these assessments, I will conclude that the arguments in support of a neonatal euthanasia protocol for non-terminal newborns remain unconvincing. Thus, the implementation of such a protocol cannot be morally permissible. These newborns ought to be treated to survive.

Duties towards the Patient

The common phrase, "Do no harm," highlights the principle of nonmaleficence in medicine. In order to uphold this standard, medical professionals must not intentionally or unintentionally inflict harm upon others. To do so would violate this key moral issue, and it would compromise the trust patients have in their

⁴⁸ Verhagen, Eduard, and Sauer, Pieter J.J. "The Groningen Protocol — Euthanasia in Severely Ill Newborns." *The New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 352, no. 10, 2005, pp. 959–962.

physicians.⁴⁹ By employing a policy of neonatal euthanasia, physicians bring about the ultimate harm to their patients. Additionally, parents of ill or disabled newborns may grow skeptical of their physician's motives.

Also pressing, in this case, is compliance with the moral principle of autonomy. As defined by Lewis Vaughan, autonomy is “a person's rational capacity for self-governance or self-determination; [it is] the ability to direct one's own life and choose for oneself”.⁵⁰ When, as in the case of infants, the patient is not capable of expressing his preference for certain treatments, these choices fall to surrogate decision-makers. Often, these surrogates are close family members. One important caveat, however, is that these surrogates are *close*; they ought to know the patient well enough to make a decision based on what they believe the patient would have wanted. Their decisions aren't expressions of their own desires but are expressions of what they believe the *patient* would have desired. You would not want your long-estranged father to make a life or death medical decision for you if the last time you saw him was when he walked out on you when you were five. Likewise, it seems problematic that parents who have not yet gotten to know the personality of their newborn should be allowed to subject the newborn to a life-ending protocol. These parents have no way of knowing what decision their newborn would prefer if he was capable of expressing his opinion. Moreover, because people systematically misjudge how bad it would be to have a disability,⁵¹ I shall argue that

⁴⁹ Gaylin, Willard, et al. “Doctors Must Not Kill.” JAMA : the Journal of the American Medical Association, vol. 259, no. 14, 1988, pp. 2139–2140.

⁵⁰ Vaughn, Lewis. *Bioethics : Principles, Issues, and Cases*. Fourth ed., Oxford University Press, 2020.

⁵¹ Leplège, Alain, and Hunt, Sonia. “The Problem of Quality of Life in Medicine.” JAMA : the Journal of the American Medical Association, vol. 278, no. 1, 1997, pp. 47–50.

it is not ethically permissible to rely on surrogate decision-makers who will predictably misjudge the quality of life of those with disabilities.

I admit that it is possible to use this argument in reverse. For example, why treat newborns at all? Surely, newborns are incapable of implementing their autonomy and cannot consent to any forms of treatment;⁵² so, why assume that they would *want* to be treated? However, this reversal to me seems unconvincing. When a rational adult patient is unable to provide consent (and when no surrogates are available to provide consent on his behalf), the default in medical practice is to treat his condition and prolong life.⁵³ I argue that this default also exists when the patient is a newborn. Surely, the moral status that newborns possess is reason enough to justify prolonging life until the patient is able to request otherwise. As Alexander Kon states, we ought to provide these non-terminal patients with the best possible medical care until they are capable of expressing their own decisions.⁵⁴

Healthcare providers ought to work diligently to minimize the newborn's suffering. As he grows older, he will be better equipped to understand his condition and to compare its burdens against the joys in his life. Only he, upon reaching the age that confers upon him the legal authority to consent, may make the determination that his suffering is truly unbearable and that he would be better if allowed to die. However, he must be of a rational decision-making capacity and must not be experiencing psychological illnesses (such as depression) which might

⁵² Singer, Peter, and Kuhse, Helga. *Should the Baby Live? : the Problem of Handicapped Infants*. Oxford University Press, 1985.

⁵³ Cooksley, Tim, et al. "A Systematic Approach to the Unconscious Patient." *Clinical Medicine* (London, England), vol. 18, no. 1, Royal College of Physicians, 2018, pp. 88–92, doi:10.7861/clinmedicine.18-1-88.

⁵⁴ Kon, Alexander A. "We Cannot Accurately Predict the Extent of an Infant's Future Suffering: The Groningen Protocol Is Too Dangerous to Support." *The American Journal of Bioethics*, vol. 8, no. 11, 2008, pp. 27–29.

cloud his decision. As Kon pointed out, if the illness or disability prevents the neurocognitive functioning needed in order to accurately evaluate one's own level of suffering, then it remains impermissible to terminate this person's life.

Therefore, requests for physician-assisted suicide motivated directly by mental illnesses which impact this functioning ought to be denied--as rational decision-making capacities are altered.

Harmful Societal Implications and Increased Marginalization

An acceptance of neonatal euthanasia as an act of mercy signifies a belief that certain lives are worse than death. It reflects an acceptance that certain conditions bring about so much hardship and suffering that all future joys in life are not capable of outweighing this suffering. However, I am skeptical that the value of a life should be determined by extrinsic factors such as health and productivity. I argue that we must not only recognize the intrinsic value of individual life, but we must also protect vulnerable newborns so as to avoid setting a precedent about what forms of life we judge as worth living. For, if it is acceptable to euthanize infants for a given condition, then it would logically follow that adults with the same conditions might feel societal pressures to pursue the same fate.

In the face of extensive medical bills, frequent hospital visits, and poorly managed pain, this pressure could build to a point such that disabled people may begin to view euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide as the *only* treatments left which grant them some form of dignity. It is possible that disabled people may be unconsciously coerced by the pressures of society to prematurely end their lives so

as to achieve what society views as a “death with dignity”.⁵⁵ In such a way, handicapped people are at increased risk of facing the unspoken (but deeply felt) duty to die, and it truly might seem to them more of a duty than a choice.⁵⁶ Thus, acceptance of a neonatal euthanasia protocol places already vulnerable adult populations at increased risk for harm and susceptibility to coercion for treatments they may not truly want.

This potentially felt “duty to die” is harmful for several reasons. First, it reinforces an already unjustified double standard for patients who usually just want to escape from the pain of their current condition. For example, when a 40-year-old businesswoman requests voluntary active euthanasia because she feels isolated from her peers and feels as though she cannot contribute meaningfully to her work, support and prevention tools are provided to her in response. It is seen as a very tragic situation that ought to be worked through without resulting in the termination of her life. However, Liz Carr points out that if a *disabled* woman in an otherwise identical situation were to request to end her life, her decision would not only be supported, but it would be seen as rational and understandable!⁵⁷ The disabled woman is rarely offered the same treatment for depression or provided other prevention tools; rather, her decision is seen as final. This negative societal view of life with handicaps will only be reinforced if we accept euthanasia in infants with these conditions.

⁵⁵ Davis, Alison. “A Disabled Person's Perspective on Euthanasia.” *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2004.

⁵⁶ Davis, Alison. “A Disabled Person's Perspective on Euthanasia.” *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2004.

⁵⁷ Liz Carr, “Legalizing Assisted Dying is Dangerous for Disabled People,” *The Guardian*, September 9, 2016.

Additionally, the implementation of a neonatal euthanasia protocol risks the development of increasingly negative views towards those newborns who “survive” the protocol. As more infants with certain conditions intentionally do *not* survive due to neonatal euthanasia, all other persons living with those conditions will come to be viewed callously; they will come to be viewed as mistakes within a system that was designed to prevent their survival. Misunderstanding and discrimination are likely to increase as the number of people with a given disability decreases. Moreover, it is possible that these views will lead to a less supportive environment for those living with these handicaps. In fact, initiatives for research may decline, funds for facilities to care for these individuals may decrease, and attitudes of medical personnel towards these patients at the end of their lives may become overbearingly paternalistic.

The Problem of Subjectivity

While in theory, it might follow that euthanasia can function as a mercy to newborns, in practice, there are too many dangers that cannot be presently accounted for. For example, the notion of implementing neonatal euthanasia based on “unbearable suffering” is inherently flawed and prone to mistakes. The “unbearable suffering” is an estimate of the sum of both the physical and mental pain that the newborn is predicted to experience if treated for his condition and permitted to survive. It is a determination that there will never be enough joys present in the newborn’s life to ever outweigh the suffering he will experience because of his diagnosis.

But, how can medical personnel knowingly bring about the death of an infant based on the *subjective* experience of the infant himself--based on something that cannot be expressed to them at the time at which the protocol is implemented? Additionally, what one individual might deem unbearable suffering, another might be capable of enduring. So, although medical care providers and parents believe they are acting in the newborn's best interest if they spare the newborn from experiencing such a life,⁵⁸ In reality, they merely risk killing newborns who would grow to determine that their suffering does *not* actually outweigh the joys in their lives.

Clearly, the consequences of such a protocol demonstrate that those with disabilities will be placed at increased risk for even further marginalization. In fact, studies have demonstrated that a physician's evaluation regarding the quality of life experienced by a disabled person often ranks it much lower than the disabled person himself ranks it.⁵⁹ It is possible that physicians, who often do not themselves suffer from such disabilities, attempt to estimate their impact on quality of life by imagining how they would feel if suddenly shifted from an able-bodied life to one tackling disability. Yet, in doing so, they factor in the devastation of losing certain abilities which they have assumed are guaranteed, and they must then imagine a world in which they must adapt to the new and permanent loss. However, this is surely not the situation experienced by newborns who come into this world already disabled. These newborns know nothing of their loss in the sense that they

⁵⁸ Singer, Peter, and Kuhse, Helga. *Should the Baby Live? : the Problem of Handicapped Infants*. Oxford University Press, 1985.

⁵⁹ Leplège, Alain, and Hunt, Sonia. "The Problem of Quality of Life in Medicine." *JAMA : the Journal of the American Medical Association*, vol. 278, no. 1, 1997, pp. 47–50.

never experienced life without their disability. Often, in fact, children born with disabilities rate their quality of life on par with their non-disabled counterparts.⁶⁰

Here, I ought to address a distinction which I believe is critical to this debate. Proponents of this protocol argue that it spares the newborn from a life of otherwise unbearable suffering. Yet, I want to make a distinction between suffering and suffering *unbearably*. It is quite clear to me that any infant whose conditions are grim enough to warrant consideration for euthanasia must surely be suffering. Yet, it is not clear to me if the infant's suffering has reached such a point that it has become unbearable for him. Thus, neonatal euthanasia risks condemning to death newborns whose suffering would have turned out *not* to be unbearable for them--newborns who would have judged their quality of life as satisfactory and indeed worth living. This is an assessment that can only be made later in life by the newborn himself. So, by subjecting newborns to neonatal euthanasia, physicians risk doing the ultimate harm to their patients; they risk potentially depriving them of a life that may have been judged as worth living.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have provided an account that addresses critical components of the infanticide debate in the context of the non-terminal infant. I have demonstrated why infanticide cannot be viewed as a form of beneficence to the sick newborn, and I have assessed the risks this protocol poses (both to the individuals subjected to it and to the larger population of handicapped persons). Moreover, I have emphasized the existence of a gradient of severity that is present in a newborn's

⁶⁰ Tyson, Jon E, and Saigal, Saroj. "Outcomes for Extremely Low-Birth-Weight Infants: Disappointing News." JAMA : the Journal of the American Medical Association, vol. 294, no. 3, 2005, pp. 371–373.

suffering, and I have discussed the problem of subjectivity. Based on these assessments, I have concluded that the neonatal euthanasia protocol for non-terminal newborns is too ethically dubious for the medical community to support. Thus, these non-terminal infants ought to be treated to live.

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Being and Death

Russell Clarke

I do not want to die—no; I neither want to die nor do I want to want to die; I want to live for ever and ever and ever. I want this “I” to live—this poor “I” that I am and that I feel myself to be here and now, and therefore the problem of the duration of my soul, of my own soul, tortures me.

—Miguel De Unamuno
The Tragic Sense of Life, 1912

*All my life coldly and sadly the days have gone by.
I who dreamed wildly and madly am happy to die....
Long since my heart has been breaking its pain is past.
A time has been set to its aching peace comes at last.*

—Lawrence Macdonald
Monument to Emily Georgiana, Lady Winchilsea,
1850

Abstract

This essay analyzes the existential contours of being and death. Deploying a thought experiment which outlines the hypothetical conditions of ‘true immortality’, I utilize a vast literature on the topics of death, existentialism, and freedom to disambiguate the existences of human beings and true immortals. I explore the ways that dying and death define our conditions of being and instantiates a humanness that is fundamentally different to true immortals who are impervious to death. I contend that the metaphysical condition of death, which is intrinsic to human beings, underscore existential qualities being

phenomenologically, temporally, and otherwise ontologically that, as a result, constitute a different creature than what I define as a true immortal. On one hand, I list and elaborate on numerous features of the human condition that I assert imbues human beings with a particular *humanness*. In contrast, I describe two conceptual assertions about the existential strictures of true immortality that underwrite their mode of being. This essay attempts to explicate the relationship between death and existence and, in the process, theorize about how the fundamental nature of human beings is ontologically defined by the capacity for and inevitability of death.

Introduction

The relationship one has to their death is, all the time, an existential contemplation. It can be said, then, that our relationship to immortality and its potential is an existential impasse. To be clear, I want to prime this dialectic by offering the necessary distinction between the two forms of immortality. Belief in the feasible potential of immortality is not necessary to conceive of the conditions of both *medical* or *true* immortality. The former can be succinctly defined as the invulnerability to death due to natural causes of any sort. What is more or less an ode to Victor Frankenstein's aspiration to "banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!"⁶¹ The alternate kind of immortality, which is the physiological and existential framework within which this work will operate, is what is referred to as "true immortality". While Victor wished to bypass the physiological essentiality of decay and natural death, true

⁶¹ Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. London: Penguin Books, 1818 [1985], pg. 89.

immortality is the condition whereby the individual is invulnerable, as it were, *incapable* of death altogether. The question is often asked of what one may gain under the condition of immortality and the answers appear obvious: infinite projects, the alleviation of dread concerning death, the intrinsic goodness of life's continuation, etc. However, I want to probe more deeply into a profoundly different question: what does one stand to lose under the conditions of true immortality?

There are numerous points of divergence when discussing the constitutions of the person who is truly immortal and the person who is a human being. Additionally, much can be said with respect to the impact that these vastly distinct physiological constitutions can and will have throughout the course of their respective lives. A great many of these consequences are existential in nature. That is, they pertain to the topic of human freedom and its mutual relation to the conditions of our existence. What is more, I explore how consequences put into question differences between human and true immortal consciousness to the freedom or lack thereof of the conditions of birth and fate of our life and death. What is also imperative is the ontological relations that human beings have toward their death. Using Heideggerian guideposts, I analyze the immanence and eminence of death as the foremost condition of being in human life, crafting a nexus of significance and relation between what it means to be human, how the potential for death impacts this meaning and what it entails to be conscious of this relational impact. This ontological relation is relevant as well to the dimensions of meaning and boredom, projects and memory in the disambiguation of temporal reality between a human being that can and will eventually die and a true immortal

who, taking on similar projects, is easily capable of exhausting meaning in their actions and becoming susceptible to boredom and meaninglessness. Lastly, I attempt to reverse the deprivation account by suggesting that enterally immortal existence deprives the individual of the option to die if they so choose and purloins the option for one not to exist after death, further assorting the existential journeys of these two creatures qua their physiological constitutions. I want to examine and explicate the piercing existential dangers posed to human beings under the conditions of true immortality. That is, the aim of this paper is to elucidate the myriad ways that one's modes of being are transmuted under the conditions of true immortality. It is my contention that the potential for and eventuality of death underwrites the particularities the human quintessence, that true immortality is *existentially* transformative and diminutive.

It is not enough to ascertain true immortality in the simplified fashion outlined above. Nor should we concede the notion that immortality, especially in the 'true' sense, can be qualified as a condition of *human* life or, at the very least, an extension of human life. The position of true immortality must, in my view, confront its differences with the deeply enshrined aspects of the human condition which, in many ways, it obliterates. In simpler words, one reaches the conclusion that true immortality indefeasibly alters the fundamental nature of *humanness*. True immortality creates a fundamentally different creature to that of human beings. Therefore, in this essay, I distinguish between the two animals who I believe are existentially and metaphysically opposed: *human beings* and *true immortals*.

J.M. Fischer lays out three requirements within the conceptual framework of immortality that would render it desirable. Immortal life must be *recognizably*

human, the imagined immortal must be *me*, and finally, the immortal life must be attractive.⁶² Note the first two requirements for desirability are principally existential; they stipulate the preservation of a fixed human nature which I argue is irremediably changed given the true immortality condition. Moreover, measuring attractiveness entails strong subjective value judgments of immortal quality of life which again hinges on existential qualities that I elaborate on throughout the work. Each conceptual facet of the true immortality condition will undoubtedly alter the hypothetical mode of being for that truly immortal creature, as well as its respective degrees of attractiveness. I devise a thought experiment in which I lay out the facets of true immortality, framing its conditions and scope. From a purely conceptual perspective, a couple assertions can be made in respect to the constitution of the true immortal. That is, 1) true immortality makes *being* a contingency in itself and 2) the temporal relation to death and its contingent dynamism of action is permanently lost. In other words, true immortality forces one to *exist* for its own sake, for eternity. Also, the way human beings approach death phenomenologically and otherwise as a necessity of the future is no longer possible and thus, all action which depends on this temporal relation is demeaned. These assertions scaffold the material reality of life which distinguish true immortals from human beings. Furthermore, they delineate the metaphysical conditions which existentially constrain the true immortal, once again marking its difference from humanness.

⁶² Fischer, John, Martin. Fundamentals of Philosophy Series: *Death, Immortality, and Meaning in Life*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pg. 102

According to Fischer, in order for a thing to maintain its identity it must exist within its particular metaphysical parameters. While an object may accommodate certain superficial changes, it must adhere to the material structures that make it what it is or else it is no longer that thing.⁶³ There are many features of life that I argue are constitutive of its humanness, of which I would include, among other things, freedom, authenticity, potential, meaning, physiological decay, and death. Correspondingly, the features I attribute to true immortality—through a continuous heap of counterfactuals—is defined in full (for dialectical purposes) in this hypothetical experiment:

Imagine an existence where you are born a true immortal. That is, you are completely invulnerable to death by any means, irrespective of the cause or force. You simply cannot ever die, and thus you would be subject, without recourse, to everlasting life on Earth. Your body will not be recreated or otherwise reincarnated in any form except that as you were born and have grown into. Barring any cataclysmic event or series of events that ravages our planet, you can still be made to live an abundant life without fear that it will be taken from you or altered in any physiological way. Moreover, despite the typical inevitability of decay, senescence, and its associated sufferings, you are immune to ageing and will maintain your youthful vigor forever (assume an age cut-off point of say a 25-year-old). Thus, you are able to fulfill all your desired projects for an infinitely long time. As an added benefit, let us suppose that all individuals, including your loved family and friends live under this condition of true immortality as well. Being all at once the charm and caveat of this existence, you are **impervious to death**, and so, can never commit suicide. You are bound to life and living, without choice, forever.

I have established the metaphysical parameters or rather the borders which constitute the life of a true immortal. Amenable as these conditions may seem, there are still challenges that arise with this way of living that run counter to our fundamental humanness. True immortality absolves human freedom in its most obvious stricture, being the freedom of choice between life or death as it

⁶³ Ibid, pg. 104

definitionally precludes the latter. Our cultivation of meaning, including the meaning of our own lives, and its robustness thereafter is directly related to the temporal, as it were, finite nature of the entities we ascribe value judgements to. The diminution of meaning and temporality also provokes the question of boredom within true immortal life. Perhaps counterintuitively, I want to make the claim for the value of death as a plausible human desire of the first and second order and as a necessary ontic potentiality and then reverse the deprivation claim, straddling it to the desirability of death in an otherwise truly immortal world.

Death and Freedom

One can maintain the intrinsic value of life with little trouble, and thereafter assert the *goodness* of continued life without limitation, which is the immutable condition of true immortality. Returning to Fischer, the metaphysical and existential parameters of a thing must be upheld for it to maintain a particular identity. Leon Kass⁶⁴ agrees with my position that “to argue that human life would be better without death is...to argue that human life would be better being something other than human.”⁶⁵ Citing Kurzweil, Felicia Ackerman rebuts this notion by begging the question of why we ought to define humans in respect to their limitations (death being our ultimate delimitation) as opposed to defining humanity by its ability to transcend those limitations.⁶⁶ Although Kurzweil views death as the condition which delimits human capacity *par excellence*, a larger constrain is cast upon the

⁶⁴ Kass, Leon. *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*. San Francisco: Encounter, 2002.

⁶⁵ Ibid, pg. 265

⁶⁶ Ackerman, Felicia, Nimue. Death is a Punch in the Jaw: Life Extension and its Discontents. *The Oxford Handbook of Bioethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

true immortal that itself delimits the creature who is bound to living without recourse. True immortals differ from human beings insofar as their agentic capacity to choose between life and death is unviable; a true immortal cannot choose death as he is impervious to it. To be clear, the freedom of will towards death and dying is not altogether lost in the true immortal world. One assumes the capacity for decay and annihilation for all other biological organisms *except* for true immortal people. However, the condition of true immortals does not exclude the potential of what Frankfurt delineates as first and second-order desires. First order desires being ones where we desire to do or not to do or be or not to be something. The latter are desires to want to do something or desires to have particular desires.⁶⁷ In his tract, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Jean-Paul Sartre emphasizes the procurement of objects of desire by the conscious *me*. According to Sartre, the *me* “if it is not present to consciousness, is hidden behind consciousness and is the magnetic pole of all our representations and all our desires”⁶⁸ The phenomenological capacity for death and the desire it fosters belies the reality of a true immortal whose freedom to determine their fate is never offered to him.

Freedom is one of many essential parameters of humanness that I asserted cannot be altered or subjugated while still insisting on its particular human constitution. Many immortality optimists are persistent in transcending human limitations while neglecting the fact that true immortality is itself a limit. While I do not deny that life has intrinsic value, irrespective of the perceived beneficence

⁶⁷ Frankfurt, Harry G. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person." *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 1 (1971): 5-20, pg. 7.

⁶⁸ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *The Transcendence of the Ego*. (New York City: Hill and Wang, 1957), pg. 55

of life and living, this profit ought not to subsume the irrevocable human value of freedom of choice. In his proto-existential novel, *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky uses numerous phrases that analogize the misguided notions of human rationality and beneficence undergirding the utopian ideal and which I import to illuminate the limitations and follies of true immortality. Alas, literature is wed to philosophy through metaphor. Dostoevsky uses phrases such as the ‘laws of human nature and arithmetic’, ‘real profit’, and ‘virtuous wanting’ in order to burlesque the paternalistic and utilitarian nature of human rationality which seek to undermine personal agency. Dostoevsky wanted to discard the virtue of human rationality and benefit precisely because it has the potential to negate desire and thus negate freedom. The protagonist writes, “And where did all these sages get the idea that man needs some normal, some virtuous wanting? What made them necessarily imagine that what man needs is necessarily a reasonably profitable wanting? Man needs only *independent* wanting”⁶⁹ He continues by declaring that:

reason...is a fine thing...but reason is only reason and satisfies only man’s reasoning capacity, while wanting is a manifestation of the *whole* of life....there is only one case... when man may purposely, consciously wish for himself even the harmful, the stupid, even the stupidest of all: namely so as *to have the right* to wish for himself even what is stupidest of all and not be bound by an obligation to wish for himself only what is intelligent. For this stupidest of all, this caprice of ours...may in fact be the most profitable of anything on earth for our sort....⁷⁰

For my part, the object of living without recourse to any choice regarding its continuation or cessation, especially in light of the phenomenological capacity for death, is a deeply inferior metaphysical condition. It is important to note the

⁶⁹ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground* (Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky Trans.). (New York City: Vintage Book; Random House, 1864 [1993]), pg. 26.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, pg. 28

distinctions between an agent's will to freedom to act and their will to act. For it can be perfectly normal for an agent to be deprived of their freedom to act whilst leaving their freedom of will and desires intact, as would imaginably be the case for the true immortal.⁷¹ Clearly the irremediable nature of the truly immortal condition does not necessarily occlude the potential for one's effective desires or their will and, in this way, a phenomenological similarity is found between the human being and their true immortal counterpart. It does, however, offend the freedom of action (with respect to the capacity for death) in the true immortal where it does no such thing for the human being who can and eventually will die. Thus, I assert the existential tyranny of true immortality. I can agree in good faith that life is valuable *a priori* and still conclude, as Dostoevsky had, that within the hierarchy of human values, freedom outstrips the beneficent, specifically that which is thrust upon us. As Berlin once remarked, "To block man from every door but one, no matter how noble the prospect upon which it opens, or how benevolent the motives of those who arrange this, is to sin against the truth that he is a man, a being with a life of his own to live."⁷² That freedom dwells within the upper bound of human values, and that its lack is of tragic consequence is not to suggest that it is the only major shortcoming of true immortality.

Complications abound when considering true immortality and its constraining forces. These complications have to do with the quality of life at hand. Although the hypothetical experiment I provided ensured the absence of senility and the suffering that typically accompanies ageing, to imagine even a youthful,

⁷¹ Ibid Frankfurt, pg. 14

⁷² Berlin, Isaiah. 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in Berlin, Four Essays on Liberty (New York: Oxford University Press), 1969. 118-72. Pg. 127.

truly immortal world without certain implications of suffering would be to engage in continuous flights of fancy. We can imagine a world where individuals are born, do not and cannot experience disease and only age to a certain extent and then no more afterward. However, as Benatar notes, death is only one bad thing that can befall one. Other negative experiences can occur to individuals throughout their life, regardless of age or bodily fitness.⁷³ Many of these experiences can persist throughout one's life as well. The physiological conditions of a true immortal have very little bearing on severe social and economic inequality, poverty, various ineptitudes, personal failures, heartbreak, and other suffering that may befall an individual during the course of their life. In fact, one can easily imagine that a true immortal, compared to a finite human being, would endure protracted suffering. Eternal life would surely entail perpetual suffering. The difference is one of these beings will have put a stop to their suffering after the occurrence of death; the other will not. Benatar suggests that to make immortal life a desirable one, we would have to stipulate that immortal life be blissful or that one could opt out of immortality if they so wished.⁷⁴ This choice to opt out of immortality is plausible in the realm of medical immortality where one is capable of dying by violent causes and could, conceivably, undertake suicide thereby ending their life. The true immortal is utterly bereft of this choice ideal. It is true that human beings are not in control of much of the suffering that they endure under the influence of many unjust social structures and other individuals close or not close to them. Human

⁷³ Benatar, David. *The Human Predicament*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 153

beings, however, do have the choice, under any circumstance, to cease living when they want, and at any rate, would have ceased living at some point.

Notwithstanding the qualities that make human beings and true immortals fundamentally different beings, they clearly share certain commonalities. One such commonality between both human beings and true immortals, and in fact all living things, is their lack of control over the actions that resulted in them being brought into existence. Both creatures often have no control over the actions that cause suffering in their respective existences. What is more, neither creature is ever in control of the only actions that could have obviated their suffering altogether, those actions which put into motion their existence.⁷⁵ Essentially all creatures are arbitrarily thrown into existence. True immortality presents a metaphysical tyranny which bears importance on the symmetry of being and non-being. Lucretius was an Epicurean poet and philosopher who put forth a mirror argument to illustrate that prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are identical:

Look back again to see how the unending expanse of past time, before we are born, has been nothing to us. For Nature holds this forth to us in a mirror image of the time to come after our death. Is there anything terrible there, does it seem gloomy? is it not more peaceful than any sleep?⁷⁶

In part a consolation to the human dread of death, and in part a response to the popular deprivation account, Lucretius argues that both modes of nonexistence are temporally and metaphysically similar and therefore, if one is indifferent to their nonexistence before they were born, so too should they be indifferent to their nonexistence after they die.⁷⁷ In simpler terms, prenatal and postmortem

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Lucretius. (n.d.). *De Rerum Naturum*, pg. 3

⁷⁷ Ibid Fischer, pg. 41

nonexistence are symmetrical. The importance of illustrating the symmetry argument is to demonstrate that true immortality itself offers a symmetry, albeit an oppressive one. Just like the symmetry argument presented by Lucretius regarding our prenatal and postmortem nonexistence, the true immortality condition proffers a metaphysical symmetry of prenatal and immortal non-control. No one is ever in control of the circumstances culminating in their conception and eventual birth. Only their biological parents hold such a privilege. Correspondingly, a truly immortal life robs one of their agency concerning death as it definitionally precludes death. One cannot control their birth any more than they can control the death they are incapable of having. Furthermore, the infinite and oblivious temporal lapse before their birth congruently corresponds to the infinite, meandering lifespan of the true immortal after they are born. If the mirror argument says we are to be indifferent as to our death because we are no longer living, that is because we no longer have a conscious *I* or *me* to intend or desire anything worth concern or apathy. That consciousness, like everything else, is simply annihilated upon death. It is easily imaginable that the true immortal's imperviousness to death complicates second-order desires for death and dying, albeit in the same way the condition of death does for human beings yearning for immortality as demonstrated in the first of this paper's two epigraphs. Admittedly, the distinct complications we see regarding the second-order desires and freedom of wills between these two creatures and their fates, while not exactly equating to two phenomenologically differentiated positions, still underscore a difference in kind between these desires and wills precisely because of their physiological dispensations. The true immortal's *me* is eternal and cannot, so long as it is

cognizant of death, help but to intend death. An awareness which it cannot act upon. Human beings need never confront this block. In fact, the temporal journey of their existence negates this block.

Human beings partake in three successive metaphysical stages of prenatal nonexistence, existence, and finally, postmortem nonexistence. Invariably, existence is what unites these stages of nonexistence and what I believe is constitutive of a life imbued with humanness. This tripartite unity requires death. True immortals, on the other hand, have a unity of a different sort. The problem is that true immortality affords one *perfect* symmetry; it affords a *dichotomous* unity. This is undesirable because it is invariably a symmetry of metaphysical tyranny; one which they do not and cannot choose on either end. Invulnerability to death would permanently alter the human tripartite unity. It bisects it. It mutates it. Moreover, it is an *asymmetrical existential* tyranny because free will necessitates a consciousness to apprehend it and act upon it, no such capacity exists before birth. Yet, this phenomenological capacity exists for both creatures, only one, however, can truly anticipate it and *be* towards it forever. Freedom, is then, in the most impactful sense, a human characteristic. Freedom and death are existential qualities that are allocated differently according to the metaphysical constitutions of different creatures.

Being-Toward-Death as a Potentiality

Being in the world is fundamentally shaped by our tendency, as it were, our capacity to question our very mode of being. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger, in his *Being and Time* maintained that we are the Beings for

which *being* is a question. We attend to this question as a means to ascertain our existence and truthfully exist in the world. Heidegger termed this Being as Dasein. The former of the two assertions outlined earlier which I stated were constitutive of true immortals: true immortality makes *being* a contingency in itself, is helpful in demarcating the essential features of Dasein or human beings in general.

Without explicitly referring to the parameters of Dasein as borders, such as Fischer does, Heidegger professes that death is a potentiality of Dasein and could thus be presently attributable to Dasein as a “not-yet” feature. The two following quotations will be useful to elucidate Heidegger’s conception of being-toward-death. He writes that “it is a matter of taking the existential meaning of the coming-to-an-end of Dasein itself and of showing how this “ending” can constitute a *being whole* of the being that *exists*”⁷⁸ Also:

just as Dasein constantly already *is* its not-yet as long as it is, it also always already *is* its end. The ending that we have in view when we speak of death, does not signify a being-at-an-end of Dasein, but rather a *being toward the end* [*Sein zum Ende*] of this being. Death is a way to be that Dasein takes over as soon as it is.⁷⁹

That true immortality makes being a contingency in itself, belies the essential fact that Dasein is partly constituted by its very potential for death. According to Heidegger, to characterize being-toward-death was to understand this being-toward this not-yet as a distinct possibility or potential of Dasein.⁸⁰ Indeed, he referred to death as Dasein’s “*ownmost, nonrelational, and insuperable [unüberholbar] possibility*.”⁸¹ (which one could not escape. Consistent throughout the

⁷⁸ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time* (J. Stambaugh Trans.). (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1962) pg. 233.

⁷⁹ Ibid, pg. 236

⁸⁰ Ibid, pg. 250

⁸¹ Ibid, pg. 241

suggestions of Heidegger and Kass, it appears death is the shape of life, at least of that relating to human life.

Admittedly, one may find it difficult to decipher, or for that matter, grasp the significance of the ontological premise of death that Heidegger binds so tightly to Dasein. Coyne says, so the theory runs, that life has no “end” if this end is to be understood as the culmination of a point of magnitude. Rather, he claims that the intrinsic existential value of death is that it is tied to the permeation of death as a possibility of Dasein⁸². In other words, Dasein has a perpetual, acute sense of death as a possibility that punctuates its own ending. Death being the most imminent possibility of being no less, and Heidegger suggests as much. As part of a series of potentialities which human beings alone can represent and project, death is a possibility of the highest magnitude precisely because it extends farther than all other possibilities. What is more, compared to all other possibilities, death and its finite temporal structuring which it thrusts upon Dasein, informs, to the greatest degree, all other existential constituents of Dasein itself. In addition, if death, as Heidegger suggests, is a way of *being* that Dasein procures the moment that it *is*, then death is the most possible and urgent of possibilities.⁸³ The shadow of death becomes of Dasein, its all-encompassing possibility and influence. For better or worse, death provides the *raison d'être* of Dasein. If I am to say that death constitutes the human aspect as surely as it veils our existence and because of our acuity to it, I may concede that the potentialities of true immortals overlap with human beings except for in its most fundamental region of being. I can suggest

⁸² Coyne, Ryan. "Bearers of Transience: Simmel and Heidegger on Death and Immortality." *Human Studies* 41, no. 1 (2018): 59-78.

⁸³ Ibid.

with confidence that the ownmost, insuperable potentiality of the true immortal is indeed a very impossibility, that of dying and death.

Like Heidegger, Seneca warned us to be vigilant when, crippled with anxiety, we chose to lament over life's brevity and death. He urged us to cast our eyes on death at all moments.⁸⁴ This acuity of life's evanescence which Seneca encouraged in us arose, undoubtedly, from an acuity of the inevitability that one would eventually meet their demise. Anxiety, Heidegger tells us, is actually a way of existing in the world. He made it clear that anxiety ought not to be confused with fear over death but rather a cogent perception or 'disclosedness' of a reality forged by death as Dasein's greatest possibility.⁸⁵ As well as Heidegger, both Camus and Sartre emphasized the instrumentality of consciousness in *being*. Camus declared that "the consciousness of death is the call of anxiety...one stands in this absurd world and points out its ephemeral character. He seeks his way amid the ruins."⁸⁶ Camus encodes within his philosophy a more plausible encouragement, that of rebellion against the absurd, embattled condition of life. Less realistic in terms of his prescriptions but more exigent is Heidegger, who believed "that understanding does not primarily mean staring at a meaning, but understanding oneself in the potentiality-of-being that reveals itself in the project"⁸⁷ This conscious relation to death or 'anticipation [*Vorlaufen*]' underwrites the most essential being of Dasein itself. Anticipation represents the contemplation and revelation of Dasein to itself (death) which instantiates its very potential and brings about a potentiality of

⁸⁴ Seneca. *Epistles*, Volume III: Epistles 93-124. Translated by Richard M. Gummere. Loeb Classical Library 77. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925

⁸⁵ Ibid Heidegger, pg. 241

⁸⁶ Camus, Albert, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. (London: Random House, 1942), pg. 24.

⁸⁷ Ibid Heidegger, pg. 252

Dasein. For Heidegger, it was this revelation which made authentic existence possible. The issue with true immortality is that it infinitely expands a potentiality of being-toward-some-thing *other* to death, namely eternal life, and simultaneously purloins the possibility of the Dasein's ownmost potentiality. The question of whether Dasein, in death's absence, as an existential and metaphysical constitution remains as *itself* is urgent. My answer is no, it cannot. It is key to understand that consciousness, for all three thinkers, reifies the potentiality of the human being. Sartre writes "Potentiality is not mere possibility: it presents itself as something which really exists, but its mode of existence is potency"⁸⁸ Camus asked us to embrace the potentiality of rebellion against our imprisonment in the absurd. Heidegger urged one to comprehend this prison *as oneself*. True immortals confront a different prison entirely, one that begets their existence—rather than death which for them is impossible—as *their own* insuperable potentiality. Assuming true immortals are as capable of cognition as human beings, we can rest assured that each performs their respective anticipation. And yet, the direction of one's phenomenological thrust matters. Once again, the metaphysical constitution of the two beings permits and solidifies a grotesque existential obscurity.

Meaning and Projects

Meaning is not the same as goodness. It is, in my mind, a grave error to conflate the perceived goodness of continued life with a life that imbibes meaning. The issues that conceptions of meaning face up to with respect to true immortality is that of transience, finitude, and subjectivity. These issues are significant when analyzing

⁸⁸ Ibid Sartre, pg. 71

the efficacy and performance of projects that are purportedly meaningful. I discussed earlier the two assertions that can be said to be *a priori* constitutive of the true immortal. The second assertion which emphasizes the lost quality of the temporal relation to death is instructive. Let us recognize the value of transience to our representations of meaningful projects. Human beings and true immortals are largely capable of undertaking similar projects. Both can procreate and raise children, write profound literature, travel the world and the like. But how does time impact the meaningfulness of these activities? I consider here the arguments of both Martha Nussbaum and Thomas Nagel, who, while demonstrating diametrically opposed temporal adaptations of meaning, nevertheless illuminate the integrity of meaning in relation to time and finitude. Nussbaum attaches moral worth to temporally constrained projects when she writes:

The intensity and dedication with which very many human activities are pursued cannot be explained without reference to the awareness that our opportunities are finite, that we cannot choose these activities indefinitely many times. In raising a child, in cherishing a lover, in performing a demanding task of work or thought or artistic creation, we are aware, at some level, of the thought that each of these efforts is structured and constrained by time.⁸⁹

Here you witness the temporal structure of the moral value of human action. Simply put, human beings attach extrinsic moral worth to things as well as activities because they understand the essentiality of objective (the project or thing) and subjective (personal) finitude. As an inadvertent critique on the moral worth of true immortal projects Nagel claims:

It is often remarked that nothing we do now will matter in a million years. But if that is true, then by the same token, nothing that will be the case in a million

⁸⁹ Nussbaum, Martha. *The Therapy of Desire. Theory and practice in Hellenistic ethics*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pg. 229

years matters now. In particular, it does not matter now that in a million years nothing we do now will matter.⁹⁰

It is inevitable that in a truly immortal world one will live through thousands and eventually millions of years. Nagel reminds us to zoom out and entertain the potential that human projects will not bear resonance at the opposite end of a vast expanse of time. Presumably, the cosmic significance of even an intrinsically valuable human life aged 110 years will be so minuscule as to be negligible.

Although a true immortal's life can reach no completion and thus negates temporal polarities, the evidence that imbued meaning in their projects will dissipate remains strong. A true immortal life will continue to have meaning, but throughout time their projects will not. Following Nagel, if a true immortal's project now has no meaning a million years from now, then the inverse claim holds true as well. That is, at no finite temporal end within and around a grand expanse of time will the true immortal's project have eminent meaning. The concept of a legacy, and the value architecture it rests upon is thrown into the dustbin. Subjectivity, by definition, implies individuality. Of course, one could still pursue projects that are enticing and this would qualify its intrinsic meaning. However, I make the argument that the temporal component of meaning that I suggest in reference to transience is universal. Time is the key agent in the extrinsic conference of meaning onto an entity in a human world. Conversely, the temporal *lack* in the true immortal realm is for the true immortal a universal blockade.

⁹⁰ Boden, M. A., Feldman, F., Fischer, J. M., Hare, R., Hume, D., Joske, W. D., ... & Luper, S. *Life, death, and meaning: Key philosophical readings on the big questions*. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), pg. 32

The specters of boredom and existential bloat as functions of temporal magnitude are equally dubious. Preston and Dixon⁹¹ point to the importance of temporal limits in enduring a mortal life due to our being able to have novel experiences. Human beings and true immortals alike can and eventually will experience boredom. The latter faces a boredom which is perhaps incurable. True immortal lives may be infinite but the array of experiences on a finite planet are not. The true immortal runs the risk of doing everything they could ever wish to do, and experiencing everything they may wish to experience. Even the undertaking of certain projects would be contingent on one's degree of economic and social resources, which, as I pointed out earlier, are variable and potentially skint. Squalid is the creature whose existence is bound to perpetual destitution. Still, one's life could be constantly pleasant. Indeed, a susceptibility to the boredom argument is that certain experiences exist whose utility never diminishes. Activities such a sex, eating good food, listening to fine music are repeatable, rather than 'self-exhausting' activities. These and other activities often depend on our conscious attitudes toward that activity which relies, in turn, on our memories of that activity.

Let us argue, as Fischer has cleverly done, that in a truly immortal life, our memories would fade over time and be reconstituted around the new experiences which shape memories.⁹² Perhaps this would satisfy the problem of boredom regarding both repeatable and self-exhausting activities but it would fail to satisfy the conceptual requirement of desirable true immortality which stipulates that the

⁹¹ Preston, Ted M. and Scott Dixon. "Who Wants to Live Forever? Immortality, Authenticity, and Living Forever in the Present." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 61, no. 2 (2007): 99-117

⁹² Ibid Fischer, pg. 122

imagined immortal would still be *me*. We are largely our consciousnesses, both our capacity to conceive of the world then code and recall it. Although, theoretically speaking, true immortals could traverse the reality of boredom, they would undergo psychological recreations periodically *ad infinitum*. Their potentiality, unlike a human's, would be meandering, would be of being-toward-no-thing. The protagonist of Dostoevsky's work repeatedly impugns his condition. He wishes over and over to affirm his essence, to define himself positively but he cannot⁹³ A common feature of the existentialist canon was their almost religious faith in man's ability to be free, to choose. Be it the *essence* of one's character or the very continuation of one's life. The Heideggerian schema involves an existence which reveals itself to death at all times. The life of a true immortal is revealed only to existence which lends itself to an endless succession of ephemeral essences: being-towards-no-thing. Humankind cannot bear very much existence. The true immortal, unfortunately, bears far too much. The underground man writhed in indignation at his solitary fate, understanding that one cursed with the freedom to become everything would become altogether nothing.

Conclusion: Immortality as Deprivation and Rejecting the Impasse

A number of authors have rightly advanced the argument in response to the Epicurean position that death is not bad for the person who dies. The deprivation account, according to Benatar, is the idea that death is bad because it deprives an individual of any future good that they would have otherwise had had they not

⁹³ Ibid Dostoevsky, pg. 19

ceased living.⁹⁴ Expanding this view, death can deprive one of other intrinsic goods. For instance, death can deprive one of various desire-satisfactions. Certain projects that one yearns to fulfill could be permanently and irreversibly snatched from them. Moreover, what is clear about death is that it is the *annihilation* of one's life and so vanquishes a vessel of existence which is good in itself. Where any of these deprivations fall on an individual's scale of values is a subjective matter. Yet, to posit such a scale is a determination of free consciousness. Freedom is the value that shrouds value itself. Considering this, reversing the deprivation account to shine light on immortality as tyranny is a laudable goal. Benatar concedes that one may very well find themselves in a position where they judge their lives not worth continuing. He condemns the moral constrain that is often derived from stigmatization surrounding suicide. He writes, "If suicide were impermissible...then those people would be trapped....To deny people the moral freedom to kill themselves is to deny them control over a decision of immense importance to them."⁹⁵ Suicide in a truly immortal world would not be impermissible, it would be impossible because death is impossible. True immortality is metaphysically abundant but leaves its subjects devoid of the human being's most possible constitutive properties which is death and freedom over life.

Appealing to Christopher Hitchens, Fischer elucidates the deprivation theory with a metaphor of a party:

It will happen to all of us, that at some point you get tapped on the shoulder and told, not just that the party's over, but slightly worse, that the party's going on—but you have to leave. And it's going on without you.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Ibid Benatar, pg. 101

⁹⁵ Ibid, pg. 196

⁹⁶ Ibid Fischer, pg. 40

Deprivation wades through the deepest recesses of the human essence, it operates between the full spectrum of human desire and being. True immortality is the grandest party, to be sure. And I, as much as anybody, would be dejected if, while jovial in song and dance, I were to be escorted out by a dark figure armed with a scythe. However, this looming fate would seem sweet when compared to the option of being told that I could not leave the party at all. True immortality is this other fate. True immortality is telling one they can never leave the party. I may even make the claim, aligning with my idea of the tripartite unity, that categorically, true immortality is a net disadvantage. It offers the true immortal only two metaphysical modes of being, prenatal nonexistence and existence but obscures the metaphysical dimension of postmortem nonexistence after death. Once again, as a constitution, true immortals are vastly different to human beings.

I reject the impasse. *I am* because I will one day no longer *be*. The purpose of this critique consists in the attempt to discern the metaphysical and existential constituencies between both the human being and the true immortal, thereby demonstrating that both creatures are ontologically irreconcilable. The physiological hue of the true immortal forms the two *a priori* assertions I made in the introduction that underlie the tyrannies it cannot escape and furthermore, corroborates an index of impossibilities and privations. The border analogy is pertinent to comprehending why certain facts about the human being cannot be changed lest we risk serious permutations. I have shown that death underscores the quintessential facts of being for humankind. A particular ontic existence that includes freedom, a richness of meaning, an acuity for death, authenticity, and finally, death itself. Medical immortality, one might say, makes considerable

alterations to the physical nature of the human being while adjuring still to the metaphysical aspects of that creature that make up its identity, namely, death and freedom. For true immortality to be desirable, it would have to comply with the parameters of *human potentiality*. It fails in this mission. It dissolves our borders and creates its own. The fate of the true immortal never belongs to him. Rather something else begets his existence, an eternity foisted upon him, strange and inhuman. An endless day; a sun without shadow. The torpor of one whose reality is shaped by his very bondage to existence. As Franz Kafka once correctly remarked, the meaning of life is that it stops.

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The Provincializing Power of Mahāyāna Buddhism

Ryan Curnow

Abstract

Alongside the physical, concrete history of colonialism, there is always the perniciously pervasive self-absolutizing philosophy which supports this colonialism. Likewise, just as there have always been resisters against the physical oppression of colonialism, there are both critiques and the potential for critique of colonialist philosophy around the world. This essay seeks to demonstrate how colonial epistemology and its deeply harmful effects may be challenged not only by the thought of modern-day academic thinkers influenced by current trends in postcolonial and decolonial theory, but just as well by the original philosophies of colonized peoples. Combining Dipesh Chakrabarty's astute postcolonial analysis with the principles of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, I aim to display the inherent potential that this prominent sect of Buddhism contains with regards to refuting epistemic colonialism. To this end, I discuss the nature of Chakrabarty's critique of European historicism, the distinct philosophical approaches of the Mahāyāna sect's two most preeminent schools, and how these schools stand alongside Chakrabarty's critique in synergy.

Introduction

Through the work of the contemporary postcolonial thinker Dipesh Chakrabarty, we may see that the modern history of Europe's relation to the cultures it has subjugated has been one of epistemic absolutism and developmental demarcation. Among countless colonized peoples, local ways of life and worldviews have been subjected to the strict assessment of a specific European philosophical standard and, in no small part resulting from imposed colonial categories of inferiority, such practices have been denigrated and the peoples disenfranchised. One non-Western intellectual tradition which has been subject to this asymmetrically historicist dogma is the philosophy of Buddhism, as demonstrated by many scholars, such as the example of G. W. F. Hegel's dismissal of it as a premature stage in his envisioned world system of religious development hierarchically culminating in Western Christianity. However, it is through Buddhist thought that one may find one of the strongest critiques of such narrow philosophical outlooks. The European judgement, as described above, indeed must be understood as absolutizing—in its 'vantage from nowhere' atemporal stance, it sweeps under the rug a problematic epistemology which I take Buddhism to be fit to challenge. In challenging this view, Buddhism shows its potential for a decolonizing ethics which thereby combats the violence caused by Europe's attempt at self-universalization. Along the lines of Chakrabarty's project of provincializing Europe's belief in its own universality, deriving from the perspectives of the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra

schools of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, there is the potential for a robust non-dualist critique of European colonial historicism and epistemic absolutism.

Universalist Historicism and Chakrabarty's Critique

The problematic nature of European historicism, as described and analyzed by Chakrabarty, is defined by its tendency to place other social or cultural groups in a rigidly ranked, linear hierarchy of temporalities in which the dominant group sits at the top. Within the historical—and in certain ways still present—paradigm of European modernist ideology, this most simply manifests itself in the mentality which states, “first in Europe, then elsewhere.” Chakrabarty explains this mentality further as follows, “Historicism is what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global over time, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it.”⁹⁷ From within the broadly European intellectual framework, or at least from the frameworks which had been most virtually prominent on the continent such as modernism and capitalist ideology, the colonial mindset promotes the assimilation of non-European cultures with non-European intellectual systems into their specific conception of history. The “global” nature of the European conception is asserted through an idea of universal progression. With the notion of universal progression comes the idea of an inequality in development towards the same ideal throughout different cultures. This is epitomized by John Stuart Mill's assessment of non-Western peoples in Africa and India regarding the question of self-government: “According to Mill,

⁹⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 7.

Indians or Africans were not *yet* civilized enough to rule themselves. Some historical time of development and civilization (colonial rule and education, to be precise) had to elapse before they could be considered prepared for such a task.”⁹⁸ Hence, for this epistemologically colonialist worldview, European standards became a goal for all non-European peoples to ascend towards hierarchically. In this way, even benevolent intentions towards colonized peoples can retain a supremacist and inegalitarian view towards differing cultural worldviews and practices.

The philosophical problem at the core of this colonial homogenization of world history is constituted by a disjointed view of time and a dichotomously objectifying view of different cultures, in which Europe deems itself the prime subject of history, relegating the rest of the world to the position of its objects. Firstly, inherent within the European separation and hierarchical-ization of peoples into different levels of progress towards European cultural standards is the act of displacing such peoples into entirely separate temporalities. Chakrabarty expresses it in this manner, “The inhabitants of the colonies, on the other hand, were assigned a place ‘elsewhere’ in the ‘first in Europe and then elsewhere’ structure of time. This move of historicism is what Johannes Fabian has called ‘the denial of coevalness.’”⁹⁹ By viewing the non-European colonized groups as, in a sense, behind Europe in the straight line of progression, as if these non-European peoples resembled Europeans in previous epochs of development, the historicist outlook treats the “underdeveloped” groups as though they inhabit their own

⁹⁸ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 8.

⁹⁹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 8.

separate spheres of time and place. This is what is meant by the “denial of coevalness,” in that the historicist neglects the reality that those who they view as underdeveloped actually inhabit the exact same time and (global) place as them—in other words, there is always contemporaneity between peoples.

Moreover, this treatment of foreign, colonized cultures by those who inherit the European colonialist mindset is an expression of a particularly dehumanizing relationship. On that note, Chakrabarty says this in particular regarding the typical historicist view of the supernaturalist practices of certain colonized peoples:

Depending on the political dispositions of their authors, historicist narratives by secular and rational scholars have produced either harshly judgmental or sympathetic accounts of subaltern social groups’ tendency to treat gods, spirits, and other supernatural entities as agential beings in the worlds of humans. But, sympathetic or not, these accounts all foreground a separation—a subject-object distinction—between the academic observer-subject and the “superstitious” persons serving as the objects of study.¹⁰⁰

Not only are the colonized set apart in such a way as to make them seem as if they inhabited an entirely different temporality, they are also analyzed as though they were mere pieces of evidence or objects from another time. Even if the colonizer has the intent to liberate the colonized people, if this value of liberation comes from a historicist position in which the colonized must catch up in terms of progress, then this is an objectifying view: “It is through such objectification—predicated on the principle of anachronism—that the eye of the participant is converted into the eye of the witness.”¹⁰¹ It is explicitly in this manner that the nature of historicist observation, treating other human cultures as though they were pieces of archaeological evidence to be analyzed, is connected to the

¹⁰⁰ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 237.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 239.

denial of coevalness—through the act of witnessing as opposed to simply being a fellow member of one and the same time and space. What is common to these one-sided views of European colonial epistemology is the absolutizing of itself within time whilst relativizing all other times in relation to its own. Through his addressing of these colonialist outlooks, Chakrabarty seeks to subject Europe to the same 'provincialization' that it reserves for the rest of the world, thereby de-reifying its absolutist epistemological self-understanding. A relevant example of an epistemology that successfully provincializes Europe while avoiding the urge to declare itself the end of history can be found in the different metaphysical approaches of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought.

Madhyamaka Emptiness and the Reassertion of Coevalness

Through an analysis of space and time as necessarily interdependent, as provided by the Madhyamaka school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, one may begin to philosophically critique the absurdity of the colonialist denial of coevalness. The Madhyamaka school, founded by the saint Nāgārjuna, is predicated on a philosophical interpretation of the core messages of Buddhism on the basis of “emptiness.” When something is referred to as “empty” within the Madhyamaka system of thought, it is deemed as lacking in inherent, or self-subsisting existence. Nāgārjuna applies this critical analysis not just to observable entities but to all possible objects and subjects, as all things are interdependent in some causal or conceptual manner.¹⁰² Hence, the aim of this philosophy is to show that there can

¹⁰² Peter Della Santina, “The Madhyamaka Philosophy,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (June 1987): 174-175, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23445443>.

be no such thing which can be tenably referred to as metaphysically independent; by the very fact of existing, something must be completely relationally dependent upon other phenomena. Furthermore, Nāgārjuna totalizes the nature of this emptiness by adding that objects cannot even have an inherent existence through dependence on other phenomena: “If there is no essence, there can be no otherness-essence.”¹⁰³ As there is no thing which, by its own power, can be said to exist, there is no possibility for anything else to inherently exist by depending on phenomena which only purportedly already do. It is through this analysis that Nāgārjuna is able to assert the “empty”-ness of all things. Already, one may see how such a view of interconnectivity may serve as a critique of views which seek to posit separate temporalities. For if something is said to exist in any way, then it must bear some connection to the rest of perceivable or conceivable existence; this is another way of saying that, if something were said to be, somehow, metaphysically independent of all other things, then it would not be able to be conceived or perceived in any possible way. From this view alone, the Madhyamaka school is able to criticize the historicist treatment of the colonized as intellectually untenable, given its doctrine of separate time-spaces leading up to one supposedly ultimate end.

Just as well, through the logic of Madhyamaka, the total relationality of all conceptions of time shows that any notion of multiple, disparate times is indefensible. Nāgārjuna criticizes the idea of an independent time in this manner, “If they [the present and the future] are not dependent upon the past, neither of

¹⁰³ Nāgārjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, trans. Jay L. Garfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.

the two would be established. Therefore neither the present nor the future would exist.”¹⁰⁴ If there is no sense in which the present moment, or in fact the future as it can be thought of, depends upon what is prior, then once again there is no way to ground such ideas. Thus, Nāgārjuna says, “A nonstatic time is not grasped. Nothing one could grasp as stationary time exists. If time is not grasped, how is it known?”¹⁰⁵ This question directly challenges the denial of coevalness enacted by the colonial historicist mindset. Time can *only* be conceived of in terms of relations we find in one interconnected reality. There can be no discussion of some “other time” or an “elsewhere.” The Madhyamaka perspective logically demands that one view all temporal relations as contemporaneous. This confronts the historicist and demands that they recognize the “primitive” culture as existing in their own time, in their own plane of existence, just as much as any other human subjects. Hence, at least as one school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Madhyamaka doctrine shows how the metaphysical tendency inherent within historicism to temporally displace other human cultures is a fundamentally illogical view. Coevalness is necessarily maintained thereby.

Yogācāra Subject-Object Dissolution as the Rejection of Objectification

On the other hand, the Yogācāra sect of Mahāyāna thought may serve as a particularly apt critique of the objectification of the observed through its philosophy of subject-object dissolution. Distinct from the Madhyamaka school,

¹⁰⁴ Nāgārjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom*, 50.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

the Yogācāra are more intent on proving the “emptiness” of phenomena through the dependence of all external entities upon consciousness. The foundation of this idealism is summarized well by one of the school’s founders, Vasubandhu, in this verse,

In Mahayana philosophy . . . , [reality is] viewed as being consciousness-only Mind (citta), thought (manas), consciousness (chit), and perception (pratyaksa) are synonyms. The word "mind" (citta) includes mental states and mental activities in its meaning. The word "only" is intended to deny the existence of any external objects of consciousness. We recognize, of course, that "mental representations seem to be correlated with external (non-mental) objects; but this may be no different from situations in which people with vision disorders 'see' hairs, moons, and other things that are 'not there.'"¹⁰⁶

Through the unity found in the nature of mental representations, the Yogācāra school asserts the dependency of all external phenomena. Vasubandhu argues that, regardless of how much it may seem as though there is an external thing which our perceptions only correspond to, this does not alter the fact that all perceptions are nothing but representations; any attempt to find a true, inherent phenomenon would only be met with more representations, due to the fact that one is still merely perceiving. By virtue of always being perceived, the object of perception being an object of consciousness, there can be no tenable positing of things totally external to the mind.

The dissolution of the dichotomous notions of subject and object follow from this Yogācāra idealism. After all, the consciousness of “consciousness-only” is not the mere individual consciousness of a self, but what is described as the *alaya-vijñana*, or the “store consciousness.” It is from this universal form of

¹⁰⁶ Vasubandhu, *Twenty Verses on Consciousness Only*, trans. George Cronk (1998), 169, <http://www.cronksite.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/VasubandhuGC.pdf>.

consciousness from which all forms of perception or phenomena arise from different streams or “seeds.”¹⁰⁷ Hence, Vasubandhu says, “Both subjectivity (atman) and objectivity (dharma) arise from the unconscious (the alaya-vijñana = the domain of 'seed-consciousness'). Perception [for example, vision] arises from a seed [in the unconscious] and gives rise to an apparent object [for example, color] . . .”¹⁰⁸ Vasubandhu then explicates this view further in this next passage,

The six levels of perception are only representations (appearances) of consciousness that arise out of the unconscious (the alaya-vijñana). Once a disciple, through his study of the Dharma [the teachings of the Buddha], realizes that there is, in fact, no seer, no hearer, no smeller, no taster, no toucher, and no thinker, he will enter into an understanding of the insubstantiality of self. And when he learns that the objects of perception are also representations (appearances) of consciousness-only, and that there are, in fact, no experienced entities that have the characteristics of external objectivity, then the disciple will enter into an understanding of the insubstantiality of [experienced] objects.¹⁰⁹

Given that even perceptions of the self are themselves representations of what are merely the germinating seeds of the universal store consciousness, there is neither a subject as typically conceived nor are there external objects to be perceived by the self. In this way, to speak of any dichotomy between a subject and an object is untenable. Rather, there is only the stream of the single, ineffable consciousness. This assertion of subject-object unity is relevant to critiquing colonial epistemology in the same way that the notion of emptiness is, as it is a specific subject's (in this case, a culture's) self-universalization and consequent coevalness-denial that suggests their dichotomous separation.

¹⁰⁷ David J. Kalupahana, “Yogācāra Idealism,” in *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1976), 147, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wqjnw.18.

¹⁰⁸ Vasubandhu, *Twenty Verses*, 171.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

Through the dissolution of subject and object, Yogācāra Buddhism provides an essential basis for the critique of the objectification of colonized peoples done through historicist observation. For, when the ideas of singular selves and objects which can exist externally independent of those selves are done away with, any notion of observing another person as a mere object, a piece of evidence from “elsewhere” to be analyzed, becomes logically indefensible. Like with the relationality of time, the dissolution of subject and object, and thus the dissolution of objectification, compels a perspective of all sides as contemporaneous. Chakrabarty remarks on the nature of this in the following passage, “This gesture is akin to the one Kierkegaard developed in critiquing explanations that looked on the Biblical story of Abraham’s sacrifice of his son Isaac either as deserving an historical or psychological explanation or as a metaphor or allegory, but never as a possibility for life open today to one who had faith. ‘[W]hy bother to remember a past,’ asked Kierkegaard, ‘that cannot be made into a present?’”¹¹⁰ Through the dissolution of subject and object, human beings from different groups, including colonizer and colonized, can come to see the experiences of their Other as positively influential upon themselves rather than primitively detached and merely “behind”. Instead of viewing what were once regarded as “primitive” practices as merely superstitious supernaturalism, one can see how these practices may actually carry truth and weight in a sense that is just as meaningful as one’s own ideas of rationality.

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¹¹⁰ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 108.

In fact, on this note, both the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra schools provide a way in which different, perhaps supernaturalist ways of being-in-the-world which are usually incommensurable with Western rationality may in fact be logically legitimized. The Madhyamaka philosophy agrees with Yogācāra in their view of the formation of phenomena as dependent upon conceptual fabrications, which are constructions of consciousness.¹¹¹ Hence, although they differ in multiple nuanced ways, both schools deny the possibility of there being an ontologically independent state of the external world. As articulated by Eviatar Shulman,

The world, we may say, is similar to an illusion. It is not totally an illusion, but is similar to one, in the sense that it lacks any truly objective aspects, or at least that these are minimized and marginalized to such a degree that they can never be fully independently real. The world may be external, but it is not categorically, qualitatively, and ontologically distinct from consciousness. This is what Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu most clearly agree on—that the world is a type of illusion, dream, or fantasy.¹¹²

With this in mind, this means that different non-Western forms of reason which are usually deemed as irrational due to their supposed lack of objectivity, or lack of correspondence with some external matter of fact, may actually be seen as just as meaningful as other conventional ways of looking at things. Given that everything perceived is a representation in the sense that what is perceived is dependent upon the unpredictable fluctuations of consciousness and how our dispositions arise, endure, and fall in response to those fluctuations, non-Western forms of perception which were once insulted and set aside as mere fantasy can now be legitimized as such. It is not because of the absurd possibility that suddenly all fiction is fact that these viewpoints may be legitimized, but from the fact that all

¹¹¹ Santina, “The Madhyamaka Philosophy,” 174.

¹¹² Eviatar Shulman, “Nāgārjuna the Yogācārin? Vasubandhu the Mādhyamaka?: On the Middle-Way Between Realism and Antirealism,” in *Madhyamaka and Yogācāra: Allies or Rivals?*, ed. Jan Westerhoff and Jay L. Garfield, 184-212, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 209.

perceptions which are held to be true in some fashion are themselves representations of a conventional sort (illusion-like, as Shulman suggests), and thus stand on the same substratum or ground. Hence, different ways of experiencing and being-in-the-world need not suffer such a dehumanizing attack from the colonial epistemology of Western rationality—when all things are empty, either in relation to each other or upon an indiscriminately universal idea of mind, there can be no rational allowance of such absolutization.

Conclusion

Through the Madhyamaka rejection of coevalness-denial and the Yogācāra rejection of subject-object dualism as both being metaphysically incoherent, Mahāyāna Buddhism offers a provincializing force towards absolutist European epistemology and any other reifying outlooks like it. In accordance with Madhyamaka philosophy, no epistemology of a certain province has the logical right to assert itself as temporally above and beyond others, since time cannot be segmented into different static entities—rather, it is an interdependent whole. In like manner, the Yogācāra school challenges the mindset that other groups may be seen as objects to be merely studied as such based on the reality that the notion of object is actually inextricably linked to the subject and the fabrications of consciousness; how can one be justified in detaching the so-called object from oneself when it is ultimately not detached or disconnected at all? It is in these ways that the truths of Mahāyāna philosophy eliminate the assumptions of epistemological reification, provincializing Europe alongside all other continents

and cultures. However, the aim of this essay is not just to demonstrate how one of many world philosophies may use its logic to challenge others, but to show how a philosophy of a colonized people may play a vital decolonizing role. As so much violence done towards colonized peoples is attributable to the colonial epistemic worldview, a philosophy capable of critiquing this view serves not only a logical function but a significantly ethical function just as well.

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